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Now more than ever we need strong Canadian leadership in the world

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A strong development and humanitarian assistance policy requires a strong financial commitment: that is the clear and striking conclusion of the latest report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee.

The report, released Nov. 3, has strong language on the need for a comprehensive long-term strategic approach to development co-operation. It recommends that partnerships and funding for civil society organizations should be long term, predictable, and locally focused—a longstanding request of Canadian organizations involved in development and humanitarian work. The committee also pointed to structural changes at Global Affairs Canada that are needed to build expertise in regional issues, policy innovation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Most significantly, the committee called for government spending on official development assistance or aid to reach 0.35 per cent of gross national income by 2020, and that Canada should aspire to a plan that would see Canada spending 0.7 per cent of its GNI on ODA by 2030, the timeline for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The longstanding target of reaching 0.7 per cent of GNI is Canadian-designed, having been originally advanced by former Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson. The Canadian Parliament has reiterated this commitment several times in the last 15 years, under both Conservative and Liberal governments. The target has been endorsed by the former Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (2002 and 2003), the former Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Development (2003), and the Standing Committee on Finance (2007).

In 2005, the House of Commons as a whole concurred unanimously with a report from the former Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committee supporting this goal. Yet today, in 2016, Canada sits at about 0.26 per cent. Our country has fallen below the average of its peer group in the G7, OECD, and other Western liberal democracies. These figures matter to how Canada is perceived internationally by its peers. Without substantial increases in the next couple of years, this government risks having the worst record in Canadian history in terms of investments in international assistance. And with the Canadian government having fully endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals, there are important expectations that we do our part to support inclusive development that "leaves no one behind." Canadians expect nothing less from their government.

It is in the interest of Canada and Canadians for the government to make significant investments in tackling these global challenges, and in building a fairer, more sustainable and safer world. The impacts, both social and economic, of health pandemics like Ebola, humanitarian crises like the civil war in Syria, climate change, and inequality, are manifested in illness, refugee movements, changing weather patterns, and systemic poverty. They are felt in Canada and around the world. And they are especially severe in developing countries.

The federal government is now in the final stages of its deliberations on Canada's International Assistance Review, which will include a new funding framework for Canada's development and humanitarian investments. The committee suggested matching the long-term strategic objectives of our new policy "with the resources and tools required for their realization." According to our calculations, predictable annual increases of 12 per cent to the aid envelope would see Canada reach 0.34 by 2020 (close to the committee's request), hit 0.42—above the OECD donor performance average—by 2024 (the end of a potential second Liberal mandate), and 0.7 by 2030. The committee's report is thus a timely and very appropriate call to action.

As ministers make their submissions to cabinet as part of the pre-budget processes, we encourage them to join the committee, and Canadian civil society, in urging for increased Canadian funding for international assistance. This includes in areas that touch the ministries responsible for environment and climate change, development and humanitarian assistance, health, justice and human rights, migration and refugees, peace and security, and status of women, among others. Today, as we assess the aftermath of Brexit, a Trump presidency, and a growing tide of protectionism and isolationism in too many corners of Europe and beyond, the phrase "the world needs more Canada" takes on heightened relevance. Luckily for the world, the Liberal government has been vocal about its desire to be a leader on the global scene. It is time to put resources behind that ambition, by increasing the budget for international assistance as the Foreign Affairs Committee has so rightly recommended.

Julia Sánchez is the President-CEO of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, a national coalition of civil society organizations working globally to achieve sustainable human development.