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Going Viral: Development Assistance under the Trudeau Minority Government

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Abstract: This chapter traces the evolution of Canadian aid in the first year of the Trudeau minority government, beginning with an examination of the electoral context and its immediate aftermath. It then analyzes the impact of COVID-19 on the aid landscape. The unlikelihood of a significant increase in the aid budget means that pandemic-related spending will come at the expense of other sectors. Changes in aid delivery that have resulted from the pandemic, namely a growing focus on short-term welfare, an increasingly multilateral approach to aid delivery, and a process of localization, may not persist post-COVID-19. Similarly, the shift in rhetoric towards more enlightened self-interest may be reversed once the world emerges from the coronavirus-induced crisis. The chapter concludes, first, by highlighting the Liberals' and Conservatives' shared lack of interest in changing Canada's current level of engagement with international development. Second, it suggests that the pandemic's potential to impel lasting changes to the Canadian aid program will depend primarily on the political will to resist post-pandemic pressure to cut the aid budget significantly and realign aid with narrowly defined self-interest.

Introduction

The October 2019 federal elections had the potential of throwing a gigantic wrench in Canada's foreign aid program: In a provocative move, the Conservative Party had promised to cut international assistance by 25%. Although the Conservatives won the most votes, the Liberals, led by Justin Trudeau, won the most seats and formed a minority government. Given the negligible attention that the Liberals paid to foreign aid in the campaign and the lack of influence of other parties in setting the policy agenda even under minority government, there was no reason to expect the Liberals to make any significant changes. Rather, they seemed likely to show continuity with their first mandate and focus on the implementation of the Feminist International Assistance Policy, which they had adopted in 2017. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, causing political turmoil in Canada and tumult around the world.

This chapter traces the evolution of Canadian aid in the first year of the Trudeau minority government within those sudden, unexpected and far-reaching changes in national and international circumstances. It begins with an examination of the electoral context and its immediate aftermath, which suggest continuity in Canada's aid program. It then analyzes the consequences of COVID-19 for the Canadian aid program on: 1) the total amount of aid, 2) priority sectors and preferred aid modalities, and 3) the fundamental rationale for aid. It argues that the aid budget is unlikely to increase significantly, meaning that new pandemic-related spending in health, food/agriculture and humanitarian assistance will come mainly at the expense of other sectors and divert resources within those sectors as well. Canada's growing focus on short-term welfare (as opposed to long-term growth), the increasingly multilateral approach to aid delivery, and the greater reliance on local staff and organizations in the Global South – all of which resulted from the COVID-19 crisis – may not last in the post-pandemic aid landscape. Similarly, the shift in rhetoric towards more enlightened self-interest, which emphasizes the alignment of Canadian and international interests, may be reversed once the world emerges from the coronavirus-induced crisis. The chapter concludes, first, by highlighting the Liberals and Conservatives shared lack of interest in changing Canada's current level of engagement with international development. Second, it suggests that the pandemic's potential to impel lasting changes to the Canadian aid program and to defend its global relevance will depend primarily on the political will to resist post-pandemic pressure to cut the aid budget significantly and realign aid with narrowly defined self-interest.

Foreign aid, the 2019 elections and inter-party dynamics

The 2019 federal elections had the potential to reshape Canadian development assistance. As is usually the case in Canada, foreign policy more generally and foreign aid in particular were not important campaign issues – until the Conservatives decided to use aid to grab headlines. On October 1, three weeks before the vote, Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer held a press conference at which he announced that, if victorious, his party would cut international assistance by 25%. He used wildly inaccurate claims about Canadian aid to justify this significant policy change, apparently seeking to whip up populist outrage against wasteful spending and support

to dictators (Gatehouse 2019; Wright 2019). Regardless of the rationale, the promise to slash aid constituted a significant departure from past Conservative policies, which had historically been at least as favourable to aid spending as the Liberals. For instance, the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin (1994–2005) and the Conservative government of Stephen Harper (2006–2015) spent on average the same proportion of gross national income on official development assistance, whereas Justin Trudeau’s first government (2015–2019) spent a bit less (Brown 2018: 147).

