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Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): At this point in time, I'd like to call the meeting to order. *Bienvenue à tous.*

This meeting is called pursuant to the Standing Orders, and the committee today is dealing with chapter 8, “Strengthening Aid Effectiveness—Canadian International Development Agency”, of the fall 2009 report of the Auditor General of Canada.

We are very pleased to have with us today, first of all, from the Office of the Auditor General, Richard Flageole, the Assistant Auditor General, accompanied by John Reed, Principal, and Dusan Duvnjak, Director. From the Canadian International Development Agency, we have the President and Accounting Officer, Margaret Biggs, accompanied by David Moloney, Executive Vice-President.

On behalf of the committee, I want to again welcome each of you to the meeting.

There is a possibility, members and witnesses, that the committee hearing may be suspended for a vote, but that would only take about 10 or 15 minutes. That's just a possibility. I don't know if it will happen or not. In any event, we have no control over that, so I'm going to call for opening statements.

I understand, Mr. Flageole, you'll be delivering the opening statement for the Office of the Auditor General. I turn the matter over to you right now.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Flageole (Assistant Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss chapter 8 of our 2009 fall report, “Strengthening Aid Effectiveness”, concerning the Canadian International Development Agency.

As you mentioned, I'm joined at the table by Mr. John Reed, principal, and Mr. Dusan Duvnjak, director. They were responsible for the audit.

CIDA is the agency that administers the bulk of Canada's official development assistance. In the past fiscal year, it spent around \$3.5 billion, almost half of which was for its geographic, or country-to-country, programming. CIDA's geographic programming takes place in over 60 countries, 20 of which are considered countries of concentration.

Our audit examined the extent to which the agency is meeting commitments it made in 2002 to improve the effectiveness of delivering aid in its geographic programming. Specifically, we looked at CIDA's management processes to sustain the implementation of its commitments related to aligning with the needs and priorities of recipient countries; harmonizing with other donors; using program-based approaches; and achieving greater sectoral focus. CIDA views these commitments as important for delivering aid effectively.

[Translation]

As noted in the chapter, CIDA has made progress in aligning its projects with the needs of recipient countries and harmonizing its efforts with other donors.

Many stakeholders in the development aid community—both here in Canada and abroad—describe CIDA and its field staff as a valued and active partner. Yet, overall, we found that CIDA had not put in place the basic management processes required to direct and sustain implementation of its commitments. Frequent changes in priorities and policy direction, and weak management practices have hampered CIDA's ability to deliver foreign aid more effectively.

With respect to achieving greater sectoral focus, the agency recognized that its aid is widely dispersed across many sectors. It therefore committed to focus on fewer priorities to make a more meaningful Canadian contribution. However, we found no evidence that it was concentrating its aid on fewer sectors. This is due to CIDA sectoral priorities being too broadly defined and changing too often, and to the agency never developing a robust plan to achieve greater focus.

[English]

This situation has also had a negative impact on the agency's ability to determine and build upon its strengths relative to other donors. CIDA's relative strengths in the development of its country programs and individual projects were not evident in our audit. The agency has also made limited progress in deciding what types of skills and expertise it needs to support its priorities and how to provide them. CIDA needs to clearly identify which sectoral priorities and programming areas it will and will not fund, and acquire the appropriate skills and expertise.

Over the past decade, new forms of projects known as “program-based approaches” have been put in place. These approaches entail new forms of funding, such as direct transfers to the budgets of recipient countries, and involve several donors working together. They typically rely on recipient government systems for delivery.

Our audit found that the support for using these approaches has been neither uniform nor timely throughout the agency. CIDA management has provided little specific direction and no targets to country desks on how and when to use program-based approaches. Further, it has not clearly defined the specific conditions under which the agency would or would not participate in a program-based approach, and it has not standardized the types of risk assessments that must be done before accepting such approaches.

Given that CIDA has gained considerable experience with such approaches over the past decade, it would be important that the agency evaluate its use of them to determine whether the approaches are in fact achieving the agency's goals.

• (1535)

[Translation]

With respect to CIDA's process for planning its country programming, we found that programming frameworks for the countries that we examined had all expired by the end of our audit and a rigorous country planning process was missing. The Agency was embarking on a new planning process whose requirements were constantly changing, causing frustration among staff, and taking time away from analytical work. As a result, donor partners, recipient governments, and program staff were unclear about the agency's direction and long-term commitment.

With respect to funding projects, we found that CIDA adequately identified project risks up front and managed those risks through implementation. However, we also found that burdensome administrative processes within the agency hamper effective decision-making. For example, an internal study conducted by the agency in 2007 found it took an average 43 months to get project approval. The agency acknowledged such problems in 2002 and yet this long-standing issue remains unresolved.

In our view, many of the weaknesses discussed above and in the chapter can be traced to the absence of a master plan to implement the commitments made in the 2002 policy statement. Early intentions were simply not matched with specific action plans and followed through. Indeed, even when action plans were developed, they were not completed.

[English]

Finally, as we note in the chapter, the long-term nature of international development requires stability and predictability of programming. In our view, frequent changes in policy direction and substantial turnover of senior management have posed significant challenges to CIDA in achieving its aid effectiveness agenda.

CIDA has agreed with our recommendations and we understand it has prepared a detailed action plan. While we're encouraged by the current management commitment, we are mindful of past initiatives that fell short of timely and full completion. Your committee may wish to have the agency report on its progress to ensure that the current momentum is sustained.

This concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Flageole.

We're now going to hear from Ms. Biggs, from the agency.

Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Ms. Margaret Biggs (President, Canadian International Development Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Chapter 8 of the 2009 Fall Report of the Auditor General of Canada as it relates to the Canadian International Development Agency, CIDA.

Aid effectiveness is a priority of the Government of Canada, and CIDA has an agenda that delivers on the government's commitment to ensure that Canada's development assistance yields concrete results.

[English]

The Auditor General's recommendations are very much in line with our ongoing efforts to improve how we do our work. I would point out that the audit was completed six months ago, in the middle of May, and many steps have been taken since that time.

I would like to take a few minutes to outline for you the important progress that CIDA has made to implement its aid effectiveness agenda. I would like to highlight three areas in particular. These are bringing greater focus to CIDA programming, stronger management and sustained implementation, and streamlined business processes.

First, in terms of bringing greater focus to CIDA's work, the agency has made significant progress in defining and refining its priorities, and in fact has already moved on many of the steps laid out in the Auditor General's report. We have narrowed our focus both geographically and thematically so that our resources can have the greatest impact where they are needed the most.

Regarding geographic focus, Minister Oda announced in February that 80% of CIDA's bilateral assistance will be concentrated in 20 countries. The remaining 20% of our bilateral aid will be invested in a smaller number of countries as required, and as of this year CIDA has met this commitment.

As for thematic focus, last May the minister outlined CIDA's thematic priorities for international development: increasing food security, securing the future of children and youth, and stimulating sustainable economic growth. She followed up by unveiling CIDA's food security strategy in October, the children and youth strategy in November, and the third, on sustainable economic growth, will be released in the new year.

• (1540)

[Translation]

For each of these strategies, we consulted extensively with experts and partners to put together what we believe are solid plans for our priority areas.

[English]

Within these thematics, the agency has narrowed the focus, further targeting elements we believe will make the greatest difference and where Canada can make a significant contribution. For example, for children and youth, CIDA will zero in on three elements: child health and survival, including maternal health; access to quality education, particularly for girls and young women; and safety and security. Using these thematics, the agency has also narrowed the focus of our individual country programs and new country strategies have been approved.

[Translation]

I believe that concentration of CIDA's efforts will strengthen our results. I believe it will strengthen the expertise and effectiveness of the agency. And I believe it will provide the clarity and direction that CIDA partners and staff have been seeking.

[English]

The second area I would like to highlight, Mr. Chair, is that solid management tools are being put in place to ensure follow-through and sustained implementation of the government's development priorities. The Auditor General's report correctly notes that previous intentions were not always matched with specific action plans. We agree this was a concern for the period under review. I am pleased, however, to report that significant work has been completed since that time.

CIDA has put in place an aid effectiveness action plan. This plan now provides the entire agency with clear actions and concrete direction, including indicators and time-bound targets for implementing all key elements of the government's aid effectiveness agenda. The agency will monitor performance and report progress annually.

[Translation]

CIDA has also instituted a policy to guide the use of program-based approaches throughout the agency. It sets out very clearly whether and when to use PBAs to maximize results and how to put them in place.

[English]

This policy was not yet finalized at the time of the audit. Program-based approaches are still a relatively new approach. CIDA, like other donors, has had to learn by doing. We have now consolidated the lessons learned into our program-based approach policy and have communicated this directly to staff.

[Translation]

Third, CIDA has been rightly criticized for its complex and lengthy administrative processes.

[English]

The length and unpredictability of CIDA's decision-making has made it an unreliable partner. It has also made the agency inefficient and it has compromised its effectiveness. The agency has taken action. It has successfully piloted a new business process that cuts processing times for its major bilateral programs from 43 months to 15 months at a maximum. This is a 66% reduction, and these processes will be mainstreamed in January 2010.

[Translation]

The agency has also reduced processing times for its partnership programs from 50 weeks to 20, a 60% reduction.

[English]

In conclusion, I draw your attention to the detailed action plan the agency has prepared in response to this audit. Most of the actions we have identified are already completed and the remainder are well on track. I'm also tabling with you today the OECD's mid-term review of Canada's development assistance. Following up on its 2007 peer review, the OECD also highlighted and encouraged CIDA on the need to focus its efforts. It states that Canada is progressing well and on a good trajectory.

I believe the steps CIDA is taking will meet the concerns outlined by the Auditor General.

• (1545)

[Translation]

CIDA is becoming more focused, effective and accountable. It now has clear priorities and a management plan to guide and sustain implementation of the government's aid effectiveness agenda.

[English]

It also has the talent and the expertise. As the Auditor General highlighted when she was here with you on November 4, CIDA staff in the field are highly regarded by donor partners and recipient countries, and their efforts are appreciated.

I believe we now have the priorities and the plan needed to deliver Canadian aid more effectively.

Merci beaucoup.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Biggs.

Just a couple of issues I want to address before we go to the first round.

First, I plan to stop at 5:15 and deal with the minutes from the steering committee on an issue arising from the steering committee during the last 15 minutes of our two hours allocated.

Secondly, you can take this in the nature of a pre-ruling, but it's a job of the chair to predict issues that may or may not come up during the questioning.

One issue that I predict might come up is KAIROS, which is a public debate. There are a number of findings and recommendations made regarding the performance targets, evaluations, focus, expectations, progress, and the expertise needed. If the decision not to fund relates specifically to a finding, I will allow the question. But I will not allow any discussion or questions dealing with the merits of the decision. That is a policy decision made by the government. This is not a continuation of question period; it's the public accounts committee, and any question of that nature will be ruled out of order by the chair.

