

INTERNATIONAL NGOs AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

On May 17th, 1999, The Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organised a small roundtable with six NGOs, including the Red Cross and CARE Canada, for George Haynal, the Assistant Deputy Minister, Americas. The purpose of the meeting was to think about work twenty years from now and implications for foreign policy. This conversation was among others conducted by Mr. Haynal with the Department officials, journalists, bankers, academics as well as social scientists and social workers. Some of the issues addressed in those conversations included the nature of career, family, and life styles. The aim of this meeting was to look at the problem through NGO perspectives and experiences.

Context

George Haynal started the conversation by pointing to the rapidly changing work environment and asking how large institutions such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade might approach and respond to these changes. What does globalisation and the information revolution mean for the institutional structure of DFAIT? What do changes mean for the policy community? What is the work environment going to be like in ten years and how will the conduct of Canada's foreign affairs evolve? How will the roles of various actors change and what impact will that have on relationships (i.e., the relationship between NGOs and DFAIT)?

Conceptualising Work in the Future

Information technology now has an impact on how work is done:

1. **Time has compressed** since the new communication technologies not only allow for a constant stream of new information but also cut down the reaction time an individual has to respond to messages. The "calming influence of a time lag" has disappeared as people fire off e-mails to each other in an instant, often based on "gut reactions" rather than deliberation. However, attempts to improve the quality of information run into problems related to censorship and the futility of trying to control digitally generated information.
2. Another emerging trend in the contemporary workplace has been an **information overload**. Relatively easy use of communication technology combined with a declining price has led to a constant movement of huge amounts of information. No methods have yet been found to cope with this situation.
3. New communications technologies contribute to the emergence of **new institutional arrangements** such as virtual organisations and digital resource bases. Mariane Whiteman of CARE Canada shared her experiences with new technology in facing the Kosovo crisis. She described how, through the use of wind-up radios and computer networks, a virtual organisation came to exist from a myriad of atomised agencies and individuals. Harry Qualman,