Canada in Africa: Finding our Footing?

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Executive Summary

As part of its effort to refurbish the image of Canadian Liberal internationalism, the Trudeau government has signaled its intent to re-engage with issues and countries in Africa. Notwithstanding the debate over where to deploy a major “peacekeeping” contingent and Defence Minister Harjit Singh Sajjan’s mission-shopping trip to Africa in August 2016, the motives, objectives, and resources for a “renewal” of Canada’s presence in Africa have not been clearly specified. In this context, the current re-engagement risks becoming yet another oscillation in Canada’s longstanding pattern of consistent inconsistency towards the continent.¹ This paper situates the latest resurgence of interest in Africa in relation to this persistent tendency. It then considers what a more effective policy would require: greater and more consistent commitments of resources, a more coherent approach to the various elements through which Canada and Canadians engage with Africa and Africans, and a more modest self-assessment of the significance of our role(s). Finally, it briefly considers the prospects for moving beyond the shallow and inconstant tendencies of the past, towards a more sustained and constructive approach that seeks to work with African governments and organizations to foster more inclusive development and mutually beneficial relationships.
The myth(s) of Canada in Africa

One key error to avoid is for Canadian policy makers to allow themselves to think that they will be restoring a tradition of active and constructive engagement in the challenges facing the continent—“good international citizenship,” in the terminology of the English School of international relations. To be sure, some Canadian officials and civil society groups have built sustained “partnerships” with African counterparts in addressing development and security challenges. There have also been historical moments during which Canadian policy has been consistent with this image—for example, the Mulroney government’s activism on apartheid, the Chrétien government’s advocacy of the African Action Plan within the G8 or, on a smaller scale, UN Ambassador Robert Fowler’s work on the Angola Sanctions Committee that helped create the conditions for the ending of the disastrous Angolan civil war. But these moments have been regularly interspersed with periods of indifference and neglect, or worse (quintessentially Somalia, but more routinely the habit of tackling federal budget deficits through severe cuts to the aid program). They have also tended to be mythologized as emblematic of our “normal” selves, when too often these promising openings have not been sustained, even with such important partners as South Africa.

Canada’s intermittent African activism has been caught between two competing impulses, both deeply embedded in the Canadian political and policy elite. The first is an admirable inclination to respond positively to appeals for help in ameliorating situations of deep crisis and suffering (especially when encouraged to do so by major allies)—typically accompanied by inflated rhetoric (“ear candy”) and almost always under-resourced and “incomplete.” The second is a view of Canada’s national interests and identity that sees the allocation of substantial resources (human, institutional, and financial) to Africa as a distortion of our most pressing and enduring priorities. Caught between these competing pressures to “do something”, but also to limit exposure and entanglements, the result has been a pattern of unsustained and incoherent engagements, shallow relationships, and limited understanding. But because the results of these initiatives are of little concern or consequence to most Canadians, there is typically little political price to be paid for their inadequacies.

Characteristically, this policy approach has tended to be one-dimensional. Thus, “Africa” is viewed through the prism of a particularly prominent issue area (most often aid, “peacekeeping”, or the extractive sector), while the image of the continent thereby projected to Canadians is distorted and decontextualized. Again, one must be careful not to overstate this tendency. Nevertheless, the Trudeau government’s highly publicized and debated intent to re-engage with UN peace operations in Africa risks repeating it, while the complex and interconnected nature of African policy challenges and opportunities is obscured. To illustrate this tendency, the three policy issue areas noted above (peacekeeping, aid, and the extractive sector) will be briefly probed.
A return to peacekeeping?

