

JOIN THE JOURNEY: CANADA'S PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION

By Palash Sanyal, ICD.D, GCB.D, PMP, CPF, MSc, MEng, MWS

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About the Big Ideas Series

The world needs bold, forward-looking ideas to meet today's complex global challenges. As part of a 2025 *Call for Big Ideas*, Cooperation Canada invited changemakers to propose catalytic concepts that reimagine the future of Canadian international cooperation.

The views expressed in this concept are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Cooperation Canada or its members. Big Ideas are published to spark dialogue and inspire innovation across the sector.

Summary

Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action proposes a national civic engagement platform that connects Canadians to real-time updates from Canadian-supported international initiatives. By matching participants with projects abroad and collecting their annual reflections, the initiative transforms aid from an abstract concept into a shared, relational experience — fostering public trust, participatory learning and a renewed sense of ownership in Canada's global cooperation efforts.

Introduction

Canada's contributions to international cooperation are significant yet operate in a paradox: they are globally respected but domestically invisible. For most Canadians, foreign aid is an abstract concept, a line item in a national budget (if at all visible), managed by institutions and delivered without a tangible Canadian connection. This invisibility fosters disconnect and undermines public *trust*.

Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action proposes a shift — from institutional aid to participatory presence. Through a national civic engagement platform, Canadians can follow the real-time progress of Canadian-supported projects abroad, like a maternal health program in Senegal or a climate resilience initiative in Bangladesh.

Participants receive monthly multimedia updates, engage with community voices, and share annual reflections. These are compiled into a national report, *Aid from Where I Stand*, combining Canadian perspectives with those of partner communities.

By turning aid into a shared, relational experience, *Join the Journey* builds public trust and invites Canadians to become co-stewards of international cooperation.

Why Now?

The Generational Shift

A generational shift is reshaping how Canadians engage with global issues. Abacus Data (2024) shows that younger Canadians (Gen Z and Millennials) prioritize accountability, financial stability and meaningful engagement with social issues.¹ They want to see impact, not just be asked for donations. Traditional government communications often fall short of these expectations. As the most globally connected, digitally fluent and values-driven generation in Canadian history, they are critical to the long-term sustainability of Canada's international cooperation narrative. Designing an initiative that meets their expectations ensures both immediate uptake and lasting relevance.

The Trust Gap and Narrative Battle

Public confidence in foreign aid is weakening. Studies from 2021–2024 (Angus Reid, World Vision Canada) show many Canadians feel disconnected from international efforts, often viewing aid as a “black box.” Over half believe Canada overspends on aid, despite it accounting for less than 2% of federal spending.² In 2024, official development assistance (ODA) stood at under 0.4% of GNI — far below the 0.7% Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee target.³

This disconnect makes aid vulnerable to misinformation and politicization. Canada is also losing the narrative battle online, where polarizing voices dominate. A 2023 Digital Public Square study found that authentic storytelling is now essential to democratic resilience. Most Canadians have never seen a Canadian-funded project, heard from a recipient, or been invited to evaluate aid—limiting transparency and weakening public trust.

Building on What Exists

GAC already invests in direct public engagement through youth and professional internships and other efforts to promote global citizenship. While these deep experiences are valuable, they are not accessible to all Canadians. *Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action* is designed to complement these efforts by opening a broader entry point. It offers a low-barrier way for Canadians of all ages and backgrounds to connect with international cooperation, expanding reach to a wider public.

The Big Idea

At its core, *Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action* is about building credibility and connection between Canadians and the country's global partnerships. Through a voluntary digital platform, participants are matched with Canadian-supported initiatives abroad and receive accessible updates that bring project stories to life.

- 1 Eddie Sheppard and David Coletto, “Housing Concerns Grow as Over Half of Canadians Fear Losing Their Home Due to Financial Changes,” *Abacus Data*, 13 December 2024, accessed 2 October 2025, <https://abacusdata.ca/housing-concerns-grow-as-over-half-of-canadians-fear-losing-their-home> & Eddie Sheppard and David Coletto, “Canadians believe businesses giving back is an important part of building stronger communities,” *Abacus Data*, 29 November 2024, accessed 2 October 2025, <https://abacusdata.ca/businesses-giving-back-an-important-part-of-building-community/>
- 2 Angus Reid Institute, “Defence, Aid or Trade? Canadians' shifting international priorities now lean toward economic opportunity,” *Angus Reid Institute*, 24 June 2025, accessed 2 October 2025, <https://angusreid.org/canada-defence-spending-trade-foreign-aid-carney-nato-trump-nuclear-war/>
- 3 OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: Canada*, 26 May 2025, accessed 2 October 2025, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-canada-2025_fcd70ea1-en.html

Each year, participants share a short reflection on what they have learned. These insights are compiled into a national report that makes public how Canadians perceive and value international cooperation.