The Liberals could have seized upon this campaign surprise as an opportunity to distinguish itself from its “stingy” rivals and burnish its claims to internationalism. However, at a press conference, Trudeau repeatedly ignored questions on foreign aid (Dzsurdzsa 2019). His reluctance to say anything reflected the Liberal electoral platform’s vagueness about the party’s intentions regarding international assistance: After offering some self-congratulatory bromides about Canada’s place in the world, the platform commits only to “continuing to increase Canada’s international development assistance every year” – which, phrased thus, could fail to even match the inflation rate – and “spending no less than 10 per cent of our international development assistance budget on education” (Liberal Party of Canada 2019).

The election of a minority Liberal government at the October 21 general elections was the plausible scenario with the greatest potential for boosting foreign aid. Both the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Greens had long-standing commitments to increase aid to meet the UN target of 0.7% of gross national income, which would require increasing Canadian aid expenditure by a factor of about 2.5, but otherwise their respective platforms said very little about development assistance, and the Bloc Québécois’ election manifesto did not mention it at all (Brown 2019). An important precedent existed: In 2005, Paul Martin’s Liberal minority government obtained NDP support for the federal budget in exchange for an immediate injection of \$500 million into the aid envelope, among other measures (CBC 2005). However, the NDP did not in any case include in 2019 any foreign policy issues on its list of six “urgent priorities” upon which any form of alliance or coalition with a minority Liberal government would be conditional (Tunney 2019) – and, after the election, no multipronged deal was negotiated between the Trudeau Liberals and any other party.

Initial expectations and business as usual

Given the above, there was no reason to expect any significant changes to Canadian foreign aid after the Trudeau minority government was sworn in. All signs pointed towards only very modest budget increases. New programming would continue to be framed by the Liberals’ Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), launched in 2017. The only sign of a new priority was the mention of education in the Liberal election platform, repeated in the mandate letter of the new Minister of International Development, Karina Gould (Trudeau 2019), whereas the FIAP document frequently mentions education, but never singles it out as a sector that would be assigned a minimum of 10% of total aid spending. The only FIAP spending targets relate to the proportion of projects that either specifically target or integrate the crosscutting “action area” of gender equality or the empowerment of women and girls, set to reach 95% by 2021–2022

(Government of Canada 2017: 71).¹ The mandate letter contained no real surprises, but noticeably did not mention the promotion of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people in developing countries, despite it being a prominent issue under Justin Trudeau's first government. However, it is unclear whether that omission signalled a loss of interest or was merely an oversight (Aylward and Brown 2020).

The appointment of Gould as the new development minister suggested a certain degree of continuity, notably because she had previously been the Parliamentary Secretary to that position for a year before being promoted to Cabinet in early 2017. At a conference on liberal internationalism and the legacy of Pierre Trudeau's foreign policy, she staked out a strong case for a rules-based international order. Contrasting her government's position with that of the Conservative Party under Stephen Harper and Andrew Scheer, and referring to herself as "a Liberal [liberal?] internationalist and a feminist," Gould argued that Canada's "own self-interest lies in a more peaceful, stable, equitable world" and extolled the merits of FIAP (quoted in Wells 2020). In so doing, she linked policies of the Trudeau *fiils* government to the legacy of Trudeau *père* and reinforced liberal/Liberal internationalism as the brand of both her party and her government's aid program, promoting both to the Liberal's electoral base (Brown 2018).

During this period, the Canadian government ramped up its campaign for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, using its aid program and internationalist posture to try to win votes from developing countries. In January 2020, Gould made an official trip to vote-rich Africa, as did Minister of Foreign Affairs François-Philippe Champagne and his Parliamentary Secretary, MP Rob Oliphant, followed by Trudeau himself in February, accompanied by Somalia-born Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Ahmed Hussen. The sudden attention paid to the continent contrasted sharply with the apparent disinterest under the Trudeau Liberals' previous government – Chrystia Freeland never set foot on the continent during her three-year tenure as Foreign Minister – and its motivation was quite transparent.

Other than that public charm offensive in Africa and a de facto increased interest in agriculture and food security, it otherwise seemed to be business as usual at Global Affairs Canada. The appearance and subsequent spread of a novel coronavirus in China and then Iran and Italy just strengthened the case that we live in an interconnected world and cannot afford to cut ourselves off from what happens elsewhere. But then the outbreak turned into a global pandemic, with far-reaching consequences on well-being around the world.

A paradigm-shifting pandemic?

