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North-South Institute: We've lost a Canadian asset

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The recent closing of the North-South Institute as a result of discontinued federal government funding is a loss both for Canada and for the global community.

The daily dose of news – Ebola in West Africa, the rising incidence of terrorism in the Middle East and Africa, the millions of immigrants and refugees fleeing bad governance and poverty – is graphically symptomatic of ill-conceived and inadequate support for solving today's international development challenges.

Amongst the major aid donors, Canada's current government has been a significant contributor to that inadequacy. Canada's aid levels are now amongst the lowest of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development donors at about 0.2 per cent of national income. And to follow this up with the progressive dismantling of the former CIDA and other publicly funded development institutions, such as Rights and Democracy, is beyond comprehension. This reduced support suggests a failure to grasp the significance of today's threats to global stability and to Canada's long-term economic and social well-being.

The closing of NSI constitutes the jettisoning of a critically important tool of Canadian leadership internationally, exercised not through Canadian military or economic might, but rather through our capacity to generate and globally disseminate knowledge and best-practice alternatives. In 2011, 2012 and 2013, NSI was internationally recognized as the world's leading development policy think-tank with an annual budget of less than \$3-million.

NSI's policy recommendations – in areas as diverse as improving the impact of the private sector on economic growth; maximizing benefits for communities affected by mining and other extractives; ensuring benefits and human rights for indigenous peoples; enhancing for women the benefits from international trade agreements; and using "big data" for more effective public policy – have all been recognized as significant contributions to international development. As were the international conferences NSI hosted in Ottawa in 2013 on African natural resource management and in 2011 on the future of multilateralism.

More recently, NSI was the only Canadian institution invited to contribute to the international task force led by British Prime Minister David Cameron on devising the post-2015 set of sustainable development goals – a policy framework for achieving a more stable pattern of economic and social development globally. In the absence of such a framework, political and security risks for the global community will only intensify.

Although NSI had over the past three years been successful in attracting new sources for funding research,

including from mining companies, foreign governments, and U.S. foundations, it would have needed modest funding from Canada's government for a three-year transition to cover part of its operating costs. Yet, without disclosing why, the federal government effectively chose to shut down this internationally respected Canadian asset. All this at a time when we need an independent, non-partisan voice dedicated to dealing with some of the world's most critical policy challenges.

The question is: What will Canadians gain from this decision and at what cost?

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