



# Sharing Skills for Better Futures

STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2027





Teresa, cocoa farmer and member of the local Copracajul Cooperative in Jutiapa, Honduras.

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Cover photo: Madame Sabine (left), a farmer in Awae, Cameroon with Cuso International volunteer Nelly Rakotozafy. Photographer: Brian Atkinson.

## WHO WE ARE

Cuso International is an international cooperation and development organization that works to create economic and social opportunities for marginalized groups. Together with our partners, we are focused on efforts to advance gender equality and social inclusion, improve economic resilience, and deliver progress on climate action. We believe that by sharing skills, we can build better futures. Founded in 1961, Cuso International works in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Canada.

## WHO WE WORK FOR

Wherever we work and in everything we do, Cuso International prioritizes the interests and needs of marginalized communities. We use the term “marginalized” to refer to all groups of persons excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, political, and/or cultural life, including those who face discrimination on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, political opinions, legal status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and/or religion. Such marginalization varies by context. Marginalized groups usually include (but are not limited to) women and girls, LGBTQI+, Indigenous Peoples, people living with disabilities or in extreme poverty, youth, elderly, refugees, migrants and other displaced people.



Ntue, Cameroon. Photographer: Brian Atkinson.

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# Foreword

Cuso International's 2023–2027 Strategic Plan is our renewed commitment to build on a legacy of impact in international cooperation spanning six decades. It is a clarion call from all parts of this organization to address the root causes of inequality and improve the economic and social conditions of the most marginalized.

To deliver on this overarching goal, the core of this plan focuses on three strategic priorities. Over the next five years we will build on our experience to strengthen gender equality and social inclusion, improve economic resilience through sustainable solutions, and advance climate action. We will use our institutional capacity and network of volunteers, alumni, and supporters to strengthen civil society organizations in the countries where we work so they can deliver stronger outcomes.

Informed by global analysis, our core organizational beliefs, and extensive consultations with the Cuso International community, our 2023–2027 Strategic Plan is guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a vision for a better world. Our strategic plan lays out an exciting and ambitious path for the future of Cuso International.

From its founding as a volunteer-based organization, Cuso International has evolved to become an experienced international cooperation and development organization. We strive to embody the best traditions of partnership and global solidarity. In the face of

today's pressing global challenges, we will build on Cuso International's core experience of sharing skills – through volunteering, technical assistance, and knowledge exchange. We will work shoulder to shoulder with our partners to expand and improve the economic and social conditions of marginalized groups.

We recognize the role of colonial legacies in creating and perpetuating the global inequalities and injustices we see today, and we want our work to contribute to improved sharing of power in the countries where we operate. In Canada, this means we will act in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples' pursuit of self-determination, decolonization, and reconciliation.

To fulfill these ambitions, we commit to:

- Be an inclusive, anti-racist organization applying feminist principles in how we work
- Deepen our expertise and abilities where needed to effect change, including through thought leadership and advocacy
- Strengthen our internal capacity and organizational processes
- Consult, engage, and listen to our partners, participants, stakeholders, and staff.

By our everyday actions, we will continue to work to earn the trust and respect of the communities we serve and those who support us. Without you, none of what we do would be possible. **Together, everything is possible.**

## COMMITMENT TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Cuso International recognizes the historical legacies of colonization in creating and perpetuating the inequalities and injustices experienced by Indigenous Peoples around the globe. We are committed to acting in solidarity with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada in their efforts to advance self-determination, decolonization, and reconciliation. Throughout the countries where we work, we honour the land through programs that reflect and respect the heritage of all people. We strive to implement the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). We recognize our privilege in working and living on lands Indigenous Peoples have nurtured since time immemorial. Honouring the land is an opportunity to reflect on the impacts of colonialism, to better understand our collective history, and to promote environmental sustainability.



Cuso International volunteer Ching-Lung Huang (left) and her students. Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories.



# Vision

An equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world where all people are treated with dignity and can participate fully in society.

# Mission

Sharing skills for better futures.

