

“From Idealism to Imperialism”: Canada’s Dark History of NGO Funding

Interview with the co-author of "Paved with Good Intentions"

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For many years Stephen Harper’s Conservative government has been heavily criticised for its ideological management of aid funds. Known for its ties to right-wing religious groups and its unwavering pro-Israeli stance, the Harper government has cut the funding of organisations such as KAIROS working to promote, among other objectives, Palestinian human rights.

The Conservatives recently decided to review the funding of projects in Haiti, arguing there was a “lack of progress”.

We will recall, however, that “progress” in Haiti was greatly hindered when the US with the support of Canada and France orchestrated a coup d’état against Haiti’s very popular and democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Aristide was to implement measures to improve the living conditions of most Haitians, a move feared by the Haitian elite and their foreign partners making profits from the slavery-like conditions of most Haitians.

A Conservative government would have probably acted just like the Liberals did at the time.

Both the mainstream and alternative media suggest that the Harper government has scrapped the well-established and neutral institution of foreign aid, which was not prone to being influenced by the ruling party’s political and financial interests:

“The issue here is the reversal, by Stephen Harper, of a 60-year consensus shared by all previous governments about the central role of civil society in Canada. Every previous government has funded civil society groups and NGOs even when they espoused policies that contradicted the government’s own. Governments might have done so grudgingly and not as generously as some of us hoped. But it has been one of the quiet glories of Canadian democracy that our governments have often backed groups that criticized them or had competing priorities.

No more. With Stephen Harper, you either buy the party line or you get slapped down.” (Gerry Caplan, [Kairos case is a reminder of the real Harper agenda](#), [rabble.ca](#), February 20, 2011.)

To say that “every previous government has funded civil society groups and NGOs even when they espoused policies that contradicted the government’s own” is an incorrect statement. The book [Paved with Good Intentions – Canada’s Development NGOs from idealism to imperialism](#) “uncovers the darker side of the role played by NGOs.”

Like most developed countries, Canadian development NGOs have in fact served Canada's foreign and domestic interests, and it is not only since the present Conservative government took power that NGOs have served Canadian as well as US foreign policy objectives.

Global Research met with one of the authors of the book, Nik Barry Shaw, who explains the origins of development NGOs in Canada and how they are serving political interests.

Here is the first part of the interview.

How and when did you discover the influence of government funding on NGOs?

It started as a conjecture. We were involved in Haiti solidarity activism in the early 2000s and heard many sources criticising NGOs. We knew that their position in Haiti was a hundred per cent in line with the foreign policy interests in Canada. This influence obviously happens behind closed doors and it is hard to demonstrate.

In the late 60s and the 70s, with the antiwar movements and the influence of the liberation theory, a handful of NGOs tried to go in a radical direction doing things which activists nowadays should be doing: criticise Canadian foreign corporate interests in the Global South, in South Africa, Guatemala, the mining interests in Chile, Canada's foreign policy alignment with the US empire, etc. That criticism became an important part of their work and lots of projects were influenced by what they called the 'ideology of solidarity', which was saying to Canadians: "We need to fight on the side of the oppressed in these countries."

From the beginning, the funding of the NGOs was governmental; it started out as a creation from government and they were looser with the control. They probably did not expect anything to go off the rails, like CUSO - an NGO founded by Keith Spicer and other people who had ties to universities, and the Liberal Party of Canada. They went to Lester B. Pearson and appealed for funding, and a lot of NGOs did the same. CUSO was the first NGO funded by a government. The largess that it received from the government pushed others to ask for funding and that spurred the creation of a matching grant system.

It started as a governmental creation explicitly as a way of winning over ordinary Canadians to the idea that Canada has to be up on the world stage, and that our duty in the Cold War was to develop the Third World, and that NGOs would create that human connection with Canadians and the aid program because otherwise it wouldn't exist and would have no real relevance for ordinary Canadians

But it's funny that a handful of them, including CUSO, the biggest NGO at the time, ended up doing the opposite! They made a case against aid and Canada's foreign policy and went at the root of the issue which was that the corporations dominated the world economy, and the foreign policy of Western governments played a role in that domination and furthered it and were impoverishing the Global South. That, of course, was unacceptable.

So this led to increasing tensions between NGOs and the government, which started increasing control into the funding, eventually cutting it all in the case of CUSO in 1979. They were told they were not getting money until they reorganised their whole structure. Up until this time, under the influence of the more radical elements, they had been pushing toward a more democratic direction, giving more influence to the people in the field, decentralising and allowing programs to be developed by people outside the head office.

The government said, “We are getting rid of the democratically elected board of directors, replacing them with a bunch of people flown from the outside and we’re going to recentralise decision making power back in the hand of the home office.” They wanted someone that was accountable to them not accountable to people in Tanzania they had been working with, for example. So we discovered that there were very clear and very public instances of where the government stepped in and really imposed its agenda on organisations that received government funding.

In the past few years, cuts from the Harper government, related for example to NGOs defending Palestinian human rights, have given the impression that agenda-driven NGO funding is a new trend initiated by the Harper government when in fact government funding has practically always been aligned with foreign policy.

Yes, the first example in the book is in 1970-1975 when CCIC (Canadian Council for International Cooperation) had their funding cut after they organised a delegation to a UN conference in Rome on the food crisis at the time. Look how things change! They criticised very strongly the Canadian government’s position and that echoed back home and led to a pretty big overhaul of the food aid program, which in some ways ameliorated it, but the main impact was that the Liberal government, run by Trudeau at the time cut their funding.

