

**COVID-19
IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS'
RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES – PART 1**

Between Solidarity and Threat to Autonomy

IN THIS REPORT:

The Power of Solidarity	2
Relationships with External Parties: Difficult at Times	5
Outsourcing over Partnerships	7
Public Services Struggling to Face the Crisis	9
Opportunities and Challenges with External Parties in a Time of Crisis	12

Community organizations' **proximity** to the population and the **ties they have built** with different stakeholders in the area they cover constitute an important strength of the autonomous community action (ACA) movement.

For many community groups reached by the Observatoire de l'ACA, the COVID-19 crisis has been seen as a particularly favorable period in which to **strengthen solidarity** and develop a **better understanding and recognition** of the ACA movement's work among different actors.

However, certain relationships, while framed as partnerships, have added **external pressure** and have **threatened community organizations' autonomy**. Public institutions, heavily destabilized by the crisis, (the health and social services network and educational institutions, in particular) have sought to outsource public services that they've struggled to offer to community organizations. Alerted to this phenomenon by their membership, **umbrella organizations** have been especially proactive in denouncing these threats and have played an essential role in defending ACA organizations' autonomy to different external parties and funders during the crisis.

Using data from a review of existing reports and studies, from a survey conducted by the *Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques* (IRIS) in the fall of 2020 and from focus groups with community organizations in the winter of 2021, this report presents the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on community groups' relationships with external parties, based on data collected directly from community groups as well as their umbrella organizations.

Details on community groups' experiences within **crisis units** that were created to share information and coordinate actions relating to the COVID-19 crisis are addressed in a second report on the impacts on relationships with external parties, entitled [A Wide Range of Experiences within Crisis Units](#).



THE POWER OF SOLIDARITY

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, there has been a great deal of **solidarity** between various stakeholders in the same area, especially during the first wave.

Community organizations relied on **mutual aid** to face the crisis as a united autonomous community action movement. In addition to regional collaborations, community organizations across regions working within the same sectors became more tightly knit during the crisis.

In many areas, **public and private stakeholders** mobilized themselves to support community organizations and their actions. These included institutions (e.g., free space rentals, assistance from staff), cooperatives (e.g., material donations, collective purchasing), businesses (e.g., food donations, free space rentals), etc.

During the first months of the crisis, in a show of solidarity, many **external staff members got involved** in different community organizations. Some of these workers were from other community groups, others from public institutions. Due to the disruption of activities, these workers were often waiting for their work to be reorganized. As a result, they would continue to be remunerated by their regular employer while lending a helping hand to understaffed community organizations. For certain specific projects, fiduciaries would take care of paying staff that were sent as backup. However, this involvement was often short-lived, raising issues around the longevity of the actions posed by people who had to eventually return to their employer.




The city quickly offered support in the form of relief staff, who were either working remotely or couldn't work remotely. So, there are many basic services that we were able to keep offering.

Group in Outaouais



Access to adequate space has been a serious issue for community organizations during the crisis. Some landlords restricted access to groups' regular spaces as a reaction to government public health measures. Other groups required larger spaces to be able to maintain their activities with appropriate distancing measures. Many partners, particularly municipalities, mobilized themselves to support community organizations' efforts around this issue.





For many community groups, the crisis made space for **new partnerships and collaborative relationships** (see the second report covering the impacts on relationships with external parties, entitled [A Wide Range of Experiences within Crisis Units](#)), and helped **solidify pre-existing partnerships**. At this exceptional time, certain stakeholders gained a better understanding of community organizations in their area. The crisis has also created opportunities for regular communication, allowing different actors to better understand each other.



This means there are some partners that were harder to work with before, but now, there's a lot more acceptance. A complete paradigm shift, truly. We're currently getting unprecedented opportunities, for partnerships, funding—really, a lot of opportunities.

Group in the Laurentides



Engaging with Political Stakeholders: From Facilitation to Interference

During the COVID-19 pandemic, community organizations' experiences with political stakeholders at different levels have **varied greatly from one region to another**.

In some instances, municipalities proved to be **very proactive** and **showed support** to community organizations. For example, the presence of elected municipal officials made it easier to reorganize specialized transit. Certain political staffers have also been very present on the ground in their MNAs' and MPs' ridings.

The City really helped us. We received a lot of material, human and financial help. It has to be said—they were very proactive. And there's our MNA as well, who has always been very close to us. He's a minister now, so he's been able to exert some influence — we've been lucky in that way.

