

A large decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of several overlapping rounded rectangles and circles in various colors: teal, red, orange, yellow, and green. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement.

WHAT HAVE SMOS LEARNED FROM COVID?

MAY 2022

SPUR CHANGE
SMO REPORT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Spur Change team would like to express heartfelt thanks to the 111 organizations that kindly completed the survey that was circulated at the end of 2021. Spur Change would also like to extend deep thanks to the 22 organizations that generously agreed to participate in interviews with the research team along with the 8 organizations who provided their consent to be featured in a case study; it was through this engagement that the team was able to collect the findings presented in this report.

This report presents findings from a research project conducted by investigators at the University of Guelph in collaboration with the Spur Change program. The research was made possible through funding from Global Affairs Canada via the Spur Change program, in addition to funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The research team includes Andrea Paras (Primary Investigator, University of Guelph), John-Michael Davis (Worcester Polytechnic Institute), Craig Johnson (University of Guelph), Andréanne Martel (National Program Director, Spur Change Program), Asa Coleman (Research Assistant, University of Guelph) and Heather Dicks (Research Assistant, Memorial University). The Spur Change Program and the research team would like to express their appreciation to Heather Dicks, who took primary responsibility for drafting this report.

SPUR CHANGE

The Spur Change program is a five-year initiative (2019-2024), operated by the Alberta Council for Global Cooperation (ACGC) on behalf of the Inter-Council Network (ICN) and funded by Global Affairs Canada. Spur Change aims to increase the effectiveness of Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) in delivering sustainable results in support of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The main outcomes of the program are to increase the engagement of Canadian SMOs in global development and to increase the engagement of Canadians, particularly youth, as global citizens.

ANNUAL SMO REPORT

Once a year, Spur Change publishes a report which provides information about the state of SMOs in Canada. This year, Spur Change chose to explore how Canadian SMOs working in the field of global development have responded and adapted to the

realities associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the Spur Change team wanted to highlight some of the unique and creative ways in which individual organizations have evolved and altered their programs and operations in light of the pandemic. Thus, alongside information on generalized trends, this report includes case studies associated with specific organization responses. This report is the product of a collaborative research initiative between Spur Change and researchers with the University of Guelph. Previous SMO reports published by Spur Change are available here: <https://icn-rcc.ca/en/reports/>¹.



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¹ Spur Change, Needs Assessment Report, published by the Spur Change program on behalf of the Inter-Council Network, March 2020, https://icn-rcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/SPUR_SMOReport2020_EN.pdf
Spur Change, The Impact of the COVID19 Pandemic on SMO Adaptation and Resilience, published by the Spur Change program on behalf of the Inter-Council Network, March 2021, https://icn-rcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/ACGC_SMO-Report-2021_EN.pdf

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last two years, Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) have had to significantly adapt to the changing context of the unfolding pandemic. While some organizations struggled to shift in this fast-paced changing reality, others thrived and exhibited impressive flexibility, adopting innovative solutions leading to permanent changes in the way they work. Responses from organizations have been diverse, creative and deeply reflective as many SMOs harnessed this period of global disruption to take a step back and truly consider their role in global development.

This report presents research that has been conducted by a research team from the University of Guelph in collaboration with the Spur Change program. Between February and March 2022, the research team interviewed 22 representatives from Canadian SMOs working in the global development sector. Prior to this, in December 2021, an online survey was distributed to Canadian development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 111 responses were collected and analyzed. This report primarily utilizes findings from the interview data, with some supplementary data from the survey, to illustrate Canadian SMOs' experience with and response to COVID-19.

In analyzing interview responses related to how organizations have reacted to the global pandemic, four key themes emerged: (1) SMOs have adopted **creative local solutions**; (2) they have deepened collaboration through **virtual connections**; (3) SMOs have introduced a more **human-centered approach** to their work; and (4) many of them have used the pandemic period as a **moment of reflection**. These themes are discussed throughout this report, alongside eight case studies illustrating specific responses adopted by Canadian SMOs.

In terms of **creative local solutions**, SMOs have leaned heavily on the knowledge and expertise of their local partners and have adapted their programming in a regionally responsive manner. In some cases, these responses have involved reconfiguring existing programs, such that they could be delivered in a COVID-friendly manner. In other situations, SMOs have changed their programming entirely to address new needs associated with the impacts of the pandemic within the communities and regions where they are operational.

In adopting new **virtual connections**, SMOs have overcome significant obstacles associated with technological infrastructure and training needs in order to establish new ways of connecting and collaborating with their partners. For some SMOs, these virtual connections have proven so successful that they have even expanded their networks and established new online partnerships.

During this challenging time, organizations across Canada have also come to understand the negative impact of the pandemic on staff, partners, and project participants. In response, SMOs have shifted their organizational cultures to embody a more **human-centered approach** in their business operations. This has involved a greater awareness of mental health strain and a desire to support one another during a difficult period.

Finally, despite the challenges associated with COVID-19, many organizations managed to maintain impressive fortitude and optimism, utilizing this period as an opportunity to take **a moment of reflection** and pause. These organizations have been able to rethink and, in some instances, reorient their organizational models during this disruptive time, such that they are now prepared to be more efficient and effective in a post-pandemic period.

Although this report illustrates the incredible resilience of SMOs and highlights key success stories associated with their responses to the global pandemic, interview respondents also noted continued challenges that persist in their work. Among these challenges are issues associated with funding, staff burnout and a desire to return to in-person means of connection.

These challenges inform key recommendations for the Spur Change program moving forward, which include the need to (1) support SMO efforts to diversify funding sources, (2) communicate the need for increased flexibility in government funding, (3) promote and support SMO efforts to prioritize staff wellness, and (4) provide opportunities for post-pandemic in-person connections.

Overall, the flexibility and adaptability that Canadian SMOs continue to exhibit in the face of a challenging global situation serves to highlight the impressive resilience and strength of these organizations and their critical contribution to global development.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has marked an unprecedented moment in human history. This virus has stretched its fingers across the globe and triggered disruptions and transformation across all sectors of society. This has included significant disruptions in the field of global development and humanitarian relief.

Early projections in the pandemic noted small and medium-sized organizations working in the development sector as those most vulnerable to financial losses and at the highest risk of closing their doors (Bond, 2020; Wright, 2020; Paras, Johnson, Henson, Coleman, & Otto, 2020). A survey administered to development NGOs in the UK by Bond identified small charities as feeling the impacts of the pandemic most acutely, followed by medium and then larger organizations. This survey revealed that a disproportionate number of small NGOs (income under £ 2,000,000) were being forced to cut programs and staff (Bond, 2020).

