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# Is Social Innovation a Useful Tool in a Crisis? Lessons From COVID-19

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*This is the final installment [in our series](#) about social innovation. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and McConnell Foundation.*

As we were striving to understand how the United Way-Centraide (UWC) movement has leveraged social innovation methods and tools to achieve more impact, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus quickly became the most significant global pandemic in more than a century. In Canada, the health and financial impacts of the crisis have stressed the social sector's ability to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and forced organizations to rapidly adapt to new information, emerging needs, and operating models.

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis have been both devastating and unequal: the pandemic hit marginalized communities hardest and it has further entrenched societal inequities. Despite this, there is a silver lining: the unprecedented learning opportunity before us as we work to not only respond, but build back a better, more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable society.

Our peers have argued that social innovation is key to unlocking pathways for such a transition to happen. Yet, as Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair caution in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, innovation may not be the "holy grail;" many social changes can come about from growing and improving existing operations, and in some cases, this may be the most effective strategy for impact.<sup>[1]</sup>

In reflecting on a series of discussions with UWC staff before and during the crisis, an important question surfaced: can we really innovate during a crisis, or are we simply adapting and drawing on the innovation, talent, culture, and systems that were already built before?

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Our preliminary research suggests that we can accelerate social innovation tools developed in “normal” times in times of crisis. The following sections explore this idea.

## **Innovation before COVID-19**

More than a century after initial community-based fundraising efforts in Toronto and Montreal, UWC has scaled its reach to 5,000 communities across Canada, served through a network of 79 local offices that mobilize more than \$540 million annually to address poverty, create opportunity, and foster social inclusion. In recent years, United Way and Centraide branches have applied social innovation practices in specific circumstances and geographies to improve their services and programs. Two examples from UWC illustrate how it has supported several noteworthy social innovation projects.

The Social Impact Lab, launched by the United Way of Calgary and Area, uses design thinking to try to address social issues. Design thinking aims to resolve problems using a process that starts with observation and moves on to work with a series of prototypes. For example, the Social Impact Lab’s Inspire program brings together a cohort of seven or eight social service agencies from the area every three months. For 12 weeks, they work in teams to find a creative solution to a shared problem while a facilitator guides them from problem analysis to prototype testing.

Next door in British Columbia, the Social Purpose Institute, spearheaded by the United Way of the Lower Mainland, works with businesses to help them find their social purpose and put it into practice. One program, Social Purpose Innovators, lets businesses find and delineate their social purpose – the societal reason the business exists. A second program, Social Purpose Implementers, helps businesses create a plan to bring their social purpose to life and put it into practice, in a realistic fashion. A third, still to be launched, will enable businesses to concretely implement their purpose.

In Quebec, meanwhile, Centraide of Greater Montreal launched the *Projet Impact Collectif* (PIC) in 2016, with support from nine foundations (including the one we work for, McConnell). Le PIC allocated \$23 million over six years to develop creative and effective solutions to address poverty and inequality in 17 neighbourhoods. The many PIC projects share a commitment to the collective impact approach, unifying disparate local activities into a more coherent whole, and equipping residents to face the challenges they see around them.

"When citizens are well supported and given the right tools, they can share their vision, create in a collaborative way, and find effective solutions to social problems," says Myriam Bérubé, director of experimental projects and learning for Centraide. In part, the innovation of Le PIC is that community collective impact consultation groups (*tables de quartiers*) determine what projects to fund, rather than these decisions being the sole preserve of Centraide.

## **First response to COVID-19**

The initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis – from mid-March to mid-May – tested the strengths and limitations of the UWC networks like no prior event. We interviewed Dan Clement, president and CEO of United Way, and Lili-Anna Pereša, president and executive director of Centraide of Greater Montreal, in early June, when the infection numbers in Canada were starting to subside. The insights they shared painted a unique portrait of social innovation’s limitations and

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contributions.

In the pandemic's earliest phase, the national UWC network faced new and unanticipated logistical challenges. These had little to do with social innovation specifically but did bring into clear focus the extent to which a crisis suddenly elevates the importance of data, technology, and communication. COVID-19 represented a global crisis playing out at local scale in all regions of the country at the same time. It revealed the strength and importance of local leadership and coordinated local action. At the national level, particularly for the federal government, the need for platforms that support and enable local and regional action became apparent. The crisis required UWC to combine its traditional strength as a local community movement while also acting as a shared platform for provincial and national coordinated action.

The UWC's partnership with the federal government early in the crisis through the [New Horizons for Seniors](#) program is an example of this. Within weeks, more than 900 community-based programs were supporting isolated seniors from Newfoundland to Yukon. Later, the federal government partnered with UWC, the Canadian Red Cross, and Community Foundations of Canada to launch the \$350M [Emergency Community Response Fund](#).

It soon became clear to Clement and Pereša that United Way and Centraide would need to improve their communication across municipal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions. All past crises had been local: forest fires in BC; flooding in Manitoba, Alberta, and Quebec; or serious winter storms in Ontario and the Maritimes in 2013. The COVID-19 crisis, while local in its effects, required a national response.

"COVID-19 was an economic and social shock," says Clement. "We knew there would have to be a coordinated response to resource mobilization. This 'muscle' had been very strong locally, but now we had to build it at a national level. We were able to find instances of local innovation and scale these up to the national platform, in French and English, to help identify and respond to needs such as food security, hygiene, seniors' isolation, community needs for transportation, delivery services, and more."