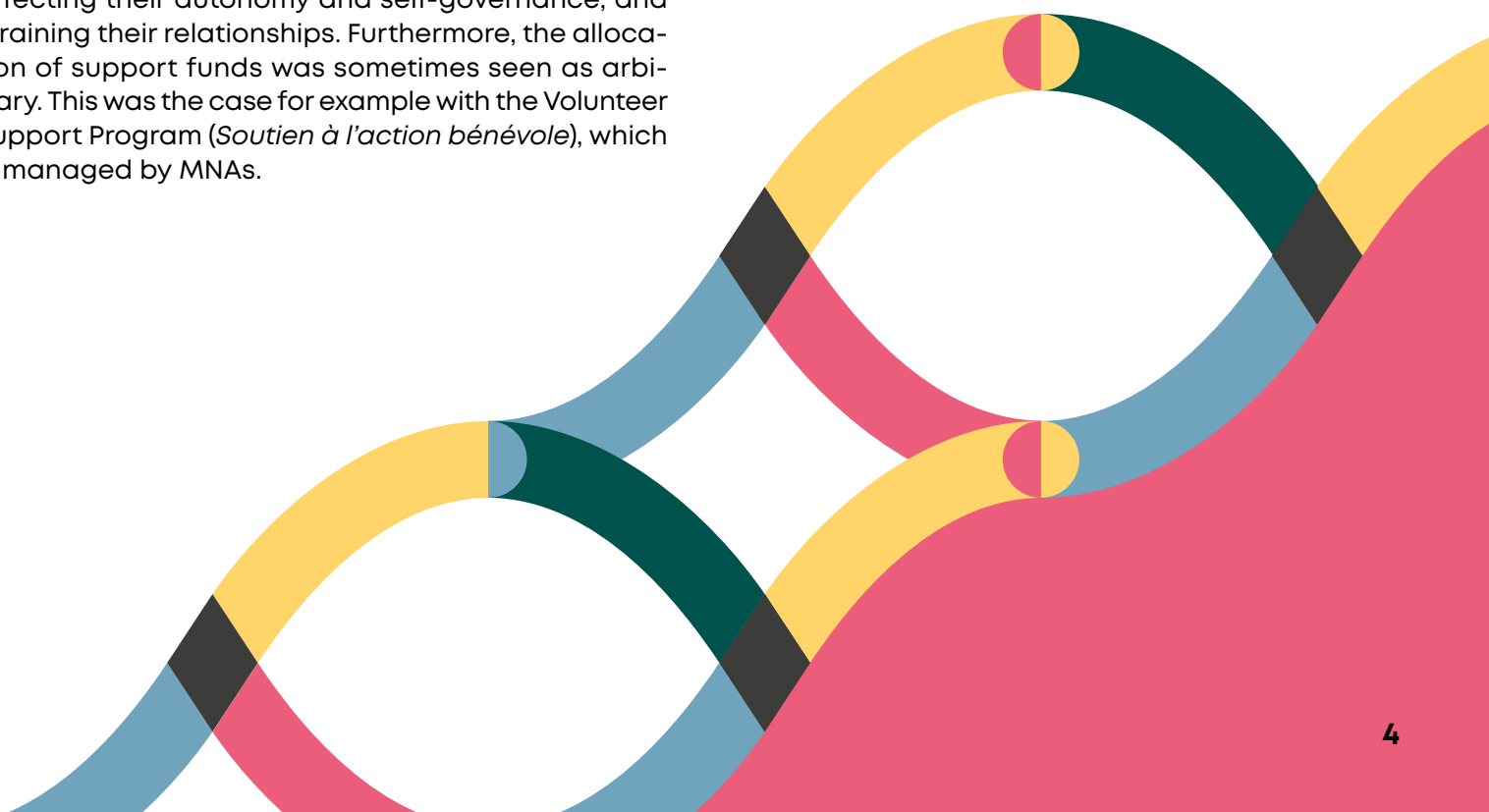
Group in the Laurentides

In other instances, the actions of political stakeholders have raised **questions** and even **criticism** with regards to their understanding of a given territory's needs. Some municipalities took over services or interfered in community organizations' activities, directly affecting their autonomy and self-governance, and straining their relationships. Furthermore, the allocation of support funds was sometimes seen as arbitrary. This was the case for example with the Volunteer Support Program (*Soutien à l'action bénévole*), which is managed by MNAs.



