

A large, abstract graphic on the left side of the page consists 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

## 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.

## 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.