

# Connecting with Canadians: Qualitative Research on International Assistance – Executive Summary

Prepared for: Global Affairs Canada  
Prepared by: Narrative Research  
5001-7071 Bayers Road Halifax NS B3L2C2  
(T) 902.493.3820 (F) 902.439.3879

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For more information on this report, please email:

[Kevin.chappell@international.gc.ca](mailto:Kevin.chappell@international.gc.ca)



## Executive Summary

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## Background and Research Methodology

Results from the Privy Council Office's 2018 Current Issues Survey showed that Canadian residents have limited awareness of the Government of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals or Agenda 2030 as well as relating to specific programs and initiatives. To better inform its communication strategy, Global Affairs Canada commissioned qualitative research with Canadian residents to identify best ways to engage them on these topics.

A total of ten (10) focus groups were conducted from July 23<sup>rd</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 with Canadian residents 18 years or older. In each of Halifax (NS), Toronto (ON), Calgary (AB), Vancouver (BC), and Quebec City (QC), one group was conducted with women, and one group was conducted with men. Discussions in Quebec City were held in French, while English was used in all other locations. Each session lasted approximately two (2) hours, and participants each received \$100 in appreciation of their time. The research included a total of 87 participants across locations. Recruitment of participants was conducted through random telephone calling of the general public and from general population online qualitative panels. All participants were recruited per established industry standards and per the recruitment specifications for the Government of Canada. This report presents the findings from the study. Caution must be exercised when interpreting the results from this study, as qualitative research is directional only. Results cannot be attributed to the overall population under study, with any degree of confidence.

### Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as a Representative of Narrative Research that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Directive on the Management of Communications. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.



Signed

Margaret Chapman, COO & Partner | Narrative Research  
Date: August 19, 2019

### Key Findings and Conclusions

Findings from the *Connecting with Canadians: Qualitative Research on International Assistance* study show that there is limited awareness or specific knowledge of Canada's international assistance and international humanitarian assistance initiatives, despite positive opinions regarding the Country's involvement at a general level.

The study findings also reveal that the concepts of international assistance and international humanitarian assistance are viewed as referring to different ideas, to varying degrees. International assistance was considered as a broad term to describe the general idea of helping out other countries or foreign governments through the donation of money, supplies, or expertise. By contrast, international humanitarian assistance conveyed the idea of direct support to populations (e.g., food, medication) during times of crisis. Despite these broad perceptions, there remained a fair bit of confusion regarding what these concepts specifically include and how they are applied by the Canadian government.

Reportedly, the news media was the most relied-upon source of information on international news, or involvement of Canada in international assistance, followed by word-of-mouth from individuals directly

involved in international aid, and to a lesser extent, social media. With media focusing their international affairs reporting on crisis situations and political events, participants were most likely to view Canada as primarily involved in providing assistance during natural disasters and in disease prevention, treatment, and awareness. Education, safety and security, and addressing famine were also considered current areas of focus for Canada. By contrast, fewer participants were under the impression that Canada was involved in initiatives related to skills and training development, gender equality, solutions that empower the poor, healthcare, and the promotion of democracy. Along with the provision of assistance during natural disasters, participants believed that human rights initiatives, disease prevention and awareness, and addressing famine should be Canada's priorities internationally.

Given their limited knowledge of what is being done, participants expressed an interest in better understanding Canada's strategic plan for international assistance at a high level. Specifically, knowing the amounts allocated (in dollars and percentage of government spending), the causes and countries supported, how these were chosen, what actions were taken, and what were the outcomes, are all considered of interest to varying degrees to participants. Informing the public on the broad scope of international assistance may also help alleviate some of the negative feelings that exist and the perception that Canada is helping other countries to the detriment of helping Canadians in need (e.g., fighting poverty; employment; clean water for Indigenous people within Canada). In essence, speaking of the plan will help establish its validity, relevance, importance and usefulness to Canadians.

Apart from information being filtered by news media, other reasons explaining participants' limited recall of Canada's international aid initiatives included a greater interest in local or national stories, and a perceived lack of personal relevance in the topic. This points to the need to present stories related to international assistance initiatives in an engaging manner, by focusing on topics of interest or by featuring a personal story, while providing supporting facts to showcase the scale or scope of the initiative. A more developed strategy for unpaid communications content in news media should also be considered.

Participants were most attracted to communications pieces discussed during the sessions that elicited a sense of connection through a topic of interest and a personal story in the form of a testimonial. This approach was felt to be engaging, and informative, when supported by facts and statistics. Nonetheless, results show that because of where and when messages may be heard, as well as how different approaches appealed to different individuals, there is a need to include more than a single type of approach. For example, focusing stories on one individual, within the context of a community or country level, were considered both important elements to include. Similarly, speaking of the situation was felt to highlight the need for assistance, while focusing on the outcomes engendered pride, making both angles important to communicate. At the same time, greater cohesion between communication pieces – either by theme or visual identity – to bring them together may help capture attention and strengthen memorability.

In terms of format, there was a preference for communications that presented real people or situations over those that focused solely on animations or infographics, and participants generally voiced a preference for a video format, as long as it was short (less than a minute). As for images, showing a diversity of scenarios and emotions in images is important to capture the attention of a

wide variety of people. Images showing emotion and those that evoked curiosity about what was happening or what the story is worked best.

Results of the focus groups also found that there is limited information available right now regarding Canada's international assistance. This perception may be in part due to a lack of sufficient proactive communications, providing the information to the public where they are most likely to encounter it, without having to seek it out. To increase the impact of communications about international aid, consideration should be given to more clearly identifying the Canadian government as the financial sponsor of specific initiatives, especially when describing the work of non-governmental organization (NGO) partners. In addition, a more prominent Canada wordmark will lend greater credibility to information presented, and a way to quickly establish its validity.