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**Department of Foreign Affairs and
International Trade**

Human Rights Issues Management

Synthesis Report

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HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES MANAGEMENT — SYNTHESIS REPORT

This study of the management of human rights issues is one in a series of studies undertaken by SIXE on the role of the political and economic officer. The theme is also an entry point for understanding general aspects of managing thematic issues and, indeed, for discussing management in DFAIT in general. The report presents our main findings on the nature of the officers' work in managing these issues, and identifies the priority areas that need to be addressed to enhance DFAIT's performance. The appended material includes case studies of human rights management in multilateral and bilateral contexts, as well as much of the data upon which these findings and conclusions are based.

1.0 Nature of the Work on Managing Human Rights Issues

The information collected on the nature of the political and economic officers' work in managing human rights issues may be summarized into six main findings.

1.1 The work patterns of political/economic officers suggest commitment and hard work, but no special status for their human rights work.

Political and economic officers work hard — they put in a total of 47 hours a week on average. They tend to have similar general work responsibilities and only minor variations in work patterns across different branches, locations or levels (from FS-1 to EX-2). They spend the bulk of their time (about 25 hours per week) managing issues or managing information and another 14 hours a week coordinating events or tending to administrative and management duties.

Political and economic officers average five hours a week on human rights issues (this increases to 6.2 hours in P Branch and 6.9 hours in A Branch). Although they have high personal expectations for their human rights work, they do not consider it more meaningful than their other work, nor do they feel stressed about it. Over half of the surveyed officers had completed formal human rights training and now consider themselves adequately trained.

1.2 Patterns of tasking, service and influence tend to be within rather than outside DFAIT.

The vast majority of officers report handling no more than five human rights cases in the past six months. They tend to be tasked by, and provide services to, people in DFAIT rather than in OGDs or outside of government altogether. This is consistent with their role as policy advisers or managers of information.

With regards to this work, officers believe they have more influence on people inside than outside of the department. They associate the influence they have with the amount of time they work on human rights issues — the more they work, the more influence they believe they have. They believe they are more influential in these areas when their role is clear, when the work is well-managed and efforts are coordinated, when they enjoy positive relations with external groups, and when they are personally committed to the human rights agenda.

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1.3 While DFAIT is moving ahead in its ability to balance interests and values, competing domestic interests sometimes lead to inconsistently implemented human rights policy.

Human rights issues are managed in the context of the department's relations with Canadian and international stakeholders — very few of whom are neutral about the theme. As an issue, international human rights carries a large amount of domestic political capital, and policies sometimes appear to play more to the hometown audience than to the situation overseas. Canadians hold seemingly contradictory values (e.g. human rights and trade) but want consistent and integrated policies in our foreign affairs.

Balancing these interests and values is a dynamic, on-going process that may never reach completion in practice. DFAIT officers remind us that human rights is a relatively new policy area in bilateral relations, and that in a short period we have taken significant steps to build our capacity to manage the seeming inconsistencies, particularly in policy implementation. However, the officers state clearly that inconsistency in human rights policy across time and geographic location remains a source of frustration and an obstacle to effective issues management. They ascribe this inconsistency to two sources: different ministers with different priorities, and the officer's need to balance serving government policy, providing policy advice, and serving the needs of the minister.

1.4 DFAIT's performance in managing human rights issues is based on individual excellence. Its performance could improve with more effective management systems.

DFAIT relies more on individual officers' abilities than systems and procedures in managing human rights issues. Given the shrinking resource base, and the declining level of support to officers, this may not be the most propitious strategy. Assuming a clear government policy and corporate mission, the department lacks strong, effective systems and procedures for planning, implementing and monitoring its performance in managing human rights issues. This would include: priority-setting and resourcing; policy coordination among themes and agendas; operating principles for determining who gets involved when and for what reasons; coordination mechanisms to ensure the added value of expertise; coherent roles and responsibilities to reduce indecision; clear lines of communication; effective human resource management; performance standards and benchmarks; and systems for learning from past successes and failures.

1.5 Coordination in issues management among DFAIT branches and among DFAIT and OGDs is complex, costly, but it usually works well. Good coordination is necessary for effective issues management.