You have seven minutes, Mrs. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Sorry, on a point of order, Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, in your comments you mentioned committee business at 5:15. My understanding, unless I'm wrong, is that the bells will go then.

The Chair: Yes, it will give us ten minutes. We will go until 5:22. I'll stop at 5:10.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I think you might need a little more time, based on what I heard before the meeting started.

The Chair: We'll go from 5:10 to 5:25.

You have seven minutes, Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Thank you, and welcome to our guests.

My first question is to Mr. Flageole. The audit rightly says that CIDA doesn't have any governing legislation that defines its role or mandate. But we know that in 2008—and I think it concurred with the time the audit was written or being prepared—Parliament adopted Bill C-293, which was the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act. So I wonder why it wasn't referenced in the audit or within the scope of the audit. It provided for three criteria that defined the mandate of CIDA: poverty alleviation, perspectives of the poor, and being consistent with international standards.

Mr. Richard Flageole: The act was promulgated while we were doing the audit, so right at the planning of the audit we considered that. A good portion of the act is also related to reporting requirements. The first report was due in fall 2009, which was after the report was finalized, so it was not possible for us to look at it. We probably should have made a reference to that in the introduction of the chapter as a point of background, but we just made the decision not to. There was nothing to audit at that stage.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Thank you very much.

Ms. Biggs and Mr. Moloney, you were criticized at the time, and I don't know how new you are to CIDA. Perhaps you can let us know. Certainly someone has to be accountable and explain what was—and not just that you have good intentions and wishes going forward, and a plan, but let's talk about what was. There was no master plan or comprehensive strategy. There was a lack of direction, shifting priorities, and a lack of corporate management process.

From what I can count, there were about 24 different priorities since 2000, five different ministers, four different agency heads, and a partridge in a pear tree. How did such shifting priorities and priority sectors impact your effectiveness? How did this lack of focus or absence of a plan help you achieve your effectiveness commitment? How did the agency achieve its goals? Which goals could you achieve? How did that impact recipients, other governments, other donors, etc.?

•(1550)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Just to answer your first question, I was appointed the president of CIDA on July 1, 2008, so I've been there for 16 months. David joined me in May 2009.

As the Auditor General's report notes, CIDA's work that they reviewed—and they did field visits—was highly regarded. We have a very strong results-based management system in CIDA, so I

believe the work on the ground was still garnering very strong results.

We accepted the comments of the Auditor General, and in fact we had already begun to put in place greater focus and a stronger sense of priority and direction in what CIDA would focus its programming on. My comment really relates to the work that has happened recently, which has been to give the kind of sense of overall direction, priorities, and implementation plan that I believe the Auditor General was looking for and the Government of Canada committed to do.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I know we're going to go back to this issue, probably repeatedly, so I'll let it go for now, but with so many differing priorities over the years, how is a government or an NGO able to apply for funding if they don't know what the priorities will be next year? How can anyone anticipate what the priority will be so they know if they can qualify to apply?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I can't speak for all of the different moments, and this goes back through, as you would of course remember, a number of governments. Governments have a policy decision where they can decide what it is they wish to focus on. I believe that at all times the agency has been transparent about what its priorities were. I think the question you're asking is that there has been—and the Auditor General notes this—some change in terms of the leadership of the agency and the direction it has been given.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Shall I keep going?

The Chair: There will be a 30-minute bell, so I'll suspend the meeting with five minutes left to go.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Okay.

So let's go back to achieving your goals—

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Chairman, I have a point of order. I think you need unanimous consent, once the bells go, to extend the meeting. Do you not?

The Chair: That's not my understanding.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I do believe that. Would you check with the clerk, please?

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): As I understand, the Standing Orders now explicitly require the committee to adjourn as soon as the bells start ringing, but members can, by unanimous consent, carry on as they think best.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: It's right next door, for goodness sake.

The Chair: The clerk's checking that.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'll move a motion for unanimous consent to continue.

The Chair: Well, we're going to ask the clerk to check that. That's a change in the Standing Orders. I didn't know that.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: How much time do I have left, by the way?

Mr. Derek Lee: Is there no unanimous consent, then? There is not?

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: You don't want to continue? These people came here today to talk to us.

It will take us two minutes to get there.

Mr. David Christopherson: Is there a motion on the floor?

The Chair: Well, we're getting advice from the clerk on the issue.

• (1555)

Mr. David Christopherson: I have questions I want to ask them. Why are we doing this?

The Chair: The clerk has presented a copy of the new *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, O'Brien and Bosc. I'll just quote it:

Pursuant to the Standing Orders, the Chair of a standing, special, legislative or joint committee is required to suspend the meeting when the bells are sounded to call in the Members to a recorded division in the House, unless there is unanimous consent of the members of the committee to continue to sit.

In this case, it's a 30-minute bell. I'm going to ask if there's unanimous consent. If there's not, then I'm going to have to follow the Standing Orders and suspend until the vote has been concluded and resume the meeting.

Mr. David Christopherson: Just a question, Chair, a clarification.

You're seeking unanimous consent from the committee. If it's granted, then we would continue to meet for another 15 or 20 minutes—

The Chair: For five minutes before—

Mr. David Christopherson: And then we would adjourn and walk down the hall and vote. That's what you're seeking.

The Chair: That's what I'm seeking, Mr. Christopherson.

Is there unanimous consent to continue the meeting until five minutes before the vote?

Mr. David Christopherson: A recorded vote, Chair.

