



## MANAGING RISK IN CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SECTOR'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

### *RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SERIES, BRIEFING NOTE 1*

#### Introduction

As Canadians and the global community grapple with the impacts of COVID-19, Canada's international development and humanitarian sector is playing a prominent role to effectively respond to the crisis with stronger partnerships and support for a more equitable, resilient and sustainable future. At the frontlines of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian aid workers are working to save lives and hold on to the hard-won sustainable development gains of the past decade through intersectional and feminist approaches.

In this context, while Canadian and their local partners continue their excellent work abroad, they must also grapple with the impacts of the crisis for their organization, employees, programming and partnerships. Among the many risks and threats that have been flagged, the main concerns regard the continuity of programs and the consequences of delays for the most vulnerable. Organizations are working to repatriate staff and volunteers, reorganize budgets and work remotely.

This briefing note, the first in a series developed by CCIC, looks at the strategies for risk mitigation being carried out by the sector while addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Based on responses to an open questionnaire launched by CCIC March 10, 2020 to solicit information on the sector's response to the crisis, this briefing note unpacks what organizations have done to address COVID-19 and their approaches to managing risk.

#### Shared Strategies

The most common measures put in place by international development and humanitarian response organizations include following public health agencies' recommendations, transferring activities online as much as possible, canceling and postponing events, suspending travel both overseas and in Canada, ensuring physical distancing and ramping up sanitary and prevention procedures. Apart from those essential actions, shared among all the almost 90 organizations<sup>1</sup> that responded to CCIC's questionnaire to date, other solutions arose reflecting the sector's commitment towards long-term operation sustainability while addressing the unprecedented present situation. These strategies include: development of contingency plans, creation of internal/external working groups, supporting staff and partners and programming in partner countries. The briefing note concludes with recommendations for Global Affairs Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> These organizations represent a large spectrum of Canada's international development and humanitarian sector. They include large and small organizations based in different regions in Canada. They are religious and secular and include anglophone and francophone organizations. Respondents were diverse representing development groups, professional associations, co-operatives, labour unions and groups devoted to social justice, humanitarian aid and economic and democratic development.

## Contingency Plans

Among all the proposed risk management strategies, organizations most commonly noted the development and implementation of contingency plans. In general terms, these plans aim to address the organizations' present situation, but also take into consideration the possibility of further disruption to operations. Moreover, contingency plans aim at facilitating continued operations online and/or with reduced staff while also considering the public health agencies' measures immediately in effect. For example, one large organization developed a Business Continuity Plan and established an emergency call tree. According to the organization, they have commenced a process of assessing, project by project, the impact of COVID-19 on their programs, the adaptations which may be required and the approvals needed to put those adaptations in place. In turn, a small organization from Ontario has altered their planning in order to address the economic fallout of the crisis and how to adapt. They are adjusting fundraising messaging and practices to ensure their partners and their partners' communities are not forgotten during the crisis.

## Working Groups

Some organizations have established working groups or taskforces specifically related to the COVID-19 crisis response. The COVID-19 taskforce of one large organization includes their Safety and Security Advisor, human resources and other key staff with experience working on pandemics (a public health nurse and an epidemiologist). In addition, this organization has also activated their internal Crisis Management Protocols and is meeting daily to monitor and discuss the evolving situation. Another large organization developed a COVID-19 working group that has been mostly addressing issues related to travel, facilities and staff concerns. In addition, their Programmatic Impact Group is identifying solutions with respect to impacts in partner countries, especially for grant-funded and time-sensitive projects. Finally, an educational institution from Newfoundland initiated an Emergency Operations Centre. They also re-established a Pandemic Preparedness Committee and sub-committees to address many different and specific issues, such as human resources and faculty relations, international travel, facilities, security, and environmental health and safety and student wellness.

## Supporting staff and partners

Canadian partners are worried about their local partners and staff in partner countries. They have been acting globally to repatriate staff and volunteers and to support local efforts. An organization based in British Columbia developed a specific [protocol for their team in Rwanda](#). Among their actions, they were able to provide enhanced internet facilities to Rwandan staff in order to facilitate work from home (people will receive airtime to allow them to access the internet and have laptops at home). In turn, a small foundation sent out communiqués to all 25 partners in Central America to protect staff, encourage work from home and recognize that delays in project deliverables are inevitable. In addition, they will continue to pay staff and expect their partners to do the same. One large organization developed a strategy of quarantine preparedness: given their concern that traveling staff may get put unexpectedly in quarantine, all travelers are being equipped with a quarantine kit that will ensure they have items required to meet their basic needs during a fourteen day period, regardless of where they end up being put, or the external services available to them during that time. In February, one provincial international cooperation network implemented a [COVID-19 protocol](#) that is being largely circulated among organizations throughout Canada. This organization, like others, has also developed a [resource list](#), collating online resources to assist organizations to work virtually and continue to support their staff and partners.

## Programming in partner countries

At the global level, a large organization is responding to the crisis by scaling up access to clean water and sanitation, increasing access to healthcare, protecting and safeguarding children, especially girls, against all forms of violence, and ensuring children receive some form of education while schools remain closed. In coordination with the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, another large organization is establishing a 68-bed emergency field hospital / respiratory care unit just outside Milan. One plane will carry approximately 20 tons of medical equipment, a specialized respiratory care unit and 32 disaster response specialists including respiratory therapists, doctors, and nurses.

## Recommendations for Global Affairs Canada

As Canadian organizations work to manage risk, innovate and adapt overall approaches and programming, Global Affairs Canada can support them through efforts to:

- Allow partner organizations to use development and humanitarian funds flexibly to support responses that most appropriately address urgent and emerging community and individual needs, to avoid the need for project-by-project adjustments.
- Temporarily lift restrictions that limit charities to only providing funds to qualified donees.
- Fast-track funding renewals for multi-year international programs and program extensions as needed, and minimize reporting for ongoing projects and programs.
- Employ a whole-of-government approach to COVID-19 response, for example by ensuring that Canadian Embassies can support Canada's aid workers abroad as well as their continued work, drawing on existing infrastructure and programs such as the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives.
- Establish an ongoing ad hoc forum for Global Affairs Canada and other relevant departments to share advice and ideas with leaders in the international cooperation sector – to help foster a whole-of-society response.
- Continue feminist and human rights-based support for climate action, gender equality, education, food security and nutrition, economic development and civic space during the response to COVID-19.
- Ensure that all Canadian organizations working internationally are eligible for all federal initiatives aimed at helping employers to retain staff, and that all initiatives to support individual Canadians are open to individuals working in international cooperation.

## Note to CCIC Members

CCIC is committed to protecting the information generously provided by members of the sector that informs this briefing note. If you are a CCIC member and would like to learn more about the experience of a specific organization noted above, please reach out to [covid19@ccic.ca](mailto:covid19@ccic.ca) and we will do our best to connect you with the organization noted above with their permission.