Trends in Canadian Aid

Briefing Note Two

What issues are driving the changing priorities in Canadian ODA?

Section Seven:
Strengthening Canadian global citizenship education and support for public engagement in development cooperation

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Prepared for Cooperation Canada

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In January 2025, Cooperation Canada and AidWatch Canada published a series of Briefing Notes,[1] which provided an overview of main trends in Canadian ODA since 2015/16. The scope and allocations for Canadian aid have shifted over this past decade, responding to urgent global challenges (the pandemic and a deepening climate crisis) as well as Canadian foreign policy preoccupations (Ukraine), trade and investment challenges. Documenting changes in the Canadian aid context can serve as a foundation for understanding the current unravelling of international cooperation and to inform advocacy directions for feminist aid priorities that focus on reducing poverty and inequalities.

In May 2026, Cooperation Canada commissioned AidWatch Canada to update these four Briefing Notes, taking into account recent transformations in Canadian development cooperation with the most recent aid data for 2024/25. These Briefing Notes are organized around four thematic areas:

1) Overall Trends in Canadian ODA: What are the key dimensions of its volume and allocations?

2) What issues and approaches are driving the changing priorities in Canadian ODA?

3) Tracking ODA for Reducing Poverty and Inequalities: The Core Poverty Accountability Standard (CPAS), a new accountability metric, and

4) What are the main channels for delivering Canadian ODA, including multilateral organizations and CSOs?

They will continue to be updated periodically, taking into account the changing dynamics of development cooperation in the coming years.

I am very appreciative of the leadership and support by Paul Farran, Director of Policy and Advocacy, and Darron Seller-Peritz, Policy Analyst and Program Officer, with Cooperation Canada. Darron has encouraged and facilitated the research in every iteration and has generously arranged Cooperation Canada's financial support for the work needed to bring together these updated Briefing Notes. Paul and Darron provided thoughtful input into the development of the four Notes along with careful copy editing of the text and suggestions for its improvement.

The author alone is responsible for the content, calculations, and any errors or omissions in the analysis. The resulting Briefing Notes do not imply agreement by Cooperation Canada's Board of Directors or the Board of Directors of AidWatch Canada.

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September 2026

[1] See https://aidwatchcanada.ca/canadian-aid-trends/ for the 2025 Briefing Notes and a summary article by Brian Tomlinson and Darron Seller-Peritz.

Section Seven
Strengthening Global Citizenship Education and support for Public Engagement in Development Cooperation

Highlights

At a time when sustaining a strong poverty focus in Canadian ODA has never been more urgent, amid increasing attention to domestic issues, support for promoting public awareness with Canadians remains a very low priority for Global Affairs, accounting for a mere 0.49% of GAC's bilateral ODA. Canada ranks 17th among its DAC peers in its support for public awareness programming.

Close to seven in ten Canadians continue to hold the view that Canadian aid should have a substantial focus on reducing poverty and addressing inequalities. Most want aid to address conditions that sustain poverty – education, health, water and sanitation. A strong majority endorse an ethic of solidarity and common humanity and agree that these values should anchor the Government's approach to Canadian aid.

The organizational capacity, resources and sustained commitment needed to maintain a Canadian aid program centred on poverty and inequalities are fragile. A major channel of global citizenship education and public engagement has been through the Provincial and Regional Councils and Canadian cooperant-sending organizations. Given competing public narratives on the purpose of Canadian aid, this area must be a central component of Canadian CSO strategies for sustaining public support for, and the broader legitimacy of CSO engagement with counterpart communities across the global south.

1. Introduction

Expanding global citizenship education and deepening public engagement in development cooperation has never been more urgent. Development cooperation is being buffeted by global turbulence in a convergence of global crises. Combined with major reductions in ODA, progress is jeopardized in key areas for advancing the goals for poverty eradication and reducing all forms of inequalities. As the various sections in **Briefing Note Two** have highlighted, Canadian development cooperation has become increasingly complex, with expanding demands, new roles and approaches for aid, which are contested and politicized. The resulting narratives and rationales for aid have become fragmented and confused.

