

Workshop on Social Development

Key Themes

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Permanently Altered Development Landscape

The workshop discussed the fundamental shifts underway in development; there will be no return to the ‘old way of doing things.’ Canada will need to rethink how we engage in a world that is fragile and unpredictable, and where some social development indicators (health, education) are stagnant or declining.

This new development landscape is being shaped by both negative and positive trends.

Negative trends include a narrow definition of national interests (and a failure to articulate common/shared interests with LICs) among HICs, reduced ODA spending in favour of defense spending, economic challenges (indebtedness) within LICs exacerbated by the threat of a global recession, heightened global fragility and conflict, record levels of displacement, growing levels of authoritarianism, and the unpredictable impacts of climate change.

Positive trends include growing innovation within LICs, global networks of research collaboration, and the willingness of leaders to use this moment of crisis as an opportunity to find efficiencies and transform the development architecture.

All actors, including Canada, need to understand and adapt to this new development landscape. A focus on ‘saving lives’ is not enough. Local – not global – priorities need to drive the agenda. The objective should be to build self-reliance through sustained and sustainable engagement. While health gets much of the attention and funding in the social development sector, we cannot forget the critical importance of education and building human capital – including within fragile and conflict affected settings.

The development landscape is also affected by the growing crisis of confidence in multilateral agencies. Canada has been a strong supporter of multilateral agencies – in part because it is in our self-interest. Multilateral agencies lower the barriers to global cooperation, and through effective engagement with these agencies, Canada can multiply our influence and impact. A significant share of our ODA flows through multilateral

agencies (e.g. 42% of Canada’s ODA to Africa is through multilateral agencies¹). It is in Canada’s interest to ensure that multilateral organisations regain the confidence of donors and recipient countries by focusing on their core tasks and delivering results.

Building on Strengths

Workshop participants emphasized that Canada has a long history as a **trusted convener** that supports and enables global cooperation. We are perceived as a country that **promotes equity and human rights**. We also work effectively across various forums - in partnership with civil society groups, with governments through bilateral engagement, and through multilateral action.

Canada has a history of concrete accomplishments related to social development. Canada helped facilitate the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), is a global leader on nutrition, and expanded access to maternal health services through the Muskoka Initiative and comprehensive reproductive health services through the FIAP.²

Our leadership in education includes a focus on teacher training as well as the Canadian led effort at the G7 to [expand access to girls education in conflict](#). Canada is also a global leader in development monitoring and evaluation – skills that will be important to utilize in a resource constrained environment.

Learning from Weaknesses

Canada’s engagement globally currently has the reputation of focusing more on rhetoric than results.

Beyond our commitment to the health and education of women and girls, we do not sustain our commitments in other areas. This lack of sustained engagement impacts on relationships and reputations.

Our rhetorical interventions are perceived as too ‘preachy.’ Canada has domestic inequities in health and education, and our rhetoric can sometimes be hypocritical. Given we do not have our own house in order, our global engagement should be framed as an opportunity for shared learning.

¹ Government of Canada, “Statistical Report on Official Development Assistance 2022-23” Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 2024.

² The history of Canadian leadership role in global health was summarised in a recent Royal Society of Canada [Report](#).

Our hyper-focus on development outcomes for women and girls sometimes distracts us from the evidence base for broader development challenges. For example, while Canada rightly works hard to keep girls in school so they can avoid early marriage, we do not place the same importance on keeping boys in school to stop them from joining gangs or insurgencies.

Our development assistance program would benefit from a more fulsome embrace of debate and criticism to safeguard the challenge function. Organisations with a 'red team' – individuals that question assumptions, think outside the box, and challenge policies to find their weakness – emerge with stronger policies.

Balance Among Values, Pragmatism and Action

While all participants acknowledged the importance of Canada advancing global norms in the areas of health and education, we debated the appropriate balance between values and action.

Some participants argued that Canada does not currently have the correct balance – we show too much rhetorical leadership and not enough action.

Other participants argued that we cannot avoid norms - without a strong reference to advancing equity, our interventions risk perpetuating those inequities.

