



THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE NETWORK OF CANADA RESPONDING TO COVID-19

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SERIES, BRIEFING NOTE 4

Introduction

The Humanitarian Response Network of Canada (HRN) is a vibrant community of practice made up of 38 Canadian Humanitarian Organizations. The HRN seeks to share lessons learned with the view to strengthen the quality and efficiency of humanitarian action by creating a conversation around key humanitarian policy issues and practices. As the only network of its kind in Canada, the HRN has fostered a rich and meaningful dialogue on humanitarian issues of critical importance to the sector. The network gathers in-person for triannual meetings, and an annual Head of Agencies (HoA) meeting for sector leaders.

Since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, HRN members have used the network to share information and learn from one another. On March 20, the HRN convened a call between members and Global Affairs Canada, giving both the chance to discuss the challenges and responses both in overseas operations but also in taking care of staff in Canada as the situation evolved domestically.

The first triannual meeting of the 2020-2021 year was held on May 7. Initially planned to take place in Montreal, the event went ahead with members gathering virtually instead. A total of 91 people registered, representing 32 member organizations. The agenda was full with five sessions: two led by Global Affairs Canada, one by members (update from [Doctors of the World](#) and [Doctors Without Borders](#) on their medical response to COVID-19), and two virtual networking sessions on [Braindates](#).

The HRN continued to build upon these conversations through the HoA meeting on June 9. A record number of 260 participants attended the sessions, showing the advantage of online forums in allowing more participation from across the country. The overarching message that emerged from the HoA meeting is that COVID-19 adds an extra layer of complexity to organizations responding to existing humanitarian crises around the world. The government and NGOs are committed to adapting to global needs for humanitarian assistance and working with partners in new ways in this evolving reality. However, work overseas can only continue if innovative measures are taken domestically to ensure the sustainability of the sector during the unprecedented loss of revenue and simultaneous growth in the need for services. Opportunities for collaboration, capacity building and engagement with the Government of Canada will continue through the HRN virtually, for now.

HRN members respond

Since the initial coordination call, HRN members have shared details of their crisis or infectious disease protocols, innovative ways of taking care of staff's physical and mental health, and the concerns they have for continuing to implement lifesaving programs while adapting to a new layer of crisis. Members have outlined how they are supporting local country directors, humanitarian country teams and implementing partners who are taking the lead on country-level contingency and response planning. Some organizations get more involved in the response-related work if they are the lead on cluster groups, but ongoing communications with country teams and implementing partners is a priority for all organizations. Most organizations are anticipating significant impacts of travel restrictions and increased needs on their operations, and there is concern for vulnerable populations and the compounding impacts of COVID-19 response measures on already fragile contexts, or when natural disasters strike.

HRN members have been involved in the various advocacy efforts that address the constraints put on the sector due to COVID-19: decreased donations, lost revenues due to social distancing requirements and increased demand for their services. Bill Schaper of Imagine Canada presented at the HoA meeting. He has worked on many of these advocacy initiatives alongside the rest of the charitable sector – not just international humanitarian responders. The issue of Direction & Control resurfaced in his presentation, as COVID-19 has illuminated the fact that charities

may be unable to support certain initiatives – both in Canada and overseas – due to these restrictions. He emphasized the importance of working together to solve our collective problems.

During the HRN Triannual meeting, Doctors of the World/Médecins du Monde (MDM) and Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) presented what their organizations have been doing to respond to and overcome the health impacts of COVID-19, particularly in fragile contexts. During the pandemic, the work of these organizations becomes more relevant than ever, so that vulnerable people and communities receive medical aid, and no one is left behind.

Doctors of the World (MDM) is an organization active both in Canada and internationally (e.g. Syria, Iraq, Colombia, Haiti). In Canada, their work focuses on marginalized immigrants, Indigenous, and (near-)homeless populations. The organization's human rights-based approach aims to reinforce and/or help to rebuild public health systems. MDM advocates for solidarity, based on the understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic will only be eradicated through joint efforts. Although the organization faces many challenges in both domestic and international contexts, such as shortage of human resources, technical issues, financial constraints and other crises that enhance fragility (e.g. humanitarian, political, economic crises), staff have also envisaged solutions. Among those are the establishment of new working models, the constant use of masks, psychological support to staff and constant communication using a variety of tools where internet connection is not fully available (e.g. radio, sound trucks and others). Their message is clear: in this critical moment, awareness-raising, communication, adaptation and support are key for the continuity of the organization's impactful work.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) operates in more than 70 countries offering humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. In the contexts where health systems are more fragile and they have limited capacity to respond, MSF is already seeing the impacts of COVID-19. In order to appropriately respond to the COVID-19 crisis, MSF is working to keep essential medical and health care services running, protect at-risk populations and provide urgent medical care to patients. Some areas of concern highlighted by MSF are:

- Not neglecting other health needs in view of COVID-19;
- Having a proportionate public health response that ensures availability and access to lifesaving services;
- Noting the secondary impacts of COVID-19 (e.g. reduced access to medical supplies and personnel);
- Continuity of essential services and of broad access to treatments and vaccines, once they are available.