The Trudeau government has most strongly signaled its intent to re-engage with Africa in the context of (principally UN-mandated) peace operations. Defence Minister Sajjan’s exploratory mission to Africa (accompanied by iconic Canadian internationalists Louise Arbour and Roméo Dallaire), followed by the announcement of Canada’s renewed support for peace operations in August 2016, elicited a flurry of reaction - much of it alarmist.10 The tone of the reaction suggests that the Harper government’s deeply skeptical view of UN peacekeeping has left its mark on the Canadian attentive public, even as other evidence suggests the continued attraction of the idea of peacekeeping (however loosely understood) in the Canadian political imagination.11

It is troubling that these plans are being formulated prior to the completion of the government’s Defence Policy Review - and in the complete absence of an overriding foreign policy review, which could, or at least should, clarify the strategic calculations that lie behind them. Moreover, contemporary peace operations have become more complex and potentially dangerous - though this trend is hardly new and in fact, they have become less deadly to peacekeeping personnel as peacekeepers and planners have adapted to the painful lessons of the post-Cold War era.12 Moreover, despite the UN’s deep flaws, there is robust evidence that peace operations have, on balance, assisted in saving lives and stabilizing volatile situations;13 while their persistent operational weaknesses have much to do with the post-2000 retreat of relatively sophisticated and professional Western militaries from significant levels of participation – Canada’s prominently among them.

Indeed, Canada is in a position to make a modest but significant contribution to increasing the effectiveness of African peace operations. Some other Western governments are already re-engaging - particularly in Mali - based not on soft-minded idealism, but because failure to do so will exacerbate zones of insecurity that both endanger growing numbers of civilians (thereby worsening humanitarian crises), and spill over in ways that compromise wider regional and international security interests.14 Their re-engagement also reflects, implicitly at least, an understanding of Western complicity in the sources of insecurity in Mali, linked to the fallout from the ill-conceived Libyan intervention in which Canada was a key participant.

In this connection, it is clear that Canada’s return to an active role in UN peace operations will be welcomed by its Western allies – large, medium, and small.15 At one level, the eagerness of other (especially major) Western powers for Canada to re-engage should give Canadian policy makers pause, in light of the complex historic roles and motives of these powers in Africa. On the other hand, it is important (both politically and operationally) that countries like Canada, along with the Dutch, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Finns, and others who have already returned to significant operational roles, begin to break down the inequitable division of peacekeeping labour through which virtually all top contributors of ‘front line’ military and police forces come from the global South,16 bankrolled by risk-averse Western governments.
Moreover, the new government’s emphasis on the provision of “force enablers,” including “leadership for command and headquarters positions, air transport, engineering and medical expertise, military and police training, and capacity building,”\textsuperscript{17} is in line with both Canadian capabilities and UN operational needs. Another related possibility is to focus on the provision of technology enablers for “smart peacekeeping.”\textsuperscript{18} While these contributions will not turn troubled UN operations into exemplars of efficiency, the appropriate test should not be their ongoing trials and inadequacies, but rather (counterfactually) the likely repercussions of their absence or withdrawal.

In addition, Canada’s hiatus from a significant operational role in the UN context creates both a challenge and an opportunity to reconsider the roles and capacities of the past. Now is the time to think critically about the appropriate balance between military, police, and civilian contributions, and how to better coordinate their roles. In order to do this, the Canadian government needs to re-invest in a standing capacity to reflect on, and prepare for, the policy and operational challenges associated with peace operations. This means ‘standing up’ something akin to the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre – though preferably in a more networked and virtual form that maximizes connections between academic, policy, and applied knowledge and experience, in collaboration with African and European “partners.”

Nevertheless, these prospective contributions to UN peace operations do not address the underlying sources of recurrent crises in zones of regional insecurity. If such operations are to be more than short-term palliatives, or international riot control, they need to be coordinated with more robust, sustained, and sophisticated political and developmental responses. These, in turn, are required to address the more routine structural violence confronted by many poor and marginalized people. This requires more consistent and effective development policies – including but also transcending foreign aid.

