CANADA

Becoming a Model Power

March 2026



By Jonathan Glennie
and Alejandro Torres

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Abstract

This report proposes Model Power as a new framework for understanding Canada's role in a fractured world. Building on its post-war tradition as a trusted "middle power," and set in the context of a rapidly changing global order, it argues that influence today depends less on size or wealth than on credibility – on demonstrating that cooperation can be both fair and effective. A Model Power leads by example, aligning domestic integrity with international purpose, turning ethics into strategy, and proof into persuasion. For Canada, this approach offers a modern doctrine of principled realism – one that renews its global vocation and makes cooperation believable again.

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Foreword

by Jonathan Glennie, Executive Director, Global Cooperation Institute

Every generation redefines the idea of power. In the twentieth century, it was measured in armies, empires, and influence. By mid-century, figures like Lester Pearson proposed a subtler model – the middle power: nations strong enough to act and small enough to be trusted. This idea reflected the optimism of the post-war order, when cooperation seemed both rational and achievable.

Eighty years later, that order is under strain. Power has dispersed; trust has eroded. The hierarchies that once structured international life have dissolved into a complex web of interdependence. In this new world, dominance yields diminishing returns. What matters now is not how loudly a country speaks, but how credibly it acts.

This report argues that Canada's future influence lies in its capacity to model rather than to manage power. The concept of Model Power builds on Canada's tradition of bridge-building while recognising the constraints of a more contested age. It asks a different question: not how much power a nation has, but how responsibly and effectively it uses it.

The model power framework recognises limits – fiscal, political, and institutional – but treats those limits as design principles rather than excuses for inaction. Leadership in the twenty-first century will not come from grandeur, but from example: from countries that align domestic integrity with international purpose, that invest in fairness as strategy, and that prove cooperation can still deliver results.

For Canada, this is not a nostalgic appeal to a bygone multilateralism. It is a call to evolve the Pearsonian legacy – from middle power to model power – by demonstrating that credibility, not coercion, is the true currency of global affairs.

This reality was articulated with unusual clarity by Prime Minister Mark Carney in his 2026 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Rejecting the comforting language of "transition," he described the present moment as a rupture – one in which the old rules-based order can no longer be assumed to protect prosperity or security. Yet his message was not one of retreat. Instead, he called on countries like Canada to respond by acting together: building coalitions, investing in shared capabilities, and grounding international engagement in both values and practical resilience. In doing so, Carney signalled a decisive shift away from nostalgia or nationalism, toward a form of leadership based on credibility, cooperation, and demonstrated contribution.

If the twentieth century was defined by those who built institutions to contain rivalry, the twenty-first will be shaped by those who rebuild trust to sustain cooperation. Canada has the means, the history, and the temperament to do just that – to show, with quiet confidence, that decency and effectiveness can still coexist.

In a world that doubts its capacity to work together, if belief in cooperation is rebuilt anywhere, it will be rebuilt by example. That is how Canada, in this age of uncertainty, can become not a middle power or a moral power, but a Model Power – a nation that shows, quietly and persuasively, how purpose, fairness and effectiveness can finally align.

1. Introduction

Purpose

This report sets out to define how Canada can exercise meaningful global influence in a new and unsettled era. It argues that the world no longer needs more power in the traditional sense – economic, military, or rhetorical – but more credible examples of how power can be used responsibly, effectively, and cooperatively.

Canada is unusually well placed to offer such an example. With its long reputation for fairness, competence, and bridge-building, it has often been described as a middle power – a term first popularised by Lester Pearson to describe countries "strong enough to act, small enough to be trusted." Yet the challenges of the 2020s – from climate fragility to geopolitical rivalry and digital disruption – demand more than trust; they demand demonstration.

The central purpose of this report is to propose a new framework for Canadian global engagement: Model Power. Where "middle power" describes position, "model power" describes purpose – a conscious effort to use influence as a force for cooperation rather than competition, and to align domestic integrity with international responsibility.

Specifically, the report seeks to:

- Present a coherent narrative for Canada's role in a fragmented world, grounded in public attitudes and national values;
- Outline an action agenda that links global contribution to domestic benefit, focusing on fair finance, capacity support, coherent policy, and accountable institutions; and
- Offer a unifying doctrine – the philosophy of model power – as a guide for Canada's foreign, development, and multilateral policy in the decade ahead.

At its core, this is a paper about credibility: how Canada can rebuild belief in cooperation – at home and abroad – by showing that principled leadership remains compatible with national interest and democratic politics.

Methodology

This report builds on research, analysis, and dialogue conducted by the Global Cooperation Institute (GCI) during 2025. Qualitative and quantitative evidence from three main sources inform the findings:

1. Public opinion analysis – A review of over a decade of polling from EKOS, Abacus, Ipsos, and other major research institutions. This data traces Canadian attitudes toward international engagement, multilateralism, and global spending, revealing a consistent pattern: Canadians support cooperation when it is fair, effective, and demonstrably beneficial to their own wellbeing.

2. Literature review – A synthesis of recent academic and policy work on middle powers, global governance, and Canadian diplomacy, including sources from the OECD, G7, and leading Canadian think tanks. This helped identify the strengths and limitations of Canada's traditional "middle power" identity, and the potential for a renewed framework better suited to today's multipolar world.

3. Expert interviews – In-depth conversations with diplomats, policymakers, scholars, and civil society leaders from Canada and abroad. These discussions helped interpret polling and literature findings, identify practical entry points for influence, and test the political feasibility of a "model power" approach.

The Global Cooperation Institute team synthesized this evidence with our own analyses of narrative and policy requirements. The result is a report that integrates evidence, reflection, and proposition. It aims to help shape Canada's global posture, linking national integrity with international credibility and proposing a practical path toward becoming a Model Power.

Structure
This report unfolds in six sections.

This opening section introduces the report's purpose, method, and structure.

Section 2 situates Canada's position in a world off balance, analysing the political, economic, and moral context in which it must now act. It includes a summary of the evidence we have gathered from polling, literature and expert interviews.

Section 3 defines our new concept of Model Power, outlining its five attributes – aspiration, mutual interest, learning, demonstration, and connection – as a new framework for credible cooperation. This is explored further in a separate paper due to be published in 2026; here we supply the basic ideas.

The fourth and fifth sections explore what we propose are the twin engines of Model Power: Narrative and Action. They show how argument and performance must work together, linking purpose to practice.

Finally, the Conclusion brings these strands together and suggests next steps for anchoring a new approach for Canada as a Model Power.

In the annexes to this report we include more detailed analysis of the polling of the past couple of decades.

2. Canada at a crossroads

A world off balance

The mid-2020s are an age of paradox: the world is more interconnected and affluent than ever, but new risks and distrust are mounting.

The geopolitical context is fluid, volatile, and contested. The United States remains a military and financial superpower, but is perceived as domestically polarised and intermittently inward-looking. China has consolidated its position as a dominant economic partner across the Global South, advancing a state-led development model that challenges Western norms. Meanwhile, regional actors such as India, Brazil, Türkiye, and the Gulf states are asserting new influence, contributing to a more multipolar and transactional international order.

For democracies, this presents both acute pressures and unexpected openings. Populist movements in North America and Europe, coupled with authoritarian consolidation in Russia and parts of Asia, have narrowed the space for principled internationalism. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 has added protectionist and unilateral strains. Yet institutional flux also brings strategic possibility: as old hierarchies falter, countries like Canada can help model what credible, effective cooperation looks like at scale.

This moment of disruption builds on longer-term global shifts. While the world is more interconnected and affluent than ever, it is also marked by deepening risk and declining trust. Extreme poverty has fallen dramatically – global rates declined from over 35% in 1990 to around 10% in 2025 – but progress has stalled. Recent crises including COVID-19, rising food insecurity, and new conflict have reversed gains. Fewer than half of the Sustainable Development Goals are on track, with sharp regressions in education, gender equality, climate, and health.

Forced displacement has reached record levels, surpassing 123 million people in 2024, while global debt has exceeded 235% of GDP, constraining fiscal options across both developed and developing economies. Confidence in the institutions once tasked with stewarding global order – such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system – is faltering amid perceptions of ineffectiveness, politicisation, and scandal.

Faith in post-Cold War multilateralism and market-led development is eroding, but no clear alternative has yet taken hold. Surveys reflect pervasive public anxiety over cost of living, migration, and fractured social cohesion. Younger generations – especially young men – are more pessimistic than their parents, even in affluent societies.

Global systemic shocks – from climate change and pandemics to digital disruption – have underscored how interdependence is no longer a choice, but a defining condition. Cooperation is not merely a moral imperative; it is a practical necessity. The real test of this new era is whether politics can rise to that challenge – by building shared rules, renewing

institutional trust, and reimagining power as the ability to solve problems, not dominate rivals.

Canada's place in a changing world

Canada enters this unsettled period with remarkable advantages and growing responsibilities. It continues to rank highly in global measures of human development, governance, and social mobility, maintaining strong institutional trust and a reputation for plural democracy. As a G7 economy, a founding member of the United Nations and NATO, and a country with enduring credibility across regional divides, Canada possesses a robust architecture for international engagement.

However, its comfort zone has disappeared. The longstanding strategy of relying on the stability of the US-led, rules-based order is now challenged by external contestation and internal drift. The return of Donald Trump to the White House and growing uncertainty in North American climate, trade, and security arrangements have deepened Canada's external risks, even as domestic priorities – affordability, productivity, housing, and reconciliation – demand urgent attention.

Mark Carney's surprise victory in the April 2025 election marked an inflection point, shifting the country from cautious retrenchment to confident re-engagement with global affairs. His mandate is to rebuild public faith in cooperation – showing that principled leadership is compatible with domestic prosperity and security. At the same time, citizens and experts express fatigue with rhetoric and demand proof that fairness and competence can deliver results. Canadians want a government that shields them from external shocks while providing tangible benefits at home.

Polling review: How Canadian public opinion on global engagement has evolved

Across the past fifteen years, Canadian attitudes toward international assistance and global engagement have remained broadly supportive, but the underlying drivers, tone, and political economy of that support have shifted markedly. Our comparison of the 2010–2020 and 2022–2024 datasets (analysed in more detail in the Annexes) reveals a move from a period defined by a stable moral consensus on helping the world's poorest, toward one in which support is still high but increasingly shaped by economic anxiety, domestic precarity, geopolitical uncertainty, and concerns about migration. Canadians remain internationally minded, but the logic of their support has changed.

The public mood is proud but pressured: Canadians want Canada respected and engaged, but expect international action to deliver benefits at home and be managed well. This sets the bar for recent political leadership, as new strategies must frame cooperation as mutual investment, demonstrate impact, and work through trusted channels if they are to gain sustained support.

1. Stability of core values, but transformed context

The foundational finding across both periods is the same: Canadians consistently believe that global issues matter to Canada, that helping others is morally right, and that Canada should play a constructive international role. In 2010–2020, this took the form of broad majorities linking global interconnectedness to issues such as climate, hunger, conflict, and disease, and endorsing Canada "doing its part" in foreign aid. By 2022–2024, these values remain remarkably robust – support for ODA still sits around 75–80%, and moral obligation remains widely affirmed.

But the context has changed profoundly. In the earlier decade Canadians were worried about global problems but relatively confident in Canada's place in the world, relatively positive about globalisation, and less personally insecure. By the early 2020s, the social mood is more anxious, fatigued, and economically pressured. Cost-of-living concerns dominate; pessimism about global stability has skyrocketed; and feelings of domestic insecurity now structure how people think about international engagement.

Canada's international identity is still strongly associated with peacekeeping, leadership-by-example, and human rights, even if these roles have softened in public perception over time. Evidence indicates Canadians believe the country's global influence is credible when grounded in fair and responsible action.

2. A shift from moral duty to mutual interest

From 2010 to 2020, support for aid was grounded predominantly in ethics: the belief that Canadians had a responsibility to fight poverty and that helping others aligns with Canadian identity. The sector's strongest arguments were moral, humanitarian, and values-driven.

In 2022–2024, the strongest arguments are instrumental. Canadians increasingly see foreign aid as a tool to protect national well-being – preventing conflict, pandemics, forced migration, and geopolitical adversaries' influence. The most compelling justifications for aid now emphasise material benefits (e.g., limiting spread of disease, creating global economic stability, reducing refugee flows), and public concern is highest for issues perceived to affect Canadians directly. The mutual-interest narrative has effectively overtaken the moral-duty narrative, though both remain present.

Canadians' moral compass is generous but sober. Most (59%) accept a responsibility to assist poorer countries, yet only 41% believe development aid is effective; about three in ten are sceptical, with a similar share unsure, underlining demand for transparency and results (Environics Institute, 2025). Many overestimate global poverty rates and expect little improvement, making proof of success essential to maintain confidence (World Bank, 2025).

Message tests show that linking global engagement to domestic outcomes – such as health security, lower food prices, and climate resilience – significantly boosts support. In one case, 85% agreed that investing in global health protects Canada's own health-care system, and

"win-win" framing raised approval for international spending by up to nine percentage points (Money Talks, 2023).

3. Less confidence in global progress, but rising recognition of interdependence
Earlier polling (2010–2020) shows a public that worries about global issues but still believes Canada can make a difference – through peacekeeping, diplomacy, or aid. There is scepticism about Canada's influence, but it is tempered by pride and optimism about international cooperation.

By 2022–2024, the optimism has eroded. Canadians increasingly believe the world is getting worse, that global problems are intensifying, and that their domestic wellbeing is threatened by global instability. Yet paradoxically, this has strengthened the perceived importance of international cooperation. The public is now more convinced that global shocks affect Canada and that cooperation is essential, even if they doubt global institutions' efficacy. This creates a dual dynamic: pessimism about outcomes, but strong support for engagement.

4. Growing domestic insecurity reshapes international attitudes
In 2010–2020, domestic concerns were present but not dominant. Canadians were interested in international issues, broadly satisfied with Canada's world role, and supportive of aid even amid fiscal debates.

By 2022–2024, domestic pressures – housing, inflation, health care, cost of living – crowd out mental space for global engagement. This does not reduce support for aid in principle, but it shifts priorities: Canadians want domestic issues solved first, are more sensitive to government spending levels, and express sharper opposition to aid when framed competitively with domestic needs. Support for ODA remains high, but the salience of opposition has grown.

On national security and prosperity, Canadians decisively favour international cooperation: 64% prefer working with other countries rather than isolation, and 89% agree that global challenges require collaborative solutions (Blacksands, 2025; Glocalities, 2024). Reputation and fairness are key values: 43% say it is "very important" for Canada to contribute its fair share to global problem-solving, while 42% say engagement in those efforts is itself "very important" (Earth4All, 2024).

5. Immigration and refugee flows become far more politically salient
In the previous decade, immigration and refugee issues were present in public debate but rarely decisive. By 2023–2024, however, concerns about immigration and refugee flows have become one of the fastest-rising issues in Canadian polling, increasingly shaping how citizens interpret global engagement. These concerns now sit at the intersection of foreign policy, domestic affordability, and social cohesion, making them a central lens through which Canadians assess international cooperation.

