

# MAKING AID VISIBLE

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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

Many people are sceptical of the value of international assistance (commonly referred to as aid); they don't see or are not convinced by our current reporting and messages. This is a proposal to Make Aid Visible by combining results over several years from civil society organizations (CSOs) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC) working in the same region, and honing effective messages and channels to convey these results to people outside the international cooperation sector.

Making Aid Visible aims to move reporting from

*“In 2020-21, Canadian partners committed \$52.8 million to support the health sectors in Africa, Asia and Latin America”...*

*...to “Canada’s aid has saved 1 million children from malaria in west Africa”*

## Background

In Canada and other high-income countries, public and political support for international assistance has fallen significantly in recent years. Many believe aid is corrupt, wasteful and ineffective. Some politicians cut aid (or promise to) to trim the budget and demonstrate stronger focus on other issues, including defence or domestic needs. In Canada, the Conservative party made aid cuts part of their 2025 election platform. The Liberals (who won the election) made vague promises to maintain aid, but with no agreed baseline for aid. With anticipated budget cutting across government departments, Canada's aid is at risk.

This Big Idea is a proposed project to Make Aid Visible: engaging with a cross-section of Canadians, to show that Canada’s aid is effective and is producing positive changes in the world.

It is proposed that Cooperation Canada lead this work, with strong input from GAC and people in the Global South.

This project will focus on **evidence** from international program work, combining impact data from several agencies over many years into common metrics and messages that resonate with the target audiences. This is a different but complementary approach to other public engagement work, including **testimonials** (people expressing their opinion that aid is effective, as in the #AidWorks campaign by Bigger than our Borders) and **stories** (about how aid has helped one person or family – the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and other agencies often use this approach in written and online materials).

## Proposal

There are three components to this project, each carried out by a different entity.

### 1. Project oversight

The project would be guided and managed by a small steering committee, including Cooperation Canada, senior GAC staff, a few representatives from the Global South and few representatives from Canadian CSOs.

The steering committee would:

- review and improve this proposal, editing and finalization;
- develop a budget and seek funding;
- identify and guide individuals or organizations to carry out the data management and communications work; and
- assess project impact.

One challenge will be getting buy-in from GAC and various CSOs, as it may require staff time (to provide data) and they may be hesitant to share data. It will be important to convince senior staff (Chief Executive Officers of CSOs, Director General or Associate Deputy Minister level at GAC) of the value of this project. Once they are onside, they can direct their staff to participate. The project will need to develop clear guidelines for use of shared data.

### 2. Data management

The central idea is to collect and analyse program data from GAC and many CSOs, looking for geographic areas (countries, or regions within countries) where there is credible evidence that aid from Canada has led to significant improvement in at least one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (poverty, hunger, health, education, etc.) over 10 or more years.

Cooperation Canada has already started to develop a dashboard on the composition of the international cooperation sector, drawing from GAC’s Project Browser and the T3010 forms that organizations submit to the Canadian Revenue Agency. The dashboard focuses on the composition and contributions of CSOs. This initiative could more effectively tell the story of Canada’s impact if it was to:

- include results from all of Canada’s aid channels, including funding through bilateral and multilateral streams as well as through CSOs;
- rollup results from all aid channels to assess impact in certain geographies, distilling the various impacts reported for each project into a few common metrics (ideally referring to individual SDG targets) that Canadians understand; and
- look at long-term impacts over at least 10 years, rather than results of individual projects which are usually 5 years or less.

Those working on data management should work with the steering committee to decide on:

- the programs to include (which CSOs, what channels of GAC support, etc.);
- priority geographic regions;
- timeline (years to include in the dataset); and
- reporting metrics.

A significant challenge will be in interpreting the data to discern Canada’s role. Much of Canadian aid is delivered in concert with others, so Canada can’t take sole credit for progress. Where progress is evident, what’s the appropriate attribution claim for Canada: instigator, lead donor, significant contributor or some other description? Attribution will have to be carefully scripted with local counterparts (see the role of the Global South below).

### 3. Implementing a communications strategy

While Cooperation Canada has started work collecting data for a dashboard, it has yet to develop a strategy to disseminate results. Here’s where the Making Aid Visible project could add significant value, in providing data and messages to reach beyond those who already value aid.