**Towards renewed “development cooperation”**

For much of the post-colonial history of Canada’s relations with the countries of (mostly Commonwealth and francophone) Africa, Canadian policy was widely perceived as virtually synonymous with aid policy. The problems with such a narrow and often paternalistic perspective are multiple.\textsuperscript{19} From a practical perspective, however, it meant that Canada’s official engagement with Africa rested on a weak and shifting foundation, as Canada’s aid program underwent frequent changes in thematic and country priorities and, since the early 1990s, large swings in aid volume – though always well short of the longstanding international target of 0.7% of GDP first proposed by the Pearson Commission on International Development in 1969.\textsuperscript{20} These weaknesses persisted under both Liberal and Conservative governments.

Where does Canadian development cooperation fit into the Trudeau government’s emerging approach towards the continent? The portents at this early stage (with the results of the recent International Assistance Review still pending) are mixed. One crucial area of uncertainty concerns the prospects for a more respectable and consistent level of aid spending. It is
increasingly axiomatic that traditional bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) is of diminishing importance among financial flows to developing countries. As other sources of development finance grow, including remittances, foreign direct investment, influential “new philanthropists” like the Gates Foundation, and new aid providers from rising states of the global South (e.g., China, Brazil, India, Turkey, etc), it is tempting to conclude that more Canadian development aid spending is discretionary if not redundant. Particularly in the poorest countries, however, heavily concentrated in Africa, aid serves essential needs that cannot be met in other ways. Moreover, because it is a direct and intentional result of public policy, ODA can play a strategic role that other sources of development finance cannot. In short, a more active presence in Africa will require that the government systematically move beyond the current desultory level of aid spending (below the OECD average, at 0.28% of GNI in 2015), and at the same time forge consistent relationships with governmental and non-governmental “partners” in a stable set of “countries of concentration.”  

At the same time, there are some more positive indicators emerging from the current consultation process. For example, the Trudeau government has chosen to build on the previous government’s flagship development initiative of maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH) – again, particularly relevant in Africa – while correcting its key gaps on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and on the neglected needs and interests of adolescents. Since this initiative played a catalytic role in accelerating progress in reducing maternal and child mortality and morbidity between 2010 and 2015, and has been positively (if not uncritically) evaluated, it makes good sense to build on this country’s accumulated expertise, and resist the temptation to rebrand by discarding a predecessor’s priorities. 

Similarly, the government is set to grasp, once more, the nettle of “governance, pluralism, diversity and human rights.” This is fraught territory that needs to be approached in a spirit of dialogue, reciprocity, and self-reflection. It cannot rely on easy assumptions (whether explicit or implicit) of the ‘exportability’ of our governance practices. Rather, it must draw on the patient work of building relationships of trust, and contextual understanding of indigenous challenges and capacities. As in peacekeeping, Canada’s ability to engage in this pivotal policy area has been diminished by the dismantling of key elements of the development research ‘ecosystem’, such as the North-South Institute and Rights and Democracy. Some variation of this capacity will have to be re-established. Nevertheless, given the integral links between (mal)governance and problems of insecurity as well as distorted development, this issue area cannot be evaded. 

Most importantly, however, Canada’s development policy capacity, now lodged primarily within the integrated international policy establishment of Global Affairs Canada, must be re-focused to view aid as only one element of a significantly larger ensemble of Canadian policies (concerning the environment, natural resources, trade, immigration, agriculture, oceans, etc.) that bear on the development prospects of African countries. Those responsible for development policy must become an intellectually robust presence in debates with their trade and security counterparts concerning how Canada can and should engage with African counterparts in the most mutually beneficial ways possible. The government’s new openness to engagement with
experienced and knowledgeable Canadian civil society organizations and development researchers, manifested in the International Assistance Review, is a promising start. However, the end point needs to extend well beyond the ‘disconnected’ relationships that have been the historic norm between development policy makers and non-governmental expertise on Canadian policy toward Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.24

The challenge and opportunity of extractive sector investment

A key reason why it has been so difficult to set and sustain a coherent policy approach towards Africa(s)25 has been the perception of its marginality to Canadian economic interests.26 During the past decade, as Africa’s global economic significance has grown and as other countries have energetically jockeyed to increase their continental presence, the feeling has been increasingly mutual.27 Nevertheless, the extractive sector has become a prominent exception to this apparent mutual economic disinterest, and the dominant face of “Canada” in many parts of the continent.28 No issue area so clearly highlights the need for, and challenges of, forging a more comprehensive and coherent policy approach.

