

MESSAGING GUIDE

Talking for Impact

A public engagement messaging guide for
Canada's global health and development sector



CanWaCH

Canadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health

CONTENTS

About this guide	3
What the research tells us	4
Our core story	10
Story pillars	11
Primary messages	12
Language guide	15



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Canada's global health and development sector is doing important work around the world, and how we talk about it matters.



Together, we are louder, and we are stronger.

To better understand how Canadians currently think and feel about international development, global health and gender equality, the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH) commissioned qualitative research into public attitudes and perceptions. Together with members of CanWaCH's Public Opinion Research Working Group (PORWG)* and our polling partner Abacus Data, we developed a robust set of open-ended questions and interactive activities to dig deeper into the minds of Canadians than ever before. The findings gave us an honest and insightful picture of where understanding is strong and where misconceptions persist.

**The CanWaCH Public Opinion Research Working Group (PORWG) is an ad-hoc working group made up of member representatives whose work involves public or stakeholder engagement. The 2025/2026 iteration of this working group included representatives from Amref, Aga Khan Foundation Canada, Canadian Association of Midwives, Partners in Health Canada, Oxfam Canada and Results Canada. Together, the PORWG worked with our polling partner Abacus Data to develop the questions and activities that formed the basis of this research.*

This guide translates what we learned into practical language that organizations can use across a range of different channels, whether speaking at events, engaging with media, posting on social media, meeting with decision-makers, or having everyday conversations about their own work.

This guide is neither a rulebook nor a script. We appreciate that each organization has its own mandate, expertise, relationships and unique voice. Our goal is to offer a research-

based framework for communicating about our work, supported by a shared language that helps us speak more clearly, consistently and confidently about our collective impact.

When we speak together, with clarity and a shared language, we amplify every voice in this sector. Together, we are more visible, more influential, and better positioned to build public understanding and support. Together, we are louder, and we are stronger.



WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

The research, conducted by Abacus Data in April 2026, provides a picture of Canadians' understanding of international development and global health.

It suggests that the conditions for a stronger public conversation about our work already exist. We have an opportunity to help Canadians better understand the impact of this work and Canada's role in supporting it.





WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

Canadians want to help.

“Helping other countries develop by contributing to education, infrastructure, food, healthcare, etc.”

“We are a ‘have’ country and it is the right thing to do to help others in need.”

“as humans, we owe it to ourselves to help the less fortunate.”

Across all audience segments, the most common response to supporting international development is “somewhat supportive” rather than strongly committed. Most people believe helping others is the right thing to do, but that belief sits alongside real concerns about whether Canada can afford it, whether the money actually reaches people in need, and whether the sector is being straight with the public about results.





WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

Canada is already perceived as a nation that helps.

“If someone is sick in one part of the world it can end up affecting people everywhere, like with COVID”

“I think this is a crucial part of our identity as Canadians”

“a leader of change and kindness”

The public often views Canada’s international identity as that of a fair and principled helper or peacekeeper that leads by example. This perception is a major source of pride. The concept of aiding others aligns with fundamental Canadian values such as compassion, generosity and fairness.





WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

The tension between global responsibility and domestic priorities is real.

“lots of Canadians need help too”

*“we also need to keep our own country
strong as it faces new problems”*

*“I think overall it’s an amazing thing
to do, but does Canada have enough
resources to go around to help
everyone, but neglect their citizens?”*

Canadians weigh international development against concerns about health care, housing and the rising cost of living at home. Acknowledging this and helping people understand that investing in global health protects Canadians opens up the conversation. Canadians who feel heard about domestic concerns are more open to conversations about global ones.





WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

Trust matters more than any message.

“To hear about actual results in numbers and concrete impacts.”

“I always wonder why there is this constant call for funding”

“I would want an organization that is thoroughly vetted”

Trust is the single most important condition for support. Trust, in this case, is not about brand recognition, it's about transparency. Canadians want proof — real examples, research and numbers — that funding is used effectively and reaches real people. Organizations that lead with transparency earn lasting support.





WHAT THE RESEARCH
TELLS US

Language matters.

