



Atlantic Resilience

- Learnings & Adaptations Among Atlantic CSOs during COVID-19

- Preliminary Findings
- May-June 2020



Acknowledgment

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Introduction

The Atlantic Council for International Cooperation is a coalition of over 70 individuals, organizations and institutions working in the Atlantic region to build and model just, equitable and sustainable communities, locally and globally. ACIC connects leadership across generations by strengthening members and partners, bridging dialogue and building networking and learning opportunities. ACIC also represents and amplifies the voice of Atlantic Canada and connects the Atlantic with other provincial, national and international stakeholders.

The purpose of this study was to understand the creativity, adaptability, and challenges of ACIC's members during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to share learnings, resources, and best practices that have emerged. Members include non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and individuals across all four Atlantic Canadian provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia), doing community work both domestically and in international partnerships. ACIC believes that the international cooperation sector in Atlantic Canada, our global and domestic partners, and others who face the same transitions and uncertainties can benefit from research that reflects our shared and unique challenges, creativity, adaptation, and resilience.



Methodology

Unsurprisingly, because these interviews were conducted during the global pandemic, the methodology itself was shaped by the opportunities and limitations of the time. Travel and in-person interviews were not available options, but members (even those who are often travelling internationally) tended to be at home, attentive and responsive to online communication, and eager to find ways to connect.

In May of 2020, ACIC invited members via email and social media to participate in interviews about how the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting their work and how their organizations and communities were responding and adapting. Members were quick to volunteer their time to talk with interviewers; most respondents approached ACIC independently after a general call for participants with no incentive provided. Participation from a few additional members resulted from a direct reminder, either by phone or e-mail. In total, two ACIC staff members conducted a series of 25 semi-structured phone and video interviews within a three-week timeframe.

Because the interviews took place during a time when in-person meetings contravened public health recommendations, interaction with participants was entirely online and over the phone. On-going voluntary and informed consent was obtained either verbally or via email, and re-confirmed throughout the process. A few sensitive elements that arose during interviews have been omitted at the participants' request.

Analysis of the data began as soon as interviews started, with researchers employing a semi-grounded theory approach to identify themes as they emerged. The process was iterative, with researchers making adjustments in approach and questions as interviews unfolded and as “sensitizing concepts” were identified (Given, 2008). When interviews were complete, the research team organized key learnings from multiple interviews into thematic areas for discussion and analysis.

Findings

Virtual Programming & Events

In order to comply with public health guidelines, workplaces around the world have needed to cancel in-person meetings and gatherings, or to move activities online. Every interviewee had experienced changes resulting from the loss of ability to host and attend in-person meetings and events.

Many organizations were faced with the difficult decision of postponing and cancelling in-person events and meetings. The impacts of these cancellations were social, financial, and strategic for organizations. Members saw a loss of normally-predictable revenue from annual fundraising events, which affected local operations, and also meant a decreased capacity to support partners and programs internationally.

International cooperation practitioners know the value of relationship building, and many members mourned the loss of the informal opportunities for connection, ability to read between the lines through body language, and the trust-building that happens so naturally in person. Adapting to online-only communication required recalibrating of organizational culture. One interviewee noted that staff within their organization were

“struggling to get to a balance around how many emails is acceptable and are there other ways to communicate. We're really missing our hallway chats and our kitchen chats, and the lunchtime chats where some of that information would just more organically be shared.”

On the other hand, virtual meetings and gatherings allowed some interviewees to include their international counterparts (and even their program participants) more regularly in routine conversations and meetings:



we've been able to connect at a level with our partners, but even beyond that, to the beneficiaries which is a connection we never really had before. It's blown wide open our assumptions about how connected we can be at any given time, I think.

While moving activities online was more inclusive in some cases, interviewees also cited situations where online platforms were a barrier in their work. One member organization, for example, noticed that some participants stopped attending their youth program after they introduced a new online format. At the same time, they saw new youth join the program, who preferred meeting online.

