

# A BIG IDEA FOR CO-RESPONSIBILITY, NOT SOLIDARITY

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## About the Big Ideas Series

The world needs bold, forward-looking ideas to meet today's complex global challenges. As part of a 2025 *Call for Big Ideas*, Cooperation Canada invited changemakers to propose catalytic concepts that reimagine the future of Canadian international cooperation.

The views expressed in this concept are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Cooperation Canada or its members. Big Ideas are published to spark dialogue and inspire innovation across the sector.

## Summary

*A Big Idea for Co-responsibility, not Solidarity* proposes a shift from “solidarity” to **co-responsibility** as the foundation of international cooperation. The prevailing model—where the Global North designs and the South executes—reinforces inequality by concentrating agenda-setting, funding and visibility in the North. **Red Encuentro** envisions a system grounded in resource mutualization and economic autonomy, where Southern organizations co-design, co-implement and co-own development processes.

The proposal includes piloting **mutualized cooperation nodes**, rooted in the Global South and connected through **horizontal planning cells**: diverse North–South teams that jointly plan, fund and implement projects under shared accountability frameworks, beyond donor-driven logics.

Southern platforms would be supported in building **economic autonomy**—e.g., through income-generating ventures aligned with their mission. As aid and public funding shrink, this would help transform cooperation into a relationship between equals.

## Introduction

Red Encuentro is a national network of grassroots civil society organizations from Argentina, dedicated to human rights, inclusive development, and democratic participation. **Red Encuentro's big idea is one that seeks to transform international cooperation through co-responsibility, authentic participation and the construction of autonomy.**

Cooperation must evolve beyond paradigms that reproduce asymmetry. Inequality is not only about the distribution of resources but also about the concentration of power. A more just future

requires those who hold power—whether governments, institutions, or organizations—to share it. This proposal builds on practices already alive in Argentina and across Latin America, grounded in strong conceptual foundations and territorial legitimacy, while opening pathways for global relevance.

## Participation and Political Dialogue: From Incidence to Co-construction

One of the greatest challenges in polarized societies is building interest around common ground. Red Encuentro's experience demonstrates that polarization does not prevent collaboration when engagement is anchored in shared needs. Employment, education, access to rights, mental health and digital inclusion are priorities that cut across ideological divides. By convening actors around these universal issues, dialogue becomes possible and new alliances emerge.

In many existing participation frameworks, young people are treated as passive recipients or symbolic voices. Consultations and forums are often limited to giving opinions or nominating a single “youth representative,” detached from the realities of collective, territorial life. This kind of participation is closer to *incidence*—unilateral demands directed at institutions—than to real collaboration.

Red Encuentro's approach is different. Through youth assemblies across Argentina's urban, rural, and indigenous communities, the organization brings together diverse groups of young people with public officials to collectively diagnose problems and generate proposals. These spaces are not about advocacy alone; they are about co-construction. Youth learn how institutions function, while institutions learn from youth perspectives, producing solutions that are both innovative and feasible.

This process creates interest even in hyper-polarized contexts because it shifts the focus from ideological differences to pragmatic solutions. Dialogue is no longer a zero-sum game but a collaborative exercise. Alliances built around **co-construction** endure beyond electoral cycles and partisan divides, providing resilience for democratic practice.

The investment required is not in isolated leadership programs for individuals, but in the **collective strengthening of youth organizations**. Only strong collective actors can sustain long-term participation and exercise real power in shaping public policy.

## Co-responsibility, Not Solidarity

Traditional cooperation has often been framed as solidarity: the North “helps” the South, adults “guide” youth, men “support” women. While solidarity may sound generous, in practice it tends to preserve existing asymmetries. It assumes that one side has power and resources, while the other depends on them.

Red Encuentro proposes **co-responsibility** as the foundation of international cooperation. Co-responsibility means acknowledging that all actors are part of the problem and must therefore be part of the solution. It requires those with more privilege to cede space and share decision-making so that others can exercise agency.

This principle operates at multiple levels:

- **Globally**, Northern countries must recognize that their wealth is often built through extraction from the South, and that a more equal world requires redistribution of both resources and power.
- **Socially**, adults must recognize *adultcentrism*—the structural privileging of adult perspectives—as one among several systems of domination. Just as *androcentrism* and *heteronormativity* have been widely studied and challenged, adultcentrism must also be addressed if youth are to assume genuine leadership.
- **Within civil society**, larger organizations must share power and resources with grassroots and community-based actors, ensuring that participation is not monopolized by the most visible or well-funded.

