Decades of Change: A Short History of International Development Organizations in Canada

By Juniper Glass

This article is the sixth in a series on Canadian Charities Working Internationally.

SUMMARY: Juniper Glass traces the history of international development organizations in Canada from the earliest religious missions to the present day. The article examines the major advancement and challenges in each decade together with insights from thought leaders in the field.

RÉSUMÉ : Juniper Glass trace l’histoire des organisations de développement international au Canada, à partir des premières missions sous l’égide des religions jusqu’à maintenant. L’article examine les défis et les progrès majeurs pour chaque décennie, et rapporte le point de vue d’experts reconnus dans ce domaine.

Introduction

At pace with global change, the Canadian international development sector has undergone many shifts and influences over the past 60 years. This article attempts to highlight some of the key transformations related to the role of voluntary sector organizations, although because the space here is limited, much has had to be left out. The article begins by painting a broad picture of the sector and then examines the major advancements and challenges of each decade, with insights along the way from thought leaders in the field.

For a relatively small country, Canada has a diverse international development sector. About 2300 registered charities include “international aid and development” in their official activities and over half make it their primary focus; collectively, these organizations raised $3.9 billion in revenues in 2011 (Ayer, 2013, p. 2). In addition to registered charities, the sector is made up of a large number of nonprofits as well as the international programs of trade unions, faith-based organizations, and post-secondary institutions. There is a huge range in the size of these groups, from very small and volunteer-led to large well-staffed organizations. Ian Smillie, former executive director of CUSO and author of Diamonds
has observed five major roles or types of organization in the field: humanitarian relief, child sponsorship, direct development program implementation, partnership and solidarity with global South partners, and volunteer-sending organizations. Smillie remarks that this typology is far from black and white, with many civil society organizations carrying out more than one of these activities, but it helps to demonstrate the diversity in the sector. He also adds that a sixth area, advocacy and coalition building to impact systemic change, is also on the rise. This robust and complex landscape of activity to alleviate and prevent global poverty has evolved significantly in the past 60 years, and its roots extend even further back in history.

**Early international aid**

The earliest form of organized Canadian interventions in what was to become known as the global South were, of course, religious missions (Paras, 2014). Since at least the mid-19th century, missionaries “offered humanitarian aid as part of an evangelistic package” (Compton Brouwer, 2010, p. 693). Health services and education in particular were found to be useful means for churches to advance their religious agenda.

In the early 20th century, secular humanitarian organizations began to emerge in response to war, providing food, shelter, medical care to support the rebuilding of European societies impacted by armed conflict. One of the first voluntary service providers was the Canadian Red Cross, founded in 1896 (see Glassford, 2007, for a history of the organization). Dominique Marshall, founder of the Canadian Network on Humanitarian History (2015), remarks that the period after WWI and during WWII saw an “acceleration of the growth of humanitarian aid” in which many of the largest and most well-known international organizations were created to provide war relief, reconstruction, and support for refugees in Europe (personal communication, December 19, 2014), including Save the Children Fund (1921), Plan (1937), Unitarian Service Committee (1940), Oxfam (1942), and Care (1945). Each of these went on to start Canadian branches, at first solely for fundraising (Brodhead & Herbert-Copley, 1988), and later as humanitarian or development actors in their own right. Ian Smillie remarks that “NGOs were out there before governments” responding to human needs across borders (personal communication, November 14, 2014). Indeed, the “first Canadian official aid program dates only from the Colombo Plan of the early 1950s” (Brodhead & Herbert-Copley, 1988, p. 3).

Soon enough, most of the “humanitarian energy initially devoted to the reconstruction of Europe was reconverted toward what was then called the Third World” (D. Marshall, personal communication, December 19, 2014). This shift coincided with decolonization efforts undertaken by dozens of former European-ruled states in Africa and Asia, starting with India’s independence in 1947 and continuing with great rapidity through to the 1960s. Colonialism had left many countries of the global South impoverished and without functioning indigenous governance structures. The “political space and optimism” stimulated by decolonization as well as the United Nations’ designation of the 1960s as the Decade of Development provided the impetus for many new organizations and initiatives to address poverty and ‘under-development’ in ‘the Third World’ (Plewes & Tomlinson, 2013). Ernie Regehr, co-founder of Project Ploughshares, remarks that the infrastructure and knowledge held by churches in the global South, especially Africa, continued to play a major role in facilitating development efforts by Northern organizations right through to the 1970s, because “religious institutions were often the most organized elements of society, with strong networks and established links in local communities” (personal communication, November 28, 2014). For the most part, international development interventions in the mid-20th century were based on a charity approach of helping the needy through
the provision of basic services while accepting the traditional model of economic growth (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 1995).

