

# A Practical Guide to **Effective In-Person Public Engagement Events**



**CanWaCH**

Canadian Partnership for  
Women and Children's Health



## BACKGROUND

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The [Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health](#) (CanWaCH) is a membership of over 100 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), academic institutions, health professional associations and private companies committed to advancing the health and rights of women, children and adolescents globally.

CanWaCH and its members take great care to engage public audiences on the importance of international development work, and to highlight organizational and sectoral impacts. Those efforts include hosting events, both in-person and online, to connect with the Canadian public. Through years of our own experiences, and those of our members, we have compiled insights and best practices around engaging with the public in-person. That includes the ways in which the events landscape has changed in a post-COVID-19 lockdown world.

Throughout 2024, CanWaCH supported a variety of in-person public engagement events hosted by member organizations. The learnings gleaned from those events, as well as our own, have informed the development of this guidance note.

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**CanWaCH**  
Canadian Partnership for  
Women and Children's Health



In partnership with

**Canada**

## PURPOSE

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Organizing an in-person event with a public audience is challenging. We've created this guide to help.

There's a special energy that comes from people gathering face-to-face to talk, learn, debate or dive into an issue. Meeting in person builds trust and relationships, and strengthens connections and networks. It enables deep discussions, nuance and understanding.

In the context of global health and international development, in-person public engagement initiatives are about more than putting people in a room. It's your opportunity to connect the Canadian public, perhaps for the first time, with the issues and ideas they see in passing on the news or other media. It's a forum not only to educate, but to truly engage the public in Canadian-driven efforts to build a healthier world for everyone.

In this guidance note, you'll find best practices, tips and tools to plan, organize and deliver an in-person public engagement event with success.

# WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

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This guide was created for:

- CanWaCH member organizations
- Professionals working in global health and international development
- Public engagement specialists responsible for reporting to funders, including Global Affairs Canada

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# PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In the context of Canada's work in international assistance, Global Affairs Canada's (GAC's) framework on public engagement indicates that activities and initiatives must show:

- The connections between major global challenges and local issues;
- The impact of global challenges on Canadians;
- The ways in which Canada's international assistance efforts directly contribute to alleviating these global challenges.

## IN-PERSON OR ONLINE? HOW TO DECIDE

In-person events take more time and resources to organize than online ones. When is it worth it to hold an in-person event? Here are a few considerations.

### IN-PERSON EVENTS MIGHT BE BETTER WHEN:

- Face-to-face networking, relationship or community building are part of the event, either formally (in the agenda) or informally (with space for side conversations).
- There is a budget for venue, catering, speaker costs and other in-person expenses.
- Another event can be leveraged, in terms of the venue, speaker or audience. For example, scheduling an expert panel at an annual conference.
- The event has a hands-on element, with interactive workshops or a meet-and-greet with special guests.
- The ambiance is important, for events with live performances or immersive experiences.
- There is a local or community-focused aspect to the event.

### ONLINE EVENTS MIGHT BE BETTER WHEN:

- There are budget or time constraints.
- The content can be effectively delivered online.
- You want to reach as broad an audience as possible, including many international participants.
- You want an easy way to record and share content afterwards.

# FIVE ESSENTIALS TO SUCCESSFUL IN-PERSON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

**Great ideas and enthusiasm** often drive decisions to hold in-person events. Equally essential are **solid planning and organization**. For your event to succeed, five essential elements require equal attention and consensus within your organization. Asking the following questions can help align you and your team.

**1. PURPOSE** - *Why are you engaging with the public? Is it in line with the goals of your organization? What outcomes do you want to see?*

**2. CONTENT** - *What topics or issues will be covered? What is the proposed format? How can you enhance engagement in person?*

**3. AUDIENCE** - *Who is the event for? What do you want the audience to experience? What audience size are you aiming for?*

**4. TIMING** - *Is there enough time to organize and deliver a high quality event? Will the event time ensure maximum attendance?*

**5. RESOURCES** - *Who is available to help plan and organize the event? What is the event budget? What other resources are available?*

With clear answers in these five key areas, you'll be in great shape to drill down into the details of planning.