The Chair: The rule is, Mr. Christopherson, I've asked for unanimous consent, and I do not have unanimous consent, so I have no authority to proceed any further.

Mr. David Christopherson: It would be for clarification only.

The Chair: It's not a vote. It requires unanimous consent. I do not have unanimous consent.

Mr. David Christopherson: How do you know that until we count how many votes?

The Chair: I asked for unanimous consent, and I was told by—

Mr. David Christopherson: It was the government members who don't want to extend so we can continue meeting? Is that the clarification that I needed, chair, that the government is denying this committee the right to continue meeting for who knows what political reason?

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, the chair has seen members who were not in consent. According to the Standing Orders, the meeting will be suspended to allow members to vote. Once they vote, I would ask members to immediately come back to the meeting and we will resume.

The meeting is suspended.

• _____ (Pause) _____

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• (1635)

The Chair: The meeting will resume.

When we left off, Ms. Crombie was the first member on round one, and she has two minutes left.

Ms. Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I have two minutes left. Thank you very much. Let's get to it.

I want to go back to how you achieve your goals and how you know whether or not the goals are achieved and what the impact is on recipient governments and donors. Specifically, could we talk about how you know if a project is successful? What criteria do you use for evaluations? Also, how are projects monitored?

I don't want to get into the reporting-back structure, because I know that's very cumbersome. We can talk about that another time.

I just want to know how success is achieved—what milestones are reached, whether you look at benchmarks, etc. How are projects verified? Are there field visits, etc.?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you.

On the basis of specific initiatives, each CIDA initiative—a project or a program-based approach—would have a clear statement of objectives it's trying to achieve. It would have a results framework, and it would be designed to achieve those results. There would be ongoing monitoring of the project while it's under way. The Auditor General's report said that's done very well. And once the project is completed, the performance of that of course would be reported out and there would be an evaluation.

Evaluations are done at CIDA. We do 100% evaluations. We have a strong track record and are deemed, in our management accountability framework, to have a very strong evaluation function. We are also considered to have a very strong results-based management framework within CIDA. In fact, other donors come to Canada to CIDA to understand how we do it.

So we do actually have an extremely strong results focus within the agency.

• (1640)

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: How are countries selected? I know you have shifting priorities.

Every once in a while we understand that there is a level of corruption that's tolerated in certain parts of the world that we don't tolerate here. What I really want to know is, how is that dealt with if you encounter a partner government that isn't completely operating at the standards we expect here in Canada?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: The government has just announced 20 countries of focus, and there were three criteria used to select them. The first one, as you would expect, is need and whether or not there was significant need in a country, from a poverty reduction point of view, in terms of both absolute poverty and relative poverty, and whether or not the country was particularly vulnerable, for example, due to natural disasters.

The second criterion was really Canada's ability to make a difference, and that was assessed in a number of ways. Really, can that country use our assistance effectively? Do they themselves have the kind of governance and management tools that we would expect to ensure we would actually have pretty good results with them? We would also look to see whether or not we had presence and capacity to monitor our work in those countries. We also looked at whether or not Canada had a potential to really have some influence. Could we actually have a significant influence? Because we would be one of the major donors.

The third criterion was the extent to which the countries selected were aligned with our foreign policy priorities. As you would expect, that had to do, for example, with our democratic values.

If we felt that in one of the 20 countries selected the conditions were deteriorating—either they were inconsistent with our foreign policy priorities or we felt they were not able to make effective and efficient use of our resources—then we would take corrective actions and we would bring advice to the minister if we were going to stop. We chose the countries to prevent that from happening, but if it did, we would certainly monitor and we would take action.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Crombie.

Thank you, Ms. Biggs.

Madame Faille, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): I am in fact going to let my colleague, Ms. Deschamps, ask a few questions because this is her area. She is the critic for the Bloc Québécois.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I now have an opportunity to discuss matters with you. We saw each other quickly when the Auditor General tabled her report. I would like to take this opportunity today to seek some clarification.

Mr. Flageole, I'm going to summarize what you said, probably a bit too quickly. You said, in a nutshell, that the report on international cooperation and CIDA can be traced to the absence of a master plan to implement the commitments made in the 2002 policy statement. Finally, you mentioned that CIDA had agreed with your recommendations and that you believed and understood that, based on these recommendations, it had established a detailed action plan.

Does CIDA subsequently have to present you with a plan, by a certain date, explaining how it will remedy the operational shortcomings you uncovered? In all of this, we have noted that the agency had been really in a shambles over the past four years and that project management has been plagued by a certain degree of administrative slowness.

I would imagine that this cannot be done in two shakes of a lamb's tail, but did the agency make a commitment that it would submit an action plan to you? Will this plan be submitted by a certain deadline, or is it depending on the goodwill of the minister?

Mr. Richard Flageole: Mr. Chair, the chapter contains a certain number of recommendations. We have had discussions with CIDA

on the appropriateness of these recommendations. CIDA has provided us with a response. As the president mentioned earlier, CIDA agrees with all of our recommendations.

There is not necessarily any formal requirement that we be provided with an action plan. However, I think that this is good management practice. Moreover, we are really encouraging parliamentary committees to request action plans and ensure that there is follow-up. We have in fact obtained a copy of the action plan and we have taken a look at it. We will now have to determine whether or not we will do a follow-up report and when this will be done.

Usually, this depends on the amount of time required to implement the action plan. We may review CIDA in two or three years. This is a decision that we will have to make. We may do a follow-up audit to ensure that the noted shortcomings have been remedied.

• (1645)

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Was this action plan distributed to the committee? Thank you.

