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## **Bridging the divide: The importance of digital infrastructure to Canada's short- and long-term future**

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Willa Black is vice-president of corporate affairs and corporate social responsibility at the Canadian arm of IT and networking company Cisco. She has held executive marketing and CSR roles at Cisco Canada since 1999, leading strategies to drive Cisco's brand relevance and transformational impact. Working with governments, NGOs, and communities across Canada, Black builds strategic partnerships with a focus on education and healthcare, reinforcing the company's commitment to social innovation and sustainable systems change. In 2014, Black led the development and launch of Connected North, a virtual program that connects 25,000 students in remote Indigenous communities to digital resources and opportunities not available to them locally through Cisco's Webex video technology.

Black is also a board member of Century Initiative, a group of Canadian leaders from diverse backgrounds who came together in 2016 to provide a platform for the argument that Canada needs to grow its population – to 100 million people by 2100 – and must develop the policies and infrastructure necessary to do it in a smart, sustainable way.

Here she shares her thoughts on the growing importance of digital infrastructure, especially during a pandemic in which we cannot connect physically, and how we can better prepare for a future that allows all sectors of Canadian society, including the non-profit sector, to participate fully.

### **What do you mean by digital infrastructure, and why does it matter so much?**

When we talk about infrastructure, we absolutely have to expand our definition beyond the traditional bridges, roads, and hospitals we usually think of to include the digital infrastructure we rely on to run businesses, scale digital health and education services, provide services for citizens – and to connect with each other.

Simply put, we are now in an age where that access is so integrated into our day-to-day work, home, and social lives that internet access is no longer a nice-to-have, but a must-have.

We must work towards eliminating the “digital divide” by providing [equal access for all Canadians to opportunity and resources](#). Digital equity will lead to a more economically and socially successful and prosperous Canada.

### **What implications does this have for the non-profit sector?**

That is a good question. COVID-19 has taught us a lot about how fragile our prosperity is as a country – but also how fragile our business models are, regardless of the sector that we are in. The non-profit sector is not immune. In fact, in some ways non-profits may be more exposed than other businesses or organizations that have the resources to pivot quickly when challenges arise.

The non-profit sector is on the front lines of capacity-building and social services delivery in Canada. What we have learned in the pandemic is that it is essential for this sector to have access to the support and tools they need to leverage digital platforms to continue to deliver critically needed programming – where it is needed most.

We have seen how businesses that had plans for, and access to, digital tools and platforms and were able to move their operations online – whether we’re talking about direct-to-consumer sales or the ability to conduct day-to-day operations and meetings – appear to have weathered the pandemic better than those that were not able to.

In jurisdictions like Ontario, the provincial government’s Digital Main Street initiative provides funds to help businesses adapt to using technology to move their businesses online, and training to help them get up to speed on basic digital marketing practices. Programs like these are useful, but right now they are piecemeal across the country, and they aren’t really targeting the non-profit sector.

This is important because COVID-19 has really hurt so many charities and non-profits at a time when people need them like never before. The pandemic has, of course, been particularly hard on the sector’s ability to fundraise and connect with people.

Unfortunately, while it is easy to say that the sector should “adopt new tools, move your

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operations online,” it is much harder to do, particularly in a sector where operating costs remain a challenge and the price, not just of adopting new technology but planning for and maintaining it, can be prohibitive.

We’ve learned some important lessons over the course of the pandemic on the role that technology can play to drive scale and productivity in the non-profit sector. Many organizations have made significant progress in a very short period of time. The hope is that the foundations have been laid to ensure a more enabled, productive, and agile sector going forward. There’s no turning back.

So, as a country, as we look for ways to build greater resilience so that we can withstand the shock of future pandemics or other similarly disruptive events, we need to think about how we can support all sectors, including the non-profit sector.

**Can you give us an example of how we should be thinking about addressing the issues you’ve raised from a policy perspective?**

Absolutely. If we accept that affordable, reliable access to internet and wireless services is no longer a nice-to-have but a must-have in today’s world, then we need to take the steps required to allow organizations and communities to have that access.

Unfortunately, the financial and technical costs are often prohibitive. Given the pace at which the technology is evolving, too, upgrading and staying on top of each new generation is challenging, particularly for organizations that don’t have or can’t afford to have dedicated IT support, for example.

The Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) recently published a [report](#) that highlights how, as COVID has forced so much of our lives online, funding approaches for digital development projects in Canada are piecemeal and, frankly, ineffective. Government grant applications as they are currently written are often out of date and do not provide enough scope to accommodate advanced digital solutions.

In short, the organizations that have been helping non-profits, schools, and others connect to the internet are facing funding shortfalls themselves. If we accept that internet access is going to remain critical to our future, then we need a plan for helping the non-profit sector, which is already strapped, access funding to take full advantage of digital platforms and tools.

The non-profit sector will need to be more vocal to the general public (as well as government and other funders) about the role it plays in delivering so many of the supports and services we rely on, particularly in times like we are in now. And the sector has to remind people that it, too, needs access to the same tools and platforms that businesses do if it is going to thrive. Funders should heed their calls.

For example, governments should consider funding collectives focused on addressing specific social challenges and should discourage competition for funding. Moreover, as opposed to bilateral agreements, collaboration between the public- and private-sector players working with non-profits and local communities should be encouraged.

More simply put, we need to start shifting peoples’ mindsets. So much policy-making, and

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decision-making for that matter, is driven by the short- and medium-term needs in front of us. We need to think in much longer timelines about what kind of a world we want and what is required to get us there. If we are to continue to rely on the non-profit sector to remain on the front lines of community capacity-building, services delivery, and relief efforts, then we need a clearer vision for the future. And we need to ensure we have policies and funding mechanisms in place to help support it. When we start thinking this way, we start making different decisions.

That shift is what will open the door to the discussions and policy decisions that will lead to a bigger, bolder Canada for future generations. And the non-profit sector has to be an integral part of it.