## A NOTE ON TIMING

How long does it take to plan an in-person event? While it really depends on the specifics of the event, you can count on the fact that planning often takes longer than expected. There are likely to be a few bumps along the way.

Having **at least four months** to plan is ideal. The two most important tasks to prioritize are securing a **venue** and deciding the **"headline" activity(ies)**, which could be a keynote speaker, a book launch, interactive booths, a debate, or even a team-based competition. The longer you wait to lock these two items down, the more stressful the planning can get. Set aside **even more time** if your event has complicated elements, such as:

**INTERNATIONAL SPEAKERS OR GUESTS:** If you're bringing in speakers from overseas, account for the time it takes to [secure a Canadian visa](#). Also note that flights are often less expensive the earlier they are booked.

**VENUE:** If you're seeking a specific type of venue, you might need to book 6-12 months in advance. For example, concert halls or venues with specialized audio/visual capabilities might not be available within four months. Post-secondary institutions and non-profit organizations may have spaces to rent at a reasonable cost, but these spaces are often in high-demand as a result.

# KICKING OFF THE PLANNING

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You're clear on the event's purpose. You know who the audience is, and the issues to engage them with. You've got enough time and resources to make it happen. *Now what?*

## ASSIGN A DESIGNATED EVENT MANAGER AND PLANNING TEAM

You don't need to be a full-time event planner to host a great event, but having a clear lead and a strong team is essential. Assign a designated event manager to keep planning on track, delegate tasks and update the team. Gather a core group to help organize and deliver the event — experience is a bonus, but enthusiasm and reliability matter most. Schedule regular check-ins and use the event checklist below to keep everyone aligned on progress and next steps.

## EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS WITH ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

Strategic partnerships can amplify your event's impact, expand your reach and strengthen your program. Identify potential partners within your network and discuss how best to approach them. Consider whether sponsorship opportunities might also be a good fit at this stage.

A well-matched partner brings mutual benefits. For example, if your event highlights a specific issue or global region, a partner with that expertise can enrich the program with valuable insights. If you're hosting an event in another city, a local partner's community knowledge can help with logistics and audience engagement.

Beyond strengthening your content, partners can also provide practical support by:

- Joining the event planning team
- Offering resources, such as public engagement materials, venue access, or social media and design expertise
- Recommending vendors, such as caterers or printers
- Promoting the event through their communications channels

In the long term, partnerships may lead to future collaborations and strengthen networks for all.

## DRILL DOWN TO UNDERSTAND YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Learn as much as you can about your audience. This knowledge should guide all aspects of planning, and it will ensure success. Why would people want to attend your event in-person? What do they know about the issue? What's the best way to reach them? What can you do to maximize their attendance?

In short, your audience will influence:

- Specific objectives and event activities (see section on objectives, below)
- Date and time
- Venue location and size
- Event promotion activities

Your audience may include people who know very little about the topic of your event. Plan with this in mind. Experience shows it's best to meet people where they are, so you don't lose them. Assume your event is planting the first seeds in raising awareness of your organization's mission, and the work of the broader sector.

If you have a 'built-in' local public network of people interested in and aware of your work (volunteers, for example), remember that they are unlikely to travel. You may want to consider keeping your event local to tap into local interest you've built over time. If you decide to branch out and host an event in a region where your organization is less known, extra planning may be required to drive interest.

## ENGAGING WITH YOUTH

The best way to create a public engagement event that truly connects with young people is to involve them from the start. Invite youth onto your event team — not just as participants but as decision-makers with a real voice. Listen to their ideas and act on them. They know how to engage their peers, whether through social media, relevant themes or creative approaches.

For example, if you're organizing an event for university students, consider linking it to career development — such as offering an online certificate they can add to their LinkedIn profiles. Youth advisors can help shape programming that resonates, making your event more relevant and impactful.

If your organization is already youth-led or has strong youth involvement, this process will come naturally. If not, actively seek young voices by reaching out through your organization, partners and networks.

Finally, remember that "youth" are not a monolith. They represent diverse ages, backgrounds, experiences and priorities — including high school students, post-secondary students and young professionals. Ensuring a mix of perspectives will make your event more inclusive and engaging.

