



# CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE: UNDERFUNDED FEMINIST AMBITIONS

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## OVERVIEW

- In 2017 Canada launched its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), committing to a rights-based approach that positions gender equality as an intrinsic global objective and a requisite for the achievement of all other goals. FIAP has resulted in significant shifts but the key framework targets are yet to be achieved. While the 2018/2019<sup>2</sup> statistical report shows that 95% of development bilateral assistance in some way integrates gender equality objectives, just over 6% of it has gender equality as its main objective, which is far from the Government's target of 15%.
- FIAP has positioned Canada among leading donors focused on the empowerment of women and girls. Canada has recognized the importance of investing in local women's rights organizations, as shown by its Cdn\$300 million<sup>3</sup> contribution to the Equality Fund and Cdn\$150 million<sup>4</sup> to the Women's Voice and Leadership Program, the world's largest commitment of this nature. It remains to be seen whether this approach will be scaled up, especially in light of the ambitious program objectives that

Awaho Talla is the first woman in her family to own land. Next, she plans on building a house that she can rent to supplement her income. In her tribe, socio-economic status is often determined by the number of cattle they own and women rarely own property or have decision-making powers in the family.

SOURCE: UN Women

are matched with limited funding and short program cycles.

- Policy priorities of Canada's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and ambitious targets of the FIAP are undermined by low funding allocations. Canada's ODA for 2018-19 fiscal year amounted<sup>5</sup> to Cdn\$6.2 billion, only 0.27% of the country's Gross National Income (GNI). This put Canada below average<sup>6</sup> donor effort of the Development Assistance Committee

(DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

- The current pandemic has put the global governance structures and actors under scrutiny. With the humanitarian needs rising and development objectives threatened, Canada's international political ambitions and persistently low levels of ODA funding stand in contradiction, which may in part explain the latest UN vote for Canada's failure to be elected to the Security Council.<sup>7</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) established the country's donor profile as one that is strongly supportive of human rights and transformative gender equality efforts. Canada is increasingly recognizing the importance of flexible funding for feminist organizations and sustained and comprehensive investments in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).<sup>8</sup> However, persistently low budgets have seriously hindered the effectiveness of the country's international ambitions.

Canada's civil society's calls to increase official development assistance (ODA) are gaining momentum in the current context of the global pandemic of COVID-19, which has highlighted the interdependent nature of our economies and social safety nets. Canada has responded by announcing<sup>9</sup> an additional Cdn\$400 million in COVID-related programming in September 2020, followed by an additional investment of

Cdn\$485 million in December 2020, resulting<sup>10</sup> in Cdn\$865 support for partners of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator alone and approximately Cdn\$1.23 billion of "new and additional" international spending. It remains to be confirmed the degree to which these funds will be considered ODA-eligible,<sup>11</sup> or what the development and humanitarian setbacks resulting from the pandemic will mean for the Government's development cooperation agenda over the next few years.

Canada's ODA performance, which stood at 0.27% of the GNI in 2019, is below the OECD donor average<sup>12</sup> performance (0.38% for 2019). Low levels of ODA, combined with the projected rise in humanitarian and development costs resulting from pandemic-containment measures and its impact in developing countries, constrain Canada's ability to achieve its policy objectives without a significant budgetary increase.

## PART I: UNPACKING REQUISITES FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA

After a yearlong public consultation, Canada announced its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in June 2017.<sup>13</sup> Through a human rights-based approach, FIAP positions gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as an intrinsic global objective and

a requisite for the achievement of all other international assistance goals. Consistent with the ODA Accountability Act (ODAAA), this human rights-based framework highlights the normative values of "equality and non-discrimination," "participation and inclusion"

and “transparency and accountability.” All of the above is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>14</sup> (Agenda 2030), which addresses gender equality as the stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) as well as through targets and indicators across other SDGs.