I have a question for you, Ms. Biggs. I'm going to make some very broad statements. You stated that you had achieved significant progress on the plan which defines and solidifies CIDA's priorities. You also mentioned that you held very extensive consultations.

NGOs or experts often tell us about their concerns regarding the lack of consultation or the way that consultations are held, particularly since some of the organizations have had or are expecting cutbacks in the assistance they have been receiving for, in some instances, 35 years.

How can priorities change? After 35 years, how can an organization that has always been supported and subsidized by CIDA respond when it receives a simple phone call from an official informing it that it is no longer eligible?

Have these organizations been consulted or advised? We try to provide them with answers, but we have very little to say because we do not know what CIDA bases itself on in deciding who will be receiving aid from now on.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Biggs, just before we get into this, we're not going to get into the merits of the decision. If you want to get into the process of how these decisions are made, that's fine.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Maybe I'll answer it in a couple of ways, Chair.

In terms of setting our priorities, in terms of setting what we are going to do in a country, we would have consultations. For example, we had extensive consultations last summer before we developed our thematic priorities. We consulted in Canada with a great number, a cross-section of Canadians, we consulted in our countries, and we consulted with other partners, other donor agencies. So we did a consultation, and CIDA consults on a continuous basis.

So we did consultations for that. As we develop our country strategies, we will consult both in Canada and in the countries themselves, and of course with the partner countries, etc. CIDA has a very strong tradition of consultations. It is also one of the requirements under the overseas development assistance act for us to consult, and we do that.

In terms of our operational issues, we don't consult on operational decisions. Those are the decisions of the government, the department, and the minister, and we don't consult on those. Canadians can apply and those decisions are the decisions taken internally.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: CIDA is criticized for not consulting enough in the field. The agency is also being criticized because, in this new list of countries that have been given priority by the minister, many of Africa's francophone countries have been overlooked. Indeed, over the past few years, a certain number of embassies have shut down. The presence of CIDA representatives in the field has therefore been reduced. We even saw evidence of this in the new strategy unveiled by the minister two Fridays ago, in which anglophone African countries will be the beneficiaries of certain projects. We're being told that francophone Africa is at a disadvantage because the services are becoming less and less present in these countries.

• (1650)

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Deschamps, you're out of time.

We'll have an answer from Ms. Biggs, I understand. Go ahead, Ms. Biggs.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I believe CIDA actually does consult very adequately and well in the field. In fact, I would take in part from what the Auditor General's report says that CIDA is well thought of in the field. That means we work well with the partner countries, with groups in the countries, and with the recipient government. I think CIDA has a fairly strong track record, actually, of consulting in the field and also here in Canada with our partners.

In terms of francophone Africa, we have a very strong presence. We have two very major programs in francophone Africa: Mali and Senegal are priority countries for CIDA. The Government of Canada has doubled its aid to Africa and has significantly increased its assistance to francophone Africa as well. I think government did select twenty countries of focus, seven of which are in Africa, and there is a very strong presence for francophone Africa there as well.

On the question of consultations, CIDA has a consultations policy. We consult. As I say, the ODA Accountability Act also asks us to consult, and we do that all the time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Biggs.

We're now going to move to Mr. Christopherson for seven minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you all for your presence.

I want to follow up on the foundation that Madame Deschamps has laid. We're both active on the executive of the Canada-Africa Parliamentary Association. However, I want to take a higher macro-overview. Chair, I'm respecting what you said earlier, and I agree entirely. If you think I've crossed the line, I know that you'll bring me back, but I'll do my best not to do that at all.

I want to raise the issue of the procedure that was applied, given your response about consultation. With the KAIROS funding, there doesn't seem to have been a lot of consultation, given the outrage that I'm hearing from across the country. These are social justice groups, they're faith organizations, they do good work, and they've lost \$7 million that they were expecting from October 2009 to December 2013.

I cannot ask you about the decision to cut, but I think it's fair for me to ask you about the procedure this went through. I'd like to suss out how much of this procedure was problematic, given the audit that we have in front of us. And I would ask the same question regarding the funding to countries in Africa. I raised this earlier when the auditor first tabled this report. We had an extraordinary meeting with 10 to 12 ambassadors from Africa—you don't normally get that many at one time—who came to talk about the funding they were losing through CIDA. There couldn't have been a lot of consultation or they wouldn't have been as shocked as they were.

They couldn't understand why Canada, which had been a long-time friend of Africa, was throwing old friends overboard to make new friends. That was their phraseology. They couldn't understand why we were doing this to them. That's the way they saw it. They pointed out that they're a good friend to us on the international stage, where African countries try to vote as a bloc. They've always seen us as a tight ally. On issues we care about at the UN, we have almost 55 votes there that we might lose.

I can't ask you about the dollar decision, but I want to ask you about the procedures. What procedures did this go through? Help me understand how we went from funding to generating outrage. I want to know what procedure it went through—not the political decision but that process that you undertook at the bureaucratic level.

• (1655)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Maybe I can distinguish a couple of different issues.

As the Auditor General has said, and as the audit says, a policy decision on what priorities a government wants to bring to its development assistance is a decision of the government. This government chose to focus its assistance so as to increase its impact. That's a decision of the government. But this course was also recommended by the Auditor General and the OECD. The government adopted this policy on the basis of three criteria: need, effectiveness, and foreign policy priorities.

Choosing which projects get funded is an operational issue. The one that you're raising has nothing to do with the programs that were referenced in the Auditor General's report. They're in a different part of the agency. They have nothing to do with the setting of priorities. They have everything to do with exercising due diligence in deciding whether or not an initiative is going to make the best possible use of taxpayers' dollars.