1960s

In the 1960s, a change began in the orientation of development work that has continued to gain strength to this day, moving away from the charity model in which the global North knows best toward partnerships with citizens, organizations, and governments of the global South. The founding of Amnesty International in 1961 is an example of the growing importance of human rights in the discourse and practice of international cooperation. In Canada, a major contributor to this shift in understanding, as well as the growth of the international development sector as a whole, was what Ian Smillie terms “the CUSO experience” (personal communication, November 14, 2014). Starting in the early 1960s, Canadian University Service Overseas and other volunteer-sending organizations such as Canadian Crossroads International provided the opportunity for thousands of Canadians to live and work for significant periods of time in countries of the global South. The experience was transformative for many. Working alongside Southern counterparts, receiving the same salary and living conditions, these volunteers gained knowledge and respect for the host countries and cultures and became the “first generation of development workers” in Canada (I. Smillie, personal communication, November 14, 2014). Upon their return, many alumni of volunteer-sending organizations would found new international organizations, join and lead existing organizations such as Oxfam, become researchers on international issues at, for example, the North–South Institute, drive Canadian solidarity to support anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements in the global South, or take on leadership in the burgeoning international development-related public service (see Compton Brouwer, 2013, for a history of CUSO).

The creation of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) by the federal government in 1968 added another huge boost to the growth of the international cooperation sector. From the beginning, partnerships with nonprofit organizations were a primary means for CIDA to meet its objectives, in addition to official development assistance provided to governments of the global South and contributions to multilateral aid (Ritter, 2012). “In its first year, the NGO division disbursed $5 million to 50 projects carried out by 20 [non-governmental] agencies” and by the mid-1980s, CIDA supported 2400 projects led by 200 organizations (Brodhead & Herbert-Copley, 1988, p. 3). At first, CIDA’s need for staff with international experience was met by those with a missionary (Paras, 2012) or military backgrounds, but soon this gap was to be filled largely by Canadians returning from volunteer placements abroad (I. Smillie, personal communication, November 14, 2014). The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) was also founded in 1968 to foster good practice among civil society organizations working to reduce global poverty. Julia Sanchez, the current CEO, noted that for many decades until only recently, CCIC and its member organizations were active stakeholders in shaping Canada’s international policies, largely through their relationship with CIDA (personal communication, November 21, 2014). Because CIDA wanted to see Canadian value added to development projects, nonprofits in the country had to step up and step away from a simple fundraising role and, in the case of the early international nonprofits, distinguish themselves from their parent organizations in the UK or USA. Thus, CIDA “allowed organizations to develop a Canadian persona” as well as fostered proliferation in the number of small, independent groups dedicated to international development (I. Smillie, personal communication, November 14, 2014). Canada’s financial generosity to global development peaked in 1975-76 when an all time high of 0.53% of gross national product was dedicated to international aid; this proportion has been in decline ever since (Black & den Heyer, 2010).
1970s

In tandem with flourishing governmental and nongovernmental international activity was the political turn to the left in the late 1960s and 1970s, including redistributive social policies in Canada and Canadian movements of solidarity against dictatorships in Latin America and South Africa (D. Marshall, personal communication, December 19, 2014). Experience gained by Canadians in the field in the global South as well as the worldwide economic crisis of the 1970s led more development actors to question whether the prevailing model of economic growth, “far from eliminating poverty, was in fact a major cause” (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 1995, p. 10). Since this period, “Canada’s internationally oriented NGOs have defined their engagement with Canadian foreign policy through an ethic of justice and human rights” (Tomlinson, 2002, p. 273), putting into practice the growing understanding around the world that respect for rights and local partnerships were key to achieving development goals. In the same period, intellectual and research infrastructure was built to investigate questions about development policy and practice, led by the crown corporation International Development Research Centre (1970) and the non-partisan North-South Institute (1976). One key emerging area was the rights of women and their role in creating healthy, prosperous societies in the global South. Canadians founded MATCH International, one of the earliest development organizations run by and for women, in 1976, the same year that the UN launched its Decade for Women (Ritter, 2012). Many faith-based organizations became active in promoting social justice, playing a major role in negotiating peace in conflict areas like Sudan, and assigning church staff to advocate on Canadian foreign policy (E. Regehr, personal communication, November 28, 2014). In many ways the international solidarity arms of mainline Canadian churches became indistinguishable in values and practices from other nonprofits in the field (Compton Brouwer, 2010).