Despite these grim projections, small and medium-sized organizations have also proven flexible and adaptable in their pandemic responses, something that has enabled them to continue operations in spite of present circumstances (Spur Change, 2021). One distinct advantage of SMOs has been their ability to accelerate localization efforts in response to the pandemic. Numerous SMOs were in fact already implementing most, if not all, of their programming through local partners before the onset of the pandemic, which enabled them to respond to the location-specific realities of COVID-19 more quickly (Spur Change, 2021). This level of localization is something that larger development and humanitarian organizations appear to be struggling to achieve (Barbelet, Bryant, & Willitts-King, 2020; Roche & Denney, 2021).

In their [annual report for 2021](#), the Spur Change program looked into how SMOs exhibited flexibility in their pandemic response, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on these organizations' adaptation and resilience. It focused on five thematic areas associated with SMO adaptation: resource mobilization and fundraising, program development, gender-based approaches, partnership with local organizations, and differences and variations across SMOs.

This 2022 report builds on the findings presented by Spur Change in 2021 and seeks to further explore SMOs' experience with the pandemic, including looking at the ways in which these organizations have permanently shifted their work in response to COVID-19. Given the incredible resilience that SMOs have continued to exhibit, this report is principally focused on the positive adaptation strategies SMOs have employed. Specific case studies exhibiting the notable experiences and adaptation strategies of SMOs have been included throughout this report to highlight these successes.

The main findings presented in this report were gathered through **22 semi-structured interviews conducted between February and March 2022 with representatives from Canadian SMOs working in the global development sector.** Throughout the report there are also several figures illustrating quantitative data that were collected in December 2021 through a survey of SMOs. More details on the research methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

Throughout the interviews, despite a substantial diversity across organizations, there were nevertheless common threads that emerged regarding SMO experiences and adaptation strategies. In analyzing the interview responses, four key themes were identified: (1) SMOs have adopted **creative local solutions**; (2) they have deepened collaboration through **virtual connections**; (3) SMOs have introduced a more **human-centered approach** to their work; and (4) many of them have used the pandemic period as a **moment of reflection**.

For the majority of organizations, the positive changes they have instituted in response to COVID-19 now represent permanent changes to the way their organizations work. The next four sections of this report describe in greater detail each of the above-mentioned themes and highlight case studies illustrating SMO adaptation strategies during the pandemic.

While the principal objective of this report is to document the flexibility, creativity, and resilience of Canadian SMOs, this is not to diminish the difficulties that these organizations have had to face. On the contrary, recognizing the tremendous obstacles that SMOs have had to surmount and continue to face is critical. This report includes a reflection on this point, with a section highlighting some of the key challenges that SMOs continue to experience. These challenges directly inform the final section of this report, which provides recommendations for the Spur Change program.



1. CREATIVE LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Although the principal concerns related to COVID-19 were health-related, the impacts of this novel virus swiftly rippled out to touch the political, economic, and social fabric of our globalized world. This pandemic ushered in profound changes to the way communities and countries operate. Isolation orders and lockdowns, health mandates, and significant travel restrictions were just some of the many ways in which people the world over were forced to alter their everyday lives.

While this pandemic was felt all over the globe, the reactions and regulations of each region differed in meaningful ways. Naturally, for SMOs working in global development, these varying societal changes proved immensely disruptive to their work.

In many instances, this resulted in programs slowing down or even coming to a halt entirely. This was especially true for programs that relied heavily on international travel or in-person gatherings and other face-to-face touch points. In other instances, however, SMOs were able to adjust their projects and approaches to match the changing situations within the communities where their projects were being implemented.

During this time, SMOs found they became increasingly reliant on their local staff and partners to determine the most appropriate responses and solutions to ensure continued project implementation during the pandemic. Those SMOs that proved most successful at adapting their strategies to the COVID-reality on the ground were predominantly those that had strong relationships with their local partners and had the ability to follow their partners' lead in changing project directions.

One interview respondent noted that, at the start of the pandemic, their organization first attempted to implement a standardized adaptation approach in each of the countries where they were operating. This ultimately proved unsuccessful, however, and they ended up adopting a more flexible location-specific approach with increased reliance on their local partners for continued project implementation. In the majority of interviews, the organizations' increased reliance on local partners was said to have strengthened their relationships and advanced their organizational model towards greater localization.

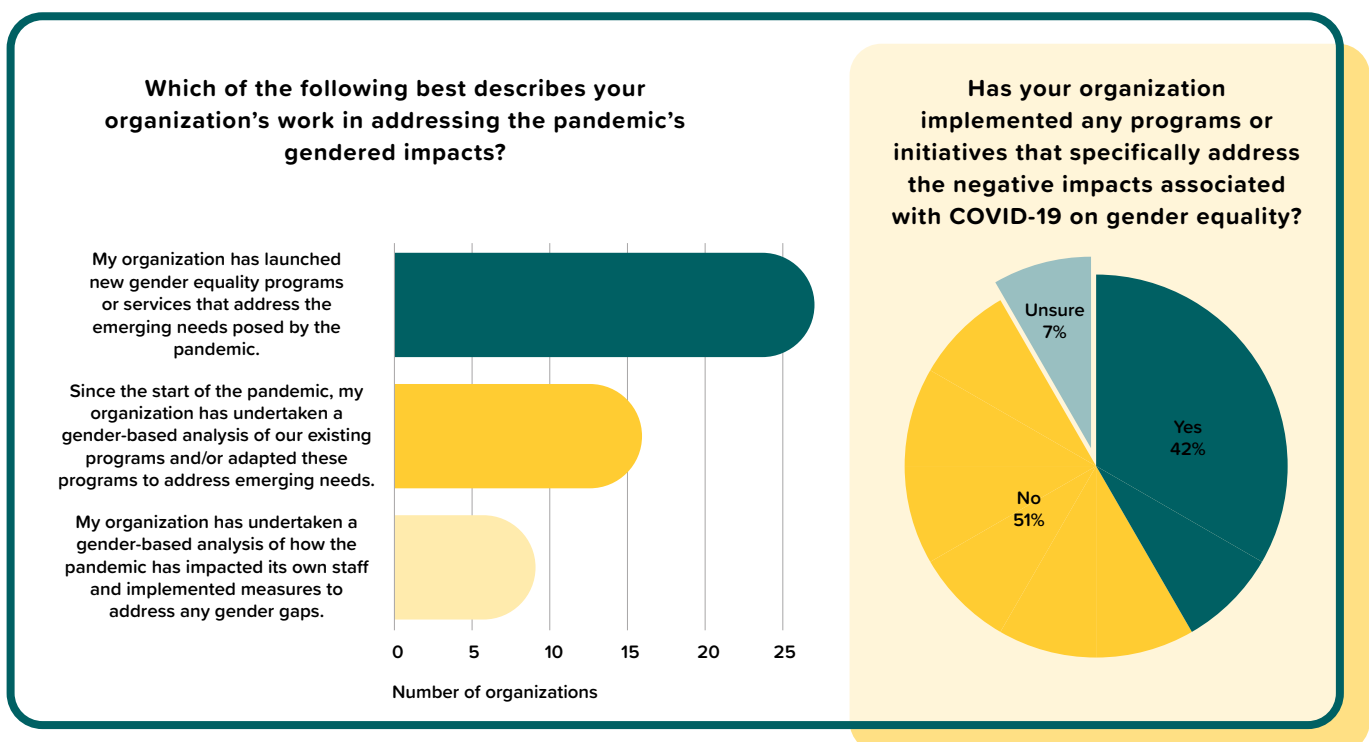
In some cases, creative local solutions involved changing the way existing projects were being delivered. For instance, two SMOs that were interviewed reported the local schools they were supporting changed from in-person classes to a weekly system of homework pick-ups and drop-offs for students. In other cases, however, project funding