Our mandate is to give advice on that basis, and we make decisions like that every day. It's a different issue. It's not something we would ever consult on. It's something that is done on the basis of good management practice—whether or not we think the criteria are clear, and whether the expected results are sound, achievable, and positive.

That's the due diligence that Canadians expect from their public servants, and that's the work we do. That's an operational decision, and it's not at all relevant to the issue in front of us in the Auditor General's report.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, I had a sneaking hunch that I wasn't going to get too far.

These issues are so important that I want to ask them and to put them in front of you. I appreciate the answer you gave and I won't go any further on it. It gets into the political realm after that, and I respect that. Thank you for answering as fulsomely as you could.

My experience with CIDA, especially in Africa, is that they're either beloved or loathed. Sometimes it's just like, "Thank God that CIDA's there, and here's what they're doing for us", and other times it's just a rolling of the eyes and no sense of the focus. It has been raised in the report, and we've had this before on numerous occasions, and our chair always makes sure we raise this when it's pertinent. Since 2000 we've had five different ministers and four different agency presidents, you being the fourth.

Again, I know you can't speak to the appointments process—we've had that bite elsewhere—but I do want to ask you this. How much of an impact has it on CIDA when the top of the house, both at the president's office level, yourself, and at the minister's office, keeps changing all the time, and new people bring new priorities? So for those areas of the world that roll their eyes when they hear "CIDA", just how much of the lack of consistent leadership at the ministerial and at the president's level has affected all of this, in your opinion?

• (1700)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Maybe I can just put a little context around the issue you're asking, sir. The Auditor General's report and the audit period that was undertaken was during a period when all donor agencies were undergoing quite a shift in terms of how they were going to do their work. That really is under the rubric of aid effectiveness. There was a meeting in Rome in 2002 that got the ball rolling. There was the Paris Declaration in 2005. There was a meeting in Accra, the Accra agenda, in 2008. All donor countries have been struggling to try to figure out how best to put their dollars to use.

That has meant that all agencies have been trying to figure out the best way to have effective assistance, and I think that's consistent with what you would expect here. That in itself has generated a degree of change, and CIDA—and I think it shows in the Auditor General's report—was looking at how to do that better and was learning as it was going. I think a lot of the change and the turn that you're seeing, that we are now able, I believe, to resolve and give much stronger direction on, is because we know more now about how to go about effective assistance.

That's one piece of context. As you would expect, in any organization when there is change, governments change. There were three ministers in one government, and maybe two ministers in another government. That does create some change in transaction costs as people have to get up to speed. I believe for the current government, starting in 2007, the budget right off the bat said that CIDA was going to focus its international assessments, it was going to focus on results, it was going to untie its aid, and it was also going to decentralize its operations. That was also followed up in the 2008 budget. Since then you have seen a consistent rollout of untying, countries of focus, thematic priorities, and now we're implementing it in the agency.

I think we have the direction we need now to actually do everything that you would want us to do in terms of making our aid more effective.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Biggs.

Mr. Saxton, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for coming today.

We see in this report that the first aid-effectiveness plan was adopted in 2002 by the previous Liberal government, but little was done to implement it. Our government made a commitment to make Canada's aid effectiveness transparent and accountable. I'm pleased to see that we have taken real action by focusing our aid geographically and thematically.

Can the president comment on our commitment to focus on the 20 countries and how this will improve our effectiveness?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Biggs.

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, sir, I personally feel—and it shows with other donor agencies—that if you're able to focus on fewer things, you can have much more clarity around the results you're trying to achieve. It just concentrates the effort inside the agency. As the Auditor General has pointed out, it allows us to really concentrate our expertise, build up our experience base, and make us have more impact and be more present in the countries with which we're choosing to work most directly.

I think the lack of focus was something the OECD had pointed out. As I've tabled here today, they are giving us encouraging marks in terms of these steps that we have taken to focus our assistance. I think that focusing is actually the key to making us more efficient and more effective. I can tell you that it's also very helpful to our staff, because they now know what they have to bear down on, and it actually clarifies things tremendously.

Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

Can you describe some of the steps this government has taken to make Canada's international assistance more focused, effective, and accountable?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: There have been a number of steps, starting with geographic focus, as we just discussed. There has also been a thematic focus, which are the three thematic priorities Minister Oda has laid out. Beyond those thematic, which are understandably fairly broad, we have zeroed in on some core elements that we think will have the greatest impact in terms of need. They are also where Canada can bring a special degree of attention.

So we are focusing within the focus in our thematic, and we are focusing within our countries on sub-elements of our thematic.

Another particularly important area that has now been addressed is that Canada has moved to untie all its food assistance. This allows the World Food Program, for example, to source food assistance in the most responsive and cost-effective way. That can increase the value of every Canadian dollar by 20% to 30%, which is very efficient. And sometimes the food aid can be sourced in the country.

We are also moving to untie all of our assistance by 2012-13, and that will have a huge impact in terms of the effectiveness of our assistance. So I think a number of these major steps...

The final step that I'll mention is that the government started with budget 2007, but we are also moving to put more of our resources and our people and our functions in the field so we can be more responsive. Again, this is something Canada has been criticized for by the OECD. We're taking a number of concrete steps, which we can go into if you want, but I think that will make us more effective on the ground.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

In CIDA's response to the AG's recommendations, many actions were already under way. One of those is the aid effectiveness action plan. Can you describe this plan in more detail?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: One of the findings by the Auditor General was that the agency had a strong understanding of aid effectiveness principles, but they didn't see concrete direction from the leadership of the organization so there would be clear and consistent and coherent guidance to staff.