COVID-19's irruption onto the global scene raises several key questions for Canadian foreign aid and development cooperation more generally: Will governments provide more aid? What impact will the pandemic have on priority sectors and preferred aid modalities? How does it affect aid's fundamental rationale? This section explores each of these issues in turn for the case of Canada.²

¹ See discussion in Brown and Swiss 2017

² A more in-depth examination of global trends, including variations on some of this chapter's analysis, can be found in Brown (2021).

Will supply follow demand?

By mid-March 2020, it became clear that COVID-19 could not be contained and its effects would be profoundly felt across the world. The disease itself quickly infected millions and preventive measures (such as lockdowns and curfews) disproportionately affected the most vulnerable people in the Global South, especially women, workers in the informal sector, refugees, migrant workers and LGBTI people (Al-Ali 2020). Poor people often lack the ability to wash hands their hands frequently and also live in conditions under which it is not possible to maintain physical distancing. Moreover, they usually have very limited access to quality healthcare as well as broader social safety nets, making them extremely vulnerable in case of disease or other causes of lost income. One study cautioned that 400–500 million people could be pushed below the poverty line as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (Sumner et al. 2020). David Beasley, the head of the World Food Programme, warned of “the worst humanitarian crisis since World War Two” and the possibility of “multiple famines of biblical proportions” (quoted in UN News 2020), while one international NGO referred to COVID-19 as “the hunger virus” (Oxfam 2020a). Years and perhaps a decade or more of development progress could be undone (Economist 2020; Gates Foundation 2020).

While the pandemic caused the need for assistance to mushroom, it also triggered a dramatic drop in sources of development financing, including domestic revenues in developing countries, foreign investment, trade and remittances from abroad. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Global South’s external private financing could drop by 45% between 2019 and 2020, representing a reduction of US\$700 billion (OECD 2020c). Clearly, the need for international assistance was suddenly much greater. To what extent would Canada provide more aid?

Before the pandemic hit, Canada was already less generous than the average of its fellow members of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, the main club of Western aid donors. In 2019, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands all provided between two and four times more development assistance than Canada, relative to the size of their economy (OECD 2020a: 7). These unfavourable comparisons had little influence on the Canadian government, which, as mentioned above, had shown little interest in making any significant increases.

The pandemic had an immediate impact on the Canadian aid program, which reacted by repatriating many of its international staff and announcing a series of new measures. Within weeks, the Canadian government committed \$52 million to the World Health Organization and other partners, soon followed by an additional \$110 million to be disbursed mainly through United Nations agencies, and \$40 million for vaccine development. Although described as “increasing” international aid and as “new money,” it was not clear that these funds actually constituted supplements to Canada’s aid budget (Blanchfield 2020b). Analysts from the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, the umbrella group of development NGOs, stated that they actually came from “previously unallocated pools in [the government’s] international assistance envelope” and highlighted that Canada and other donors needed to “Up the ambition and acknowledge that existing aid resources will not be enough” (Charles and Kindornay 2020).

Indeed, these announcements represented a small proportion of Canada's annual aid budget of \$6 billion and could be considered a rounding error in the growing hundreds of billions of dollars that the government was spending domestically to offset the deleterious impact of the pandemic on Canadian citizens and businesses. Neither the modesty of the amounts (though Gould promised more to come) nor the urgency and importance of the cause prevented Opposition Critic for Foreign Affairs Erin O'Toole, who was running for the Conservative Party leadership, from tweeting his objections in early April: "Foreign aid can wait. Right now, the Trudeau government should prioritize Canadians" (quoted in van Scheel 2020). The tenor of those comments, however, did not seem to elicit much support from Canadians or within the Conservative Party, whose other officials did not echo the criticism. Mike Lake, the Conservative foreign aid critic, disavowed O'Toole's position and expressed his support for pandemic-related international assistance, as long as the funding was "taken only from the existing foreign aid budget" (van Scheel 2020).

In the run-up to the UN vote on Security Council temporary membership, Canada's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister tried to woo foreign governments by positioning Canada as a leader in the global fight against COVID-19. They made official calls to numerous leaders of small countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific whose importance was temporarily amplified by the UN General Assembly's one-country-one-vote principle. Although the purpose of the calls was officially to discuss the global response to the pandemic, the Prime Minister's Office admitted at the time that "the Security Council campaign has come up in some conversations" (Carbert 2020). Trudeau also cohosted a virtual UN meeting on COVID-19 a few weeks before the UN vote, at which Canada did not pledge any new contributions. Still, strong efforts – and stronger track records – from rivals Norway and Ireland, contrasted with "too little, too late" from Canada (which was probably also too transparently instrumentalist), resulted in the latter being defeated in the first round of voting in June 2020.