## SET SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

Clear objectives ensure your event stays focused, impactful and measurable. Objectives outline the key activities or approaches that will drive your event's success while also providing a framework for evaluation and reporting.

A useful way to set objectives is by applying the **SMART** framework: they should be **specific, measurable, achievable, relevant** and **time-bound**. This ensures your objectives are clear, realistic and aligned with your event goals.

## ENGAGING WITH YOUTH

For example, here are two SMART objectives in action:

**EXAMPLE 1:** *Host a documentary screening on [chosen date] to raise awareness among 500 attendees about the health impacts of climate change.*

- **Specific:** Clearly defines the goal (raise awareness), method (film screening), focus (climate and health), target audience (500 attendees) and timeline.
- **Measurable:** Success can be tracked through attendance numbers and a post-event survey to assess awareness.
- **Achievable:** If you've followed the five essentials above, this goal should be achievable!
- **Relevant:** Aligns with broader objectives related to climate and health.
- **Time-bound:** Tied to a specific event date.

**EXAMPLE 2:** *Host three group challenge competitions at three universities during the fall term, engaging 150 university students to build their knowledge and skills on the social determinants of health (SDH).*

- **Specific:** Clearly outlines the goal (build knowledge and skills), method (group challenge competitions), focus (SDH), target audience (150 students) and timing (fall term).
- **Measurable:** Success can be tracked through attendance numbers and a post-event survey to assess knowledge and skills gained.
- **Achievable:** Following the five essentials for event success makes this goal realistic and attainable.
- **Relevant:** The topic (SDH) and audience (students) align with your organization's goals.
- **Time-bound:** Completion of all three events within the fall term ensures a clear deadline.

## DESIGNING THE IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE

In-person events offer a unique opportunity to create lasting, impactful experiences. From the moment guests arrive, the event experience begins. Consider the audience's journey from start to finish, focusing on every detail that contributes to a memorable atmosphere. Use the prompts below to guide your planning, and encourage creativity and collaboration within your event team.



Think beyond the main activity. How can you amplify the live, in-person experience and keep the audience engaged? Consider these ideas:

- **Set the right tone from the moment guests arrive:** Create an inviting atmosphere that draws people in and gets them excited for the event.
- **Engage the audience immediately:** Connect them to the issues from the start and keep them invested throughout.
- **Use visuals to capture attention:** Incorporate posters, infographics or displays with intriguing facts or striking imagery to spark curiosity.
- **Incorporate cultural elements:** If your event focuses on a specific community or region, include music, food or art to enrich the experience.
- **Try innovative, immersive approaches:** Experiment with new formats like interactive installations or multimedia elements to deepen engagement.

One way to spark your creativity is by looking at Global Affairs Canada's four action areas for public engagement and consider how they relate to your audience. Try to plan activities that cover more than one area.

**1. INFORM:** Raising awareness, by creating and sharing information to expand your audiences and reach new ones.

**2. ENABLE:** Building capacity so that audiences are better positioned to contribute to international assistance. You may be increasing engagement with established audiences, but also reaching new and diverse audiences. Activities could include training, workshops and skill building.

**3. MOBILIZE:** Encouraging active participation in experiences that contribute to concrete actions in international assistance and development. These activities deepen engagement, such as volunteering or signing up for a course, while mobilizing new knowledge and skills.

**4. CONVERGE:** Activities that include collaborative or multi-stakeholder initiatives to build trust and progress towards common goals by creating spaces and encouraging diverse connections.

Let's apply these action areas to an example from the last section. Consider objective 1 - **Raise awareness among 500 members of the public on how climate impacts health through a documentary film screening on a chosen date.**

» *This objective falls under **INFORM**. What else can you do to heighten audience interest and make the event more engaging? Some ideas:*

- Bring in the director to speak about the film followed by an audience Q+A
- Set up a booth with video clips, stats and takeaway info on climate change and health

» *Are there activities in other action areas you can consider? Some ideas:*

- Set up a table for people to sign up for volunteer opportunities (**MOBILIZE**)
- Organize a learning cafe with info and quizzes on climate and health (**ENABLE**)

