



Code of Ethics

A tradition of mutual responsibility
for ethical practice

2025

Ethical Values Statement

Cooperation Canada and its members champion fundamental ethical principles, prioritizing the rights and needs of all, promoting international cooperation for human rights, environmental sustainability and social justice. We commit to championing human rights, advancing our duty of care, fostering public trust and actively contributing to civil society's flourishing in Canada and internationally.

What is Cooperation Canada's Code of Ethics?

The Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics is a voluntary, self-regulating framework that sets a standard for ethical practices within the international cooperation sector. It is an aspirational document with a primary objective to enhance the impact of international cooperation initiatives and bolster trust among collaborators by promoting greater transparency and accountability among its signatories.

The Code is designed to reflect the diverse nature of Cooperation Canada's members. It embraces their various approaches to development work, rooted in shared ethical principles focused on human rights, justice and decolonization, cooperation and solidarity, sustainability, protection and accountability.

Cooperation Canada defines international cooperation as a comprehensive process that integrates social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. This process works towards the achievement of fundamental human rights as outlined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further detailed in treaties and instruments, including but not limited to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Support for the wider human rights system means that Canadian organizations also have a responsibility to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Calls to Justice.

Emphasizing the importance of prioritizing the rights, needs and aspirations of all people, especially populations that have been historically marginalized and/or experiencing displacement, international cooperation underlines the promotion of peaceful conflict management and the preservation of environmental health, diversity, resilience and decolonization. Decolonization in Canadian international cooperation agencies involves acknowledging the legacy of Canada's colonial history, recognizing and dismantling historical power imbalances, ensuring Indigenous voices are central and respecting diverse cultural perspectives. This is relevant to work in Canada as well as worldwide.

Within the context of international cooperation, Cooperation Canada and its members commit to safeguarding the safety, dignity and human rights for all. Aligned with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, Cooperation Canada and its members endorse a global framework to eradicate poverty and hunger, combat inequalities, build just and inclusive societies, protect human rights, promote gender equality and ensure the sustainable protection of the planet and its resources.

Given their influence on public perception, Cooperation Canada and its members acknowledge a substantial responsibility to act in ways that bolster public trust in their activities. Additionally, members recognize a duty of care to all individuals involved in their work and commit to addressing inherent power imbalances in their endeavours.

Adherence to this Code of Ethics, supported by Cooperation Canada's ever-green Good Ethical Practice Guide, is one way that members demonstrate publicly their commitment to operate ethically and responsibly. Membership also provides tremendous opportunities to learn from peer organizations and deepen and improve members' practice of international cooperation.

To ensure accountability, Cooperation Canada regularly updates the Code's standards, identifies and supports learning opportunities for good ethical practice, requires members to renew their commitment to the Code annually, and ensures Board-level leadership when complaints arise.

History

Cooperation Canada is proud to be one of the first networks of civil society organizations in the world to adopt a code of ethics including a collective statement of “Principles of International Cooperation” and a “Code of Conduct.” The Code of Ethics demonstrated Cooperation Canada members’ organizational commitment to ethical practice when it became the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (Cooperation Canada’s previous name) peer accountability framework in 1995. A further decade of experience and reflection resulted in a revised Code of Ethics in 2004 that incorporated sections on working in partnership with Southern civil society organizations. In 2009, the Code was again updated and is now known as the Code of Ethics and Operational Standards.

A review undertaken in 2019-2020 was designed to update the Code of Ethics and Operational Standards to take into account new developments in international cooperation practice during the past decade and to integrate key principles related to Cooperation Canada’s Leaders’ Pledge on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Misconduct, launched in 2018. These updates also clarified the compliance process – putting the onus on Members to view the Code of Ethics and Operational Standards as an opportunity for organizational learning and continuous improvement.

In 2023-2024, Cooperation Canada underwent another process of revision, this time engaging external consultants in a process of discussion and dialogue to revisit and rethink elements of the Code of Ethics. The process was informed by Cooperation Canada’s Leaders’ Pledge on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Misconduct, and the Anti-Racism Framework for Canada’s International Cooperation Sector, a 2021 framework of commitments developed by an independent advisory group convened by Cooperation Canada.

