

Is this what a feminist policy looks like?

Foreign aid under the Trudeau government

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A couple of years after it was first elected, the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau positioned Canada – and itself – as a global leader by releasing the world’s first Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). Widely praised, the policy was heralded as a much-needed innovative approach to pressing global issues, especially in the wake of Canada’s declining commitment to international development during the last few years of the Conservative government under Stephen Harper. Moving beyond the initial hype around FIAP, this chapter traces the process that led to the new aid policy’s adoption, considers its content, assesses its impact and explores its slow decline. I situate my analysis within the context of Canada’s aid program and the vagaries of the Trudeau government, from parliamentary majority to minority, and towards another challenging re-election campaign, keeping in mind the broader context of a global development landscape in flux. The latter includes the rise of the Global South as providers of development cooperation, evolving understandings of aid effectiveness, the adoption in 2015 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The portrait that emerges is of a policy that has had some positive concrete impact, notably in increased funding for women’s groups in the Global South, but that has failed to live up to its feminist transformative potential because of the Liberal government’s lack of political and financial commitment. In addition, FIAP is increasingly neglected by a government that has other priorities, while civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the development sector have limited influence over its direction and are reluctant to criticize the government. As a result, overall, Canada’s aid program shares many elements of the policies of the previous Conservative government and, despite the Liberals’ claims to the contrary, Canada is poorly placed to demonstrate leadership in international development issues on the global stage. Moreover, FIAP is bound to be dropped once the Liberals are no longer in power, probably accompanied by cuts to the aid budget.

Sunny ways and the adoption of the Feminist International Assistance Policy

International development is rarely a priority for a new Canadian government, and the Liberals under Justin Trudeau, elected in 2015, were no exception. Despite repeated claims that their return to power meant that Canada was “back” on the international stage, they were loath to devote important new resources to international assistance, which the previous Conservative government had significantly cut in the previous few years, including reduced funding to a number of critical CSOs. The Harper government had justified reducing the aid budget with the argument that it was focusing on getting “real results.” During this period, it also increasingly aligned aid with Canadian commercial interests, especially in the mining sector, while also concentrating a rapidly growing share of its aid on maternal, newborn and child health (Brown 2016).

Initially, the Trudeau government seemed to continue very much in line with its predecessor. It increased its support for the private sector in development, launching a development finance institution, known as FinDev Canada, which had previously been announced by the previous government but never implemented. It maintained the Conservatives’ signature programming in maternal, newborn and child health, but rebranding it as “sexual and reproductive health and rights” while promising to do more to support the provision of contraception and safe abortion services. The Trudeau government rebuffed pressure to reverse the recent aid budget cuts, justifying the decision with spurious arguments about wanting to focus on getting “real results,” echoing the Conservatives, and telling CSOs that they needed to learn “to do more with less” (Brown 2018, 155–156). Liberal politicians implied that more spending was not really needed, in spite of Canada endorsing less than one month before the elections the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which required trillions of dollars in additional funding to be reached.

Instead, the Trudeau government launched a long process of developing a new aid policy, beginning with a discussion paper and followed by extensive consultations. More than 15,000 people and partner organizations in over 65 countries participated in the process and Global Affairs Canada received over 10,600 contributions. It was unclear what the government would do with such a massive quantity of diverse inputs. In the end, the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), launched in 2017, did not differ very much from the original discussion paper. The lengthy consultation process is best understood as the Liberal government’s attempt to brand itself as inclusive and “to distinguish its openness to consultation and collaboration with development CSOs from the Conservatives’ distant and at times hostile approach” (Black 2021, 379).

The FIAP document itself was a stark departure from previous Canadian policy documents, not least because of its overt embrace of feminism – albeit without ever defining what it meant by the term – and its reference to feminist concepts such as intersectional discrimination, structural inequality, root causes of oppression and underlying power dynamics (Brown and Swiss 2017; Rao and Tiessen 2020). It garnered far more national and international attention than aid policies normally do, most of it very positive (Harris 2017; Rao and Tiessen 2020, 350–351). FIAP committed Canada to spending 95% of its bilateral (country-to-country) aid on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls by 2022, which sounded like a massive reorientation of Canadian assistance. Concurrently, it engaged more collaboratively with Canadian CSOs and quietly dropped the emphasis on aid in the mining sector.