was diverted entirely to address new emerging issues associated directly with the impacts of the pandemic. For example, one SMO that normally supports women’s training and education pivoted their focus during the pandemic and used their organizational donations to pay for personal protective equipment (PPE). Likewise, other organizations shifted project resources to meet the basic needs of families and community members that lost their incomes and employment as a result of the pandemic.

SMOs have also been poised to respond to increasing needs associated with gender inequality, which has become heightened during the pandemic. For some organizations, this has meant tracking their gender equality metrics more closely, while for others it has included directly implementing new programs including new trainings, workshops and information campaigns on such things as prevention of gender-based violence, toxic masculinity, and human rights. In the survey, approximately 42% of respondents noted that their organization had implemented initiatives that specifically addressed the negative impacts associated with COVID-19 on gender equality (Figure 1).

Although the creative local solutions that were put in place by SMOs were born out of necessity during a time of unprecedented societal disruption, many of these solutions have proven to be so successful that organizations plan to continue them even after the pandemic recedes.

Figure 1: COVID-19 and SMO Gender Initiatives



CASE STUDY #1: PETIROJO'S PANDEMIC RESPONSES IN PERU

The Petirojo Foundation, named after a local red bird known to bring good luck, proved to be swift and nimble in adjusting to pandemic circumstances.

Petirojo is a small Ontario-based family foundation that supports an educational institution in rural Northern Peru, which offers pre-school and elementary school programs for disadvantaged children. Before the pandemic, the school provided a diversity of academic and creative classes for these children, including a nutritious breakfast, ultimately striving to set them up for future success. In addition, the foundation funds a bursary program for school graduates to allow them to pursue secondary and post-secondary education.

With the onset of the pandemic and for two full academic years, the Peruvian government prohibited all in-person school activities and created virtual programs in their stead. Because students lacked devices, internet access, and some even electricity at home, the teachers had the parents pick up worksheets on a weekly basis and followed up with regular WhatsApp calls to answer questions, provide explanations if needed, and feedback after the worksheets were returned. Petirojo responded to the situation by funding the teachers' phone fees as well as transportation costs for occasional visits to family homes, when COVID restrictions allowed.

Since the breakfast program had come to a halt at the same time as many parents struggled to feed their families because of employment insecurity and severe inflation, the Foundation started funding monthly baskets of staple food that the parents would pick up along with the worksheets.

With respect to bursary students, Petirojo approved the purchase of cellular phones and funding of monthly phone fees in addition to tuition to allow the students to pursue secondary education and even university classes virtually. The Foundation also gave extra funding to the bursary program administrator to provide counselling, encouragement and support for bursary students who were struggling with this way of studying. While some high school students found studying 'by phone' just impossible, the majority of them succeeded.

With the impossibility of bi-annual visits by Petirojo protagonists, monitoring was conducted by frequent emails and bi-monthly Zoom meetings, effectively increasing the quality and quantity of communication with its partners in Peru. Also, the ongoing communication of teachers with families had the unforeseen lucky outcome of improving the involvement of parents in the education of their children.

CASE STUDY #2: LOW-TECH CONNECTIVITY

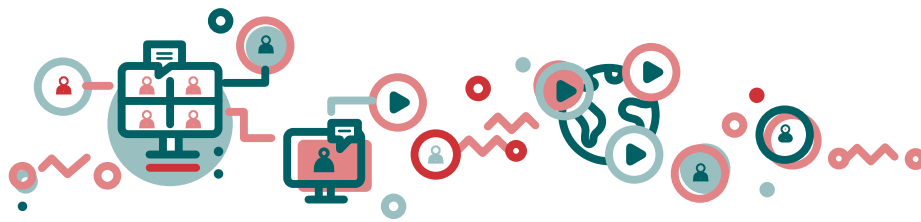
Partners Worldwide Canada (PWC) is based in Ontario and represents the Canadian branch of the larger US-based NGO, Partners Worldwide. PWC's model, as an organization, involves working with local partners around the globe to support the growth of local businesses with the aim of generating local jobs and ultimately lifting families out of poverty. As part of their model, PWC works with partners to deliver training in some of the most remote and poorest regions in the world. PWC identifies and coordinates local and international volunteers to work with their local partners and deliver business training in poor communities. All of their volunteers represent skilled business individuals with a desire to build capacity among budding entrepreneurs.

With the onset of the pandemic, communities around the globe swiftly became locked down and in-person trainings were no longer an option. Unlike in Canada, some of PWC's intended training participants did not have access to a computer, a smartphone, or the internet. As such, switching solely to an online format was not an option.

It was during this time that PWC's partners stepped in with impressive entrepreneurial creativity. They recognized that although these participants were not able to access anything online, they nevertheless did have access to a cell phone. With this knowledge in hand, they developed a new hybrid method of training delivery with both an online option and an option to dial in through local toll-free numbers; anyone with access to a phone could call into the training and participate.

The results were astounding. An unprecedented number of people participated in the training, with PWC estimating that attendance was two to three times higher than in previous years. Moreover, unlike in the past when their trainings were confined to a single community, they found people from a large number of communities were hearing about the trainings and dialing in to participate. In delivering these trainings, PWC discovered that not only were they providing people with an opportunity to learn, they were also providing people with the chance to connect with others during a time of isolation.

While this hybrid video-conferencing model was not something they had considered in the past, this means of low-tech connectivity proved to be a highly successful and creative solution emerging from PWC's pandemic experience. PWC plans to revive in-person training when the pandemic allows, but this will no longer be their only means of training delivery. While it is still important to understand whether dial-in or virtual trainings have the same qualitative impact as in-person trainings, it appears like these hybrid models are here to stay.



2. VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS

For most SMOs working in global development, overseas travel was a fixture within their project implementation models. Thus, when COVID-19 hit and international travel came to a halt, SMO operations across a wide range of sectors were significantly impacted and organizations began looking towards virtual means of connection.