The human rights context requires Canadian experts to intervene in specialized capacities. The cornerstone of an effective strategy is the coordination of such expertise. DFAIT divisions routinely coordinate their efforts with a range of internal and external groups that are often specialized in some aspect of the political, trade or aid dimension of a bilateral relationship.

While effective coordination facilitates issues management — and conversely, poor coordination prevents people from playing their specialist role and adding value to the work produced — we must ask how effectively DFAIT's structures serve its coordination strategy. Interview data suggest that DFAIT is not always coordinating the work of experts efficiently. The 'stove pipe' effect sometimes results in too many people at meetings; work teams are the exception, not the rule;

electronic networks carry unnecessary information; resourcing patterns require high level staff to perform low level tasks. While DFAIT will bring together specialized working groups, its structures and values require that more people than necessary are managing issues. The current models for coordinating expertise are more costly than alternatives.

1.6 The 'value added' of political and economic officers in managing human rights issues is in assessing situations, analysing possible responses, and recommending bilateral and multilateral approaches that bring the most benefits to Canada at the least cost and risk.

The political and economic officer adds value to the department's work in human rights by managing information and managing relations. According to questionnaire data, the officers spend 53% of the work week in such value-added tasks as gathering and providing information, applying expertise, exerting influence, managing relationships, building consensus and implementing policy that promotes Canadian values. They also spend 30% of their time coordinating events or tending to administrative and management duties — areas where their value-added is less clear.

The case studies suggest that both the functional and geographic branches add value to DFAIT's human rights work. The functional branches make significant ongoing contributions in multilateral contexts, where we set our priorities, plan and state Canada's position clearly. The geographic branches manage relations with bilateral partners and Canadians in more complex environments — often without having set priorities or allocated resources strategically. The data suggest that the department performs best when it acts proactively to manage relations and situations before they become 'issues'. Yet the tendency among geographic branches especially is to act in a responsive, operational mode (producing Q&As for example) rather than being strategic in times of crisis. The political and economic officers *do* add value to issues management — though we must be clear as to when they add value, what priorities they work toward, and what demands prevent them from performing to their potential in managing relations and managing information.

2.0 Priority Areas in Managing Human Rights Issues

The study uncovered six issues which affect DFAIT performance in managing human rights cases. These issues are also understood as areas of wider concern to the department.

2.1 DFAIT's organizational culture has positive and negative effects on the department's ability to manage human rights issues.

Tradition in DFAIT fosters loyalty to the system and commitment to quality service for the public good. The political and economic officers are industrious problem-solvers who pull together in crises to overcome myriad ambiguities and complexities in the issue and the context in which they work. But the department's organizational culture also has some paradoxical and negative features. As resources and opportunities for personal advancement diminish, the culture is at once competitive and risk averse. In describing the negative aspects, some officers say the department is hierarchical, closed, segmented and isolationist.

The virtues in the organizational culture, more than contemporary management thinking and systems, have enabled the department to realize significant success in managing human rights issues. Nonetheless, various aspects of the culture are antithetical to the type of foreign service Canada needs and can afford in today's context. Competition, hierarchy, risk aversion — these qualities are not conducive to the Team Canada approach to managing foreign policy. Instances of

the new management thinking — a niche for specialized services, the country desk approach — are still the exceptions in the department's attempts to deal with the challenges it faces.

2.2 More proactive leadership could improve human rights management.

Concerns with leadership surfaced in much of our data. A significant number of officers perceive an inconsistent, and at times, ineffective leadership at the level of ADMs, Deputies and Ministers — notwithstanding the large numbers of senior managers. Many officers argue that managing human rights issues is affected by leader inconsistency, lack of a coherent vision, and an apparent unwillingness to prioritize. More generally, the officers are cynical that the department leaders will follow through on the results of reports and studies, and they are concerned that senior managers do not advocate the value of the political/economic function with government leaders.

The issue is how DFAIT defines and rewards leadership. In DFAIT the individual can seldom afford to be even a little 'wrong' in his or her judgement or action — so as a result he or she is not likely to take any risks. But given the complexities of the work environment, DFAIT should be rewarding teamwork, decision-making, risk-taking, and those who learn from their mistakes. The participants at the concluding workshop asked that we communicate a clear message on this matter, as the subject is sensitive and not easy for those involved to address directly with their leaders given the realities of the department's culture. The isolation of most senior managers on the 8th floor does not ameliorate what might in fact be inaccurate perceptions.

