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# Canada's non-profit sector needs to fund digital projects: CIRA

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A report published in October found that digital development in Canada is not prioritized by the charitable sector, leaving projects such as rural broadband access and digital literacy “underfunded, piecemeal, ad hoc and unorganized.”

The study, titled [Unconnected: Funding Shortfalls, Policy Imbalances and How They Are Contributing to Canada's Digital Underdevelopment](#), was produced by the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), the not-for-profit that manages the .ca internet domain and also funds digital projects across the country.

According to the report, there is no such thing as “digital philanthropy” in Canada, despite the fact that access to a good, stable internet connection is increasingly seen as an essential need as well as a bridge to accessing services like healthcare and education, which are actively provided by Canada's social sector.

In the wake of the pandemic, Canada's social sector is now looking to fix this gap in service.

“In 2021, digital issues are still new for non-profits,” says Kathryn Ann Hill, executive director of [MediaSmarts](#), a digital and media literacy group. “We haven't quite understood how they can contribute to social problems and social inequities both in terms of access and use of technology. It's not as simple as giving everyone access to broadband. It's about understanding how the internet is becoming foundational to how we live.”

“Digital philanthropy is a plane we're building as we fly it,” Hill adds.

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CIRA's report acknowledges this, noting that digital projects are complicated and involve infrastructure set-up, distribution of technology, literacy efforts, vigilant monitoring, and lots of organizational and structural planning. Compared to some other philanthropic initiatives, such projects are, by nature, costly and require consistent funding over longer periods.

"It's very hard to convince donors and granters and any kind of government or research funder to invest in these long-term initiatives," says Colette Brin, head of media studies at Laval University. "There are so many people trying to vie for the philanthropic pie to fix social inequality, so it's hard to make the argument that digital access is more important than food or housing."

CIRA surveyed 115 people in the digital space to understand the core issues behind this lack of support: 45% of respondents said funding is difficult to access. CIRA has tried to fill this gap. It has funded organizations such as [Gluu Technology Society](#), which boosts seniors' digital literacy in BC; the Toronto-based [Parkdale Centre for Innovation](#), which serves as a virtual business incubator for female and BIPOC entrepreneurs; and the [Mamawapowin Technology Society](#), which delivers free public wireless internet to Samson Cree First Nation in Alberta.

The organization's latest investment [program](#) is offering more than \$1 million for digital philanthropic efforts; the deadline to apply is April 14.

"The debate over whether the internet is an essential service is officially over," says Maureen James, CIRA's community investment program manager. "Whether your number-one issue is racial justice, climate change, mental health, or another social change area, your second has to be an accessible and affordable internet. Without this, fewer Canadians can get online and get engaged in your work, and it makes everything you do harder." Some advocates have gone further to argue that internet access should become a public utility as opposed to a commodity supplied by private firms, a [point explored](#) in *Unmasking the Future*, a new book by James Stauch of the [Institute for Community Prosperity](#) and funded by the Calgary Foundation.

At the moment, the only funding streams available to a Canadian non-profit digital project are CIRA and federal government programs, which have strict eligibility requirements requiring proof that organizations have the capacity to embark on large and complicated projects.

The lack of funding puts Canada far behind countries like the United States, where non-profit digital initiatives are "more developed, more collaborative, and better funded," says Jesse Bourns, chief operating officer of [Ajah](#), a Montreal-based company that builds information infrastructure for non-profits to help them find funders and provide better services.

Bourns says things are changing, albeit slowly, as Canada's non-profits realize that inadequate digital infrastructure affects "their own objectives and the people they fund." He adds that funders are beginning to broaden their scope. The Canada Council for the Arts, for example, created a hefty [digital strategy fund](#) as part of its 2016–2021 strategic plan to boost digital literacy and engagement. The Ontario Trillium Foundation has a similar innovation fund. More and more technology funders are emerging to help end the digital divide.

"COVID just made it more apparent to people in a way that wasn't before of the urgency of fixing this issue," Bourns says. "It used to be a fourth or fifth priority, but now everyone is taking a 'do it now' approach."

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Toby Harper-Merrett, executive director of the non-profit [Computers for Success Canada](#), a Government of Canada–funded program that refurbishes donated computers for use by schools, libraries, and marginalized communities, believes the lack of funding is an issue of perception. “It costs billions of dollars to put satellites in space and dig kilometres of fibre,” he says. “It doesn’t cost billions of dollars in digital investment to address the larger problem: mapping and helping those who don’t have the technology to access the internet.”

“The [non-profit] sector should stop talking about economic development and the digital economy as two separate things,” Harper-Merrett adds. “Anything a charity does is going to depend on a digital device. Any investment you’re doing should be seen through a digital lens.”

Brin believes there is a perception among non-profits that technological efforts are too big or complicated and must be left to tech giants like Google, Facebook, or the big telecoms. “Non-profits aren’t making technological advances, but they can deliver the simple things to broaden internet access that aren’t appealing, like computers and Wi-Fi hotspots,” she says.

One solution is to incentivize more collaboration between non-profits and technology companies, says Stauch, who is based at Mount Royal University. He points to the example of non-profit internet service providers, like Saskatchewan’s [O-Net](#). “We always talk about the digital deficit in the social sector, but there is also a social deficit in the tech sector,” he adds. “People in the tech space can innovate, but they lack a lot of context and knowledge of on-the-ground social issues. We need to create more ways for the two to cross paths and mingle.”

Some of that cross-industry work is already starting. The proposed merger of telecom giants Rogers and Shaw includes a commitment to establish a \$1-billion fund to connect rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Western Canada to high-speed internet. As part of the arrangement, Rogers will consult with Indigenous communities to create Indigenous-owned and -operated internet service providers.

Hill is encouraged that these conversations are happening more and more because of the gaps revealed by the pandemic: “We’ve all learned that it really is a privilege to work from home and to have the technology to do that.”

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### **Haliburton bands together to counter bandwidth shortage**

The closure of Ontario schools last March left 150 students at Haliburton Highlands Secondary School, in rural central Ontario, with spotty access to their online classes. Some students reported it could take an hour to get into the online livestream, with the video dropping in and out frequently.

Some students moved to other cities temporarily or travelled to their school’s parking lot. The dire problem has received a short-term solution: [Point in Time](#), a local community centre and service provider, set up a task force to improve internet connectivity in the county, which raised more than \$102,000 (of a \$180,000 goal) to purchase cellphones with data with the help of Rogers.