Over time, the Canadian government made additional pandemic-related aid announcements. For instance, in late June it committed \$180 million "to address the immediate humanitarian and developmental impacts of the pandemic" and \$120 million "to accelerate the development, production and equitable distribution of new COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines" (Blanchfield 2020a). In September, Trudeau announced an "extra" \$400 million in development and humanitarian assistance, mainly to support responses to the pandemic (Blanchfield 2020c), though again it was not clear that these funds represented an increase in planned spending, rather than a routine allocation of resources from the existing envelope. Overall, with a few exceptions, the prominence that the government gave to the global dimension of the pandemic dropped after Canada lost the Security Council vote.

As of the end of September 2020, the government has not yet made available any total of expected aid expenditures related to the global pandemic, nor has it given any clear indication of what its intentions are regarding the overall aid budget. The September 2020 Throne Speech merely promised to "invest more in international development" (Governor General 2020: 30). A few days later, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, Trudeau (2020b) stated that Canada "will keep increasing our international assistance budget every year," repeating almost word for word the vague commitment cited above that can be found in the 2019 Liberal election platform.

Pressure for any important change in the international assistance envelope remains weak, be it from opposition parties or voters more generally. A few Canadian development NGOs have

argued that Canadian spending on fighting COVID-19 abroad should represent at least 1% of its spending on the pandemic domestically, which would require an extra \$2 billion in foreign aid as of September 2020, an amount that will grow as the Canadian government continues to announce more spending on its domestic response. Still, there is no sign of sustained pressure on this point or of broader resonance, though some have stated the obvious point, which bears repeating, that “existing resources will simply not be enough” (Charles and Kindornay 2020). By way of contrast, Germany increased its aid budget by 30% or €3 billion (about Cdn\$4.5 billion) for 2020 and 2021 in response to the pandemic (Johnson et al. 2020).

After his populist tweet failed to gain any traction, O’Toole – who replaced Scheer as Conservative leader and Leader of the Opposition in August 2020 – dropped the “Canada first” approach to foreign aid. His party leadership platform heavily criticized the UN and the multilateral system, but did not suggest cutting the aid budget, nor did his main rival Peter MacKay. Rather, O’Toole promised to “allocate funding to pro-pluralism education and development initiatives through organizations with proven track records of effectiveness” (O’Toole 2020), which does not sound very different from something the Liberals could have written, especially given the latter’s recent emphasis on the education sector. The main difference is that the Conservatives suggest that they would spend aid more effectively, notably by doing so through more trustworthy partners, tracing some continuity with Scheer’s critique of development assistance under the Trudeau government and harkening back to the Harper government’s frequent invocation of greater aid effectiveness (Brown 2015).

Notwithstanding Scheer’s grandstanding before the 2019 elections on his plan to cut aid by 25%, a consensus seems to exist within both the Liberal and Conservative parties that Canada’s aid should remain around its current level. Although, as mentioned above, the New Democrats and Greens both advocate more than doubling aid to meet Canada’s international commitments of 0.7% of gross national income (Brown 2019), the issue does not attract much attention from most Canadians, other than the staff of development NGOs and a few academics (e.g., Brown 2020). It is therefore unlikely that Canada will make any important increases to its aid budget, regardless of the COVID-19 crisis.

In fact, aid spending might go down in 2020, despite the unforeseen cost of repatriating Canadian staff in March/April 2020, because the pandemic has delayed many project activities. Lapsed funds are normally returned to the Treasury Board, rather than rolled over to the next year. However, the Canadian government could avoid the loss of funds by making “one-off” contributions to multilateral organizations, including to the UN agencies’ emergency appeals, before the end of the fiscal year, or by prepaying their annual contributions to multilateral agencies, as it has done on many occasions over the decades. Alternatively, the Canadian government might be content to see aid spending fall, as long as its share of Canada’s shrinking gross national income remains constant or even increases, allowing it to claim in the latter case greater generosity according to that metric.