Nonetheless, deeper analysis highlighted several fundamental problems with the policy. For instance, it was apparent from the start that the government’s continued refusal to commit important new resources to its aid program, which was essential for transforming international assistance, constituted FIAP’s “Achilles Heel” (Brown and Swiss 2017, 118). Critics also questioned why, despite government claims of a broader feminist foreign policy, the government policy was overwhelmingly concentrated on aid issues, failing to promote the type of policy coherence that was invoked when the

previous government (sub)merged – to borrow David Black’s (2021, 384) expression – the Canadian International Development Agency into what is now referred to as Global Affairs Canada. Even though many non-aid Canadian policies could have an impact on development in the Global South (including diplomacy, trade and peace operations), it seemed the new vision and the feminist dimension of foreign policy primarily applicable to narrowly defined international assistance.

Moreover, despite FIAP ambitions to achieve gender equality, that concept is reduced to women’s empowerment, as if the concept of gender simply referred to women and girls and did not equally apply to men and boys (Cadesky 2020; Rao and Tiessen 2020). It also presents a very restrictive conception of empowerment, mostly equating it to women’s ability to run small businesses. As Swan (2021, 130) argues, “in order for international assistance to be ‘feminist,’ it must go beyond a technocratic liberal approach that equates women’s empowerment with projects simply ‘targeting’ women and girls.” In addition, by presenting female entrepreneurship as the main path to gender equality, FIAP adopts a primarily “business as usual” approach, albeit cloaked in feminist vocabulary (Parisi 2020). Its reference to “intersectional discrimination” is never applied, amounting to little more than feminist name-dropping (Aylward and Brown 2020). As a result of such critiques, Morton et al. (2020, 347) describe FIAP as “an aspirational document that seeks to advance a slightly more equitable status quo, but not fundamentally transform it.”

Gender equality and women’s role in development had already been central preoccupations of Canadian aid since the 1980s. So, concretely, what did FIAP change? The aid policy’s implementation did lead to more funds being allocated to women’s groups in developing countries, most notably the creation of the Equality Fund (Rao and Tiessen 2020), an endowed and relatively autonomous funding body that could continue to support feminist groups around the world even if a future Canadian government no longer considered it a priority. It also resulted in new funding to help defend LGBTQI+ rights in the Global South (see Aylward and Brown 2020) and an end to the proscription of mentioning abortion and emphasizing contraception in sexual and reproductive health programming (Johnson 2023).

The election of the Liberals and the adoption of FIAP in particular, after a “dark decade” under the Conservatives (Swan 2021, 118), vastly improved the government’s relationship with Canadian civil social organizations (CSOs) that work in the development sector. Whereas the Harper government had reduced them to service providers, silencing potential criticism via the all-too-plausible possibility of retaliatory funding cuts, the Trudeau government drew CSOs in with consultations and increased funding, as well as inclusive, feminist language. As a result, CSOs are almost as unlikely to criticize the Liberal government as the previous one. They consistently praise FIAP but fail to push back against ill-advised policies and practices and limit their advocacy primarily to campaigning for increased aid budgets, albeit with little success (Cameron 2023).

In the context of only small annual increases in Canadian aid, the expected massive reallocation of resources to gender equality could have led to important cuts in other development sectors. However, a redirection of that scale never occurred. FIAP’s commitment to spending 95% of bilateral aid by 2022 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls was made up of two separate targets: 80% towards projects that had gender equality as one of their objectives and 15% for projects that had gender equality as their main objective. The first component required no action at all: When FIAP was adopted, 89% of projects already listed gender equity as one of their objectives, so the 80% target was already met. However, in 2017-18 only 3% of spending went to projects that had gender equality as their central objective, so a major effort was required to reach the 15% goal. Although significantly more aid was channelled to that purpose, the government failed to reach its commitment. Spending on gender-targeted projects peaked at 14% in 2019–20 and then declined to 10% in 2021–22 (OAG 2023, 10–11).

Other than the concrete changes noted above, most Canadian aid continued along lines very similar to the pre-FIAP days, merely rebranded as “feminist” (Brown 2018), and sometimes putting in place more regressive policies than those of the Harper government. For instance, the Liberals

reintroduced the provision of loans to its aid program – for decades, all Canadian aid had been in the form of grants, i.e., did not need to be repaid. The Trudeau government’s support for private sector–led development increased when compared to the previous government. In particular, as mentioned above, the Liberals launched FinDev Canada to provide loans to the private sector in developing countries. The Trudeau government, however, added its feminist brand, asserting that its “blended finance” initiatives would align with FIAP’s prioritization of poor people and women and girls, despite serious doubts about how realistic that claim was (Murray and Spronk 2019).