*“I DON’T KNOW IT’S TOO TECHNICAL
OF A TERM FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND”*

In international development, the way we speak shapes how the public perceives and supports global efforts. Research indicates that while some terms resonate well with Canadians, others are overly technical or vague, leading to confusion for non-experts. To build lasting support, we must bridge this gap with accessible, clear language.



Every organization in this sector is contributing to a different piece of a larger story.

OUR CORE STORY

Canada is a country that helps, and it always has been. Canadian organizations are working to make sure that women survive childbirth, that children get the vaccines they need, that communities have access to health care and the tools they need to shape their own futures. This work is being done by Canadian actors at every level — including the 110+ CanWaCH member organizations committed to advancing the health and rights of women and children globally and united in the belief that where you're born shouldn't determine whether you live or thrive.

The work we do is tied to very real and concrete outcomes: a child reaching her fifth birthday; a teenager getting the education she deserves; a new team of trained health workers supporting their community.

The investment is modest, but the returns are real: measurable health outcomes, stronger international relationships, and a world that is less vulnerable to the kinds of health crises that, as COVID-19 reminded us, don't stop at borders.

More Canadians should know and understand this story, and the most powerful way to make sure they do is for all of us to tell it — in our own voices, on our own channels, with the specifics of our own work — while drawing on a shared language and framework.



STORY PILLARS

All messaging should connect in some way to one or more of these three pillars.

They reflect what Canadians actually care about based on the Abacus research.

It works, and here's the proof.

Transparency and evidence are the foundation of trust. Every claim about impact should be specific and verifiable. Numbers matter, and human reality does too. Using them both together is powerful.

Consider this “anchor message” as inspiration as you talk about your work:

Canadian organizations are saving lives and building healthier, more sustainable communities around the world, and Canadians should know about it.

It reflects who Canadians are.

Canadians see themselves as helpers and peacekeepers, as a country that believes in fairness and human dignity. Most Canadians, even skeptics, feel some pride in Canada's role as a country that helps others. This is a genuine asset.

It benefits Canada too.

Disease prevention, global stability, international partnerships, a safer world for everyone — these are not abstract concepts; they're things Canadians care about. The research shows that even people who are skeptical of international spending become more supportive when they understand how Canada's investment protects Canadian health, security and global reputation.



PRIMARY
MESSAGES

These are core messages that organizations can use as the foundation for public communications.

They are designed to be adapted. The language and proof points below are a starting point for communicating to a general audience.



1 The work is real and it saves lives.

Every year, Canadian organizations working in global health deliver vaccines that prevent epidemics, provide medical care during crises, support mothers and newborns through healthy pregnancies and births, and help communities build the health systems they need to thrive. This is effective, evidence-based work that produces measurable results.

Proof points to adapt:

- Describe a specific outcome to which your organization contributed.
- Use real data, stories and numbers that prove impact. (e.g., lives saved, services delivered, communities served.)
- Connect outcomes to Canadian expertise: Canadian health professionals, researchers, partner organizations who are part of this work.

2 Canadians are at the heart of this work.

Canada's global health and development sector is united in the belief that every person, wherever they live, deserves access to health care and the chance to live a healthy life. They bring Canadian values, Canadian expertise and a genuine commitment to results. Canada has a long tradition of stepping up when and where it can make a real difference. This work is a natural extension of that tradition.

Proof points to adapt:

- Name your organization's specific identity, expertise, history.
- Reference your organization's Canadian staff, partners, tools, or funding base
- Connect to national pride in Canada's role as a country that helps; be specific about what that looks like.

3 Helping others helps us as well.

Investing in global health helps keep Canada safe and prepared. Health crises do not stop at borders. As COVID-19 made clear, a crisis in one region can escalate and become a global threat. When Canadian organizations help build strong health systems in lower-income countries, prevent the spread of infectious disease and respond to health emergencies quickly, they are protecting Canadians too.

Foreign aid is not simply charity, it is a preemptive measure against disease, conflict and instability before they become global problems. It strengthens international security, supports economic stability and builds international relationships. And, it saves lives at a relatively low cost compared to responding to crises after they escalate.

Proof points to adapt:

- Reference COVID-19 as a shared experience. It illustrates that a health crisis anywhere can become a health crisis everywhere.
- Connect to participation in international partnerships.
- Describe specific work your organization does and its global impact.