The realization of the SDGs has been threatened by the current pandemic with experts warning that global goals have been set back by a decade.<sup>15</sup> Canada’s new and additional funding for COVID-19 related programming have largely been oriented towards crisis containment, with steps geared towards a more just and sustainable recovery still awaited. In relation to its commitments to the SDGs, Canada produced *Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy*<sup>16</sup> in 2019, which outlines key areas for national engagement. In July 2018, Canada presented its first Voluntary National Review<sup>17</sup> (VNR), although concerns about the inclusivity and the rigor of the reporting process remain, as outlined in the 2018 Report of Canada’s Commissioner on the Environment and Sustainable Development.<sup>18</sup>

In adopting the FIAP Canada joins an informal global coalition of countries with a “feminist foreign policy.” These donor countries include Sweden,<sup>19</sup> a long-standing champion with a strong feminist foreign policy, as well as France<sup>20</sup> and Mexico, which joined this group<sup>21</sup> in 2019 and 2020 respectively. While fears of oversimplified feminist approaches remain, Canada’s FIAP is showing results with a clear set of benchmarked targets. In the 2018/2019 fiscal year, Canada reportedly reached<sup>22</sup> its goal of ensuring that 95% of bilateral international assistance budget addressed gender equality as a principal or a significant objective. However, only a fraction of that funding is allocated to initiatives that directly address gender equality (6.2% in the same fiscal year).

More significant is Canada’s goal of ensuring that at least 15% of its bilateral development funding directly targets gender equality, which remains to be realized. Canada’s progress

places the country above the global average, which is around 4% for all OECD donors, as a 2020 OECD report<sup>23</sup> indicates. The FIAP target to allocate 15% of bilateral assistance to gender-focused initiatives represents an effort to address this global funding imbalance that, as UN Women argues,<sup>24</sup> has resulted in “unacceptably slow” progress towards gender equality as a global goal. Programs with gender equality as the main target generally address underlying gender norms and other causes of gender-based discrimination and other harmful practices, making them an essential investment of any feminist actor.

The ambition encapsulated by the benchmark of 95%, however, leaves room for bureaucratic “gender-washing” against which the latest OECD report warns, calling on Canada not to undermine the integrity of the gender marker system that ranks the level of gender equality considerations in international assistance programming.<sup>25</sup> The danger is twofold: the figure of 95% obscures significant difference between gender markers, conflating programs where gender is a significant objective, but not the main objective, with those where gender equality is the principal goal of the project. Secondly, the departmental pressure to meet the objective of 95% of gender-responsive programming risks technocratic exaggeration of the extent to which gender equality objectives are integrated, thus invalidating the reliability of gender markers as a tool.

While investments in programs addressing root causes of gender inequality are yet to materialize, Canada is taking an important normative stance arguing for long-term, predictable, and flexible funding to women’s rights organizations. As of December 2020, this commitment has included a Cdn\$150 million local fund to women’s rights organizations (the Equality Fund)<sup>26</sup> and over Cdn\$180 million channelled through the Women’s Voice and Leadership<sup>27</sup> initiative working with feminist actors in historically disadvantaged countries. This funding is normatively significant, as Canada joins Sweden in the call

for flexible funding targeting women's rights organizations. To effectively work towards these goals, however, Canada's funding should be matched with the ambitions and duration of the programs themselves. Ambitious transformative commitments are far too often translated into modestly funded grants, allocated to too many CSOs and for short time periods.<sup>28</sup>

Canada's deliberate focus on a feminist lens has resulted in the development of vital policy instruments to support this framework. This includes the action area policy: A Feminist Approach: Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action,<sup>29</sup> as well as the Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance Policy and its Action Plan,<sup>30</sup> constructed with input from civil society representatives. To help enact these policy shifts, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has set up the International Assistance Operations Bureau, which includes a Task Force on Improving Effectiveness in which Canadian civil society participates.

By investing in the often-neglected areas of SRHR and the empowerment of women and girls, Canada's approach involves a thematic focus in terms of areas of intervention, which is expected to supplant the previous "countries of focus" model, although it is unclear what this entails in practice. This shift has often been described as a strategic and a more purposeful approach for Canada's international assistance although specific guidance in this regard is still pending.

