

**A conversation with the Honourable Harjit Sajjan, Minister for International Development
and Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada
(February 3rd, 2022)**

Reflections by Cooperation Canada

Cooperation Canada partnered with sister coalitions, including the Canadian Association for International Development Professionals (CAIDP), Climate Action Network (CAN-Rac), the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH), the Inter-Council Network (ICN), and Dignity Network Canada, to plan and organize a conversation with Canada's new Minister for International Development, the Honourable Harjit Sajjan, Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada. In the lead up to the event, coalitions consulted members on key priorities and concerns for Canada's international cooperation. This brief presents a summary of the key issues that emerged during the conversation with the Minister, punctuated by reflections on sector expectations and concerns raised during the conversation, as well as implications for Cooperation Canada's members and other actors in the sector.

On February 3, 2022, Minister Sajjan shared his vision for Canada's international cooperation with the audience of over 470 representatives from government, civil society, academia and the private sector. This conversation served as a timely kick-off to the [International Development Week](#) activities held on February 7-11, 2022.

The Minister highlighted his mandate priorities that include providing a more robust response to the global pandemic and vaccine equity, making more progress in education and health, tackling the climate emergency, and promoting the rights of women and girls as well as LGBTQI+ communities abroad. Speaking specifically on human rights, he stated that Canada "cannot pull back when it comes to these rights." The Minister sees an opportunity for Canada to champion the needs and priorities of development partners, noting, "We want to be a voice for lower-income countries. We want to listen to them to see what their needs are." Towards the end of his intervention, Minister Sajjan maintained that "Being raised in Canada and coming from all over the globe, we have a sense of wanting to give back [...] That's what Canada is about: how to make people's lives better all over the world." Finally, Minister Sajjan made it clear that he wanted to keep the conversation going and meet with Canadian CSO representatives in person when restrictions ease.

Following the initial exchange with the Minister, coalitions welcomed the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development, Anita Vandenberg, and the Deputy Minister of International Development and G20 Sherpa to the Prime Minister, Christopher MacLennan who actively engaged with the audience of some of the mandate priorities including vaccine equity, climate change, localization, collaboration, and human rights.

COVID-19 and Vaccine Equity

Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to ensure vaccine equity are a high priority for Canada's international cooperation sector. As one attendee noted, "[Canada's] vaccine equity efforts need to go beyond getting doses on the ground, ensure there is support for the national health systems to get vaccines out and into arms, and make sure communities have the accurate information they need to access vaccines." For his part, Minister Sajjan stressed that vaccine equity involves strengthening healthcare systems on the ground abroad. He views Canada's responsibility not only as getting vaccines to countries in need, but also ensuring that vaccines are dispatched most efficiently.

The Climate Emergency

The climate emergency is a clear mandate priority issue for the Minister, echoed by Parliamentary Secretary Anita Vandenberg who stated that "climate change and biodiversity loss are a fundamental global threat that disproportionately affect marginalized populations globally." Secretary Vandenberg later added that the Government of Canada has already allocated around \$5.3 billion Canadian dollars towards finding solutions for this issue globally, with "a minimum 20% of funding [being given] to nature-based solutions to the climate emergency" in other countries. Deputy Minister Christopher MacLennan emphasized that

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“wealthy countries like Canada need to work with those countries, who are not those that created the problem, in mitigating these challenges.”

Addressing climate change is also key action area for the sector, especially as it connects to the ability to sustain food systems. Sector actors emphasized that agriculture and food security are daily concerns for many women in the Global South and wonder how these concerns, not explicitly mentioned in the Minister’s mandate letter, would be integrated in efforts going forward. Underlining that many lessons can be learned from the implementation of Action Area 4 (Environment and Climate Action) of the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), questions remained regarding departmental plans in this area and possibilities for collaboration with other federal departments, to further promote Canada’s efforts on the environment and climate change.

Recognizing that Canada should increase its funding for climate adaptation, the Canadian international cooperation sector is ready to support the Government of Canada. As noted by Eddy Perez, representing CAN-Rac, civil society is ready to support efforts to mitigate the disproportionate and intersectional effect of climate change on women and girls, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented communities, and enhance their meaningful participation and leadership in climate action. The more recent announcement of the [Partnering for Climate](#) initiative on February 17th, is a welcome step towards such efforts in the fight against climate change.

The sector has consistently highlighted the impacts of the pandemic and climate change that continue to exacerbate economic and gender inequalities, as well as inequalities in access to basic services such as health, nutritious food, water, toilets, and facilities to wash hands. Sector actors remain eager to further unpack Canada’s plans to push progress in the provision of these essential life-saving services, especially for women and girls, in line with its human-rights based approach.

Localization

The conversation with the Minister touched on localization, a topic Cooperation Canada members and many in the sector see as a top priority. The Minister indicated that it was of utmost importance to listen to the countries Canada is providing aid to, and work towards building solutions together: “We have to start looking at building capacities in other countries.”

Parliamentary Secretary Vandenberg expressed her strong desire to make sure that local communities are involved in creating their own solutions, with help from Canada where they may need it. In this context, she noted the FIAP is the leading framework to accomplish this task. The focus on the FIAP aligns well with sector interest in improvements to government plans and policies to develop feminist, equitable partnership models that are more just and respectful vis-à-vis Southern organizations, tackle structural racism in the international development system, and shift power and resources to local actors. This kind of deep sector transformation and efforts to decolonize Canada’s international cooperation efforts has been called for by many of Cooperation Canada’s members and the members of other coalitions.

Human Rights

Minister Sajjan recognized the human-rights based nature of Canada’s international assistance and highlighted the importance of governance, peace and conflict prevention in his opening remarks. Canada’s international cooperation sector also raised concerns about human rights, decent and equitable living conditions, equity, and diversity. Civil society speakers affirmed the sector’s willingness to engage in collaborative work to overcome barriers to human rights and advance the FIAP. The sector would like to see Canada to remain an active and responsible actor on the international stage, bolstering its global leadership as a feminist champion of human rights. Multiple attendees brought attention to the secondary consequences of the pandemic on human rights, and especially those of women and LGBTQI+ communities, in many countries.

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Increasing ODA

Parliamentary Secretary Vandenberg assured participants that the Canadian Government is working towards an increase of overseas development assistance (ODA) every year in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Minister’s mandate letter. Increasing ODA has been a recurrent ask by the sector. Actors have repeatedly conveyed that increasing Canada’s investment in international assistance will match Canada’s feminist aspirations with the resources necessary for success and support Canada’s efforts to contribute to recovery from shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of climate change. While the Parliamentary Secretary’s reference to increased ODA was welcome, Cooperation Canada notes that there remains a need for a predictable and transparent timetable with respect to ODA increases.

Collaboration and Effectiveness with Partners

Cooperation Canada welcomed the Minister’s strong acknowledgement of the role of civil society and recognition that “civil society organizations are a powerhouse in terms of what can be done around the world and how to make life better, and more importantly how to prevent conflict.” The Minister, Deputy Minister, and Parliamentary Secretary addressed other cross-cutting topics, including larger and more streamlined budgets for Canadian CSOs, recognizing the need to also streamline application processes. They also noted the importance of expanding opportunities of collaboration with Canadian CSOs on the FIAP.

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Overall, the Minister provided some reassurance to the sector, noting that Canada would be working to ensure that the goals that have been achieved abroad, and that will be achieved, cannot be “undone”. There is no question that a lot to work remains for all international cooperation actors. Coalitions look forward to working with the Minister and his department to promote feminist, human rights-based international solidarity, including localization, increase predictable and transparent ODA, and remove bottlenecks to improving the effectiveness in international cooperation.