01 | A Greek Chorus

All but the most hard-core cynics will admit that there is such a thing as altruism which inspires people to invest time and money in helping others without any hope of tangible returns … But altruistic intentions must be translated into concrete actions. In a world of conflicting interests, that means making choices which are political, accepting compromises which are debatable, and influencing public opinion in one direction or another.

—— Lissner 1977, Preface

This book looks at NGO development through the lens of the first 50 years of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), from its very humble beginnings in 1965 to the respected peak body it has become in 2015. This period coincided with the optimism of the first Development Decade of the 1960s through to the emergence of developing countries as rising political powers in the 2010s, many with their own aid programs, and with quite different views from the West on what development means for them and what role NGOs might play.

While the story of ACFID is common to most national NGO groups and peak bodies in Europe and North America since the 1960s, it is also a story of nuanced responses to the issues of the time. For example, as much as there have been increases in government funding of NGOs, such as in the 1980s, there have also been real cuts in government funding to NGOs at other times, such as in the early 2000s in Australia and the early 2010s in Europe. In the 1980s, NGOs were seen as a solution to the need for service provision in 'weak' developing countries, while in the 2000s there has been much more pressure from the politically strong developing countries to limit the NGO 'voice' (Howell and Lind 2009a; Smillie 2012; van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012).

This book engages with the complex histories that shaped NGOs. It tries to avoid sweeping generalisations and catchy slogans such as NGOs are 'too close [to government funding] for comfort' (Edwards and Hulme 1996), or that there is an inexorable growth in numbers, scale and importance of NGOs (McGann and Johnstone 2004; Reimann 2006; Elkington and Beloe 2010). While these generalisations may be true for certain periods, they tend to suggest that there is

an inevitable path-dependent process of 'NGO-ization' of civil society involved in development (Lang 2012). I will argue that this process is not the case, rather NGOs and their peak bodies such as ACFID respond to the changing contexts their members face, while still hanging on to their founding vision and values.

This book discusses how NGOs responded to the social and political mood of the times, the changing ideologies of the governments of the day with their differing priorities for aid, in general, and for dealing with NGOs, in particular, as part of the broader political cycle. Each chapter examines key themes that shaped ACFID. Chapter 1 provides an overview of ACFID and how it has developed. Chapter 2 outlines the origins of ACFID and traces its formative processes and the work of Sir John Crawford. Chapter 3 looks at the central role global education and later campaigning has had in ACFID's work. Chapter 4 questions the progress that ACFID and its members have made in realising gender justice in their programs. Chapter 5 examines how NGOs shaped and are shaped by humanitarian interventions, and the work that ACFID undertook through its International Disasters Emergency Committee (IDEC) and later the Emergencies Forum. Chapter 6 analyses the leadership ACFID took on human rights, particularly on East Timor but also more generally. Chapters 7 and 8 examine ACFID's relations with government and how these are affected by not only the political cycle but also other events outside ACFID's control. The penultimate chapter deals with the role ACFID has had globally in developing NGO self-regulation and the use of robust codes of conduct to argue for NGO legitimacy. This book concludes with a look into the future and what a changing global and local context may mean for ACFID.

What is ACFID?

ACFID is the peak organisation representing Australia's aid and development NGOs. It is 'a single, united Australian voice for global fairness' (ACFID 2013a). ACFID's 140 members are involved in providing development assistance (or aid) mainly to local NGOs and civil society organisations such as religious groups, trade unions and activist groups in developing countries. The purpose of this aid is mainly for community level work that ranges from livelihood programs, such as microcredit or training programs, to the provision of health or education services, or to address human rights and social justice issues. ACFID members are also involved in public awareness and advocacy campaigns on social justice and poverty issues in developing countries and in Australia. ACFID members range from small NGOs run entirely by volunteers to the large household names such as World Vision, CARE or Oxfam, who are part of global coalitions of NGOs. ACFID provides a forum for its members to discuss issues affecting NGOs. It also

runs campaigns on their behalf and, most importantly, offers a single, united voice to government and to the Australian public on major aid, development and social justice issues.

ACFID was founded in 1965 with a handful of members. It now has members operating in 100 countries and spends over $1 billion per annum on overseas aid, most of which comes from donations from the Australian public and the rest from government grants and subsidies. As a proportion of GDP, ACFID's aid programs funded by public donations have been remarkably stable over the past 50 years, with NGO aid expenditure of 0.035 per cent of GDP in 1970, 0.02 per cent in 1988, and 0.03 per cent in 2000. A big jump in the 2000s was due to Indian Ocean tsunami expenditure. Unlike the early 1970s, when there was no government support for NGO work, by the late 1980s NGOs were able to lever significant government funding. While government grants to Australian NGOs represents around 20 per cent of their total aid expenditure, the government, as both a regulator and funder, has a large influence on NGO work and the approach ACFID takes in its relations with government (ACFID 2013b) – a theme that recurs throughout this book.
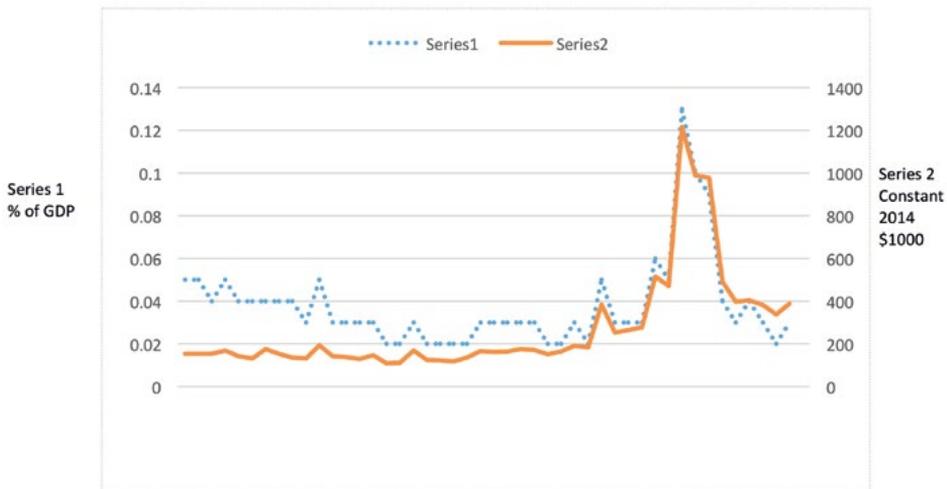

Figure 1 Australian NGO aid levels and as a percentage of GDP 1968–2014.