Public anxiety has sharpened significantly. Eighty-three percent of Canadians now say refugee flows are a problem, with the share describing them as a "very big problem" rising year on year (Environics Institute, 2025). At the same time, immigration concerns are being reframed domestically by some as a driver of housing shortages and cost-of-living pressures. This marks a notable departure from Canada's long-standing all-party consensus in favour of high immigration levels, and helps explain why attitudes have hardened even among groups previously supportive of openness.

Importantly, this does not signal a wholesale retreat from internationalism. Canadian public opinion remains internally divided rather than polarised. Many Canadians continue to hold cosmopolitan views: majorities agree that international events affect their daily lives and that helping others globally is an important value to pass on to future generations (Ipsos, 2024). For some, international cooperation is increasingly justified as a way to reduce forced displacement and instability at source; for others, concerns about immigration and refugee arrivals fuel scepticism about international engagement altogether.

As a result, immigration and refugee flows have become a structuring issue for Canada's global narrative. They amplify the political stakes of international cooperation, reinforcing the need for framings that connect global action to domestic outcomes (particularly around stability, housing pressure, and economic security) while avoiding the language and assumptions that resonate more strongly in European debates.

6. Information deficits have persisted and arguably widened

Across all periods, Canadians report limited understanding of aid, global poverty trends, and Canada's ODA program. However, the 2022–2024 data show an even sharper knowledge gap, likely due to information overload, polarisation, and the sheer number of global crises. Misperceptions (e.g., exaggerations of global poverty rates or ODA budget size) remain stable or have worsened. This lack of knowledge increases susceptibility to narratives of waste, corruption, and inefficiency – which remain potent across the years.

Views on international aid remain moderate and stable: 54% think current aid spending is "about right," 17% say it's "too much," and a quarter want to see more – a pattern consistent over recent years (EKOS, 2023). However, only 28–30% of Canadians say they are familiar with Canada's international development programs, while 64% remain unaware of these efforts altogether (CBC/Angus Reid, 2024). Trust in aid delivery is low: 41% trust NGOs to deliver assistance, compared to 35% for government (EKOS, 2023).

Long-term trend: resilient support but weakening enthusiasm

Viewed longitudinally, support for international assistance is surprisingly durable. Canadians still want Canada engaged, still see moral value, and still prioritise areas like health, gender, education, climate, and humanitarian relief. But enthusiasm has moderated over time. Public opinion now operates within a more fragile social contract, where internationalism must be justified through clear, tangible benefits.

- 2010–2020: Stronger belief in Canada's influence, pride in international leadership, willingness to spend more.
- 2022–2024: Support remains – but more conditional, cautious, transactional, and tied to domestic confidence.

Canada has not experienced the sharp collapse in public support for foreign aid seen in several peer countries, particularly in parts of Western Europe. Long-running Canadian tracking surveys show notable stability in core attitudes over the past decade. Around half of Canadians (approximately 50–55%) consistently agree that Canada should provide assistance to poorer countries, with only modest fluctuation since the mid-2010s despite COVID-19, inflation, and geopolitical shocks (EKOS; Environics Institute). This contrasts with declines of 10–20 percentage points in support for maintaining or increasing aid budgets recorded in countries such as the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands over the same period (British Social Attitudes; Eurobarometer; OECD).

What has changed in Canada is not the presence of internationalist values, but the conditions under which they are expressed. Canadians remain outward-looking: over 80% support continued participation in international institutions, and around 85% agree that global cooperation on health and climate directly benefits Canada (CanWaCH, Ipsos). At the same time, confidence in delivery is low. Only around one-third believe Canadian aid is effective, and over half worry that aid is misused or lost to corruption (EKOS; CanWaCH).

Taken together, the evidence points to a shift in public mood rather than a collapse in values. Canadians continue to endorse fairness, cooperation, and global responsibility, but now expect international engagement to demonstrate clear links to security, economic stability, immigration and refugee pressures, and geopolitical resilience. Support has moved away from altruism as identity toward cooperation as protection and shared interest, placing a premium on credibility, effectiveness, and reciprocity rather than charity alone.

The sector should therefore:
- anchor its case in mutual interest without abandoning moral purpose,
- demonstrate visible results,
- link international action to domestic wellbeing, and
- engage a public that is overburdened by domestic stress but still instinctively supportive of cooperation.

[See Annexes A and B for detailed analyses of shifts in Canadian public opinion since 2010].

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Literature review: Canadian narratives need to catch up with changing times

The contemporary Canadian narrative on international development and global public goods has been shaped by two intersecting forces: a growing recognition of global interdependence and a persistent uncertainty in political leadership about how boldly Canada should act. Across three decades of scholarship, government reporting, and civil-society analysis, a consistent insight emerges: Canadians value fairness, global responsibility, and multilateral cooperation, yet the narrative surrounding development policy remains fragmented, technocratic, and insufficiently compelling to mobilize broad public or political commitment.

Across thirty distinct studies – from academic analyses to government reports, advocacy documents, and think-tank reflections – the through-lines are strikingly consistent. Canadians care about global justice, value multilateral cooperation, and believe that Canada has a moral and strategic role to play in shaping a fairer and safer world. Yet political messaging remains fragmented, overly technocratic, and insufficiently ambitious. Institutional incoherence, inadequate public engagement, and reliance on narrow economic framings have weakened Canada's global narrative.

The literature calls for a renewed story – one that combines moral clarity with strategic relevance, domestic resonance with global solidarity, and historical identity with future-oriented ambition. Such a narrative, grounded in the evidence across these thirty documents, would position Canada not just as a supporter of global public goods, but as a leader committed to a more just, stable, and cooperative international order.

1. Historical evolution of Canada's international development narrative

Early contributions, including Noël, Thérien, and Dallaire (2003), situate Canada historically within a liberal-internationalist tradition grounded in peacekeeping, human rights, and multilateral diplomacy. This foundational narrative – later echoed in Martin (2005) – emphasized Canada as a principled middle power committed to equitable global order. Gulrajani (2010) highlights how CIDA's institutional culture once centred on solidarity and long-term development partnership, operating with a relatively coherent identity distinct from foreign policy imperatives.

By the early 2010s, scholars increasingly documented a drift from this clarity. Essex (2012) and Brown (2012) describe a growing instrumentalization of development toward commercial and geopolitical objectives, reducing space for rights-based or justice-oriented narratives. Schmitz (2013) further argues that parliamentary accountability weakened as aid was absorbed into broader foreign policy frameworks. The result, as Paris (2014) observes,

was a diminished public understanding of Canada's international role, even as global challenges intensified.

The merger of CIDA into Global Affairs Canada prompted major debate. The McLeod Group (2014) and Brown (2015) both show how integration diluted development priorities within a foreign-policy culture oriented toward short-term strategic interests. Brushett (2015) adds that although policy frameworks remained rhetorically committed to poverty reduction, bureaucratic incentives increasingly favoured risk aversion and measurability over transformative partnership.

The landmark volume edited by Brown, den Heyer, and Raddon (2016) synthesizes this turning point: Canada's development cooperation became less coherent, less politically salient, and more vulnerable to shifting governmental preferences. Tijerina (2017) describes a corresponding decline in Canada's soft-power presence and its credibility among Southern partners. Government of Canada (2018) and Cogan (2018) together reflect an institutional narrative attempting to position Canada as a modern, feminist, and values-driven donor – yet without the financial ambition required to make such commitments convincing.

2. Public attitudes, political narratives, and the challenge of persuasion

A major theme across the literature is the disconnect between public values and political leadership. Brown (2017; 2019) consistently argues that Canadians remain broadly supportive of cooperation, but political elites underestimate this support and therefore underinvest in development. Cooperation Canada (2020) likewise finds that although Canadians believe strongly in fairness and global responsibility, communication strategies within the sector fail to activate these values.

More recent polling synthesis by Henson, Davis, and Lafrance (2022) demonstrates that Canadians continue to affirm solidarity, multilateralism, and global justice – but are skeptical of government competence and wary of waste. These ambivalent attitudes invite narrative strategies that emphasize trust, clarity, and demonstrable impact.

Several authors argue for values-based rather than technocratic storytelling. Some suggest that public communications grounded in empathy, fairness, and shared humanity generate more durable support than narratives emphasizing efficiency or self-interest. Others argue that Canadians respond best to narratives that combine solidarity with relevance – linking global crises to domestic concerns such as climate resilience, migration stability, or supply-chain security.

Global Affairs Canada (2023; 2024) amplifies this, noting in its diplomatic-policy documents that public confidence in Canada's role abroad depends on clear articulation of the stakes of multilateral cooperation. Yet both documents imply that Canada's narrative infrastructure is weak: inconsistent messaging, fragmented leadership, and internal uncertainty hinder the ability to project a coherent story to Canadians.

At the same time, several authors critique the reliance on mutual-interest framing, warning that while such framing can broaden audiences, it risks marginalizing justice-based arguments and reinforcing transactional approaches. Some go further, arguing that moral clarity – not strategic calculation – is what resonates most deeply with Canadians, who expect their country to act with integrity even when immediate interests are unclear.

3. Canada's perceived role and credibility in international development

Multiple sources depict Canada as a state caught between aspiration and hesitation. Buck (2024) emphasizes the gap between Canada's historical reputation as a principled multilateral actor and its present-day caution, budgetary stagnation, and strategic drift. The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation (2023) likewise notes that although Canadians want global leadership, governments fear political backlash and therefore communicate defensively.

Balsillie School of International Affairs (2022) highlights Canada's declining influence in global governance, pointing to inconsistent engagement in climate diplomacy, peacekeeping, and development finance. This narrative of diminished leadership is echoed by Government of Canada (2023), which acknowledges that while Canada positions itself as a reformer in multilateral institutions, its contributions fall short of its rhetorical commitments.

Canada retains unique credibility due to its feminist policy orientation and broadly trusted brand – but only if that credibility is backed by visible leadership and adequate financing. And Canada's reputation is further threatened by global competition from emerging donors and by the growing politicization of aid in OECD countries.

4. Effectiveness and critique of the financing for development system

A shared theme across the corpus is dissatisfaction with the current financing architecture. Gulrajani (2010) and Noël et al. (2003) anticipated many of the concerns now echoed in more recent studies: a lack of democratic accountability, dominance of Northern priorities, and fragmentation across institutions. Brown (2016) and Brown (2017) later deepen this critique, describing how institutional incentives undermine long-term partnership and system-level transformation.

Some authors are critical of the development sector's self-inflicted wounds: confusing messaging, indifference to macro-level impact, and complacency about fragmented strategies. They call for a disciplined, strategic, and politically grounded narrative that highlights systemic returns on investment, not just project successes.

The lack of public transparency and communication regarding financing decisions, which erodes trust and limits political support for reform, is cited as a problem by Global Affairs Canada (2024), which calls for modernizing Canada's development institutions to strengthen coordination, accountability, and public legitimacy.

5. Narratives that resonate with Canadians
Across the literature, three narrative families consistently emerge as particularly effective:

a. Values-based narratives: fairness, justice, solidarity
Documents from Brown (2019) and Cooperation Canada (2020) show that Canadians respond strongly to narratives rooted in compassion, fairness, and shared humanity. These narratives highlight Canada's moral responsibilities, align with national identity, and appeal across party lines.

b. Interdependence and shared global challenges
The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation (2023), Balsillie School (2022), and Government of Canada (2023) all demonstrate that Canadians readily understand the connections between domestic well-being and global stability. Climate change, pandemics, conflict, and economic inequality are perceived as intertwined with Canadian security and prosperity.

This narrative gains support not by appealing to self-interest alone but by emphasizing mutual vulnerability and mutual responsibility.

c. Mutual interest and strategic investment
Buck (2024) highlights the political advantages of framing development as a strategic investment that reduces global risks, opens economic partnerships, and strengthens Canada's international influence. Such narratives are especially effective with centrist and conservative audiences who demand pragmatism and fiscal justification. However, some caution that mutual-interest messaging should complement – not replace – solidarity narratives, or else risk eroding the ethical foundation of cooperation.

6. Gaps between public values, political leadership, and sector capacity
Many authors observe that despite strong public alignment with global cooperation, Canadian political leadership often appears risk-averse. Buck (2024) describes a federal policymaking culture that prioritizes caution over ambition and argues that the development sector has failed to tell a convincing story about Canada's global impact, contributing to political hesitancy.

The Balsillie School (2022) further emphasizes that public engagement mechanisms are weak, underfunded, and disconnected from grassroots realities. Several authors note that Canada's narrative is weakened by incoherent institutional structures. This is a recurring theme in Brown (2015), Cogan (2018) and Brown (2016) all of whom document how the merger into Global Affairs Canada diluted development leadership, blurred priorities, and entrenched bureaucratic silos.

7. Toward a renewed narrative for Canada
Synthesizing insights across all thirty documents, a vision emerges of what a revitalized Canadian narrative might look like. It would be:

- Deeply values-based – grounded in fairness, dignity, and global citizenship (Brown 2019).
- Explicit about interdependence, linking global risks to domestic well-being (Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation 2023; Balsillie School 2022).
- Clear and confident about Canada's identity as a principled actor with unique credibility – especially in feminist, climate, and human-rights policy (Cogan 2018; Government of Canada 2023; Buck 2024).
- Committed to systemic reform, emphasizing justice, equity, local ownership, and transparency in financing for development. Politically strategic, offering compelling rationales for action that address different constituencies (Brown 2017; Cooperation Canada 2020).
- Inclusive and participatory, elevating Southern voices, Indigenous perspectives, youth, feminist movements, climate advocates, and diaspora communities (Brown/den Heyer/Raddon 2016).

The literature collectively suggests that Canada's narrative challenge is not a lack of public support, but a failure to harness, articulate, and mobilize that support into political action.

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Synthesis of expert interviews: Support is fragile but opportunities exist

Across the interviews, a remarkably coherent picture emerges regarding how Canadians understand, value, and respond to narratives about international development and global public goods. Despite their varied professional backgrounds and perspectives, the contributors shared consistent assessments about the forces shaping public attitudes, the

gaps in current political and institutional practice, and the opportunities for reframing Canada's international cooperation narrative.

When interpreted alongside two decades of polling data and the broader scholarly literature, the interviews deepen and contextualise the overarching trends: Canadians remain broadly supportive of international cooperation, but their support is fragile, often poorly activated, and increasingly shaped by concerns about domestic insecurity, governmental capability, and global turbulence. Together, these sources point to a clear imperative: building a renewed, values-driven, politically resonant narrative that connects global challenges with Canadian interests and identity.

A strong theme running through all expert perspectives is that Canadian public support for international development rests on deeper values than simple charity or transactional benefit. Contributors emphasised repeatedly that Canadians respond most strongly to narratives grounded in fairness, justice, global citizenship, and the belief that Canada should act consistently with its principles on the world stage. This echoes nearly all of the literature reviewed – from early analyses of Canadian multilateralism in the 2000s to more recent diplomatic strategy papers – which highlight Canada's self-perception as a principled, cooperative actor.

Polling evidence reinforces this: even during periods of fiscal constraint or political polarization, large majorities have continued to express the view that Canada should contribute to solving global problems, remain active in the UN, and be respected internationally. Polling from 2010 onward shows consistently high levels of agreement that Canada has a moral responsibility to help others, that global issues affect Canadians directly, and that cooperation is preferable to isolation – findings that our interviewees see as underutilised anchors for narrative development.