Canada has continued to maintain its commitment to the most disadvantaged countries, with the target of earmarking 50% of funding for Sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>31</sup> although the latest statistical report would suggest the current levels are closer to 40%. More recently, the 2019 Mandate Letter of the Minister for International Development has highlighted the need for integrated programming, especially linking gender equality, climate finance, and agriculture.<sup>32</sup> Climate finance, however, is an area for which civil society is advocating for increased and more diverse funding. Canada's fair share of international climate finance until 2025/26 is \$1.8 billion annually (3.8% of US\$100 billion global target). Canada has not yet announced its commitment for the period of 2021 to 2025. However, the Government's 2015 commitment of \$2.65 billion over five years until 2020, and \$800 million per year in 2020/21, are a far cry from this fair share.<sup>33</sup> Future climate finance investments should aim for a more even ratio of adaptation (essential for poor and vulnerable populations) and mitigation in its climate finance. The current ratio is approximately 3:7 in favour of mitigation. Canada's climate finance portfolio should also increase its investment in projects that address gender equality as a principal target and those that are channelled through the civil society, which currently implements only about 7% of allocations. Lastly, Canada is among a few Paris Agreement donors whose climate finance largely consists of loans.<sup>34</sup>

## **PART II: FIAP, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, AND NEGLECTED HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES OF THE TRIPLE NEXUS AND LOCALIZATION**

Canada's FIAP is strongly aligned with objectives outlined in the Grand Bargain document from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which calls for unearmarked and multi-year funding for increasingly protracted and complex humanitarian crises. To achieve these objectives, GAC needs to re-structure its funding mechanisms to allow for long-

term, integrated, and flexible funding that also recognizes the expertise and agency of local actors, proven to be the most effective strategy for reaching the most marginalized populations.<sup>35</sup> Such a shift is clearly needed, given the evolving nature of increasingly predictable and protracted emergency settings that require sustained and strategic

investments to both save and sustain lives and elaborate sustainable long-term solutions for displaced populations and their host countries. This is especially important given the increasing proportion of Canada's ODA allocated for humanitarian purposes.<sup>36</sup>

Investment in core global issues such as displacement, conflict, climate change effects, or food insecurity offer an opportunity to expand Canada's funding and programming categories. The present practice, of earmarking funding as purely humanitarian or development, discourages integrated programming envisioned under the label of "triple nexus"<sup>37</sup> in the United Nations' New Way of Working. Endorsed during the same 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the triple nexus is the objective of integrating efforts across the continuum of operational environments spanning across what are traditionally classified as humanitarian (emergency), peace and security (conflict) and development (long-term poverty alleviation) settings. As a member of the OECD DAC Canada is now accountable to its 2019 "Recommendation on Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus," which will be explicitly monitored by the OECD DAC in various processes including its peer reviews.<sup>38</sup> Without such integrated approaches, investments in neglected yet highly impactful areas of emergency preparedness, disaster risk reduction, and in sustainable exit strategies are highly unlikely.

Added to this concern is a rigid regulatory system that constraints innovation and

equitable partnerships, such as the "direction and control"<sup>39</sup> regulations of Canada's Revenue Agency that prohibit attempts to boost country ownership, encapsulated by the global goal of "localization".

Localization<sup>40</sup> emerges as a largely unaccomplished objective of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, as outlined in the Grand Bargain document and other development frameworks. Local ownership, decision-making, funding, and operational control of ODA remains normatively imperative yet operationally elusive.<sup>41</sup> Canada, as a feminist donor, has yet to articulate its strategy for effectively shifting decision-making opportunities to local actors with intimate knowledge of local contexts and accountability to target populations across the triple nexus. Women's organizations, in particular, are proven to be the most effective at reaching the most marginalized, especially in humanitarian settings, yet they receive the least financial support.<sup>42</sup>

More generally, these lessons are also emerging in the civil society report from the Women's Voice and Leadership initiative, which calls for a greater investment in organizations' institutional capacity to mainstream gender.<sup>43</sup> This report also calls for greater consistency in the use of gender markers, which track the extent to which GAC-funded programs integrate gender equality as primary, significant, or non-targeted objective.

### **PART III: INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE BEYOND ODA**

The Canadian government continues to struggle to allocate substantial increases in its ODA to properly address root causes of key development challenges such as climate change, poverty and inequality. Instead, it has been encouraging alternative funding tools to maximize the impact of its ODA.