Sharing learning across different nodes of the network became imperative, but sometimes learning fell short of demands. Pereša said it was initially almost impossible to forecast where personal protective equipment (PPE) was most needed. It is now clear that the priority should have been high-risk communities, such as Montréal-Nord, that have higher levels of poverty, crowded living conditions, and numerous low-paid frontline service workers, including those employed in seniors' homes, which were hot spots for infection in April and May.

There were other instances where innovative tools developed before COVID-19's onset suddenly acquired greater utility. For example, the emergency number 211, which is the primary way a resident can obtain information about local health, human, and social service organizations. During the COVID-19 crisis in Montreal, the open data model adopted by 211 meant that everyone in the Centraide of Greater Montreal network could access the self-reported needs of thousands of callers. This helped inform a response that was continually adapting to new realities on the ground. (The value of 211 has been recognized by federal and provincial governments with new funding to help expand it across all regions of Canada via the UWC network.)

Using 211 data, Centraide built Radar, an online mapping tool to provide a sociodemographic

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profile of Greater Montreal area neighbourhoods, cities, and towns. During COVID-19, Radar evolved and became another critical information tool. It tracked, for example, neighbourhood-level facilities to address food insecurity and which community agencies were operative. It also helped Centraide communicate where new funds could be effectively deployed. This aided in channeling government funding and grants from the philanthropic community and private donations from individuals and corporations.

Beyond service delivery, Centraide came to recognize its role in both assessing community needs and sharing information. “Everyone came to us first for information,” says Pereša. “Initially we were reacting to demands. There was no ability to be proactive. We didn't think the emergency would last so long. We had to learn it was a marathon, not a sprint.”

Because Centraide could not hire additional staff to keep up with these demands, they adapted new forms of collaboration. “We had to find creative ways to meet needs,” says Pereša. For example, city workers replaced volunteers at the main food bank, Moisson Montreal, and Uber drivers delivered 3,000 meals to confined seniors.

Elsewhere in the network, as the pandemic continued to amplify long-standing local problems, teams adapted with social innovation. In Calgary, the Social Impact Lab kicked off a five-day “Disrupt-ATHON” on July 18, with a focus on highlighting the innovative approaches local citizens were taking to address food insecurity. Fifteen teams submitted various ideas to disrupt Calgary’s food system, including a farmer-owned meat processing cooperative; a hydroponic, vertical crop cultivation system; and a lunch program for students who were going hungry because of school closures. Social Impact Lab planned to take the idea that resonated most with area residents – determined by a vote – and help implement it.

At United Way of the Lower Mainland, the work of the Social Purpose Institute, previously all conducted in person, shifted to online delivery. Many of the cohort of nearly 30 businesses in the innovation program rapidly adapted to find ways to serve urgent new needs. The tech company Traction on Demand, for example, worked with the provincial government and two other companies to build a supply chain platform to speed up the sourcing and distribution of vital healthcare supplies. They designed an open-source application, called Traction Thrive Critical Care Management, to view, track, and allocate healthcare personnel, PPE and ventilator availability in real-time. Other businesses in the Social Purpose Institute also shifted their definition, and delivery, of their social purpose, including a tourism company that realized its most important offering wasn’t travel or sightseeing, per se, but rather, bringing people together in shared, transformative experiences.

Panning back to the national level, COVID-19 required the Ottawa office to undergo a major shift and increase capacity. “We had to activate our leadership network,” says Clement. “Our community investment professionals and our resource development professionals – they all had to be responding rapidly and connecting with each other and sharing insights. We had members of the entire network on calls, sharing information every two weeks. We had never before held town halls and webinars in French and English at two-week intervals, non-stop. It was all part of the activation of our network.”

### **Lessons to apply in the future**

Not surprisingly, for a health and economic crisis without precedent in terms of its rapidity,

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scale, and scope, COVID-19 was a harsh but informative experience for the UWC network. Clement and Pereša are in broad agreement on the lessons they've learned for the future.

1. *Advance preparation is key*: In hindsight, the network should have been activated a month prior to the severe onset of COVID-19 in March. This lesson has great implications for anticipating the possibility of a resurgence of COVID-19 this fall.
2. *Speed over perfection*: Formulating the “perfect” response strategy was not possible. Time and realities on the ground wouldn't permit it. UWC was better off trying to respond in real time, seeing results, and refining strategy on an ongoing basis.
3. *Flexible funding*: A crisis requires increased levels of flexibility for allocating resources. UWC and most of its funders understood this. Flexibility enabled UWC to speed up its ability to respond to unanticipated demands.
4. *More open and current data*: Open source, open data were built-in advantages for UWC through 211 and RADAR. However, the broader social sector's data deficit hampered its response and often failed to show how community needs such as infrastructure and human resources are funded, and where more support was required.
5. *Transparency and rapid communication*: Everyone wants to know where their money is going and why. Hence, UWC has been reporting in real time how it is deploying its funding, which it sees as critical for maintaining trust. Frequent and rapid communication cycles are also vital for supporting cohesion internally at UWC and with external stakeholders.

“COVID-19 is a massive accelerator of the trends we already saw: the digital transformation, automation of transactions, acceleration of digital philanthropy, and major shifts in the workplace, particularly to remote working,” says Clement.

These lessons will surely be put to the test, and complemented by considerable new learnings, as the pandemic continues to unfold. The social sector, on the frontlines of this crisis, still struggles for the public visibility enjoyed by other responders, including health care workers and teachers. Nevertheless, it's clear that Canadians will continue to depend more than ever on the sector to respond to the economic and social consequences of the pandemic and any subsequent infection spikes.

<sup>[1]</sup> Seelos, C., Mair, J. (2012) Innovation is Not the Holy Grail. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.