However, the experts also caution that values alone are insufficient. They argue that narratives relying exclusively on moral appeal, without demonstrating relevance to domestic concerns, often fail to mobilize broader public support or political commitment. A recurring insight is that Canadians want to see how global engagement connects to tangible outcomes – economic stability, climate resilience, migration management, public health security, and broader social wellbeing. This aligns closely with literature pointing to the rise of "constructive self-interest" narratives and with polling showing that Canadians respond strongly to arguments linking international cooperation to preventing conflicts, pandemics, and refugee crises. Indeed, one contributor stressed that the most effective narrative is neither pure altruism nor hard nationalism, but a blend of solidarity and mutual benefit, framed as shared security and shared opportunity in an interdependent world.

The interviews also reveal deep concerns about the erosion and fragmentation of Canada's foreign policy narrative over the past decade. Contributors broadly agreed that Canada once possessed a more confident, coherent international identity – rooted in multilateral leadership, peacekeeping, and human rights – but that this clarity has diminished. Several

connected this trend to the institutional merger that created Global Affairs Canada, which integrated development more explicitly into diplomacy and trade. This shift, discussed at length in the literature, is described as having weakened the distinctiveness of development principles and subordinated them to short-term political or economic priorities. Polling data from 2018–2024 also shows declining public perception of Canada's international influence and greater scepticism about the effectiveness of government aid spending. The experts interpret these trends as signs not of declining public support for international cooperation itself, but of a vacuum of leadership and narrative coherence.

Consistent with the findings of the literature review, the experts argue that political hesitancy, rather than public resistance, is the principal barrier to bolder Canadian action. Multiple contributors noted that politicians systematically underestimate public openness to principled internationalism. They suggested that leaders often fear backlash from fiscally conservative or populist constituencies, even though polling consistently shows that only a small minority strongly oppose foreign aid, and that most Canadians express moderate or strong support. This mirrors conclusions found in works examining Canadian political behaviour and foreign policy communication, which argue that politicians have become increasingly risk-averse in articulating global priorities. The experts suggest that this political caution creates a feedback loop: inadequate communication leads to public misunderstanding about aid levels and impacts, which in turn reinforces political reluctance.

A related theme is the mismatch between public values and sectoral communication strategies. Contributors repeatedly argued that the international development community in Canada has not invested sufficiently in narrative infrastructure, public engagement, or cross-movement coalition building. Some suggested that the sector often relies on technocratic or insider language, which alienates the broader public. This critique echoes literature dating back more than a decade which highlight the sector's struggle to communicate effectively outside specialist circles. The interviews, however, add nuance: the problem is not only insufficient communication, but communication that fails to emotionally resonate. The experts advised that narratives must be more human, story-driven, and values-aligned – not focused solely on outputs or finance mechanisms.

The interviews also emphasise the importance of reimagining the narrative around financing for development. Contributors expressed strong scepticism about the dominance of blended finance, private-sector-led approaches, and narrow effectiveness metrics. They argued that these models, while often politically attractive, risk sidelining marginalized communities, perpetuating inequalities, and obscuring questions of justice. This critique closely parallels literature questioning the effectiveness and equity of contemporary financing architectures. At the same time, some contributors highlighted the need to better communicate long-term macro-level benefits of development cooperation – using historical examples like South Korea or global health investments – to counter the perception that aid is wasteful or ineffective. This aligns directly with polling showing that Canadians respond positively when presented with concrete evidence of impact.

A particularly rich area of convergence across interviews, polling, and literature is the importance of mutuality and partnership. The experts consistently argued that traditional "donor-recipient" framings are outdated and politically counterproductive. They suggested that Canadians respond better to narratives emphasising cooperation among equals, shared challenges, and reciprocal benefits. Literature on international development discourse – from early critiques of paternalism in Canadian policy to newer analyses of feminist and decolonial approaches – supports this view. Polling from 2022–2024 provides additional evidence: Canadians express strong support for international collaboration, trust NGOs and global institutions more than governments on global issues, and increasingly see global inequality, climate change, and refugee flows as interconnected with domestic security. The experts suggest that this creates fertile ground for a narrative of "shared destiny," rooted in dignity, justice, and interdependence.

Another powerful point of consensus is the need for more diverse and credible messengers. The interviews highlighted the growing importance of youth, Indigenous leaders, climate movements, feminist organisations, and Global South partners in shaping public understanding. Contributors argued that these voices bring moral clarity, authenticity, and lived experience that traditional actors cannot replicate. Literature from 2016 onward similarly calls for amplifying marginalised perspectives to strengthen the legitimacy of Canadian narratives. Polling, too, shows that younger Canadians are more supportive of ODA, more globally engaged, and more motivated by justice-aligned messaging – suggesting strategic value in elevating youth leadership, as several experts recommended.

The experts also described Canada as a "declining middle power" whose influence has waned, but not irreversibly. This aligns with a substantial body of literature portraying Canada as having strong historical credentials in multilateral diplomacy but lacking recent consistency or boldness. Polling indicates that Canadians still want Canada to be respected globally and engaged constructively, even as they express scepticism about the country's current trajectory. The interviews suggest that reframing Canada's international role – away from nostalgia for peacekeeping and toward leadership on climate justice, feminist policy, and debt reform – could resonate with both public values and contemporary global needs.

Across the interviews, a central conclusion is that the public is ahead of the political class in its willingness to support an ambitious, justice-oriented global agenda. Polling shows strong and sustained support for ODA, for international institutions, and for collaborative approaches to global challenges. The literature demonstrates that Canadian identity has long been tied to principled internationalism, even if practice has not always lived up to rhetoric. The experts argue that by tapping into these foundations – fairness, global citizenship, responsibility, partnership – Canada can build a new narrative architecture capable of supporting bold outcomes at forums like FfD4.

In conclusion, the expert interviews reaffirm and deepen the insights from polling and literature across the past two decades. Canadians' underlying values – fairness, justice,

compassion, and multilateralism – remain remarkably stable. Support for international cooperation is real, though often latent; political caution, narrative fragmentation, and institutional incoherence have prevented it from being fully realised. But if Canada invests in a compelling narrative grounded in shared humanity, mutual interest, and principled leadership, there is substantial public appetite for renewed ambition.

How does the world feel about Canada?

Internationally, Canada remains well regarded as a principled, credible, and constructive actor – though its reputation for distinctive leadership has diminished since the Pearson era. Its image is still linked to fairness, peacekeeping, and multilateralism, but recent research suggests peers increasingly view it as steady and reform-minded, with credibility in finance, climate, and digital governance, yet not a primary agenda-setter.

Within the G20 and other multilateral forums, Canada is often seen as a fair-share partner that supports coalitions and institutional reform rather than seeking dominance. Its standing in global financial institutions, strengthened by Carney's leadership, offers new opportunities to promote resilient systems and public-first investment.

Experts from Global Affairs, academia, and international organisations highlight Canada's reliability and institutional trust as its defining assets, even if its leadership style remains quiet rather than bold. In many parts of the Global South, Canada is viewed as an honest broker but one that lacks differentiation from broader G7 positions. Overall, the world sees Canada as liked and trusted but not always listened to for decisive agenda-setting.

The consensus among both polling and expert commentary is clear: the world welcomes a Canada that moves beyond moral signalling to build tangible partnership – a nation that uses credibility to catalyse reform and collaboration.

Balancing ambition and realism

Taken together, the interviews, polling, and literature suggest several overarching implications. First, Canada's narrative must shift from "aid as charity" to "cooperation as shared security and justice." Second, communication strategies must be more emotionally resonant, human-centred, and inclusive, moving beyond technical descriptions toward storytelling that connects global issues with everyday Canadian concerns. Third, political actors need clearer evidence that bold action is politically viable, which requires the sector to articulate and coordinate its messaging more effectively. Fourth, Canada's credibility depends on coherence: policies on climate, trade, resource extraction, and Indigenous rights must align with its international commitments. And finally, the moment is ripe for renewal. Canadians are anxious about global instability, but polling shows they understand the world's interdependence – and support engagement when framed around fairness, shared responsibility, and long-term benefits.

The central task for Carney's government is to show that global engagement reinforces Canadians' socioeconomic security rather than undermines it. The April 2025 election –

closely fought between retrenchment and renewed cooperation – produced a narrow but meaningful mandate for leadership that aligns principled internationalism with domestic prosperity.

Canada enters this era with formidable assets. It ranks among the world's top ten economies, with deep trade integration, significant resource wealth, and resilient governance. Its civil society and globally respected research institutions remain influential and trusted, even amid political transitions. Core agencies such as Global Affairs Canada and FinDev Canada provide a globally recognised toolkit for combining development, diplomacy, and finance.

Yet Canada's reach often falls short of its potential. Development assistance has remained stagnant at about 0.35 percent of GNI – below the UN's 0.7 percent target and the performance of several OECD peers. Climate pledges are sizeable, but disbursement lags behind commitments. In multilateral settings, Canada is seen as constructive and technically skilled but rarely the agenda-setter. Expert assessments describe it as a "trusted but quiet" participant – valued for reliability and moral credibility but seldom a convener.

Institutional capacity is strong but fragmented. Global Affairs Canada's innovation agenda, the IDRC's research excellence, and FinDev's ability to mobilise private finance are robust individually but underleveraged collectively. While frameworks such as the Feminist International Assistance Policy and new climate initiatives have attracted attention, they have yet to form a coherent doctrine of 21st-century cooperation.

A realistic but ambitious approach must recognise both the scope of Canada's influence and the limits of its scale. In today's system, credibility as mediator and bridge-builder matters more than quantitative weight. G7 and G20 partners look to Canada to turn broad ambitions into actionable consensus, especially where trust and fairness are scarce.

The opportunity for the Carney government is to convert credibility into measurable influence – to demonstrate how advanced democracies can act effectively in a competitive world. The challenge is not to revive middle-power nostalgia or chase status through rhetoric, but to prove that fairness and competence can coexist in leadership.

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3. What is a Model Power?

From middle power to model power: reinterpreting Canada's role

Canada's search for a renewed global role must answer an enduring question: what does it mean to be influential in a world where power is diffuse and trust is fragile? For much of the post-war era, Canadian diplomacy was defined by Lester B. Pearson's notion of middle power – "strong enough to act, small enough to be trusted" – an identity synonymous with cooperative bridge-building and moral purpose. Canada's leadership at Suez, within the Commonwealth, and at the United Nations earned it a global reputation for professionalism and pragmatism. Analysts long saw middle powers as catalysts within the international system, helping sustain institutions and mediate between great powers.

Those virtues – pragmatism, pluralism, and coalition-building – defined Canada's temperament in a more orderly age. But the world that gave rise to this model has changed fundamentally: power is now multipolar and volatile, shaped as much by networks and technology as by traditional statecraft. In this context, credibility and legitimacy are as important as material capability, and the language of "middle power" describes position more than purpose.

This calls not for rejection of Canada's tradition, but its renewal. What sustained the country as a middle power – fairness, competence, and coalition leadership – remains essential, but must now be demonstrated through results and institutional innovation. As global institutions strain and great powers compete, there is growing demand for nations that can architect renewal, showing through action that cooperation still works.

The concept of model power reflects this evolution. It suggests that legitimate influence is earned not by scale or rhetoric but by coherence, example, and the disciplined alignment of domestic integrity and international conduct. Rather than aspiring to perfection, model powers commit to transparency, measurable results, and continuous learning – turning constraints into credentials.

For Canada, this approach suits both temperament and circumstance. It offers a realism-infused ambition: to lead not by being the loudest voice, but by being the most trusted and effective partner. Great powers seek dominance; model powers win by demonstration. In an era weary of hollow promises, Canada's most credible contribution may be to prove that fairness and effectiveness can, indeed, coexist.

Influence in international relations has historically depended on hard resources – military and economic strength – or on positional dominance within the system. However, in a context where coercion evokes suspicion and rhetorical claims often outpace outcomes, the foundations of power are shifting. As trust in great-power hegemony declines, a country's credibility is increasingly judged by the congruence between words and actions, and by the demonstrable efficacy of its conduct.

A “model power” is a state whose influence arises not from dominance or wealth, but from demonstration: it validates the value of cooperation and responsible global engagement by showing that these approaches deliver results. Legitimacy and reputation – the willingness of others to accept and emulate a nation’s practices – become central currencies of influence. In a climate of domestic and international skepticism, countries that prove “responsible power is successful power” wield a form of authority that resonates across borders and constituencies.

Being a model power is not self-congratulatory. Rather, it entails discipline and openness to scrutiny – inviting external judgment and adapting through learning and feedback. The concept recognizes that legitimacy must be continuously earned through transparent, coherent, and evidence-based policy, aligning domestic values with international conduct. The bar for credibility is now coherence between intention, action, and result.

The idea of Canada as a model actor in world affairs is not new. Scholars such as Jennifer Welsh have long argued that Canada should aspire to be a “model citizen” in the international system – principled, reliable, and committed to multilateral rules and norms. For Canada, this resonates with traditions of pragmatism, pluralism, and quiet competence, but also demands a more deliberate approach – grounded in partnership, mutual interest, and performance. A model power leads by demonstration, not assertion; it prizes reliability and humility above grandiosity, aiming not for omnipresence but for trusted, focused impact.

Great power rivalry is the defining constraint of the current international moment, but it is also the condition that makes model power relevant rather than redundant. As Prime Minister Carney has argued, we are living through an era of great power rivalry in which the rules-based order is weakening and raw power is more openly asserted. In his words, “the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must.”

In such a context, countries that cannot and should not compete on coercion face a choice: retreat, align uncritically, or demonstrate a different logic of influence. Model power is not an alternative to realism in an age of rivalry; it is a response to it. Where great powers compete for dominance, model powers compete for credibility, showing that cooperation, fairness, and reliability still produce security, prosperity, and legitimacy.

Model power therefore operates alongside great power rivalry. It recognises that rivalry is unlikely to disappear, but insists that it does not exhaust the possibilities of leadership. In a fragmented system, smaller and mid-sized democracies can stabilise cooperation by proving that rules, institutions, and shared investment still work in practice. By leading through example (on finance, capacity-building, institutional reform, and policy coherence) model powers help preserve space for collective action even as competition intensifies.

Building on earlier frameworks

The international relations literature has long distinguished between forms of power: hard power (coercion), soft power (attraction), and, more recently, smart power (the strategic

combination of both). During the Cold War, the "middle power" concept described states capable of mediation and institution-building, bridging the gap between the agendas of superpowers through reliability and moderation. Middle powers, such as Canada, exercised influence primarily by consensus-building and rule stewardship.

The soft power paradigm, introduced by Joseph Nye, contends that the ability to influence through culture, political values, and legitimate policy is now at least as important as the use of force or inducement. Smart power, in turn, advocates the context-dependent blending of "hard" and "soft" resources, aiming for strategic advantage and policy agility. Yet both theories are critiques from within a managerial logic, focusing more on tools and techniques than on broader purpose.

Normative power – coined by Ian Manners to explain the EU's global influence – emphasizes the role of values, arguing that sustained leadership derives from norm promotion and being seen as an ethical exemplar. Its principal critique is that espoused norms are often not matched by practice, weakening persuasion when performance lags rhetoric.

