# SILENCE ONLY SAFE POLICY FOR AID GROUPS

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By Carol Goar, The Toronto Star, 19 February 2010

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So far, it has only happened to one aid organization, Kairos. The charity, a coalition of 11 religious denominations that stands with poor, oppressed and disenfranchised people across the world, lost its funding last November, after 35 years of co-operation with Ottawa. It was told it "did not meet the government's current priorities." But two weeks later, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney boasted in a speech in Jerusalem that the government had defunded Kairos because of its anti-Israel stance. Other aid organizations that speak out on public issues say they have received warnings that their funding is in jeopardy. Stories of unsettling conversations with federal officials are spreading through the aid community. The only safe policy seems to be silence.

But for charities such as World Vision, Oxfam, Care and Alternatives – all working on the front lines in Haiti – that is not an option. Their work flows from their convictions. They cannot turn a blind eye to human rights violations. They cannot allow the world's poorest people to fall by the wayside. They cannot pretend there is no link between degraded land and hungry people.

Every government uses public spending to advance its goals and promote its world view. But none of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's predecessors punished foreign aid groups that spoke out on public issues. None demanded conformity to the ruling party's ideology.

Since the 1980s, non-government organizations have become the primary distributors of Canada's

foreign aid. Today, most receive the bulk of their funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). They depend on federal contracts to provide health care and education to children in the world's poorest countries, build wells, teach skills, extend microcredit, nurture indigenous partners capable of extending Canada's reach, and mobilize rapidly when hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and droughts strike.

The relief mission in Haiti is a tantalizing example of how things could work: the government is working in partnership with aid agencies that have experience and expertise in disaster zones and Canadians are donating generously to these charities.

The trouble is the model isn't built to last. It works impressively right now because Haiti is one of the government's foreign aid priorities; Harper wants to demonstrate global leadership; and the need for basic necessities is so overwhelming that the relief organizations don't have time to think about public advocacy.

But a relationship rooted in a temporary alignment of interests is never secure. What happens when the crisis over? What happens if Ottawa decides to chop Canada's already modest foreign aid allocation (0.32 per cent of GDP) in next month's budget? What happens if other aid organizations start losing their funding as Kairos has?

These questions are not theoretical. Women's groups, literacy groups, arts groups, regulatory agencies, public servants, critics of the war in Afghanistan, even the chief executive of one of Canada's biggest banks have all felt the sting of Harper's displeasure.

Even as they serve their country and humanity, foreign aid workers wonder if they could be next.