

Governance, pluralism, diversity and human rights



Introduction

Inter Pares was founded in 1975. Our feminist analysis informs our understanding that unequal power structures are at the root of underdevelopment, and that transformative social change is required for true positive development. The following is a summary of the relevant section of our full submission to the International Assistance Review (IAR).

Many of the counterparts with which Inter Pares works are engaged in struggles aimed at pressing their government officials and institutions to be more responsive and accountable to the needs of their populations. In many places we see limited and often shrinking space for citizens to participate in economic and political decision making, and serious gaps in the promotion and defence of human rights by state and non-state actors.

Far too often international assistance aimed at strengthening systems of governance has a top down approach concentrated principally on building government institutions. Where trade interests of the donor country are a strong driving force, support for governance can often be self-serving, involving the promotion of regulatory regimes that will be most beneficial to the foreign investors, at the expense of the needs of the local populations.

For Inter Pares, governance does not refer simply to government; in fact government is not the primary element. Rather, good and effective government flows from and is in function of broad, active, mature and responsible citizenship. It is precisely for this reason that individuals, associations and institutions within civil society have to be central to any development strategy and international programs to support local development. The priority should be on strengthening the authentic participation of all people - in particular those who have been

historically excluded - in forging solutions to the conditions of their lived lives. And the promotion and protection of human rights must be central to that effort.

Strengthening the capacity of marginalized people to influence the social, economic and political structures that govern their lives – even as forces of globalization, government decentralization, repression and militarization threaten the basis of civil society – remains a central focus of Inter Pares' work.

Inter Pares' Work on this Theme

Since its inception more than 40 years ago, Inter Pares has supported civil society organizations in developing countries to engage with their governments, within their societies and globally, to address poverty and inequality, gender inequality and human rights issues. We believe that our counterparts are best placed to define their own priorities, and to develop appropriate strategies to make their governments and institutions accountable in terms of governance, pluralism, diversity and human rights.

Inter Pares' programs have contributed to building organizations in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Canada, many of which are now CSO leaders in governance, civil society participation, and the construction of citizenship - especially for the most marginalized, who are often neglected in policy-making and access to public services.

Recommendations

Focus on civil society, and recognize its existing capacities

It is difficult if not impossible to think of a case where human rights have improved, or governance has become more inclusive or accountable, without strong domestic civil society input. Improving governance should therefore primarily focus on supporting civil society, with building government (and/or parliamentary) capacity comprising an important but smaller component.

Inter Pares has learned over the years that the most effective civil society groups are those created by people in affected communities. These local grassroots groups have more accountability to their communities. They have the trust of community members, and the historical and contextual knowledge so essential to understanding sensitivities and identifying needs in ways that outsiders can never replicate. They know the issues, and have ideas about how to address them and the people to do it. What they need is funding, and in some cases political and technical support.

For years our partners throughout the global South have witnessed and experienced an increasingly vertical "projectization" of aid that refuses to cover rent, salaries, institutional strengthening, or costs for locally identified needs. With little core funding available, they tell us they are forced to accept funding for inappropriately constrained "projects" just to survive, and try to fund work that directly aligns with their mandate from whatever cost recovery they can gain through these projects. With flexible core support, they can act on needs they have identified themselves. Defining needs from Canada and assuming we are the experts and they are the students is not compatible with a feminist approach to development. We need to recognize local capacities, and let them indicate the needs and agenda, rather than treating them as subcontractors.

For example, when Inter Pares began supporting grassroots ethnic civil society organizations in Burma's conflict zones over 20 years ago, they were few, small and nascent, growing out of communities directly affected by armed conflict,

human rights abuses and ethnic marginalization. The Canadian government, through CIDA/DFATD, has been almost alone among governmental donors in supporting these groups over the past 15 years, contributing to core costs and organizational strengthening rather than short-term projects. The result is a highly professional, vibrant, and well networked ethnic civil society today, with groups taking on highly complex issues, providing draft policies used in peace negotiations, and with significant achievements in human rights, environmental protection, women's rights, and the establishment of an independent media.

Support the most marginalized within civil society

The dynamics of power and exclusion have left many people, groups and communities on the margins, subject to fundamental violations of their human rights. International assistance must take every precaution to ensure that its interventions not only do no harm but are aimed at building more inclusive and pluralistic societies. Canada's international development programming should create space for marginalized voices and strengthen the agency and participation of civil society actors that have been historically excluded on the basis of their sex, race, ethnicity, colour, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or other factors.

Frequently the experiences of marginalized people are also characterised by resistance and resilience. The very fact of being oppressed, of having fundamental rights denied or diminished, often leads to attempts to press for positive change and the creation of innovative, collective action and community-based movements. These require our political and financial support.

The civil society groups that Inter Pares has supported in Burma for 20 years, as noted in the previous section, were formed by displaced people of marginalized ethnic groups, and by women who are further marginalized within those groups. Despite the challenges of working under government scorched-earth campaigns, they have thrived due to determination and long-term,

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flexible core support. Since 2012, Burma has become more open to international assistance, and international donors are entering the country keen to work with the government and with civil society based in central Yangon. Many choose to bypass independent civil society based in the ethnic conflict zones, and seek instead to extend development to these areas from central Burma, usually in partnership with government or with Yangon-based civil society. By ignoring locally based civil society and the history of people in these regions resisting government abuses and central control for over 60 years, many of these interventions are seen locally as vehicles for government/military control and are leading to mistrust, tensions, increased conflict and duplication. To its credit, Canada recently committed to continue support for ethnic community-based civil society through a 2016-2020 program with Inter Pares, while simultaneously supporting other work in central Burma toward governmental accountability and civil society strengthening. This helps Canada retain its reputation as a politically balanced partner in a country still divided. It also helps the country move toward a more pluralistic democracy, which is the only way to end armed conflict and make democracy sustainable in this multi-ethnic context.