There is definitely a parallel between what was happening internationally with development NGOs and what was happening domestically with community organisations. Trudeau wanted to create a participatory society so a lot of money was given to those orgs but always with conditions and strings attached. In Marxist terms it’s building the hegemony, the idea that the ruling class will appropriate the initiatives and ideas of oppositional movements and turn them into something that is harmless and defends the existing order. So it may seem like the rulers are willing to reform when in fact they absorb the oppositional elements, neutralize them and use them to defend the status quo.

It is basically what we call manufacturing dissent?

Yes. And it’s been going on for a long time.

How did you get the idea of writing about the inner workings of NGO funding?

Through my involvement in Haiti solidarity and the conflicts we had with development NGOs throughout 2004-2005. We expected these organisations who are for democracy and human rights to obviously be opposed to what was happening [the US-French and Canadian coup d’état] in Haiti because it was so blatant, how could they not? *[To read more about Haiti and the coup d’état against the first democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, see our [file here.](#)]*

Do you think these NGOs defended the military intervention deliberately or that they got caught in the propaganda against Aristide?

It’s complex. At the time we were just a bunch of anglo kids with some connections to the Haitian community that was opposed to the coup and we lacked experience and credibility. So we got in touch with other people, tried to build allies in the struggle, and they would tell us, “Well, I know someone at Development and Peace or Alternatives and they’ve been working on this issue for years and they’re good people and they say you’re completely wrong, so – end of discussion.”

It was difficult because they would not look at the facts, but would decide on the basis of their contacts. And if you told them, "You took all this money from the government and have this position on Haiti because of Canada's implication in the coup, you are sold out, you're a tool," they would reply, "No, we're not a tool, we were faithfully reflecting the position of our partners in Haiti." And it's true, they were.

Alternatives worked with a group called The Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA), headed by Camille Chalmers, an economist at the state university in Haiti, and regroups a bunch of left leaning, anti-neoliberal NGOs and it's true they reflected their position. But the next question is why were they getting funding? Who were the groups that were getting funding? How come you were working with them and not some pro Lavalas groups [President Aristide's party]? How come there is not one NGO in Canada that was working with the government, that happened to support the government or at least was not vehemently opposed to Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his Lavalas movement? And we're talking about a movement that had 50-60 per cent support, and overwhelmingly amongst the poor.

So are these NGOs being dishonest? I think a lot of it is that you buy into your own thing, especially for the left NGOs. They'll say, "We're working with the grassroots, we're working with the civil society, with the people who are really struggling to change things." You need to believe that if you're going to do the work. But it's not true. Who is Camille Chalmers? Who's PAPDA? Who's SAKS and all the NGOs they're working with? They're middle class Haitians! University educated, very far from the base, living a comfortable life, they have air-conditioned offices, they are set apart on a class basis from the rest of the society and their positions reflected that.

In the second coup it was overwhelmingly the tiny middle class and the bourgeoisie with members of the former dictatorship against the rest of society, against the government and its supporters in the slums and the countryside.

But the NGOs don't see that because these groups give up on class analysis and can't acknowledge the fact that the groups they are working with are not actually that grassroots and are not that connected to ordinary people, because that destroys the whole lies of NGOs, because they're supposed to work directly with the poor people, the grassroots and social movements or whatever the buzzword they use at the time. They see themselves as working directly with the people, whereas the big, official aid agencies are working with the governments; they are big, top-down institutions and we, the NGOs are bottom up. That's the appeal, and fundamentally it's false because they end up creating a lot of little top-down structures and hierarchical relationships throughout society within Haiti and between organizations in Haiti and their relationships with foreign NGOs.

A good example of the lack of interest of NGOs in grassroots organisations is the one you mention at the beginning of your book, where you explain that it is the Haitian grassroots NGOs which initiated the downfall of the Duvalier dictatorship and instead of associating themselves with these organisations, the international NGOs replaced them or linked themselves with NGOs run by the Haitian elite.

In some ways it's an unconscious and inevitable process. A lot of international NGOs, after the first coup in 1994, went there to try to work with the popular organisations. But the way they are structured and the amount of bureaucracy there is and paperwork there is to fill out and the expectations of the donors who fund the Canadian NGOs have - all of this

makes it impossible to work with someone who is genuinely poor working class. You need people who are university educated, who are from the relatively privileged elite, who can talk the talk to get the funding.

It doesn't automatically mean that they are unrepresentative of the rest of the population but you tend to work with people who aren't necessarily connected with the grassroots, and if there is no strong accountability between the middle class people at the top getting the funding and the people at the bottom, the grassroots that you claim to be supporting, then sometimes what happens is the organisation becomes a vehicle for the person at the top. And the funding has a tendency to erode the accountability to the bottom and I think that's what happened to a few organisations in Haiti. They received large amounts of funding after 1994 and they were very militant and very pro-Lavalas for a time, and with more funding it centralised power in the hands of the people who were able to get that funding and made them dependent on continuing to please the donors.

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Julie Lévesque is a journalist and researcher with the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. She was among the first independent journalists to visit Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. In 2011, she was on board "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie", the only humanitarian vessel which penetrated Gaza territorial waters before being shot at by the Israeli Navy.

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