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## **Web-exclusive comment**

### **Our Africa policy should be made in Canada. Using Canadian expertise doesn't have to mean a return to the bad old days of "tied aid," says development specialist Don Sawyer**

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Special to Globe and Mail Update

Despite the rhetoric of Canadian politicians promising new money and new ideas to help build more sustainable, prosperous African societies, Canada's aid to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa remains meagre, piecemeal and ineffective.

Canada's commitment to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), so loudly trumpeted when it was announced in 2001, has all but melted away. We rarely hear about the ambitious United Nations Millennium Development Goals that Canada was to help achieve by 2015. And even last year's Group of Eight Gleneagles hoopla, which promised to double African aid (even if much of it was already committed), has become muffled under the weight of policy wrangling, disconnected officialdom, and lethargy. "Canada has an African aid policy, not a development policy," said Lucien Bradet, president of the Canada Council on Africa. "We need a coherent made-in-Canada strategy for Africa."

The figures bear him out. While Canada's official development assistance (ODA) for Africa grew to \$804-million in 2003 from \$140-million in 1999, the amount that went to Canadian public- and private-sector organizations involved in delivering development assistance plummeted to 25 per cent from 64 per cent. In 2003, the amount of Canadian assistance delivered by the Canadian private sector was less than 6 per cent. And all Canadian university and college assistance delivery represented less than 2 per cent of ODA funds for Africa. Even Canadian non-government organizations saw their participation drop to 17 per cent of Canadian assistance in 2003 from more than 36 per cent in 2000. Since then, the situation has become worse.

So where's the money going? With little public discussion or consultation, Canada has begun following a radical policy of "untied aid." This aid takes two main forms: "bilateral" (the direct dispersal of funds to developing country governments) and "multilateral" (payments to international organizations such as the World Bank, various UN agencies, and the World Health Organization). In 2004, bilateral aid skyrocketed to 41 per cent of Canadian assistance dollars, while another 42 per cent went to multilateral organizations. This left 17 per cent of our aid money available for truly Canadian

assistance initiatives that reliably reflect Canadian social principles and involve Canadian expertise.

So what's wrong with this new policy of hands-off Canadian assistance? After all, the development community has long complained about old tied-aid policies that saw as much as 80 per cent of Canadian assistance funds spent in Canada. Fiascos such as the Tanzanian wheat project of the 1960s are often (and quite rightly) cited as examples of the failure of this approach. (In that notorious project, it seems that Canadian aid personnel took one look at the vast grazing lands above Dar es Salaam and saw one thing: amber waves of grain. No matter that the area was dotted with villages and that Tanzanians didn't eat much bread anyway. Soon the whole program fell apart - the sophisticated Massey-Harris farm machinery could not be maintained, and the industrial bakery built as part of the project hardly lasted a few years - but not before putting dozens of small bakeries out of business). Tied aid was bad aid, everyone concluded.

But wait, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Our new aid policies of funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars into bilateral and multilateral coffers aren't so great, either. In the case of multilateral aid, Canadian money often goes toward supporting bloated and inefficient bureaucracies. Moreover, we have little influence in how our money will be used. Will the multilateral agencies support projects, institutions and priorities that reflect Canadian values, beliefs and concerns? Who knows?

Bilateral aid sounds great - government to government assistance lets us duck accusations of neo-colonialism and paternalism. Plus we don't really have to do anything. No messy projects to track, no need to actually work with developing country partners to assess genuine needs and match them with Canadian expertise. But does bilateral aid get to those who need it the most? Even if they wanted to, few developing country recipients have the financial systems and personnel needed to monitor where and how the money is spent. (Rather than risk charges of paternalism, donor countries are often reluctant to demand much accountability in any case.)

So what to do? If we want to evolve a genuine Canadian development policy - and make a real difference in reducing global poverty - we need to do two things:

First, we need to follow through on the commitment that Canada and other industrialized countries made more than 25 years ago to put 0.7 per cent of our GDP toward development assistance.

While, shamefully, only five countries (Norway, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands) have met that target, Canada isn't even close. Of the 22 countries in the Development Assistance Committee (industrialized donor countries), Canada ranks 14th, with a miserly 0.26 per cent of our GDP going toward international assistance.

Second, we need to re-Canadianize our assistance policy.

I'm not talking about returning to the bad old days of tied aid. I'm talking about evolving a policy that, first and foremost, recognizes that the real knowledge of local needs, conditions and priorities - as well as much of the capacity to respond to these - are on the ground in the developing countries themselves. But any effective policy must also accept responsibility for ensuring that ODA dollars are spent efficiently and with maximum benefit to the poorest and most marginalized sectors of the recipient's society. Only in this way do we avoid pouring money into agencies and activities that may or may not reflect Canadian development and social priorities while providing Canadians with the opportunity to participate in the development and implementation of our assistance policy.

To re-Canadianize, we need to follow two main strategies: Provide greater support for local, often small, developing-country NGOs with Canadian linkages and proven track records; and fund projects and initiatives that make more direct use of Canadian skills and knowledge in both the private and public sectors. The best local African NGOs provide the most efficient and effective means of delivering ODA to those in greatest need. Their overhead is small, salaries low, and their staff is often local. These NGOs are located in the communities they serve. They rarely build bridges or dam rivers. More often, they work on less glamorous projects, such as increasing girls' school participation rates and mobilizing communities to assess and address their own development needs.

Putting Canadians back into Canada's development policy and its implementation means unabashedly acknowledging the wealth of innovative ideas and technology that Canada has to share with communities and nations dedicated to creating better social, economic, health, governance and environmental conditions for its people. It means reversing the practice of marginalizing Canadian corporations, colleges, universities and NGOs and, instead, incorporating their experience and expertise at the very heart of CIDA programming. Smaller, more focused Canadian projects that involve a broader cross-section of Canadian citizens will not only result in more effective development, it will also mean more public understanding of and support for our assistance initiatives.

By mobilizing the thousands of Canadians committed to sensitively collaborating with African partners in innovative, effective development projects, Canada will begin to build a genuine development policy that does justice to the desires of Canadians to see their country contribute to a more just and equitable world.

*Don Sawyer, the former director of Okanagan College's International Development Centre, managed six CIDA-funded projects in West Africa.*