Many organizations noted that working as a team online was not a large aspect of their work before the pandemic, and thus they faced a significant learning curve when COVID-19 first hit. This often involved providing training and support to staff and partners as they tried to learn new means of connecting and collaborating online.

At times, organizations reported having to adjust their approach or adopt new tactics to their online efforts as the pandemic wore on. One SMO noted that at the outset of the pandemic they made a significant investment in a new online platform to facilitate connectivity within their work. Over time, however, they realized that this new platform was not being used and they ultimately had to change their approach entirely and adopt another means of connecting virtually.

Other times, incessant connectivity issues in partner countries curtailed meaningful engagement. These technical issues often exacerbated existing language and cultural barriers making communication increasingly difficult. One organization noted that they had tremendous difficulties engaging with partners over video conferencing software early in the pandemic. In trying other means of connection, however, they found that written forms of communication worked extremely well, and they have now adjusted their model to make greater use of messaging software, such as WhatsApp, to stay in regular contact with their local partners.

In some cases, organizations were able to invest in improved infrastructure and connectivity to ensure local partners had access to high-speed internet. Several organizations noted that they were able to divert funding from various aspects of their work to support the purchase of such things as cell phones, internet boxes and internet airtime, in order to ensure their partners were able to stay connected.

Overall, a surprising narrative among SMOs is that the various virtual means through which they have begun to implement their work have in fact increased the connections

and collaboration they have with their partners. In some instances, this increased connectivity has expanded beyond previously existing partners, with several interview participants noting new collaborations with other organizations and institutions, which have been made possible on account of increased online activity.

As SMOs have now proven their ability to operate successfully in spite of a global standstill on travel, they are also starting to question the necessity of their frequent international visits. Many organizations note that they have plans to reduce the amount of travel they do in the future. Most people do still miss having in-person touch points with those they work with and thus it is expected that international travel will still be part of these organizations' models. Nevertheless, SMOs across the board foresee a reduction in travel in the future. This, they expect, will simultaneously tighten their budget, and diminish their carbon footprint.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has moved the world together in one direction, it has been towards greater online connectivity. After experiencing some initial growing pains, SMOs have found ways to meaningfully harness online options for connection and collaboration in their work. Most organizations do not intend to return to their pre-pandemic models but hope to maintain some of the successes from this period, moving towards a hybrid model which embraces online tools as a complement to in-person connection.

CASE STUDY #3: A VIRTUAL CONGRESS

Le Comité régional d'éducation pour le développement international de Lanaudière (CRÉDIL) is a non-profit organization based in Quebec whose work includes raising awareness and education on international solidarity and global citizenship; facilitating internships and projects in the Global South; and welcoming newcomers to the Lanaudière region in Canada.

Before the pandemic, CRÉDIL was able to facilitate global learning and exchanges through international volunteer trips. This included Canadians traveling to their partner countries in the Global South, as well as partner visits to Canada. With the onset of the pandemic, however, international travel came to a halt and CRÉDIL was forced to turn to virtual means to connect people globally.

One of the most successful virtual programs they developed during this time was a series of virtual fora for youth across four countries: Canada, Bolivia, Peru, and Togo. The ultimate goal of this virtual series was for youth to come together and develop a declaration for an inclusive and sustainable global economic recovery post-pandemic. Between January and May 2021, CRÉDIL provided support and information to the four groups of young people regarding sustainable development objectives to facilitate their in-country discussions. Then, once a month, a multistakeholder forum would be held, which included speakers and a larger exchange of ideas between all the groups through simultaneous translation.

This program enabled youth from across the globe to learn from one another and share their ideas, concerns, and respective approaches to addressing major global issues. This type of gathering was not something they had done in the past. Pulling together an in-person congress of this size and nature would not have been feasible given the costs associated with travel; but holding it virtually proved incredibly successful. While it will not replace in-person volunteer visits in the future, given the overwhelmingly positive experience they had with this model, CRÉDIL plans to continue having this virtual congress beyond the pandemic.

More information on this series of fora and the declaration that was developed by the four groups of young people can be found on the CRÉDIL website, here:
<https://www.credil.qc.ca/declarationforums.html>

CASE STUDY #4: BRING THEM INTO THE CONVERSATION

The Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST) is an Alberta-based charity and engineering firm that seeks to increase global access to safe drinking water and sanitation through local capacity building and knowledge sharing related to low-tech household water, sanitation, and hygiene solutions. CAWST works with a multitude of partners and clients to reach communities all around the world.

Given their focus on hygiene and sanitation, through their work, CAWST frequently engages with manual pit emptiers, which represent a particularly marginalized group of sanitation workers. Before the onset of the pandemic, CAWST staff and local partners would have frequent discussions and deliberations regarding manual emptiers, yet these individuals were rarely directly involved in these conversations. Surprisingly, it was the global COVID-19 pandemic that ended up shifting this dynamic.

As more and more work started being facilitated through online means, CAWST recognized an unprecedented opportunity for greater and stronger collaboration. They decided to coordinate with their local partners to help identify manual emptiers that might be interested in joining discussions happening in the organization related to their work. CAWST was delighted with the results. Manual emptiers eagerly stepped into the conversation, bringing with them impressive knowledge and perspectives that had not previously been considered. This served to demonstrate to CAWST the incredible power of expanding the tent and welcoming new voices within.

Further, CAWST's new collaboration efforts did not end here. During this time, they also discovered the benefits of establishing collaborative jointly owned online spaces. Of note, they paired up with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine to develop The COVID-19 Hygiene Hub. This hub represents an online space for people from all over the world to tap into and learn about hygiene management. The collaborative development of this space allowed for more information to be shared in a timely fashion, keeping it up to date and responding promptly to current events. They noted that collaboratively managed online spaces have become a huge driver for their organization; they are being accessed by large numbers of people and pushing their impact further each year.

Whether it is welcoming manual pit emptiers directly into project discussions or working alongside a university, the pandemic has certainly taught CAWST a valuable truth that they will carry with them into the future: open the door and bring others into the conversation.



3. A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH

Frequently, in discussions regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the foreign aid and global development sector, the focus rests on project activities, operations, and funding streams. Above all, however, it is critical to remember that this pandemic has impacted people.

The most immediate impacts of COVID-19 have been on individuals' physical health, culminating in illness and death on account of the virus. The physical health related risks of the pandemic represent only one of many ills, however. Loss of employment due to lockdowns and disruptions to numerous economic activities have hit many families and communities very hard; this is particularly true in countries where government financial supports were not made available. Moreover, isolation and a rapid switch to online means of work and communications have led to increased mental health concerns, including depression and staff burnout.

