

ENG

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VOLUNTEERING FOR SOLIDARITY: THE POWER OF WOMEN'S RECIPROCAL MENTORSHIP TO TRIGGER TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

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How can the power of volunteering for solidarity go beyond merely giving, by driving mutual growth, learning and reciprocal collaborations?

For decades, International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCOs) have mobilised individuals to support development initiatives of partner organisations, and secured sustained government funding due to proven development results and effective public engagement. While their programmes remain relevant, in a world beset by intersecting crises and challenges, they must adapt to better address power imbalances and trigger transformative change.¹

Transformative change can unfold when volunteering is rooted in reciprocal collaboration between individuals and organisations sharing common interests and objectives. This think piece presents innovative examples of such collaboration: i) reciprocal mentorship among women from the global North and the global South where participants are contributing equally, with each assuming the role of mentor and mentee; and ii) horizontal and equitable relationships between organisations from the global South and global North, which are collaborating to tackle shared challenges. These relationships aim to transcend entrenched power dynamics and deliver greater value to participating individuals and organisations, serving as leverage to reach and engage a broader public, and forging stronger human connections than through traditional volunteering models.

The 'Women's Entrepreneurship in Solidarity' Initiative

A standout example is the initiative 'Women's Entrepreneurship in Solidarity', which is part of the Volunteer Cooperation Programme of CECI (*Centre d'étude et de coopération internationale*) and funded by the Canadian government. The programme pairs volunteer Canadian women entrepreneurs with women entrepreneurs from the global South. It also pairs Canadian organisations with organisations in the global South that influence the business ecosystem.² The programme addresses gender-based barriers, such as lack of access to credit and tailored products, services and networking. Women entrepreneurs often face isolation and greater challenges than men as they juggle care work obligations and discriminatory social and cultural norms while managing their businesses.³ The initiative fosters solidarity among women entrepreneurs and partner organisations in Canada and the global South, transforming the business ecosystem into one that is conducive, adapted to, and supportive of, women entrepreneurs. It focuses on shifting the dynamic from hierarchical 'givers' and 'receivers', to richer horizontal exchanges of experience, know-how, analytical questioning and active listening.

[1] Baillie Smith, M.; Jenkins, K.; Adong, C.; Anguan, G.; Baniya, J.; Baskota, P.; Boudewijn, I.; Fadel, B.; Gibby, P.; Kamanyi, E.; Mademba, S.; Okech, M.; & Sharma, R. (2022). *Volunteering Together: Blending Knowledge and Skills for Development*.

[2] Laurin-Desjardins, C. (2024). Pour que le leadership entrepreneurial féminin dépasse les frontières, *Le Devoir*.

[3] Germann, F.; Anderson, S. J.; Chintagunta, P. K.; Vilcassim, N. (2023). *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Empowering Female Entrepreneurs through Female Mentors*. University of Chicago, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper No. 2023-42.

Impacts of Women's Reciprocal Mentorship

Successfully piloted with women entrepreneurs in Bolivia and Senegal, alongside their Canadian counterparts, this initiative focuses on the mutual exchange of expertise, experience and skills between like-minded women entrepreneurs, businesses and support organisations such as chambers of commerce. Through reciprocal mentorship, it is expected that women-led businesses based in Canada and in different countries in the global South will become more resilient, innovative, competitive, socially responsible and better equipped to navigate and adapt to crises and rapidly changing environments. This reciprocal mentorship model is driven by the widespread interest among women entrepreneurs to engage in mutual exchanges based on respect, solidarity, engagement, sharing of experiences and skills, which, in turn, impact the development of leadership roles within businesses, organizations and communities.

CECI's pilot initiative has facilitated these mutual exchanges. Canadian women entrepreneurs reported increased confidence, managerial skills, enhanced strategic thinking, strengthened networking capacity, and a better understanding of international markets. On the other hand, Bolivian and Senegalese women entrepreneurs reported enhanced their leadership abilities, developed a greater understanding of Artificial Intelligence, and improved their strategic communication skills. This collaboration also led to the adoption of more environmentally sustainable business models and the strengthening of organisational and business networks, resulting in increased public engagement.