Canada is not alone in not opening its purse. While OECD donor countries made a collective – albeit cautiously phrased – promise to “strive to protect ODA budgets” (OECD 2020b: 2), their aid commitments in January-May 2020 dropped by one third – US\$7 billion – compared to the same period in 2019 (Breed and Sternberg 2020: 2, 8). The United Kingdom actually announced a cut of £2.9 billion to its 2020 aid expenditures (BBC 2020), a sum equivalent to about Cdn\$5 billion, close to Canada’s total annual aid disbursements. Notwithstanding

Germany's aid budget increase mentioned above, an OECD survey found few indications in April 2020 that donors were planning to increase overall spending abroad in response to the pandemic (Ahmad et al. 2020), though this could change over time. If total Canadian and other bilateral donors' assistance will increase at best only marginally, any pandemic-related activities will require the reallocation of aid program resources that would otherwise be spent on other areas.

What impact on priorities and modalities?

Over the course of decades, the aid pendulum swings back and forth between a prioritization of welfare spending to meet needs quickly and emphasis on long-term growth, which will theoretically do more to reduce poverty in the long run. In 2000, with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, donors' emphasis had returned to social spending, but after the 2008 global financial crisis it swung strongly back towards the promotion of growth and the private sector and, relatedly, donor self-interest (Mawdsley 2018).

Canada is no exception to that trend. Under the Harper government, Canadian aid was increasingly instrumentalized and in particular "recommercialized" (Brown 2016b, 2016c; see also Gecelovsky 2019). Though its successor, the Trudeau government, distinguished its international role from its predecessor at the rhetorical level and branded its aid program very differently, its aid shows "remarkable continuity" with the previous government's practices (Brown 2018: 159). Despite espousing a feminist approach and women's empowerment, FIAP retains an "unwavering focus on economic growth as the path to poverty alleviation" (Parisi 2020: 173).

The catastrophic impact of COVID-19 on the Global South dictates a reorientation of development assistance away from long-term growth objectives towards more immediate needs. Access to food and health services are particularly urgent (Cardwell and Ghazalian 2020; Okoi and Bwawa 2020) and could fall under the rubric of humanitarian assistance. But where will the funds come from, if the overall budget does not significantly increase, and at what cost? As aid analysts have noted, "As donors shift priorities towards COVID-19, a 'zero-sum' funding competition between individual sectors is likely and will be fierce" (Johnson et al. 2020). Similarly, Cardwell and Ghazalian (2020: 2) recognize that "increased humanitarian spending may come at the expense of other forms of ODA [official development assistance]." Canada's Minister of International Development Karina Gould seems well aware of this problem, stating that "What keeps me up at night is not just the immediate needs of the pandemic, but the collateral damage if we turn our attention away from our core activities" (quoted in Blanchfield 2020a), but she lacks the power to set Canada's aid budget.

Without an overall budget increase, new funding to the health sector, for instance, means that fewer resources will be available for education, legal reform or supporting women's entrepreneurship. Even within a sector, new priorities imply a concurrent deprioritization of others. Spending any proportion of the health sector allocations on COVID-19 will require sacrificing funding for other areas, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, or children's standard vaccinations. Such cutbacks are particularly ill-timed, as the pandemic already makes it harder for people to access treatments and other health services. As a result, COVID-19 will negatively affect the health even of people who do not get the virus, just as recent Ebola

outbreaks indirectly led to higher prevalence of measles and maternal mortality in Western and Central Africa (Gigova 2019; Gould 2020; OECD 2020c: 11).

The impact has two important short-term effects on aid modalities as well, which could translate into a longer-term change. First, the urgency of the need to act prompted the Canadian government to channel much of its initial pandemic-related spending via multilateral institutions and funds. Indeed, in addition to the required speed, the basic importance of a joint response impelled the prioritization of collaborative efforts. Joint measures are especially relevant in instances of not only humanitarian assistance but also global public goods, in this case best illustrated by coordinated efforts to develop and make globally available effective treatments and a vaccine for COVID-19 (Nickerson and Herder 2020). COVID-19 could therefore be an impetus for moving away from “branded” bilateral initiatives that promote donor visibility at the expense of effectiveness (Brown 2018; Vollmer 2014) towards more multilateralism and pooled funds.