Travel

Organizations with international partnerships naturally tend to travel frequently, so the closure of borders, cancellation of flights, and public health recommendations to stay at home had a major impact on operations. One group, for example, said:

“Our youth exchange got canceled and youth from here were not able to go to Italy, and the youth from Italy was unable to come here. Instead, they decided to have virtual meetings to stay connected and postpone the actual travel to next year.”

The disruption to travel caused others to reflect on the extent to which alternatives to in-person connection with international partners could be built into programs, not only for resilience in case of travel interruptions, but also as a fiscally and environmentally responsible measure:

“What's the new normal gonna be when we come out of this? Climate change, the carbon footprint that travel has, the transaction costs, the possibilities of quarantining and perhaps visas being more difficult, the cost of travel being more difficult as airlines go out of business and less people are able to be on a plane, so prices rise. We may be looking at using more remote technologies and doing less travel and I think what it's gonna force us to assess is what is necessary travel? Like what activities on the ground, if we have a 5-year project and we built two to three trips a year for our staff, are all those trips necessary? Could one trip a year suffice and the other activities be done remotely?”

Gender

Women make up 75 percent of the workforce in nonprofits (Center for Global Development, 2018), so the layoffs that took place within member organizations had a correspondingly gendered impact. For staff and volunteers who have continued working during the pandemic, the shift to working at home has meant an intimate and at times overwhelming collision of home life, social life, and work life. A UNFPA report cautions that:

“The closure of schools to control COVID-19 transmission has a differential effect on women economically, given their role in providing most of the informal care within families, with consequences that limit their work and economic opportunities. In general the outbreak experience means that women’s domestic burden becomes exacerbated as well, making their share of household responsibilities even heavier, and for many while they also work full time.”

Indeed, interviewees talked about the challenges of balancing work and caregiving:

“personally as a mom of young kids and with a partner who also is working remotely it's a very different dynamic than what I'm hearing other colleagues describe. It's busy. It's um... there's no pause or slow down really. Like, I hear people talking about 'oh you know did a jigsaw puzzle, or I finally did this or that' and I'm just kind of like shaking my head thinking 'what? when? how?' [laughs] I am [a] full-time 24/7 mom and 8 1/2 hours a day Chalice employee, while my partner is also working a full-time job remotely and our house is messier because we're in it more and we eat more food, and we have to buy more groceries, it just seems overall more.”

Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy (2017) calls for a gender-responsive approach to our work internationally, a lens which is increasingly relevant domestically as organizations made up of mostly women look to build resilience based on learnings from COVID-19.

○ Localisation

In addition to being strategic about when to travel for international work, some interviewees talked about plans for more locally-led activities, both domestically and overseas. Border restrictions on both people and products opened up new opportunities for local talent and production.

Organizations in Atlantic Canada noted that their expertise is just as needed in Canada as it is around the world. The pandemic caused them to think about investing more in work that can be done locally. For example, one interviewee noted:



I see a huge opportunity for us to be doing much more work locally, like in our own communities, in Northeast Nova Scotia, but throughout Nova Scotia and even Canada. We've been developing some really great Women's Leadership programming in Indigenous communities across Canada.

In planning initiatives with partners in the Global South, interviewees had a renewed commitment to building capacity and entrusting power to partner organizations. Members found that international projects which had a strong focus on local leadership and decision-making tended to be more resilient during the pandemic, weathering temporary gaps in communication with greater ease, and responding to local conditions as they evolved during the pandemic.

Additionally, border closures and shifting trade policies resulted in strength for local markets and homegrown products. One respondent told researchers that new restrictions on agricultural imports had opened up new markets for domestic poultry production in Haiti, which represented a significant opportunity for their agricultural project there.

○ Infrastructure & Funding

Like so much of the world, interviewees whose work normally takes place in offices found themselves setting up workspaces at home. Although the transition from in-person meeting to videoconferencing may have been relatively smooth for those living in major cities, Atlantic Canada's more rural population has less consistent access to reliable high speed internet. Interviewees reported that staff within their organizations who lived more rurally had difficulty participating in videoconference with the same ease as their urban counterparts.