We have now put that in place. We have an action plan, which has been taken throughout the agency, that has very clear guidance to our staff on how they're to implement the principles of aid effectiveness. Similarly, as we outlined in our management response, we have given a clear set of directions in terms of how to use these new program-based approaches, when to use them, what conditions have to exist before they are appropriate, how to put them in place, and how to monitor them effectively.

• (1705)

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

Can you explain how the accountability and monitoring guidelines clarify accountabilities and tracking methodology?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Sorry, could you repeat that?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Yes. How do the accountability and monitoring guidelines clarify accountabilities and tracking methodology?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure. I mean, it's—

Mr. Andrew Saxton: The accountability and monitoring guidelines. Can you explain how those are effective?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: How are they effective? Well, they are basically built into our country's strategy. If we know clearly what results and what aid effectiveness principles we're trying to achieve, we have embedded those into the strategies we're developing in our partner countries. We have gone further and put them in place in terms of the performance contracts we have with our senior managers. We expect them to be doing that as well.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: How often will the monitoring be conducted?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Monitoring is done on an ongoing basis, and we report on an annual basis against the principles and targets we set out for ourselves.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Finally, how will you communicate the elements of the plan to Canadians?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: We will do so on our website, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saxton.

Ms. Biggs, I have an issue I want to bring up before we go to the second round.

I've gone over the audit, and, as has been pointed out, there are a number of issues. Of course that was during the period of the audit, and a lot of the testimony you have given is post-audit. You're taking action and you've agreed with all the recommendations set out in the performance report.

I've also read the departmental performance report for the period 2008-09. A lot of the issues that were identified in the report from the Auditor General were not contained in your audit report: the challenges the agency was facing, some of the difficulties that are clearly identified. You, as the accounting officer, signed a certificate saying that the performance report was to be balanced and reflected that... This is what Parliament is looking for. It is looking for a document that clearly states what the department has done but also the challenges and risks that the agency faces.

Do you have any comment on the contents of this performance report and any explanation why, in my view, it doesn't address the issues set out in the report of the Auditor General?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: The departmental performance report reports back on the previous report on plans and priorities, so there's a bit of a lag there. I think the principles around aid effectiveness have been reported consistently through the departmental performance report. I think you will see changes in the next DPR.

One thing, and I don't have it in front of me, sir, that I think we may not have gotten into in the DPR are some of the administrative issues the Auditor General has pointed out in terms of some of the complexities and the lack of timeliness in our administrative processes, so that is probably a fair comment. I'd have to go back and look.

I certainly was very comfortable with the DPR when I signed it. I think you'll see the new DPR will reflect the priorities, the thematic, and the action plan we're laying out for you here today.

The Chair: In the second round... Well, three minutes, and we'll go as long as we can, which may not be too long.

Mr. Lee.

Mr. Derek Lee: This is my best three minutes of the day.

The Chair: Well, enjoy it, then, if that's the case.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Derek Lee: One of the items outlined in the Auditor General's report, Ms. Biggs, is the turnover of staff. It was pretty recognizable statistically. I'm curious. Why? Maybe CIDA doesn't know the reason. This has come up with other ministries, and often the reason isn't known. All they know is there's a huge turnover, people zipping around, taking promotions, going to the private sector, coming back, finding jobs for their friends—it just goes on and on—people getting raises, demotions. Do you know why CIDA went through such a merry-go-round of staff turnover?

My colleague was just pointing out, maybe they were just following the example of their ministers over the last number of years, as ministers turned over.

It's okay. I just wanted to make that comment. Mr. Saxton invited that comment. Anyway, your response, please.

• (1710)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I can't comment on the reasons for the turnover that go back to 2002. Some turnover is necessary, and you would expect it. In CIDA, many people take other assignments with other development agencies. The policy branches throughout government tend to have people who bring policy skills from other departments, and you tend to see more.... That figure does not concern me, because you need to bring in some new blood sometimes.

I don't think there's any reason to believe these people were not operating effectively. Like other parts of the public service, we have some demographic change and we see a fair amount of turnover because we have a cohort that's retiring or about to retire.

Mr. Derek Lee: Sure, and we've seen that at this committee and other committees. Have you turned the corner on it, or do you still have high rates of turnover that would impair implementation of the new processes?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: CIDA has difficult levels of turnover in some of our corporate functions. This is an issue throughout government. I'm sure you've heard it from others, particularly where it's very competitive in the financial area with their CFO branch, etc. So that's one area where we have to concentrate on building the specialized expertise, but it's not anything I'm concerned about right

now. In our program areas, no, I do not think the turnover is a significant concern.

I also think the more you have an organization that is stable, that has clear focus, that has a good esprit de corps, to the extent that people have left because they were uncomfortable, there's more likelihood they will stay and do a great job.

Mr. Derek Lee: Thank you very much. That's been a great three minutes. It made my day.

The Chair: Three and a quarter, actually. Thank you, Mr. Lee.

Mr. Kramp, three minutes.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you, Chair.

I'm just astounded at the 43 months it would take to approve a sense of direction to come up with aid. I'm pleased to see you're down to the 15-month process now. Why 15 months, and are you happy now? Do you believe this is acceptable? Is it doable, and can you deliver results within that timeframe? Could it be even less if we had even more efficiencies?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you. Those are good questions.

