

EMBASSY

Government backs disputed mining institute

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The Trudeau government will continue to support a Harper-era organization that aims to help developing countries to grow and regulate their mining industries.

That support, confirmed by a spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada, comes despite ongoing criticism of the organization known as the Canadian International Resources and Development Institute from a student-led advocacy group, as well as MiningWatch Canada.

The head of the institute says it is trying to ensure developing countries benefit from resource extraction in the same way Canada has, and that CIRDI has had a “hard time keeping up” with requests for its services from foreign governments.

The Liberal government’s statement of support for CIRDI comes the week after [the government told *Embassy* it supports the Office of the Extractive Sector Corporate Social Responsibility Counsellor](#), another controversial creation of the Conservative government that aims to promote corporate social responsibility for mining companies abroad.

Funding runs to 2018

CIRDI was established in 2013 to “deliver knowledge on proven regulation and oversight to help resource-rich developing countries create jobs and economic growth,” according to a press release from then-international co-operation minister Julian Fantino.

The institute—formerly known as the Canadian International Institute for Extractive Industries and Development—is a combined effort between the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and École Polytechnique de Montréal, and was given \$24.6 million over five years by the federal government in 2013.

The government continues to support CIRDI’s mandate and its funding, said GAC spokesperson François Lasalle.

“Global Affairs Canada is confident that CIRDI’s leadership is working hard to build a solid foundation to enable the Institute to effectively deliver on its mandate,” wrote Mr. Lasalle in an emailed statement, which also highlighted CIRDI’s hiring of new staff and “key actions to strengthen the Institute’s financial systems [and] governance structure.”

CIRDI’s creation was followed by a campaign urging the closure or “complete overhaul” of the institute by a group of student activists, as well as criticism from advocacy group MiningWatch Canada. The two groups have argued the institute simply advances the interests of Canada’s mining companies in foreign countries at the expense of communities negatively affected by their mining projects.

CIRDI CEO Cassie Doyle rejected claims that the institute works on behalf of Canadian mining companies, and said some of CIRDI’s critics “have been sort of determined to not understand what we do.”

The Canadian model

CIRDI’s goal is to help developing countries to draw up laws, regulations, health and safety standards and royalty regimes that will allow their mining sector to flourish while also benefitting the population as a whole, said Ms. Doyle.

Canadian laws and regulations for mines serve as a rough template, she said.

“I guess ideally we would like developing countries to enjoy the same standards like health and safety and the environment that we do in Canada. Not that we’re perfect, as you know, but we...have a very advanced regime in terms of securing benefits from our resource extraction, which funds our health care system and our education,” she said.

CIRDI relies upon experts from its member universities and partner NGOs to provide advice to officials for foreign governments that express interest, she said.

“We have a hard time keeping up, frankly,” she said.

CIRDI currently has 13 projects spanning 19 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

However, CIRDI has attracted criticism from social justice advocates and students from its member universities, who say it does little to strengthen the voice of communities negatively affected by mining operations.

“I think all of this can sound good without an understanding for the historical context,” said Samuel Stime, a spokesperson for stoptheinstitute.ca, a website run by a “loose collective” of students at the UBC and SFU that oppose CIRDI’s mission.

Numerous Canadian mining companies have been associated with incidents of violence and environmental degradation in developing countries over the years. Mr. Stime said Canada’s government should pass a law to allow victims of those incidents to seek justice in Canadian courts before it concerns itself with promoting Canadian-style laws and regulations abroad.

“Canada has a lot of work to do here first before thinking that we have any right internationally to be urging other governments to be behaving more in the interest of their people,” he said.

CIRDI’s work promoting policies that try to limit the negative consequences of mines on people and the environment ignore the bigger issue of empowering affected communities to stop mines from being built in the first place, he said.

“Everything should be centred on the question of consent,” he said. “If the people said ‘no’, then that’s it.”

CIRDI does work with communities “to help inform citizens about governance and other issues related to their natural resources,” including through projects in Peru and Mongolia, spokesperson Gilian Dusting wrote in an emailed statement.

Catherine Coumans, a research director for MiningWatch Canada, said it is “ironic” that Canada would be held as a model for resource development given the financial difficulties faced by the government of Alberta now that the price of oil has fallen.

“We’ve allowed that to happen here, and yet we presume to tell other people how to manage their natural resources?” she said. “Really what we’re doing is...we’re creating markets for our companies. And that’s what that institute is really meant to do.”

Ms. Coumans said CIRDI was perpetuating an “illusion” that resource extraction is linked to development, which is not always the case when all of the consequences of resource extraction booms are taken into account.

Mr. Stime also criticized CIRDI for what he said was a lack of transparency around the organization’s spending, its work and its ties to Canadian mining companies.

Ms. Doyle—a former Canadian deputy minister for natural resources—said it was not her job to defend Canadian mining companies. CIRDI does not work directly with Canadian mining companies, she said, but does draw upon their knowledge as “part of our

stakeholder universe.”

Several mining companies and industry associations are included in CIRDI’s list of partners that provide financial support or free services to the organization, as are the World Wildlife Fund, Carleton University, CARE Canada and other organizations. CIRDI has a goal of raising \$15 million from “strategic partners” to help fund its operations, though Ms. Doyle said the organization has raised less than \$1 million so far.

Ms. Doyle said CIRDI was working to address criticisms of its transparency to the public.

“CIRDI had some growing pains. Trying to set up an institute right from scratch, being governed by three universities, was a very complex undertaking. So I think there were misses in the early days in terms of transparency, or even just the whole public profile of the institute, and lack of transparency. We’re trying to remedy that right now,” she said.

CIRDI is currently renegotiating parts of its contribution agreement with the federal government “to better reflect how we’ve organized our program activities and our reporting,” wrote Ms. Dusing.

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<http://www.embassynews.ca/2016/02/17/global-affairs-backs-disputed-mining-institute/48249>