

Leadership for a greener international development and humanitarian sector: Sustainable civil society organizations

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The global climate emergency, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need to accelerate efforts towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have become critical reference points for the activities of Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs), including in the international development and humanitarian sector. Multiple crises, in addition to the transformational principles embodied in the 2030 Agenda - inter-generational equity and responsibility, respect for planetary boundaries and recognition of the holistic and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals - put an onus on organizations to adjust not only their programming and advocacy efforts but also how their operations and ways of working impact global ambitions to address climate change, promote sustainable development that leaves no one behind and contribute to a just, equitable and climate smart recovery from the pandemic. CSOs are increasingly seeing the need to ensure that their efforts to promote environmental sustainability in international programming abroad coincides with efforts within organization walls at home.

In 2020, Cooperation Canada launched its [Greening CSOs initiative](#) to support CSOs in the international development and humanitarian sectors in Canada to emerge as global leaders in environmental mainstreaming and climate-conscious operations. A survey of 51 organizations and interviews with 12 organizations¹ as well as a series of case studies and peer learning discussions from this initiative point to the importance of high-level leadership within Canadian CSOs as a critical factor in determining the extent to which organizations are “green.” This research brief presents key findings regarding CSO leadership in greening operations. It outlines the current state of affairs, challenges and opportunities.

Understanding the role of leaders

Leadership for environmental action within organizations is shared

Evidence from a survey of 51 international development and humanitarian CSOs suggests that the extent to which leaders have prioritized efforts to green their organizations varies across the sector. Organizations point to diverse sources of leadership with respect to organizational greening. While survey respondents noted that the task of identifying and prioritizing environmental issues most often sits with the chief executive officer (CEO) (43%), 35% of organizations noted that all staff are expected to contribute. Nearly 14% of organizations noted that a dedicated staff member was responsible for environmental issues.

¹ Of the 12 interviews conducted, four included CSO executives.



However, leadership at the highest levels is critical

While there are various approaches to leadership for greening, some approaches have particular benefits. For organizations in which leadership lies at the CEO level, dedicated leadership sends a signal to all staff regarding organizational priorities, impacting decision-making processes, operational practices and programming. There is a view that when green efforts are led by executives who choose to reinforce and prioritize sustainability, such approaches foster employee engagement and dedication to generating positive change.

For organizations in which all staff are expected to contribute to green efforts, a shared sense of responsibility can emerge. However dedicated resources and higher-level leadership remain important factors for progress. The existence of a dedicated staff position also shows that an organization is prepared to invest in improving its environmental sustainability. Leadership is more likely to be aware and considerate of the impact of its operations and programming, and more importantly, willing to observe and make changes accordingly.

Moreover, most participants noted that green efforts often lead nowhere in their respective organizations due to lack of executive buy-in, and that for those equipped with a green team, not having a member of the executive reduced credibility. The CSO Greening project shed light on a few cases where green teams had been successful at triggering formal organizational change without the presence of leaders in the team – but the road to success for the most part had been long and arduous with participants noting that leader presence would have surely sped up change.

Greening operations, programs and policy and advocacy efforts

While recognition for the global climate crisis is well established, this reality has not translated to urgent action by leaders to green their organizations and programs or update their approaches to policy and advocacy.

Canadian CSOs have made significant strides in pushing for government action to tackle climate change, including championing government commitments to global climate and environmental frameworks and progress on national commitments. Most recently, the international cooperation sector has [called](#) for increased investments in climate finance as part of Canada's global fair share, aligned with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. The survey results and interviews confirmed that environment and climate change are topics of great concern for leadership. However, there is a perception that leaders do not appear to apply a critical lens to their own organization to trigger internal change. An additional impediment voiced by some interviewees is a perception that space does not exist within their organization for communication between staff and leaders to raise critical issues related to how the organization ensures its operations align with the shared values of the sector and staff vis-à-vis environmental sustainability and addressing climate change. As society and governments become increasingly concerned with addressing the impacts of climate change,

there is a need for leaders to apply a critical lens to their own operations, in line with international and national commitments, and engage staff to support improvements operational sustainability.

Reducing the environmental impact of CSO operations is not a priority shared by all with leaders focusing more on programming

When asked how important it is to minimize the negative impact of CSO operations on the environment, less than half the participants, at 47%, noted it was very important. Some participants noted the increased necessity to incorporate environmental concerns into programming with less emphasis on operations. Indeed, stakeholders observed that minimizing operational impacts on the environment was important but not a priority nor central to strategic planning. Others advised that it was rarely discussed and that the bare minimum was requested by management – reducing travel to field offices, and/or being mindful of water, electricity and waste in headquarters. Interviewees noted that the environment tends to be mainstreamed across their work rather than recognized as a dedicated target for the organization – support from leaders in formalizing commitment to climate change and environmental issues in operations (and programming) is essential. Furthermore, some also highlighted that although budgets do sometimes allow more sustainable spending, it is often to the detriment of something else. Staff are encouraged to do cost-benefit analysis, which in some cases result in the environment no longer being a priority.