# Strategic Goal

Work with our partners to address the root causes of inequality and improve the economic and social conditions of marginalized groups.



Farmers Madame Sabine and Madame Benda. Awae, Cameroon.  
Photographer: Brian Atkinson.

## Sustainable Development Goals



## Strategic Priorities

Three strategic priorities will guide us. Over the next five years, we will work to:

Strengthen gender equality and social inclusion

Improve economic resilience through sustainable solutions

Advance climate action

## Core Competencies

Partnership

Skills-sharing

Education and public awareness

Thought leadership\* and advocacy

## Organizational Shifts

Champion inclusion

Build our capacity and knowledge to effect change

Increase our organizational resilience

\*Thought leadership implies becoming a recognized authority in our field and generating innovative ideas, which influence and guide positive change. "Thought leadership is the action of introducing and promoting convention-breaking ideas that cause people to change how they think regarding societal issues." (Van Halderen & Kettler-Paddock, 2011)



# Strategic Priorities

Our three strategic priorities will guide our work toward achieving our strategic goal. We hold ourselves accountable to make progress in all of these areas, both in the programs we support and across our internal organizational processes.



Cuso International program participant Luisa Serna, Quibdo, Colombia.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY #1

### Strengthen gender equality and social inclusion

We commit to grow as a feminist organization. Promoting gender equality using a feminist approach is at the heart of our values for more equal and just societies. This means we actively address inequality, injustice, and marginalization in the pursuit of equality. It is also about non-discrimination, not only for women and girls, but also for other marginalized groups such as LGBTQI+ and people with disabilities, migrants, and refugees. Our programming approaches will promote gender equality and fuller development, prioritizing gender-transformative approaches\* wherever possible. This will also involve meaningful participation from more privileged groups and those with power to advocate for and support women and marginalized people in their communities.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY #2

### Improve economic resilience through sustainable solutions

Central to our work is our commitment to engage and nurture partnerships that support marginalized people and communities to overcome poverty and inequality by enabling access to fair and decent employment and by improving existing jobs. Our objective is to see improved socio-economic integration and a significant reduction in poverty and inequality in the communities we serve, ensuring a dignified way of living for all.

As we work to support economic integration for marginalized groups, we recognize the growing needs of populations facing involuntary displacement due to conflict, climate change, or social, economic, and environmental injustice. Our work will increasingly focus on supporting economic opportunities and decent work for displaced peoples.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY #3

### Advance climate action

Climate change is humanity's defining challenge of the 21st century, with its negative impacts disproportionately affecting marginalized communities around the world. Building on our experience, Cuso International will promote, advocate, innovate, and partner for inclusive and effective climate action. We will support livelihood resilience and adaptation by and for marginalized communities affected by climate change.

We also will engage in strategic partnerships to promote knowledge, expertise, and influence in developing responses to climate change.

\*Gender transformative interventions go beyond gender responsiveness. They aim to transform unequal gender relations to promote shared power, control of resources, decision making, and support for the empowerment of women and girls. (Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy).



# Our Core Competencies

The ways in which we work, and the skill sets that define Cuso International's unique added value as an organization are reflected in the following four core competencies:

## Partnership

We are invested in the success of our partners. With a systems-level perspective, we facilitate alliances between partners and marginalized groups to accelerate and scale developmental impact. Partnerships are at the heart of Cuso International, reflected in who we are, what we do, and how we work. What sets us apart in our partnership approach is our focus on supporting locally led design and management of activities.

## Skills Sharing

An expert in volunteer management, operations, and training, we also support partners to develop their capacity through the provision of locally relevant skilled volunteers or other forms of technical assistance. Our approach to volunteering is a two-way exchange, and we use the term "skill sharing" to elevate the roles and learning of all the stakeholders involved.

## Education and Public Awareness

Our experience with education and public awareness is foundational to our contribution towards positive change. We engage the public, civil society, governments, and the private sector in dialogue to help them understand key international development issues, and ways to address them. We work with education institutions to advance our strategic priorities.

