
Virus That “Knows No Borders” Sees Canadian Aid Groups Responding Both Locally and Globally as Financial and Humanitarian Pressures Mount

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Canadian non-profit staff who work with vulnerable communities around the world are urging the federal government to maintain international development and humanitarian aid and establish a stabilization fund to help them remain afloat during the crisis.

Aid groups say Ottawa’s commitment to international aid is also the right thing to do in response to a global crisis that will only be solved here once it is solved everywhere.

“Our wellness and our security are intrinsically bound with those of our sisters and brothers around the world, and in particular the more vulnerable communities,” said Richard Morgan, the executive director of the [Humanitarian Coalition](#), an umbrella group of aid organizations.

That vision of humanitarian aid and international development as a core tenet of Canada’s foreign policy will run up against what some aid workers believe is an inevitable scaling back of international commitments, as the government tries to alleviate economic suffering at home and grapple with the scale of the post-pandemic recession.

Like their domestic counterparts, non-profits operating abroad have been hit hard by the pandemic. It has forced some to suspend critical aid delivery and other programs on account of lockdowns as well as lay-off staff amid a slump in donations that many expect may last into 2021.

Lockdowns have also brought restrictions on the movement of aid workers. The impact of this is felt by, among others, those living in war-torn regions or refugee camps who rely on aid groups for food and water; women who are more prone to gender-based violence in confinement; and people in communities with weak public health systems where vaccinations have declined.

Some organizations, such as Support to Life, a Turkey-based agency that supports refugees in eight provinces of the country and has received Canadian government funding, have tried to move some of their work online. Sema Karaosmanoğlu, the organization's executive director, said this included language classes, information sessions for beneficiaries, and outreach to vulnerable communities.

But efforts like these won't alleviate the most serious difficulties facing vulnerable communities, such as lack of access to technology, clean water for handwashing, adequate living space for social distancing, or the lack of public health services such as routine vaccinations. Nor do they help with issues such as food insecurity, which plagues tens of millions of people worldwide, including refugees who often rely on hourly wages or mobile, seasonal agriculture jobs for income.

In April, Turkish police in the province of Adana killed a Syrian teenager on his way to work in violation of a curfew meant to curb the spread of the coronavirus. He was shot while trying to flee, [local media reported](#), because he would not have been able to afford the fine.

"This is the first time mobility has been an issue for us," said Zaid al-Rawni, the CEO of Islamic Relief Canada, the Canadian arm of a multinational aid network. "Typically, it's access. We have to negotiate access over long periods of time with some unseemly characters. Movement is difficult, but the need has increased."

Al-Rawni added: "Previously we could support 1,000 people, say, in a refugee camp, and 20 to 30% of the households would be headed by [someone] who can work in the informal economy and can bring back something to the family and share with the neighbors. Now those people have lost their income and they are in a real bind. Their ability to feed themselves has completely evaporated."

The risk of heightened food insecurity, in particular, was highlighted in a recent [report](#) by an alliance of United Nations agencies and other NGOs. It estimated that 135 million people suffer from acute food insecurity in 55 countries, a number that will likely rise significantly as a result of breakdowns in supply chains during the pandemic.

The restrictions on travel and the ability of Canadian international NGOs (INGOs) to deliver aid has drawn attention to the importance of two key elements in international humanitarian work – flexible funding regimes that allow aid to be redirected to address an emergent crisis like COVID-19 and reliable local partners who can reach vulnerable communities even in the midst of a crisis.

"COVID has shown us that these big agencies are not [always] able to come in and provide that support," said Karaosmanoğlu. "So it's really up to the local capacities and the local resources to be able to create that impact, to make a difference."

Jessica Ferne, the director of global health impact at the [Canadian Partnership for Women and](#)

[Children's Health](#) (CanWaCH), said the pandemic has revealed gaps in international development, public health infrastructure, and data sharing. The crisis has further exposed the fragility of gains in the field of women's health and empowerment, as well as inequitable access to technology.

In light of the pandemic's fall-out, Ferne argues that governments should re-examine funding models and expand core funding that allows organizations to keep their teams running instead of paying for time-limited aid projects.

CanWaCH is planning to release a report next month with findings based on the response of Canadian NGOs during the first 100 days of the pandemic, which will offer some lessons learned from the crisis.

Canadian charities have [called on the government](#) to offer emergency stabilization support, with many seeing drops in private donations because of the pandemic. Others have seen higher than usual donations despite the decline in events and fundraising galas – including those who usually fundraise during the holy month of Ramadan – [which they attribute to](#) a heightened sense of social responsibility. But even those groups believe charitable giving could decline by 30% or more when the whole year is taken into account.