Source: Author's composition.[1]

---

1   This expenditure was calculated from ACFID Annual Reports, and Lissner (1977) for the 1970s figures. The jump in the 2000s was also due, in part, to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, which lifted both the profile and income of NGOs for the next eight years after which expenditure returned to the long-term trends.

ACFID has a secretariat in a part of Canberra often referred to as 'lobby valley', where a large number of industry peak bodies have been corralled by the town planners. A staff of around 20 people look after a broad set of issues, including advocacy, members, policy, and the Code of Conduct. At the time of writing, ACFID was working on three major themes: human rights, gender, and civil society. On top of this there are about another dozen specific issues looked after by member working groups which network and share information.

ACFID has counterparts in most donor countries, the main ones being Bond in the UK, InterAction in the US, the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), the Council for International Development (CID) in New Zealand, and the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC). ACFID is one of the strongest of these peak bodies in that it represents the largest proportion of national member NGOs working in international development, and it derives a high proportion of its income from member fees – both good indicators of the strength of member support.[2]

The challenge for peak bodies such as ACFID is how to represent the diversity of membership, which invariably includes global NGO networks, such as Oxfam, CARE and World Vision, and small locally based NGOs that might be involved in a small program in one part of a country, or be involved in controversial advocacy work which other NGOs or their international affiliates might disagree with. In the UK, New Zealand and Canada, divisions occurred in the peak bodies so that they became vulnerable to either internal or external pressures. In the UK it was over the direction of global education in the 1970s which forced the Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development (VCOAD) to close (Burnell 1991). In the case of Canada and New Zealand, both CCIC and CID were significantly reduced in size due to sharp cuts in government funding in 2010, compounded by a perceived loss of support of the larger agencies (Smillie 2012; McGregor et al. 2013).

The historical context

The history of NGO aid since World War II can be divided into four periods. The first, until the 1960s, was mainly about sending volunteers, and in some ways was a colonial relic in that it followed the former colonial practice of sending young administrators to the colonies (Webb 1971). The second period was from the mid-1960s until the 1980s, when NGOs were recognised as development actors, and they were part of the movement for development alternatives. This followed the launch of the first Development Decade in 1960, the global Freedom from Hunger Campaign in 1962, and the 1963 United Nations

---

2   Based on the 2012 annual reports for each.

General Assembly (UNGA) call for more recognition of the role NGOs play in development (UNGA 1963a). The third period, from the early 1980s until the mid-1990s, saw more formalised government relationships with NGOs and a rapid expansion of official funding of NGO work. Finally, the fourth period, from the mid-1990s until into the 2010s, has been characterised by:

> a persistent and public set of concerns about practice, direction, and focus of NGOs. It is a period in which NGOs have had to come to terms with their entry, at scale, into the reform agenda, as well as increasing diversification within the NGO sector (Mitlin, Hickey et al. 2007, p. 1709).

While voluntarism and development work have been a part of the historical evolution of many societies, in the West this can be traced back to the seventeenth century (Lissner 1977). A notable example of early NGO work is the advent of service delivery, such as health and education by missionaries. Another is public advocacy, such as the anti-slavery movement in the early nineteenth century. Development as we currently understand it, however, is essentially a post-World War II phenomenon where 'individuals and groups within the field of development derived … their motivation from an ideological and spiritual commitment to social reform and change' (Tandon 2000, p. 319). In the 1950s and early 1960s the major development paradigm was state building, with a focus on infrastructure and industrial development. This approach to development typically ignored the more local community contexts, with NGOs being at the margins involved mainly with missionary-based welfare work, sending volunteers, or involvement in disasters and emergencies work (OECD 1988; Webb 1971; Smillie 1995). It was also a period of what was seen as Western neocolonial domination:

> In the 1960s and 1970s, the problems of war and famine in the non-Western world were predominantly seen in the context of Western domination and Cold War clientelism. The existence of broad social and political movements based on Third World solidarity or critiques of Western market domination meant that the problems were seen in a broader international context (Chandler 2001, p. 681).

NGOs were part of the response to this paradigm through their aid programs and advocacy so that by the late 1960s and into the 1970s NGOs were demanding alternatives focused on local level development. This demand was driven in part by Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), and was enthusiastically picked up by NGOs through small-scale, integrated community development activities, and promoted through public awareness programs (Tandon 2000; Chandler 2001; Mitlin, Hickey et al. 2007). Underlying this approach was the strong belief that people can and should develop themselves, and that 'their own involvement, engagement,

and contribution are an essential foundation for sustainable development' (Tandon 2000, p. 320). Non-formal education, community organising, and local leadership building were the types of interventions being promoted, and it was out of this experience that emerged the 'rights-based approach' to development (see Chapter 6).

By the 1980s the idea of state building was cast aside and a new development paradigm emerged. The basis of this paradigm was to pare down the size and role of the state under what was called a New Policy Agenda, picking up the central tenets of neoliberalism: deregulation, privatisation, and liberalisation (Newman et al. 2002; Stokke 2013). In this framework of a smaller state, NGOs were being asked and supported to perform many local and state functions. This was the period of the NGO 'boom', characterised by broader relationships among state, market and civil society, and the promotion of practices such as strengthening 'civil society' and 'people's participation', which were a central part of NGO arguments around aid quality. NGOs at the time were also highly critical of structural adjustment policies of aid donors, particularly the World Bank, but at the same time there were high expectations of NGOs to provide a better alternative. These criticisms were perhaps unfair and certainly unrealistic, given the relatively small scale of most NGO work.

> While there was some discourse space and there were financial resources for collaborative projects, there was little to no space to pursue large-scale, or system-questioning, or alternative projects (Mitlin, Hickey et al. 2007, p. 1706).

The final phase of NGO engagement can be tracked from the mid to late 1990s until the 2010s. This phase is characterised by a persistent and public set of concerns about the practice, direction and focus of NGOs. This was related to the failure of much of the neoliberal agenda in the mid-1990s, exemplified by the Asian economic crisis, to be replaced in the 2000s with an increased security agenda and the rise of a nationalistic, more centralised, development state (Hallsworth and Lee 2011; Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire 2011). With this came more cautious, uncertain and risk-averse donor governments, and the re-emergence of both donor and recipient national interest in a more complex donor world.