The latest revision to the Code was also informed by:

- Cooperation Canada’s 2023 survey of its membership;
- Member, staff and Cooperation Canada board consultations;
- Facilitated discussions and learning sessions on Indigenous teachings and Reconciliation in relation to ethics and ethical practice; and
- A review of the revised Code by representatives from sister coalitions from other parts of the world, including Fierté Afrique Francophone, the Nigeria Network of NGOs (Nigeria), the Portuguese Platform of Development NGOs (Portugal), and the Movement for Community-led Development (United States)

The result of this process is the current Code of Ethics. The Code more clearly outlines the ethical principles that Cooperation Canada and its members should implement as members of Cooperation Canada, allowing for self-evaluation and learning. Feedback from members also provided impetus to move from a set of operational standards that were formerly part of the previous Code of Ethics, to a list of good practices. The rationale behind this shift was to create space for growth and evolution, serving as the basis for an ever-green set of practices that can evolve and adapt through member engagement and learning, and as new practices emerge. This approach also enables the guide to better reflect the varied mandates, size, and contexts in which Cooperation Canada’s member organizations work. Finally, a glossary was also added to the Code of Ethics to provide greater clarity in interpretation, built from expert sources and inputs received during the consultation process.

Code of Ethics

Cooperation Canada's Code of Ethics is rooted in core principles that reflect the shared values of Cooperation Canada and its Members. These principles guide our collective efforts and are mutually reinforcing, as are the commitments that support them. We have organized our commitments into two key areas: international cooperation and partnerships. Each commitment is assigned to a specific principle but is designed to support multiple principles, creating a cohesive and interconnected framework. We embrace the interconnected nature of these commitments and principles, recognizing that this alignment underscores the importance of our values. This approach strengthens our collective commitment to integrity, collaboration and accountability in all our endeavors.

The principles of the Code Ethics are Human Rights, Justice and Decolonization, Cooperation and Solidarity, Sustainability, Protection and Accountability. Each principle is accompanied by a set of International Cooperation Commitments and a set of Partnership Commitments (see Figure 1). International Cooperation should foster and promote the full realization of human rights, gender equality and fundamental freedoms. In tandem with the International Cooperation Commitments, Cooperation Canada and its members should work towards the additional commitments related to partnerships.

Figure 1. Understanding Cooperation Canada's Code of Ethics: Mutually re-enforcing ethical principles, supported by commitments for international cooperation and partnerships.



Principles and Commitments

Principle 1. Human Rights

Cooperation Canada and its members should respect and promote the human rights and dignity of all people.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Satisfy basic human needs.
- Be people-centred in both its purposes and the distribution of its benefits.
- Advance gender equality and reflect the concerns, perspectives and experience of all genders and enable all genders to realize their full rights.
- Respect the integrity of all cultural and spiritual belief systems.
- Uphold the integrity of international human rights law and all relevant legal frameworks to ensure the protection of all human rights.

Partnership Commitments

- Partnerships should advance and exemplify the full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, social justice, equitable distribution of global wealth and environmental sustainability.
- Partnerships should be formed in a spirit of inclusiveness and in accordance with the do-no-harm principle that respects and promotes the value of diversity.
- Partnerships should recognize any challenges facing the international human rights system and commit to strengthening it through constructive changes, addressing gaps and ensuring its sustainability to protect and promote fundamental human rights globally.

Principle 2. Justice and Decolonization

Cooperation Canada and its members should navigate a just and respectful path in their engagements, promoting equity and acknowledging the agency of equity denied populations.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Address the root causes, and not merely the symptoms, of global inequality.
- Promote social justice through the equitable distribution of power, wealth and access to resources.
- Ensure that future generations have the same or greater quality of life benefits as the current generation.
- Respect Indigenous Peoples and their rights to self-determination and to sovereignty over their own traditional territories.
- Ensure the full participation of individuals and groups that have experienced exclusion and marginalization by actively recruiting, hiring, and promoting a diverse workforce.
- Enable historically underserved, underrepresented, poor, oppressed, and marginalized communities by providing tools and resources, addressing systemic issues, and collaborating with partner organizations to support their efforts to organize and improve their situation.