Second, the pandemic has erected barriers to the deployment of international staff in developing countries. As noted above, one of Canada’s first responses to the COVID-19 was to repatriate many of its aid workers stationed abroad. As a result, aid projects must increasingly rely on local staff – something that Southern-based development actors have been advocating for years, if not decades. Localization, as the phenomenon is known, does not just imply counting more on country nationals for labour; it also involves “transferring power and decision-making into the hands of local people, and organisations” (Roche and Tarpey 2020), which is something the Canadian government has always been reluctant to do. Even locally based Canadian aid officials have very little decision-making authority compared to other donors (den Heyer 2012).

It remains to be seen, however, if increased multilateralism and localization are temporary or lasting effects of the pandemic. The fate of trends will depend in part on how effective the modalities prove to be. Also key in both instances will be the political will in Canada and other donor countries to relinquish both control and the ability to claim direct credit for positive outcomes.

The rationale for aid: global vs. national perspectives

Debates on the overarching motive for aid are unending and unresolvable. Actors will never agree on the fundamental purposes of aid – nor do they need to, as enlightened forms of self-interest are compatible with altruistic perspectives (Black 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, highlights the underlying tensions. Should Canada provide assistance because of the sheer scale of human suffering caused or exacerbated by the coronavirus? Or should it act because a “virus reservoir” anywhere in the world could affect Canada’s economy and the health of Canadians, even if Canada has the disease under control within its own borders?

Whereas O’Toole’s outdated tweet suggested the need for a “Canada first” approach (or maybe even “Canada only”), it seems quite uncontroversial for the government to take a position that straddles altruism and enlightened self-interest. For instance, weeks before the Security Council vote, Trudeau combined the two perspectives when addressing Canada’s response to the global economic crisis caused by COVID-19, emphasizing Canadian economic interests:

Canadian jobs and businesses depend on stable and productive economies in other countries – so it matters to us how everyone weathers this storm. We cannot forget those who are most vulnerable, whether they are living in remote regions or in the Caribbean. For so many, this pandemic is devastating. More than 300 million people around the world will be out of work. And more than 30 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty. We can't wait for others to act. It's not in our self-interest, and it's just not who we are. (Trudeau 2020a)

Gould, as noted above, had already made the case for altruism as self-interest before the pandemic was declared. Since then, whereas Trudeau emphasized Canadian economic interests, she places greater emphasis on Canadians' health and safety. For example, she argued that "we will only be safe until [sic] everyone, everywhere on the planet is safe" and "Our health here depends on the health of the other 'over there'" (Gould 2020). In other examples of intertwined national and international interests, she stated that "Our global response is part of our domestic response: we will not be safe from COVID-19 in Canada until everyone, everywhere is" (quoted in GAC 2020) and "We strongly believe that supporting other countries in their fight against COVID-19 is crucial to protect Canadians at home" (quoted in PMO 2020).

Despite these statements, domestic and international interests do not always dovetail so neatly. They can sometimes be in direct competition. Notably, a tension – if not an outright contradiction – developed between the government's principled support for universal access to vaccination on the one hand and "vaccine nationalism" on the other hand, including the imperative of meeting popular expectations that the government would secure a sufficient supply to meet the needs of its citizens (for example, Attaran 2020). For instance, as mentioned above, Trudeau announced \$120 million in June 2020 for an initiative that would help ensure that treatments and vaccines would be made available to the poor and middle-income countries. On that occasion, he stated, "We're also committed to working with countries around the world on how we can pool procurement efforts to make sure all countries have access to the vaccine" (quoted in Blanchfield 2020a).

Despite Trudeau's commitment to pooled procurement and Gould's support for "fair, and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines" (quoted in PMO 2020), the government sought "Canada first" access by signing bilateral contracts with numerous pharmaceutical companies for early access to several as-yet-unapproved vaccines for the country's population. In August, Procurement Minister Anita Anand said that her government wanted to ensure that "Canadians are at the front of the line when a vaccine becomes available" (quoted in Jones and Harris 2020). However, by elbowing its way to the front, Canada pushes lower-income countries to the back of the line and delays their access to vaccines. Because it is a zero-sum game, prioritizing the wealthy over the most vulnerable actually reduces the total number of lives saved by vaccines (Gates Foundation 2020: 16; Labonte et al. 2010).

In an apparent attempt to mitigate criticism of the government's vaccine nationalism, Trudeau announced in September 2020, alongside the government's sixth bilateral vaccine procurement agreement, a \$220 million contribution to the COVAX Facility, a global procurement mechanism, in order to help make vaccines available in low- and middle-income countries (PMO 2020). By then, Canada and other high-income countries, representing 13% of the world's

population, had already secured more than half of the potential supply of five of the most promising vaccine candidates (Oxfam 2020b).