During the first decade of the new millennium, Africa led most of the world in economic growth. Much of this growth, breathlessly (and misleadingly) characterized as “Africa rising,”29 was fuelled by a sustained commodities boom in which Canadian extractive companies were instrumental, and from which they benefited handsomely. There is no doubt that many Africans also benefited from this boom. However, many others, often living in communities adjacent to mine sites, became more insecure – through displacement, environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods as artisanal miners and even, in some cases, through armed violence fuelled by competition for control of lucrative resources. Meanwhile, the public revenues from these projects were highly constrained by the terms of the liberalized mining codes adopted by most African countries under pressure from the structural adjustment policies championed by Western governments, including Canada’s.30

The net effects of this extractive-fuelled growth have generated much controversy, but it is clear that the benefits have been inequitably distributed and that they have not been adequately linked to processes of economic diversification that would lead to more balanced and sustainable development.31 Even Ghana and Tanzania, star development performers and major recipients of both Canadian mining investment and development aid, remained 140th and 151st out of 188 countries in the UN Human Development Index in 2014 – in both cases, only two places up from the positions they occupied in 2009. Poverty and inequality remained deeply entrenched in both.

Meanwhile, faced with controversy concerning the human insecurity associated with many extractive developments, the Canadian government has continued to opt for soft (voluntary) options in holding its own corporate citizens to account. While advances have been made through the elaboration of codes of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and through pressure
from civil society organizations as well as growing corporate concern with the need to maintain a “social license to operate,” the effects on the ground have been slow and uneven.32

For Canadian policy makers, there is no easy way to square this circle, given the wealth and influence of the extractive sector on the one hand, and growing pressure for more transparency and accountability on the other. But there is also no responsible way to avoid it. Canada arguably has both an obligation and an interest in being, and being seen to be, at the forefront of efforts to enable host governments and communities to maximize the social benefits from their extractive sectors, and minimize the harms associated with extractive sector developments. Fundamentally, this too is a governance challenge, with the need for more effective, accountable, and enforceable environmental, taxation, and socially redistributive regulations and policies to ensure that one of the continent’s most reliably robust sectors contributes to sustainable development in host countries. This requires Canadian policy makers to directly confront the tensions (political, economic, developmental, and social) associated with the large footprint of the Canadian extractive sector in Africa.

**Policy Implications**

Of course, Canadian-African relationships encompass far more than the issues highlighted in this brief analysis, including long-standing and steadily expanding trans-societal links, other dimensions of trade in goods and services, the seemingly never-ending “crisis” of humanitarianism in the face of protracted humanitarian emergencies, and the challenges and repercussions of climate change. Taken together, however, they illustrate the need for a more comprehensive and coherent approach to Africa policy.33 “More coherent” does not mean without contradictions; it simply means that in the course of the policy process, the contradictions are recognized, confronted, analyzed and, to the greatest degree possible, mitigated.