Some Canadian aid groups have been able to take advantage of the government's rent relief and emergency wage subsidy, allowing them to keep staff on the payroll. Others have applied for local stabilization funds to help them redirect their ongoing operations towards dealing with the pandemic, such as in Manitoba, where the Winnipeg Foundation has earmarked up to \$6 million for local charities.

"It would allow charities to continue to operate in the short term and any additional expenses in terms of shifting online, and operating under the new restrictions and guidelines," said Janice Hamilton, the executive director of the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation.

Still, some Canadian NGOs say more can be done. They want the government to channel more money through Canadian non-profits with an international presence because they offer more accountability and have pursued robust, local partnerships around the world, empowering local institutions, and civil society. This will also ensure support goes towards Canadian government priorities such as women's empowerment.

"One of the challenges to date is that the Canadian government in funding is channeling a lot of its COVID response through the large multilaterals, [and] has not yet figured out how it wants to channel funding through Canadian-based INGOs, so there's a lot of opportunity for Canadian INGOs to do more," said Morgan, of the Humanitarian Coalition. "We would certainly encourage the Canadian government to seize the opportunity to work more with Canadian-based INGOs, for the accountability to the public and for the quality of the work, the ability to push the localization agenda, the empowerment of women's organizations and women."

Morgan warns that some voters and opposition parties may balk at the idea of continuing to fund international development and humanitarian projects around the world when so many Canadians are now unemployed or watching businesses collapse. (During last year's election campaign, the Conservatives [proposed drastic cuts](#) to international aid.)

“You cannot have that many Canadians hurt economically without seeing some impact,” said Morgan, noting that Canadian non-profits are poised to lose between \$9.5-15 billion in potential funding, as well as shedding 17,000 jobs.

He said these layoffs will disproportionately affect women, who make up the majority of employees in the sector.

Almost everyone interviewed for this article noted they also want to make the case that giving internationally is good for Canadians and good for Canada. They say international development support is a key component of Canada’s role on the world stage; that it will promote Canadian objectives like the effort to secure a UN Security Council seat; and its withdrawal could spell disaster in vulnerable communities that depend on Canadian aid to survive. They also say the pandemic’s rapid spread shows the importance of shoring up public health systems far away – to be solved anywhere, the pandemic must be solved everywhere.

So far, they appear to have had a receptive audience. Canadian NGOs say Ottawa has signaled greater flexibility in its approach, and dialogue is ongoing with officials at Global Affairs, who they said have been responsive during the crisis.

Ferne, of CanWaCH, said people working in the international development sector have found the government to be flexible in its response, consistently making officials available for roundtables and discussions.

In April, Karina Gould, minister of international development, announced [nearly \\$160 million](#) in international assistance efforts to fight COVID-19, noting that the virus “knows no borders.” The language is helpful in promoting the idea that international support is needed to overcome the crisis, says Morgan.

Nevertheless, Canadian aid NGOs worry about the likelihood of a fundamental shift away from international development in the coming years, and whether voters will tolerate an internationalist outlook from top officials. Whether nativism or globalism reins in the aftermath of the pandemic remains an open question, and its implications have left many uneasy.

One Global Affairs official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to media, said the pandemic, though an exaggerated event with unprecedented impact, was “nevertheless a demonstration of how challenges abroad can have impacts in Canada.”

While huge looming deficits will likely lead to robust discussions on setting priorities and belt-tightening in various departments, the official insists that Canada will maintain its overseas presence. “What’s not going to happen is a shutdown of our efforts internationally.”

“I’m hoping that the renewal of empathy will be one of the legacies of the COVID experience,” says Morgan, who adds that Canadian leadership on international aid and development is even more crucial at a time when the United States has withdrawn from multilateralism.

Others are not so sure.

“International aid is one of the first things to get scrapped,” said al-Rawni. “It’s not a vote

winner. As important as it is for global stability, it can sometimes lose people votes. I'm expecting a tough two to three years in the international development space."

Bayan Khatib, the executive director of the Syrian Canadian Foundation, which helps integrate Syrian refugees in Canada, believes humanitarian impulses will endure but that the instinct for welcoming strangers from abroad is unlikely to survive.

"I think it's going to be hard, and I don't think people are going to be in the frame of mind anymore of wanting to bring outsiders into our country and settle them," she said. "Everybody's frame of mind has shifted."

The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits. [Read more of our COVID-19 coverage.](#)