4 We are transparent about how resources are used.

We know that Canadians want proof, not promises. We are committed to transparency about where funding goes, how it is spent and what results it produces. [Include how you convey accountability e.g. annual reports, independent audits, community reporting etc.]. And we hold ourselves accountable to the same standards we ask of anyone entrusted with public resources.

Proof points to adapt:

- Describe your organization’s specific accountability and reporting practices.
- Reference any third-party oversight, accreditation or independent audits.
- Share concrete evidence: a recent report, a specific program result, an assessment by a community partner.

5 This work balances global needs with Canadian values.

Canadians want their country to be generous, but also responsible, and we share that view. Canadian investment in global health is modest, carefully targeted and designed for lasting impact. One of the central tenets of our work is to help communities build their own capacity.

Proof points to adapt:

- Describe how your programming builds local capacity and self-sufficiency.
- Speak to the affordability and proportionality of Canada’s investment in global health.

Across all groups, participants consistently point to similar ways the message could be improved:

- **Shift the focus from image to impact:**
Emphasize helping people rather than boosting Canada’s influence
- **Provide evidence and specifics:**
Include data, examples, impact stories and measurable outcomes
“real examples, research, proof and numbers”
- **Acknowledge domestic trade-offs:**
Show how Canada can balance global leadership with internal needs
- **Clarify limits and affordability:**
Reassure that increased spending is realistic and sustainable
- **Highlight tangible benefits:**
Both for vulnerable populations and, in some cases, for Canadians



The Abacus research tested the terms our sector uses most often.

Some land well with general audiences, but others create confusion, even before a conversation has had a chance to begin. Using plain language in our communications isn't a compromise, it's a strategic choice. Our goal is to clearly communicate what we do in words that open doors, not close them.

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT WORK

Use these freely with general audiences:

- **Global health:** Well understood, high values alignment, connects easily to shared experiences like COVID-19. This term is a reliable entry point into a conversation.
- **Climate resilience:** Understanding is relatively strong, it has high relatability, and most participants said the term aligns with their values.
- **Gender equality:** Broadly understood and supported. Use this rather than more technical alternatives in public-facing communications.
- **Humanitarian aid:** Clear, concrete, emotionally resonant. People associate it with food, water, shelter and medical care.

A NOTE ABOUT “HUMANITARIAN AID”

The term “humanitarian aid” resonates strongly with general audiences, however, most people associate it with emergency response. This is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. Organizations across Canada’s global health and development sector are working hard to stabilize and strengthen communities before emergencies occur. Investment in women and girls, who are often the hardest hit during a crisis — and whose empowerment is one of the most reliable predictors of community resilience — is a critical piece of the puzzle. This is strategic, forward-looking

work, and it deserves the clearest possible explanation. When describing long-term development work to a general audience, pair the “humanitarian” framing with language that conveys durability and longevity. For example “... so that communities are in a better position to withstand the next crisis, not just survive this one” or “... building capacity to meet future challenges.”

Canada is doing more than “just” crisis response, it’s helping build stronger, healthier, more resilient communities before crises occur.



LANGUAGE TO TRANSLATE FOR PUBLIC AUDIENCES

The concepts listed below are important, but the more technical sector language around them creates confusion and distance with general audiences. Use the plain language version when speaking publicly and reserve the more technical terms of sector, funder or policy contexts.

Instead of the sector term...

... use a plain-language alternative

International development assistance

“Global health support”
“Canadian organizations working abroad”
“Investments in health and well-being worldwide”

Gender-transformative approaches

“Tackling the root causes of inequality”
“Changing the conditions that hold women back”

Sustainable development

“Creating the conditions that support lasting change”
“Helping communities become self-sufficient”

Localization

“Community-led solutions”
“Communities leading their own change”



These are some questions staff, volunteers and spokes-people are likely to encounter.

The responses below are not scripts, they are approaches grounded in what the research tells us. The goal here is to give communicators solid reasoning to use when answering these questions in their own words.

“Why should Canada spend money abroad when we have problems here at home?”

