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CIDA merger with Foreign Affairs may help the poor

Positioning Canada's aid officials closer to the centre of power in Ottawa may help focus our programs abroad, say aid experts.

By: [Rick Westhead](#) Staff Reporter, Published on Fri Mar 22 2013

CIDA merger with Foreign Affairs may help poorest nations, aid experts say

Canada has never been a great friend to farmers in developing countries.

Most agricultural commodities imported into Canada face a 19-per-cent tariff, a high barrier that most farmers in the world's poorest nations can't navigate.

But even as Canada protects its own farmers with high tariffs, it also disburses billions of dollars worth of aid to the world's poorest.

"It makes no sense, giving aid to the same countries you hit with high tariffs," says Owen Barder, a London-based official with the [Centre for Global Development](#), a think tank that focuses on international aid issues.

It's a disconnect, Barder said, that could be addressed and resolved with foreign aid officials positioned closer to the centre of power in Ottawa.

On Thursday, the federal Conservative government announced [Canada's international aid and humanitarian assistance agency, CIDA, will be folded into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#).

While some aid experts worry the shakeup could mean poverty alleviation will become an afterthought to Canadian business interests, others in the international aid and development sector say the move may actually give foreign aid advocates more influence.

"Wouldn't it be great if development people within DFAIT (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) could help shape trade policy and bring down the high Canadian agricultural tariffs?" Barder said.

Canada's move is in line with other developed countries. While Sweden and the U.K. have their own independent aid ministries, the U.S., Norway, France and others have folded them into larger government departments, usually with positive results.

"We wish foreign aid was altruistic, but it's always been an expression of foreign policy," said David Morley, president of UNICEF's Canadian operations. "Sometimes you felt the two (CIDA and Foreign Affairs) were going off into different worlds. This could be good, getting the aid portfolio closer to power."

"Canada doesn't do aid out of generosity or good nature," said Marc Bellemare, a Quebec native and assistant economics professor at Duke University who studies development assistance. "Aid has always been tied to foreign policy. This is a more transparent. At least we're being more open about what it is."

Morley said the merging of CIDA and DFAIT comes after years of conjecture about CIDA's future, speculation dating to the late 1990s when then-Liberal Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy mused about a similar shakeup.

"There's been a change in the paradigm of aid," Morley said. "Globally, statistics say the world's developing countries are getting better. More middle-income countries like China and India have become involved as donors, and recipient countries have a louder voice about how they want aid disbursed. The question for Canada now is are we going to continue investing in things like maternal and child mortality, and we don't know the answer to that yet."

Canada's aid program, which has lurched between crises in recent years, is at a crossroads. CIDA recently started a series of pilot projects alongside charities and mining companies, investing about \$30 million in development projects in education and training programs.

Those projects have polarized the aid sector. Critics say CIDA is essentially underwriting programs that the mining companies themselves should be paying for.

Ian Smillie, an Ottawa-based aid expert, says the merging of CIDA and DFAIT will heighten the concerns that aid is being used simply to foster Canadian investment abroad.

"Canada has been cutting aid projects in the world's poorest countries and opening new ones in places like Bolivia and Peru, middle-income countries that happen to have rich mineral resources," Smillie said.

"The danger now is that aid meant for poverty reduction becomes an afterthought to mining and selling locomotives and airplanes in foreign countries," he said. "It's in Canada's interest to end poverty. It's not going to benefit us to have wars raging across northern Africa. There's a greater risk of huge migrations, pandemics and other problems."

Kevin McCort, the head of [Care Canada](#), said the merging of CIDA and DFAIT at least offers clarity.

"It wasn't so much a shock as, 'oh, they have done it,'" McCort said. "The conversation has been ongoing for years."

During a 20-minute conference call Thursday with NGO officials, CIDA chief of staff Neil Desai said that under the new arrangement the government will write a new legislative framework for aid, which Canada does not currently have.

"For aid agencies, that's the biggest issue moving forward," McCort said. "We want to offer advice about what's in the mandate and emphasize that emergency assistance should be awarded on need alone and not aligned with other considerations."

While the Conservatives are looking to trim spending to balance the books, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird insisted the merger of CIDA into his department was not being done to save cash.

"We're not doing this as a cost-saving measure," Baird said on Parliament Hill Friday. "We're doing it to deliver better and more focused development assistance."

He said CIDA issues — and the agency's staff — will be "integrated" into his department so that "one team" could now deal with diplomacy and development in places like Africa.

“The idea is that you can deliver better assistance by focusing all of your resources in a certain country,” Baird told reporters.

He promised the merger would produce “synergies” on the government’s foreign file.

“There’s great synergy between the work we do internationally with trade and with diplomacy. I think that’ll be the case with development as well,” Baird said.

He noted that earlier in their mandate the Conservatives moved international trade back into the foreign affairs department; it had previously been split by the Liberals.

“We put them back together and it’s been incredibly effective,” Baird said. “Development now will have the full strength of our international presence abroad rather than, you know, just putting a few CIDA people there.”

The minister also downplayed concerns of aid groups that the changes will erode the Harper government’s development priorities.

“Any NGOs delivering good quality, effective aid will have nothing to worry about,” he said.

Diana Rivington, a former director of human development and gender equity at CIDA, said she was disappointed with the merger.

She called it the latest in a string of poor development-related decisions by Canada. “If you look at recent history, we have had grade B if not grade C ministers either, on their way up before they move on, like Pierre Pettigrew, or others on their way down, like Bev Oda.”

She worries that DFAIT officials don’t appreciate how long it takes to establish effective aid projects.

“We live in two different time zones,” said Rivington, who held postings in Colombia and Honduras and at the United Nations. “If you are a good CIDA officer, you think in terms of five- to 20-year cycles.”

For a 20-year teaching program, for instance, program officers might spend the first five years building schools, the second five years determining how to attract children who don’t attend, and the third cycle improving curriculum. Then there’s working on improving the quality of teachers, which can also take five to 10 years.

“These things take a long time and the longest my Foreign Affairs colleagues could think was in six-month cycles,” said Rivington, who retired last year after 35 years at CIDA.

With files from Bruce Champion-Smith