Adopt a human rights framework for international assistance as a tool for coherence between government policies

In line with the IAR discussion paper's call for greater policy coherence, Global Affairs Canada should put the full-range of human rights (including economic, social and cultural rights) at the centre of its international agenda, not limiting itself to development, but also trade and diplomacy. Adopting this framework would mean that concerns for human rights have precedence over other types of interventions that could impact those rights negatively. The IAR document notes that Canadian law requires all development assistance to be "*consistent with international standards of human rights*" and proposes adopting a rights-based approach to development¹. Yet Canada's current policy explicitly makes

development and humanitarian aid subservient to trade interests, with Canada's Global Markets Action Plan designed to "*ensure that all the diplomatic assets of the Government of Canada are harnessed to support the pursuit of commercial success by Canadian companies and investors in key foreign markets*"². The Plan states that Canada will "*leverage development programming to advance Canada's trade interests*"³.

With respect to the resource extraction sector in particular, Canada must ensure that there are basic conditions for the free, prior and informed consent of the populations in areas hosting projects that receive Canadian investments. A way that Canada could ensure policy coherence would be to open up new corporate accountability mechanisms in Canada, both non-judicial (such as setting up an ombudsperson for the corporate sector) and judicial (legislated access to Canadian courts), to prevent harm and offer remedy to victims of Canadian economic activities abroad when local justice mechanisms are either unable or unwilling to process those demands.

Support process-oriented outcomes with predictable and flexible core funding

Supporting human rights, pluralism and good governance is not like delivering relief supplies or building infrastructure. Claiming human rights, creating space for marginalized voices, establishing mechanisms to hold governments accountable: all of these are politically contentious projects that encounter resistance, and depend on contextual and external factors. Expecting time-bound quantifiable impacts is risky, naïve, and can be counterproductive. Positive outcomes may take years, depending on political will. However, without making the effort, things will not change.

The best way to ensure progress in these circumstances is to focus on *processes*. Helping grassroots organizations to become stronger, more democratic and inclusive, and networked with other like-minded organizations is helping them to achieve positive impact over the medium and long term. Setting up and supporting a political forum, an independent media outlet, or a mechanism for

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addressing complaints will create change that will respond to the evolving context and needs.

Local organizations need to plan strategically into the future with some confidence of their continued existence. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recently reported that *"Predictability of core funding is fundamental for civil society organizations to work effectively and independently, undertake long-term planning and adapt to evolving situations"*⁴. This requires multi-year, flexible core funding arrangements.

Inter Pares sees the establishment and maintenance of coalitions as a significant process-oriented result. We supported the formation and ongoing activities of the Burma News International coalition so that independent ethnic media groups could share skills and gain greater recognition for their work, but one of its unanticipated outcomes in recent years has been to counter hate speech between Buddhists and Muslims by establishing guidelines for journalistic ethics and training journalists on these.

In Peru, Inter Pares' counterpart DEMUS worked hard to pursue processes that exposed the forced sterilizations of over 300,000 indigenous people committed by the Peruvian government between 1995 and 2000. This process finally led to government acknowledgement and the creation of a national registry in 2015. Both of the above outcomes required ongoing core support to keep these processes going, and the local knowledge partners deployed to identify needs and possibilities along the way. Assistance tied to narrowly defined quantifiable outcomes would never have allowed these key achievements to happen.

Conclusion

The IAR Discussion Paper raises several issues of concern to GAC regarding this pillar, which are addressed by the above recommendations as follows:

Implementing Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda:

- Canada should recognize that good governance and accountability come from the grassroots

up, not from the government down, and should therefore focus its support on locally-run civil society more than on government.

Promoting inclusion, advancing respect for diversity and upholding human rights:

- Canada should focus its governance and human rights assistance on the most marginalized groups in society, particularly women, indigenous or ethnic groups, and people marginalized due to race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or other factors.

Maximizing impact of Canada's international assistance:

- Interventions should recognize local capacities, not assume that we are there to build their capacity, and let them indicate the needs and agenda, rather than treating them as subcontractors.
- Assistance should whenever possible be multi-year, flexible core funding that strengthens local civil society.
- Human rights and governance assistance should focus on creating and strengthening processes, local organizations, and coalitions.
- Canadian international assistance should be driven by a human rights framework that should also be the guiding framework for trade and foreign policy.

¹ Global Affairs Canada, IAR Discussion Document, p. 18

² Global Affairs Canada website, <http://www.international.gc.ca/commerce/index.aspx?lang=eng>, accessed 29 June 2016.

³ GMAP (Section 3: A Focused Pro-Trade and Investment Plan to Open New Markets), <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/plan.aspx?lang=eng>, accessed 29 June 2016.

⁴ *Practical recommendations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and enabling environment for civil society, based on good practices and lessons learned: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, United Nations General Assembly document A/HRC/32/20, 11 April 2016, p. 15 (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/073/52/pdf/G1607352.pdf?OpenElement>)