Municipalities did whatever they wanted with the funding, not necessarily according to the MRC's priorities. I had cities that started supporting organizations that were already doing work around food security. Other cities took up the mission of food security, adding themselves to organizations that were already doing the work. Some said it was to "lighten the load" of food security organizations, without even asking them. The general consensus is that it was a good opportunity for them to use people's poverty and vulnerability to gain political capital.

Umbrella organization in Lanaudière



RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES: DIFFICULT AT TIMES

The COVID-19 crisis has also created **barriers** between different community organizations and external parties.

In a context where community organizations' and external parties' resources were **monopolized to manage the crisis and its impact**, working collaboratively didn't come as easily in the face of more pressing emergencies.



Round tables have really slowed down, and partners are elsewhere. We notice the limits of what public service workers can do (for example, Services Québec and the Ministry of Immigration): limited ability to act because of teleworking, not being able to participate in round tables in person, etc.

Umbrella organization in Mauricie



Communication was **difficult** with different well-known partners, but also for community organizations who had to get in touch with government bodies for the first time about specific issues relating to the crisis. Some government services were extremely difficult to access. Certain partners had closed down or barred access to intervention sites, which made it more difficult for community organizations to do interventions in external locations, such as in schools, penitentiaries, etc.



It was hard to reach the government. Voicemail ping-pong—we had a really hard time with that from March to June. We'd call and get people's voicemails because they're working from home. They'd call us back and get our voicemails. It was complex, making it that much more difficult when it came to interventions.

Group in Lanaudière



The initial goodwill expressed by various partners at the beginning of the pandemic appears to have been short-lived. As of September 2020, community organizations have felt a return to **constant pressure** and **disproportionate requirements** from their different external partners and funders.



In the fall, we really felt that expectations went back to the way they were. In terms of organizing the workload, it's as though we had to deliver the same things: "We're reorganized, back to normal," but I feel like the pandemic's impacts, which are still very concrete in many people's lives, aren't being measured properly. At first, there was a certain goodwill among partners and funders, and now, it's like we've fallen back into "normalcy." But for us, in terms of us organizing our work, it's not back to normal.

Umbrella organization in the Capitale-Nationale Region



Generally speaking, many community organizations have expressed being **over-solicited** by external parties. The coordinators who participated in our focus groups mentioned a drastic increase in the number of external meetings, to the detriment of their other tasks. Workers felt extremely pressured to respond to partners and funders quickly and at any moment. The pressure to be **constantly available** added significant stress to the heavier-than-usual workload.



When I'd get a message from the CISSS every week that said: "How can we help you?" and it's like, "I haven't even had time to read your email, stop sending me meetings!" There was Chagnon who had money and wanted to invest, the CISSS who wanted to have a round table. In the end, if I accepted all the requests, I'd spend half of my week having meetings so that I could be kept up to date, but when it comes down to it, we still have to write 12-page funding requests, or nothing happens.

Group in Lanaudière



For many community organizations, **going digital** made it logistically easier to participate in round tables and coalitions. A number of people contacted have, however, highlighted that apart from information sharing and emergency planning, meeting online doesn't make space for the conversations that are needed to develop collective action and undertake larger-scale projects.



Technological tools allow us to be functional, but it's hard for partners, especially when the organizational cultures are different. We don't share the same reality, the same issues, the same values. I find that in person, sometimes it's easier to solve things. Doing it online adds a layer of complexity.

Umbrella organization in Mauricie



OUTSOURCING OVER PARTNERSHIPS

Another element that has impacted relationships with external parties is the **growing number of external referrals** to meet support needs, in a context where finding resources has been difficult. As a result, certain partnerships developed during the crisis are more akin to **outsourcing** and seem like an attempt to instrumentalize ACA organizations.



We got a lot of referrals from CLSCs, hospitals, police, and other community organizations, to help women get the support they needed for different issues they were experiencing.

Group in Montérégie



The CIUSSS asked to be partners because they're not able to hold individual meetings, or offer support at home, so they're referring people to us.

Group in the Capitale-Nationale Region



Certain community organizations have also felt pressure to **shift toward a service-based model**, to the detriment of their other activities and their associative life. On the one hand, pressure is caused internally when teams feel unable to leave calls for help unanswered. On the other hand, certain external parties can apply pressure from the outside due to a lack of understanding of ACA organizations' roles.



