



EMERGING CONCERNS FOR CANADA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SERIES, BRIEFING NOTE 2

Introduction

Canada's international development and humanitarian sector is responding to immediate challenges brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. After quickly adapting to [tackle](#) the immediate health needs arising from the crisis, Canadian civil society organizations are examining the secondary knock-on impacts of the pandemic and what will be needed over the medium to longer term to support vulnerable populations around the world.

While health remains a central issue in the struggle to support vulnerable communities in Canada and abroad, economic and other social impacts of the pandemic also require immediate attention. In this context, Canada's efforts should continue to be guided by a feminist and human rights-based approach, as outlined in Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. Canada's efforts at home and abroad are connected by a common concern for shared health, safety and the protection of human rights as part of the COVID-19 response.

This briefing note, the second in a series developed by CCIC, provides an overview of emerging issues related to Canada's COVID-19 response. Based on the contributions from civil society organizations during webinars and other discussions around the crisis,¹ this briefing note identifies immediate, medium- and longer-term concerns by the international development and humanitarian sector.

Ensuring no one is left behind

It is no secret that the most vulnerable communities are the ones hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis, particularly due to fragilities that preceded the crisis whether from conflict, poor governance, global economic shocks or as a result of climate change. Apart from the most blatant impact on peoples' health and the overload of the public health structure, organizations have raised concerns over:

- the gender-related implications of the crisis, seeing increased vulnerability for women and children (especially girls);
- impacts on education, due to school closures and the recoil in learning development;
- food insecurity;
- limited access to water, sanitation and hygiene;
- overall loss of livelihoods for people around the world that can ill-afford to stay at home;
- the importance of maintaining social justice; and
- violations of human rights and the closing of civic space.

¹ Informed by sector calls hosted by:

* Climate Action Network-Réseau action climate (CAN-Rac) Canada, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), and 350.org Canada on April 9 and April 16. Minutes of both calls are available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1chzgfvbCRuIGrlhV5MmZ6QegxWYb2bDlrievEbB6jWw/edit>

* CCIC member update call on COVID-19, held on April 16, with the presence of Caroline Leclerc, Assistant Deputy Minister, Partners for Development Innovation at Global Affairs Canada, with 115 participants.

* CCIC member Executive Director call held on April 17 over COVID-19 responses and challenges, and on other ODA-related discussions, with around 50 participants.

Exacerbating these concerns is the underlying reality that the COVID-19 crisis will intensify inequalities, particularly in Southern countries. Women working in textile industries are being [laid off](#) in Bangladesh. Microentrepreneurs around the world have no recourse to sell their products if confined to their homes. Farmers [cannot](#) bring their produce to market. Indeed, the economic impacts are significant.

Canadian civil society organizations have longstanding relationships in the global south, innovation, flexibility and experience in human rights-based approaches. In addition, due to their [track record](#) in not only identifying who is being left behind, but also reaching them, they are particularly well positioned to reach those most impacted by COVID-19 and its knock-on effects.

Linking the local to the global

A shift from the health of individuals to the health of the economy is gradually becoming more present in Canadians' discussions around domestic realities. Although organizations are very aware of the economic impact of the crisis for Canadians, they also recognize the need to build public awareness on the international dimensions. While organizations in the sector are working hard to provide support to their workers and the communities at home and abroad that they serve, there is ongoing concern that limited appetite exists for an ambitious global response.

Yet, addressing issues at the international level is crucial in terms of shared safety, prosperity, security and resilience. In our connected global health system, an engagement of Canadian society toward a safer and healthier world would also mean a safer and healthier Canada. Secondly, Canada's economy is international with commercial and trade linkages across the world. Supporting the global economic recovery is good for Canada. Finally, it is paramount that we limit back sliding on sustainable development gains and continue to move forward to meet the [United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), areas on which Canada has committed to action at home and abroad.

As part of its response to COVID-19, the sector is supporting public engagement on the global impacts of the crisis and encouraging the Government of Canada to maintain commitments toward global development.

Recovering better together

Members of Canada's international development and humanitarian sector are calling for a phased response to COVID-19. While the first priority has been put on health, longer-term strategies focusing on building resilient systems and providing stimulus for a just recovery are now needed.

In this sense, the sector has argued for:

- ongoing efforts guided by a feminist approach to protect fundamental human rights at home and abroad;
- balancing the immediate response with long-term commitment;
- debt relief for partner countries and acknowledgement that existing aid resources will not be enough;
- stimulus programs that integrate humanitarian response with development programming; and
- diverse partnerships to build social contracts that allow for an equitable, resilient and sustainable recovery.

What does this mean for the sector?

Signals from the Government of Canada indicate that Canada plans to "stay the course" with respect to ensuring a focus on longer-term sustainable development goals while responding to the crisis. Global Affairs Canada is working to provide flexibility for the continuity of our sector's projects. However, it also cautions against pivoting too many resources to avoid a greater lack of resources in the long-term. On a project-by-project basis, Canadian civil society organizations will see possibilities for incremental/additional funding to adapt programs, as well as opportunities for some shifts in scope, such as adding additional outcomes.

Government officials, however, have also made limitations on their flexibility clear: projects cannot be repurposed on a unilateral basis, and requests by the sector for blanket extensions and renewals are not possible at this point. The government – and by extension the projects it funds – remain accountable for previously stated specific results.

Overall, guidance from the department and signals from high level officials suggest that Canada's development partners will have an important role to play while recovering better. Existing programs will have space to adjust to the COVID-19 reality, but they are also expected to continue focusing on the longer-term outcomes that characterize a just recovery.

Recommendation for Global Affairs Canada

As the Canadian response to the COVID-19 crisis starts to move into a second phase, sector concerns are also shared by the Government of Canada. Health, water, sanitation and hygiene, gender equality, human rights, food security, education, livelihoods and climate action intersect with each other and with overall efforts to leave no one behind. The needs of those most impacted by the crisis should be addressed both in Canada and abroad, working in solidarity to support locally driven solutions. The long-term goal should be social improvement – not just from the reality of the pandemic but from the world before. Canada should be aiming to help the world [recover better](#).

Recommendations:

- Continue to drive a human rights-based and feminist response to COVID-19 in the short term and for a just recovery by targeting assistance to women, girls and the most vulnerable communities and working with local organizations, including women's rights organizations, as key partners in Canada's approach.
- Ensure the next phase of Canada's COVID-19 response demonstrates commitment to just recovery with additional investments to tackle the secondary social and economic impacts of the crisis in areas such as gender equality, food security, education, livelihoods and protection of human rights.
- Balance the immediate response with long-term commitment by continuing to support Canada's international development and humanitarian sector to flexibly adjust programming – including in the context of the humanitarian, development and peace nexus – to meet immediate needs while maintaining efforts for a just recovery.

Note to CCIC Members

CCIC is committed to protecting the information generously provided by members of the sector that informs this briefing note. If you are a CCIC member and would like to learn more about the issues raised above, including organizations that share these concerns, please reach out to covid19@ccic.ca and we will do our best to connect you.

This briefing note was prepared by Ana de Oliveira, Researcher at CCIC, in April 2020.