

The Importance of Transparency, Accountability and Intersectionality in the Implementation of International Assistance

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Issue

Effective and sustainable international bilateral assistance, within and across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, requires transparency and accountability. Moreover, this effectiveness is heightened by adopting an intersectional feminist perspective that highlights the needs of the most vulnerable groups among affected communities. Nevertheless, the implementation of transparency, accountability and intersectionality is challenging in practice.

Background

In February 2019 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) adopted the Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. DAC defines the triple nexus as the "interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions" and the "nexus approach" as the "aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity, capitalizing on the comparative advantages of each pillar" (Development Initiatives 2019). The need to work at the nexus between emergency assistance and longer-term approaches has long been recognized for the approach's capacity to reduce risk and vulnerability of crisis-affected populations while supporting sustainable enhancements to wellbeing. This notion builds on the precedents established by

other articulations of best practice for development and humanitarian assistance such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Grand Bargain and the 2016 Agenda for Humanity.

The Government of Canada (GoC) employs the logic of the triple nexus in its international assistance, which is understood to comprise international development, humanitarian assistance, and peace and security initiatives (Global Affairs Canada [GAC] 2019a). Canada is actively pursuing the implementation of best practices and lessons learned for effectively working at the triple nexus. At the forefront of these efforts is the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), launched in 2017 (GAC 2017). To this end, GAC has developed a range of guidance documents and tools to facilitate a consistent and coherent implementation of the government's policy, such as the "Feminist approach — Innovation and effectiveness guidance note" (GAC 2019b).

Canada engages across and within the triple nexus with a gender-based approach, based on an intersectional feminist perspective. GAC's feminist perspective applies a human rights-based approach for transformative change, with the aim of making societies more equal, prosperous and peaceful (ibid.). Grounded in the FIAP, this approach seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more inclusive world, while ensuring the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (GAC 2017). In this context, the GoC defines gender equality as

enabling the full participation of diverse groups of men, women and non-binary people in all spheres of life (GAC 2019b). The FIAP applies a feminist approach to six action areas: gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; human dignity; growth that works for everyone; environment and climate action; inclusive governance; and peace and security.

Transparency

While the goals and objectives of the GoC aim to address the most vulnerable groups, existing data lacks the level of detail needed for the Canadian public and international assistance recipients to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of certain programs and initiatives. The policy outlines several general goals, such as intending to encourage greater political participation by women and girls (GAC 2017). Yet in order to effectively evaluate the impacts of a policy, the data that is produced should incorporate not only the successes that have been produced but also the failures. Current findings that are reported and made available to the general public often highlight only the successes in relation to the policy. While GAC intends to improve the means of data collection with an increased focus on success stories (Kilroy, Kirby and Bhatia-Murdach 2019), there are no good criteria currently in place to analyze data in which goals and objectives have ultimately failed. By increasing transparency with the data that is available and reporting on all outcomes and not simply the successes, we can better evaluate if the gender-based approach is having a significant impact on women. Evidently, effective program monitoring and evaluation are important components of ensuring that collected data is transparent and detailed. This allows for effective conclusions to be made regarding the action plans that are set out in the policy.

Accountability to the Public

Best practices for implementing a nexus approach call for donor governments to be accountable to the public. Accountability to the public enables governments to pursue ambitious plans. This accountability relies on transparency regarding the bilateral initiatives in which the government is involved. Canada is dedicated to enhancing transparency around international assistance, as demonstrated by its commitment to the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the International Aid Transparency Initiative and the Open Government Partnership (GAC 2019a). Making information readily

available, easily accessible and comprehensible to the non-expert public is crucial for informing citizens and cultivating trust in the government. Currently, there is no designated location for all information, which remains scattered across a variety of sources, including government databases, reports issued by non-governmental organizations, and the GAC Project Browser, making it difficult for users to collect. To this end, the narrative on international assistance should be framed around the tangible impacts and achievements of said assistance (Gouett 2019).

Currently, the available resources and data focus on overview information and provide few details of international assistance achievements, limiting the possibilities for the public to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of assistance initiatives. This lack of depth and transparency skews public perception. For instance, in the lead-up to Canada's 2019 federal election, then Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer proposed a 25 percent cut to Canada's international assistance spending (ibid.). The resonance of this proposal among certain groups of Canadians is indicative of a lack of public understanding around international assistance, contributing to a systematic overestimation of Canada's international generosity. For instance, a 2019 survey by Nanos Research, commissioned by the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH 2019), found that Canadians believe the government spends 17 cents for every dollar on development aid—far more than the two cents per dollar of the federal budget that is actually spent (ibid.).

Accountability to Stakeholders and Affected Communities

Beyond accountability to the public, donor governments are also accountable to stakeholders and affected communities. This is recognized by the GoC in its intersectional feminist international assistance, which acknowledges that reinforcing accountability is critical for achieving transformative change through its international assistance (GAC 2019b). Accordingly, the FIAP advocates for initiatives that assume a long-term perspective, relying on tactics and strategies grounded in context-specific realities (GAC 2017). The GoC's guidance for reinforcing this accountability notes several actions to be pursued, including: considering the risks associated with altering traditional power relations; ensuring that the perspectives and voices of affected individuals—including diverse

groups of women and girls—are included in results-based management practices; facilitating communication; and targeting the most marginalized by promoting inclusive disaggregated data (GAC 2019b).