Partnership Commitments

- Partners should respect one another's autonomy and constraints and strive to foster a climate of mutual trust in all their partnership activities.
- Partnerships should embody equity. Acknowledging that inequalities often exist as a result of power dynamics, especially in funding relations, partners should strive for equitable partnerships.
- Partners should endeavour towards reciprocity, learning from one another and facilitating the sharing of knowledge.
- Partnerships should be vehicles for long-term accompaniment that support the right of peoples to determine and carry out activities that further their own options, through their civil society organizations.
- Partnerships should ensure local leaders, community members or change agents take the lead and systems and capacities are strengthened and responsive to local communities.

Principle 3. Cooperation and Solidarity

Cooperation Canada and its members should cooperate with each other in order to promote Canadian involvement in international cooperation.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Promote a global movement by intentionally linking shared interests and issues
- Foster mutual respect, intentionally creating an environment of trust, open communication and fairness, enabling effective and ethical collaboration.

Partnership Commitments

- Partnerships should be built on shared visions and goals for society which imply mutual support and solidarity beyond the implementation of specific programs and projects.
- Partnerships should involve working together, while recognizing both shared goals and differences.

Principle 4. Sustainability

Cooperation Canada and its members should take appropriate measures to address the three interconnected areas of sustainability – environmental, social and economic – to promote long-term positive impact.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.
- Foster sustainable development considering the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Promote economic sustainability to support decisions that are equitable and fiscally sound.
- Acknowledge and support efforts to revitalize traditional Indigenous practices of protecting the environment.

Partnership Commitments

- Partnerships should include support to ensure climate resilience and promote environmental sustainability in all activities and actions.

- Partnerships should work to support sustainable development as per the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Projects and decisions must be made with organizational sustainability and long-term benefits in mind.

Principle 5. Protection

Cooperation Canada and its members should commit to creating safe and respectful workplaces and programs that promote gender equality and are free from gender-based violence, including by addressing and responding to all abuse of power, holding people to account, and protecting the vulnerable. Cooperation Canada and its members will take action to respond to all concerns and complaints about sexual exploitation and abuse and child abuse involving recipient populations, employees and related personnel.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Recognize the hazards of militarism and promote peaceful solutions to international, national or local conflict.
- Aim to create work environments free from sexual misconduct by and of civil society organization staff and volunteers within our organizations and the countries in which we operate.
- Support survivors/victims of sexual misconduct and ensure all allegations are investigated, and that perpetrators are held to account, including through prosecution and/or dismissal where appropriate.
- Acknowledge and address disproportionate violence faced by Indigenous women and children, and those identifying as 2SLGBTQI+ globally.

Partnership Commitments

- Partnerships should be dynamic relationships built on respect and honesty, in which partners strive for better understanding and appreciation of one another.
- Partners should benefit from each other's experiences and strengths, and identify joint solutions, including by sharing and building knowledge and capacity around survivor/victim-centred approaches.

Principle 6. Accountability

Cooperation Canada and its members should communicate freely and accurately, and be accountable to their international partners, to their staff, to their donors, to the Canadian public and to each other for their contributions to international cooperation and their stewardship of resources.

International Cooperation Commitments

- Work with integrity, accountability, transparency and participation of civil society.

Partnership Commitments

- Partners should be transparent and accountable to one another.

Achieving Compliance

Statement of Commitment

Cooperation Canada members commit to strive towards Cooperation Canada's Code of Ethics upon becoming a member and renew their commitment annually as part of membership renewal. This practice, further outlined below, is matched with a commitment by Members to raise awareness of the Code among their employees as part of their efforts to work towards compliance.

Dedication to Upholding the Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics

Initial Commitment: A new member of Cooperation Canada shall submit this statement of commitment to the Code of Ethics. The statement of commitment should be approved by the Organization's Board of Directors and signed by the Executive Director/CEO and Board Chair.

Annual Re-Confirmation: Each member shall re-confirm its compliance every year, as part of the annual membership dues payment process.

Employee Awareness: members commit to ensuring their employees will be informed of the commitment to the Code of Ethics.

Cooperation with Cooperation Canada: Upon written request from Cooperation Canada, each member shall respond to any questions related to the Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics in a timely fashion.