Cloudy days and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The 2019 Liberal Party election platform did not say much about foreign aid, beyond committing “to increase Canada’s international development assistance every year towards 2030 to realize the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.” That phrase, which remained extremely vague about the size of the increases, was subsequently repeated in the next two development ministers’ mandate letters and the 2021 party platform. In that respect and others, the newly re-elected government, reduced to minority status in Parliament after the October 2019 elections, remained quite unambitious in its plans to make any additional changes to its aid program in line with FIAP (Brown 2021a).

In early 2020, some five months after the elections, the global COVID-19 pandemic quickly modified the aid landscape. Canada responded by modestly increasing its contributions, especially to multilateral agencies, to help mitigate the pandemic’s impact abroad and to contribute to vaccine research (Brown 2021a). Conservative Party leadership candidate – and subsequently leader of the opposition – Erin O’Toole objected, stating that the Trudeau government should spend the money on Canadians instead. The Liberals, including Minister of International Development Karina Gould and Trudeau himself, responded with renewed expressions of global solidarity, making multiple announcements of new funding and repeatedly using statements like “We are all in this together” and “No one is safe until everyone is safe” (Brown 2021a, 2021b).

Most Canadian development and humanitarian CSOs adopted the same approach as the Liberal government, stressing the importance of global cooperation in the areas of development and humanitarian assistance, invoking the pandemic to illustrate the need to increase the government’s aid budget. A targeted campaign sponsored by two CSO umbrella groups – the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (now known as Cooperation Canada) and the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health – adopted an approach that was far more self-interested than the government’s initial response. It paid for a series of social media advertisements and a website entitled “Aid helps Canada” that sought to increase support for Canadian aid by making “a nationalistic, threat-based case for aid that verges on xenophobia, reinforces outdated stereotypes and risks undermining foreign aid” (Brown 2020). Following outrage from their member organizations, the umbrella groups dropped the ill-considered campaign.

The Conservatives’ “Canada First” position did not initially have much resonance, but it later characterized Canada’s COVID vaccine acquisition efforts. Despite the Trudeau government’s repeated statements about the importance of an equitable global distribution of COVID vaccines, Canada quickly became the largest vaccine hoarder in the world, circumventing and in fact impeding the work of COVAX, the multilateral initiative whose mission was to acquire and equitably distribute doses globally. Moreover, the Canadian government did not donate any doses to lower-income countries, despite its locked-in supply, until it had stockpiled more than it could possibly use – and, even then, initially shared only the AstraZeneca vaccines that Canadians no longer wanted. As a result, millions of doses expired and had to be destroyed before they could provide any protection to the billions of unvaccinated people in the Global South. Canada also helped block a multilateral intellectual property agreement that would allow

expanded manufacturing of vaccines and therapeutics, in light of the global health emergency (Brown 2022; Brown and Rosier 2023; Houston, this volume).

After the Liberals' re-election in 2019, total aid spending increased faster than expected, in large part because of new funding for Canada's international COVID response. As a result, funds did not need to be radically reallocated from other sectors because of COVID, as had been initially feared (Brown 2021a). However, other crises competed for the limited aid budget, including large numbers of Rohingya and Venezuelan refugees in neighbouring countries and various natural disasters. While such assistance is crucial, the Trudeau government's pre-existing predilection for high-profile emergency aid announcements meant that fewer resources were available for longer-term development projects that were less visible or telegenic (Brown 2018, 155).

In 2022, Canadian aid reached its highest level ever, totalling about Cdn\$10.7 billion. As a share of the country's gross national income, it represented 0.37 per cent, more than any other year since 1995, albeit still less than in any year between 1970 and 1995 and a far cry from the 0.7 per cent target to which Canada committed itself at the UN in 1970. To a large extent, the increase is a consequence of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, after which Canada's humanitarian and development assistance to the latter ballooned to \$3.3 billion. In that year, Ukraine alone, among over 100 low- and middle-income countries, received 31% of total Canadian aid and 48% of its bilateral aid, an unprecedented concentration of aid spending in a single country (data from OECD 2023). These figures illustrate the politicization of aid allocation and the rapidly growing influence of domestic diasporic politics, which was already a factor in Canadian assistance, diverting aid from its legislated focus on poverty reduction (Brown 2018).¹

In 2022, Canadian assistance to the private sector also peaked. Despite the commitment that investments would concentrate on FIAP's priorities of gender equality and reducing poverty, most of FinDev's investments have gone to middle-income countries and to the energy and banking and financial services sectors (OECD 2023, 16–17). It remains to be demonstrated the extent to which those funds have supported FIAP's feminist principles, complicated by the fact that combatting poverty and social marginalization often does not generate enough profit for loans to be repaid.