Despite the turbulence, support for development cooperation, and its focus on poverty, remains high among Canadians. When asked about the purpose of aid, 39% of Canadians say it should be exclusively poverty reduction, while only 19% say it should be to promote Canadian national interests. Another 30% say it should be a combination of these purposes. Together, close to 70% of Canadians think poverty reduction is an exclusive or significant purpose for Canadian aid. Close to 60% are concerned about the levels of poverty in countries in the global south, with 59% identifying access to education, health care, clean water and sanitation as the main benefits of aid – all conditions related to poverty and inequalities.[2]

Support for a generous aid program in Canada ranges between 48% and 60%, depending on the question, but only 19% think that the current aid budget should be increased.[3] Some aspects of support for aid may be weakening. Support for an exclusive focus on poverty slipped from 43% to 39% between 2025 and 2026, while the "both" category grew from 28% to 30%. But a narrative built around purely Canadian interests and a trade/investment narrative is not likely to resonate with Canadians, with the 19% who wish to frame aid in purely national interest terms remaining unchanged.

A recent OECD Policy Brief warned that development organizations that have "pivoted to narratives that focus strongly on the value of development cooperation to OECD citizens … may be an overcorrection, appealing to a vocal minority of critics, but alienating the many citizens who have long supported development co-operation for moral reasons."[4] The same Policy Brief observes that traditional narratives are polarizing. Narratives that focus on a charity frame can be offensive to audiences in partner countries and are resonating less with citizens in DAC provider countries.[5]

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[2]Jennifer Hudson and David Hudson, "Canadian attitudes and engagement with global poverty in 2026: Canada in Comparative Perspective," Development Engagement Lab, April 2026, slides 9 and 10, accessed at https://developmentengagementlab.org/publication/canadian-attitudes-engagement-with-global-poverty-in-2026-canada-in-comparative-perspective/.

[3] Ibid., slide 21.

[4] OECD DAC, "Re-building trust in international development cooperation: the role of communications," Policy Briefing, October 2025, page 6, accessed at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/re-building-trust-in-international-development-co-operation_9b2b1660-en/full-report.html.

[5] Kumar et al., "The Case for Development in 2025: Exploring new narratives for aid in the context of the EU new strategic agenda," ODI Europe, July 2025, accessed at https://odi.org/en/publications/the-case-for-development-in-2025-exploring-new-narratives-for-aid-in-the-context-of-the-eus-new-strategic-agenda/.

Some suggest that an emphasis that highlights mutual benefits will be less polarizing.[6] Others worry that the notion of mutual benefits masks unequal power relationships and persistent neo-colonial approaches to counterparts in the global south. In this context, it seems more important than ever to reposition the narrative for development cooperation, away from immediate self-interests, towards one of peoples' solidarity based on donor obligations to our shared and common humanity. Close to three-quarters of Canadians (72%) think "helping people in need is the right thing to do" and that "every person in the world should be treated equally" (69%).[7]

With the potential for competing narratives about Canada's role in the world, building accurate public awareness of global issues and focusing on addressing the structural barriers to reducing poverty and inequalities is consistent with Canadians' perceptions of the purpose of aid. As Canada faces serious economic threats from erratic United States trade and investment policies, the Government has reduced Canadian aid, while increasingly realigning it with Canadian economic interests. In this context, global citizenship education becomes a central foundation for sustaining public support for development cooperation and progressive internationalism.

2. Current investments in public awareness

With current information, it is not possible to determine the extent of government and CSO investment in public awareness, global citizenship education and public engagement. One indicator is GAC disbursements for the promotion of public awareness. For sure, these disbursements do not capture the full range of investments in public awareness and public engagement by Canadian CSOs or provincial education systems. There is a need to augment the financing picture below with a systematic survey of Canadian CSOs.

