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Canada cut projects to Catholic agency despite staff recommendations

Michael Swan Catholic News Service | Jan. 17, 2013
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Government staffers described the bishops' Development and Peace agency as "Canada's most experienced development organization supported exclusively by Canadians" -- then slashed its funding.

Internal emails, briefing notes and memoranda obtained by *The Catholic Register*, a national weekly, reveal that a government decision to cut funding to the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace in 2012 went against the advice of almost everyone consulted, including its own bureaucracy.

Last spring's massive cut in funding is not recommended anywhere in 235 pages of documents *The Catholic Register* obtained from the Canadian International Development Agency through an Access to Information request.

Instead, in an email outlining Development and Peace's five-year proposal for $49.2 million in funding for 20 countries, CIDA program officer Doug Henderson told the agency's media relations department, "CIDA has analyzed and agreed with the results ... and the amounts allocated in the budget ... and to the entire five-year project. Extensive due diligence has been carried out up front."

In a briefing prepared for Canadian International Development Agency President Margaret Biggs, staffers said, "This is a strong proposal from an experienced partner." The Aug. 31, 2011, briefing -- delivered the same day Development and Peace's previous five-year funding agreement ran out -- praised the agency for its outstanding record since 1968.

"Periodic financial audits, program and project evaluations and institutional assessments have consistently shown that D&P was well managed, organizationally and financially, and very capable of achieving results for CIDA. Over the past 40 years, there has never been any major incident or problem in their development work with CIDA," said the briefing document.

The documentation, however, fails to explain why former CIDA Minister Bev Oda decided to slash almost $35 million from Development and Peace's proposal: The government funded $14.5 million for projects in seven countries.

The reason for the cut remains a mystery, said Canadian Council for International Cooperation spokeswoman Chantal Havard, who reviewed the documents. The council lobbies for about 100 Canadian nongovernmental development agencies.

"It's not a good practice for good development," Havard said. "If you want international assistance to be efficient, provide long-term results and have a good impact, experience has demonstrated over and over again that you need predictability for the aid budget."

Information the government is permitted to exclude under the Access to Information Act includes "advice or

recommendations ... consultations or deliberations ... plans or positions." However, even outside the context of a formal recommendation, CIDA's internal communications consistently speak positively about Development and Peace and its 2011-2016 proposal. The documents show broad support for the Catholic agency among its partners in the global South, individual beneficiaries of its projects and development professionals in Canada.

CIDA media relations has said many times that funding was withdrawn from all but a few Development and Peace projects because these were the "most likely to produce tangible results."

Michael Casey, executive director of Development and Peace, said he still finds the explanation mystifying. Meetings between the two agencies offered no explanation, Casey said, adding that it was all water under the bridge now.

CIDA media relations refused to answer six separate *Catholic Register* questions about the final decision on Development and Peace's funding.

"The proposal was evaluated by CIDA following established criteria, and the decision was based on the careful evaluation of the merits of each component of the proposal," said a CIDA spokesperson.

In a July blog by the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies, Stephen Brown, an association professor in the political studies department, said that at the end of Oda's term as minister of international cooperation, "the government systematically undermined both the fundamental purpose of Canadian foreign aid, which is to fight poverty in developing countries, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) itself."

Although the information available online increased under her watch, he said, "How decisions are made, however, remains as mysterious as ever."

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