Canadian Leadership and Influence

Workshop participants discussed ***the need for realism and pragmatism***. Canadian ODA for global health and education will not increase. USAID cuts will not be reversed. Multilateral institutions will not receive resources to compensate for the US ODA cuts. Canada needs to be realistic about the world and our place in it.

Canada is currently not viewed as a global leader in development. Instead of striving to be a 'leader', we should strive for influence.

Participants discussed the need to have stronger coherence in our development agenda – pairing the articulation of values with concrete action and outcomes. But they also emphasized the need for coherence between our domestic and foreign policy. Canada could achieve this coherence by prioritizing the development outcomes of indigenous populations in global health.

Canada could better utilise ***technical expertise and action*** within its development programming. Workshop participants discussed how other HICs placed a higher value on

technical expertise in their development programs, investing in that expertise, integrating experts in their delegations in global forums, and supporting research networks. Workshop participants also reflected on the importance of skilled and experienced diplomats at the negotiating table.

Canada should work to **support coalitions** to ensure a multiplying effect for Canadian development aid and technical expertise. Canada should seek out different global and regional forums as part of that coalition building.

We also discussed the importance of **focused engagement**. Canada has limited resources, and we should not scatter our efforts across sectors and countries. We discussed the importance of sustained bilateral investments building relationships.

Canada can also exercise influence in multiple forums – including at International Financial Institutions (IFIs) whose role may grow in importance given the withdrawal of US ODA and the debt crisis.

Within recipient countries and regions, Canadian development assistance must better understand how to **harness the power of innovation** in recipient countries.

We also discussed the importance of **communication** – sharing with the public Canadian development assistance success stories.

Opportunities for Canada: New Models of Engagement

Canada needs new approaches or models for Canada’s global engagement in health and education.

Given the importance of national ownership and social development tailored to the context, Canada could **foster and fund innovation** to address locally identified ‘grand challenges.’ Such an approach would build on Canadian expertise, mobilize private capital in countries, ensure country ownership, and focus on results. Such engagement could help national governments scale the private sector and support innovation. The workshop did not discuss specific models for such innovation.³

³ In partnership with other like-minded donors, Canada could establish national or regional innovation hubs. These hubs would bring together key actors – researchers, government, implementation agencies, civil society and the private sector - to identify local ‘grand challenges.’ Funds could be dispersed within the country or region to ensure responsive programming. The hubs could also fund both technical and social innovations to address barriers to social development.

Any innovation or efforts to mobilize private capital must be realistic about the development ‘ecosystem.’ Participants discussed the importance of this ecosystem approach - i.e. identifying and addressing structural factors that impede private capital mobilization in the global south (security, governance, etc.)

Canada can build on its evaluation expertise to ensure a clear **results orientation** within development assistance models. Such an orientation supports transparency, shared learning, cost-effectiveness, and accountability. Yet measuring results in some social development sectors that focus on building human capital can be challenging. Human capital is not always easily measured with conventional indicators. In such instances, Canada could support the development of specific human capital indicators; the measure ‘learning poverty’ in education was referenced as an indicator innovation that filled a gap in educational attainment measurements.

Canada could also champion this results orientation in our engagement with IFIs and multilateral development agencies. Funding for multilateral agencies will not increase and Canada should press multilaterals to find gains through efficiencies and a focus on results.

We also discussed the importance of a model of **mutual learning** that shows the benefit to Canada of engagement with LIC and LMICs. Canada can improve our health and education systems through lessons learned from other countries. Such an approach would foster a spirit of partnership and ensure greater humility in Canada’s development engagement.

Research networks and **technical expertise** are underutilized tools in Canada’s development policy. Canada’s research networks in global health and education remain fragmented and lack sustained support. We also discussed the role of deployment of technical expertise to support health and education programs, and distance learning to support training for national actors to develop specific skills.

Workshop participants also emphasized the importance of **communicating success** – both as evidence of what works, and to build public support for development. This requires Canada to do a better job of documenting success. Case studies are important to develop the evidence base and communicate the importance of development aid.