During this period of Liberal minority governments, the revolving doors at Global Affairs Canada sped up. In the four-year period from the dissolution of the Liberal majority Parliament in September 2019 to the finalization of this chapter in late 2023, there have been four different ministers of international development. Each transition to a new minister brings in new staff and requires quite a bit of time to familiarize them with their new portfolio. In fact, some ministers seemed to have a poor understanding of 21st century development assistance (Munro and Brown 2022). Although ministers continued to attend international meetings, make rather empty boasts about Canadian leadership and occasionally announce new projects, there appeared to be no appetite for undertaking new aid initiatives or deepening the implementation of FIAP. In fact, the government seemed to have lost its initial enthusiasm for FIAP, probably in part because of Canadian disenchantment with the feminist posturing, reflected in the growing popularity of the Conservatives in opinion polls, but also the return to the "realist" geopolitics and hard power on the international stage, difficult to frame as feminist, and a global anti-feminist backlash. Those factors may also help explain why, four years after announcing the preparation of a "feminist foreign policy" document, Canada has still not finalized and released it.

¹ Canada's Official Development Assistance Accountability Act, adopted in 2008, seeks "to ensure that all Canadian official development assistance abroad is provided with a central focus on poverty reduction" (Government of Canada, 2023).

Pivot in 2023: What lies ahead for Canada's aid program?

The 2023 Federal budget provided a shock to Canada's development sector. Hidden in the numbers was a 15% cut in aid spending in 2023 compared to the previous year, breaking the Liberals' promise of annual increases. According to the aid budget, expenditures would be only 5% higher in 2023–2024 than in 2019–2020, before the COVID pandemic struck, when adjusted for inflation (Tomlinson 2023, 7). The 15% drop in 2023 highlighted the failure of a concerted CSO campaign to get the government to significantly boost aid (Cameron 2023). The government remained noncommittal on any additional funding during the remainder of its mandate.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly launched a "Transformation Initiative" aimed at increasing GAC's efficiency via internal organizational reforms – but without an injection of new money. This process is likely to last several years and will divert attention from any improvements to the aid program itself. After decades of cuts and the deskilling of its staff, GAC will have trouble improving its ability to engage substantively in global development debates without any additional spending. Canada is missing out on contributing to, and falling behind on implementing, important international discussions on aid effectiveness, the localization of aid and the urgent need to accelerate efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, among other issues. At home, Canada's long-promised Africa Strategy, subsequently downgraded to a "framework," is clearly not a government priority and is unlikely to make much of a difference since it will not come with any new funding to support it. Already of marginal importance to the prime minister and most Cabinet ministers, development issues are less likely than ever to have a meaningful role in Canadian foreign policy.

Government interest in FIAP is already waning. As the Liberals grow increasingly worried about their re-election odds, they will probably concentrate on domestic issues that are more likely to generate voter support than foreign aid will. They are likely to continue to periodically tout their international development leadership for domestic consumption, but without the substance to back up their claims.

While the Liberals have modestly increased aid and provided valuable support to women's groups in the Global South, most of their initiatives have been in the same vein as the previous government's approach. Canadian civil society organizations remain too timid to conduct sustained criticism, no doubt leery of how a future Conservative government would scale back Canada's aid program. They recall then Conservative leader Andrew Scheer's promise to slash Canada's aid budget by 25% if his party won the 2019 general elections (CBC 2019). Moreover, because of the feminist label and FIAP's close association with the Trudeau government, a new Conservative government is likely to quickly tear up the policy document. It might prove to have been a mistake to have branded it so prominently with the Liberal Party's signature feminism. Still, most Canadian aid programs will probably continue along their current path, as they have in the past whenever a new party comes to power in Ottawa, albeit in this case with shrinking resources.

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