It is in this historical context that ACFID has grown and developed, and to which it has responded. There has been a shift from the activism for alternatives in the 1970s and 1980s to the adoption of a more circumscribed role in an uncertain NGO world of the 2010s where government and, to some extent, the public have become more sceptical.

An overview of the Australian Council for International Development

This book tracks the history of how ACFID got to where it is today, and be as strong in the 2010s as it has ever been, but with a different voice to reflect the times. This chapter looks at how ACFID has developed since 1965 and its work as a commentator and a voice for NGOs in Australia – a bit like a Greek chorus or conscience. The idea of ACFID as a Greek chorus arose from a conversation with Jack de Groot, a long-standing AFCID executive member, about what ACFID was.[3] In Greek tragedy the role of the chorus was to express the fears, hopes, questions, judgements and feelings of the spectators who made up the civic community (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990). The challenge for the Greek chorus was to comment on the dramatic action in a collective way with a balanced sound of all the voices – to curb individual choristers from drowning out the whole (Black 1988, p. 282). Over its 50 years of existence, ACFID has been at times a sharp and loud commentator on the events around aid and development in ways that both reflected and led public opinion. There have also been times when some of the choristers have tried to sing from different song sheets. At these times, ACFID has had to manage the disharmony among the 'choristers' with some deep soul-searching, most notably in the 1970s around the issue of global education (see Chapter 3).

At ACFID's 25th anniversary conference in 1990, Doug Porter used the metaphor of a Jazz Band: 'one of the more enigmatic of musical forms that never respects any of the perceived truths about itself, and is neither composed nor purely extemporised music' (Porter 1990). He also noted that the tradition of NGOs parallels the tradition of jazz, with the strong role of the Christian church in both, and certainly religious NGOs (mainly Jewish and Christian) have played a central role in ACFID's development, particularly in the early years, when they provided much of ACFID's leadership. The metaphor was also used as a critique of ACFID, with Porter (1990) suggesting that ACFID had become set in its ways by playing traditional jazz and 'what the punter wants to hear … with a tempo that is too fast and a volume too low', suggesting that ACFID had strayed from its 'radical' roots.

Doug Porter seemed to have been pining for the activist era of ACFID in the mid-1970s when it seemed to take on a more radical hue, or as Rolf Gerritson noted, ACFID 'was a home for left over student radicals' (quoted by Rollason 2013). Of course this begs the question of whether or not ACFID's roots were indeed radical, which is dealt with in detail in the following chapter on ACFID's

---

3   Marc Purcell, an ACFID executive director, took the metaphor a step further and suggested that at times the organisation had all of the elements of a full-blown Greek tragedy.

origins. While the roots of ACFID may have been set down in the radical times of the late 1960s, few of the founding members would have called themselves radical, and certainly not Sir John Crawford, ACFID's founder, academic and public service icon. What may have been in people's minds was that the ACFID executive committee may at times have been 'courageous' in employing the passionate and outspoken staff that it did.

ACFID has to juggle a number of competing interests: it has to not only represent the broad set of views of its constituency – its member NGOs in Australia – but it also has to inform and challenge both the membership and the government of the day. In doing so, ACFID must strive not to alienate either. In the 1970s there was a strong perception that it alienated many of its members (ACFOA 1979c), and in the late 1990s and early 2000s it at times alienated elements of the government (see Chapter 8). The problem seemed to be that the messages did not resonate with the audiences in those times. In either case, the audience – be it the ACFID membership or government – could not simply switch off, as they were in part paying for the messages being delivered, either through member fees or AusAID grants. The paradox, as Lang argues, is that the 'stabilisation of an organisation … to confer predictability … tends to turn down the volume of public advocacy' (2012, p. 205). Forty years earlier, Lissner argued in the same vein that the 'opportunity cost of income maximization poses a greater threat to the credibility [of NGOs] than does doctrinaire idealism' (1977, p. 227). Perhaps 'turning down the volume' is not bad thing, if being too strident leads to people either not listening or to merely preaching to the converted.

This book is heavily influenced by Jorgen Lissner's *The Politics of Altruism* and Sabine Lang's *NGOs, Civil Society and the Public Sphere*. Their two works serve to bookend this history. Lissner's (1977) work looks at the issues facing NGOs in the 1970s while Lang's (2012) looks at the state of NGOs in the 2000s. While Lang focuses on relations between NGOs and government as regulator and funder, and what she refers to as the 'tacit co-dependency among unequals' (p. ix), Lissner focuses less on government and more on the tension between fundraising and advocacy, or 'voice'. What the two books share is a critique of social movements which become institutionalised – Lang calls this the 'NGO-ization' of social justice movements. While ACFID did not directly emerge from the social justice movements of the 1960s and before, many of its members did, such as Oxfam, Caritas, OSB, Act for Peace, Overseas Service Bureau (OSB), which all have had a strong influence on ACFID and its work.

Lissner (1977, p. 74) and Lang (2012, p. 4) both argue that an integral part of being an NGO is that it is a public benefit organisation driven by a world view or Weltanschauung (such as humanism or religious beliefs), from which it draws legitimacy by communicating messages to the public about this world view. While NGOs can and do communicate individually on social justice issues, there

is also a big advantage in communicating with a common voice, such as that provided by ACFID. This also enables individual NGOs to be a bit 'hands off' in their advocacy work and avoid the tension Lissner mentioned that comes with NGO funding, whether from the public or government. This still leaves the question as to whose voice ACFID should represent – is it just about 'normative claims about the common good … [and being] a public expert in variously scaled civic spaces'? (Lang, p. 13).

The issue of moral hazard is one consequence of 'whose voice?', as ACFID and its members may be articulating their own values as being the values of those they purport to represent (Kilby 2011). This is the major criticism of NGOs: that the universal public good and set of values they claim to represent may be more contested (Staples 2008). Is a peak body like ACFID able to enter these spaces and argue that the social justice agenda is not about the self-interest of a few NGOs but represents a broad public view and gives voice to the voiceless? This is a theme to be explored throughout this book. This question goes to the effectiveness of ACFID in the role of a commentator with a strong values base, or what Landolt (2004) and O'Neill (2000) refer to as a 'constructivist' analysis of the world, which sees change as adopting norms around social justice and equity.