In order to achieve these objectives, MSF has adapted existing projects and established new ones. In addition, the organization has been taking actions in terms of dedicating capacity, equipment, innovation and research towards diagnostics, treatments, medicines and vaccines. MSF continued the conversation on their response at the HoA meeting, focusing on the challenges that they are facing in addressing increased vulnerability worldwide. Not only are they anticipating the health impacts of COVID-19, but also a looming food crisis and the needs of displaced populations. Unequal distribution of PPE globally has been highlighted as an ethical dilemma that exacerbates other inequalities such as accessibility, availability and distribution of vaccines and other pharmaceuticals. MSF's focus is on working together with local populations in a context where the movement of assistance is hindered.

Disaggregating COVID-19: tackling the thematic priorities in an evolving context

As the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how humanitarianism operates, stakeholders have been keen to address the operational and thematic changes needed for an effective response. The ability to connect and share information is a key advantage of networks such as the HRN, so discussion groups were facilitated in the context of HRN gatherings. At both the Triannual and HoA meetings, small group discussions were hosted virtually. Over 100 individuals from the HRN membership participated in over 20 discussion groups on important topics. Some of the issues that HRN members are tackling include:

- Perspectives on GHRP Coordination and Impacts of COVID-19 on Education
 - There has been a lack of prioritization of education in the global HRP funding ask (only about 4%). However, the numbers estimate an amount of 1.3 to 1.6 billion children out of school. There needs to be sector planning at scale, and coordinated response between the humanitarian and development agencies where internal structures make it difficult to bring those worlds together. Additionally, age is not reflected in the GHRP. The impacts of 3 months out of school for a 5-year-old versus a 16-year-old are very different, and Early Childhood Care and Development is poorly understood. How will we catch them up? This is the challenge.
- COVID and Conflict: Why We Need to Contribute to Locally-Led Peace
 - Two billion people living in conflict-affected States will be among the hardest hit by COVID-19's economic devastation. COVID-19 is exacerbating already acute needs in these contexts (e.g. rising food insecurity). Within these exacerbated needs, women are often particularly affected. COVID-19 is worsening the situation for people forcibly displaced by conflict: population density in camp-type

and urban refuge settings makes physical distancing impossible, adequate WASH services are most often absent/insufficient, and asylum is no longer accessible to people fleeing violence/persecution.

- Inclusion of Persons With Disabilities in the Humanitarian COVID-19 Response
 - Persons with disabilities face heightened risks in the COVID-19 pandemic and response in humanitarian settings. These heightened risks include increased exposure rates and disproportionate impact, due to numerous barriers to accessing life-saving information, protective measures and other essential humanitarian assistance on an equal basis with others. Those risks are often intersecting with other pre-existing inequalities, including poor access to health care, and are further increased by gaps in the preparedness and response plans and interventions.
- Nutrition and Food Security: Issues and Opportunities From COVID-19
 - Health crises do not only affect health: they also affect human relations, economic functioning, food security, governance, politics and even international relations. Nevertheless, the expected impact on health and nutrition will be major. Health systems will face a rapid increase in demands generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When health systems are overwhelmed, both direct mortality due to an epidemic/pandemic and indirect mortality due to conditions that can usually be prevented and treated increase dramatically. While research suggests that obesity is one of the risk factors for severe forms of COVID-19, there is still a lack of data on undernutrition in children and adults, particularly pregnant women. Malnutrition amplifies the severity of infectious diseases as it impedes child development and reduces nutritional reserves, compromising the immune system and increasing the risk of disease. Once nutritional status is compromised, the vicious cycle of malnutrition and infection continues, and the child remains at increased risk of morbidity and mortality. Moreover, in our intervention settings, children often combine chronic and acute malnutrition, which would lead to a higher risk of death. We do not yet know how undernourished children will respond to COVID-19.