The negative spill-over effects of the pandemic were often felt most heavily among vulnerable populations. Those that are under-employed, that lack strong social networks, and those that have been forced to take on a double burden at home as isolation has led all facets of life to take place in the homestead.

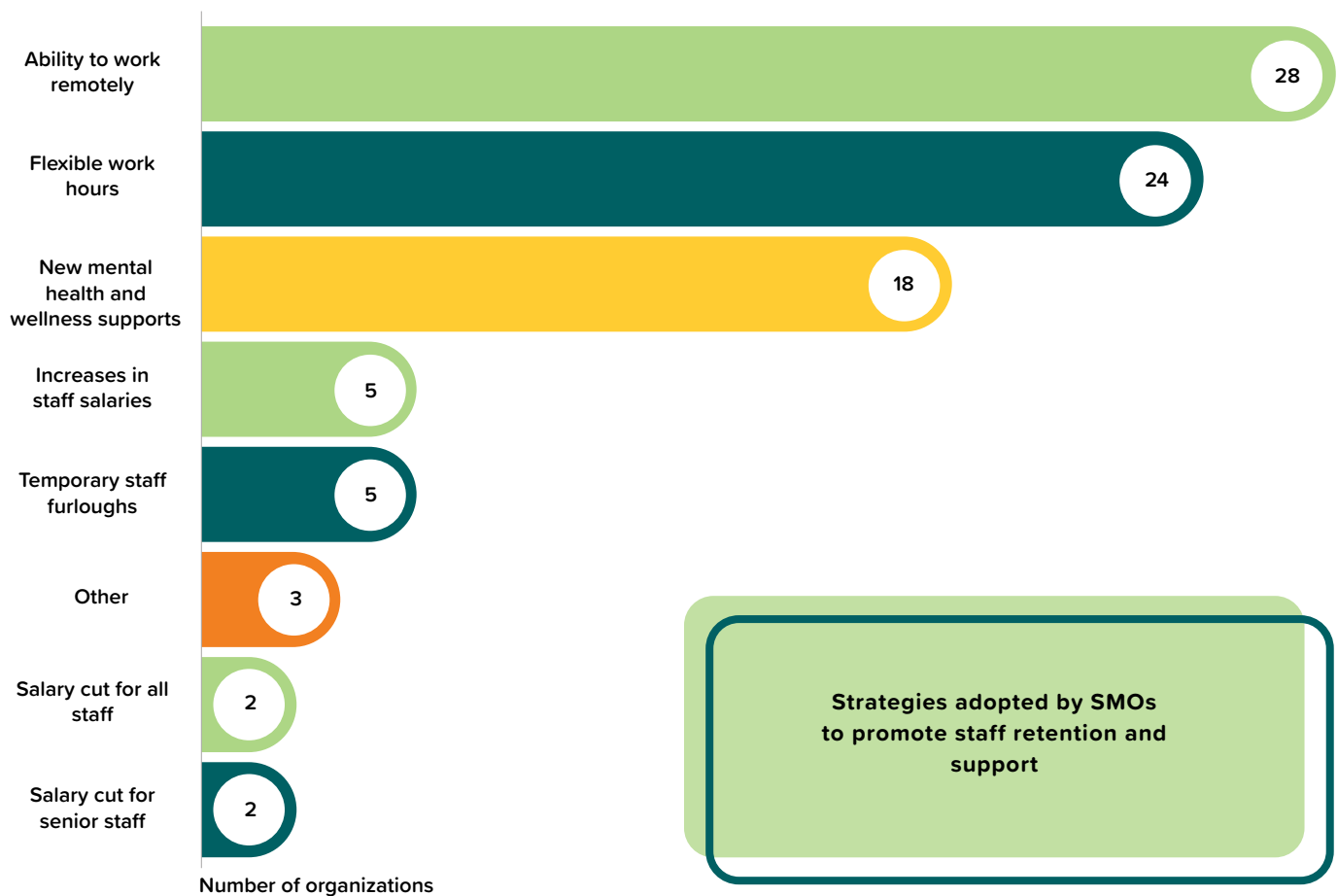
Notably, women have been disproportionately impacted during this time, as they have had to take up a larger share of the work within the household while juggling other duties. This is particularly the case within Canada's charitable sector, where up to 80% of workers in non-profit organizations are women (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2020). Meanwhile, with women being overrepresented among vulnerable populations worldwide and occupying more precarious work, they have also faced greater financial losses and employment instability during this period (Albelda, Bell-Pasht, & Konstantinidis, 2020; Sudiono, 2021; Young, 2010).

While this has been a challenging time for people around the globe, SMOs report that this has also been an experience that they have been able to face together with their staff, their partners, and their project participants. They have stood strong together during a time of loss, grief, and uncertainty. For many organizations this has deepened their relationships, as they have opened new spaces to discuss health and wellbeing, as well as check in on how communities and families are doing during a time of illness and uncertainty.

This period has also led to greater awareness and understanding of mental health strains and home-related burdens. SMOs report instituting measures to start tracking the mental wellbeing of their people, adapting more flexible working arrangements, and putting in place mental health supports such as counseling services. Of note, in the survey, 31 organizations reported implementing new strategies for staff retention and support; of these, 18 organizations (58%) stated they had instituted new mental health and wellness supports (Figure 3).

For the vast majority of SMOs, they intend to maintain many, if not all, of the measures they have instituted. This marks a positive shift in many organizational cultures, revealing a firm desire among SMOs to ensure that the mental health and wellbeing of the people in their lives remains a priority.

Figure 2: SMO support for staff



CASE STUDY #5: MAKING IT RELATIONSHIP-BASED

VIDEA is a British Columbia-based organization whose work is centered on creating a more just and equitable world through the support and engagement of vulnerable and marginalized populations, including Indigenous and underrepresented youth. Their work seeks to empower and give voice to youth and communities, such that they become equipped with the skills, information, and support needed to take on leadership roles in tackling complex global problems, including pressing environmental and human rights issues. Their work is undertaken through a dynamically feminist and intersectional approach. Decolonization is not just a concept for VIDEA but is something they strive to embody as an organization.

VIDEA recognizes the critical importance of community and identified COVID-19 as a serious threat to the physical, emotional, and mental health wellbeing of not only their staff, but everyone engaged in their programs. Early in the pandemic, they decided as an organization to strongly focus on their decolonization work to guide them through the pandemic. This included moving forward with heart-centered approaches, prioritizing people, and identifying those in their projects that they felt might be most vulnerable in light of the emotional, mental health, and financial strains associated with the pandemic, particularly Indigenous women and girls. They then developed meaningful leadership roles for these individuals, hired them onto their staff, and secured a variety of funding opportunities to support their youth leadership and team expansion. While successfully and significantly expanding their organization, they also added a rich diversity of voices to their staff.