## THE VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

[CanWaCH polling](#) has found that many Canadians are not well informed about topics related to global health, Official Development Assistance, or development work more broadly. Your event provides a key opportunity to raise awareness not only about the specific programs and initiatives within your organization but also about the broader impact of international assistance. In addition to showcasing individual efforts, the event can:

- Highlight the mutual benefits of international partnerships
- Foster a deeper understanding of global health challenges and solutions
- Strengthen the connection between Canadians and the global communities we work with

### A FEW TIPS ON HOW TO ENGAGE:

- **Connect with people in a way that relates to their interests and reality.** For example, during a series of public engagement installations at the WickFest hockey tournament, CanWaCH's booth had posters with surprising facts on women's health and research in Canada. As people walked by, these facts drew attention and created a starting point for conversation on women and children's health globally.
- **Talk about projects that made a difference.** Bring the impact of international assistance to life with stories that relate to your audience.
- **Explain the value of international assistance.** You may get the question, "Shouldn't we be spending our money in Canada, to help Canadians?". For those working within the sector, the rationale behind Canada providing international assistance comes naturally, but remember your audience may be hearing this information for the first time. Consider which core benefits will most resonate with your target audience and use specific examples from your organization or partners to support your points.

## YOUR EVENT'S IMPACT

Your objectives provide a clear idea of the results you want. How will you know that you've achieved these results? How will you show how the event met its goals to your organization and to funders?

Having a successful event isn't exactly the same as achieving objectives. You might get a 5/5 rating because your event was well-organized and the food was great. But to show you've met your objectives, you need data. The good news is that you start collecting data as soon as the event is promoted online and people start registering.

During the planning phase, look at your objectives and any reporting requirements. Use these to develop a plan to measure event outcomes. The chart below includes a list of possible indicators to track and report. Choose the ones that are relevant or useful for your plan.

WHAT TO MEASURE OR OBSERVE	HOW TO GET THIS DATA
<b>ATTENDANCE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total number of attendees vs. target number<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Demographic representation<sup>123</sup> (for example, if you've targeted a specific number of youth)</li> <li>• Registration number versus attendance rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Registration forms</li> <li>• On-site check-in</li> </ul>
<b>ENGAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poll response rates</li> <li>• Social media engagement (hashtag use, mentions, shares)</li> <li>• Number of questions asked by audience</li> <li>• Participation in activities - visiting booths, etc.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live polling</li> <li>• Social media monitoring</li> <li>• Observation</li> </ul>
<b>AUDIENCE FEEDBACK</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event satisfaction ratings</li> <li>• Perceived value of information presented</li> <li>• Likelihood to attend future events</li> <li>• Understanding of key messages<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience survey</li> </ul>
<b>AUDIENCE OUTCOMES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in awareness or understanding<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Changes in skill or knowledge<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Plan to take action</li> <li>• New connections formed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience survey</li> <li>• Live polling</li> </ul>
<b>AUDIENCE ACTIONS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletter sign-ups<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Volunteer registrations<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Future event registrations</li> <li>• Resource downloads/requests<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online tracking (sign-ups, registrations, downloads)</li> </ul>
<b>POST-EVENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media coverage quality and tone</li> <li>• Social media engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media monitoring</li> <li>• Social media monitoring</li> </ul>

<sup>123</sup>These items are particularly important for organizations implementing public engagement events funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC). GAC expects partners to report on three core performance indicators, including some demographic information. See [Global Affairs Canada's Integrated Public Engagement Results Framework](#) for more information.

<sup>1</sup>**Increased awareness.** How many people attended your event? Did they report increased awareness on an issue?

<sup>2</sup>**Improved knowledge and skills to act.** How many participated in activities to improve their knowledge and skills? Did they report improved knowledge or skills?

<sup>3</sup>**Increased access to opportunities.** How many participated or signed up in terms of volunteering or taking action?