Other discussion points covered include:

- Human-Centered Response: Cash Programming and COVID-19
- What are the potential secondary health impacts of COVID-19, and how can we measure them?
- Gender and COVID-19: Unpacking the Impact
- The Duty of Care and the Humanitarian Imperative: Navigating the Commitment to Stay and Deliver
- Addressing gender, marginalization and gender-based violence with a feminist approach in COVID-19
- The Nexus: Is COVID-19 shifting the divide between development and humanitarian response?
- Innovation: What is the top operational challenge for organizations in the new COVID-19 reality?
- Localization: The opportunity to shift to local response due to COVID-19

Engagement with the Government of Canada

At the various HRN meetings, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) took the lead in providing participants with important updates on their funding decisions, processes and engagements around COVID-19, and answering questions about how those with ongoing or new projects funded by GAC would be impacted. GAC's intervention to date in the global response to COVID-19 includes supporting multilateral agencies (e.g. WHO, UN OCHA, the Red Cross movement globally) and allocating resources through the UN country-based pooled funds (CBPF) mechanism. GAC has continuously expressed their support of a localization agenda and showed openness to work alongside NGOs to achieve these goals.

Canada has been addressing issues regarding the COVID-19 pandemic both nationally and internationally, with GAC remaining highly engaged on all conversations. Moreover, GAC's focal point on the COVID-19 response described Canada's multi-stakeholder engagement approach, and how it is placing the safety of women and girls at the centre of its response. Of note is the [Joint Statement on Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19](#) issued by the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, which outlines relevant considerations in humanitarian response.

Members were keen to hear from GAC's International Humanitarian Assistance Director Stephen Salewicz, who reiterated that humanitarian programming would continue as planned, and funds would not be diverted to COVID-19 response in the upcoming Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP). Instead, flexibility in budgets would allow for organizations to respond to COVID-19 within existing programming and contexts. While they recognize that COVID-19 is a health crisis, stakeholders agreed that a comprehensive response is needed to ensure other needs are also met during these times. Although GAC recognizes there is still work to be done in terms of addressing humanitarian response situations, they also point out the importance of balance between what the expectations are and what is realistic in terms of allocation of resources. However, they reiterated their intention to remain open to continuous discussion around suggestions, reflections, and specific proposals coming from NGOs.

The HRN engaged other stakeholders in the Government of Canada as well. The HoA meeting hosted an engaging session on the needed updates to the CRA's Direction & Control regulations, where Senator Ratna Omidvar issued a call to action to support changes to rules that hinder localization and empowerment with the restrictions for Canadian charities on giving funds to 'qualified donees.' This is particularly important in the context of COVID-19, where organizations are not always able to implement directly, but regulations may hinder how they can partner with local responders. The Honourable Bob Rae, Canada's Special Envoy on humanitarian and refugee issues, engaged with the HRN for the first time since his appointment to this role. He highlighted the issues that humanitarian organizations are facing in responding effectively, including decreased humanitarian access, displaced populations in cramped living conditions, and the potential financial impacts that will devastate already fragile contexts. He gave members a preview of his upcoming report and the main message: humanitarian crises are no longer short-term, and how we address the impact of the global COVID-19 crisis, which is far from over, is a major challenge for Canada and the world.

In view of these discussions, Global Affairs Canada can:

- Continue to encourage discussion and awareness in government around humanitarian needs and to advocate for a robust international response from Canada.
- Maintain a flexible and open approach in its support to NGOs.
- Continue to support the work of NGOs, which are better positioned to work with local partners and can add value through their existing relationships, by guaranteeing they have access to country-based pooled funds.
- Continue to progress on partnership-building and enhance internal capacity around FIAP in order to improve humanitarian response in view of a feminist and gender-based agenda.

Resources

- Rethinking direction & control: a new way forward: [View the Recording](#)
 - Recommended reading:
 - [Catalyst for Change: A Roadmap to a Stronger Charitable Sector](#)
 - [Direction and Control: Current Regime and Alternatives](#)
 - [Direction & Control solution \(Samaritan's Purse\)](#)
- Gender Equality guide for COVID-19 Programming: [EN](#) | [FR](#) | [ESP](#) (Plan International Canada)
- Adapting education interventions COVID19 response: [EN](#) | [FR](#) | [ESP](#) (Plan International Canada)
- [Conflict in the time of Coronavirus](#) (Oxfam, May 2020)
- [Covid & conflict](#) (International Crisis Group, March 2020).
- [Joint Statement on Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19](#) (Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies)
- [Backgrounder on COVID-19 funding to date](#) (Global Affairs Canada)
- [Inclusive COVID-19 Response](#) (Humanity & Inclusion)
- [Global Rapid Gender Analysis For COVID-19](#) (CARE)
- [Anchored in Local Reality: Case Studies on Local Humanitarian Action](#) (Oxfam)
- [Gendered implications of COVID-19](#) (CARE)

Note to CCIC Members

CCIC is committed to providing an open channel for communication on the topic of the COVID-19 response. If your organization would like to share concerns or resources, please reach out to covid19@ccic.ca

This briefing note was prepared by Aislynn Row, Humanitarian Response Network Coordinator, and Ana de Oliveira, Researcher at CCIC, May/June 2020.