Despite global recognition of its importance, fostering this form of accountability in practice remains a challenge in the implementation of a nexus approach. Actors have pursued diverse approaches to overcome this challenge. For instance, humanitarian actors working in Chad and Haiti have increasingly made use of perception surveys with target communities to guide their planning and programming efforts according to context-specific needs (CIC 2019). Moreover, among development actors, the World Bank has adapted its jobs program in Ethiopia based on consultations with refugees and other actors, which highlighted specific concerns such as the distance between employment sites and refugee-hosting areas (ibid.).

Furthermore, some donors have adapted their international assistance strategies to incentivise joint humanitarian-development action, thereby increasing their accountability to stakeholders. Germany's Transitional Development Assistance (TDA) is a promising example of such initiatives (Center on International Cooperation [CIC] 2019). Led by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), TDA is designed to bridge immediate and long-term funding to build the resilience of people and institutions in fragile contexts (BMZ n.d.). For this purpose, BMZ works closely with the UNWFP and UNICEF, which gives them greater access to marginalized individuals within their communities of work.

Implementing Intersectionality

Canada pursues a gender-based approach to international assistance, based on the FIAP. Gender is a socially constructed and situated concept that varies across cultures (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003). GAC understands intersectionality as a model of analysis that recognizes and examines the consequences of interacting inequalities, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability, on people who occupy different social locations (GAC 2019b). An intersectional feminist perspective is therefore aimed at addressing the unequal relationships between individuals based upon their social, economic, political, cultural and sexual differences (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003).

While intersectional feminism provides the basis for the proposals advanced among FIAP's action areas, the implementation of this idea in practice thus far has been insufficient as a means of spurring transformative and sustainable change (Tiessen 2019). While increasing participation of marginalized individuals is positive, these individuals must directly benefit from this participation (ibid.). For instance, while the FIAP proposes to increase women's participation in the formal labour force as a means of increasing economic empowerment, evidence demonstrates that this participation means little if women have no control over how their income is used within their household (ibid.). Equally, it is important to question assumptions around agency and the capacity of women in other societies to counter perceptions that women are weak and vulnerable.

Additionally, despite espousing an understanding of intersectionality, the FIAP has been criticized for prioritizing heterosexual and cisgender women and girls, overlooking other intersecting dimensions of marginalization such as gender identity and sexual orientation (Mason 2019). A persistent challenge to counter such critiques is the inadequacy of traditional monitoring and evaluation measures and indicators (Bardall 2020). For instance, an intersectional feminist evaluation of women and girls' empowerment is comparatively resource-heavy relative to traditional gender-based analysis, and it requires significant expertise to conduct. Moreover, progress across indicators such as these only appears incrementally (ibid.).

FIAP must address the root causes of structural and systemic inequities in an intersectional way (Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights 2016). This brief makes recommendations on how Canada may improve the implementation of its feminist policy by having an approach that is accountable, transparent and intersectional to ensure the best impact on the livelihoods of women, girls and all vulnerable individuals around the world.

Recommendations

- 1. Canada should increase access to timely and easily comprehensible information regarding international assistance, inclusive of successes and failures, and improve information management.** Positive public opinion, within donor countries concerning international assistance, is necessary

to shape an environment conducive to the implementation of effective assistance efforts. The public, including both the expert and non-expert public, should share a common understanding of Canada's international assistance, based on facts. This understanding should recognize there must be transparency concerning both successes and failures, as the lessons learned from these experiences are equally valuable to inform more effective future initiatives (Development Initiatives 2019). This is especially necessary when working at the triple nexus where a high degree of risk is involved. Metrics should be developed to inform criteria on data transparency to ensure further accountability. Moreover, key performance indicators should be established and the results of monitoring and evaluation activities in relation to these indicators should be made available in a designated place to measure the progress of these international assistance initiatives.

2. **Canada should engage meaningfully with affected communities and individuals, in particular, women and girls.** To ensure accountability to affected communities, donors should move beyond tokenism to engage with those they seek to target in the spaces in which donor initiatives are to be implemented. This engagement should account for context-specific realities such as cultural perceptions of gender, age, race and other intersecting dimensions of inequality. Areas for meaningful engagement include the formal labour market, where women and girls are significantly underrepresented. Canada should adopt the best practices of BMZ by working closely with partners that can provide them with access to marginalized individuals to best respond to context-specific needs sustainably.
3. **Canada should incorporate a more comprehensive intersectional feminist approach to international assistance.** Although the FIAP mentions women and girls, other vulnerable gender groups must be identified and targeted for the improvement of gender equality. GAC should therefore ensure there are adequate resources for conducting meaningful evaluations, including resources for consistent training in intersectional evaluation that have been developed based on input from concerned stakeholders among both donors and recipients.

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