Resolution of Concerns: A member that has a question or concern about the conduct of another member relating to the Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics shall first make an effort to directly discuss it with the member in question. If there is not a satisfactory response from the member, the issue should be raised with the Cooperation Canada Board Membership Committee who shall inform the Board and may designate 1 or 2 board members to engage in dialogue with the member. The designated board members will be mandated to discuss the issue or concern with the member to understand the issue being raised and to explore potential solutions. These discussions will be engaged in good faith by the board members in an effort to support the member in achieving compliance. However, in the case where a member fails to demonstrate a commitment to upholding the Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics, the Cooperation Canada Board may revoke their membership. A decision to revoke an organization's membership requires a decision by the board of directors. These rules are defined by Cooperation Canada's Bylaws.

Glossary

Recognizing that Cooperation Canada's Code of Ethics includes a range of terminology that may have different meanings for different communities, a glossary was built to assist in understanding the principles and commitments in the Code. The following definitions have been revised and adapted from sources including [IVCO Forum](#), [British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner](#), and [United Nations](#), as well as conversations that have informed the Code of Ethics as a whole. In this sense, the definitions presented below are fit-for-purpose and derived from expert sources and those engaged in the Code of Ethics renewal process.

Decolonization

Decolonization involves the dismantling of historical legacies of domination over other nations lands, people, and/or culture. Decolonization restores the worldview of those who have been colonized, allowing the colonized to reclaim cultural identity, traditional ways of life, and accurate historical perspectives. For Indigenous populations, it shifts how Indigenous Peoples view themselves and how others view Indigenous communities, reclaiming family structures, community bonds, cultural practices, languages, histories, and traditions lost under assimilation policies. Achieved through selfgovernment agreements, treaties, or other negotiated agreements, decolonization emphasizes revealing, renewal, and rediscovery. In Canada, this requires non-Indigenous Canadians to accept the reality of Canada's colonial history, acknowledge its impact, and support Indigenous reclamation efforts. This collaborative process involves dismantling ongoing oppression and supporting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination for true reconciliation and a more equitable future.

Diversity

Diversity is defined by the United Nations as: diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, culture or language, sexual orientation, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, geographic location, educational background and other characteristics.

Equity

"Equity" focuses on fairness and justice by recognizing that each person or community has different circumstances and needs. Consider that this is different from "equality," which refers to the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities. Equity involves supporting or providing what is necessary to achieve this equality, often requiring the distribution of resources and opportunities based on varying needs. Equity aims to level the playing field by addressing systemic inequalities and providing support to those who need it most, even if it means offering different levels of assistance or opportunity to different individuals or groups.

Impact

This describes something that has a significant effect or influence, often producing meaningful changes or results. It signifies the ability to make a tangible difference or leave a lasting impression in a particular context or community.

Inclusion

This term refers to the intentional and active participation of all people, especially those who are marginalized or vulnerable, in decision-making processes and the benefits of any development initiatives. It emphasizes creating environments where diverse perspectives are valued, respected, and integrated. Ultimately, inclusion seeks to ensure that no one is left behind, promoting equal opportunities and access to resources for all individuals and communities.

Localization

Localization refers to the process of empowering local communities and organizations to take the lead in designing, implementing, and managing development projects and initiatives. This approach emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, expertise, and ownership in addressing development challenges. Localization involves shifting decision-making power, resources, and responsibilities from international agencies and donors to local actors to

ensure that development efforts are more sustainable, contextually appropriate, and responsive to the needs and priorities of the local population. The goal is to enhance the effectiveness and impact of development work by fostering greater local participation, capacity-building, and accountability.

Partnership

Partnership refers to the collaborative relationship between Cooperation Canada Member Organizations and civil society organizations, excluding individuals or governments. This relationship is characterized by a mutual agreement committing each organization to a set of agreed principles and actions over an extended period. These partnerships should be founded on the Cooperation Canada Code of Ethics and may be further enriched by additional international cooperation principles mutually agreed upon by the involved parties.

About Cooperation Canada

Cooperation Canada brings together Canada's international development and humanitarian organizations and advocates for them by convening sector leaders, influencing policy and building capacity. Together, we work with partners both inside and outside Canada to build a world that's fair, safe and sustainable for all.

Land Acknowledgement

Cooperation Canada acknowledges the historical and ongoing oppression and colonization of all Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and lands in what we now know as Canada. The land on which Cooperation Canada's office is located is the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabe People. We believe that social justice in Canada and globally depends on reconciliation with all Indigenous peoples, including the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, who are the original guardians of the land we are grateful to be sharing.

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