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The Role of NGOs in International Demo- cratic Development

**Introduction
by George Perlin**

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In its 2005 International Policy Statement the Canadian government proposes to extend and deepen its program of assistance to political reform in developing and failed and failing states. In doing so it is undertaking to participate in a collective international effort which, since Canada first began to provide this kind of assistance nearly 20 years ago, has grown to encompass hundreds of programs, with total annual expenditures approaching an estimated US\$8 billion. As part of its project to assess how Canada can contribute most effectively to this collective international effort, IRPP has invited a number of the leading practitioners in the delivery of Canadian assistance to describe some of their experience and the lessons they have learned from it.

Most of Canada's activity in this field has been directed at the building of political institutions that will establish a framework for good governance, that is, institutions that provide for an effective popular voice in governance, honest and accountable public administration, effective policy-making, and observance of the rule of law.

In order to provide a forum for discussing the issues and challenges in the field, IRPP convened a workshop in Ottawa on August 9, 2005, which brought together the principal practitioners in the delivery of projects of this kind. The two case studies we present here helped frame the discussion at the workshop, a [report](#) of which we also present.

The case studies provide important insights into the experience of Canadian aid practitioners and the problems they face. One is by Robert Miller, executive director of the Parliamentary Centre, the other by Ann Masson, director of international programs with the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC). Both the centre and IPAC have had active programs of international assistance since the early 1990s. While the centre has focused on the development of democratic legislatures, IPAC has been primarily concerned with capacity-building in public administration.

[Robert Miller's paper](#) served as a general introduction to the issues that were discussed at the workshop. Outlining the history of the centre's experience as its program has grown, he describes the peculiar problems of delivering assistance for political reform, and how the administration of Canadian assistance policy has evolved through three distinct phases as administrators have tried to deal with these problems. Mr. Miller concludes with an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the administrative strategies adopted in each phase of this evolution. He describes the challenges that each strategy has presented to both government administrators and Canadian aid practitioners.

[Ann Masson's paper](#) discusses lessons learned about best practices in the field, through an analysis of four current IPAC projects. She deals with the kinds of problems that have to be addressed in administrative reform programs and what is required in order to solve these problems and deliver aid effectively. Masson concludes with a discussion of the constraints imposed by changes in the general aid delivery environment. She suggests that these changes may limit the

effectiveness of nongovernmental organizations, which have been the principal agencies for the delivery of Canadian good governance assistance.

Both Miller and Masson draw attention to the growing complexity of managing the delivery of assistance to political reform. This has been a recurring theme as the IRPP project on democratic development has evolved. From this theme a core set of issues is beginning to crystallize about the choices that Canada faces. These two case studies help shed light on some of the challenges in this policy field from the perspective of organizations that have been closely involved on the ground in a number of countries.

One important issue is the need to distinguish between the kind of assistance needed to support interventions that are based on longer-term programming objectives, and that which is needed for interventions requested because of short-term, specific situations. Canada has been doing both, but they constitute competing demands. So, the question is, how should Canadian policy reflect these differing priorities and how should funding be allocated between them? This question is particularly important because the literature on assistance to political development has stressed the need to make long-term commitments. As I pointed out in my introductory paper for the International Democratic Development project, critics argue that many projects to assist political development have failed because they have not been sustained for long enough.

Given the scale of the collective international effort and the presence of multilateral, single-state, and private-sector donors, how can Canada be most effective in the kinds of assistance we offer? Should we be specialists? Do we have particular competencies? Further, are there functional areas where other donors are already doing an effective job and where interventions by Canada would at best have a marginal effect and at worst be redundant?

Another issue involves assessments of where we can make the most useful contributions to the effectiveness of assistance to political reform. Should we focus on those countries where stable governance and democratic development are clearly well-grounded and where our interventions would contribute to a final push toward consolidation and sustainability? Or should we go into those countries where start-up help is needed? Further, what, if anything, do we do in countries where the process of democratic development is stalled or failing?

How can we promote more effective cooperation in the delivery of assistance for political reform? There has been a reluctance by donors and by practitioners to work together, which has led to wasted resources and ineffectual interventions. This is a problem that all donors have begun to recognize and, as Miller points out, one that Canadian policy-makers and administrators are starting to address. But it is not within the capacity of any one donor to bring about the solution. Is Canada in a position to provide some leadership in addressing this problem?

There is also the question of how policy for assistance to political reform is to be administered. Although the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has been the source of most of the government's funding for this form of foreign aid, many other federal departments and agencies have international governance programs. While there is a need for more effective coordination among international donors, there is equally a need for more effective coordination among practitioners within Canada. Not surprisingly, this was a major focus for discussion among the practitioners who participated in the August 2005 workshop.

Finally, there is a knowledge deficit, which is a significant impediment to the effectiveness of Canada's policy-making and aid delivery. Very little is known about the extent to which Canadian practitioners have been active in the field of international assistance, the kinds of activities in which they are engaged, and what they have learned from their experience. As emerged at the August 2005 workshop, if Canadian assistance is to be made more effective, it is imperative that this problem be addressed.

It is with the goal of helping to remedy this deficit of knowledge about Canadian activities on the ground that the IRPP's International Democratic Development project presents these two reports on the work of Canadian aid practitioners. These case studies are the first two in a series about Canadian activities in this field. Through this series we hope to contribute to an informed discussion of the issues that must be dealt with if Canada is to be effective in its commitment to support political reform as expressed in the International Policy Statement.