

## **International Issues News # 24 (January 2013): Government funding of Amnesty International.<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

As a general principle, AI does not accept direct national government support or funding. This is an important source of AI's credibility, independence and impartiality. Consequently, there are only very limited exceptions to this principle. These include accepting indirect support that is available to all charities (such as tax exemptions), and accepting funding for relief which is not earmarked for particular cases, and human rights education (HRE), which always requires IEC approval. The detailed rules controlling the acceptance of government funding were last revised in 1999.<sup>2</sup> In the months leading up to the 2011 ICM, AI Sweden called for a complete ban on government funding of AI while AI Australia called for a review. As a result, 2011 ICM Decision 5 called for a study of the issue to be circulated by October 2012. That deadline was met and an executive summary of the study (actually its methodology and recommendations) was sent to all sections and structures. It is now being discussed by AI leaders. The study was carried out by an external expert and involved a survey of AI policies, interviews with relevant AI staff and volunteers, and collating feedback from AI entities about their experience of working within the current guidelines.

### **Different types of government funding of AI**

The phrase "government funding" covers many different situations. The review identifies six main types of government funding:

- a. Bilateral international development assistance to Northern-based NGOs. Several AI sections (including the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK) have received substantial governmental funding to operate HRE programmes in the global South.
- b. Bilateral international development assistance to Southern-based NGOs. Some Northern governments also distribute development assistance via their official agencies and embassies directly to NGOs in the global South. Beneficiaries include AI Senegal and AI Turkey.
- c. Multilateral international development assistance by UN bodies and the European Union. AI's "Education for Human Dignity" programme is partly funded by the EU through EuropeAid's development education funding programme (€700,000 over three years).
- d. Multilateral social, economic and cultural development. The EU's European Social Fund is funding part of AI Czech Republic's HRE programme.
- e. Bilateral social, economic and cultural development assistance from domestic government sources. For example AI Denmark receives funds from the Education Ministry towards its HRE programme.
- f. Local governmental funding (town councils, regional authorities etc.). Several European sections have received such funds.

### **Actual receipt of government funds by AI**

The International Secretariat plus 16 national AI entities are currently (2012) in receipt of government funding. In addition, another 13 national AI entities have recently received government funding over the last five years, and one section currently receives in-kind support from governments. Current government funding across the Amnesty International movement totals £1.9 million. Furthermore, a five-year grant of around £3,850,000 will be received from

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<sup>1</sup> This article is mainly based on *Review of government funding at Amnesty International* (August 2012, ORG 70/015/2012). A shorter version is also available as *Executive summary of the review of government funding at Amnesty International* (October 2012, ORG 70/014/2012): this contains the methodology and recommendations of the report but is not, in fact, a summary.

<sup>2</sup> See *Revised Proposed Guidelines for the Acceptance of Funds and Fundraising by Amnesty International* (FIN 21/03/99). In spite of their title, these are the actual guidelines because the proposed guidelines were not amended before being

January 2013 – December 2017 via the Norwegian government's contribution to the new NRK (Norwegian Telethon) grant to AI.

### **Positive and negative experiences of the current system**

The review received many strongly argued presentations both for and against the principle of government funding of AI activities. These followed broadly the same lines as in the past (citing, on the one side, actual and perceived independence and impartiality, and on the other side, the value of AI's HRE work which cannot be funded in any other way). In some cases, those receiving funding argued that it added to AI's credibility because government funding carried status and validity in their countries.

### **Recommendations of the review**

The review contains 18 recommendations, some on practical points, others on matters of principle. It notes that there is no evidence of government funding under the existing rules having any adverse effect on AI (#8), although AI could consider surveying its members and supporters to test their views more systematically (#9).

The review uncovered significant differences of opinion within AI about the desirability or otherwise of accepting government funding, as well as much difference in knowledge about what AI is actually receiving. It therefore recommends that forums and mechanisms should be created for further discussion of the matter (#1), and to provide better information on what is happening (#3), including a clear statement of existing AI policy (#5 and #14). It also recommends that the current approvals process be tightened up to make sure that it is always followed by all AI entities because this does not happen at present (#2), and that the more detailed guidelines on HRE funding be revised to recognise the significant amount of money (nearly £2million per year) that AI accepts for this purpose (#4), as well as the contractual framework for these funds (#7).

Several AI entities reported that if they lost their government funding for HRE they would lose significant and valuable parts of their HRE programmes. The review therefore recommends (#11) that HRE should be resourced centrally, not as an "add on" to core work (#13), and that the distinction between HRE, on the one hand, and the activism, lobbying and campaigning that can arise from it on the other hand, needs to be clarified (#12).

Overall, AI's approvals process should pay more attention to the variations in size of funding agreements and the sources of funds (#10) and the funding options available to individual sections (#17). AI's policies need to be sensitive to changes in governmental funding that could have an adverse impact on AI's independence and impartiality (#15). AI also needs to coordinate properly its multi-section applications to government and intergovernmental funding bodies (#16).

The review calls on national AI entities to drop their unilateral opposition to all forms of government funding for themselves (#6); they should instead abide by the overall AI policy as they could receive money that would benefit the work of AI. Finally (#18) it calls for a new post of Accountability Officer to be created in the Office of the Secretary General to be responsible for AI's overall accountability on government funding, including carrying out due-diligence assessments, publishing an annual list of approved government donors for HRE, and coordinating and commissioning market research into public perceptions of AI in this context.

### **Conclusions**

The overall conclusions of the review are that the risks of withdrawing current government funded HRE projects are greater than the perceived risks of accepting government funding: there is currently no evidence that government funding relationships are compromising AI's independence or impartiality, or that they are discouraging new members and supporters.

However, the current approach to seeking and accepting government funding is incoherent and inconsistent around the movement: there are too many different policies in operation in different countries, and internationally agreed policies and guidelines are often not followed. This lack of rigour is itself a risk to AI's reputation. The review also notes that AI's failure to build HRE funding into centrally planned budgets, instead of treating it as an "add on" needs to be confronted.

In any case, government funding needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis weighing up the advantages of the relationship against the disadvantages. But this process should avoid the sort of exhaustive criteria that can be a hindrance: AI needs to find ways of assessing risks and then taking balanced decisions on funding, rather than refusing to accept funds on the basis of purely hypothetical risks. The sheer diversity of AI means that we need to be very sensitive to the contexts in which funds are sought and accepted: *"There is no typical AI section and there is no typical government funder. Experiences of interviewees in Ireland or the Netherlands cannot be expected to guide policy directed at AI in Mexico, Canada or Nepal."*

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### **Note on original documents**

These articles are taken from internal AI documents from the Weekly Mailings sent out by the International Secretariat. AI sections vary in their practice with respect to making these available to members. If you are interested in finding the original document please investigate within your own Section but feel free to let us know if you are having problems.