They also decided to deepen their team-based approach during this time, making it more inclusive and relationship-based. They developed a WhatsApp group for their entire global team and began having twice weekly meetings as a group. Rather than taking a business-as-usual approach to their staff meetings, they decided to transform them into relationship-building opportunities. They recognized that at a time when many people were worried about their jobs and livelihoods, work-centered meetings would place undue pressure on some team members. This was counter to what they desired as an organization; they wanted to meet people where they were at during this difficult period and place value on the emotional support that team members could give to each other.

From decision-making and leadership to the content of team meetings, feminist decolonization informs concrete everyday practices throughout the organization. Team meetings have helped build relationships and community amongst their staff and have helped VIDEA, as an organization, to prioritize new forms of knowledge and connection. This relationship-centered approach has been transformational for the organization and VIDEA has no intention of ever looking back.

CASE STUDY #6: IN THE TRENCHES

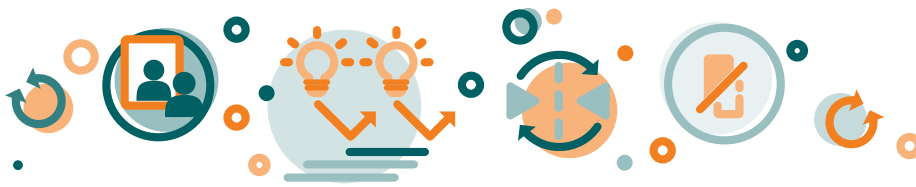
Canadian Friends of Oaxaca Inc. (CANFRO) is a not-for-profit volunteer organization, incorporated in the province of Ontario, that is focused on relieving poverty, advancing education, and promoting health in the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. This organization was established by a small group of Canadians who recognized that important work could be undertaken by partnering with reputable NGOs based in Oaxaca. Since 2013, CANFRO has been delivering six projects with the assistance of five partner agencies in Oaxaca. CANFRO'S fundraising efforts ensure that consistent financial resources are channeled in support of its mission.

CANFRO's partner agencies were badly affected by the pandemic; many of the staff and their family members became ill with COVID-19. The worry, grief and loss associated with this period was palpable; above all, this was a moment of human suffering. During this time, CANFRO stood with their partners. They increased the frequency of communications and shared in the pain and loss being endured. They also shared in the joy of survival and resilience as their projects continued to be delivered in new ways. CANFRO made themselves flexible and responsive to any needs the partners identified, supporting them in every way possible.

Beyond their own pain, CANFRO's partner agencies also recognized that the populations being served were becoming further marginalized as illness and death tore through the region. Families were losing relatives, some children were being orphaned, and economic privation created situations no one should ever have to endure. While those being served were already vulnerable, during the pandemic there were heightened levels of domestic violence, mental health issues and suicide.

The Oaxacan organizations saw the need for mental health supports during this time and CANFRO was willing to add this new programming to its existing projects. Two of the partner agencies engaged the services of local therapists and social workers, who were made available to children and families free of charge. This new service has provided much-needed mental health support during an unprecedented time of anguish and is the kind of support CANFRO plans to continue offering as Oaxaca moves into a post-pandemic world.

While the pandemic period was painful, CANFRO volunteers and donors feel as though they have "been in the trenches" with their partner agencies and this has led to a new sense of commitment and respect for each other. CANFRO and their partner agencies are now standing stronger together as they move forward into a period of recovery.



4. A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

It cannot be denied that the pandemic marked a challenging time for SMOs across the country. For many organizations, operations slowed, funding streams were disrupted, and revenues diminished. The viability of projects and operations became tenuous.

A surprising theme to emerge during interviews with SMOs was that several of them were able to view the chaotic and challenging COVID-19 era not just as a disruption, but also as an opportunity. These organizations used this time to take a moment and reflect on who they were, what they had to offer and how they wanted to operate in the future.

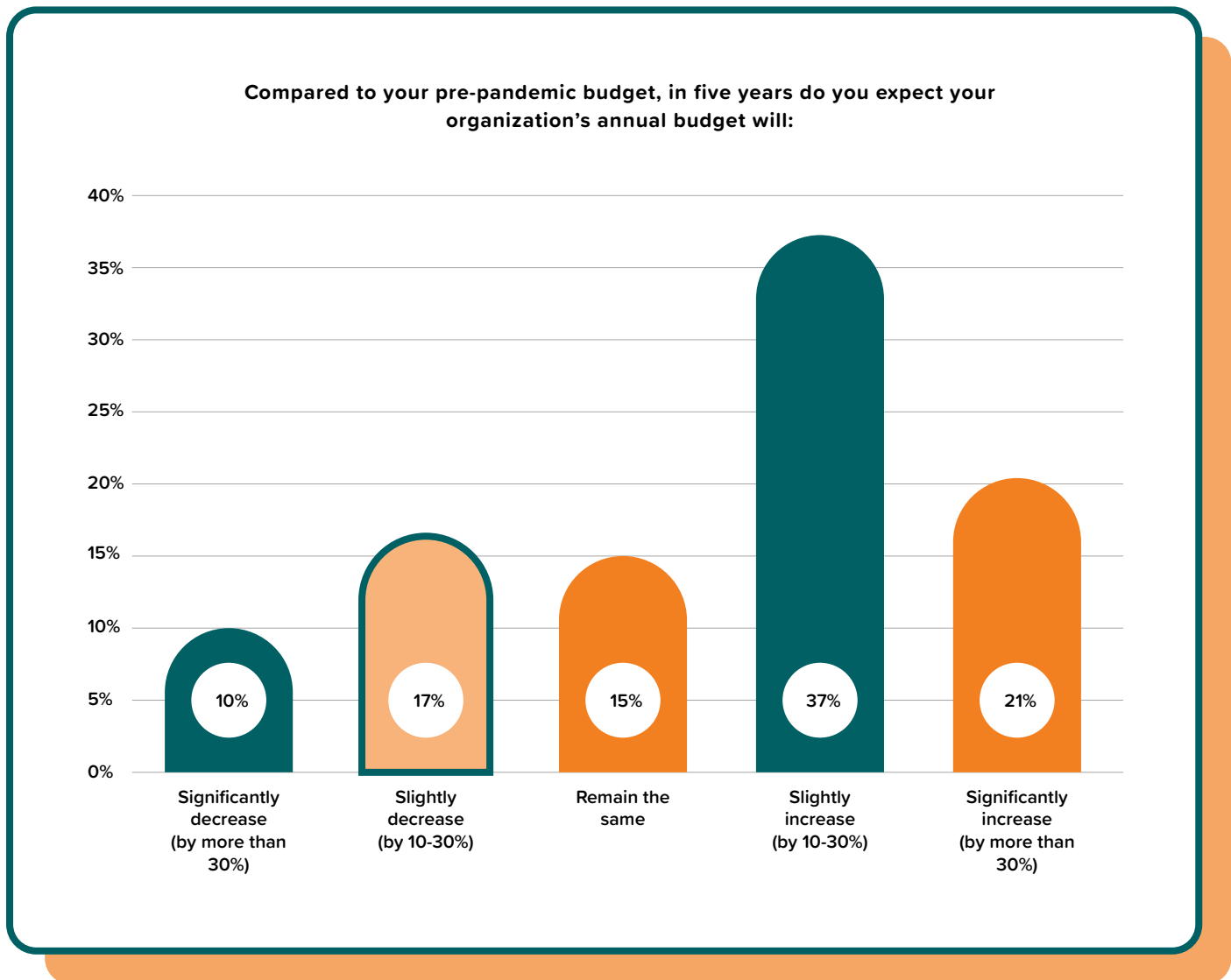
Taking this time as a moment of pause from the hectic grind of business-as-usual operations, these organizations were able to actively and deliberately determine what they wanted to look like in the post-pandemic period and what they might need to change in order to achieve this. As one interviewee noted, the pandemic served as a catalyst for thinking “outside of the box,” providing SMOs the chance to explore new ideas and possibilities at the larger organizational level.