1980s

The 1980s saw a neo-conservative political turn in the global North. Many governments encouraged the growth of private humanitarian organizations to take on more of the share of international aid. In Canada, the CIDA Partnerships Program was still going strong, contributing funds to about 500 organizations in 1989/90, including the international programs of universities and colleges, cooperatives, faith-based organizations, and trade unions (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 1995, p. 7). Public awareness of poverty in the global South expanded, in large part due to television coverage of famines in Africa that also incited more Canadians to donate to humanitarian relief. On the other end of the spectrum, adding context to the images of starving Ethiopian children broadcast worldwide, robust development education programs were underway, implemented by organizations across Canada to help youth and adults alike understand the issues of global inequity and solidarity. In the 1980s, even provincial governments funded international development education, and most provinces had an active association of international development organizations to strengthen public engagement. Brian Tomlinson, executive director of AidWatch Canada, reflects that Canadian civil society organizations were catalyzed by the Ethiopian famine “to really effectively collaborate together for the first time” including the creation of Partnership Africa Canada (personal communication, November 28, 2014). This organization was innovative in that it had a joint African and Canadian governance structure, managed a “delegated fund” granting program on behalf of CIDA, and facilitated peer learning among development actors. Other similar initiatives were also active during this period, particularly the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Fund managed by CCIC and South Asia Partnership Canada, demonstrating the considerable involvement nonprofits had in setting
the direction of public funds and policies in these areas (B. Tomlinson, personal communication, November 28, 2014).

1990s

In 1995, major budget cuts resulted in the end of CIDA’s delegated funds as well as the majority of the domestic public education programs in Canada’s international development sector. Brian Tomlinson observed that “overnight, Canada lost a very important infrastructure that many of us felt was a prime mandate of international CSOs—to engage Canadians not just for their money but in terms of education about international issues and promoting better policies on the part of the government” (personal communication, November 28, 2014). Provincial alliances for international cooperation were also drastically weakened. Labour union and faith-based international programs, unable to mobilize as many resources from their membership as in the past, also experienced a decline during this decade. The larger international development organizations for the most part weathered the federal budget cuts and continued public fundraising, aided now by digital communications that allowed for wider spreading of their messages and their asks. In part due to the strength of organizations and communities in the global South, Canadian organizations positioned themselves more and more in the role of capacity builders for Southern partners and advocates for equitable policies. As Tomlinson observed, “by the 1990s, most mainstream Canadian NGOs had accepted that advocacy and policy engagement with governments and multilateral institutions across a wide spectrum of issues was imperative for realizing their development goals” (2002, p. 278). Canadians contributed actively to a number of campaigns for multilateral policies in the late 1990s, including debt relief and the landmines treaty. An accountability leader, CCIC’s 1995 Code of Ethics (Murray & Aitken, 2000) was one of the first self-regulatory codes in the world to be adopted by a network of civil society organizations (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 2012).

2000s

The new millennium intensified a number of influences on the international development sector. Canada’s anti-terrorism legislation and the international climate of high security may have affected the activities and policy statements in which Canadian organizations believed they could take part (Tomlinson, 2002). The increasing role of nonprofits in responding to acute crises was also magnified. In 2005, many of Canada’s largest international organizations formed the Humanitarian Coalition, agreeing to jointly work with media and private sector collaborators to mobilize and coordinate donations from Canadians during international crises (Humanitarian Coalition, 2014). At the same time, the new millennium is a period of great wealth transfer and digital technology, giving rise to new, more individualized efforts to prevent and alleviate global poverty. Crowd-funding and crowd-sourced micro-loans have been on the rise to finance small initiatives. A number of organizations have also been created by Canadians to directly support site-specific development projects in the global South through fundraising and volunteering, made possible by more accessible travel and communications. The growing number of short-term volunteer programs that bring students and others to countries of the global South has also likely contributed to this wave of small-scale international cooperation (see Tiessen & Huish, 2013, for critical perspectives on such volunteer programs). At the other end of the philanthropy spectrum, there has been a growth in the number of Canadians with high net worth who have created substantial international initiatives, such as the former eBay CEO’s Skoll Foundation, Diesel Canada CEO’s OneXOne Foundation, and Cirque du Soleil founder’s One Drop Foundation (Plewes, 2008). While these novel forms of development organizations have emerged, resources have
also been concentrating within many of the largest existing organizations. Brian Tomlinson examined the global revenues of the eight largest families of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), including World Vision, Care, Plan, and Save the Children, and found that they expanded very rapidly in the last decade. For example, between 2005 and 2012, they doubled their revenue and now command about 12B$ annually in development cooperation revenue, making them “major players with a sophisticated presence around the world” (personal communication, November 28, 2014). The Canadian chapters of these families do represent the largest development organizations, with a sizable proportion of their funds raised through child sponsorship programs (Plewes, 2014). Organizations that make $10M or more per year represent only 2% of the Canadian charities that undertake international aid and development, but account for 73% of the sector’s total revenue (Ayer, 2013, p. 3).

