

CANADIAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

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CIVIL SOCIETY
AND GLOBAL CHANGE

Overview



THE NORTH-SOUTH INSTITUTE

OVERVIEW

Today, some 175,000 nonprofit, voluntary organizations in Canada provide community services; organize cultural, educational, and sporting activities; and lobby for change on the political front. These organizations and their counterparts around the globe—members of civil society—are credited with much of the positive change that occurs in the world today. How effective are they?

The Canadian Development Report 1999 examines how Canadian society is organized to support collective expressions of social, economic, political, and environmental justice, both here and abroad. Each chapter examines the actions taken by Canadian civil society organizations in one sphere of activity. Together, the chapters depict a vibrant, committed sector of society that has achieved much success, against considerable odds.

At noon on March 1, 1999, church bells around the world proclaimed the entry into force of what has become known as the "Ottawa Treaty"—the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction. The event was notable for the speed with which the convention entered into force. It was also, as some political scientists described it, "a tale of David triumphing over Goliath" and the partnership between civil society and like-minded states which made the treaty a reality was heralded as a new "superpower."

The success of the global campaign to ban landmines has been very visible. But it is only one example of the way in which civil society organizations, from church auxiliaries to political parties, Girl Guides' associations to sporting clubs, bring about change—small and large, at home and abroad (see Box 1).

The work of civil society is vital to our economy and society. It is estimated that the Canadian voluntary sector each year

delivers services worth more than \$3,000 per person. More than 1.1 billion hours are donated annually to Canada's 75,000 charities alone, and close to \$90 billion passes through their coffers in the form of government grants and individual and corporate donations. More important, half of all Canadians—more than 12 million people—participate in some kind of civil society organization.

Linking North and South

If Canadian civil society organizations deliver a substantial part of domestic social services, they are also an important vehicle for Canadian foreign aid, and key actors in forging Canada's relationships with developing countries. Canadian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on international development issues—some 300 of them—work in at least 79 developing countries, annually raise about \$412 million from the public and another \$209 million from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Funding from all sources brings the percentage spent by these

organizations close to 22 percent of Canada's overseas development spending, among the highest ratios anywhere in the world.

NGOs are a diverse group: they range from small volunteer initiatives to large, staffed organizations, whose mandates vary from raising awareness of global issues at home to carrying out agriculture, health, education, and other projects in developing countries. And it appears that these organizations are as successful as, if not more than their official counterparts in delivering aid, in large part because of their in-depth knowledge of the people and countries they serve. As development consultant and author Ian Smillie explains, their effectiveness also rests on their flexibility and adaptability.

If development CSOs' roots date to missionary movements of the 19th century, they blossomed during the 1960s and 1970s when their numbers expanded and thousands of Canadians joined their ranks as volunteers, at home or abroad. Today, says Smillie, they maintain three types of relationships with the Canadian public: through voluntary contributions of time and labour; through financial donations; and through their education and advocacy work. In fact, public support for development through these organizations, measured in terms of donations, has increased steadily since the 1960s (see Box 2).

A WIDE RANGE OF ACTIONS

The *Canadian Development Report 1999* focuses on just a few of the many areas in which internationalist CSOs work—international development, environment, food security, alternative trade, gender equality, human rights, and conflict prevention. All these organizations embody the key attributes of a constructive civil society: bringing together key stakeholders and engaging in a real debate to shape policies and outcomes.

A large part of Canada's 1,300 environmental associations, NGOs, and networks, for example, have links with Southern groups. These relationships have helped many make connections between domestic and international problems—excessive logging, water pollution from intensive fish farming, and Indigenous rights, for example. Environmental author and activist

TACTICS AND SUCCESSES

Canadian CSOs employ a variety of public and private tactics to reach their goals: they make individual contacts; advocate publicly for change; lobby in national and international venues; build coalitions, networks, and partnerships; launch media and education campaigns to raise public awareness; monitor governments and expose failures; create local, national, and global events; support existing groups; and take action in international forums. They work with individuals, groups, and coalitions; loudly in public or quietly behind the scenes; in private meeting rooms, international forums, and over the internet. They also work on the ground, at home and abroad, implementing programs and projects.