One organization, for example, reported that they were previously very reliant on volunteer-based short-term international engagements for their activities as well as their fundraising efforts. The pandemic period, however, forced them to re-think this model. During this time, they decided to shift their focus away from time-bound volunteer trips and explore the option of adopting a project-based model for their organization. They have now successfully reoriented their work towards more continuous project activities in partner countries and they plan to further adapt volunteer trips in the future such that they will serve to support project-based work.

Looking to a post-pandemic future that is marked by meaningful organizational shifts towards greater efficiency, effectiveness and impact, SMOs noted feeling very optimistic for what the future had in store. This sense of optimism was furthermore reflected in the financial growth perspectives expressed by SMOs, both in interviews and in the survey. Of note, when survey respondents were asked whether they projected their budget would increase or decrease in the next five years compared to pre-pandemic budget, a full 58% reported expectations that their budgets would increase (Figure 4). Importantly, survey respondents remain optimistic about the future, despite the fact that 50% of their organisations reported a decline in funding after the onset of the pandemic.

Overall, in spite of the fact that Canadian SMOs have had to endure a challenging pandemic period, the resilience, fortitude and creativity of these organizations has shone through and ultimately, the future looks bright.

Figure 3: SMO Financial Projections



CASE STUDY #7: RECOGNIZING A STRENGTH

Collaboration Santé Internationale (CSI) is the only international cooperation non-profit organization, accredited by the Government of Quebec's Ministry of Health and Social Services, that collects and recovers surplus medicine and medical equipment to give them a second life in humanitarian projects to meet global development and health needs.

The pandemic has inevitably led to significant disruptions to CSI's operations; yet they took advantage of this moment of destabilization to take a step back and reflect on who they were as an organization and what they had to offer society. By reflecting on this question, they realized that they were not only strengthening healthcare networks in emerging countries, but also helping to reduce the ecological footprint of their donor partners in favor of a sustainable development approach.

Each year, CSI recovers approximately 300 tons of surplus medical and paramedical equipment, which they revitalize and reintegrate into health facilities in need. On average, CSI finds use for 70% of this equipment in hospitals and health clinics. For unusable equipment, CSI methodically dismantles this equipment piece by piece so that each piece can be recycled and reused via eco-centres in a sustainable development approach.

While this environmentally sustainable way of managing surplus medical equipment has always been a priority for CSI, their societal contribution in this area was not valued as a separate growth axis of their work.

Recognizing this strength, CSI gave a mandate to a consultant in sustainable development to help them obtain accreditation from Recyc-Québec. Their goal is to develop an area of growth that is based not only on their humanitarian activities, but also on expertise in environmental responsibility. While this is still a developing niche, it is a meaningful and relevant recognition of the work they have always prioritized, and they hope that by highlighting this crucial area of their operations, they will be able to attract new volunteers and fundraising opportunities in the future.

CASE STUDY #8: READY FOR A STRONG REBOUND

Aléas is a Quebec-based organization that specializes in risk management for clients involved in international work. Aléas works with their clients to collaboratively develop tailored safety and security strategies for overseas engagement. This includes supporting clients in the development of safety policies and procedures, establishing preventive measures within clients' organizations, and capacity building of staff through training and simulations. Ultimately Aléas serves clients to ensure they are equipped to handle any risk that could threaten the continuity of their international activities.

When COVID-19 hit, most organizations turned inward, trying to reorient themselves in the face of a new global reality. Amidst fears of decreased funding and serious disruptions to project implementation, most organizations involved in international activities were not in the mindset of reaching out and employing the services of an organization like Aléas.

Although business slowed, Aléas was not dismayed. Rather, they chose to take the pandemic period as a moment of pause and reflection. They realized that COVID-19 need not represent a threat to their organizational survival, but rather an opportunity. This pandemic exhibited to global development organizations across the world the diverse risks associated with working internationally. It highlighted very strongly the fact that unexpected challenges and disruptions are bound to arise and thus, there will always be a need to establish and maintain effective risk management strategies and procedures.

Aléas chose to look at the pandemic as a free marketing campaign and they used this period to start making their brand known. Moving out of the pandemic, they are now ready to market more proactively their services; building on the shared global experience of the pandemic, they hope to provide more clients with the systems and services they need to be prepared for the next crisis that may arise.

Aléas effectively managed to see opportunity in a time of disruption and confusion. They harnessed this chance and maintained a sense of hope and optimism for the future of their organization. They are now ready for a strong rebound.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Although this report has highlighted many of the impressive ways in which Canadian SMOs have managed to shift gears, remain flexible, and adopt successful adaptation strategies during the pandemic period, this is not to say that challenges do not exist. To be sure, SMOs report facing significant and continued challenges along a range of issues. Perhaps not surprising, funding emerged as one of the key areas of concern for organizations during participant interviews.

For a number of organizations, their funding model involved the use of volunteer mission-trips to help raise funds and garner support from donors. With international travel virtually coming to a standstill, these organizations saw this funding vein dry up abruptly with the onset of the pandemic. Likewise, for other organizations, in-person events, such as charity dinners and galas served as a critical means of raising funds from individuals. Limits on in-person gatherings and isolation orders meant that these revenue streams were no longer feasible.

For most organizations, there emerged significant efforts to diversify funding streams so as to offset lost revenues associated with those veins that no longer proved viable in light of the pandemic. A common means of trying to achieve this was to look for grant opportunities through provincial and federal government agencies. Although some organizations did experience some success in this area, many SMOs pointed out that there remain significant challenges associated with these more traditional funding sources.