The model power framework synthesizes these traditions but insists that credibility is behavioral, not just rhetorical. Unlike the "middle" or "normative" power frames, it makes proof its primary test: legitimacy flows from the demonstration that fairness, competence, and cooperation produce practical results. A model power does not seek to convert or coerce, but to persuade by visible example; it reframes international leadership as the capacity to attract imitation and consent.

In the twenty-first century, legitimacy depends less on position and more on proof; the world believes what it observes. For Canada, this means moving from aspiration and assertion to performance – demonstrating rather than declaring that fairness and effectiveness can coexist.

Model power redefines leadership through five interlinked attributes: mutual interest, aspiration, demonstration, learning, and connection. These qualities translate cooperative values into practice. Mutual interest ensures reciprocity and shared benefit. Aspiration sets visionary, inclusive goals. Demonstration builds legitimacy through action, not words. Learning enables adaptive, evidence-based policymaking. Connection fosters empathy, engagement, and cross-sector partnerships. Rooted in international relations and organizational research, these traits guide countries to lead credibly and effectively – grounding foreign policy in realism while upholding trust through transparent, inclusive behaviour. Model power is not about perfection, but about credible cooperation made practical, principled, and persuasive.

1. Mutual interest – linking domestic renewal with global responsibility

A model power begins its influence at home, understanding that credibility abroad is built on coherence and legitimacy at home. In a context of political polarization and rising economic insecurity, a state's ability to lead internationally is inseparable from its citizens' belief that

global engagement reinforces, rather than threatens, their welfare. Classic and contemporary research confirms that the "national interest" and "global responsibility" are not binary choices, but mutually reinforcing spheres in an era of interdependence.

Today, effective foreign policy fuses the logic of domestic renewal with international cooperation. National priorities – such as economic innovation, energy transition, health security, and equitable migration – can only advance in deep connection with international networks, global public goods, and effective systemic rules. As seen in the Canadian context, building public consent for international action requires demonstrating tangible benefits: recent polling shows Canadian support for global engagement rises when practical links are made between international programs and outcomes like job growth, cost of living, and social inclusion.

This alignment demands coordinated action across federal, provincial, and municipal governments; robust engagement with civil society, academia, and business; and broad access to policy debate. Far from being a closed project, national interest is continuously reshaped by collaborative partnership with the world.

For Canada, mutual interest is both pragmatic and political. Public support for engagement abroad depends on the visible reciprocity of cooperation – evidence that international investment brings home local benefits in security, stability, and shared prosperity. Research on "credible commitments" in international cooperation similarly finds that durable multilateralism depends on perceived mutual interest, not norm subscription alone.

This dynamic, when turned into institutional strategy, creates a virtuous cycle: international action boosts domestic legitimacy, while domestic consensus enables more sustained and credible engagement with the world. Successful model powers – Canada among them – thus demonstrate that national confidence and global solidarity are not in tension, but two essential sides of good governance.

2. Aspiration – Model Powers try to make the world better

Aspiration is the defining feature that moves a model power beyond pragmatism to purpose. It asks foundational questions of leadership – what is power for, and how can it be used credibly for constructive impact? In current scholarship, states with aspirational global roles attempt not only to safeguard their interests, but also to expand the public good, embracing the "ethics of responsibility."

For model powers, strength and legitimacy derive not from declarations but from practical contributions – visible efforts to balance fairness and capacity, ambition and constraint. The legitimacy of aspiration in global politics emerges when a country consistently works to make the world in which it operates fairer, safer, and more sustainable – not through grand gestures, but by "exemplary performance" in its chosen fields.

This aspiration is grounded in realism: model powers recognize the limits of their reach but commit to using available influence as ethically and effectively as possible. Their leadership is not about controlling all outcomes but about inspiring confidence, enabling cooperation, and demonstrating that international progress is possible even amid complexity. Research on international legitimacy underscores that aspiration must be institutionalized through credible actions, not simply proclaimed.

It is also clear, in both classic and recent literature, that foreign aspiration cannot be separated from domestic example. How a country treats equity, inclusion, and justice at home will shape the credibility and persuasiveness of its message abroad – a principle especially relevant to Canada's pluralist and innovative traditions.

For Canada, the aspiration to model leadership is embedded in its pluralistic ethos and moderated by its historical and geographic position. The point is not to claim superiority, but to foster a discipline of continual improvement and public learning – projecting credible hope that solidarity and progress are both possible.

Aspiration, then, is the courage to make constructive effort visible, to seek practical improvements, and to use national example as a lever for collaborative global change.

3. Demonstration – Model Powers influence through example, not assertion

A model power models power. The essence of model power is performance: influence is earned through the steady accumulation of example, not claims or declarations. In modern diplomacy and international relations, credibility increasingly depends on the observable alignment between principle and practice – nations that "show rather than tell" foster trust and replicability.

In a global climate marked by growing disinformation, declining institutional trust, and skepticism toward elites, demonstration has become a vital source of legitimacy and soft power. Scholarship on leadership and influence consistently finds that "performative integrity" – the act of modeling values and goals – elevates persuasion and institutional stability. Model powers make their diplomacy "open source," inviting scrutiny, replication, and learning by making outcomes as transparent as possible.

In policy terms, this means retooling statecraft and diplomacy around accountability, impact measurement, and knowledge sharing. Performance becomes the diplomacy: results in areas like peacebuilding, disaster response, gender equity, or carbon pricing serve as proof points for others to study and adapt. Such demonstration is not theatrical, but a disciplined practice aimed at practical influence; evidence-based leadership can build "legitimacy capital" that transcends the limitations of scale.

Canada's international reputation – as with other middle and model powers – is maximized when it turns innovative domestic policies into peer-reviewed demonstrations for global

audiences. In doing so, it earns authority through clarity, humility, and visible results rather than through rhetoric or simple self-branding.

Ultimately, nations that lead by demonstration rely not on volume but on veracity. Institutional and behavioral studies agree: consistent, transparent proof is more persuasive than ambitious declarations, especially in a crowded, skeptical, and competitive international environment. In the language of modern diplomacy, "the world believes what it sees, not what it's told."

4. Learning – Model Powers learn as they cooperate

No nation, however capable or well-intentioned, has mastered how to wield power responsibly. A model power acts with humility, recognizing the inherent fallibility of power and the dangers of influence unaccompanied by reflection or evidence. Leading international relations and public policy literature stresses that legitimacy today depends not on projecting certainty, but on transparently demonstrating self-correction and improvement. In this way, learning is elevated from an administrative process to a central philosophy of governance.

Serious powers build evaluation, feedback, and adaptation into their core strategy – not as donor or audit requirements, but as the way legitimacy is continually renewed. By honestly admitting error, welcoming critique, and shifting course when warranted, they convert humility into strategic advantage and moral authority.

The "reflective realism" of a model power translates into a distinctive cycle of impact: credibility leads to trust; trust creates the space for cooperation; cooperation generates outcomes; and outcomes, if made visible and honestly assessed, regenerate legitimacy. This dynamic is increasingly seen as essential to the resilience of international partnerships and institutions whose credibility often falters in the absence of honest self-appraisal.

Learning, moreover, is a public good – not a private or insular exercise. The best international actors share data, lessons, and evaluation results openly, enabling collective progress and "collaborative intelligence" internationally. This openness builds both mutual accountability and trust – allowing nations to learn from both successes and failures, and making adaptive government the norm rather than the exception.

Finally, effective learning is dialogic: model powers listen as much as they teach, embracing knowledge from all partners – especially from leaders and communities in the Global South, who often pioneer solutions under constraint. Such humility is not weakness: it is a foundation for credibility and can, over time, attract others to imitate and cooperate.

In sum, in a world where the premium on certainty is giving way to the premium on honesty, model power is, above all, a commitment to continual learning and visible evolution.

5. Connection – Model Powers empower others

A model power understands that global leadership in the 21st century is rooted in the capacity to connect – through networks, dialogue, and enabling others' agency, rather than dominance. In an era where power is distributed and legitimacy contested, the ability to convene coalitions, foster partnerships, and convert difference into shared action has become a cardinal asset in international affairs.

Relational power is increasingly recognized as distinct from both the "attraction" of soft power and the "efficiency" of smart power; it is exercised through building inclusive, trusted networks – formal and informal – across borders and sectors. Trust, transparency, and reciprocity underpin this infrastructure, and research demonstrates that co-created solutions are more sustainable, equitable, and resilient than those imposed by any single actor.

A model power invests deliberately in platforms and communication channels that enable collaboration, information-sharing, and mutual learning. It listens as much as it speaks, recognizing that today's credibility hinges on empathy, responsiveness, and the lived experiences of others. Collaboration is reconceived as co-creation: a joint project in which knowledge and responsibility are shared, distributed, and reinforced.

Such networking is not just instrumentally valuable; it is transformative. Connection multiplies collective agency, turning peer learning, demonstration, and adaptation into a self-reinforcing loop – one that advances both international and domestic understanding. Model powers act as conveners and amplifiers, strengthening global public goods and empowering partners to act autonomously.

This approach demands humility, as it requires empowering others without claiming authority, and building trust incrementally through honest engagement. Legitimacy in contemporary diplomacy flows from the ability to sustain such relationships over time.

Humility and integrity

The idea of "model power" is not intended to suggest hierarchy or emulation, nor that Canada offers a template for others to follow. Rather, it describes a stance toward cooperation grounded in humility, reciprocity, and continuous learning. A model power does not claim superior answers; it commits to showing its work, learning in public, and remaining open to adaptation through partnership. In this sense, "model" refers not to leadership by instruction, but to leadership by participation, co-creating solutions with others and allowing its own policies to be shaped by experience, evidence, and the perspectives of partners, particularly in the Global South.

Model power therefore implies mutual demonstration: Canada learns from innovations, institutions, and practices developed elsewhere just as much as it contributes its own. Influence flows not from being copied, but from being trusted as a fair, reliable, and self-reflective partner. This framing aligns with contemporary development thinking that rejects

donor–recipient hierarchies in favour of shared problem-solving, differentiated responsibilities, and collective ownership of outcomes. Canada, in this conception, is one partner among many, seeking to strengthen cooperation by helping make it more transparent, accountable, and effective for all.

Credibility begins at home

Model power also requires honesty about contradictions at home. Canada's credibility abroad is inseparable from its progress on unresolved domestic challenges, including reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, alignment between climate commitments and extractive industry practices, and the social impacts of economic transition. A model power does not claim moral perfection; it earns trust by confronting its own tensions openly and treating domestic reform as integral to international responsibility. In this sense, internal progress is not a separate agenda from global engagement but a precondition for it.

Framing domestic coherence as part of model power strengthens, rather than dilutes, Canada's global role. When a country applies to itself the same standards it advocates internationally (on accountability, sustainability, and fairness) it signals integrity rather than superiority. This approach aligns with contemporary expectations of leadership in a multipolar world: influence flows not from polished narratives, but from visible effort, transparency about limits, and a willingness to learn. Model power thus rests on coherence between values, policies, and practice – at home and abroad – making credibility something that is built continuously.

The two engines of model power: Narrative & Action

Model power turns values into systems. For Canada, this is vital: internationalist public opinion demands tangible benefits. Credibility grows when principles are made operational – when governments show that global cooperation delivers at home. Canada's strengths – trusted institutions, coalition-building, civility – can multiply influence through demonstration and partnership. Grounding foreign policy in domestic priorities (jobs, climate, health) makes global leadership practical and supportable. This demands agile diplomacy, integrated portfolios, and results-based cooperation. Canada is well-positioned to lead by example – translating credibility into strategy, and strategy into lasting influence.

Lasting influence requires structure, not sentiment. For a nation seeking to lead by demonstration, two engines are central: narrative and action. Narrative confers direction and trust; action delivers credible evidence and results.

The challenge and opportunity for Canada is to synchronize these engines – renewing its narrative of credible cooperation with a coherent, measurable results agenda. Only then can model power move from principle to performance, making cooperation both believable and effective.

A model power's narrative builds belief and collective resolve; its action agenda is the crucible of that belief, turning possibility into demonstrated progress.

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4. Narrative: A coherent story for a complex world

Any state seeking to project influence beyond its borders must first win legitimacy with its own citizens – a task highly dependent on the narratives it constructs and sustains. While policies and institutions can deliver material outcomes, it is a nation's story – its shared purpose, rationale, and sense of meaning – that gives those structures resilience and endurance. Public consent is not automatic, especially in a democracy: narrative builds the psychological contract that makes enduring international engagement possible.

Recent surveys highlight how fragile yet recoverable this contract is in Canada. Amid economic pressure and political fatigue, polling confirms a form of "conditional internationalism" – most Canadians remain outward-looking and value their country's global reputation, but their support is contingent on international policy being credibly linked to domestic prosperity and security. This intersection of ethics and utility is underscored in studies across the field of international cooperation: beliefs about mutual gain, fairness, and tangible impact shape the very possibility of support for external action.

Data shows that over 80 percent of Canadians support ongoing international institution membership, and 85 percent agree global cooperation on health and climate benefits them directly. Support grows further when global cooperation is understood as mutual investment – only when the story connects global action with domestic benefit does trust, and thus mandate, increase.

To renew faith in cooperation, Canada's narrative must link principle and practicality: a story that inspires on values and persuades on effectiveness, proving that decency and results reinforce each other. Classic IR and modern narrative studies converge: legitimate global agency is only sustained when citizens are shown, not merely told, how international engagement serves national wellbeing (Migone, 2024; Keohane & Nye, 1989).

The three ideas underpinning this effective narrative – mutual benefit, complementarity, and effectiveness – are not simply rhetorical; they are actionable frameworks for public legitimacy and pragmatic statecraft (Messner et al., 2021). Each bridges normative appeal with practical gain, carrying both ethical ("fairness," "respect," "accountability") and functional meaning (Axelrod, 1984).

For Canada, this is the foundation of a story fit for networked interdependence: "cooperation as common sense, fairness as strength, humility as credibility." Social science literature and recent Canadian opinion research align: nations that make this synthesis credible, and act in ways that visibly reflect it, shift international leadership from assertion to demonstration (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019; Migone, 2024).

Mutual benefit – shared success as self-interest

The central thread in a renewed Canadian narrative is mutual benefit: the recognition that in an interdependent world, Canadian well-being is inseparable from global stability and

progress. Canadians instinctively understand this connection, even if political rhetoric sometimes lags behind. Real-world events – from pandemics and climate change to financial crises and migration – have repeatedly shown that risks and solutions cross borders. Recent survey evidence reveals that Canadians' support for international engagement is strongest when such engagement is presented as a means of enhancing their own prosperity and security (EKOS, 2023; CanWaCH, 2024).

Consistent findings from major polling organizations reinforce this narrative. More than 80% of Canadians support ongoing participation in multilateral institutions, and approximately 85% agree that global cooperation on health, the environment, and other cross-border challenges delivers real benefits at home (EKOS, 2023; Ipsos, 2024). These numbers rise further when cooperation is portrayed as mutual investment – evidence from public attitudes research over the last two years shows that support for international spending jumps significantly when framed in terms of shared gain rather than aid or charity (Money Talks, 2023; Glocalities, 2024).