Maintaining harmony

From the outset ACFID has had the challenge of maintaining the harmony of a good chorus. The international NGO sector has never been homogenous but rather it represents a diverse set of values, beliefs and world views. A conservative religious NGO may have quite a different world view from a secular activist NGO and, while they can agree on broad principles around social justice, the devil lies in the detail of what each might say on these issues. A simple characterising of NGOs into left and right, or conservative and progressive on a political spectrum, is neither sufficient nor helpful. Similarly, the views of the broader society that ACFID's members represent are also in a state of flux, and their sympathy or hostility to the social issues of the day shifts over time. The challenge that ACFID has had over its 50 years has been that of providing leadership in the international development NGO sector. It has had to provide ideas and resources, as well as a forum, without being captured by the particular interests of its members, or fall into the trap of irrelevance by meekly following the membership.

Chapter 2 discusses how ACFID members in 1965 had to be dragged into a council by the indefatigable Sir John Crawford, and how they struggled for the next few years to find a purpose until the opportunity of being involved in global education emerged in the 1970s. This opportunity, however, was also to set the scene for division in the mid-1970s, which Chapter 3 looks at. Divisions emerged again in the mid-1990s when the government was questioning ACFID

and NGO legitimacy more broadly, prompting the suggestion that the larger NGOs form their own council or network, much like what happened in the UK following the break-up of the VCOAD in the 1970s (Miles 1978). Certainly government would prefer dealing with the larger agencies only, and AusAID has often encouraged regular discussions among the bigger agencies. In the end, however, the divisions of the 1970s and 1990s were never deep enough to split ACFID, and in the 2010s it remains probably more united and with more members than ever. The divisions that occurred were probably inevitable in a diverse council, and keeping everybody 'in the tent' has been a major challenge over the 50 years of ACFIDs' life.

Mick Sullivan, executive director in the mid-1970s, noted at the time of a major review of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), the precursor to ACFID:

> ACFOA is not a healthy organisation because it was never planned that way; [and] the consensus on what it is, is inadequate. [It] has been necessary for ACFOA's continued existence that it be ambiguous, and be many things to many people (ACFOA 1977a, p. 1).

The idea of ACFID being 'many things to many people' is an inevitable issue for any peak body that provides a range of services. Some members are there to be part of the lobbying, others for the legitimacy that membership brings, while for others again it is access to the resources that ACFID provides. Furthermore, many see the networking as essential for them to be effective in their work. The review that Sullivan refers to followed deep divisions in part around what was seen as 'a rapid growth in increasingly dissident views of aid and development problems' while at the time not being responsive to member needs (Tiffen et al. 1979, p. 29). The key finding from the review was simply that 'ACFOA had survived', but the review also noted the successful relations ACFID had built with government, its being a forum for members and the positive role the work on global education work had achieved. For some members at the time, ACFID was not sufficiently useful or of interest to them to command a greater commitment. It was seen as sending them an overload of written communication but not providing enough personal links, very necessary if complex and controversial ideas were to be 'sold' to the members.

Figure 2 Mick Sullivan meets Pope Paul VI who blesses ACFOA (Mnsgr Coveney translates).

Source: Felici (Rome).

The outcome of the 1979 review was to temper the voice of the chorus, and it led to some steps by ACFID to ensure the members were more or less singing from the same song sheet. The review, however, meant much more than survival; it also put ACFID in good stead for the following 20 years when a new set of tensions arose. These, however, were less internal and more about changes in the external environment, and how AusAID and the government saw NGOs in general and ACFID in particular. The outcome of the 1979 review led to the 'good' years of ACFID through the 1980s, when the enduring legacies of ACFID emerge: the code of ethics/conduct, and the discourse on good development practice for NGOs. In both of these areas ACFID was a world leader, discussing these issues many years before its European and North American counterparts.

In the 1980s ACFID was able to be a commentator and challenger of both government and NGOs. It was prolific, putting out roughly one press release a week, usually critical of government policy on a whole range of matters to do with international issues, often human rights or conflict related, but also on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues in Australia. The commentary went

beyond aid and development issues, with ACFID arguing that human rights abuses, international conflict and domestic indigenous issues were all related to broader questions of development and social justice. By the 1990s, however, government felt this was going beyond commentating on aid, was outside the mandate of ACFID and, more importantly, was outside the scope of the funding provided by government. By the mid-1990s AusAID was starting to define very sharply what it was paying for in the ACFID secretariat funding agreements, and advocacy and global education were no longer to be part of it. By the 2000s, government was largely hostile to such adverse commentary from ACFID and believed it was inimical to their role of service providers and based on a view that 'only elected representatives are accountable through the electoral process' (Staples 2007, p. 6). This view of the role of NGOs presented a challenge for ACFID and its members as it ignored the argument that the very purpose of NGOs is to give voice to the marginalised, that an advocacy role is central if NGOs are to be true to their values and mandate – that is, to take a social justice rather than a welfare focus (Lissner 1977; O'Neill 2000; Korf 2007).

'Biting the hand that feeds.' This was the phrase used by Andrew Thompson, the Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Trade, responsible for aid and development when ACFID briefed him on its advocacy work: 'ACFOA was on AusAID's payroll and so [by doing advocacy] they were biting the hand that feeds' (ACFOA 1996a). This has been an ongoing problem for ACFID as it receives a substantial part of its income from government. This pressure was to continue to varying degrees up to and through the 2010s.

The idea of a publicly funded critic of government was seen as important in promoting public debate on key development issues through the 1970s and 1980s (Melville 1999; Sawer 2002; Maddison, Hamilton et al. 2004; Staples 2007). The rationale was 'to strengthen weak voices, the sections of the community that would otherwise be unheard in public debate and policy development' (Sawer 2002, p. 39). While industry bodies had the resources to put their case and provide policy advice to government, the more marginalised groups in society did not. While government funding of ACFID dated back to the late 1960s (see Chapter 2), by the mid-1970s this had risen sharply when the Whitlam Labor government provided support for a large range of domestic welfare and other peak bodies, including ACFID.

