

arise. The test of a successful consultation is not the format but the outcome. And one of the essential outcomes—the mark of best practices—is the establishment of lasting relationships among consultation participants. Successful consultations foster relationships between DFAIT and the organizations it consults with. No less important, consultation fosters relationships among those organizations themselves.

The nature of these relationships, and the kinds of consultations undertaken, interact powerfully with the policy questions being addressed. As one NGO operative observed in an interview, areas of agreement between DFAIT and NGOs tend to inspire informal, supportive and informative contacts—easy conversations, frequent phone calls, timely e-mails. Areas of disagreement, predictably, generate more formal, less frequent, and more strained consultation patterns and relationships.

It is precisely in these areas of disagreement (trade, noticeably) where relationship-building is hardest and most valuable. Good relationships pay off for all participants because they can withstand the stresses of disagreement. When good intentions and good practice converge, experience proves that DFAIT-NGO relationships can endure even total disagreement on the particulars of an issue, and survive to function productively in pursuit of shared objectives. (This is why multistakeholder meetings, awkward at the start, can help both to introduce contending interests to each other and to involve all parties in a continuous collaboration with the department.)

Another word for this relationship-building is engagement. True consultation does not just mean talking to NGOs, or listening passively. It means developing sustained partnerships of policy advocacy, analysis and operations. Partnerships like that can sometimes form over a cup of coffee. They are often felt most strongly in the confusions and exhaustion of a big international conference. They can extend to the field, where NGOs and governments cooperate in the work of implementation. In the end, these partnerships define consultation more than any single episode of dispute or agreement.

### **From principle to strategy: what consultation can do**

DFAIT furthers its objectives by consulting directly with Canadians at every phase of the policy process—from problem identification and policy formulation to execution and evaluation. For proof, consider two successes and a failure.

Completion and implementation of the Landmines Convention, and creation of the International Criminal Court, were achieved in strong partnerships of like-minded governments with Canadian and international NGOs (and others) joined in common purpose. DFAIT-NGO consultations contributed both to the successful negotiating processes and to the content of the resulting agreements. The failure (from some points of view) was the collapsed effort to negotiate the Multilateral Agreement on Investment—an enterprise so deficient in transparency that "MAI" is now remembered as synonymous with secrecy, arrogance, corporate insiderism, and finally popular revolt. Together, these three cases tell much about the strategic value of open and accountable public consultation.