This is not a call for self-sacrifice, but for enlightened self-interest. Investment in global resilience – whether health infrastructure, food security, or climate adaptation – is evidence-based insurance for Canada's own stability. As polling and policy analysis confirm, Canadians expect government to pursue cooperation that demonstrably advances both pragmatic domestic priorities and Canada's international reputation for fairness and reliability (CanWaCH, 2024).

For Canada, the ethics of mutual benefit are pragmatic: partnership replaces asymmetrical "aid" models, reflecting a more modern understanding of interdependence and shared responsibility (EKOS, 2023). Canadians do not expect their country to do more than its fair share – but nor will they support retreat. As recent studies show, what Canadians seek is credible reciprocity: proof that global engagement protects, not dilutes, their interests and values (Money Talks, 2023; Ipsos, 2024).

Mutual benefit, then, is not just diplomatic rhetoric. It is a sound political and strategic foundation for Canadian internationalism, building a narrative of solidarity that is grounded in reason, trust, and modern realities. In an era of interlocking challenges, shared success is not simply idealism – it is the highest form of national interest.

Complementarity – fairness through partnership

Complementarity stands out as a distinctly Canadian approach to global influence: the conviction that credible leadership comes from fairness, balanced contribution, and respect for others' roles, not from dominance or unilateralism. Recent polling underlines this instinct. In 2024, 81% of Canadians reported it is important for Canada to contribute its fair share to solving global problems (EKOS, 2023). When asked about the nation's role internationally, Canadians expressed a consistent preference for "doing our fair share" and partnering in multilateral effort over seeking to singularly "lead" – demonstrating a civic ethic that values inclusion, proportionality, and reliability (CanWaCH, 2024).

Complementarity operates at two levels. Externally, it informs Canada's relationships with other states: recognizing that global problem-solving relies on differentiated but balanced roles, with countries contributing their unique assets, whether financial, technical, or institutional. Canada's traditional strengths – mediation, institution-building, and coalition management – reflect not military weight but a trusted capacity to bring actors together and sustain progress.

Internally, complementarity requires government to harness and coordinate the strengths of civil society, business, Indigenous leadership, academic institutions, and international partners CanWaCH, 2024). Polls consistently show that Canadians trust NGOs and international organizations more than government alone to deliver international results, with split trust levels of approximately 50% for NGOs and just over a third (37%) for state actors (EKOS, 2023; CanWaCH, 2024). As a result, the Canadian "model power" toolkit includes not just state diplomacy but platform-building, coalition convening, and amplifying diverse voices in whole-of-society engagement.

This dual orientation – abroad and at home – links legitimacy in international settings with legitimacy in domestic pluralism. Fair contribution abroad reinforces credibility, while engaging a diverse national constituency strengthens consensus and capacity at home.

In an era when both global systems and domestic trust are under strain, complementarity offers a credible template for sustainable cooperation: aligning strengths to need, balancing ambition with humility, and making fairness not just a moral value but a strategic operating principle. For Canada, complementarity is not a fallback from power, but a modern route to it.

Effectiveness – proving that cooperation works

Effectiveness is the most decisive test of any Canadian narrative of model power: the imperative to show that cooperation leads to visible, concrete results. Canadian willingness to engage globally remains steady, but conviction hinges on proof of impact. Surveys reveal this "delivery gap": a large majority recognize the logic of cooperation, but less than one third (29%) believe government spending on international aid "actually achieves what it claims" (EKOS, 2023; CanWaCH, 2024). This reflects not a rejection of internationalism, but a demand for trust grounded in credible, measured outcomes.

For a model power, effectiveness is both an ethical and strategic non-negotiable. Legitimacy built on values must be matched by evidence of delivery. When Canadians can trace global engagement to tangible gains at home – better health systems, cleaner air, or more resilient supply chains – political support rises (Money Talks, 2023; CanWaCH, 2024). Modern reporting frameworks such as the Statistical Report on International Assistance (2023–24) demonstrate Canada's capacity for tracking progress, but publics expect even clearer links between spending and results.

Meeting these expectations requires metrics, transparency, and constant communication. Claims to leadership must be tested by outcome: is Canada's engagement reducing disease or emissions, increasing fairness, improving jobs or safety? Results, not rhetoric, are the coin of trust. Only by setting realistic targets, measuring progress, candidly reporting setbacks, and avoiding over-promise can Canada maintain both public confidence and global credibility.

The external impact is equally significant. When partners know Canada delivers, it becomes a preferred ally – attracting coalitions, sharing risk, and amplifying Canadian influence. This is the "credibility cycle": credibility → trust → cooperation → outcomes → renewed legitimacy.

In an age of disillusionment with institutions, the test of effectiveness – doing good well rather than just doing good – has never been more urgent. Model powers, and Canadian leadership among them, must build credibility through demonstration, turning support into confidence and goodwill into hard national and global advantage.

Why values still matter

Any state seeking to project influence beyond its borders must first win legitimacy with its own citizens – a task that depends not only on delivering results, but on expressing a clear set of values that people recognise as their own (Glover, 2022). Policies and institutions may deliver material outcomes, but it is a nation's story of purpose – its sense of fairness, responsibility, and meaning – that gives those outcomes coherence (Migone, 2024). Narrative creates the moral and psychological contract that makes sustained international engagement possible (OECD, 2025).

Canadian public opinion reflects this blend of ethics and pragmatism. Surveys show a form of "conditional internationalism": Canadians remain outward-looking, but support depends on international action being both morally grounded and domestically useful (CanWaCH, 2024). They want their country to act with fairness and integrity, yet also expect clear evidence that cooperation delivers benefits – health, stability, security – at home. Research across cooperation studies confirms that public consent is highest when people perceive mutual gain, fairness, and real impact (Axelrod, 1984; Messner et al., 2021).

Over 80% of Canadians support continued membership in international institutions, and 85% believe global cooperation on climate and health directly benefits them (CanWaCH, 2024). However, these high numbers are realised only when cooperation is framed as shared investment, not charity – aligning ethical commitments with common-sense self-interest (Glocalities, 2024).

To renew faith in cooperation, Canada's narrative must hold these strands together. It must speak to values and prove effectiveness – showing that decency enhances security, and fairness strengthens prosperity. Classic IR and modern narrative theory converge: citizens will back international engagement when they see that principles guide action, and action reinforces principles (Keohane & Nye, 1989; Migone, 2024).

This is where the three organising ideas – mutual interest, complementarity, and effectiveness – play a decisive role. They are not technocratic concepts. They define what "doing the right thing" means in the twenty-first century:

- Mutual interest expresses fairness and reciprocity: a world where Canada protects itself by helping others protect themselves.
- Complementarity expresses humility and respect: a commitment to contribute Canada's fair share, work in partnership, and recognise others' agency.
- Effectiveness expresses responsibility and integrity: the moral obligation not only to help, but to ensure help actually works.

Together, these principles form a narrative that honours Canadian values – fairness, decency, cooperation – while grounding them in political realism. Social science and Canadian polling align: nations that make values visible in practice shift leadership away from assertion and toward example (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).

This narrative does not ask Canadians to choose between ethics and interest. It shows they are ultimately the same thing: cooperation as common sense, fairness as strength, humility as credibility, effectiveness as responsibility.

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5. Action: Turning credibility into capability

If narrative inspires belief, action is what builds – and sustains – public and international trust. While a compelling Canadian story frames cooperation as common sense, only the delivery of measurable results can prove that it truly works. The challenge for Canada as a model power is the translation of values into capability: delivering visible, credible benefits in an era marked by budgetary constraint, political turnover, and public scepticism.

Empirical evidence shows that Canadians support international engagement so long as it leads to tangible gains: climate stability, stable prices, robust institutions, and fairer economic opportunity. Polling likewise reveals how trust erodes when global commitments appear abstract or do not yield discernible domestic or international outcomes. To maintain a coalition for credible cooperation, Canada must continually demonstrate that principled engagement pays practical dividends for Canadians and the world.

A robust action agenda for model power has four foundations:

1. Financial investment: Modernizing the instruments of global finance to align with principles of fairness, moving from traditional aid models toward shared international investment and risk.
2. Capacity support: Building mutual and reciprocal partnerships – supporting learning and innovation both domestically and abroad rather than one-way transfers.
3. Policy coherence: Ensuring that various strands of policy – trade, climate, migration, development – do not work at cross-purposes, but reinforce national and global objectives through integration.
4. Institutional reform: Anchoring trustworthy and innovative governance in the architecture of cooperation – making accountability, evidence, and learning core features of multilateral and domestic systems.

Critically, this is not a call for overreach. The essence of model power is to match strengths to need: to do what Canada does best, leveraging credibility and expertise to shape outcomes, not simply multiplying commitments or resources. When performance is focused and realistic – using Canada's advantages to catalyse solutions, not compensate for scale – impact is amplified without risking overextension.

In sum, the action agenda is the discipline of demonstration in practice. It is where Canada can convert narrative into capability, turning fairness, competence, and cooperation from aspirations into the essential conditions of effective international leadership.

Financial investment – financing cooperation for shared prosperity

Money is not just a tool of influence; it is a signal of intent and credibility. For Canada, the method of financing cooperation will signal what kind of actor it aspires to be. Moving from the outdated paradigm of "aid" to a model of Global Public Investment (GPI) would reflect an

understanding that global wellbeing and Canadian prosperity are intertwined – requiring not one-way charity but shared, rules-based investment in public goods.

From aid to Global Public Investment (GPI)
Traditional foreign aid implies a unilateral transfer from "donor" to "recipient." GPI, by contrast, proposes reciprocal financing: all countries contribute, all benefit, and all participate in decision-making. This framework prioritizes fair share, joint governance, and mutual accountability – shifting the narrative from charity to shared security and investment in areas like health, climate, education, and digital infrastructure.

This shift fits Canadian strengths: fairness, competence, and coalition-building. Championing GPI principles at forums such as FfD4 or the G20 enables Canada to demonstrate constructive, modern leadership without overextension. The objective is not to outspend, but to contribute dependably and fairly – bolstering both global and domestic resilience.

Canadian public opinion strongly supports this reframing. Repeated polling by Cooperation Canada, Abacus Data, and Environics Institute shows that large majorities back international engagement when they see direct links to outcomes such as health security, climate resilience, and stronger domestic economies. Yet only about a third trust that current aid modalities truly deliver results, revealing a demand for credibility, impact, and accountability rather than raw generosity.

In practice, a modern financing and investment agenda includes:

- Integrating GPI principles into Canada's international cooperation frameworks – shifting from ad hoc pledges to predictable, multi-year, rules-based contributions.
- Expanding co-financing instruments, such as through FinDev Canada, to crowd in private and institutional capital for global public goods.
- Linking climate and development finance, supporting a just transition domestically and abroad.
- Enhancing transparency by enabling Canadians to trace how investments deliver impact – a prerequisite for restoring public trust in global engagement.

Fair finance is thus the backbone of model power. It brings together the practical and the principled, demonstrating that cooperation can be both ethical and strategic – in Canada's and the world's interest.

Capacity support – building strength through circular cooperation
In an age of complex, shared risks, national strength depends not on protecting old advantages but on constantly updating and circulating capacity. For a model power like Canada, capacity support should move beyond one-way technical assistance toward a system of reciprocal learning and innovation, a model increasingly conceptualized as Circular Cooperation.

A new model of exchange

Circular Cooperation recognizes that expertise and innovation flow in all directions – Canada has as much to learn as to teach. Existing approaches to "capacity building" often patronized Southern partners as recipients of Northern knowledge. Today's interdependent systems – spanning AI, climate adaptation, and public health – require networks of mutual learning: Canada might learn climate adaptation from Colombia, community health innovation from Bangladesh, or digital governance from Kenya.

This approach means investing in partnerships that enhance resilience for all. Recent institutional reviews highlight the value of:

- Digital and scientific collaboration – such as cross-border partnerships on AI ethics, data stewardship, or public-sector digital innovation.
- Climate and energy knowledge exchange – leveraging Canada's lessons on just transition while importing successful adaptation strategies from other contexts.
- Joint public-sector innovation – municipal partnerships, academic consortia, and civil service exchanges that multiply learning and adaptation.

A 2023 OECD analysis concluded that knowledge partnerships create deeper and more resilient change than direct financial aid because they catalyze adaptive systems that keep learning well after specific projects conclude.

Canadians strongly support international partnerships grounded in reciprocity and respect. Polling shows high trust in global scientific and university collaborations, with clear skepticism toward paternalistic "aid" models. Legitimacy flows from visible mutuality and capacity building that benefits all sides.

To operationalize circular cooperation, Canada can convene a "Network of Excellence" tying together Global Affairs Canada, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), academia, and business – a distributed platform for research, capacity, and policy experimentation. This would shift Canada's international role from just funder to trusted connector and accelerator of global knowledge.

Circular Cooperation, in this sense, is the ethos of a model power: leading by learning, equipping societies to innovate and adapt together, and building influence through shared capacity – making Canada's power and partnerships more relevant, respected, and resilient.

Policy coherence – aligning the domestic and the global

A model power recognises that credibility is determined not only by what it funds, but by how its policies fit together. Policy coherence is the ongoing discipline of aligning trade, climate, migration, and development so that each strand reinforces the others – governing as though the world's interdependence were a lived reality rather than a bureaucratic abstraction.

Gaps between policy rhetoric and practice are a classic threat to legitimacy. When a government promotes climate adaptation while subsidising fossil fuels, or prioritises global health yet weakens affordable medicines, or calls for gender equality while ignoring its own pay gaps, it invites public skepticism and erodes its claim to principled leadership. For model powers, coherence is not just efficient governance; it's a core test of integrity and trustworthiness.

For Canada, joined-up policy presents a rare opportunity to turn moral consistency into strategic benefit. Integrated priorities – across ministries and tiers of government – can increase national resilience, competitiveness, and diplomatic leverage. Concrete examples include:

- Climate-smart trade: Carbon border adjustments and transition funds that protect workers while supporting decarbonisation.
- Circular migration policy: Enabling skill mobility that boosts innovation in Canada and partner countries.
- Sustainable finance and investment: Aligning pension funds, aid, and credit agencies to drive the just transition at home and abroad.

Recent surveys show Canadians overwhelmingly support global engagement when it is explicitly linked to national well-being – especially on issues like clean energy, gender justice, and global health. Where public skepticism arises, it most often targets perceived incoherence or hypocrisy, not cooperation as such.

Delivering coherence requires deep institutional collaboration. This involves bridging federal, provincial, municipal, business, and civil society silos – potentially through a high-level Coherence Task Force or whole-of-government mechanism to ensure synergy and shared accountability.

Ultimately, policy coherence does more than avoid contradiction – it transforms cooperation from scattered intentions into unified, effective strategy, demonstrating in both word and deed that fairness and effectiveness are mutually reinforcing in Canadian practice.

Institutions – anchoring change for the long term

Narrative inspires and policy can deliver, but only quality institutions endure and scale good practice over time. Canada's long-term credibility rests on resilient, adaptive systems that translate momentary consensus into sustained progress – both domestically and globally.

Institutions are the link between principle and habit. Through rules, processes, and reliable incentives, they make fairness, learning, and partnership routine – not episodic – transforming ambition into durable capability.

Institutional change is Canada's most enduring legacy. Systems that anchor fairness, learning, and transparency outlive governments, carrying lessons forward. For Canada,

proof of institutional resilience – in domestic inclusion, reliable international delivery, and system-wide integrity – underpins national and international trust.