Although this philosophy of government providing support to NGO peak bodies was reiterated in 1991 at a parliamentary inquiry which noted that government support for peak bodies 'reinforces the democratic nature of Australian society' (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p. 4), by the 1990s and 2000s this view began to change. The more managerial Labor government in the early 1990s saw a cooling of relations with welfare peak bodies, including ACFID, as results-based management clauses were applied to their contracts

(Maddison et al. 2004; Martinez and Cooper 2013). This went a step further in the late 1990 under a conservative Coalition government when NGO critics and right-wing think tanks asserted a conservative agenda more forcefully, part of which was attacking NGO legitimacy. Using public choice theory to bolster their case, these critics argued that ACFID's 'biting the hand that feeds' was merely ACFID and the NGO sector acting out of self-interest (Johns 2000; Staples 2007, 2008). The self-interest argument was hard to maintain given the ongoing support by the public for NGO work that was clearly driven by values based on social justice and human rights. The public could also see the rising level of inequality in the world at the time, in part driven by the neoliberal policies of the late 1980s and 1990s. NGOs and ACFID argued that 'an ethical theory of global responsibility needs to take account of structural relations in our global world' (Korf 2007, p. 373). The implication was that it commits NGOs, as O'Neill (2000) argues, 'to seeing those on the far sides of existing boundaries, distant strangers though they be, as having moral standing for us' (p. 202), which was to conservative critics, a 'dangerous form of idealism' (p. 201).

This ideologically based criticism of NGO advocacy work brought a different set of pressures into play which ACFID hitherto had not had to deal with. The role of ACFID as a result of its government funding became an issue not only for government but also within ACFID (Rollason 1994; ACFOA 1994b). On the one hand, government questioned what it saw as the high levels of funding it provided to ACFID vis-a-vis member contributions (Terrell 1994) while, on the other, larger NGOs felt that some of their interests were being overlooked in favour of smaller agency interests. The bigger agencies saw any threat to ACFID as also being a threat to them, and they were thinking about ways of reducing that threat. While there were some meetings in the mid-1990s of larger agencies to discuss alternative structures, in the end these talks came to nothing and ACFID remained (Smillie 1999a; Hobbs 2013; Hunt 2011). ACFID, however, continued to be a vocal critic of the government's record on aid delivery until the early 2000s, when perhaps the last straw was the 'bawling out' of the ACFID executive director by the foreign minister Alexander Downer in front of the Indonesian Ambassador over its criticism of Indonesia's human rights record in West Papua (Harris-Rimmer 2013). As a result of these pressures from AusAID, and government more broadly, ACFID became more muted, and, for a time in the mid-2000s, it took more of a lobbying role rather than public advocacy sharply critical of government (O'Callaghan 2013).

ACFID was not alone in having at times a tense relationship with government. Canada followed a similar trajectory through the 1990s and into the 2000s, with attacks from government at the highest levels on both domestic and

international NGOs and their legitimacy to be advocates (Sawer and Laycock 2009; Smillie 2012). CCIC, the sister organisation of ACFID in Canada, had similar experiences to ACFID a few years earlier. In the early 1990s,

> CIDA did not like being hectored about their political stances on Southern Africa much less on the volume and quality of their aid program. Measured criticism was acceptable but only up to a point. Nor did they [CIDA] like being asked in Parliament why the government was supporting voices that came across as shrill, radical and sometimes abusive (Smillie 2012, p. 279).

This came to a head in 1991 when the head of CCIC was given a dressing-down by the head of CIDA for a 'report card' they had produced critical of CIDA's performance. The head of ACFID was to receive a similar dressing-down a decade later over a report they did, which was similarly critical of a DAC[4] peer review (see Chapter 8).

ACFID has always struggled with funding, and finding the 'right' balance between what members paid and any government subsidy they received. One executive director has suggested a whole chapter of this book could be spent on budgeting alone. In its early days, ACFID's members felt that as the government seemed to have a big hand in ACFID's establishment (see Chapter 2) then government should pay for its running costs. It was through some skilful negotiation that Sir John Crawford, ACFID's founder, managed to get some money earmarked for coordinating aid to South Vietnam (a project which was both unwanted and unworkable) to be used to cover the running costs of ACFID (ACFOA 1967a; Webb 1971). Ever since then ACFID has been funded to varying degrees: by a government grant, by members' fees, by special projects (usually funded by government), and from time to time from its own income generation through the sale of services and resources to its members and others. This is a balancing act that other international NGO peak bodies have to manage, with ACFID having much of its advocacy work, for the first 25 years at least, covered by government funding. However, changes in governments, with a shift in philosophy against funding NGO advocacy on behalf of the marginalised, saw much of that funding curtailed in the 2000s (Staples 2007).

From the mid-1990s the constant threat to funding and AusAID's approach of putting limits around its support to ACFID's budget, saw ACFID over time take a reduced government grant for its core operations from 60 per cent of the budget in the early 1990s to 40 per cent in the 2000s (Hewett 2013). AusAID had funded ACFID 'projects' since its inception. Funding aid coordination in South Vietnam was the first of many ACFID 'projects' up until the early 2010s, when

---

4   Development Assistance Committee of the OECD (DAC).

it provided ACFID with support for NGO research and Code of Conduct-related work as a special project. At the time of writing, the ACFID secretariat was staffed in such a way that while project-related staff might lose their jobs when projects were completed, a cut in government funding would not stop the core operations continuing. In other parts of the world, precipitate funding cuts by government to peak bodies created serious problems. In 2010 neither CCIC in Canada nor CID in New Zealand were really prepared for the sudden loss of their government grants, which reduced CID to a single staff person and CCIC having to mortgage its office space to cover the redundancies of two thirds of its staff (CCIC 2010a; Ed Challies, McGregor et al. 2011; Smillie 2012).

The work of ACFID

Histories such as this one can get caught up in the struggles that organisations go through and the politics surrounding them and forget the day-to-day work. For ACFID this is about networking among members and keeping the ear of government. While the other chapters of the book look at the work of ACFID, it is by necessity selective in picking up only some of the key themes and issues which shaped it. The rest of this chapter attempts to look at some of the everyday work of ACFID, as well as introduce the bigger issues touched on in subsequent chapters.

Advocacy

Whether it was under the guise of global education and the *Development News Digest* (the ACFID magazine through the 1970s) or through more direct advocacy targeting government, ACFID was a regular commentator and advocate for change in government development policy. It has continually pushed a poverty and human rights focus on bilateral aid, as well as government support for NGO approaches to aid. While ACFID has shifted from being a strong critic of government in its advocacy work in the 1970s and 1980s to having an uneasy alliance with government on advocacy in the 2000s with Make Poverty History, ACFID has remained an influential voice.