## Thought Leadership and Advocacy

We proactively advocate for just policies and systemic change that reflect both our values and our strategic priorities. We will leverage our organizational reputation and capacity to support the voices and experiences of our partners, program participants, volunteers, and staff to influence systems change.

## VOLUNTEERISM IS IN OUR DNA

Cuso International volunteers are skilled professionals recruited from Canada and around the world. Our North to South volunteers are Canadian volunteers. Our South to South volunteers are recruited from lower- and middle-income countries to support local partners in other southern countries. Our National Volunteers are engaged professionals in the countries where we work who contribute their expertise to supporting partners in their communities.

Through self-identification, members of Canada's diaspora communities, notably from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, contribute their skills, networks, and knowledge to support development in their countries of heritage. When travel is not possible or is not required, e-volunteering (or online volunteering), connects our skilled volunteers with local partners through remote working tools.

Cuso International's approach to volunteering has evolved over time and shares overlapping objectives with our technical assistance and capacity-building work. All of these reflect the concepts of two-way sharing and exchange. Over the past 60 years more than 14,000 individuals have volunteered with Cuso International in more than 100 countries.



Cuso International volunteer, Grâce-Divine Ingabire, Kinshasa, DRC.



# Organizational Shifts

Every part of Cuso International plays a key role in achieving our vision. Over the next five years we will strengthen our organization to truly embody “One Cuso” – a global organization where people, partners, and operations rooted in different locations work towards our strategic goals, which reflect their own unique realities, and work effectively together. We will strengthen our organization-wide decision making, provide enhanced support for all our offices and partner organizations, and actively strive for diversity and inclusion in every part of our organization.



To bring about the change that Cuso International wants to see, we will be agile in adapting to ever changing circumstances. We will:

## Champion inclusion

Cuso International recognizes the role of historic colonial legacies in creating and perpetuating the global inequalities and injustices we see today. We will ensure all aspects of our work better share power and increase representative voices and leadership. As we pursue a new South-North equilibrium, we will define success based on local context.

We are dedicated to a journey of growth as an inclusive, feminist, and anti-racist organization. This is a long-term commitment that requires constant evolution of our management processes, structures, and policies, and the terms and language we use. It also requires transparency in how we measure our performance in collaboration with our partners, the communities where we work, and the people we work with.

## Build our capacity and knowledge to effect change

The world around Cuso International is changing rapidly. To continue to be relevant and supportive of our partners and the communities we serve, we will invest resources in building organizational expertise in our strategic priority areas. We will continue our efforts to foster a learning culture structured around internal information sharing as well as “outside-in” thinking in support of learning for teams, partners, and volunteers alike.

## Increase our organizational resilience

Our internal operations must match our ambitions. To meet our organizational goals over the next five years, Cuso International will work to strengthen the following areas:

- Evidence-based performance measurement
- Processes and technology
- Workplace culture
- Innovative funding models
- Sector best practices
- Innovation and partnerships



# What We Believe In

## Human Rights

We stand for the rights of all people and defend the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## Equality

We believe every individual deserves an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents.

## Equity

We recognize that each person has different circumstances. Pursuing equity means aiming for equality of outcomes and allocating the resources needed to reach this objective.

## Diversity and Inclusion

We respect and appreciate what makes us each unique and different. We believe in equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.

## Local and Global Action

Our global commitments are grounded in local roots and leadership.

## Feminist Principles

We place gender justice at the centre of our work and recognize how diverse systems of power, hierarchy, privilege, and vulnerability interact across social contexts.

## The Power of Civil Society

We believe that a vibrant civil society is the cornerstone of healthy, prosperous, fair, and sustainable civilizations. Civil society is the space where people work to create change and build better societies.

### CIVIL SOCIETY IS KEY TO PROGRESS

In all countries where we work, civil society organizations play a critical role in the provision of basic services and championing the rights and needs of marginalized groups. Yet civil society is all too often undervalued or threatened and unable to fulfill its role effectively. Cuso International's efforts to strengthen civil society have long been core to our development approach. Our work helps civil society organizations be recognized, increase their effectiveness in delivering programming to communities and better influence public and donor policies.