Domestic credibility: institutions that work

Canada's institutional toolkit – Global Affairs Canada (GAC), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), FinDev Canada, and influential civil society partners – is admired for professionalism and reliability. However, sustained impact demands three reforms:

1. Coherence across mandates. Integration across foreign, trade, climate, and development mandates, with GAC acting as a "strategic integrator," enables Canada to link global engagement to domestic renewal.
2. Evidence and learning as a system norm. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) must become institutional infrastructure, providing agile feedback loops between action, evidence, and Cabinet – making adaptation a permanent feature.
3. Partnership as a default setting. Canadians trust NGOs, academia, and multilateral organizations more than government alone for global delivery. Embedding civil-society and private-sector voices into formal decision-making increases relevance and legitimacy.

Ethically, this approach recognizes humility as strength – validating collaborative governance rather than centralizing control.

Global architecture: credibility through reform

Canada's respected voice as a convener enables it to advocate for reform in global systems where legitimacy and representativeness are lagging. Key opportunities include:

- Supporting Bretton Woods reform to give emerging economies a greater voice.
- Championing fair-share financing in the G20, IMF, and FfD4.
- Backing outcome-oriented coalitions – on climate, health, and tech – that model accountability and mutuality.

Expert consultations highlight that Canada's "usefulness" as a builder and bridge is more valued internationally than its "leadership" as an agenda-setter.

Model power coalitions: alliances that demonstrate

Beyond formal institutions, "model power coalitions" – outcome-driven alliances of states, cities, firms, and civil society – enable Canada to catalyze innovation and participatory governance. Canadian experience in convening fair trade, green tech, and pandemic preparedness platforms illustrates how such coalitions can institutionalize learning and shared results.

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6. Conclusion – making cooperation believable again

Every generation inherits a world it must steady before it can steer. Ours is one in which cooperation – the central organising principle of the modern age – has come under strain. The reasons are not ideological but practical. Too often, cooperation has promised more than it has proved; it has spoken of fairness without demonstrating it, and called for trust without earning it.

If Canada has a distinctive contribution to make, it lies not in slogans or moral postures, but in proof – in showing that cooperation works. This report has argued that credibility depends on two engines that must run together: narrative and action.

- The narrative engine builds belief – it persuades citizens that international engagement serves their everyday interests, linking fairness abroad with prosperity, health, and security at home.
- The action engine builds trust – it turns belief into evidence, demonstrating through finance, capacity, policy, and institutions that principled cooperation delivers measurable results.

When these two engines operate in sync, cooperation ceases to be an aspiration and becomes a national capability – a defining feature of what Canada contributes to the world.

Canada's opportunity

Canada enters this decade at a moment of risk and possibility. The world is fragmenting, yet also searching for examples of responsibility that feel real. Canada's reputation for decency, plural democracy, and professional institutions gives it a rare form of influence: not dominance, but trust. That trust is the essence of Model Power – the ability to persuade by example, to lead through demonstration.

Becoming a Model Power is not a claim to virtue; it is a discipline of coherence. It requires aligning domestic integrity with international purpose, showing that doing the right thing internationally is the smartest way to protect Canadians' long-term wellbeing. Cooperation is not idealism in disguise – it is the most effective form of realism in an interdependent age.

For Canada, the model power approach means converting principles – credibility, coherence, and cooperation – into pragmatic strategies that deliver results and build trust over time. Model power is not about trying to do everything globally; it is about focusing resources where Canada's reputation and comparative advantages have the greatest systemic impact. This requires honest recognition of constraints and a selective approach that builds on domestic strengths and proven track records.

Canada's international reputation is anchored in strong public institutions, a culture of fairness, professional diplomacy, and cross-sector partnerships that include academia, civil

society, and business. Canadians consistently support international engagement when it is visibly linked to improvements in national well-being, social inclusion, and security. Recent government reviews and expert commentary emphasize that Canada's best returns come from harnessing these assets to serve as a convener, coalition-builder, and example-setter, rather than a unilateral agenda-setter.

The key will be focusing on the domains where Canadian credibility, experience, and networks can offer the greatest proof that cooperation works. Four priority areas, identified by a synthesis of expert interviews, institutional analysis, and polling data, are especially suited for this approach:

1. **Planetary security:** Advancing climate, biodiversity, and clean energy at the intersection of domestic transition and global coalition-building.
2. **Global health:** Investing in resilient, equitable international health systems and rapid pandemic response – where Canada is trusted for its convening and science-policy expertise.
3. **Women's rights and inclusion:** Building on the Feminist International Assistance Policy to lead multidimensional gender equality and social inclusion initiatives.
4. **Peace and defence:** Leveraging Canada's standing as an impartial broker and trusted partner through peacebuilding, mediation, and evidence-based alliance work.

In each domain, the path to impact runs through the four practical levers: innovative finance, two-way capacity exchanges, policy coherence, and robust, learning-oriented institutions. Canada's international leadership is most effective, and public support remains strongest, when foreign and domestic priorities are transparently aligned and performance is measured by outcomes, not rhetoric.

Next steps and recommendations

The coming two years will shape the credibility of Canada's international engagement for the rest of the decade. With new leadership, a shifting geopolitical landscape, and a rare convergence of global reform processes – from Financing for Development (FfD4) to COP30 and the World Social Summit 2026 – Canada has both opportunity and obligation to define how a model power acts in practice.

The following priorities translate this report's argument into a pragmatic agenda.

1. Strengthen the narrative infrastructure

a. Frame international cooperation as mutual investment.

- Adopt clear communication guidelines that connect every major international initiative to tangible domestic benefits – from supply-chain resilience to public health protection – making fairness visible through outcomes.
- Develop a cross-government narrative toolkit grounded in the principles of mutual benefit, complementarity, and effectiveness. This should be used consistently across speeches, budgets, and strategy documents to sustain coherence.

- Ensure that all major international initiatives clearly link to Canadian wellbeing: cleaner air, stable prices, secure jobs, and healthier communities.

b. Launch a public conversation on Canada's role in the world.
Convene a nationwide "Canada and the World" dialogue – a listening exercise involving youth, civil society, Indigenous voices, and diaspora communities – to refresh how Canadians understand global engagement in terms of mutual benefit and shared security.

2. Demonstrate impact through flagship policies
a. Position Global Public Investment (GPI) at the heart of Canada's FfD4 offer.
Propose a Fair Share Financing Framework showing how all countries can contribute, benefit, and decide – linking global investment in public goods directly to Canadian economic security.

b. Align green industrial policy with international climate finance.
Ensure that Canada's domestic transition strategy – critical minerals, clean tech, and energy transition – explicitly connects to its external climate financing, demonstrating mutual benefit and reciprocity.

c. Advance fair trade and ethical technology frameworks.
Lead a coalition of like-minded partners in the G7, OECD, and Latin America to design "trust-based trade corridors" and common AI standards that embed transparency and shared accountability.

d. Support global institutional reform.
- Use Canada's G7 and UN platforms to advocate for Bretton Woods and multilateral reform based on representativeness, predictability, and shared governance. Canada should back credible voices from the Global South and model partnership in decision-making.
- Lead reform coalitions to modernise global institutions – advocating fairer representation, predictable financing, and shared governance.

3. Measure and communicate credibility
a. Embed measurement and learning in every major global initiative.
Mandate results frameworks that make success demonstrable – integrating MEL practices across departments and publicly reporting on shared progress.

b. Report publicly on progress and learning.
Publish annual reports assessing how Canada's international cooperation advances national well-being and global fairness, demonstrating accountability through transparency.

But this transformation will not come from government alone. It demands a shared national effort – across institutions, sectors, and communities – to make cooperation credible again.

Civil society and NGOs could help reclaim Canada's moral leadership through advocacy that links global fairness to domestic benefit, showing how cooperation protects Canadian lives and livelihoods.

Private sector and investors could develop partnerships on climate adaptation, digital inclusion, and health technologies that serve mutual prosperity. They should continue to report on social and environmental impact alongside financial returns, demonstrating that ethical business is good business.

Academia and research institutions could incorporate Model Power thinking into teaching and research, preparing a new generation of diplomats, economists, and innovators. They could create multi-directional research partnerships linking Canadian institutions with those in the Global South.

Citizens and communities should themselves demand integrity and coherence from leaders: engaging in citizen diplomacy through volunteering, student exchanges, cultural cooperation, and global campaigns.

Annex A: Canadian public opinion 2010–2020

Across the decade from 2010 to 2020, Canadian attitudes toward international development, global issues and foreign aid display a pattern of broadly stable support, punctuated by rising global concern and periodic shifts in perceived priorities. Despite shifts in global politics and domestic anxieties, Canadian support for international development, ODA, and global cooperation remained remarkably robust from 2010 to 2020 – anchored in a blend of moral duty, enlightened self-interest, and national identity. The public demonstrates a consistent belief that:

1. Canada should contribute meaningfully to global problem-solving.
2. Aid is both morally right and strategically smart.
3. Global challenges increasingly affect Canadians directly, strengthening support for international action.
4. Multilateralism and cooperation are central to Canada's identity and interests.
5. Younger generations are deepening the country's long-term orientation toward global engagement.

Several macro-trends emerge clearly when viewed together.

1. Persistent baseline support for aid, framed largely as moral obligation and global responsibility

From 2010 onward, Canadians consistently express the belief that Canada should play a constructive role in reducing global poverty and contributing to development assistance. In 2010, a plurality already felt that the level of foreign aid was "about right," with only about one in six saying it was too much. By 2015, this moral rationale is even more explicit: 94% said it is important to improve health, education, and economic opportunity for the world's poorest people, and 76% agreed that Canada has a moral obligation to expand such opportunities. This strong normative framing persists through 2017 and 2018, where Canadians regularly link Canada's international role with peacekeeping, humanitarian engagement, and multilateralism, and where most continue to view global poverty as a pressing concern. The 2020 polling further reinforces that Canadians believe the world is "smaller" and that challenges abroad have direct domestic impacts, strengthening the perceived necessity of development assistance and international cooperation.

2. Growing recognition that global problems affect Canada directly

Across the decade, Canadians move noticeably toward an understanding that global issues – climate change, conflict, pandemics, migration – are interconnected with their own well-being. In 2010, global concerns centred mostly on hunger, the environment, war, and economic stability, but the link to Canadian domestic interests was more implicit. By 2018, concerns about climate change, pollution, and hunger remain high, but terrorism, infectious disease, and inequality have become more salient, and Canadians increasingly believe that developments abroad influence life at home . The 2020 CCIC–Abacus study strengthens this further: Canadians see poverty, health crises, displacement and conflict abroad as driving mass migration, instability, and infectious disease risk in Canada. This represents a

decade-long shift from charity-based reasoning to interconnected-interest reasoning in public opinion.

3. Strong and sustained support for multilateralism and Canada's international role
Another durable trend is Canadians' attachment to multilateralism and global cooperation. Already in 2010, nearly nine in ten Canadians were satisfied with Canada's place in the world and wanted active engagement in global institutions such as the UN. Through to 2018, this view persists, with majorities believing Canada should remain involved in international organisations and continue peacekeeping and humanitarian contributions. By 2020, most Canadians say they want Canada to "do its part" or even lead among peers in ODA, and nearly three-quarters believe Canada needs to match or exceed comparable countries' commitments. Over the decade, therefore, support for global engagement becomes normalized and expectation-driven, especially among younger Canadians.

4. Growing concerns about aid effectiveness, corruption, and impact – but without major shifts in overall support
While overall support for aid stays strong, a parallel trend emerges toward greater skepticism about the effectiveness of aid delivery. This becomes most visible after 2015. By 2017 and 2018, Canadians increasingly doubt that aid reaches intended recipients or avoids corruption, and somewhat underestimate Canada's influence internationally. Yet despite these concerns, support for giving aid and belief in its necessity remain resilient. The 2020 research shows that when Canadians are presented with clear causal narratives – preventing disease spread, reducing conflict, promoting economic opportunity – they respond positively, suggesting that concerns about effectiveness reflect communication gaps rather than ideological opposition.

5. Increased prioritisation of specific global challenges
Across the decade, Canadians' priority issues shift toward a more diversified portfolio of global risks. In 2010, the leading concerns are hunger, environment, war, and economic instability. By 2015, Canadians emphasise health, education, clean water, and disaster response as key priorities for aid spending – areas they overwhelmingly support. Through 2017–2018 and into 2020, climate change, global health security, forced migration, poverty and infectious disease gain prominence, reflecting a broader understanding of systemic risks. Canadians repeatedly endorse focusing aid on clean water, health, education, and poverty reduction – indicating long-term stability in the thematic priorities that resonate with the public.

6. A generational realignment: younger Canadians more globally minded, more supportive of aid, and more concerned about its impact
Across all studies, younger Canadians (18–34) consistently show:

- higher support for Canada doing more internationally,
- stronger concern about global poverty and climate,
- more willingness to see Canada as a leader in aid and cooperation,

- greater confidence that global action can improve outcomes.

This trend becomes clearer after 2015 and is strongly reinforced in the 2018 and 2020 data. As the electorate turns over, this generational tilt toward global engagement is likely to strengthen public support for international cooperation.

Annex B: Canadian public opinion 2022–2024

From 2022 to 2024, Canadians remain fundamentally internationalist but increasingly anxious. Their support for foreign aid is broad, soft, and highly conditional: they want Canada to remain engaged, moral, and respected globally – but only in ways that feel fiscally responsible, effective, and compatible with pressing domestic needs. The challenge for policymakers and communicators is not persuading Canadians to care about the world – they already do – but demonstrating that aid works, that it serves both moral and strategic interests, and that global engagement strengthens Canada rather than competing with it. The overall trend is not one of linear decline or linear growth, but rather of persistent soft support for internationalism under increasing strain.

Awareness of Canada's development efforts has remained low throughout the period. The 2022 survey showed that nearly two-thirds of Canadians were unaware of Canada's international development activities – an information gap that did not materially improve in 2023 or 2024. The 2023 EKOS study reinforced this picture: only around one-quarter of Canadians reported being familiar with Canada's aid programme. The implication is that attitudes toward aid are shaped less by detailed knowledge and more by general orientations toward fairness, global responsibility, and domestic economic pressures.

Support for providing aid is remarkably stable, though rarely enthusiastic. In 2022, a majority agreed that Canada should provide assistance to poorer countries. In 2023, this majority persisted, with over half favouring aid, even as the share wanting aid increases softened slightly. By 2024, support for ODA climbed again – nearly eight in ten expressing at least some support – though this broad approval coexisted with a powerful desire to prioritize domestic needs. When Canadians say they support ODA, they tend to mean modest, responsible, morally motivated aid rather than dramatic increases in international spending.

A persistent tension defines Canadian attitudes: strong moral instinct to help others vs. heightened domestic insecurity. Across all years, Canadians overwhelmingly endorse values of compassion, equality, and global cooperation. This is robust across age and income groups. Yet, from 2022 onward – intensifying in 2023 and 2024 – polls show rising anxiety about inflation, health care, housing affordability, and the general direction of the country. Canadians increasingly insist that domestic problems come first, even while acknowledging that global poverty, climate, conflict, and health crises matter. This is not isolationism; it is a defensive posture shaped by economic pressure.