By opening a space for citizens to witness, reflect and respond, *Join the Journey* turns aid from something abstract into something relational and shared. In doing so, it strengthens public confidence and gives Canadians a sense of shared ownership in Canada's role in the world.

Theory of Change

The theory of change behind *Join the Journey* is simple: turn passive awareness into active civic engagement by using resources that already exist. Canadian ODA investments, open data tools, and the stories collected by civil society organizations (CSOs) provide a strong foundation. Many organizations already produce updates for their donors through newsletters, social media or field reports. With consent and adaptation for accessibility, *Join the Journey* harnesses and expands this content for a wider Canadian audience.

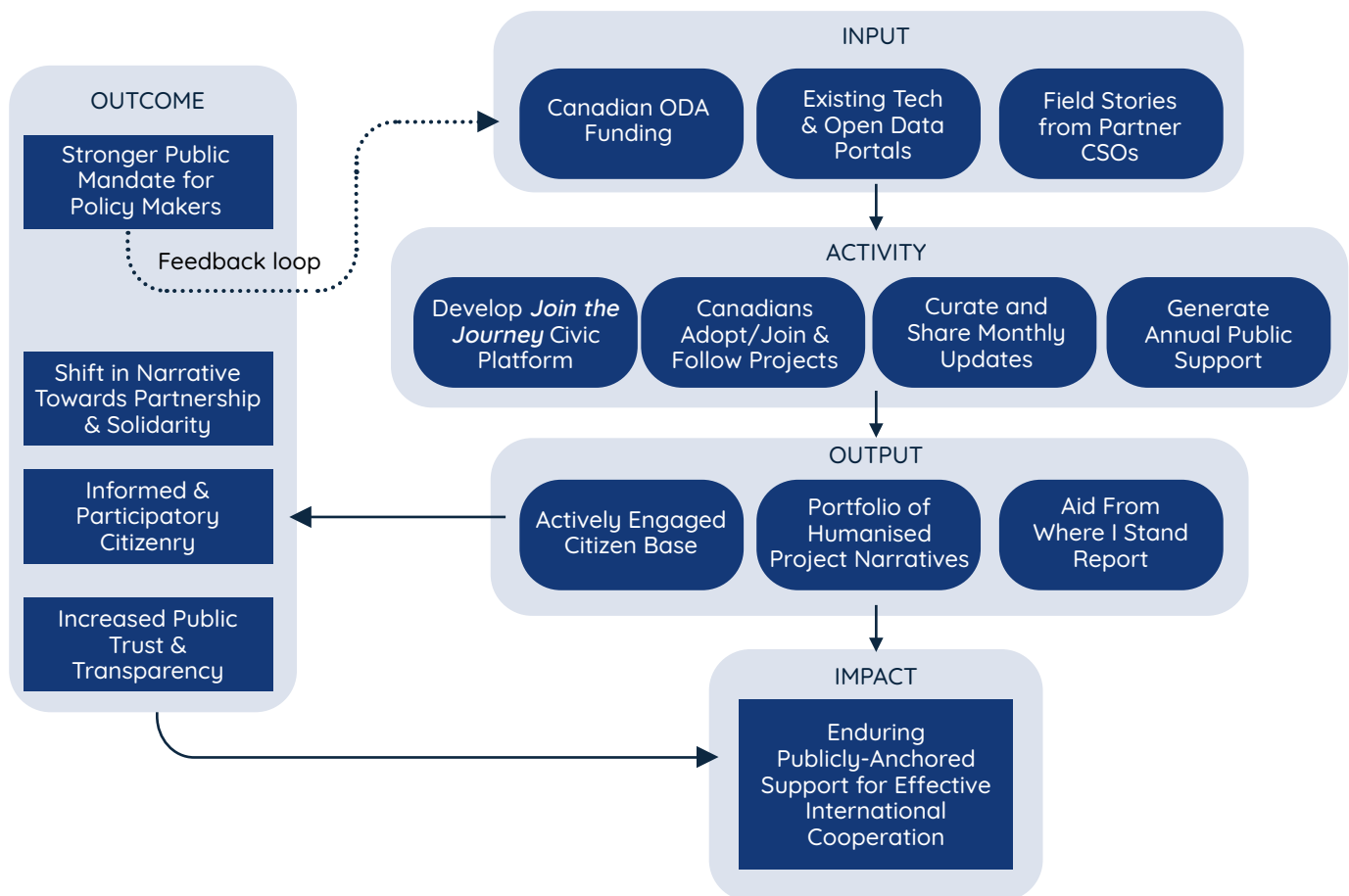


Figure 1: Theory of Change illustrating the transformation pathway of the Join the Journey initiative.