At the everyday level there are regular meetings between ACFID staff and government policymakers, whether in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) or other government departments such as Defence and Treasury. ACFID meets regularly with ministers and politicians to talk about aid policy issues. The first major advocacy campaign in 1972 was for the McMahon Coalition government to increase its aid effort to the Bangladesh refugee crisis in 1971 (see Chapter 3). With the election of the Labor government in 1972

both aid policy and the level of aid became an important issue for government, to the extent that Gough Whitlam mentioned aid in his election campaign launch (Rollason 2013).[5] Some 40 years later, in 2013, the incoming conservative Coalition government did not release its policy to cut the aid program until two days before the election, to avoid any public debate.

From the mid-1970s there were, and still are, regular meetings with government about the level and direction of aid, and ACFID, being an *ex officio* member of Aid Advisory Councils, has a seat at the 'table' set up from time to time to advise ministers on aid issues.[6] Advocacy work, however, depends on having someone to listen and the interest of the minister in the issues, and even being aware of their moods. Russell Rollason tells the story of Bill Hayden (Labor foreign minister 1983–88) not talking to him for a year over some real or imagined slight, then calling from Finland (while Rollason was visiting AusAID) seeking his urgent views on a fairly non-controversial issue. Gareth Evans for his part largely delegated aid issues to his junior minister, arguing that NGO aid issues 'were below his pay grade' (Evans 2013). Likewise Andrew Peacock, as foreign minister in the 1970s, blamed Mick Sullivan for a leak to the opposition (Sullivan 2013), and Alexander Downer, when foreign minister in the late 1990s and early 2000s, had a prickly relationship with ACFID. Mick Sullivan makes the point, however, that keeping the channels of communication open at all times to both political parties was most important, as was avoiding being tarred by some ideological brush (Sullivan 2013) – sage advice which ACFID has generally followed.

ACFID has had some important 'wins' with government: the work on Africa, particularly South Africa; East Timor; and Cambodia probably being the main ones. ACFID was one of a small number of voices who fought against the political injustices of South Africa's apartheid regime; the invasion and occupation of East Timor through the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s; the isolation of Cambodia by the West in the 1980s; and the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia and their land rights since the 1970s. ACFID often provided both a venue and a way of opening doors to many of the spokespeople for these movements. For a time in the 1980s, José Ramos-Horta, who was to become East Timor's president and Nobel Laureate, had some space in an office

---

5   This was to be the first and last time an Australian prime ministerial candidate put overseas aid into a campaign speech.

6   The first of these aid advisory councils was chaired by Sir John Crawford, who resigned as ACFID President to take up the role of chair of the first of these councils which had a number of iterations over time. Public servants tended to think these councils were interfering in their work and a waste of time, while ministers had mixed views of their usefulness (Viviani and Wilenski 1978; Tupper 2012). In 2015 an Innovations Hub was set up with a high level Reference Group to advise government on innovative aid approaches with ACFID being represented on it.

in the ACFID building, as did Fessahaie Abraham, the representative of the Eritrean Relief Association. Eddie Funde, the African National Congress official representative in Australia, was also a welcome visitor when he was in Canberra.

ACFID's work on Cambodia, which had been isolated following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, was important to the Australian government at a time when the only Australian and other donor country presence was through their NGOs (Utting 1994). As Bill Hayden (1990) put it somewhat delicately at the ACFID 25th anniversary conference: '[S]ome of the organisations were able to monitor Australian interests, much as an unofficial consulate might do.' It was probably a little more than this as Lyndall McLean, head of the Joint Australian NGO Office in Pnom Penh for three years from 1989 and a former (and subsequent) diplomat, played no small role in opening communications for the Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans and others to negotiate the comprehensive 1991 peace settlement in Cambodia (Evans 2011). Having a friendly Australian presence in Cambodia was very important at the time, and ACFID member agencies performed that role. At the same time, ACFID lobbied at home and was relentless in its push for a comprehensive settlement and a normalisation of relations between Australia and Cambodia and Vietnam – the hostility with Vietnam and Cambodia being more of a US-defined Cold War relic rather than a result of substantial security or other issues in either country (Utting 1994; Brown and Zasloff 1998; Rollason 2013).

The quality of aid

The linked issues of aid quality and aid effectiveness became very important in the 2000s as increasing aid budgets were demanding some justification (Knack et al. 2011; Birdsall and Kharas 2012; Ndikumana 2012). The key guiding process has been the Paris Principles on Aid Effectiveness, which emphasises transparency, local participation, and alignment of aid programs with recipient government priorities and recipient government ownership (Booth 2012). After 10 years the results of the Paris Principles are mixed, due mainly to donor countries being reluctant to give up power and control over their foreign aid (Eyben 2010; Booth 2012; Brown et al. 2012; Hughes and Hutchison 2012).

None of this is new, and in Australia the debates around aid effectiveness started in 1982 as a global education issue when a Quality of Aid seminar that year criticised AusAID's development programs. In particular, it focused on the use of food aid as a support to Australian producers, and two controversial bilateral projects in the Philippines: the Zamboanga Del Sur and North Samar projects, which were seen to have a more strategic security focus that a development one (ACFOA 1982a). It followed the old and ongoing argument that:

> the neo-colonial business of aid silences the autonomy and agency of local communities and citizens by the power of its representation and maintains the status quo of under-development (Gulrajani 2011, p. 202).

The clear implication was that NGO aid was somehow different. This ongoing critique of official government aid programs by NGOs raised the obvious question as to whether NGO aid was any more effective or appropriate. This led to some work by ACFID with regard to the quality of projects in the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) subsidy scheme and another Quality of Aid seminar in 1983 focusing on NGO aid (Birch 1983; ACFOA 1983b). One outcome of this seminar was a 'quality bonus' of 20 per cent within the ANCP to those agencies that could demonstrate they could meet quality criteria, including directly targeting poor women. The aim of the subsidy was to shift NGOs away from the very common, but usually poorly thought out and unsustainable village craft projects (ACFOA 1983b; Rollason 2013). The Quality of Aid seminar was the first in a series of debates on NGO effectiveness, which still engages ACFID some 30 years later. To some extent these debates are difficult to resolve as the starting points are so different. NGOs can never be mainstream players in national level aid delivery, but rather can be important marginal players with targeted small-scale interventions (Ndikumana 2012).

In 1984 the ACFID secretariat was asked by its members to help 'verify NGO claims of effectiveness' (ACFOA 1984d). In 1985 the booklet *Questioning Practice: NGOs Project Evaluation* (Porter et al. 1985) prompted further debate and led to the establishment of a Development Project Appraisal and Evaluation Unit (ACFOA 1985a; 1985b; 1985g), with a quality of aid committee of ACFID members set up to support the unit. The first adviser, who was employed in 1987, prepared a set of manuals to assist NGOs with developing viable development projects (Zivetz 1988). The unit, however, was aimed at not only improving quality but also establishing ACFID and NGO legitimacy in commenting on the quality of government aid programs (ACFOA 1986a). By the early 1990s the unit was renamed the Development Advice and Training Unit with a mandate to be more active with NGOs in building their program management capacity (Ross 1992).