Overall, the research points to the need for leaders to voice the same directives and objectives in both operations and programming, ensuring consistent and better targeted efforts overall. Becoming sustainable should not be seen as a simple shift in direction or checking off a box in a strategic plan, but rather as an element of all organization objectives and subject to continuous improvement.

Current policy and advocacy work are not reflective of the climate crisis

When asked how much of their advocacy and policy work was related to environment and climate change, 48% of organizations noted “some” was related, while 26% said a “limited amount” and 6% selected “none.” Only one organization noted that all of their policy and advocacy work focuses on environmental sustainability while for 17% of organizations this applies to most of their efforts. The survey results raise some questions regarding the extent to which CSOs have been able to incorporate climate change into their policy and advocacy work, particularly given current climate-related emergencies and the need for concerted global and national-level efforts, in addition to commitments to global climate agreements, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the need for just, equitable and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

An opportunity exists for organizations to update their communication narratives, policy engagement and advocacy efforts to better integrate issues related to environmental sustainability. The research reveals a spectrum of levels of concern and action across the sector, with organizations’ policy and advocacy efforts reflecting organizational mandate and goals. Nevertheless, climate change and environmental sustainability touch all subsectors in international development and the humanitarian sector, suggesting that – at a minimum – there is need to ensure some alignment on broader climate change and environmental issues.

Operational greening requires formalized commitment and systems of accountability

Some participants noted the extent of leaders’ involvement in formalizing greening consisted of retrofits or requiring greener shipping methods for materials sent to field offices. However, such efforts to reduce and offset carbon were not measured or evaluated against accountability criteria, in part due to lack of a dedicated team or person to do so, but largely due to such requirements not being formalized. The overall sentiment was that leaders were open to discussing ways to reduce and offset environmental footprints, but with minimal processes required to do so and/or inconsistently

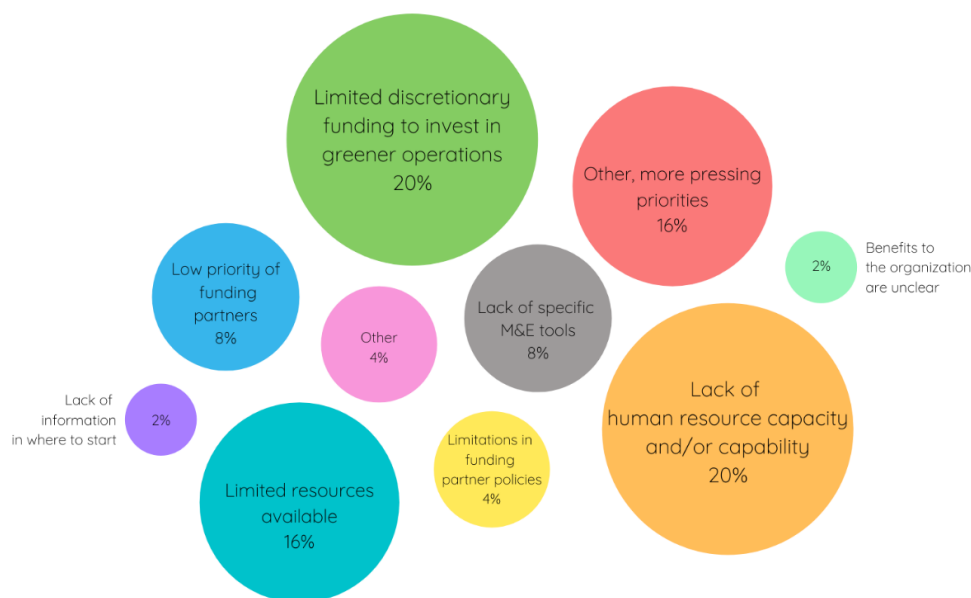
implementation at all levels of the organization.

Barriers to greening CSOs and ways to address them

Limited financial resources, human capacity and the need for further prioritization are key barriers to greening

Efforts towards greening operations, programs and policy and advocacy work inevitable confront a range of real and perceived barriers. The image below provides an overview of the main barriers reported by 51 organizations to greening. Organizations were asked to select all barriers that apply to their organization. It shows that that 16% see other priorities as more pressing (while 8% noted greening is not a priority of funders), while 20% noted the lack of human resources and capabilities. Another 20% expressed limited discretionary funds to invest in greener operations. These challenges were communicated by across organizations of different sizes with no discernable differences emerging for organizations that are small (29% of survey respondents overall), medium (26% of respondents) or large (45% of respondents).