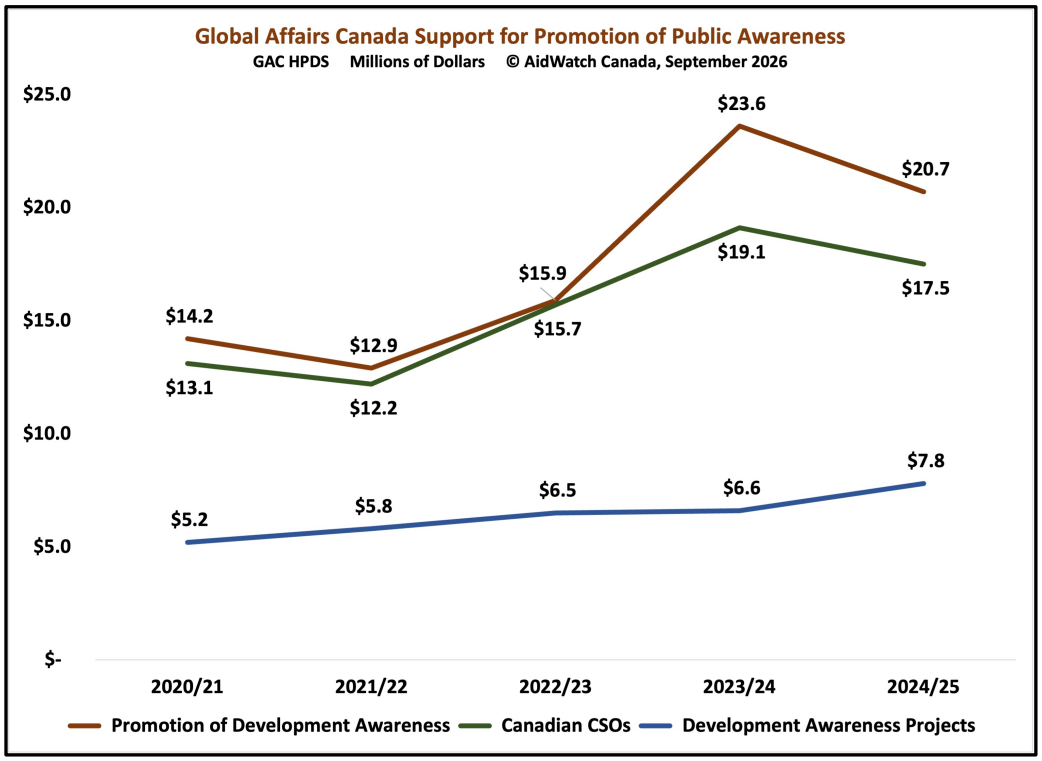
GAC support for the promotion of public awareness is a negligible part of Canadian ODA. GAC has disbursed an average of $20.1 million for this purpose between 2022/23 and 2024/25, which is up 40% from $14.3 million for the three-year period, 2020/21 to 2022/23. But this amount is still a mere 0.49% of GAC's Real Bilateral ODA (excluding in-donor refugee costs, COVID-19 Control and extraordinary support for Ukraine) for the 2022/23 to 2024/25 period. It is still less than in the 2010/11 to 2012/13 three-year period, with average disbursements of $22.6 million (2023 dollars) and an average share of 0.59%. See **Chart One** for the trend in disbursements since 2020/21.

The eight Provincial and Regional Councils delivered 31% of these resources over the three years, and Canadian cooperant-sending organizations were responsible for another 26% of the total. The Aga Khan Foundation accounts for an additional 9.5% (e.g., its International Development Education and Awareness project). With no rationale, GAC has included a portion of its core support for the UNDP as promotion of public awareness, accounting for 7.8% of these disbursements over the last three years. (See **Annex One** for a list of the top 20 recipient organizations).

[6] Ibid. page 6.

[7] Hudson, op. cit, slide 52.

Chart One: GAC Disbursements for Promotion of Public Awareness, 2020/21 to 2024/25



Projects that are coded "development awareness projects" are a much smaller subset of GAC's support for the promotion of public awareness, which includes for example a share of its support for the placement of Canadian expertise abroad through Canadian organizations. Only 38% of overall support for the promotion of public awareness in 2024/25 was directed to development awareness projects.

Canada and DAC providers

In 2024, Canada ranked 17th among 30 of its DAC provider peers in its support for public awareness through its ODA (promotion of public awareness as a share of DAC providers' Real Bilateral ODA). Only eight providers allocated more than 1% of their ODA to public awareness (Portugal, Spain, Austria, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Germany and Italy). Among the five largest providers, only Germany had significant investments, France was negligible and the others (Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom) had no investment in the promotion of public awareness in 2024.