Finding ways to work around shifting circumstances in Atlantic Canada posed a challenge in itself, but working with international partners, especially in multiple parts of the world, presented a level of chaos that was difficult to manage:



We're working with 58 different partners in 15 different countries around the world so we're up against the fact that every single one of them has different abilities to continue their programming, to meet their requirements, to send in financial reports, internet access, even computer access for some is iffy and governments are on lockdowns. We've had reports of employees of our partners who are trying to get to the office, and have gone against curfew restrictions and gotten ticketed.

As this organization found in working with beneficiaries, navigating the circumstances surrounding the pandemic required adaptations to normal protocol, allowing for flexibility to accommodate changes to programs and deliverables, and adjusting timelines when presented with barriers. Similar negotiations are taking place between ACIC member organizations and their funders.

As non-profits, ACIC and most of its members work with funders, including government funders, to support their work in Canada and internationally. Most interviewees noted that funders had been quite flexible in

terms of accommodating changes to programs, timelines, and budgets due to COVID-19. However, in looking to the future of their work, some members were concerned that the availability of funding could be impacted by federal reallocation of funds away from Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC), or by a hyper-focus of funding mechanisms on pandemic-related issues with the unintended consequence of defunding other important areas of work.



Conclusion: Building Resilience

The creativity, adaptability and resilience of Atlantic members was evidenced so clearly through this research. As mostly smaller-sized organizations, their work is built on strong personal relationships, both in their Atlantic Canada communities and with their overseas partners. Interviews with members showed that their investment in cultivating relationships, including face-to-face time, has allowed them to be nimble in terms of adapting to online communication, and effective in terms of responding to continually shifting programming environments.

Organizations' investment in strategy and planning, including adaptive monitoring and evaluation practices, provided tools for pivoting programs and activities in response to community-level implications of the pandemic. Supportive funders entrusted decision-making to local level partners and adjusted requirements in response to community needs and barriers that arose with the pandemic.



Next Steps

At the time of publication, international cooperation organizations continue to adapt to an evolving landscape. Members who were interviewed three weeks ago may now have reopened offices, reoriented programs, or made new discoveries. ACIC looks forward to following up with members to keep abreast of their work and to share key learnings and information to help build capacity and resilience in the sector.

ACIC is committed to sharing learnings from this research program with members and the international cooperation community of practice in order to contribute to ongoing conversations on resilience and strategic learning during the pandemic.



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Appendix 1

Call for Participation

Subject: Recruitment for ACIC Study on Atlantic Organisations During Covid-19

Dear ACIC Members,

I hope you're doing well. I'm reaching out today because we are conducting a short study to understand how the work of Atlantic organizations are being impacted by the global pandemic.

This project is being led by our provincial coordinators, Sam Morton (NL Provincial Coordinator- samantha@acic-caci.org) and Selvi Roy (PEI Provincial Coordinator- selvi@acic-caci.org) .

The purpose of the study is to understand the creativity, adaptability, and challenges of Atlantic CSOs during the pandemic in order to learn from each other, contribute to our community of practice, and to showcase our members' stories. Your answers will inform a publication that will be promoted widely and will be shared with government offices (e.g.: Global Affairs Canada, ESDC, Status of Women), government officials (e.g.: the Minister of International Cooperation, the Minister of the Status of Women), and will be highlighted at conferences and other events. It will also be profiled on social media and digital platforms. The report will be unveiled at ACIC's AGM on June 18th .

We are inviting ACIC members (who are at least 18 years old) to participate in an interview in which you will be asked to speak about how your work has changed, what you're doing because of the change, what you may need at this time. Interviews will start Mon. May 18. Participation will require approximately 20-30 minutes. However, the interview could be longer or shorter at your discretion. Interviews will be held by phone or via Skype, Zoom, or Bluejeans.