And they have met with many successes. Here are a few recent examples:

- Since 1972, Public Interest Research Groups on campuses across Canada have brought ecological problems to the fore. Recent activities have included pioneering work on James Bay in Quebec, the Narmada Dam in India, and the Three Gorges Dam in China.
- A network of CSOs spanning at least 70 countries—including Canada's Council of Canadians—was instrumental in halting negotiations over the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998. The alliance forced negotiations into the open, broadcast the implications in detail, and challenged the agreement on democratic principles and human rights.
- The Global Network on Food Security brought together the Canadian government, the private sector, and civil society organizations to shape Canada's commitments to the 1996 World Food Summit and subsequent National Action Plan for Food Security.
- NAC and Intercede, (a group of domestic workers in Canada), joined women's groups in Asia and the Pacific to host the Second Women's Conference against APEC and the International Day of Protest during the 1997 meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.
- CUSO and Inter Pares, in partnership with four Bangladeshi NGOs, helped put trafficking in women and children on the agenda of the 1997 Heads of Government Meeting of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, resulting in a regional convention on the issue.
- The Canadian Centre for International Study and Cooperation (CECI) has brought together conflicting parties in Guatemala, West Africa, Burundi, and Haiti to learn conflict prevention techniques and develop action plans.

Faris Ahmed points out that Canadian environmental NGOs have earned an enviable reputation for helping shape international agreements and processes. Unfortunately, he says, they have less credibility at home.

Organizations concerned about hunger also base much of their activity on a common understanding of the structural and political causes of hunger in both North and South: the problem is not too little food, but too little political will to see that the available food is distributed in an equitable manner. These CSOs argue that, here and elsewhere, governments must recognize the right to

CHARITABLE FACTS AND FIGURES

- Canadian NGOs raise almost twice as much money from individuals and corporations as they receive from government: US\$302 million in individuals grants compared to US\$153 million from government.
- Canadian CSOs put their greatest effort in the poorest parts of the world—Africa, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, then Asia.
- Individual contributions to charities have increased by 27% between 1986 and 1996.
- Some 21 million Canadians—88% of the population over the age of 15—give to charitable and nonprofit organizations.
- Some 1.5 million Canadians each contribute an average of \$90 to international organizations.
- Canadian foundations allocate only about 3% of their grants—worth some \$2 million—to international causes.

food as a basic human right, with a legally enforceable claim. This is an ideal rather than a fact, says Graham Riches, Director of the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia: today, 800 million people around the world are severely malnourished and 25 percent of humanity lives in absolute poverty. In Canada, despite the country's wealth, more than 700,000 people depended on food banks in March 1998 alone.

The global nature of the problem has led to successful domestic and international partnerships, such as the Global Network on Food Security and the Rural Advancement Foundation International, to raise the profile of hunger and secure its legitimacy as a public policy issue.

Similarly, says Université du Québec à Montréal law professor Georges leBel, Canadian defenders of human rights have entered the international arena because they now recognize that issues such as economic integration and trade liberalization have a direct effect on social and economic rights worldwide, and that progress will require close collaboration and solidarity between North and South.

International solidarity and action are also needed to ensure gender equality, a fact increasingly recognized over the past two decades by Canadian CSOs such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. But, says Deborah Stienstra, professor of politics and women's studies at the

University of Winnipeg, women's groups and international development organizations are still working independently far too often. If they are to be truly effective, stronger partnerships are needed in Canada and internationally.

The most complex CSO North-South relationship probably revolves around trade and investment, key elements in Canada's foreign relations. "Canadians have been world leaders in organizing challenges, campaigns, and alternatives to the projects of what might be termed a global political and economic elite," writes John Foster, a professor of human rights at the University of Saskatchewan. Certainly, they were active with international counterparts in fighting the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, which CSOs felt enhanced the rights of investors over the decisions of democratic governments. Canadian CSOs have also collaborated with Southern counterparts on issues of worker health and safety, the right to labour organization and collective bargaining, and alternative trade initiatives.

Canadian CSOs have also long acted in solidarity with Southern peoples to prevent or resolve conflict. And, says Jacques Bertrand, professor of political science at the University of Toronto, these organizations are well placed to play a significant role in preventing conflict because they can work closely with local people and organizations. But, he cautions, given the complexity of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, CSOs' effectiveness should not be exaggerated: greater coordination is needed between the organizations themselves and with government.

Common Challenges

Despite their differing agendas and areas of intervention, Canadian CSOs working internationally face remarkably similar challenges, both from an organizational standpoint and in their relationships with one another, with governments, and with the people they aim to serve. Alison Van Rooy, editor of the *Canadian Development Report 1999* and senior researcher at the North-South Institute specializing in civil society, identifies a few of the most pressing issues: weak political will; reduced funding; an often outdated or irrelevant

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regulatory environment; shallow public opinion; and a disinterested private sector.

Lack of political will

Whether in environment or human rights, gender or food, CSOs have sounded the alarms and raised public awareness of the issues. But action is often slow to follow: the problem is a lack of political will and a dearth of public participation in policy-making. “The challenge for NGOs and governments,” says Ahmed, “is to set forth a broader agenda which allows for greater participation—especially on issues such as international finance, trade, and climate change. By creating sufficient national pressure, CSOs should be holding politicians more accountable.”

And as Van Rooy notes, “downsized governments seem more than willing to divest themselves of responsibilities and entrust them to an already overburdened voluntary sector.” This, however, has not been matched by the will to provide adequate funding, or more fully engage the voluntary sector in policy debates.

Funding

Many Canadian CSOs active internationally have long depended on federal government funding, most of it channeled through CIDA. Repeated cuts to development assistance budgets, however, have led to the contraction—if not the disappearance—of a number of NGOs. Increased competition for fewer dollars has also led some groups to modify or distort their mission by privileging those activities more likely to be funded, stoking fear among many of co-optation by government. And certainly, dependence on government has contributed to the gradual transformation of some voluntary organizations into public service contractors.

In some fields of activity, such as action against hunger, limited support for preventive and development work has led to a prevalence of charity and *ad hoc* emergency aid programs. This short-term response provides few incentives and little support for investing in and developing long-term strategies.

Reducing dependence on government is crucial for both independence and survival. In an attempt to do so, notes Van Rooy,

some CSOs, such as the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE), have opened up for-profit programs to help finance core work.

Regulatory environment

“The way in which organizations are regulated and taxed also makes a difference to their ability to effect change,” says Van Rooy. But regulations governing whether or not CSOs qualify for charitable status with Revenue Canada currently hinder or limit CSOs’ advocacy and political activities. These are in need of updating, says Van Rooy.

Shallow public opinion

Donations to charitable organizations in Canada indicate strong support for CSOs working at home and abroad. However, that support is “a mile wide but an inch deep,” notes Smillie, making both CIDA’s and CSOs’ work somewhat precarious. It has also led many CSOs to favour high-visibility emergency work over long-term development efforts. “This lack of public understanding may ultimately be most damaging to CSOs’ endeavours to bring about change,” says Van Rooy.

A disinterested private sector

While the private sector is a potential ally for CSOs’ attempts to effect change, few organizations working internationally have entered into partnerships with the private sector. Funding statistics also show that the Canadian private sector, as well as foundations, have thus far contributed little to the work of internationalist CSOs. Among notable efforts to improve that performance Van Rooy points to the *Imagine* campaign led by the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

Changing Organizations Themselves

“Organizations seeking to change the world are often in need of change themselves,” says Van Rooy. Among the challenges and opportunities she and other authors note are the need for continuing training, for increased accountability, and for greater proficiency. Also crucial is the need for more equitable partnerships between Northern and Southern CSOs.

Capacity building and training

Trade liberalization, international UN processes, and a growing body of

"...if civil society organizations are going to help glue societies together in the future, they need to figure more prominently on the public policy agenda today."

Sharon
Capeling-Alakija,
Executive Coordinator,
United Nations
Volunteers.

multilateral agreements mean that CSOs face diverse, increasingly complex issues. "The ability to analyze and critique international agreements requires experience, specialized knowledge, and long-term memory," says Ahmed. Building this capacity is a critical challenge for CSOs. To meet the challenge, additional government funding is needed to support organizational infrastructure of both Southern and Northern organizations—administrative resources, training, and equipment.

Increased accountability

Voluntary sector organizations have sometimes been accused of serving private special interests rather than public interests. To counter this and reinforce their legitimacy, CSOs need to more visibly apply standards such as codes of conduct. They must also be seen to be working with those whose lives they mean to affect, says Van Rooy.

Professionalism

Reduced government funding, continuing poverty overseas, and global challenges have increased the need for efficiency and for better targeting of resources. Also needed is greater competence throughout the voluntary sector. Increased professionalism is hampered by CIDA's limited contribution to NGOs' administrative costs, however, as well as by the public's expectation—fed by the charities themselves—that an inordinately large percentage of individual donations will reach developing-country beneficiaries directly.

Evaluation is also vital. However, "evaluation is not a systemic part of Canadian NGO culture," notes Smillie. The reasons include the

difficulty of assessing social development, empowerment, and participation, as well as CSOs' limited financial and professional means. Evaluation is essential, however, if organizations are to learn from past experience and thus increase their effectiveness.

Building effective partnerships

As noted earlier, an increasing number of CSOs work in partnership with domestic and foreign partners, or join broad coalitions. Many, however, acknowledge the difficulties associated with international work and partnerships: differing missions and commitments; competing funding and resource issues; the stress of sustaining coalitions; and lack of shared long-term visions.

Problems also arise when Northern governments fund Southern NGOs directly, cutting out the Northern CSO intermediary. While this poses a threat to the survival of the Northern CSOs, it can also work against the Southern partner that loses both its voice in the North and means of eliciting public support. This changing funding dynamic points to the need to expand the North-South relationship into one that transcends projects and money and leads to joint projects and campaigns, both within Canada and internationally.

The *Canadian Development Report 1999* stresses that individual Canadians have an important part to play in bringing about global change. "It matters what individuals do," says Van Rooy. "Without individual involvement, civil society becomes an empty arena." The challenge, she notes, "is to extend participation from our backyard to our global home."

CANADIAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1999: CIVIL SOCIETY AND GLOBAL CHANGE

The *Canadian Development Report 1999: Civil Society and Global Change (CDR 1999)* surveys the work of Canadian civil society organizations working internationally, examines their tactics and motivations, and presents some notable successes. It also analyzes the constraints and challenges these organizations face in their attempts to bring about a fairer world.

Intended for students, academics, international development practitioners, and all those interested in the work of voluntary organizations, *CDR 1999* offers both praise and criticism, and puts forth recommendations for governments, CSOs, and individual Canadians.

In addition, *CDR 1999* includes statistical annexes that examine the funding of civil society organizations in Canada, and chart the movement of money, goods, and people between Canada and the countries of the South.

This is the third volume in the North-South Institute's annual series investigating Canada's dynamic relationships with the developing world. *CDR 1999* forms part of the Institute's broader research on civil society and global governance. For additional information about the Institute, its programs, and publications, visit our website at <http://www.nsi-ins.ca>.

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Compiled by Judy Meltzer with Alison Van Rooy

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THE NORTH-SOUTH INSTITUTE



RESEARCH FOR A FAIRER WORLD

For more than 20 years, the North-South Institute (NSI) has built a reputation for sound research and analysis of Canadian foreign policy, offered an independent voice on the urgent importance of world development issues, and brought those issues before the Canadian public and decision-makers. Established in 1976, it is the only independent, nongovernmental research institute in Canada focused on international development.

The Institute's research supports global efforts to strengthen international development cooperation; improve global governance; enhance gender equality, social equity, and corporate responsibility in

globalizing markets; and prevent conflict. The results of this research are shared—through publications, seminars, and conferences—with policy-makers, educators, business, and media, as well as with interested groups and individuals, to help generate a greater understanding and informed discussion of the problems and opportunities facing Canada and countries in the developing world.

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