### FEMINISM

Feminism has had many faces and definitions in its history. It is more than an ideology or a range of socio-political movements. Feminism is about addressing inequality and injustice. While feminism has always championed gender equality for women and girls, its objective today goes much further to shape positive futures that uphold dignity and rights for everyone. A feminist approach offers an inclusive way to help comprehend how various systems of power, hierarchy, privilege, and vulnerability intersect. Working with feminist principles means working collaboratively and contextually to champion inclusion and equity, which transcend existing structures of power and privilege.



# Our History

We began our journey as Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO). Established in June 1961 as an initiative of the Association of Universities and Colleges Canada (AUCC), today known as Universities Canada, our founders believed in the possibility of a more connected world – one where the social constraints into which people are born would not dictate the entirety of their lives.

With AUCC backing, a network of local committees was established to undertake recruitment of recent graduates interested in sharing their knowledge and skills to help others in the expanding number of newly independent states.

The early volunteers, which rapidly grew in number, took their roles as agents of positive change very seriously. They helped fill critical staffing and capacity gaps in developing countries, working as teachers, nurses, and agriculturalists. For many years, Canadian University Service Overseas volunteers (subsequently called CUSO volunteers) were provided housing and were paid a local salary by their employers, mostly governments; they thus served on the same conditions as their national counterparts, becoming global citizens in the process.

**“To serve and learn” was the organization’s early mission statement – a thread that continues through Cuso International’s work today.**

In the early years, most of CUSO’s volunteers were recent university graduates, and were placed mainly in secondary school and teacher training positions.

Over the decades, CUSO began to fill requests for other experienced technical and trade volunteers – agriculturalists, foresters, fisheries workers, and those skilled in small business, cooperatives, and community development, as well both education and health.

Increased global awareness in the 1970s marked the beginning of the organization’s emphasis on development education in Canada as well as its involvement in the anti-apartheid and liberation movement in southern Africa. During this time, CUSO also initiated project-based work, including a large school reconstruction project in Nigeria in the wake of the Biafran War.

The early 1980s marked the beginning of a new direction for the organization as it broadened its mandate to include social justice issues and a shift in focus to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality more directly. Over ensuing decades, CUSO has continued its engagement on key development issues, including women’s and minority rights, human development, social action, and environmental sustainability.

In 2008, CUSO merged with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), its United Kingdom counterpart. The merger, while short-lived, provided efficiencies of



Cuso International volunteers, 1971.



scale, and expanded our thematic areas of focus and our global footprint. In 2011, the organizations again went their separate ways, and CUSO rebranded itself Cuso International. Today, Cuso International continues to place skilled volunteers across a broad spectrum of programs, where they work collaboratively with partners and their communities.

**Since our founding, we have placed more than 14,000 skilled volunteers in more than 100 countries.**

Compared with our early days, the average age of our volunteers currently is 39. Our expertise in skills sharing includes specific operational expertise in training and deploying volunteers abroad. As a leader among volunteer-sending organizations, we often are called upon to support other organizations engaged in the deployment of volunteers.

While Cuso International's early days were defined by volunteering, our work today has evolved to respond to the needs of partners and the communities where we work. Volunteers continue to play a central role, supporting and complementing a broad range of international cooperation and development programming approaches we deploy in partnership with civil society organizations, community groups, governments, multilateral agencies, and the private sector. We are active in 16 countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as northern Canada.

Cuso International programs are funded by many institutional funders, as well as from direct donations and bequests from generous Canadian donors – including its alumni (returned volunteers), many of whom have had distinguished international development careers or who have played leadership roles in their communities.



Awae, Cameroon.  
Photographer: Brian Atkinson.





## OUR SUPPORTERS

Our institutional funders and generous and loyal donors in Canada and around the globe support our efforts and drive impact. As of January 2023, these include Global Affairs Canada, CBM International, Education International, European Union, Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, BMZ - German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and World Food Programme.