Approach: First, acknowledge the concern directly, then offer an answer that makes it clear we can do both and that helping others helps us as well. Canadians who feel their domestic concerns are taken seriously are more open to conversations about global issues.

What to say:

- That question makes total sense, and it’s one that Canadians are right to ask. The needs at home are real and urgent.
- The way we see it [at organization name], Canada can and should invest in its own people. Being a country that also helps others doesn’t mean we are ignoring challenges at home, it’s a sign of our values. It’s who we are.
- Investing in global health is not just how Canada shows up on the world stage, it’s part of how Canada protects itself. Diseases don’t understand geographical borders, as COVID-19 made clear.
- Global issues, such as disease, impact us at home too. When we help others, we are also helping ourselves.
- Canada is incredibly well equipped to play a major role in women and children’s health not only because we have done so for decades, but because we’ve established an unmatched ecosystem that brings together government, researchers, public health institutions, civil society organizations, innovators, philanthropies and feminist movements.
- The organizations doing this work aren’t choosing between Canadians and the world, they’re working on both fronts.



“How do I know the money is reaching the people who need it?”

Approach: Research shows that vague assurances aren't effective, that's why it's important to lead with your organization's specific accountability practices. People want to hear about actual results and concrete impacts. The best response is not defensiveness, it is transparency.

What to say:

- That's a great question and it's something we take very seriously.
- We have a system in place [describe your organization's specific accountability practices, such as financial audits by third parties, community reports etc.].
- We measure what we do and report back on our successes and the challenges we encounter because that's what accountability looks like.
- We believe that trust has to be earned with evidence.
- I can tell you about what we're doing, and I am more than happy to show you the data behind it.

“This international aid has been going on for decades. Why isn't it working?”

Approach: This is really a question about the effectiveness of the work. It also reflects a concern that aid creates dependency instead of change. This is where you really lean into current research.

What to say:

- The progress we are making in global health is real. For example, the global under-five mortality rate declined by 61% from 1990 to 2023.
- Another example of the lasting impact of foreign aid is [South Korea](#). In the 1950s, it was one of the poorest countries in the world and relied heavily on international assistance after the Korean War. Today, it is a high-income country and an aid donor itself — showing how early investments in education, health systems and economic capacity can support long-term self-sufficiency.
- Child mortality rates have fallen, vaccine coverage has expanded, and maternal health outcomes have improved through decades of sustained investment. Yet new crises including pandemics, conflicts, and climate-related emergencies continue to emerge. These challenges are not solved overnight, but evidence shows us that clear, sustained action and investment saves lives and improves outcomes over time.
- International assistance is one essential leg of the stool, but it is not a panacea. Multifactorial issues require multifactorial solutions.

For more questions and answers – and recent data points to bolster your answers – please see [Why foreign aid? Your questions, answered.](#)



When you only have 30 seconds

ELEVATOR PITCH In a more unstable world, global health is one of the clearest ways Canada can make a difference people can see and feel. Stronger health systems help prevent outbreaks, respond to crises, keep children healthy and support women's ability to make decisions about their lives and futures. And we get

results. This work saves lives, strengthens communities and reflects something Canadians have always believed: that Canada is a country that helps. Investing in women and children's health is one of the smartest ways Canada can protect its interests while staying true to its values.

A living document, a shared commitment

This messaging guide is a starting point. Public attitudes evolve, and the language that opens doors today will need to be updated as the conversations around global health continue to shift. We welcome feedback from member and partner organizations as you put these messages to work. Your experience in the field is what will make future iterations of this guide stronger.



*Now it's up to all of us
to help tell the story of
our sector, together.*

Thank you to the members of the Public Opinion Research Working Group, Abacus Data, Global Affairs Canada, and to all CanWaCH member organizations whose commitment to this work made this guide possible.

What won't change anytime soon is this: Canadians want to help. They want to know their values are reflected in the world, and they want proof that the help works.

That foundation exists. Now it's up to all of us to help tell the story of our sector, *together*.



CanWaCH
Canadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health



CanSFE
Partenariat canadien pour la
santé des femmes et des enfants

*Developed in partnership with Emdash
for the Canadian Partnership for Women
and Children's Health, 2026*



*This resource was made possible with
the support of Global Affairs Canada.*