One of the most common challenges cited regarding this funding source was the rigidity of government donors. This rigidity, associated with donor demands on allowable activities, reporting requirements, and budget allotments, made it very difficult for organizations to support their core costs, respond to changing needs and effectively engage local partners in meaningful decision-making on projects. Similarly, given the high standards placed on funding recipients, many of the smaller organizations felt that they were being overlooked for funding on account of their size and lack of history in managing larger budgets with government agencies.

It should be noted that this was not uniformly the case. In fact, one organization receiving funding from the Ministère des relations internationales et de la francophonie du Québec (RMIF) was brought into consultations with this donor and asked to provide input on how RMIF could best support partners during the pandemic. Coming out of these discussions RMIF made core funding available to the organization to support their mission and allowed greater autonomy and flexibility in the implementation of project activities.

While this highlights a very positive funding experience with a government agency, challenges persist, and SMOs across the board have called for greater flexibility and responsiveness within government funding veins, including consideration for core support to organizations.

Aside from challenges associated with funding, several organizations also reported heightened levels of strain on their staff and a high degree of burnout. Stresses associated with the pandemic, and the double burden placed on many staff (especially women) working from home while juggling childcare, resulted in decreased staff wellbeing.

Similarly, while most organizations report many positive aspects associated with their online work environment, the majority also stated that they missed the personal connections and touch points associated with in-person gatherings. Interview respondents noted the importance of in-person meetings for creating and maintain a strong and healthy sense of community within their organization and among partners.

Thus, SMOs still reveal significant and enduring challenges associated with the pandemic experience. In a continued effort to support the work of Canadian SMOs working in global development, the next section outlines recommendations for the Spur Change program on how it might contribute to improvements in this sector as we move towards a new post-pandemic era.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The continued challenges described above have informed four key recommendations, which have been identified for the Spur Change program:

1. Support SMO efforts to diversify funding sources

Economic contractions and travel-related restrictions associated with the pandemic have resulted in interruptions to numerous funding streams. Those SMOs that relied most heavily on a single or very few funding veins reported considerable strain associated with this period as they struggled to ensure the continued survival of their organizations. SMOs across the board increasingly recognize the importance of having a balanced and diversified funding portfolio to ensure the continuity and sustainability of their global development work. The Spur Change program should assist SMOs in identifying diverse funding streams and support their efforts, through connections and capacity building, to acquire new sources of funding.

2. Communicate the need for increased flexibility in government funding

While the hallmarks of SMO success may be their adaptability and localized models for project implementation, these strengths are significantly curtailed in the face of burdensome donor regulations. SMOs report serious barriers and challenges associated with simultaneously trying to adapt to changing local situations while also meeting donor demands regarding budget constraints and reporting requirements. These requirements remain particularly acute within government funding streams. The Spur Change program could provide feedback and share SMOs' experience with Global Affairs Canada, alongside other government funding sources, where possible, regarding the need for more flexibility in SMO funding opportunities including the potential to include grant opportunities that support, in part or in full, the organization-level mission, rather than time-bound projects.

3. Promote and support SMO efforts to prioritize staff wellness

The pandemic period has placed undue strain on individuals across the globe and, in particular, on women and marginalized populations. Canadian SMOs have recognized this strain and the important role they as development organizations have in ensuring the health and wellbeing of the people with whom they are working. While some SMOs have instituted practices and policies to help support their staff, partners, and project participants during the pandemic period, the need for continued and diversified supports remains clear. The Spur Change program should support SMOs by sharing information and resources as well as facilitating connections to support services and programs for physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

4. Provide opportunities for post-pandemic in-person connections

SMOs across the board note that while online connectivity has been crucial during this pandemic period, it cannot fully replace in-person connections. Having the ability to meet with others face-to-face remains a priority for community building within and among organizations. The Spur Change program should prioritize in-person gatherings and networking opportunities where possible, to help build and maintain a thriving community of interconnected Canadian SMOs working in global development.

CONCLUSION

Small and medium-sized organizations working in global development have experienced myriad disruptions and difficulties associated with the global pandemic and many challenges persist. Nevertheless, Canadian SMOs continue to demonstrate their impressive ability to step into challenging situations, shift gears and respond through flexibility and resilience.

The ways in which organizations have responded and adapted to the changing global situation vary significantly and illustrate the vibrant diversity of SMOs working in this sector. Nevertheless, organizations have also revealed common threads associated with their abilities to respond to the situations they have faced. This has included their ability to lean on their local partners and adapt international programming in location-specific ways through creative local solutions. Meanwhile, SMOs have also managed to maintain strong communications and have even expanded their collaborative efforts through the increased use of virtual connections.

In response to the devastating impacts of the virus on people's lives, SMOs have shifted their means of working to adopt a more human-centered approach, prioritizing the mental health and wellbeing of staff, partners, and project participants. Finally, for many of these organizations, they have managed to see opportunity where others may see disruption, and they have used the pandemic period as a moment to reflect, reorient and prepare themselves for a strong post-pandemic period.

Overall, Canadian SMOs have faced an unprecedented moment in human history; one marked by illness, death, economic contractions, and social disruptions at a global scale. While this period has been extraordinarily challenging, SMOs have stepped into this moment and exhibited their ability to apply flexibility and adaptability in all that they do. For the majority of organizations, the changes they have instituted have proven so profound and rewarding that they plan to keep them in place permanently. Their success reveals their strength and resilience, and it highlights the crucial role that Canadian SMOs continue to play in the global development sector.

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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this report were gathered through a mixed-methods research project, utilizing both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. These findings build on previous research undertaken by the University of Guelph and the Spur Change program related to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian small and medium-sized organizations working in the global development sector. These findings, alongside future planned research on this topic, will serve to provide a long-term picture of how Canadian SMOs have experienced the pandemic through its early stages to its eventual regression.

The survey data expressed in this report were collected through the distribution of an online survey, which was developed by a research team at the University of Guelph, in partnership with the Spur Change program. This survey was created and administered using Qualtrics online software and was sent to 1,097 representatives from global development organizations in December 2021. A total of 111 responses were collected and utilized in the subsequent survey analysis. Within this survey, respondents were asked if they would be open to participating in an interview in the future. A total of 58 revealed their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

Between February 9th and March 22nd, 2022, a total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with survey participants. This included 5 interviews conducted in French and 17 in English. The interview questions were developed by the research team at the University of Guelph in collaboration with the Spur Change program. The questions were determined based on trends revealed by SMOs through previous research findings and based on responses collected in the 2021 survey.

Each interview was recorded, and a transcript was developed using Otter.ai software for English interviews and Sonix software for interviews conducted in French. The transcripts were subsequently closely reviewed for accuracy by members of the research team. Thereafter all the transcripts were analyzed for themes and trends in interviewee responses, which ultimately established the framework for the findings outlined in this report.