The report will be showcasing ACIC member organizations, but participation is voluntary. If you do not want to have your organization profiled in the report, we are still interested in interviewing you anonymously, so we can have a clear picture of what is happening in the Atlantic region.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact us to arrange a meeting either online or over the phone. Selvi (selvi@acic-caci.org) will be interviewing those in PEI and NB. Sam (samantha@acic-caci.org) will be interviewing those in NL and NS.

If you have any questions about ACIC or this project, please contact either of them.

If you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this study, please give them a copy of this information.

Thank you in advance for considering our request!

Janelle



Appendix 2

Interview Guide for Atlantic Resilience Research Study

Dear XYZ,

It is my pleasure to be with you today. I want to thank you for offering your time and being a participant in ACIC's Atlantic Resilience study.

As mentioned in the e-mail sent earlier, ACIC is conducting an Atlantic wide study to understand how Atlantic organizations, specifically ACIC member organizations and associates have been impacted by the present global pandemic. The purpose of this appreciative inquiry is to gain insight into the opportunities and challenges resulting from the lockdown, and adaptations influenced by the changed circumstances. Our endeavour is also to present your point of view of this pandemic's impact on your work and in the Atlantic region as a whole.

The lived experiences you share will contribute to the larger community of practice, a resource pool, and a published report that will be shared with the Minister, Global Affairs Canada, and ACIC members. The report will also serve to address future policy and action.

This interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. The time could vary depending on your answers and it is at your discretion.

(Please feel free to add any question that you feel may be pertinent to this study, as also skip any question if in any way, you feel it is beyond your realm of comfort).

(If asked about participant base – All 37 organizational members, 4 Atlantic wide members, and specific individual members Shelagh Savage, Darlene Doiron, Keith Forsythe, Kevin Deveaux, Catherine Ronahan, Carolyn Brown, and Susan Hartley among others have been invited to participate in this study)

Personal check-in

Let's begin with a personal check-in.

How are you doing? How have the past weeks been for you? (Acknowledge the person's response and appreciate that this is a hard and unprecedented time for everyone).

Organizational check-in

Let's talk about the organization. Tell me about your work, what programs are running? How are things going? How has the crisis impacted your relationships with your partners and/ or beneficiaries?

Opportunities

Now, let's proceed with understanding the opportunities, and also the challenges faced by your organization. What's working well for you? What newer or different opportunities did you find resulting from the lockdown, if any? These opportunities could include bringing in funds to set up a home office, or organizing online meetings. Have you been able to highlight work in a different way?

Challenges

What do you feel have been specific challenges? Has the crisis exposed any gaps in your programs and/ or within the system or sector? If so, what are these? (e.g. structural issues, capacity issues, policy/ regulatory issues etc.)

Adaptations

Moving on to adaptations and best practices, what are your main priorities during the Covid-19 pandemic? Have these shifted? If so, how? What adaptations did you incorporate in your work, if any? Were there any projects that were severely impacted, had to be left undone, or implemented differently? Were there any new projects that were initiated?

Best practices and lessons learned

What do you consider to be best practices of your organization? Please elaborate.
What might be some lessons learned that we can highlight?

Needs assessment

Next, let's proceed to the Needs assessment section beginning with the support and information needed for online training needs.

As you know, ACIC conducts regular capacity building for members. To continue meeting members' needs, I would like to understand, what are the emerging needs of your program beneficiaries since the crisis has hit?

What support is needed in the short-term (3 months), medium term (6 months), longer term (1-2 years)? Financial? Technology training? Any other?

Resources

Please identify any resources or support that would be helpful to you/your organization during this time.

ACIC has put together valuable resources. These resources cover important topics such as bringing in funds, how to engage donors, etc.- see our COVID info page: www.acic-caci.org/covid)

Thank you

Thank you very much for your time.

(It is not rare for respondents to continue sharing. Their responses can continue to be recorded/noted).



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of the Mi'kmaq People.**