Using the distilled data outlined above, this project will craft and disseminate messages to target audiences about the effectiveness of Canada’s aid (in concert with other public engagement initiatives). The steering committee will assist to:

- Identify target audiences supported by an initial conversation with pollsters to understand audience segmentation,<sup>1</sup> who to target, and how to influence Canadian attitudes. Should the project try to reach the opponents of aid, the weak allies, or those who aren’t engaged at all?
- Develop effective messages for the target audiences. What values could the sector appeal to? What could counter scepticism or lack of engagement?
- Identify effective channels to reach the target audiences, considering social media, print media, events, celebrity spokespeople, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Here’s two examples of audience segmentation: Abacus Data (2024 poll for the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health) identified four segments: Canada First, Passives, Reserved Global Engagers and Full Global Engagers. Development Engagement Labs (2025 poll for GAC) identified six segments: Negatively engaged, Totally disengaged, Marginally engaged, Transactionally engaged, Purposively engaged and Full engaged.

## Further Considerations

Some questions would need further consideration once the steering committee is formed.

### 1. Role of Global South

This project runs the risk of promoting “white saviour” attitudes, if it focuses on Canada’s role at the expense of the efforts of people and institutions in the Global South. It will be important to have people from the Global South on the steering committee, to help guide the process and shape messages. Ideally, these would be from government, academia, independent local CSOs or think tanks,<sup>2</sup> to bring credibility to the data and avoid potential conflict of interest from CSOs that receive funding from Canada. The project should strive to verify the metrics distilled from our collective analysis of Canadian data, with data from the country/region in question.

### 2. Measuring impact of project

Ideally, this project (together with ongoing public engagement work by many organizations) will lead to stronger public and political support for aid over the long term, and this will show up in public opinion polls. But it could take years to see that impact. In the shorter term, people could be directed to a website for a short poll such as: *What do you feel are Canada’s greatest accomplishments through aid?*, with options relating to the SDGs. Responses could be used to indicate reach of the campaign, and summary data could be shared with Members of Parliament and GAC to show support for international assistance.

### 3. Success stories versus nuanced stories

The project should highlight a variety of stories:

- success stories showing long-term improvement;
- nuanced stories showing some improvement, but challenges remaining; and
- stories where aid programs led to unexpected consequences, either positive or negative.

The type of stories should be curated for different audience segments. A bold and simple claim (such as “one million children saved” from the text box above) could grab the attention of sceptics but would need some justification for those who dig deeper. Nuanced stories could be more effective for those who are already allies.

### 4. Election

The Liberals formed a minority government after the 2025 election. The sector could be facing another federal election in 2-3 years, with aid as an election issue. If funding can be secured quickly, this project aims to influence the public discourse on aid before the next election. If political leaders make public statement critical of aid during this project, this project should endeavour to counter these messages without being partisan.

<sup>2</sup> Many Canadian CSOs participate in multi-stakeholder groups in the countries where they program. The groups include representatives from universities, national government, etc., and could be a starting point to seek appropriate contacts to work with the steering committee.

## Timeline

If this project is to be implemented, the first steps would be to form a steering committee, decide how this project would interact with the dashboard already underway by Cooperation Canada, refine the proposal and budget, and seek funding.<sup>3</sup> Further work would be on hold until funding is secured. Once funded, the project would run for 13 months. Ideally, funding would be secured by June 2026, and engagement with the public would run from October 2026 to June 2027.

Changing public attitudes is a multi-year project. Toward the end of this short-term project, the steering committee should assess impact and learnings, then consider ways to continue the work. Options include seeking additional funding to continue this project and sharing learnings with provincial and regional councils for international cooperation, individual CSOs and GAC, for them to implement.

### WORKPLAN: MONTHS

Activity	-1	? <sup>4</sup>	1	2	3	4	5	6 to 11	12	13
Form steering committee	■									
Steering committee oversight	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Develop proposal and budget	■									
Seek funding		■								
Outreach to CSOs, GAC re data sharing, common metrics			■							
Data collection, analysis				■	■					
Identify target audiences & key messages					■	■				
Disseminate messages							■	■	■	■
Assess project impact							■	■	■	■
Wrap up and reporting										■

### INDICATIVE BUDGET

Item	Unit cost	Number	Total
Project management - Cooperation Canada			\$10,000
Data management - Consultant	\$700/day	40 days	\$28,000
Communications - Consultant	\$700/day	40 days	\$28,000
Communications - Advertising, events, etc.			\$100,000
Honoraria for steering committee members (if not part of their job)	\$5000	2	\$10,000
Website costs			\$3000
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$179,000</b>

<sup>3</sup> Potential funders could include GAC, IDRC, Gates Foundation, other foundations.

<sup>4</sup> Timing to secure funding is uncertain.