We very quickly found ourselves providing more services. We focused a lot on food assistance and tax clinics, because we were feeling pressure from all sides. Even the MNAs were applying pressure by saying that we needed to provide these services.

Group in the Laurentides



At the peak of the crisis in residential and long-term care centres (CHSLDs), some community organizations were even threatened with having to send staff there to make up for worker shortages in the health and social services network. Many people saw these practices as a **direct violation of community organizations' autonomy**, as established in the [Governmental Policy on Community Action](#).



They stated that at a certain point, they needed people in the CHSLDs: “You’re one of the groups for seniors, we fund you, so you’ll send workers”. Wait a minute—that can’t just happen, groups’ autonomy can’t get erased. You can’t just suddenly impose whatever you want.

Umbrella organization in Montréal



In the end, many community organizations have expressed feeling **misunderstood** by their partners when it comes to the issues they face on the ground, and that their work and expertise aren’t **adequately recognized**.



They don’t always recognize our expertise, but they send people to us all the time. Then when we ask to have our protective equipment reimbursed, they tell us that we haven’t been hosting any activities. So, you’re asking me to take on all this stuff, and I’m doing it, because I’m not going to let people suffer. The difference between us and the CIUSSS is that we’re on the ground. We’re with people and our mission is to help people. It’s time that they recognize this, and give us something to work with—means, funding, and that they readjust their requirements to take reality into account.

Group in Mauricie



PUBLIC SERVICES STRUGGLING TO FACE THE CRISIS

The **health and social services network** (RSSS) should have been an essential point of contact for community organizations during the health crisis. Usually, RSSS community organizers are sources of support for community groups, even though these programs have been the target of budget cuts over the past years in several different regions. During the pandemic, many RSSS community organizers have been subjected to offloading practices, effectively limiting their engagement in the community sector. As a result, support offered to community organizations by the RSSS has been extremely variable—at times, this support is limited to symbolic encouragement with no concrete follow-up.



In the CLSCs, most community organizers were reassigned to investigations. Support for community organizations is what's lacking.

Group in the Capitale-Nationale Region



Partnerships with the RSSS have **varied widely depending on the region** and the approach of the people in positions of authority. For some community organizations, the crisis presented an **opportunity to deepen ties** with their RSSS and build new collaborative relationships. It seems that this was more often the case in regions where the RSSS was less destabilized by the crisis and where offloading practices were less common.



On the ground, I heard from a variety of sources that “All of a sudden, CIUSSSs realized that community organizations exist and that we were doing something super important for the population. Now, they’re contacting us”. It’s really interesting, even though there are two distinct approaches to communication. One of them being a round table held by the CIUSSS, where everyone discusses, and another, where it was top-down: “I’m here, and I inform you. You’re 130 community organizations, I don’t care, I don’t have time for your questions.”

Quebec-wide umbrella organization




For other community organizations that usually work collaboratively with the RSSS, the network’s destabilization due to the crisis and offloading practices have been **detrimental to existing collaborations**, hindering the population’s access to care and services (see our report entitled [Loss of Access to Information and Resources](#)). Issues unrelated to COVID-19 fell lower on the priority list for the RSSS. Different people contacted by the Observatoire de l’ACA described the **complexity** of the RSSS structure as an obstacle to its responsiveness during the crisis.



We had a lot of issues due to the turnover rate and COVID-19-related absenteeism. We’d open a file with a patient navigator at the CIUSSS, and sometimes four people would end up dealing with the file. It was irritating for both members and employees.

Group in Laval






We get instructions and counter-instructions constantly. When we call our PSOC representatives, they're not aware of the notices we've received. This is the root of the issue. There absolutely needs to be an overhaul of communication strategies with community groups.

Group in Mauricie



The crisis monopolized **public health departments** in particular, to the detriment of their regular partnerships with community organizations. During the pandemic, certain measures, imposed by the public health departments themselves literally prevented community organizations from taking action. One statement even described a situation where a quarantine solution proposed by RSCS authorities threatened the safety of the women who were concerned. This reveals a lack of understanding of intimate partner violence from the people directly involved in this situation.



Yes, we managed to maintain our essential services, and the team did so brilliantly, even though we were dropped at times by different entities. Public health even made us close our injection sites, no equipment, no N-95s, because at our injection site, we have to intervene in situations of overdose, and two metres isn't possible. It put our employees at risk because people were using in our bathrooms—they needed their injection sites. Public health made us close for almost two months, and allowed us to reopen with the plan that I had initially proposed, before they made us close—it was insulting at so many levels. I think we put our employees and users at risk.