The belief that global problems affect Canada remains strong and steady. Across all four years, a majority recognised the interconnected nature of global issues. In 2023, more than half reported that events in other countries influence their own lives, and by 2024 over 85% agreed that investing in global health protects Canada's own health system. Canadians may feel domestically squeezed, but they have not turned away from the idea that Canada is tied to the world.

Concerns about aid effectiveness and corruption remain stubbornly high. In 2023, most Canadians believed that aid is often lost to corruption or does not reach intended recipients. This scepticism has been consistent since at least 2022. Even among those who support ODA, doubts about efficiency and impact are widespread. This appears to be the principal barrier to stronger support for aid increases – not a rejection of global solidarity, but a belief that the system underperforms.

Priorities for aid spending are stable and strongly aligned with basic needs. Across all years, Canadians consistently favour investments in clean water, health, education, and poverty reduction. They view these areas as both morally compelling and strategically sensible. Issues like gender equality, climate change, or geopolitical competition (e.g., countering China) receive far lower prioritisation, though they attract more support in 2024 when framed in terms of Canada's international standing.

A deepening pessimism about world affairs colours all other perceptions. The 2023 and 2024 studies show overwhelming negativity about global trends – war, instability, authoritarianism, poverty, migration pressures. Canadians perceive the world as worsening, and this influences their expectations about aid: most do not believe extreme poverty will be eradicated soon, nor that global issues are improving. This pessimism does not reduce empathy, but it does create caution about expansive commitments.

Between 2024 and 2025, a subtle but important shift appears: fiscal anxiety crystallises into stronger preferences for cutting foreign aid. The 2025 deficit-focused polling shows that when Canadians are prompted to think about government overspending, foreign aid becomes a primary target for cuts. Three in five would reduce it – higher than in previous years. This does not contradict earlier broad support for ODA; rather, it reflects the vulnerability of aid in moments of economic fear. Foreign aid is consistently seen as morally good, but fiscally dispensable.

Macro-trends across the four years

1. Enduring moral support for aid and cooperation, grounded in Canadian identity and values.
2. Persistent low knowledge and high scepticism, limiting enthusiasm for increased budgets.
3. Rising domestic insecurity, which does not produce isolationism but does reduce appetite for expanded global spending.
4. Stable recognition of global interdependence, even as Canadians worry about domestic affordability.
5. A shift toward fiscal conservatism, making aid politically vulnerable despite underlying moral sympathy.

Annex C: Individual poll analysis – key insights

"Canadian perspectives on ODA & Canada on the world stage 2024" (Abacus Data, July 2024)
Source: Abacus Data survey of 2,300 Canadians, July 11–18, 2024

This major 2024 survey offers a detailed picture of how Canadians think about international cooperation, global challenges, and official development assistance (ODA). The findings show a public that is deeply anxious about domestic pressures yet simultaneously supportive of global engagement – though often with caveats. Canadians broadly believe in global collaboration, value Canada's international reputation, and still see a moral and strategic case for ODA. However, domestic concerns – especially cost of living, health care, and housing – shape their priorities and create tensions around Canada's international role.

1. Broad belief in global collaboration, but framed by domestic pressures
Canadians overwhelmingly believe that solving major issues requires international cooperation (89%), and value teaching the next generation to help others. Yet, 84% also believe Canada should look after domestic issues first. This tension between outward-looking values and inward-looking priorities runs through the entire dataset.

Key points:
- 89% say global collaboration is needed for major problems.
- 84% believe domestic issues should come first.
- 69% say government decisions made for the greater good are worth the cost.

This creates a public that is not isolationist, but strongly "domestic-first" – global engagement is acceptable when it serves Canada's interests or values.

2. High levels of anxiety: cost of living, health care, housing dominate
Concern about domestic conditions is nearly universal. These anxieties shape attitudes to foreign engagement and create the political pressure to prioritise domestic spending.

Key figures:
- 96% worried about cost of living; 91% about health care and the economy.
- 83% concerned about domestic poverty and inequality.
- Only ~14% believe global affairs are on the right track.

This explains the ambivalence toward ODA: people care about global problems but feel stretched at home.

3. Mixed but generally supportive views on ODA
Despite domestic anxieties, support for ODA remains high by international standards.

Support levels:

- 79% support Canada providing ODA (20% strongly).
- Only 21% oppose ODA.
- 31% believe Canada is not spending enough; 39% say the amount is about right; 30% think it spends too much.

Demographics:

- Younger Canadians (18–29) and university-educated respondents are the strongest supporters.
- Those identifying as right-leaning are most likely to oppose ODA.

4. Canadians value international reputation and leadership

A striking finding is the importance Canadians place on global status, institutions, and leadership roles.

Key figures:

- 89% say it is very important for Canada to be respected internationally.
- 81% want Canada active in organisations like the UN.
- 80% say ODA strengthens Canada's global leadership.
- 83% believe ODA is important for maintaining international standing.

Reputation matters – suggesting an opening for narratives that frame ODA as central to Canada's place in the world.

5. Strong belief in interconnectedness and mutual interest

Many Canadians accept that global challenges directly affect life at home – an important foundation for a "mutual interest" narrative.

Key examples:

- 85% agree investing in global health prevents impacts on Canada's health system.
- 73% agree ODA helps counter global influence from actors like China.
- 74% believe ODA is important for maintaining a strong global economy.

6. Growing concern about migration and global disorder

The survey shows rising anxiety about global instability, including refugee flows, conflict, authoritarianism, and climate change.

Highlights:

- 83% see refugee migration as a problem (up 6 points from last year).
- 83% concerned about armed conflict; 82% about authoritarianism; 81% about climate change.
- 77% concerned about refugee migration; 65% about infectious diseases.

These perceptions shape attitudes toward ODA – sometimes increasing support (prevention, stability) and sometimes decreasing it (competition with domestic priorities).

7. Voting behaviour: global issues matter but rarely determine votes
Canadians care about global issues but vote primarily on domestic ones.

Key points:
- 31% say global issues are a key voting factor.
- 57% say they matter but come after domestic concerns.
- 12% say global issues do not influence their vote.

8. Strong moral justification for ODA still resonates
Even with domestic pressures, people continue to endorse the moral case.

Key figures:
- 76% say Canada has a moral obligation to help those in need.
- 72% trust Canadian NGOs to manage ODA funds responsibly.

9. Public wants a balanced, "fair-share" role for Canada
Canadians do not want Canada to withdraw from the world, but neither do they want overreach. This is a pragmatic, moderate internationalism.

Preferences:
- 64% say Canada should do its fair share – not more, not less.
- 26% want Canada to be a leader.
- Only 11% say Canada should play a minimal role.

Overall interpretation
Canadians remain a fundamentally pro-cooperation public, valuing global engagement, international reputation, and collective solutions to global problems. However, they are squeezed by domestic pressures and strongly prioritise spending at home. Support for ODA is broad but shallow: people like the idea, but feel constrained by economic anxiety.

For policymakers and communicators, the most effective narratives appear to be:
- Mutual interest: global investments protect Canadians at home.
- Fair share: Canada should neither retreat nor overextend.
- Reputation and values: ODA reflects the kind of country Canada wants to be.
- Stability and prevention: supporting global health, conflict prevention, and economic resilience benefits Canada directly.

Angus Reid Institute polling (March 20–22, 2024)
Source: "Majority of Canadians concerned about deficit, say federal government is spending 'too much'," Angus Reid Institute, survey of 1,602 adults

This nationally representative survey captures an underlying mood of fiscal anxiety in Canada, with clear public preferences about where government should spend more – and where it should spend less. The data points to a public increasingly uneasy about federal deficits and inclined toward a rebalancing of spending rather than large new outlays. At the same time, Canadians differentiate sharply across policy sectors, signalling strong support for investment in health care and growing interest in national defence, while foreign aid emerges as a symbolic pressure point for cost-cutting.

Overall mood: concern about federal spending and deficits

- Two-thirds of Canadians are worried about the federal deficit, suggesting widespread anxiety about the trajectory of public finances.
- This concern appears to colour attitudes toward a number of spending areas, especially those perceived as non-domestic.

Where Canadians want to cut

- Foreign aid is the top target for reductions:
- 59% say they would cut foreign aid spending.
- Of those wanting cuts, 64% are men, and 64% are aged 35–54, indicating a demographic concentration of scepticism.
- This aligns with a long-term trend in which foreign aid becomes an early casualty of fiscal tightening, even though it represents a small share of total federal spending.

Where Canadians want to spend more

- Health care dominates public priorities:
- 67% want increased investment in health care.
- This reflects sustained concern over wait times, staffing shortages, and system performance.
- National defence is an emerging area of support:
- 48% would increase defence spending.
- This is striking given defence's historically weak public salience in Canada and suggests the influence of global geopolitical instability.

Implications

- Canadians are not uniformly anti-spending; rather, they are highly selective, prioritising domestic, citizen-facing services.
- Foreign aid faces an uphill communications battle, particularly among middle-aged men – a group that often anchors political majorities.
- The pattern reinforces the need for narratives that explain how external spending (e.g., international cooperation, global public goods) contributes to domestic well-being.
- For policymakers, the message is clear: fiscal credibility matters, but so does targeted investment in systems that directly affect Canadians' daily lives.

Canadian Views on International Assistance Tracking Study 2023 (EKOS Research Associates, for Global Affairs Canada)

This tracking study, based on a large national survey (n=3,059), provides a detailed picture of Canadian attitudes toward international assistance, global issues, and poverty. The data show a population generally supportive of aid in principle, committed to global cooperation, and concerned about global problems – yet increasingly pessimistic about progress and doubtful about the effectiveness of aid spending. As in previous years, the findings reflect a mix of moral commitment, economic anxiety, humanitarian concern, and skepticism about institutions. Overall support for aid remains stable, but enthusiasm for increasing spending has softened, and perceptions of global poverty remain both highly negative and deeply misinformed.

Public support for international assistance: stable but cautious

- 54% believe Canada should provide aid; 28% oppose.
- Views are broadly consistent with 2022, with little shift across regions and demographics.
- Most Canadians see aid as morally right and globally important, but fewer now favour increasing aid spending (33%, down from 37%).

Perceived benefits of aid

- 70% agree aid improves lives through education, health, water, and sanitation.
- Nearly half see strategic benefits: 47% political influence, 45% economic growth.
- Only 33% believe aid helps Canada's national security.

Concerns about aid effectiveness

- 56% think aid ends up with corrupt politicians.
- 54% say most aid does not reach intended recipients.
- 41% believe funds are wasted on ineffective programs.
- Only 29% rate Canadian government aid spending as effective.

Despite this, views are largely unchanged from last year and slightly improved regarding overall effectiveness (+3 points).

Priorities and purpose: strong moral framing, clear thematic preferences

- 59% say poverty reduction should be the primary purpose of aid – far surpassing national-interest justifications (14%).
- Funding priorities cluster around:
- Clean water access (44%)
- Education (39%)
- Healthcare (37%)

Demographically, women and graduates show strongest alignment with humanitarian priorities.

Aid dependence and self-sufficiency

- 50% believe aid helps countries become self-sufficient.
- 27% think it produces dependency.

These attitudes have remained stable.

Canadian worldviews: cooperation valued, global pessimism rising

The study shows Canadians are globally oriented but deeply worried:

- 64% think cooperation – rather than isolation – secures Canada's future.
- Canadians enjoy global engagement (77% enjoy travel; 75% feel a duty not to harm others abroad).
- Top global concerns:
- Climate/environment (51%)
- Economic insecurity (46%)
- Inequality (41%)
- Concerns about war/conflict and economic issues have increased since 2022, while worries about pandemics and misinformation have declined.

Pessimism about the world

- 76% believe the world is getting worse.
- Only 9% see improvement.
- The sense that global issues directly affect Canadians remains strong (52%).

Concern about global poverty: high, but accompanied by fatalism

- 62% express concern about poverty in poor countries.
- Only 12% say they are not concerned.
- 83% do not believe extreme poverty will be eradicated by 2030.
- Canadians drastically overestimate global poverty levels, with many believing 20–50% of the world lives in extreme poverty.

Despite pessimism, Canadians continue to see moral and practical value in poverty reduction:

- 60% trust the UN and international organisations to make an impact.
- 54% believe NGOs play a key role (slightly more than trust in government efforts, at 42%).

Awareness and understanding of international assistance: low and declining

- Only 28% say they are familiar with Canada's international assistance programmes (down from 30% in 2022).
- Nearly half have only vague awareness.
- About one-quarter know nothing about Canada's aid role.

Views on Canada's role

- 59% believe Canada has a moral responsibility to help developing countries.
- 47% say aid supports Canada's global reputation.
- Canadians are divided between moral justifications (36%) and perceptions of strategic self-interest (28%).

Overall takeaways
This 2023 tracking study reveals a Canadian public that:
- Continues to value aid, global responsibility, and cooperation.
- Feels more anxious about the global context, the economy, and conflict.
- Is less enthusiastic about increasing aid spending but not more hostile to aid overall.
- Holds persistent misconceptions and skepticism about aid effectiveness.
- Shows low literacy on international assistance policies yet maintains strong aspirational and moral commitments to global engagement.

Canada-specific analysis of the BlackSands / Money Talks research (2023)
Across the Money Talks surveys, Canada consistently emerges as a cautious but persuadable G7 public – sharing many G7-wide concerns but with a distinctive mix of modest internationalism, high climate concern, and scepticism about taxation.

1. Issue salience and context
In the BlackSands data, Canadian respondents rank cost of living, healthcare, and the economy above climate change when asked what they will be thinking about in their next vote. This aligns precisely with the Canadian-specific polling you reviewed for 2022–2025, which shows economic insecurity and affordability dominating public attention. Yet climate change remains a stable second-tier concern, with Canadians consistently more worried than Americans but slightly less than Europeans.

2. Support for climate and development finance
Canada mirrors the broader G7 pattern in which people support climate action in principle, but prefer domestic investment over international spending. In the 2023 Money Talks charts, G7 publics show a growing preference for "spending at home, not abroad" – and Canadian polling across 2018–2025 shows the same shift. However, Canadians are more open than most G7 publics to affordable finance for developing countries and to the idea that rich countries should pay more – a finding reinforced by all four years of the Canadian ODA polling, which consistently shows majority support for Canada contributing its "fair share."

3. Tax and revenue narratives
A major insight from the 2024 Money Talks: Tax data is that trust in government's ability to manage tax revenue fairly is low and tax systems are poorly understood. Canadian public opinion mirrors this almost exactly: the national surveys you analysed show declining trust, uncertainty about effectiveness, and a strong preference for earmarked or transparent funding mechanisms. This is crucial – Canada will not support new international taxation unless the purpose is visible, practical, and clearly linked to outcomes.

4. Strategic implications for Canada

The BlackSands research reinforces your previous conclusions:

- Canadians respond best to mutual-interest framing, not charity.
- Narratives should emphasise pragmatic benefits (jobs, security, economic resilience).
- Canadians are more persuadable when climate and development are framed as investments, not costs.
- Because tax literacy and trust are low, any proposal must foreground accountability, fairness, and simple mechanisms.