This work did not stem the criticism from AusAID and others completely; the NGO effectiveness review of 1995 found, somewhat paradoxically, that while the ANCP was very effective, NGOs were, nevertheless, too 'dependent' on AusAID and so no additional funding should be provided to the ANCP (AusAID 1995a). By 2000 the AusAID 'mood' had changed and the quality of NGOs' work had 'improved'. Another AusAID review found that NGO work was appropriate to development context, focused on marginalised people and effective partnerships, and addressed long-term development needs of beneficiaries, with no mention of NGO dependency. Similar to the 1995 report, gender issues were identified

as a weakness, with the impact of projects on gender relations in general, and women in particular, neither understood or known, and monitoring remained weak (AusAID 2002). The development effectiveness debate continues into the 2010s with the new mantras being 'value for money' and 'benchmarking' effectiveness (AusAID 2012). As Lewis notes, the general view on NGO effectiveness at a global level was that:

> many NGOs were only weakly accountable to communities and governments, that their 'impact' on poverty reduction, where the attempt had been made to assess it, was lower than expected and that NGO efforts to scale up their work beyond piecemeal efforts or islands of success were largely unsuccessful (Lewis 2010b, p. 337).

While Riddell (2007) argues that NGOs are effective, the problem remains of the high expectations of NGOs, which is driven in part by the view that large-scale efforts are what is required and these are beyond the capability of most NGOs. Also NGOs themselves not only do not like admitting failure but they also do not like even admitting partial success (Kraeger 2011; Lang 2012). For many NGOs it is about an all-or-nothing approach, and being effective is an article of faith fundamental to establishing their legitimacy (Smillie 1996; Lecy et al. 2012). Of course this does little to assuage the scepticism of governments.

Professionalism

Part of the quality debate was also linked to the perceived need by NGOs to 'professionalise', which is essentially to meet the needs of the state and, to a lesser extent, the private sector (Lang 2012), but at a cost.

> Professionalization of the aid sector into a sizable industrial complex has privileged managerial values of efficiency and impartiality at the expense of civic orientations and moral purposes. This turn of events is not unique to foreign aid; increasingly modern public administration is sacrificing the social meaning of the ends for the technical efficiency of the means (Gulrajani 2011, p. 212).

Implicit in the argument that NGOs need to professionalise is a view that has always been around: that NGOs and their work were somehow intrinsically not professional, and that being 'professional' was seen as a path to legitimacy (ACFOA 1994c). Professionalism also seems to suggest that 'the language of development has become depoliticised; power analysis and conflict are removed, contradictory ideas, concepts and approaches are robbed of their differences' (Wallace et al. 1997, p. 16). Almost at any stage through ACFID's 50 years there are statements to the effect that ACFID members were now professional, implying that before they were not. In 1997, a decade after the Code of Ethics

was developed and was being replaced by a Code of Conduct, Rudy von Bernuth from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) noted that the Code was not only about professional standards but also about increased efforts by governments North and South to regulate NGOs (ACFOA 1997b). A decade earlier, Neville Ross, who was ACFID chair at the time, put it succinctly when he said:

> NGOs have been sucked in by the new emphasis on professionalism to believing that professionalism means doing things the way professionals do. Professionalism does not mean accepting AIDAB claptrap automatically (Ross 1988).

This continuing discussion about professionalism is also about NGO identity, and what they are really about (Lissner 1977). They are caught in the middle of being part of a social movement and being part of an aid 'industry' with its own language, rituals and behaviours. Over the years, ACFID has had links with social movements such as the anti-apartheid movement and various national liberation movements. While these links might be accepted to varying degrees by much of the supporter public, they are, however, looked at askance by government. NGOs are in a bind as they do need the support of government not only for formal approval via regulation, but also for 'some' funding. Some years back Michael Edwards (1999) pointed out:

> At a deeper level, most NGOs are still confused about their identity … [and they] tend to import the philosophy of the market uncritically, treating development as a commodity, measuring market share as success, and equating being professional in their work with being businesslike … [but NGO] legitimacy is derived from the NGO's social roots (its domestic constituency) and from demonstrable adherence to the values that hold the movement together (p. 28).

Lang (2012) more recently goes on to argue that a lot of the discussion around professionalisation leads to a corporate view of NGOs as a 'firm' with a product to sell. NGOs themselves can fall into the trap of inadvertently supporting the public choice theories touched on above rather than Lissner's (1977) notion of a public benefit based on values. 'The sector's function as an assembly for organised citizen engagements … have little place in the firm logic of instrumental accountabilities' (p. 115). The evidence from Australia is probably not as clear-cut as Lang (2012) and Edwards (1999) argue; while the language of professionalism is still in vogue there may be enough checks and balances in place to ensure there remains a strong values base behind the work of most NGOs.

The reason for this continuing strong values base may be the relatively low levels of government funding for most NGOs vis-a-vis their domestic and many of their international counterparts. In addition, some of the regulatory processes in place, such as accreditation, have an emphasis on values and the nature of NGOs' partnerships with their counterparts in developing countries. Since the late 1980s, however, a set of controls and procedures have been put in place by AusAID through funding contracts which have limited the more innovative aspects of social change work, what Martinez and Cooper (2013) refer to as 'management and accounting control' (p. 1).

The Australian Council for International Development committees

Most of ACFID's most effective work is the activities and the networking that occurs through its committees. A measure of success is that the demand for committees has always outstripped the supply of ACFID staff to service them. Quite early on, in 1969, ACFID set up a committee structure to replace the unworkable commissions that were part of its founding structure. In retrospect, it was hard to have a secretariat plus two semi-autonomous commissions working, which is what the founding fathers of ACFID created in 1965 (see Chapter 2). The ACFID committee structure went through a number of iterations. At the time of writing there were four main committees dealing with development practice, advocacy, humanitarian response, and the University Network. There are also a number of ad hoc working groups dealing with the important issues of the day, which are largely run by members with ACFID staff having a communications role.