Group in Montréal



Access to **protective equipment and disinfection supplies** for community organizations via the RSSS has been extremely variable from region to region. When community organizations did have access to supplies, a number of groups received them as late as the end of summer 2020—six months after the crisis began. This led community organizations in different areas to work together to buy protective equipment and supplies collectively. Local suppliers (including distilleries) were called upon. In some regions it was harder to find suppliers than in others, as many suppliers' orders and deliveries were backed up by several months.

« I have to say, with my CISSS partners, there was no help or support. I had to go through my closer contacts at the management level; information trickled down to me slowly. I had to get my gloves at an auto place, for latex gloves—I wasn't able to get any, I didn't have thermometers. I really had to figure it out on my own, we had to get creative.

Group in Laval

»

The crisis has also seriously destabilized **educational institutions**. More specifically, the lack of clarity surrounding the ministry's measures that determine what community groups can and can't do in schools, affected community organizations' partnerships. The situation has been further exacerbated due to the historical lack of recognition of community organizations working in education. Community organizations contacted by the Observatoire de l'ACA also highlighted the ministry's lacklustre response.

« It was declared only recently: "Community organizations can enter schools". It took almost a year. There are a bunch of contradictory messages from the ministry. On the one hand, we're told: "Be present, young people are in distress", and on the other, we are there but you're ignoring us. It would have been helpful for this to be made clear before the pandemic. Being recognized before the pandemic had started would've made it easier afterwards, instead of constantly fighting for recognition.

Group in the Laurentides

»

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES IN A TIME OF CRISIS

For many community groups, the COVID-19 crisis brought opportunity: it was seen as a moment for their actions to be better **recognized** by external parties, and to demonstrate the **necessity of the collective advocacy campaigns** they have waged.



For community groups, the situation that occurred between March and April—it was by far the best publicity that groups had ever received among policy makers and the population. A real visibility, a real point of contact with the political sphere and stakeholders, a recognition that continues to this day. Unfortunately, it took a crisis for many stakeholders to see this. Now, how do we go about maintaining this vision and visibility for years to come? That may be a challenge.

Umbrella organization in Estrie



Developing collaborative relationships with external parties during the crisis has also **improved coordination efforts** between various actors. By focusing on **solidarity** and through a **better grasp of different parties' essential roles**, many community organizations have understood the necessity for collaboration amongst groups and between groups and stakeholders in a time of crisis. A number of people have however also expressed feeling **concerned** about whether these new ties of solidarity **will last over time**, particularly when resources are scarce, and community organizations must compete for access to one-time funding.

Finally, for many community groups and their umbrella organizations, being more formally “recognized” by different external parties during the crisis has most often resulted in **outsourcing** and attempts to **instrumentalize** the autonomous community action movement by the State. Many so-called partnerships took the shape of external pressure to shift toward emergency services.

The fragility of certain relationships of solidarity, in conjunction with the attempts to instrumentalize community organizations that were exacerbated during the pandemic, has highlighted what many perceive as a **threat to the autonomy and social transformation mission** of ACA organizations.



I think it was also a trap to shift into service mode alone, and I think that we're still caught in this trap. Our decision-makers set up emergency measures because we were loud about food issues and all that; they answered. And in August, they all pulled out, throwing the ball in the community sector's court, and they forced us, once again, to think only in terms of services and not in terms of what the ACA actually does. We really have to be strong about what the movement creates in our communities. It's not just services—it's about making space, reducing inequities, and providing jobs to people, too. I personally feel once bitten twice shy, and very worried about the future.

Group in Montréal



DATA SOURCES

The Observatoire de l'ACA is a large-scale **action research project** that seeks to document the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on Quebec's autonomous community action (ACA) organizations.

The data used in this report are drawn from **analyses** conducted in summer 2021 from:

Qualitative component

15 focus groups conducted from November 3, 2020 to February 24, 2021 (97 participants)

Quantitative component

Online survey carried out by IRIS from October 23 to December 14, 2020 (740 organizational respondents)

Documentary component

Consultation of reports and analyses produced by governmental sources, the ACA movement and the research community during the COVID-19 pandemic, up until July 2021

Translator's note: Citations were translated into English from French. The original citations can be found in the [French version of this report](#).

To learn more:



observatoireaca.org



observatoire@rq-aca.org

A project initiated by:



This project is made possible thanks to the financial contribution from:

