

**An Opportunity for Leadership –
An Assessment of Canada's Policy for
Civil Society Partnerships**

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October 2017

On September 27, 2017, the Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, launched the Policy for Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance. The Policy outlines the government's approach to partnering with and supporting a strong civil society – in Canada and globally. The Policy comes at a time when space for civil society is increasingly closing. In the context of Canada's new Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), this Policy marks a number of positive steps forward and offers Canada an opportunity to play a leadership role in strengthening the enabling environment for civil society in Canada and overseas.

Introduction

On September 27, 2017, the Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, launched the [Policy for Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance](#) (hereafter, the Policy). The announcement came at the opening of the 2017 CCIC Annual Conference, in the presence of more than 250 international development stakeholders from across Canada.

The Policy outlines the government's approach to partnering with and supporting a strong civil society – in Canada and globally – through its international assistance. The (previous) federal government had first announced the establishment of such a policy in February 2015 (hereafter, the original) after extensive consultation with civil society organizations (CSOs). The original, however, was never fully implemented. The latest announcement signals a long-awaited step towards formalizing some of the parameters around how the government will work to strengthen its partnership with development and humanitarian organizations in Canada and overseas.

The Policy comes at a time when space for civil society is increasingly closing: where legislation and policy is increasingly restricting the ability of civil society organizations from functioning to the full extent of their rights and freedoms in a host of countries; where governments are placing limits on the amount of external funding local groups are eligible to receive; and where politicians and governments have been

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demonizing civil society organizations. Recent research by global civil society network CIVICUS [has found](#) that serious civic space violations are taking place in 106 countries around the world.

In the context of Canada's new [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#) (FIAP), as well as the [2030 Agenda](#) and the accompanying [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), this Policy marks a number of positive steps forward. While it does not integrate all the amendments suggested in [CCIC's submission to the government](#) on the draft version of the revised Policy, it integrates many of them. In fact, if implemented, it offers Canada an opportunity to play a leadership role in strengthening the enabling environment for civil society in Canada and overseas, supporting CSOs to realize their diverse roles in society, and encouraging both shared and CSO-led priorities to help build a fairer, more sustainable, and safer world.

Assessment of the revised Policy

This brief assesses elements of the Policy relative to the original, the draft revised Policy, and CCIC's suggested amendments. The changes from both the original and the draft are welcome and significant.

The Overarching Frame of the Policy

Greater coherence with the new FIAP: The principal rationale for revising the Policy was to align it with the objectives of the Feminist International Assistance Policy, the government's new human rights-based approach, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a view to "advanc[ing] gender equality, and the empowerment of women and girls to reduce poverty and build a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous world for all." All three of these agendas are listed as guiding principles for the Policy. The subtitle of the Policy is "A Feminist Approach," indicating that this approach will also underpin all of Global Affairs Canada's (GAC) civil society partnerships. Furthermore, the Policy commits "to continuous dialogue with CSOs on what it means to have a feminist approach to partnerships." Beyond this broad framing, the shift is most clearly manifested through a new first objective on empowering women and girls and promoting gender equality. This objective, for example, acknowledges women and girls as "diverse and powerful agents of change," and recognizes that "inequalities exist on intersectional lines." Objective 1 also emphasizes the need to recognize differentiated needs of women, men, girls and boys, and notes that "men and boys must also be engaged in the fight for greater gender equality, take opportunities to advocate and lead by example by respecting the rights and interests of women and girls." Finally, under Objective 1, the Policy indicates it will work to raise the "leadership, visibility, influence, capacity and access of women and girls" through the implementation of the Policy.

The Policy also identifies the SDGs (approved since the release of the original Partnership Policy) as "a key entry point for partnerships with CSOs"; and it specifically notes SDG 5 on gender equality as Canada's central focus within the 2030 Agenda framework with respect to its international assistance.

A clearer, broader purpose: The revised Policy goes beyond the original, whose purpose was to articulate the then-Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development's "approach to enhancing effective development and humanitarian cooperation with" different CSOs. While still signaling this intent, the Policy also sets out a broader and more ambitious goal: "to maximize the impact and results of Canada's international assistance and foster a strong and vibrant civil society sector". The Policy also maintains the

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FIAP's broad focus on international assistance, not just Official Development Assistance, pushing its application to a broader set of branches within GAC.

Instilling a new sense of partnership: While the Policy does not go as far as CCIC recommended in its submission on the draft, some efforts have been made to foster a greater sense of partnership within the Policy. This includes referencing “partnership principles of inclusivity, transparency and accountability, results and ownership, as well as mutual respect and a commitment for learning;” fully referencing the [Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness](#); committing to build diverse partnerships with new and non-traditional partners; committing to build capacity, organizational development and learning (among humanitarian and development actors); and more fully including civil society in the design and development of the implementation plan. These elements are discussed further below.

Recognition of CSO independence and diverse roles: The revised Policy maintains the original's recognition of CSOs as “independent actors in their own right.” But it goes further, acknowledging (as recommended in CCIC's submission) that CSOs have “diverse purposes, priorities, capacities, and constraints” – often complementary to the government's, but also distinct and in some cases different. While the Policy removes (non-exhaustive) examples of civil society cited in the original,¹ as well as the only reference to engaging diaspora communities, it expands the list of roles that CSOs play (including enhancing sustainability, promoting gender equality, supporting empowerment and human rights, challenging harmful norms and engaging Canadians as global citizens). The revised Policy also adds an acknowledgement that Canadian international assistance benefits from contributions of CSOs, “who possess valuable expertise and understanding of the local context in which they operate.”

Guiding principles – new, retained and absent: The revised Policy retains the original's acknowledgement of the Istanbul Principles as core to the work of civil society in development and humanitarian response. CCIC is pleased to see the Istanbul Principles recognized among the guiding principles for the Policy, as they were relegated to a footnote in the initial draft of the revised document. The Policy also references new guiding principles (relative to the original), including the FIAP and the 2030 Agenda (as noted) and a human rights-based approach (which is indivisible from a feminist approach). The original's reference to the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act is maintained; and the Policy is aligned around reducing (not just alleviating) poverty, as per the mandate of the Act. All the guiding principles also include some reference to how each principle relates to civil society. While all of this is positive, perhaps the biggest omission in these guiding principles is any reference to core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity (although this is now referenced later in Objective 3).

The Objectives of the Policy

As with the original, the Policy identifies **nine objectives** that GAC will pursue to realize the Policy's purpose of promoting more effective cooperation, maximizing CSO impact and fostering a strong and

¹ “Examples of CSOs include community-based organisations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, farmers' associations, faith-based organizations, philanthropic organizations, human rights groups, labour unions, youth organizations, co-operatives, village associations, professional associations, independent research institutes, humanitarian assistance organizations, and the non-profit media.”

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vibrant civil society. (Not all objectives are addressed in this brief.) Relative to the original, the sequence of the objectives is slightly reorganized, giving higher profile to humanitarian assistance and tweaking some of the language.

Compared with the original, the Policy also introduces a welcome innovation: “**example**” **action areas** specific to each objective. These give some direction in terms of implementation of each of the objectives. CCIC noted in its submission on the draft revised Policy that the actions were generally too directive, reflecting the government’s (rather than CSO) priorities. The Council suggested that the actions should instead be developed through a separate consultative process to better reflect shared or CSO priorities. Perhaps in response to this critique, the action areas in the Policy are now listed as “examples,” and the Policy signals that these can be adapted and enhanced. Many new action areas have also been added since the draft, and more closely aligned with some key CSO asks.

The few CSO actions cited (under **Objective 1** concerning gender equality) are clearly aligned with Istanbul Principles 2 and 3 (*Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women and girls’ rights* and *Focus on people’s empowerment, democratic ownership and participation*). Under this objective, the government also commits to working with CSOs and their partners to support women’s rights organizations, networks and movements of various sizes, and to working with the most marginalized groups including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit and intersex (LGBTQ2I) people.

In **Objective 2**, the Policy reaffirms the fundamental role that governments play in guaranteeing an enabling environment – in particular, freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly – for CSOs in developing countries as well as in Canada. The Policy makes specific reference to supporting new, existing and non-traditional partners, women’s rights, youth and Indigenous organizations and networks, and human rights defenders. The inclusion of references to an enabling environment in Canada, and to a broad array of civil society actors, are welcome additions that strengthen the revised Policy relative to the original. Relative to the draft version, the Policy also substantially expands the proposed action areas under this objective. Of particular note, the Policy commits the government to “leverage the full scope of Canada’s diplomatic assets to promote and protect an enabling environment for civil society;” to “work to ensure that the Policy informs other relevant departmental policies and programs;” to integrate assessments of an enabling environment into its human rights reporting; to advocate for an enabling environment through international forums like the Community of Democracies, as well as in online spaces; and to work with women’s rights groups on the ground. The Policy’s support for an enabling environment also includes commitments around funding (**Objective 6**) and institutionalized dialogue (**Objective 7**).

The Policy goes some way toward recognizing the unique roles and requirements for CSOs operating in humanitarian contexts (**Objective 3**). CCIC welcomes the greater profile for humanitarian assistance in the Policy’s objectives (relative to the original), and the shift from suffering-focused language to more empowering dignity-focused language. More concretely, the Policy includes a new direct reference to the core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanity, as well as to international humanitarian law (not referenced in the original); a new commitment to invest in multi-year humanitarian funding; and a new affirmation of needs-based humanitarian response.

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With respect to funding (**Objective 6**), the Policy maintains the original's commitment to predictable, equitable, flexible and transparent funding mechanisms. In (perhaps) a tacit acknowledgement of the continued absence of such mechanisms at GAC in recent years, the Policy also includes a new commitment to streamline and accelerate funding selection processes and reporting procedures (including results-based and risk management), with the aim to reduce administrative burdens on CSO partners.

The Policy retains the original's commitment to supporting public engagement around Canadian international assistance (**Objective 8**), and goes further by recognizing the work CSOs do to foster global citizenship and engage citizens in transformative action. Furthermore, while the original was broadly supportive of such public engagement initiatives, the revised Policy commits Global Affairs Canada to strategic investments in these activities. On the downside, relative to the original, the Policy no longer refers to the role Canadian CSOs play in supporting the work of Canadian volunteers.

In the context of **Objective 9** on "sustainability, transparency, accountability, and results," the Policy commits Global Affairs Canada to "invest in policy research, better data collection, including of sex and age disaggregated data, and monitoring and evaluation approaches for gender equality." This new commitment to invest in and improve such key methodological practices is welcome. However, the focus on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) in this objective – new in the revised Policy – comes despite this not being identified as a priority by CSOs in the International Assistance Review consultations.

The Implementation Plan

The Policy's commitment to a partnership-based approach is perhaps most notable with respect to implementation, particularly through pledges to develop an implementation plan in consultation with civil society, and to revise and prioritize specific areas of the Policy through annual and ongoing consultation. While "example" action areas are generally not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound), this consultative approach allows for refinement of mutually agreed actions, and sharing of knowledge and best practices, in support of evermore effective partnership.

Conclusion

The release of the revised Policy represents a clear affirmation of the government's intention to implement a strong policy to guide partnerships between government and civil society in support of international cooperation, and to do so in a way that reflects the spirit and goal of partnership. After more than two years of waiting, civil society – including CCIC – is ready to work with the government to implement this policy promptly and effectively.