Through the platform, Canadians voluntarily connect with real Canadian-funded initiatives. Participants receive periodic updates in the form of stories, images, or voice notes from project communities, presented in ways that respect local context and dignity. Over the course of a year, this light-touch engagement fosters reflection and learning. Participants then share their feedback, which is synthesized into a national report. This process produces three core outputs:

- An engaged citizenry with greater awareness of Canada's international cooperation.
- Humanized project stories that go beyond statistics to reflect lived experience.
- A national reflection report that links Canadian perspectives with Canada's efforts abroad.

Together, these outputs contribute to broader outcomes: greater trust and transparency, a more informed and participatory public and a shift from donor-driven aid toward respectful partnerships. The citizen feedback loop also strengthens the legitimacy of policy decisions by grounding them in civic values as well as institutional priorities.

Eventually, *Join the Journey* cultivates a culture of support for international cooperation that is rooted in trust and shared responsibility. It transforms aid from abstraction into a relational experience, with policies shaped by the perspectives of both funders and those impacted.

Outcomes and Impact

By making Canadian aid visible and relatable, the initiative enhances credibility in international cooperation. Participants engage with stories that highlight both progress and challenges, fostering transparency, building empathy and grounding abstract policy in human experience.

Table 1: Transformation Pathway: From Current State to Join the Journey outcome

From (Current State)	To (<i>Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action</i> Initiative)	Impact
Aid as a Budget Line	Aid as a Human Story	Fosters empathy and dismantles the abstraction of <i>tax dollars going overseas</i> .
Institutional Reporting	Participatory witnessing	Builds public confidence through radical transparency, showing both successes and failures.
Public as Distant Donor	Public as Engaged Partner	Creates a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for global outcomes.
Static, Retrospective Reviews	Dynamic, Real-time learning	Allows the public to understand the complexity and non-linear nature of development work.
Policy Decided by Elites	Policy Informed by Civic Insight	The <i>Aid from Where I Stand</i> report provides a unique qualitative dataset to guide future policy and budgetary decisions, making them more responsive to public values.

Redefining the Role of Citizens, Shifting the Narrative and Informing Policy

By centring local and global majority voices, the initiative challenges outdated saviour frames and presents a more respectful, reciprocal view of cooperation, consistent with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. At the same time, Canadians' annual reflections contribute a participatory lens that complements institutional metrics. Synthesized in *Aid from Where I Stand*, these insights provide policymakers with grounded qualitative data, ensuring aid remains visible, responsive and aligned with civic values.

Integration with Public Infrastructure

Join the Journey integrates with existing civic, educational, media and government infrastructure. GAC ensures legitimacy and transparency by linking the platform to tools like the Project Browser and Open Canada Portal. CSOs contribute existing content, while community voices remain central, with updates that emphasize dignity and collaboration. Public partners such as libraries, schools and media expand access and an independent delivery partner manages daily operations while safeguarding community-led storytelling. Together, these roles transform scattered information into a national platform for trust and engagement.

Implementation Pathway

The initiative can begin with a pilot phase, pairing a select group of Canadians with projects from a cohort of programs identified for the pilot. Participants would receive regular updates and contribute annual reflections, which would inform the first edition of *Aid from Where I Stand*. This early stage would test the platform's functionality, tone and public reception while minimizing startup costs by leveraging existing material.

From there, the program can expand in phases through partnerships with schools, libraries, municipalities, and civil society networks. Each new cohort would add to a growing archive of shared narratives and reflections, deepening both transparency and system learning. Over time, *Join the Journey* becomes not just a platform, but a national practice of civic participation in global cooperation.

Conclusion

Join the Journey: Canada's Partnerships in Action is not about new technology or more reporting. It is about building credibility in a moment when Canadians are under pressure and trust is in short supply. Trust is hard to earn, yet it has the power to transform Canadians from distant observers into active participants in global cooperation.

By connecting citizens directly with Canadian-supported initiatives abroad, the program makes aid visible, relatable, and grounded in human experience. It changes how aid is seen, how it is felt, and how it is remembered.

Let's give Canadians a place to trust in the story they are already writing.