2.3 Establishing strategic priorities and limits could enhance management performance related to human rights.

Much of DFAIT's human rights work is more responsive than proactive. In the process the department ends up managing events more than relationships, and being operational more than strategic. This is DFAIT's inclination in managing human rights issues — responding to the many immediate fires — even though the thrust of its bilateral work is aimed at managing relationships. Like Canada's work in multilateral fora, managing bilateral relationships is strategic when the relationship is important to our interests, and not strategic when the relationship means little to our well-being. In a resource rich context, the department can take a responsive stance and operate in all the world's corners without setting limits on what it can do. In today's context, however, the department needs to establish strategic priorities in order to remain effective in managing human rights issues. Its responses would be governed by *a priori* decisions on how much it is willing to invest in particular relationships or for particular issues. As priorities and situations change, scarce resources would need to be re-allocated.

2.4 Establishing tangible value for the management of human rights issues could contribute to better understanding of the department's 'value added' by stakeholders, interest groups, clients, and funders.

The concept of government serving the people is a sound one in principle, but it has implicit challenges in practice. DFAIT has a tradition of service on demand which in the current environment is putting enormous pressure on its people and systems. Individual officers are dealing with demands from external groups with special interests, as well as internal groups such as ministers, their advisors and assistants, managers, posts, OGDs, and members of parliament. Moreover, they are expected to respond without clear guidelines for establishing priority among client requests, and for determining the appropriate quality and timeliness of service.

Officers are interested in exploring the idea of putting a value on the level of effort required in the various aspects of their work, and asking users to assume some of the costs of the service. For example, if DFAIT can provide better quality information than can the global information highway, then that information has added value. By balancing services and fees, such a management system could control unchecked demand, encourage differing levels of service with different associated costs, and provide information that could help DFAIT in managing its human rights work. It would also begin to structure a mechanism for feedback from those served, and establish the worth of human rights work for both producers and consumers. Alternatively, users of DFAIT services could be provided with nominal budgets for a determined amount of value-added services. DFAIT could contract out the functions to which it adds little value or which could be delivered more efficiently by others.

2.5 More decentralized decision-making and resource management could improve DFAIT's performance in managing human rights issues.

It appears to us that decision-making is often pushed to too high a level, and that there are too many layers involved. An important principle in contemporary management is to empower those doing the front-line work and do so by encouraging them to make decisions through a distributed leadership approach. Properly executed, such models improve performance.

Decision-making related to resources is particularly important. Most people we consulted felt that they could not possibly do what they now do with any fewer resources. In our view, they need to consider more cost-effective alternatives to the way things are done. Traditional bureaucracies centralize resources and allocate them top-down. Modern organizations transfer budgets to key line managers such as directors, and hold them accountable for results commensurate with their capacity to respond. Furthermore, unless people are trained as resource managers at lower levels in the department, there will continue to be insufficient nurturing of resource managers able to serve the senior leadership needs of DFAIT in the subsequent generation. Of course, at the senior management levels, decisions also need to be made about where DFAIT should invest most given its overall constellation of objectives.

2.6 Improving DFAIT's performance in managing human rights issues will require proactive change management.

These are difficult times for those employed in government departments, no less so in DFAIT. Increasing demands, decreasing resources and limited opportunities are causing concern among officers. People recognize the need for fundamental change, but they are fearful and resistant to change — not knowing its consequences. Some approaches to change involve rearrangements of structures, relocation of people and/or re-definition of an organization's mission and mandate. Past attempts at change within DFAIT have tried to garner support first, with the degree and nature of change depending on the support for it. The related study on the country desk approach of P Branch suggests one successful model of this type of change management.

The study of our data, especially listening to political and economic officers, leads us to believe that the type of fundamental change suggested here will not be enacted from a bottom up or consensual approach. Rather, it will need to be guided by a clear vision of a new foreign service — one that bases priorities on realistic and coherent policy objectives linked to a realistic view of resources, and backed by solid political support over the long term.

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