Conclusion: Canadian aid in a post-pandemic world?

In late 2019, the newly re-elected Liberal government seemed prepared for business as usual for its foreign aid program. Its main focus was to continue to implement the Feminist International Assistance Policy, still barely two years old. At most, there would be some minor tweaks, such as additional official attention to education and, unofficially, food security and agriculture, but no significant changes in direction or levels of funding. The government's minority status was not a significant variable, just as it had not been under the Harper Conservatives minorities between 2006 and 2011 (Brown 2016a). During its first few months of its new mandate, the Liberal government ramped up its liberal/Liberal internationalist rhetoric aimed at the domestic audience, while also seeking greater visibility internationally as part of its unsuccessful campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council.

Like for any external shock, it is tempting to declare, "This changes everything!" The pandemic did force some rapid reorientations in how governments and international agencies deliver aid. The Canadian government rapidly brought expatriate staff back to Canada, necessitating greater reliance on local staff; announced a series of COVID-related contributions, mainly to multilateral organizations and international initiatives, often in support of global public goods; and prompted an increase of resources to the health, food and humanitarian sectors, at the expense of other areas. The government also responded by shifting how it justifies foreign aid, increasingly presenting it as being in Canada's interest, be it economic (as argued by Trudeau) or for Canadians' health and security (as emphasized by Gould). COVID-19 initially led to greater involvement in the aid file by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had already become more visible before the pandemic hit. Discussing the pandemic response was a pretext to engage with their counterparts in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, presumably through an electoral calculus related to the June 2020 vote on Security Council membership. The charm offensive, however, tapered off after Canada's bid failed.

It is uncertain how enduring the new de facto aid priorities and modalities will be. The pandemic presents Canada and development actors as a whole with an important opportunity to do things differently and "build back better." The results of this forced experiment will influence whether aid returns essentially to business as usual, but even more important will be the will of political leaders to take the required steps, even if they involve less visibility and control on the part of the Canadian and other donor governments.

The pull of the status quo is strong in Canadian development assistance. Given the Trudeau Liberals' much ballyhooed internationalist rhetoric, including the now cliché declaration of Canada being "back," one could have expected commensurately greater emphasis in foreign aid. However, only nominal increases in aid spending have followed and the government has focused on the feminist rebranding of its aid and niche thematic programming, rather than seeking broader changes (Black 2020: 232). The relatively modest level of financial resources that the Canadian government is currently willing to allocate to foreign aid is already the "Achilles Heel" of FIAP and the credibility of the government's oft-repeated claims to global leadership in

development cooperation (Brown and Swiss 2017: 118). Meanwhile, the Conservatives have abandoned their populist proposal to significantly cut aid, at least for now, and have not articulated any proposals that differ much from what is currently in place. As in the past, despite partisan differences in rhetoric, the Liberals' and Conservatives' approach to Canada's aid program varies quite little in concrete terms (Brown 2018).

The Trudeau government will no doubt continue to express its commitment to internationalism and to alleviating suffering around the world, especially among women and girls. However, an important indicator of its actual commitment to international development in the post-pandemic world will be the medium-term evolution of the Canadian aid budget. Although needs in the Global South have dramatically increased because of COVID-19 and the pandemic will have a lasting negative impact, there is a significant risk of post-pandemic budget cuts to Canadian aid. The government will be under tremendous pressure to cut spending to try to get the ballooning deficit under control. Balancing budgets is commonly done on the backs of the world's poor, as they do not play much of a role in the Canadian electoral calculations. If the Conservative Party comes back to power, the risk will be multiplied – although drastic aid cuts might be avoided if the Conservatives want to avoid seeming too mean-spirited, a factor that appears to have contributed to their defeat in 2015.

Moreover, as the pandemic threat fades, the recent rise of justifications based on enlightened self-interest could give way once again to more narrowly defined short-term interests, which in turn could divert attention from poverty reduction and the welfare of the world's most vulnerable people. Ultimately, if that scenario comes to pass, Canada's role as a global development actor would become even more marginal than it is today, and it could take a decade or more to rebuild once the pendulum starts to swing back in the opposite direction.

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