In the early days, however, there seemed to be committees for everything. Mick Sullivan said that at one point in the mid-1970s ACFID had 16 subcommittees, and he was secretary to them all (Sullivan 2013). By 1985 they had been rationalised a little, but there were still committees dealing with the Pacific, Africa, Education, Indochina, North–South issues, East Timor, human rights, and women and development (ACFOA 1985f). Later, environment and HIV/AIDS were added to the list. The problem was that the number of committees grew like Topsy, and ACFID staff had to service them despite regular attempts to cut them back, such as Janet Hunt's (1998) attempt to have just two committees: Development Practice and Advocacy, the rest being self-managed working groups.

There was always a tendency to add a new committee to look at the latest urgent issue without getting rid of those committees that may have run their course. For example, Janet Hunt (1998) noticed that there were few major agencies on the environment committee, and gender had been flagged as an issue after the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. While most people who have been

associated with ACFID probably have their favourite committees, I would argue that apart from the ones which have dedicated chapters in this book (gender, human rights, code of conduct, and humanitarian response), probably the most effective over the longer term were the Africa Committee for keeping Africa on the AusAID agenda for so long, the Mekong Committee on its work with Cambodia through the 1980s, and the North–South Committee for keeping global justice issues alive, particularly in the neoliberal period of structural adjustment in the 1980s. The work of the Environment Committee and the HIV and AIDS Development Network of Australia (HIDNA) played a key role in bringing these issues to the fore in the 1990s to the point that environment and HIV/AIDS were mainstream issues in most NGO work in the 2000s.

The choir masters

Of course any Greek chorus requires a choir master. In the case of ACFID, while the executive director is in charge of the choir, the ACFID executive committee calls the tune. In a governance sense this causes difficulty as the ACFID executive committee has a more hands-on role than a regular NGO board, and from time to time this has led to tensions as the executive directors have always been a little constrained in what they could do. The other issue is that with advocacy, and for some type of programming, such as advice and training, there was always the possibility of a conflict of interest where ACFID was competing for the same resources as its members, and so the executive committee tried to make sure that the ACFID secretariat did not become 'operational'.

There were a couple of times when ACFID did become operational: one was with IDEC (see Chapter 5), which functioned reasonably well on and off for over 20 years; the other was global education, which also ran for 20 years and morphed into campaigns for a further 10 years or so. In other cases, where ACFID attempted to recoup some staff costs through consultancies, the executive committee was more nervous (Rollason 2013).[7] The issue of ACFID's role and the extent to which it can become 'operational' is an ongoing issue. At the end of the day, ACFID has to be able to maintain its identity with the public, and more importantly connect with its ACFID values in a meaningful way and avoid the danger Lang (2012) cautions against of being turned into primarily a lobbying business. Other aid NGO peak bodies, such as InterAction in the US, derive a much larger proportion of their income from services 'sold' to members.

---

7   For example, in 1994 the HIDNA staff person's role was able to be extended by a year through the consultancy work of the development advice and training team, but this income was capped at 60 days per year (ACFOA 1994e), and then faded all together.

The public face of ACFID is its executive director, who has to lead and represent members' interests to government, build the membership and ease tensions among members. Of the 10 executive directors ACFID has had over its 50 years, only one has been a woman. Three came out of church member agencies, two from secular member agencies, one was an ex-politician, one had military connections, one was a lobbyist, one an ex-government official, and one was an internal promotion from staff. Of the first five executive directors, two were sacked, two left through ill health, and one died in office. While not all of these 'casualties' were directly related to the pressures of the job, most were – giving some indication of the fluid nature of the organisation at the time and the growing pains ACFID was having. From the early 1980s ACFID was more stable, and the executive directors have all left of their own volition and timing. It is worth noting that despite it being a peak body, unlike its US counterpart InterAction, the executive director does not come from the ranks of the executive directors of the large member agencies, but rather from their staff. Whether this is constraint or not is hard to say (Harris-Rimmer 2013).

The chorus

Throughout its history ACFID has been a broad representative body, with most NGOs as members, so as to have as many voices as possible in the chorus. However, there have been NGOs who have been either indifferent or opposed to being members of ACFID. In the early years, World Vision Australia was reluctant to join, not seeing the benefit and feeling that too many of the existing members were opposed to its way of working. At various times the Australian Red Cross has been a member, an associate member, or not a member at all. The Red Cross, as part of an international organisation, has restrictions on membership of peak bodies, particularly if they are involved in advocacy work. It formally withdrew from ACFID in 1975 over what it saw as ACFID's partisan stance on the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, but rejoined in 2013. In the early 1990s CARE Australia was not a member and did not see any advantages, but joined when the Code of Ethics became a Code of Conduct, and code compliance was mandatory for accreditation to receive government funds. In the 2010s neither Compassion nor Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the third and fourth largest NGOs in Australia in terms of funding from the public (Wulfsohn and Howes 2014), were members of ACFID or code signatories, as they did not receive government funding and felt the Code of Conduct would restrict the way they worked.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to give a flavour of ACFID's history and a taste of what is to come in this book. The key role of ACFID as commentator, advocate, lobbyist, and networker has stood the test of time. The key question this book will look at is how adaptable ACFID has been to an ever-changing environment, and how it can keep up with the changes. A former staff member questions whether ACFID deserves the name of being the peak of the NGO 'sector', as the sectoral voice is not coherent enough, and criticises it for not taking the debate forward and setting the agenda as much as it might have in the past. In the 2010s ACFID may be more of a collective bound by a Code of Conduct rather than a sectoral leader. In the 1970s and 1980s the general community knew a little bit about ACFID through its public advocacy and global education programs, but now in the 2010s there is much lower public recognition (Harris-Rimmer 2013; Hewett 2013).

This is a harsh criticism, maybe a little unfair, and probably something that staff have said of ACFID throughout its history, but it does raise the question of how the 'chorus' can keep up with changing times and changing tunes, and when to be loud and when to be quiet. The stakes are much higher than they were in the early years when NGOs were barely noticed by government, let alone regulated or funded. In the 2010s the level of funding is much the same as what it was (in real terms) in the 1990s, but the conditions attached to the funding are seeking answers to much harder questions about effectiveness and value for money, and the NGO mantra of 'doing good' and 'it is all about the values' does not wash as much as in earlier times. Also, while NGO funding has grown the ACFID secretariat has not grown in the same way so it is being asked to do more with the same staff as 20 years ago. The chorus song sheet and requests may have grown, but the choir remains the same.