

# NARRATIVE SOVEREIGNTY LABS:

## A Living Resource Library for Ethical Storytelling in International Cooperation

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OCTOBER 2025

### 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

Global crises are too often narrated through a lens that reduces Southern perspectives to suffering, reinforcing stereotypes and eroding trust in international cooperation. Narrative Sovereignty Labs presents a transformative solution: a co-governed, living library of modular storytelling assets—photography, footage and soundscapes—co-produced through a network of continent-based Labs in partnership with independent media partners across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Funding flows through a transparent consortium, with at least 50% of the budget ring-fenced for Southern leadership and rights. By hardcoding equity into creation, distribution and compensation, the Labs replace extractive storytelling practices with dignified representation. This model not only restores trust in international cooperation and re-energizes public engagement, but also establishes a scalable framework for the sector.

### Our Collective Strategic Dilemma

In a world of growing disruption, Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs) in international development and humanitarian action face a pivotal choice: continue relying on storytelling models that unintentionally perpetuate disempowerment, or pioneer a new approach that embodies the equitable partnerships they champion. The sector's legitimacy is under threat—not only from external critics, but also from an internal contradiction: missions of empowerment undermined by narratives of helplessness.

The Narrative Sovereignty Labs (the Labs) confront this contradiction. Aligned with Cooperation Canada’s *Ethical Storytelling Resource: Explore, Challenge and Reshape Narratives for a More Ethical and Impactful Future*, the Labs offer a forward-thinking vision and a practical blueprint for responsible, non-extractive narrative practices—moving beyond telling better stories to building a better system.

## Why Now? The High Cost of the Status Quo

The cost of our current narrative model is mounting: partnerships strained by misrepresentation, fundraising undermined by a public whose trust in non-governmental organizations averaged only 55%<sup>1</sup> in 2024, and reputations diminished under the persistent shadow of “poverty porn.”<sup>2</sup>

More critically, the greater risk is strategic irrelevance. As Southern movements<sup>3</sup> assert their own narratives and new generations of donors demand authentic impact,<sup>4</sup> organizations that cling to extractive storytelling risk being sidelined. Rhetoric about decolonization and localization will no longer suffice—ethical storytelling is a C-suite priority for the sector’s future sustainability.

## The Proposal: Narrative Sovereignty Labs

The Labs offer a sector-wide solution: a living resource library of modular assets for ethical storytelling that transforms a common vulnerability into collective strength. The mission is to shift the sector from extractive storytelling—which often portrays communities as passive beneficiaries—to collaborative practices and fair representation that center the agency, voices and lived experiences of Southern partners.

### A Shared Infrastructure for a Shared Challenge

No single organization can easily build the deep, trust-based partnerships with independent Southern media houses required for authentic co-creation. The Labs overcome this barrier by providing:

1. **A vetted network of partnerships** with continent-based media across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Media partners are selected through an open and transparent process, based on local credibility, ethical practice and editorial expertise.
2. **A robust ethical charter for storytelling**, co-drafted by a founding working group of Canadian CSO members and regionally based Southern partners. The charter is reviewed biennially by a rotating committee of working group members and external ethics experts from the Global South.
3. **A legally established governance structure** with equitable voting rights between Canadian CSO members and Southern media partners.

1 Edelman Canada, *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer: Canada Report*, 7 March 2024, accessed 2 October 2025, [https://www.edelman.ca/sites/g/files/aatuss376/files/2024-03/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer\\_Canada%20Report\\_EN\\_0.pdf](https://www.edelman.ca/sites/g/files/aatuss376/files/2024-03/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_Canada%20Report_EN_0.pdf)

2 Janice Nathanson, “The Pornography of Poverty: Reframing the Discourse of International Aid’s Representations of Starving Children,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 38, no. 1 (2013): 103–120, <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2013v38n1a2587>

3 Marshall Ganz, “Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power,” in *Accountability through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*, ed. Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2011), 273–289.

4 Marshall Ganz, “Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power,” in *Accountability through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*, ed. Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2011), 273–289.

## A Consortium Model: Distinct Roles, Shared Mission

The Labs operate as a symbiotic ecosystem:

- **Canadian CSOs** provide multi-year funding, subject-matter expertise and access to distribution channels.
- **Southern media partners** are narrative experts, leading production, retaining editorial control, and contributing local knowledge and storytelling excellence.
- **Philanthropic foundations** are invited to fund central coordination—project management, administration, and impact measurement—as a public good benefiting the entire sector.