More concretely, there is a need to increase and sustain the resources (both human and financial) devoted to Africa policy; to engage systematically with the best thinking in this and other countries on the nature of the challenges and opportunities facing the continent; to identify ways in which Canada can bring distinctive priorities and assets to bear in addressing them; and to build and sustain relationships with key African counterparts in “partner” countries, regional organizations, and civil societies. As noted above, particular attention needs to be paid to re-constituting the elements of a strong development research “ecosystem”, of the sort that exists in most high performing European states, which can act as a bridge to civil society and academic researchers and a source of thoughtful policy-oriented research. Similarly, the various elements of the Canadian government with relevant responsibilities and expertise will need to be brought into a more concerted policy-making process around critical challenges facing the continent. Seriously engaging with the full range of policy issues surrounding current and emerging priorities, such as maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent reproductive health, or the challenges of peace operations in zones of protracted insecurity, would be a good place to start.
Can this happen? At one level, there will never be *enough* resources to address meaningfully many of Africa’s acute challenges. Choices will need to be made and stuck with, in order to properly assess their usefulness. Many “realists” in government and the academy will continue to argue, from a strictly instrumental view of the “national interest”, that time and resources spent on Africa are largely “wasted”. This perspective will exert a constant pull away from any sustained effort to forge a more concerted and adequately resourced Africa policy. In the Canadian context, however, such a view reflects a misreading of the national interest (or, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s terms, “self-interest rightly understood”). Much of what influence Canada has been able to marshal in international affairs has grown out of its reputation as a country with the ability and inclination to support collective efforts to advance security and development where they are most needed, at least intermittently. In doing so, Canadian policy enables the promotion of Canada’s own, more narrowly defined interests.

What is emphatically *not* in the Canadian interest – yet almost impossible for many Canadian politicians to resist – is the inclination to inflate our importance in far-away ‘trouble spots’, and to exaggerate the nobility of our motivations. Neither inclination is credible, certainly in the crowded diplomatic landscape of contemporary Africa, and both should be resisted – even as the country aims toward a more comprehensive and cohesive policy approach.
1 See David Black, Canada and Africa in the new Millennium: the politics of consistent inconsistency (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).
3 Though even in such cases, the significance of Canadian initiatives has often been exaggerated. See Linda Freeman, The Ambiguous Champion: Canada and South Africa in the Trudeau and Mulroney Years (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), and Black, Canada and Africa in the New Millennium, chapter 2.
4 For contrasting accounts, see Sherene Razack, Dark Threats and White Knights (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), and Grant Dawson, Here is Hell: Canada’s Engagement in Somalia (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).
7 Darren Brunk, “Conclusion,” in in M. Carroll and G. Donaghy (eds.), From Kinshasa to Kandahar: Canada and Fragile States in Historical Perspective (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016), 239.
15 See, for example, Campbell Clark, “French PM looks forward to a ‘strong and active’ Canada in Africa,” The Globe and Mail, 12 October 2016; and interview of US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power by Peter Mansbridge, June 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2668696742.
19 On this point, see among others Edward Akuffo, Canadian Foreign Policy in Africa (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).
26 Bearing in mind that there are radically different conditions and prospects in the continent’s diverse countries and regions.
27 In 2015 for example, Canadian merchandise trade with Africa sat at just under 1% of total trade, compared with 83% for OECD countries as a group. See http://www.international.gc.ca/economist-economiste/statistics-statistiques/annual_merchandise_trade-commerce_des_marchandises_annuel.aspx?lang=eng
29 In 2014, Canadian Mining Assets in Africa reached more than $27 billion, growing more quickly than extractive investments in any other region. Canada has long been one of the most important sources of mining investment on the continent. See Natural
30 See Hevina Dashwood, “Corporate Social Responsibility in Fragile and Stable States: Dilemmas and Opportunities in South Sudan and Ghana,” in Carroll and Donaghy (eds.), From Kinsasha to Kandahar: Canada and Fragile States in Historical Perspective, esp. 211-213. For a more positive view of the potential development role of Canadian mining companies, see Andrew McAlister, “Can Canadian Mining Companies Make a Difference in Africa?” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, September 2016. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/1085/attachments/original/1474297957/Canadian_Mining_Companies_in_Africa_-_Andrew_McAlister.pdf?1474297957
33 A point made by many other scholars of the relationship. See, for example, Akuffo (2012); Hornsby (2014); and Roberts (2016).
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