On the 43 months, I should say that's not from just the approval, it's from the actual RFP, so it encompasses more than just approvals within the department.

Actually, I might ask David to speak on this issue as well.

We feel that the 15 months is pretty competitive with anybody else. It's very strong. In my view, as I say to people in the organization, that's the maximum. We can always do better than that, but we also have to be realistic about the time it takes to do the proper due diligence.

I am going to ask David if he would like to comment further.

Mr. David Moloney (Executive Vice-President, Canadian International Development Agency): Very briefly, the 15 months, as was mentioned, is a maximum. Actually, what we're aiming for is 11 or 12 months. This includes the time, as the president said, for a full RFP, and this is directive programming. This is not responding to an application.

We have four full pilots that are just completing, so we actually have something coming to the president's desk 11 months in. We think it's doable. We believe it is a significantly re-engineered process, as you would imagine.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: We'd like to have you back a year from now, or a little longer, and see if you were able to deliver on that. If you were, you might find a pretty decent reception at this committee. Should you not, all hell will break loose again, I would imagine.

However, might I just suggest that you expand a definition for me, if you would. I am pleased to see, once again, that you have stated a focus on Canada's ability to make a difference, to establish precedents and capacity in foreign policy, etc. When you say "ability to make a difference", how would you define that? Are you talking about humanitarian issues, income, health? How would you define that? Is it a narrow cast, or is it extremely broad-based?

• (1715)

Ms. Margaret Biggs: When I used that I gave you three criteria, which were for the country's selection, if that's what you are talking about. The second was making a difference. That's a generic sort of expression in terms of whether we think we can make a difference in the country we have chosen to work with. Do we have a partner there with whom we feel we can actually get the job done? There is no point in our trying to work in a country where we don't think we can get effective results. So that's more a governance measure, if you will, and whether we think they have the systems and the capacity to work with us to deliver results for Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kramp.

Madame Faillie, you have three minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faillie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, you talked about the OECD. I read the OECD report on CIDA. It contains many positive comments regarding the fact that much of the aid is untied. The report refers to the decentralized way of structuring aid in various countries. However, your action plan is criticized. The report states that it took you 18 months to prepare your report, but that it did not contain any results pertaining to development and mutual accountability. In addition, the report indicated that you had tied the performance contracts of employees in India to effectiveness objectives.

Criticism was also levied against your choice of 20 countries of focus for Canadian aid and the fact that you emphasized three of the five major Canada-wide priorities for international aid, namely: enhancing food security, stimulating sustainable economic growth and providing for the future of children and youth. The objective to promote democracy and the objective to guarantee security and stability were not given priority by CIDA. You were also criticized for the fact that you have not integrated issues such as the environment in your action plan. Finally, the lack of enlightened public debate in Canada on the issue of international aid was noted.

I would like to hear your comments.

[*English*]

Ms. Margaret Biggs: Thank you.

In my reading of the OECD's report on CIDA, the comment about 18 months was not a criticism. It was actually a positive comment that this was done with deep understanding within the agency, that the whole agency was engaged on this. It was actually viewed as being a positive comment.

In terms of the priorities, from an international point of view there are five priorities that the government is focusing on. CIDA is focusing on three, as you would expect, because they're most pertinent to our poverty reduction mandate. Again, I do not believe...

In fact, quite the opposite: I think the OECD is praising CIDA, not criticizing it.

In terms of the cross-cutting issues, CIDA already has very strong gender equality provisions that are integrated into what we do, and we're actually seen as being a leader across the world on that. We are going to renew those, but these comments by the OECD are the next pieces for CIDA to undertake. I would not view them as criticisms in any way.

The Chair: Are you raising a point of order on that issue?

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Yes.

The Chair: This is like what happened previously. The bells are ringing, and the point has been raised by Mr. Kramp to continue. We will need unanimous consent, so the chair is going to ask. Do I have unanimous consent to proceed for another seven or eight minutes?

The chair recognizes that we do not have unanimous consent. So pursuant to the Standing Orders, I am obliged to adjourn the meeting. We will not resume, because it will be after 5:30. I will allow you—and I hope I have permission—a 30-second sum-up, Mr. Flageole and Ms. Biggs. Then I will adjourn the meeting.

Mr. Flageole, is there anything you want to say? We will not be resuming after this.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Flageole: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Despite everything, we found the action plan prepared by CIDA to be very encouraging. It contains important aspects. Things appear to be moving. However, we did point out in the report that many good intentions had been expressed in the past, but that a certain number of them had never materialized. It will therefore be important to ensure that these good intentions yield results. That is why we are encouraging the committee to closely monitor the progress that will be achieved by CIDA as it implements its plan.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Biggs, do you have any closing thoughts you want to leave with us?

Ms. Margaret Biggs: I would just underscore what Mr. Flageole has said. I think it's important that CIDA—now that we have some clear direction of priorities—institutionalize and implement in a systemic and consistent way the kinds of management practices that are expected and that I believe we're putting into place. So that's why we feel very comfortable with the comments that have been made by the Auditor General. We feel we're making good progress on them. We think we have a good story, sir, and I think in 12 months, hopefully, we'll have an even better story to show you.

The Chair: On behalf of all members of the committee, I want to thank you very much for your appearance here today. There is a possibility the committee may want you back, but that's up to the steering committee. It certainly won't happen this year anyway. That's for sure; I can guarantee that. Anyway, I want to thank you.

Before I adjourn, I just want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Enjoy your holidays. This is the last meeting of the committee for 2009.

The meeting is adjourned.

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