## SURVEY TIPS

Here are some key tips for creating an effective audience survey:

- **Align questions with objectives:** Ensure each question helps measure the success of your event and ties directly to your goals.
- **Keep it concise:** Aim for brevity to encourage participation. Focus on the most important questions.
- **Test your survey:** Review questions for clarity and ensure they are easy to understand.
- **Use both quantitative and qualitative questions:** For example, use a scale (e.g., “On a scale of 1–5, how likely are you to attend future events?”) to gather measurable data, followed by an open-ended question (e.g., “Please explain why”) to gain deeper insights into participants’ views.
- **Promote the survey during the event:** Announce it at key moments to encourage more responses.
- **Make it accessible:** Use QR codes for digital surveys or provide paper surveys with pens to ensure everyone can participate.
- **Ensure anonymity:** Assure respondents that their answers are confidential, or make it optional to provide personal information if necessary.

## IN-PERSON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EVENT CHECKLIST

✓	4-6 MONTHS BEFORE EVENT	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	Five key event elements confirmed with team <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Purpose</li> <li>2. Content</li> <li>3. Audience</li> <li>4. Timing</li> <li>5. Resources</li> </ol>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Event date finalized			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Partnerships established			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Event team recruited			

<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Venue contracted</p> <p><i>Confirm the venue is accessible and the location is convenient for public transit and parking</i></p>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Costs estimated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>venue rental</li> <li>food and beverages</li> <li>equipment</li> <li>travel</li> <li>event materials</li> <li>photographer</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Headline activity confirmed			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Promotional plan developed</p> <p>Event copy/design created</p>			

✓	2-3 MONTHS BEFORE EVENT	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Program finalized</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Headline activity(ies)</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Online registration set-up			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Venue arrangements finalized</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A/V (sound, lights, projectors, etc.)</li> <li>On-site registration</li> <li>Signage location</li> <li>Seating</li> <li>Other (food tables, booths)</li> <li>Name badges for guests</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Promotional plan implemented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>E-invites, posters</li> <li>Event page online</li> <li>Social media posts</li> <li>Promo blog/video</li> <li>Submission to online event calendars</li> <li>Media list and outreach</li> </ul>			

✓	3-6 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	Social media promotion increased			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Caterer confirmed			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Logistics with speaker(s)/facilitators confirmed  <i>Ask speakers to promote the event through their networks as well!</i>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Evaluation plan finalized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live polls</li> <li>• Audience survey</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Event materials finalized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'SWAG'</li> <li>• Knowledge products/takeaways</li> <li>• Signage/banners</li> <li>• Programs</li> <li>• Name tag template</li> <li>• Presentation template</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>			

✓	1-2 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	E-invite reminder sent to registered attendees			
<input type="checkbox"/>	On-site team confirmed and briefed on duties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check-in/greeters</li> <li>• Caterer liaison</li> <li>• A/V manager</li> <li>• Writer/blogger/social media rep</li> <li>• Photographer/videographer</li> </ul> <i>Create a team text chat or WhatsApp group for the event day!</i>			

<input type="checkbox"/>	Opening/closing script written			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Speakers/facilitators briefed on details			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Catering numbers finalized			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Name badges created			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Photo ops planned			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Registration closed			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Event day schedule created			

✓	EVENT DAY	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep calm and enjoy your event! Follow the event schedule Be ready to troubleshoot Remove all event materials when you leave			

✓	POST-EVENT ACTIVITIES	INTERNAL LEAD	DUE DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>	Evaluation completed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team debrief: lessons learned</li> <li>• Survey results compiled</li> <li>• Event report produced</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Post-event promotion completed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videos</li> <li>• Blogs/articles</li> <li>• Email to attendees with links / follow-up actions</li> </ul>			

<input type="checkbox"/>	Thank you notes sent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speakers, facilitators, event team</li> </ul>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Final payments made <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receipts, invoices reconciled with budget</li> </ul>			

[\[Click to download a copy of this checklist\]](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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### Global Affairs Canada's Integrated Public Engagement Results Framework

- [Global Affairs Canada's Integrated Public Engagement Results Framework](#)

### CanWaCH at WickFest: A Case Study

- [Scoring Big in Public Engagement: Lessons from the CanWaCH-WickFest Partnership](#)

### Online wiki on public engagement

- [Virtual Engagement Resource Centre for All - wiki](#)

### Ways for Canadians to get involved in international development

- [Getting involved in international development](#)

### Canada's role in international assistance

- [Canada's efforts to address global issues](#)

### Youth engagement resources

- [Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement](#)