

PART ONE

An Overview of Trends and Challenges Facing NGO Policy Work

Introduction

For the last two decades, until recently, there has been a fairly constant increase in the capacity of Canadian international co-operation NGOs to involve themselves in policy development, policy dialogue and policy advocacy. Significant milestones during that period included work on geographic regions (e.g. South Africa, Horn of Africa, Central America, etc) and diverse thematic policy issues (e.g. infant formula feeding, bio-diversity, large scale infrastructure). The high point of the growth trend was probably the 1994 Foreign Policy Review where fully half of the public's participation was that of NGOs.¹ Since then staff capacity has begun to decline though policy continues to occupy more time for NGO boards of directors.

NGOs have moved from the periphery of public policy to a prominent place in the mainstream of public dialogue on many issues. Today some of the most visible are debt, children's rights and child labour, landmines, gender, environment, and human rights. This evolution of NGO policy capacity has seen NGOs shift from a posture of critique of policies to one of actively proposing policy alternatives.

¹ Canada's Foreign Policy: Principles and Priorities for the Future, Report of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Reviewing Canadian Foreign Policy, November 1994, p.85. For an analysis of the role of NGOs in the policy democratization process, see Tim Draimin and Betty Plewes, "Civil Society and the Democratization of Foreign Policy", in Maxwell Cameron and Maureen Appel Molot, Canada Among Nations 1995: Democracy and Foreign Policy, Carleton University Press, Ottawa, 1995.