BARRIERS TO GREENING EFFORTS SELECTED BY CSOs



^aResults not mutually exclusive

Greening is an investment in organizational resilience, cost-effectiveness and risk management that requires high-level leadership

The challenges mentioned above point towards a need for further prioritization of greening efforts, efforts to free up financial resources to support greening and increased internal capacity development. Prioritizing greening must be understood in terms of costs, benefits and potential risks to *not* taking action. As the Greening CSOs project as shown, there are [many tools](#) that can support efforts by leaders to prioritize greening, including in terms of mitigating the negative environmental impacts of their operations. Importantly, pathways to greening should be understood in terms of potential cost savings as well as part of risk management strategies, recognizing that regulatory and legal frameworks are increasingly requiring more of businesses with respect to reducing their environmental impacts. Some Canadian CSOs have shared [their experiences and approaches](#), highlighting the many benefits, including

for an organization's bottom line. Furthermore, investments in relevant staff capacity and knowledge will only become more critical as the climate crisis grows, impacting all aspects of the international development sector's work. Organizations that have invested in the capacity to mitigate their environmental impacts, ensure climate and environment resilient programming and equitable local partnerships with those impacted by climate change, will be better placed to contribute to the 2030 Agenda and Canada's contributions to a climate-smart global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Greening should be part of conversations with donors

Interviews highlighted the absence of environmental considerations in criteria for funding, an issue that further widens the gap between the work of CSOs and international climate commitments. As Canadian CSOs advocate for a more robust international climate commitments, there is also an opportunity to link these efforts to conversations with institutional funders, namely Global Affairs Canada. Leaders can contribute to positive change through dialogue with the department on project requirements, eligible expense and contracting provisions, notably making use of existing CSO-Global Affairs Canada [consultative mechanisms](#).

Adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic presents a real opportunity for greener approaches

Leaders nationwide have been forced to change the way organizations operate in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included greener operations through virtual working environments, limited staff travel (both to the office and to engage local partners) and new ways of working with local partners. Some of these initiatives have meant lower costs and reduced impacts on the environment. Although such adjustments have not come without challenges for all stakeholders, particularly with respect to well-being and change management, organizations are finding themselves able to maintain productivity (or in some cases grow) and the sector is demonstrating its ability to be more resilient, inclusive and innovative. There is an opportunity for leaders in the sector to identify a new normal and how the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic will inform longer-term strategies and approaches – approaches that can be greener and support transformational change both locally and with partners abroad.

Conclusions: Greening is an opportunity for CEOs to rise to the challenge

The Greening CSOs survey asked respondents to share what their organizations would need to further green its work. Based on discussions, green asks were reliant on initiative and investment from leaders in the sector, creating professional development opportunities and capacity development training (82%) and opportunities for peer learning from other members of the sector (85%). Cooperation Canada's Greening CSOs initiative compiled [resources](#) to support capacity development in the sector and engaged CSOs nationwide to share their experiences with greening, including through [good practice case studies](#), recognizing that such lessons can guide leadership and staff through the lessons that have emerged and successes found by peers.

While leadership for greening is required in all levels of an organization, it is those who hold decision-making positions that can set priorities and ensure environmental considerations are effectively integrated into operations, policy and advocacy efforts and programming.

Recommendations

Three recommendations emerge from the analysis for CSO leaders.

Sustainability efforts are investments in organizational resilience, cost-effective operations and risk management, in addition to serving as concrete contributions by organizations to address climate change and promote environmental sustainability. Progress on organizational greening starts with prioritization of environmental sustainability at the highest levels.

- ✓ **Working with staff, leaders should support the identification and development of the business case for greening to inform overall organizational priorities and approaches.**

While sustainability and green efforts should be on the agenda of all staff members including executives, leaders set environmental sustainability objectives, roles and responsibilities and corresponding targets and accountability systems. They are responsible for ensuring organizational capacity, including allocation of dedicated resources to support greening efforts.

- ✓ **Leaders should work with staff and stakeholders to translate greening priorities into organizational objectives, programming, partnerships, engagement with donors and other stakeholders and policy and advocacy efforts, supported by systems to ensure accountability for commitments.**

Finally, the CSO Greening project identified peer learning and experience sharing as an important means to propel progress in the sector. However, peer learning should not rest only with staff. Leaders play a key role in shaping and guiding efforts in the sector. Organizations such as Cooperation Canada and other sector associations offer opportunities for member-led communities of practice.

- ✓ **Leaders should signal their organization's interest to engage in communities of practice related to greening, support staff to participate in peer learning opportunities and share their lessons learned and experiences in greening with other leaders in the sector as part of efforts to promote sector-wide progress.**