## The Cornerstone: The 50% Ring-Fence

A minimum of 50% of all consortium funding flows directly to Southern media partners to cover editorial salaries, production, equipment, rights retention and related costs. A transparent system ensures fair compensation for all individuals and communities featured in photography, footage and sound work, extending ethical practices throughout the production chain. This ensures Southern contributors are recognized as experts, leaders and rights-holders, marking a definitive break from extractive models.

## The Output: A Living Resource Library of Modular Assets

The Labs produce a continuous stream of co-owned, high-quality modular assets: professional photography, raw footage, soundscapes and field recordings rooted in local realities. Available under a Creative Commons license, the library allows consortium members to ethically use materials to advance their mission and save on production costs. Specifically, the modular assets can be:

- Branded by Canadian CSO members and Southern partners to advance their missions.
- Integrated into impact reports, donor updates, websites, campaigns, social media content and press kits.
- Combined into longer-form narratives or documentaries.

In this way, the library nurtures a new narrative ecosystem—authentic, partner-driven, and ethical. The Labs turn storytelling into both a tool for impact and a model of solidarity. What emerges is not just content, but a collective voice that advances systemic change, strengthens trust across continents and redefines how the sector represents the communities it serves.

## The Value Proposition: A Strategic Win for All

For leadership, the Labs represent a strategic investment in resilience, reputation and impact. They reduce the risk of extractive storytelling by providing ready access to ethically produced, co-owned material aligned with organizational values, while delivering cost efficiencies through pooled, broadcast-quality production.

To ensure Northern audiences are reached without oversimplifying Southern realities, the Labs are built with three complementary capabilities:

## 1. Tailored Distribution that Preserves Context

- **Contextual Framing:** Every asset includes metadata, editorial notes, consent statements and suggested framing to avoid reductive headlines or out-of-context usage.
- **Channel Coordination:** Assets are incorporated and distributed via Southern partners' and Canadian CSO members' channels, plus curated outreach to mainstream Northern media and sector platforms.
- **Audience Testing:** Pre-release feedback loops with Northern and Southern audience samples to assess reception.

## 2. Ready-to-use Communications Toolkits for Member Integration

- **Asset Packs:** Modular assets, including photo sets, short clips, soundbites and caption banks, for common NGO uses.
- **Integration Guidance:** Clear integration guidance and attribution templates preserving nuance, consent and credit for local creators and contributors in the Global South.
- **Training and Ongoing Support:** Virtual workshops and regular office hours to support ethical usage of the assets.

## 3. Accountability and Impact Amplification

- **Provenance and Consent:** Attach visible, standardized rights and consent records to every asset to ensure credibility and ethical practice.
- **Perception and Impact Measurement:** Track perception shifts to assess whether messaging more effectively reflects Southern agency.

The Labs enable Canadian CSOs to integrate dignified Southern narratives across reporting, donor engagement, public education, advocacy and policy dialogue—amplifying impact while maintaining accuracy and ethical standards. The investment in a new narrative ecosystem both reflects and helps build the world we aspire to create.

Beyond operational benefits, the Labs rebuild trust with Southern partners through equitable collaboration. Canadian CSO members will be at the forefront of innovation and authenticity, which is a critical differentiator for a new generation of donors, talent and public audiences that demand meaningful, ethical engagement. As a sector-wide response to growing public scepticism, the Labs strengthen legitimacy and resilience for both members and the broader international cooperation sector.

## Navigating Risk: From Liability to Advantage

Relinquishing narrative control is often perceived as a risk. However, by rebalancing narrative power with Southern media partners, Canadian CSOs not only stay truer to their missions, but also gain heightened credibility and sector-wide influence, domestically and globally.

Financial sustainability is another frequent concern. The consortium model itself is the mitigation, distributing costs across members and attracting philanthropic investment in public goods. The proposal recognizes that maintaining a living resource library entails ongoing expenses for hosting, updates, maintenance, curation and information technology support, all of which should be factored into the budget to ensure long-term viability.

Legal risks around copyright, licensing, and consent will be managed through contracts and clear rights-retention agreements, ensuring ethical use and protecting members from liability. Together with shared governance and transparent protocols, these safeguards reinforce both ethical and legal stewardship.

## **The Call to Leadership: Pioneer Narrative Justice, Together**

The sector is at a narrative crossroads. Canadian CSOs can either maintain the status quo or choose to build a new framework. The Narrative Sovereignty Labs is a call to action for every leader committed to ensuring that practice aligns with principle: replacing extraction with equity and oversight with shared stewardship.

The future of international cooperation depends not on single stories, but on a sustainable ecosystem built on narrative justice. We invite you—your organization, your leadership, your networks—to become a founding architect of this new model for international cooperation. Join us in shaping a future where agency is at the heart of every narrative and Southern dignity is non-negotiable.

Together, we can transform how the world tells its stories.