Research shows that women entrepreneurs who benefit from mentorship programmes, particularly woman-to-woman mentorship, tend to be more successful than those who do not.⁴ Women-centred business models can drive social and environmental impact, community development and poverty reduction. They can strengthen community services, improve health, living standards and well-being and empower women to claim their rights and contribute to advancing gender equality.

Paradigm Shifts Needed for Volunteering for Solidarity

Experience with the women's reciprocal mentorship model highlights four areas of necessary paradigm shifts in the volunteering and development sector. These require ongoing questioning and strengthening collaborative efforts to recognise, address and deconstruct existing power imbalances, creating spaces for individuals and organisations where horizontal relationships can thrive.

1. Volunteer Modalities: Volunteers are connected on the basis of their compatibility, common objectives, similar entrepreneurial paths and experience, mutual growth, respect and confidentiality, as well as curiosity and inspiration. Their relationships are facilitated through virtual and in-person opportunities of connection, whether North-South, South-North, South-South or National.

[4] Mehta, K. (2023). Why Women Entrepreneurs Outperform Men. *Forbes*.

Stropoli, R. (2023). Women Entrepreneurs benefit from Women Mentors. *Chicago Booth Review*.

2. People-to-People Connections: The bonds formed in reciprocal mentorship are personal and professional, leading to mutual enrichment. Strengthened networks bring vital business connections, local employment opportunities, partnerships, access to new markets, and environmentally sound procurement practices. Twinning women diaspora communities with women entrepreneurs in their ancestral country can be particularly successful.

3. Public Engagement: Collective actions on contemporary issues between partners from the global South and global North can amplify impact of development outcomes. This is achieved through common communication strategies, networking and the co-creation of innovative initiatives among various actors, including financial institutions, chambers of commerce and civil society.

4. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Information Technology (IT): AI and IT have the potential to revolutionise volunteer modalities and working methods and relationships, offering adaptive learning paths, data-driven insights, resource recommendations, and feedback mechanisms. This can increase the volume and value of reciprocal relationships among women entrepreneurs and organisations.

Volunteering for solidarity through reciprocal mentorship and equitable organisational partnerships has the potential to trigger transformative change, amplifying development impact across borders. By nurturing people-to-people and organisational connections rooted in common interests and shared challenges, public engagement can increase reach and impact. This also includes tapping into the vast potential of the private sector, which plays a crucial role in achieving lasting development results. Collectively, a dynamic ecosystem of mutual learning, support and collaboration can be created, driving meaningful change and fostering a brighter future for all.

About the Authors



Cecilia Thompson

Cecilia Thompson is a Project Officer and Gender Specialist with CECI (*Centre d'étude et de coopération internationale*). Her project work focuses on strengthening the empowerment of women, enhancing the capacity of women's organisations, and combating gender inequalities. As member of the Volunteer Cooperation Programme team, she provides expertise on gender equality, rights and diversity. Previously, she has worked with NGOs in Africa, Asia, Canada and Europe, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva on the implementation of international human rights standards and procedures. She has also worked in human rights education, and has proven advocacy, capacity-building and training experience.



Nancy Lafrance

Nancy Lafrance brings over 19 years of experience as an experienced international development jurist, both in Canada and abroad. She has been with CECI since 2008, where she has played a key role in piloting partnerships with organisations and institutions across diverse sectors, and spearheading innovative initiatives in women's rights, women's economic empowerment, gender equality and innovative financing. Currently serving as the Director of the CECI Volunteer Cooperation Programme, she provides inclusive leadership in transitioning to a more horizontal model of cooperation between the North and South. Her unwavering commitment to women's and youth rights and empowerment has made a significant impact on communities in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

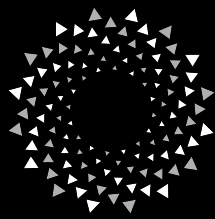


Marcela Vallejos

Marcela Vallejos is CECI's Director for Bolivia and Latin America. She has dedicated herself to the cause of women's and young people's rights, economic empowerment and climate change adaptation since the beginning of her career. In particular, she has acted as Country Manager for EQWIP HUBS, a start-up that provides young people from vulnerable communities with entrepreneurship training and access to financing. She was also coordinator of the Water and Gender programme in Bolivia and Peru for the UK's Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD). The initiative aimed to link Indigenous communities with local governments and transnational corporations in a process designed to resolve water and environmental conflicts arising from mining and energy production.

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