3. Global Citizenship Education through the Provincial and Regional Councils

The current geo-political context calls for significantly increased and sustained investment in global citizenship education and public engagement from all Canadian development actors, including CSOs. According to the recent Development Engagement Lab survey, the share of Canadians who identify as fully or partially engaged with global poverty has fallen sharply from 36% in 2023 to 26% in 2026. Only 12% of Canadians have heard of the Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, at 18% of Canadians, Canada has a higher share donating to an international development organization in the past 12 months, but only 35% say they trust "international development NGOs / charities".[8]

Over the three years of GAC data (2022/23 to 2024/25) the Provincial and Regional Councils received 86% of the $20 million GAC disbursements for "development awareness" projects. The Aga Khan's International Development Education and Awareness received 9% of these disbursements. (See **Annex One**) Other Canadian CSOs may also allocate funding to these purposes, but they are not apparent from the GAC data on Canadian aid activities. Oxfam Canada, for example, reports in its Annual Report that it spent $3.2 million on "Education and Public Affairs" in 2025, or about 12% of its total program for that year. The Canadian Christian churches have maintained for many years significant public education and engagement through their church constituencies, but the scale of their public education activities cannot be determined from public data. No doubt other Canadian CSOs carried out education programs with their Canadian constituencies.[9]

A key moment for public engagement is GAC's International Development Week held annually during the first week of February.[10] The Week is an important ministerial-level platform for GAC and is strongly supported by Canadian CSOs and the Provincial and Regional Councils, with parallel events nationally and in communities across Canada. Events are often oriented towards showcasing GAC's current priorities, and many events lean towards communications rather than critical global citizenship education. The challenge is to build from the Week through year-round initiatives that strengthen continuity and deepen outreach with various Canadian audiences.

Given their importance, this section highlights the global citizenship education programming of the Provincial and Regional Councils carried out through their joint coalition Inter-Council Network. The Provincial and Regional Councils represent over 350 CSOs working on global social justice and development at the provincial level. The Inter-Council Network (ICN) is a national forum of the Councils (distinct from but in close collaboration with the national CSO platform, Cooperation Canada) through

[8] Hudson, op. cit., slide 8, slide 60, slide 37and slide 24.

[9] The Inter-Council Network is intending to coordinate a detailed survey of Canadian CSOs on their global citizenship education and public engagement programming in the latter part of 2026 and into 2027.

[10] See GAC's web page for International Development Week at https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/idw-sdi.aspx?lang=eng and "Secretary of State Sarai wraps up International Development Week 2026 with partnerships that deliver results," at https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2026/02/secretary-of-state-sarai-wraps-up-international-development-week-2026-with-partnerships-that-deliver-results.html.

which Canadian CSOs discuss common priorities to inspire Canadians to act as global citizens, influence decision-makers on global justice issues and strengthen capacities of members of the Councils.[11]

In 2019, the Québec platform, Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale, set out a Frame of Reference for Global Citizenship Education, focusing on the responsibilities of citizenship, reaching broad audiences in formal and informal settings, and promoting a "Putting Change in Motion" model that engages individuals and communities in systemic change, grounded in solidarity, equity and ecological justice.[12] These dimensions are characteristic of work in development awareness undertaken through the ICN.

The ICN and its members implemented the 'Inspire Action and Global Citizenship Program' from 2019 to 2025, focusing on capacity building, youth leadership, educator workshops, curriculum development and public engagement on gender equality, human rights and global citizenship.[13] The Spur Change capacity building initiative (2019 to 2025), implemented by the Alberta Council for Global Cooperation with other Councils, targeted small and medium CSOs. It offered sector conferences, global citizenship education training for educators, a Youth Champions Program, and a resource library of 400+ tools.[14]

Since 2019 the Inspire Action program reports that it reached 200,000 direct participants, 2.5 million people engaged across its platforms, and that up to 12 million people were reached through communications.[15] More than 330 educators took part in Spur Change learning events, which had a direct influence on global citizenship education in the classroom, and 94 Youth Champions were recruited, many of whom participated for the first time in an internationally oriented program. Youth-led public engagement events reached more than 1,200 people, while online campaigns reached an additional 46,000.[16]

In February 2025, Global Affairs announced a new Canada LIFTs initiative for small and medium organizations (SMOs), partnering with the ICN in a seven-year $38.5 million program. It will operate through three funds (Catalyst Fund, Momentum Fund and Together Fund) targeting SMOs at various levels of capacity and programming potential. It is a multi-stream funding and learning program designed to support transformative, community-led international cooperation by Canadian SMOs and their partners. Global citizenship education and public engagement are eligible for funding through these mechanisms, but it is not clear the extent to which these activities will receive programming priority.[17]

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[11] See Inter-Council Network at https://icn-rcc.ca/icnengage/

[12] See AQOCI, "Global Citizenship Education: The AQOCI Frame of Reference," March 2019, accessed at https://aqoci.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/pdf_gce-frameofreference-aqoci.pdf.