Overall, Canada sits squarely in the "moveable middle": supportive of cooperation and climate action, sceptical of taxation, but highly responsive to well-crafted, pragmatic narratives.

"Many Canadians Unaware of Canada's International Development Efforts" (Ipsos for Cuso International, 2022)

This Ipsos survey (Nov 3–7, 2022) provides a snapshot of how much Canadians know about their country's international development work, what they prioritise, and how perceptions have evolved. Overall, the findings reveal strikingly low awareness alongside selective interest in specific themes, especially gender-based violence and rights.

Overall awareness of Canada's international development efforts

- 64% of Canadians say they are unaware of Canada's development efforts – a major visibility gap.
- Awareness is significantly higher among younger Canadians (46% of those aged 18–34; 40% of those 35–54) and lowest among older Canadians (only 26% aware).
- This suggests that international cooperation is not strongly anchored in the public consciousness, particularly among older demographics.

Public priorities in development cooperation

- 53% think Canada should prioritise preventing gender-based violence, especially violence against women and girls.
- This strong majority indicates that gender-related issues remain a powerful entry point for public engagement.
- 16% identify sexual and reproductive health and rights education as a key programming priority – another gender-linked domain that resonates with a notable minority.

Evolving understanding of thematic areas

- Over the previous two years, Canadians report improved understanding in several areas linked to the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP):
- Gender equality: +37%
- Human rights and inclusion: +35%
- Environment and climate: +29%

- These trends suggest gradual but meaningful public learning, even though baseline awareness of Canada's role abroad remains low.

The Foundations of Opinion on Official Development Assistance (Abacus Data for CCIC, January 2020)

The 2020 Abacus Data study paints a picture of a Canadian public that is deeply aware of global interconnectedness and generally supportive of Official Development Assistance (ODA), provided that its purpose and impact are well communicated. The poll shows Canadians increasingly perceive the world as "small," in the sense that crises abroad – conflict, climate change, poverty, and infectious disease – cannot be contained by borders and are seen as directly relevant to domestic security and prosperity. This worldview forms the foundation of support for ODA: when Canadians believe that global challenges affect life at home, they are more open to sustained or increased development spending.

A major underlying theme is that concern about global issues is widespread across the country and across demographics. Climate change, terrorism/extremism, conflict, infectious disease, and the migration of refugees feature prominently among top-tier anxieties. Canadians also see clear causal links between poverty and instability in developing countries and the global challenges they worry about. This suggests fertile ground for narrative strategies that reinforce how ODA contributes to reducing risks Canadians feel most acutely.

Public perceptions of the value of ODA

- Many Canadians believe ODA makes a real difference, especially in humanitarian crises, infrastructure development, improving conditions for women and girls, and preventing disease.
- The public responds strongly to tangible, results-oriented messaging that demonstrates ODA's effectiveness.
- Support for ODA is closely tied to the belief that it helps address the very problems – conflict, migration, disease – that Canadians want action on.

Desire for Canada to play its part

- About three-quarters of Canadians want Canada either to be a leader in ODA or at least to contribute at levels comparable to peer countries.
- This support spans demographics and regions but is strongest among younger Canadians and supporters of progressive political parties.
- Many Canadians feel disappointment or embarrassment when they learn Canada lags behind other G7 donors.

Arguments that resonate most with the public

The study identifies several narrative framings that strongly increase support for ODA:

- Preventing the spread of infectious disease – at the time of fieldwork, the coronavirus outbreak was prominent and heightened receptivity to this rationale.

- Cost-effectiveness – prevention through ODA is framed as cheaper and smarter than responding to crises later.
- Long-term economic benefits – investment in developing countries can create future trade partners; South Korea was cited as a compelling example.
- Reducing instability and security threats – arguments that ODA prevents violence, reduces forced migration, and mitigates root causes appeal across the political spectrum, including to more skeptical Conservative-leaning audiences.

Overall public mood
Canadians appear simultaneously worried about global instability and convinced that ODA is both morally right and strategically wise. They want Canada to contribute responsibly, understand the risks of inaction, and value narratives that present ODA as both principled and pragmatic. The study concludes that framing ODA as a moral obligation and a smart investment is the most effective foundation for building sustained public and political support.

Canada World Survey 2018 (Environics Institute)
The 2018 survey reveals a public highly attuned to global challenges, broadly supportive of Canada's international role, yet increasingly sceptical about Canada's global influence and the effectiveness of its contributions. Compared with 2008, Canadians remain concerned about core global threats, but place slightly less emphasis on traditional humanitarian issues and exhibit a nuanced sense of Canada's strengths and limitations in global affairs.

Major global concerns
Canadians identify a wide spectrum of global risks, with environmental issues still at the top of the agenda.
- Environment/pollution remains the primary concern (55% "very concerned"), though down from 61% in 2008.
- Hunger/famine (53%) and terrorism (52%) also feature prominently, with terrorism markedly higher than in 2008.
- Young Canadians and older Canadians alike continue to rank climate change and pollution as pressing global issues.

Interpretation: Global concern has broadened: climate remains dominant, but insecurity-related concerns (terrorism, war, extremism) have grown since 2008.

Attitudes toward Canada's current global influence
Canadians hold a modest view of their country's international clout:
- Only 15% believe Canada has "a lot" of influence.
- 55% think Canada has "some" influence, while 30% feel Canada has "little or none."

Interpretation: While Canadians see their country as constructive and principled, they are not convinced it is a major power shaping global outcomes.

Perceived changes in Canada's international role
Respondents offered mixed assessments of how Canada's role is evolving:

- Peacekeeping and humanitarian work remain the strongest symbols of Canada's positive global contribution, particularly among younger Canadians.
- Some Canadians cite political influence/diplomacy as a growing strength, though this view is more common among native-born respondents.
- Reasons for perceived decline focus heavily on reduced influence and reduced support to other countries, with declining overseas aid specifically noted (up from 0% in 2008 to 9% in 2018).

Interpretation: Canadians continue to value peacekeeping and humanitarian action, but feel Canada's overall influence is slipping.

Foreign aid and global engagement
The survey shows declining confidence in foreign aid as a defining Canadian contribution:

- Only 8% in 2018 (down from 17% in 2008) identify foreign aid as Canada's most positive global contribution.
- The sharpest declines are in Quebec and among Canadians who pay less attention to global affairs.

Interpretation: Foreign aid remains valued but is less top-of-mind than a decade earlier; peacekeeping still symbolizes Canada's identity more strongly.

Where Canadians believe Canada can make a difference
Across several global challenges, Canadians see room for meaningful contribution:

- Migration and refugees: 38% say Canada can make a "big difference"; 44% say "some difference."
- Global warming and environmental issues: 32% "big difference"; 44% "some difference."
- Infectious diseases: 28% "big difference"; 48% "some difference."

Interpretation: Canadians believe Canada can help address global problems, especially humanitarian and environmental issues, though optimism is moderate.

Support for multilateralism and global cooperation
The survey shows strong support for Canada's engagement in international institutions:

- 94% believe Canadian involvement in the UN is important (57% "critical," 37% "important").
- International trade is seen as essential to Canada's prosperity (73% "very important," 22% "somewhat important").

Interpretation: Canadians strongly favour multilateralism, seeing global cooperation – including trade – as vital to national well-being.

Economic globalisation and trade

- Over 63% believe NAFTA has benefited Canada, up significantly from earlier years.
- Over 90% say international trade is important to maintaining jobs and quality of life.

Interpretation: Canadians are broadly pro-trade and associate trade engagement with national prosperity.

Overall takeaways

- Canadians in 2018 are globally aware, concerned about a mix of environmental and security threats.
- They value peacekeeping and humanitarianism, though foreign aid is less salient than it was in 2008.
- Support for international cooperation and the UN is remarkably strong.
- Canadians perceive declining global influence, yet believe Canada can still make a meaningful contribution on select issues.
- Views on international trade are overwhelmingly positive, reflecting confidence in economic globalisation.

Public attitudes toward international assistance in Canada (2017 – ONE Campaign survey)

Source: "16-066685-01 ONE Canada Tables – Weighted – 160217 ICO" (n = 2,002)

This survey provides a detailed picture of how Canadians in 2017 understood international development, global issues, and the role Canada should play in helping low-income countries. Although the data is tabular, several broad themes emerge clearly.

Overall orientation toward global issues

- Canadians were highly concerned about major global challenges, including climate change, poverty, conflict, terrorism, and infectious diseases.
- A majority believed that global events affect Canadians directly, and there was substantial support for the idea that Canada has responsibilities beyond its borders.
- Respondents generally rejected isolationism: cooperation with other countries was seen as essential for Canada's prosperity and security.

Values underpinning support for aid

- Strong majorities agreed with statements expressing solidarity, shared humanity, and fairness, such as "we have more in common than what divides us" and "helping people in need is the right thing to do."
- Many supported the idea that Canada should help people become self-sufficient, seeing development as empowering rather than as charity.
- Canadians overwhelmingly valued children's rights and equal opportunities, especially in education, nutrition, and basic health services.

Attitudes toward poverty and development

- There was broad acknowledgement that poverty abroad is linked to wider global problems such as conflict, disease, and forced migration.
- Many believed that ending extreme poverty is possible with the right investments – particularly in girls' education, vaccines, nutrition, and economic opportunity.
- Support was especially strong for evidence-based interventions that save lives cost-effectively.

Perceived effectiveness of aid

- While some skepticism existed – such as concerns about corruption or mismanagement – large segments of the public acknowledged that aid can and does work, especially in:
- preventing the spread of infectious disease,
- improving education,
- increasing food security,
- supporting women and girls.
- Statements highlighting proven results and value for money tended to receive the highest agreement.

Canada's role and responsibility

- A solid majority felt that Canada should "do its part" internationally, matching or exceeding efforts of other wealthy countries.
- Respondents saw economic and security benefits for Canada in helping reduce global instability.
- There was meaningful support for the idea that aid advances Canada's long-term interests by promoting stability, creating trading partners, and preventing crises before they escalate.

Engagement and behaviour

- Many Canadians reported having donated to international causes, supported NGOs, or shown interest in global issues.
- Younger Canadians tended to be both more globally oriented and more supportive of development efforts.

Broad takeaways

- Humanitarian instinct + pragmatic self-interest shaped public opinion. Canadians believed helping others is morally right and strategically smart.
- Support for targeted, results-driven aid was strong, especially when linked to health, education, and security.
- Global interdependence was a dominant theme: most respondents understood that what happens abroad affects life in Canada.
- Although concerns about waste existed, belief in aid's impact outweighed skepticism.

Canadian perspectives on international development (2015)
Summary of key findings based on Engineers Without Borders Canada & ICN survey

The 2015 survey offers a snapshot of broadly favourable Canadian attitudes toward international development, rooted in moral obligation, humanitarian values, and strong support for poverty-focused aid. At the same time, it reflects early signs of scepticism around personal efficacy and mixed views on Canada's appropriate leadership role.

Overarching attitudes toward global poverty and moral duty
Canadians express very high concern for global poverty and strong normative support for helping the world's poorest people. These findings highlight a clear moral narrative: Canadians broadly see poverty reduction not only as beneficial but as ethically required.

- 94% say improving health, education, and economic opportunity for the poorest is important.
- 76% agree (strongly or somewhat) that Canada has a moral obligation to help expand these opportunities.
- 71% report pride when Canada increases its international aid spending.

Views on Canada's leadership role in aid
Support for a leadership posture is present, though not overwhelming. This indicates that Canadians tend to prefer Canada "doing its part," but not necessarily taking a dramatically outsized leadership role.

- 62% agree that Canada should be one of the leading countries in providing international aid.
- A significant minority (38%) disagree, suggesting limits to enthusiasm for exceptionalism even among a generally supportive public.

Engagement with global issues
Interest in international issues is moderate:

- 66% follow global social, political, or development issues "very" or "fairly" closely.
- About one-third follow only loosely or not at all.

This suggests a reasonably informed public but with limited deep engagement – consistent with later polling.

Perceived ability to make a difference
Canadians distinguish sharply between the government's ability to reduce global poverty and their own. The data reveal a sense of limited personal efficacy, with most believing that meaningful impact lies primarily with governments and institutions.

- 26% think the government can make a significant difference (score 8–10).
- Only 10% think individuals can.

Support for overseas aid and budget levels

There is clear support for a generous approach to aid:

- 26% choose 8–10 when asked whether the government should give aid "generously."
- In terms of the annual budget, 46% say Canada should spend more, while 30% want spending to remain the same and 25% want to spend less.

Issue areas prioritised for aid

Canadians strongly favour aid that delivers basic needs and humanitarian outcomes. Support decreases as issues become more structural or economically oriented, showing a preference for tangible humanitarian outcomes. Large majorities (on a 0–10 support scale) select 7–10 for:

- Clean water (75%)
- Health (71%)
- Education (69%)
- Disaster response (69%)
- Food security (68%)
- Maternal and newborn care (60%)
- Economic opportunity (52%)

Focus Canada 2010

Public attitudes in 2010 reveal a Canada still strongly anchored in social-justice priorities at home, broadly supportive of international engagement, but divided over foreign-aid spending levels. The data portrays a population concerned about global problems, confident in Canada's international role, and inclined to prioritise domestic social investment even while recognising certain global responsibilities.

Domestic spending priorities dominate

Canadians in 2010 overwhelmingly favoured increased government spending on core social sectors. Majorities wanted higher investment in reducing child poverty (78%), education (70%), and health care (69%). By contrast, areas such as domestic security, national defence, the justice system, and foreign aid attracted much more modest demand for increases, and sizeable minorities even preferred reductions. Only 19% said foreign aid should rise, confirming a long-standing trend: public support for the idea of helping globally coexists with resistance to substantial fiscal expansion.

Global concerns remain centred on poverty, environment, and conflict

When asked unprompted about the most pressing issue facing the world, Canadians most commonly identified hunger and global poverty (16%), tied with environmental degradation and climate change (16%). Conflict and war followed at 14%, closely matched by economic insecurity. Terrorism, social decline, and overpopulation registered but at significantly lower levels. These patterns show that the public already linked international development challenges such as hunger and environmental stress to broader global risks.

Strong satisfaction with Canada's global role

Public confidence in Canada's position in the world was very high: nearly nine in ten were satisfied with the country's international standing. Half the population believed Canada's leadership had grown over the previous decade, an increase from 2009. Only 42% felt Canada's role had declined – a notable drop from previous years. This suggests that Canadians viewed their country as a constructive, stabilising force internationally in 2010.

Peacekeeping and foreign aid remain central to national identity

Asked where Canada makes a positive difference globally, Canadians continued to emphasise peacekeeping (24%), though recognition of this role had declined from its earlier historical peak. Foreign aid (18%) ranked second, and other contributions – including human rights promotion, multiculturalism, neutrality, and serving as a model country – were mentioned less frequently. Even though peacekeeping had become less prominent, it remained symbolically important to Canadian self-perception.

Moderate support for current foreign-aid spending levels

A plurality, 54%, said Canada's level of foreign-aid spending was "about right," an increase from the previous year. Those believing aid was insufficient declined to 24%, while 17% thought Canada spent too much. These views suggest a centrist equilibrium: Canadians generally accepted the existing level of support but were wary of ambitious increases, mirroring attitudes in domestic spending priorities.