

Jim MacNeill *et al.* Halifax, *CIDA and Sustainable Development: How Canada's Aid Policies Can Support Sustainable Development in the Third World More effectively*

**Leonardo Ngabo Lutaaya\***

Canadian development assistance, which falls under the rubric of Canadian foreign policy, has been increasingly scrutinized in recent years. The scrutiny, if it is not just routine, should be welcomed. Any programme which has been in place for as long as half a century amidst dynamic domestic and foreign environments, needs (re)-examining at least to re-state and/or re-affirm the initial philosophy and, if needed, re-focus the mission. Canada, unlike many countries, is unique in reviewing its foreign policy: it engages its publics and sometimes even invites outsiders. While there are critics that the exercise is but window-dressing, there is contending evidence that, at least for political survival, the regime in power at the time of the review better not ignore the sentiments the publics have expressed publicly. The results of policy reviews are not to be ignored both within and beyond Canada.

The results of one such review of direct importance to Africa are presented in *CIDA and Sustainable Development: How Canada's Aid Policies Can Support Sustainable Development in the Third World More Effectively*. This bilingual report (of six chapters, 71 and 84 pages in English and French respectively) synthesises contributions from individuals from academic and research institutions, the private sector, labour unions, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations and others who took part in Roundtable Consultations held in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver in 1989. Commissioned by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada's foreign aid disbursing agency, the consultations were overseen by Jim MacNeill, an expert on sustainable development.

The MacNeill Report is located in, and is Canada's follow up to *Our Common Future* (MacNeill was an Ex-Officio member of Brundtland's Commission) at the international level and, locally, The National Task Force on Environment and Economy. Like its stimulants, the MacNeill Report re-affirms growth, with the first Chapter tellingly entitled: The growth imperative and sustainable development, but notes mistakes made in the past. Thus, while espousing growth, the Chapter paints a gloomy picture — if approaches to development continue along paths recognized as thorny.

Chapter Two, entitled Sustainable development and central decision making soothes the fears Chapter one raises. Disasters are avoidable — if sustainable development thinking is centred rather than relegated, as in the

past, to an add-on in institutions, policies and decision-making. Sustainable development must be institutionalised, embodied in project design, and must be seen to be practised in delivering development aid programmes. That is the way to capacity building.

Chapters Three and Four identify the environment as a resource base, and urbanization, as areas requiring priority in CIDA's programmes. Economies and livelihoods in aid receiving countries depend on environmental resources. But that resource base is increasingly strained -not out of malice, vandalism or ignorance on the part of the users as due to absences of exit options, competing demands and, not least significantly, due to the conditionalities donors impose. Canada as a major aid donor, has the expertise, the domestic policies and machineries, and the voice and capacity to initiate changes in the donor community to enhance rather than erode the environment in the developing countries. Canada can, and should, persuade like-minded donors to strengthen the capacities of the aid recipients to live within their own environment resource-based means.

Popular participation, a key ingredient in domestic and foreign policy making in Canada, is not ignored in the report. Hence, Chapter Five is aptly entitled Democratizing the development process. In this Chapter, the report commends Canada for having mechanisms, machineries and resources that enable popular participation in decisions that bear on environmental resources. However, the report cautions against transferring blindly made-in-Canada models and imposing them on developing countries, for any model is culturally bound and it must be to be useful. A model evolved in a developing country might reflect the value that people are part of the ecosystem, rather than as in the case of the western cultures, separate from it (p. 52). As noted, and rightly so, each developing country will need models reflecting its own unique political and institutional cultures, meaning that demanding popular participation must be weighed carefully. In many Third World countries, under various forms of one-party rule, controlled democracy, military dictatorship, insisting on open hearings could expose people to unnecessary risk (p. 53). While not condoning repressive regimes, note is taken of the limits national sovereignty places on blunt external intervention (but regimes now know they can be made to pay for repression).

The MacNeill report is not bent on criticizing; it makes several concrete recommendations on increasing the effectiveness of Canadian aid. In Chapter Five in particular, the report, little talked about in Canada's alert international development community, and little known by aid recipients, reads like an early edition of Canada's Foreign Policy: Principles and Priorities for the Future released in November 1994: adopts a strategy of focusing on a few countries rather than operating everywhere; make sustainable development a criterion in Canada's aid-related procurement

policies by loosening conditionalities such as requirements that aid recipient Y spends X per cent of the aid on Canadian goods and services; cease fire by ending the competition syndrome among the aid donors' operatives; build and strengthen capacities within CIDA and executing agencies and partners to ensure translating into action stated commitments to sustainable development.

If in making these and other recommendations, the MacNeill Report had forgotten, and God forbid, how CIDA is relatively autonomous, the 1989 federal budget (and subsequent ones since) that targeted CIDA with disproportionately large cuts (p. xii) was a timely and rude reminder of domestic and global constraints on CIDA in carrying out its mandated activities. How CIDA will perform in 1996 and beyond given the 1994 foreign policy review, is the question Canadian international development NGOs, advocacy groups, and the recipients of Canada's aid, should not try to answer without reading *CIDA and Sustainable Development*. Meanwhile, the experiences of the East African countries which have since lost out in receiving Canada's bilateral development assistance should be a lesson in what Africa -otherwise hitherto the leading recipient of Canadian bilateral aid- should have been doing and should do: buckle up. The road ahead is rough: the future does not look very good for the aid recipients without record performance. Put to maximum use the aid received, however little, while it is still coming our way.

---

\* Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.