[13] See Inspiring Action for Global Citizenship at https://icn-rcc.ca/inspiring-action-for-global-citizenship/.

[14] See Spur Change at https://icn-rcc.ca/programs/spur-change/.

[15] Inspiring Action for Global Citizenship, op. cit.

[16] *Spur Change Impact Report: Highlights from Seven Years of Programming*, 2025, accessed at https://icn-rcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Spur-Change-Impact-2026.pdf

[17] See LIFTs Canada at https://www.icn-lift.ca/

A year later, in February 2026, Global Affairs announced a five-year, $36 million investment in the ICN 'Engage: Global Citizens, Global Impact' program.[18] This initiative builds on ICN Inspiring Action, Spur Change and FIT programs, with the stated aim of shifting how Canadians understand and act upon their roles as global citizens in support of Canada's international assistance priorities, gender equality and the SDGs. It will support collaboration and knowledge exchange through public engagement, global citizenship education, capacity strengthening and policy advocacy. The ICN has set a target of reaching over four million Canadians, with particular attention to underrepresented communities. Program activities include partnerships within and beyond the international cooperation sector, youth leadership pathways, digital storytelling, educator professional development and pan-Canadian coordination.

4. Conclusions

With close to seven in ten Canadians holding the view that aid's purpose includes a substantial focus on poverty, Canadian public opinion is not an obstacle to a Canadian aid program centred on poverty and inequalities. What is fragile, however, is the narrative infrastructure that is needed to sustain such a program. GAC spending on promoting public awareness is a minuscule share of Canadian ODA priorities, leaving public support for these purposes to erode in a context where the current Government is promoting narratives centred on Canada's economic and strategic interests. The organizations working to advance global citizenship education and public engagement, largely the Provincial and Regional Councils, but certainly not exclusively, operate with resources and a scale far below what is required to sustain deep and long-term programs reaching the diversity of communities across Canada.

The tension between a poverty-focused aid program and a realignment with Canadian trade and economic priorities is very real. Without a substantial expansion of well-resourced development awareness initiatives by Canadian CSOs in the coming years, the Canadian narrative space risks being occupied by elite narratives that frame aid as instrumental and interest-driven. These latter narratives will favour discrete, performative, high-profile announcements over a sustained strategy for advancing progressive internationalism and reducing poverty and inequality across the global south. Public engagement and global citizenship education are not peripheral initiatives in communications or support for CSO fundraising. They should be central components of Canadian CSO strategies for sustaining public support for, and the broader legitimacy of CSO engagement with counterpart communities across Canada and the global south.

[18] See Engage: Global Citizens, Global Impact at https://icn-rcc.ca/engage-global-citizens-global-impact/

Annex One

Recipients of Disbursements for Promotion of Public Awareness: Top Twenty Organizations

Three-Year Cumulative GAC Disbursements, 2022/23 to 2024/25 (Millions of Canadian Dollars)

Rank	Organization	Amount (millions)	Share of Total
1	Aga Khan Foundation Canada	$5.6	9.5%
2	UNDP - United Nations Development Programme	$4.6	7.8%
3	Alberta Council for Global Cooperation	$4.3	7.2%
4	Oxfam-Québec	$3.8	6.3%
5	Atlantic Council for International Cooperation	$3.4	5.8%
6	Manitoba Council for International Cooperation	$3.1	5.2%
7	Farm Radio International	$2.5	4.1%
8	Cuso International	$2.2	3.8%
9	CESO - Canadian Executive Service Organization	$2.2	3.7%
10	Ontario Council for International Cooperation	$2.2	3.7%
11	British Columbia Council for International Cooperation	$1.9	3.2%
12	Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation	$1.8	3.1%
13	SUCO – Solidarité Union Coopération	$1.7	2.9%
14	United Nations Organization	$1.7	2.9%
15	Canadian Crossroads International	$1.7	2.8%
16	Oxfam Canada	$1.7	2.8%
17	CECI - Centre for International Studies and Cooperation	$1.6	2.6%
18	Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale	$1.2	2.1%
19	Alinea International Ltd	$1.2	2.0%
20	Canadian Network for Maternal Newborn and Child Health	$1.2	2.0%
	Top 20 share of Total Public Awareness	**83.5%**	
	Provincial Councils Share of Total Public Awareness	**31.0%**	
	Cooperant Sending Organizations Share of Total Public Awareness	**26.2%**	