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46% favour foreign aid priorities, poll finds

Revamped strategy to target certain countries

Presented by



Matthew Coutts, National Post



A recent government decision to refocus how Canada spends its foreign aid dollars, in order to target certain developing countries and initiatives while de-prioritizing others, has been received favourably by the Canadian public, according to a survey by the Innovative Research Group.

When asked whether they agree or disagree with the decision to focus Canada's \$1.2-billion annual bilateral budget -- aid that goes directly from one country to another -- to help 20 developing countries the government believes are important to Canada's global interests, 46% of Canadians agreed with the proposed changes, while 40% disagreed.

"When people look at the lack of growth in the developing world, the degree to which, despite spending billions of dollars in aid over decades, we've really done little to raise the prosperity and growth of the proverbial 'bottom billion,' " said Rudyard Griffiths, co-organizer of The Munk Debates, the speakers' forum that commissioned the study.

"There seems to be an appetite for a new approach, and a targeted approach at least offers the potential that Canada's aid budget could have more of a strategic impact, by focusing on 20-odd countries as opposed to being a mile wide and an inch deep."

The changes were announced last week by Bev Oda, the government's Minister of International Co-operation, who signalled that Canada's foreign aid strategy would be revamped to get more benefit from cash spent on international initiatives.

Canadian International Development Agency's new direction would emphasize increasing food security, stimulating sustainable economic growth, and securing the future of children and youth, as well as focusing on partner countries.

The declaration is a change from the current strategy, which sees the country's entire \$5-billion aid budget spread across the globe, assessing each country by its needs and responding.

Critics of the new plan contend that the Conservative government is choosing beneficiaries according to whether they are aligned with Canada's foreign policy priorities.

The declaration came after a Senate Foreign Affairs Committee issued a study entitled *Overcoming 40 Years of*

Failure, which concluded that Canada has tried to do too much in too many countries.

"I think this signals the disconnect between the foreign aid community, the NGO community, that prefers the status-quo approach, which is assessing each country by its needs and responding accordingly," Mr. Griffiths said.

The survey found that those who described themselves as "familiar" with how the programs operate and agreed with the changes were more likely to hold a strong opinion. However, strong opinions were for the most part limited: only 11% of respondents strongly agreed, while 16% strongly disagreed.

Generally, female respondents were less likely to agree with the changes, 37% of women agree, compared to 55% of men.

Provincially, residents of Quebec were less likely to approve (39% agree) than residents of Ontario (46%), the West (50%) or Atlantic provinces (53%).

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