Another important trend in recent years has been the significant shift in the relationship between civil society and the federal government. Betty Plewes, former president of CCIC, has observed a decline in total foreign aid, reduced policy dialogue with international development organizations, and a new funding framework based largely on service delivery rather than partnership (personal communication, November 20, 2014). Up until 2010, CIDA had the practice of negotiating priorities with civil society organizations and providing multi-year funding to advance those priorities in their respective partner countries in the global South. Canada was a global leader in creating such a responsive and collaborative funding model in the 1980s (B. Tomlinson, personal communication, November 28, 2014), and when it was eliminated in 2010, a number of Canadian organizations have had to greatly reduce their operations (Tomlinson & Inter-Council Network of Provincial and Regional Councils for International Cooperation, 2014). In 2013, CIDA was merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Ian Smillie has reflected that the new system, in which civil society organizations are expected to compete in calls for proposals and act as contractors to implement the government’s priorities, may change the international image of Canadian development actors. Until recently, Canadian organizations have been seen as relatively independent as opposed, for example, to American organizations that have been perceived as tools for US foreign policy (I. Smillie, personal communication, November 14, 2014). The federal government’s Draft Civil Society Partnership Policy created in 2014 may help to rebuild engagement with development organizations and create more appropriate funding modalities (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2014).

Meanwhile, other trends in the sector have bypassed the scope of national governments, such as the deepening work by civil society organizations on an international code of good practice for development. Canadians have been active in the creation of the Istanbul Principles and guidelines for implementation of the principles, which include human rights, gender equality, democratic ownership of development processes, equitable partnerships, and environmental sustainability as essential for effective development (Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness, 2011). Despite these efforts, the international development sector in Canada has been criticized for reinforcing inequitable relations with the global South, in large part because of financial ties to the Canadian government that limit its ability to voice political criticism (Barry-Shaw & Jay, 2012). Ian Smillie has observed, however, a promising growth in advocacy-focused campaigns and coalitions, in Canada and around the world, such as Partnership Africa Canada’s work to uncover and promote alternatives to harmful diamond and other mining extraction on the continent (personal communication, November 14, 2014). Such alliances aimed at pooling expertise to influence structures that hinder development and human rights will likely continue to grow as the sector becomes more sophisticated.
Conclusion

The history of Canadian international cooperation generally reflects the worldwide trends and trajectories in the development field, with Canadian organizations being “neither leaders nor followers” (I. Smillie, personal communication, November 14, 2014). At the same time, many Canadian civil society organizations and coalitions have been appreciated in the field globally for their development approach: their efforts to establish equitable partnerships in the global South, their ability to support CSO collaboration across countries of the global North, the importance they place on dialogue with the public and domestic government about foreign policy issues, and the fact that Canada is a bilingual and ethnically diverse country (B. Plewes, personal communication, November 20, 2014).

In contrast to this global reputation, international development organizations are among the types of charities that Canadians trust the least, and this trust has declined since 2006 (Lasby & Barr, 2013). Nevertheless, the proportion of individual charitable donations to international activities has increased from 6% to 8% of total giving by Canadians from 2007 to 2010, although this includes giving to any activity outside of Canada and not necessarily international development (Turcotte, 2012, p. 27). Although 57% of Canada’s 150 largest grantmaking foundations support international work, their giving to this area amounts to only 6% of their overall giving (Imagine Canada & Philanthropic Foundations Canada, 2014).

The international cooperation sector is currently facing a number of challenges, most notably resource constraints. The largest organizations appear to be able to weather the storm and even grow while mid- and small-sized organizations are cutting back their activities (Tomlinson & Inter-Council Network of Provincial and Regional Councils for International Cooperation, 2014). Given the rapid pace of change over the last decades, it is difficult to predict what the sector will look like in the next 60 years and, most importantly, what its impact will be in reducing global poverty and creating a more equitable world. Canada’s role is to be determined by the organizations involved but also by citizens who engage, give, and hold our governments to account.

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