In 2018, the Government allocated Cdn\$1.5 billion over five years and Cdn\$492.7 million thereafter to support "innovation" in its international assistance. However, this funding has remained largely unused as of October 2020, despite being available through the International Assistance Innovation Program and the Sovereign Loans Program.<sup>44</sup> The

goal of these programs is for GAC to offer sovereign loans to countries and to make long-term equity investments in companies or in innovative financing mechanisms, working to support development objectives.

The Government announced the creation of the Development Finance Institute Canada (FinDev) in Budget 2017. FinDev Canada focuses on the role of direct foreign investment in boosting economic growth in high-risk environments

with limited access to financing for small and medium sized enterprises. As per its last annual report (2019), FinDev Canada's portfolio<sup>45</sup> included 9 clients for a total of USD\$94 million in commitments, 82% of which are equity investments. While the portfolio lags behind the desired level, the institution has retained a strong focus on the economic empowerment of women. FinDev modalities largely focus on direct (32%) and indirect (50%) equity, compared to only 18% in loan finance.

#### **PART IV: TO CHANGE EVERYTHING, WE NEED EVERYONE: A CASE FOR CANADA'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY**

Canada's FIAP is increasingly being strengthened by additional policy tools, guidelines, and strategic investments that build on sector experience on how to achieve the highest and the most transformative impact. However, Canada's donor profile in many partner countries has been tainted by a fragmented and at times incoherent foreign policy approach. Ensuring that diplomatic and trade branches reinforce the humanitarian, development, and peace areas of intervention is an urgent next priority.

Canada's feminist foreign policy aspirations are discredited by trade and security choices such as arms deals that aggravate some of the direst humanitarian crises and enable human rights abuses.<sup>46</sup> An egregious example is the current situation in Yemen. Canada's largest military export deal,<sup>47</sup> valued at Cdn\$14.8 billion with Saudi Arabia, fuels the conflict in the country, resulting in acute hunger, cholera outbreak, internal displacement and other humanitarian needs, to which Canada has contributed Cdn\$220 million since 2015. Ensuring the integrity of Canada's missions and the coherence between its interventions across

political, economic, and environmental spheres is a complex yet a fundamental requisite for Canada's good standing in conflict affected and fragile contexts.

To craft a coherent feminist foreign policy, GAC launched consultations in October 2020, with the initial white paper expected in February/ March 2021. It will be important that this policy is supported by appropriate budgetary allocations to allow for internal capacity strengthening within GAC, at the headquarters level but also in country missions. A feminist foreign policy would also be interrogated in relation to commitments towards a more intersectional approach, as Canada's development investments have so far not explicitly accounted for priorities of racial equity or the protection and the empowerment of people nonconforming with traditional gender norms. Given (1) the current fiscal outlook, (2) the pressure for international development assistance to increase, and (3) the trend of a reduced GAC overall budget since 2012 and the capacity strengthening investments to ensure GAC's readiness to implement a comprehensive feminist policy are constrained.

## CONCLUSION

Canada's current ODA is at near historically low levels, at a time when the world is reeling from the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen whether the interconnected nature of key global challenges and their consequences will mobilize the wealthiest governments, including Canada, to maximize investments in international assistance. Given Canada's current fiscal deficit, aggravated by the pandemic-containment measures, future ODA levels are difficult to predict.

Canada is facing the challenging task of achieving ambitious FIAP objectives on a historically low budget. As noted above, the traditional funding modalities and silos based on decades-old differentiations between humanitarian, development, and peace interventions undermine Canada's feminist and transformative ambitions. Overall, Canada's FIAP is a normatively sound and evidence-based policy framework, as demonstrated by the hopeful trend of providing direct

and flexible funding to women's rights organizations. However, the evidence also calls for legislative, financial, and regulatory improvements the framework needs for its effective implementation.

For FIAP to be effective, Canada's entire foreign policy must be transformed to include a coherent set of transformative objectives encompassing trade, diplomacy, and international assistance, consistent with feminist principles. This will require a different narrative about Canada on a global stage: one focused less on specific Canadian achievements and more on Canada's role in propelling forward a feminist agenda of progressive peer countries and integrating the perspectives of marginalized groups in key decision-making processes on global, regional, and national scales.

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