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As Canada shares mining expertise, critics question GAC's transparency



Ottawa should review an agreement with Vancouver's Canadian International Resources and Development Institute (CIRDI) after an MP's inquiry into the arrangement failed to reveal key details about its activities, say critics.

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has spent \$9.5 million of the \$25 million promised for CIRDI, a school that advises developing countries on resource governance, the department said in answers provided to New Westminster-Burnaby MP Peter Julian to an order paper question last week.

GAC's response includes a general outline of CIRDI's programs, but stops short of providing lists of individuals involved in particular programs or a detailed methodology on why certain projects were selected. That makes it difficult to judge CIRDI against the *Official Development Assistance Accountability Act*, a law that was intended to ensure aid money doesn't deviate from core development aims.

"How can GAC determine whether or not these projects meet the ODA Accountability Act – if there's all this information that GAC is not requiring?" said Catherine Coumans, research coordinator at Mining Watch. "This government might want to revisit that agreement and actually look particularly at how money is spent and receive more details on the actual projects and be able to hold the projects to account with respect to the Accountability Act."

CIRDI's own website [provides some information on its programs](#), including on participants and general descriptions of the rationale behind certain projects. But the site isn't exhaustive.

Those gaps are problematic for Coumans because CIRDI walks a delicate line between espousing best practices in resource governance and staying in check with the federal government's broader interest to have developing countries run effective mining regulators.

When CIRDI was first announced in December 2012, and officially launched at the University of British Columbia in January 2014, its independence from Ottawa became a thorny issue for the government because of its perceived role as a method to parlay Canadian mining interests into unreceptive communities abroad. [One federal official even said CIRDI was under no federal influence at all](#), while researchers interested in working with CIRDI said the institute was slow getting off the ground because of disagreements over academic freedom.

As CIRDI took shape, it became more up front about the role GAC would play. The institute [is required to do 80 per cent of its work within 19 countries of focus](#) chosen by GAC, says its website.

GAC also performs regular audits and monitoring missions to CIRDI's headquarters, last week's order paper answer says. Still, "There is no role specific for CIRDI in Canada's 'economic diplomacy' concept, announced as part of the 2013 'Global Markets Action Plan,'" says the document, referring to one of the key foreign policies of the last government.

GAC does not deny CIRDI has an economic raison d'être. When asked what the school does to support

mining interests, the order paper says “CIRDI’s mandate is to improve the ability of developing countries to use and benefit from their extractive sector resources in order to stimulate sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty.”

A senior public servant at GAC — Patricia Pena, the director general of the economic development bureau — also sits on CIRDI’s advisory council.

But CIRDI CEO Cassie Doyle said the institute is independent for two key reasons. Its programs get started because a host country has requested help, not because Ottawa or a mining company asks for them to, she said. As well, while stakeholders, including governments and firms, play a role in programs, each curriculum is ultimately designed by faculty from one of the three universities that help run CIRDI.

“Where we are accountable to the government is really — as it really should be — is for the money we’re spending,” said Doyle, a former deputy minister at Natural Resources Canada and currently a board member of the Alberta Energy Regulator.

“But in terms of the actual direction our projects take, there has been absolutely no influence and no attempt to influence that...(Faculty) would be horrified at the idea of anybody directing their work.”

Last week’s order paper answers don’t make it easy to dissect that claim. GAC doesn’t require CIRDI to gather information on who attends which programs from Canada and host countries and the explanations on a project’s justifications are short. In many cases, the focus countries are places where Canadian mining companies play a major role in the sector. But Canada is a global mining hub, both for financing and expertise, making it difficult to find a place where CIRDI could work — ostensibly for the purely altruistic goal of setting of mining regulators — and not eventually benefit a Canadian firm.

So far, GAC’s country of focus list hasn’t forced CIRDI to choose between picking one of those countries or responding to a country request outside of the list provided by GAC, said Doyle.

CIRDI also has multiple corporate, non-governmental and educational partners who help fund it.

“Any contribution or partnership that we would enter into has to be very, very clear that it will not in any way influence our programming,” said Doyle.

But a special agreement with the government of Ethiopia signed in late April deviates slightly from CIRDI's assurances of academic freedom. The one-off \$15.3 million project, separate from the \$25 million GAC is providing CIRDI over the institute's lifetime, is to help the East African country modernize its regulation of the mining, oil and gas sectors.

The Ethiopian government asked the Canadian embassy in Addis Ababa about CIRDI, and in February 2014, then International Development Minister Christian Paradis met with the Ethiopian Minister of Mines to discuss the opportunity, according to last week's order papers. Departmental officials from both sides then followed-up.

The five-year project aims to create a licensing and environmental regulation regime, and includes the creation of a geoscience lab, said Doyle.

CIRDI is currently recruiting for the project's academic advisory committee, but faculty won't have the same influence as in CIRDI's core programs, she said.

"The Ethiopia project is a little different," said Doyle. "I guess the direction on this one is very much in collaboration with the government of Ethiopia. I've met with contingents from Ethiopia and they have very strong views, as they should."

"This is a real partnership between the government and ourselves."

There are no Canadian mines operating in Ethiopia, she said. "They see this as an important part of their own economic development," said Doyle.

Sam Stime, a UBC student who runs the 'Stop the Institute' campaign at the university, said in an email that the Ethiopia agreement highlights a general problem with CIRDI – the lack of input from citizens near mines.

"I'm troubled with the pattern I see...that of a top-down approach to its mandate, operations, projects and does not center on the needs, demands, worldviews, terms of engagement of those most directly affected by mining," wrote Stime.

Because of the diversity of CIRDI's programs, it's hard to judge whether a program promotes policy at the expense of citizens. But, said Doyle, CIRDI stops short of advocating a particular path a country

should take and instead tries to offer an overview of options.

That's the case for programs on royalty schemes and bonding requirements to help clean-up a mine after its finished operating, she said.

"We definitely present what the leading practices are," said Doyle. "If we're working in an area like Mongolia, we would be able to draw on the experiences of a number of countries where we consider them to have leading practices, such as Peru."

"I don't think our academics would go in and say here is exactly what you should do," said Doyle. "But it's more like a true pedagogy, saying here are the best practices or the leading practices."

Doyle, who has worked on resource governance for several governments in Canada, said Canada has a strong role to play in promoting the field given its history and the fact developing countries often don't have the money or the people to regulate with the same depth.

"What really strikes me is how little they've been able to develop, for instance, environmental assessment processes or licensing that follows through with inspections," she said.

But for critics like Stime, CIRDI's flaws go much deeper than imperfect transparency or a coziness with business interests that that may hide. He takes issue with the notion that Canada should be providing advice at all, arguing that it is predicated on a misleading "Canadian exceptionalism" that can't help but discount some voices in the development process.

"Any extractive-sector oriented projects must be mandated and implemented on the terms of the people most historically marginalized by globalization and foreign investors' mega-projects," wrote Stime.

He pointed to a recent report by B.C.'s auditor general on the province's Ministry of Mines, [which found compliance and enforcement programs were riddled with holes](#).



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After graduating from the University of King's College in 2008, James worked at the Yukon News in Whitehorse

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