Recognizing adult centrism does not mean adults withdrawing. It means they accept their responsibility to facilitate spaces, provide institutional knowledge, and share authority. Intergenerational collaboration becomes a condition for democratic renewal, rather than an obstacle to it.

This approach differs fundamentally from many “locally led development” paradigms. While those frameworks often emphasize transferring power to local actors, they rarely address the structural privileges that sustain inequality. Co-responsibility, by contrast, insists on redistribution: a conscious act of sharing power, not merely transferring tasks. It establishes horizontal alliances where risks, responsibilities and learning are shared equally.

## Building Autonomy Through Co-responsibility

Civil society in the Global South is facing an existential challenge. As international aid shrinks and states reduce their support, many organizations risk disappearing. Without financial autonomy, civil society cannot maintain independence, develop innovations or sustain long-term engagement.

Red Encuentro is responding by promoting **inclusive social enterprises** that align the missions of grassroots and community-based organizations with their sustainability. Carpentry workshops, textile cooperatives and community-based food services are examples of ventures that generate income while creating dignified jobs for people in situations of vulnerability. These initiatives are not auxiliary projects but central to a vision of autonomy: they ensure that organizations can sustain their civic and political roles without compromising their identity or mission.

This vision also redefines North–South relations. Co-responsibility calls for moving beyond donations toward relationships where Northern actors become consumers of Southern products and services, or participants in cooperative value chains that strengthen Southern autonomy. Multinational civil society platforms can exchange not only knowledge but also goods and services, creating reciprocal relationships that sustain both Northern and Southern actors.

Autonomy, in this sense, is not isolation but equality. It enables organizations in the South to engage globally on their own terms, contribute knowledge and shape agendas without dependency. It turns cooperation into a partnership of peers.

## Dialogue, Experimentation and Scaling

Turning principles into practice requires clear pathways. For Red Encuentro, implementation follows a cycle of dialogue, experimentation, evaluation and expansion.

- **Dialogue:** Bringing together diverse actors—youth, governments, private sector, trade unions, international organizations—into spaces of mutual recognition. These are not symbolic consultations but platforms where decisions can be shaped collectively.
- **Experimentation:** Piloting innovative approaches through youth assemblies, intergenerational dialogues, and inclusive enterprises. These pilots provide evidence of feasibility and create the basis for adaptation in new contexts.
- **Evaluation:** Generating research, data and lessons learned. Evaluation is not only technical but participatory, involving the actors themselves in assessing outcomes and improving strategies.
- **Expansion:** Linking successful practices through regional and global networks, ensuring that innovations are not isolated but part of a broader transformation.

Our active participation in platforms such as Forus, the Mesa de Articulación, and the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness demonstrates that civil society can already collaborate across borders. Building on these experiences, we envision multinational consortia and cooperative platforms where organizations from the North and South co-diagnose problems, co-design solutions and share accountability.

This is how the idea becomes scalable: not as a rigid model but as a living framework, adaptable to diverse realities, capable of generating global relevance while rooted in local experience.

## Why Now

The global civic space is shrinking. Organizations are closing due to repression or lack of resources. Political polarization threatens to fragment societies further, reducing the possibilities for dialogue and collective action. If international cooperation continues to operate under outdated logics of solidarity and asymmetry, it risks losing its relevance.

Red Encuentro's idea responds directly to this urgency. It demonstrates how to create interest in polarized contexts by centering on universal needs. It differs from existing paradigms by emphasizing redistribution of power and addressing structural privileges such as adultcentrism. It proposes practical applications—participatory assemblies, inclusive social enterprises, global consortia—that show how principles can be turned into action.

Most importantly, it frames cooperation as a shared responsibility: not something done “for” others, but something built *with* others.

## Conclusion

Red Encuentro's idea is **youth-led, territorially grounded and globally relevant**. It combines the strength of principles—co-responsibility, intergenerational collaboration, autonomy—with concrete practices already underway. It does not merely critique existing paradigms; it offers a vision of cooperation that is fairer, more democratic and more sustainable.

This is not about giving and receiving, but about building together. A more equal future requires all of us to recognize our place in sustaining inequality and our responsibility in overcoming it. By advancing this vision collectively, international cooperation can remain relevant and transformative, enabling civil society—especially youth—to co-create the democratic futures our world urgently needs.