L'Observatoire de l'ACA
par et pour l'action communautaire autonome

COVID-19
**IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS'
RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL PARTIES – PART 2**

A Wide Range of Experiences within Crisis Units

In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government measures put in place as a response, different stakeholders in the same area quickly implemented **new collaborative bodies** called **crisis units** with the goal of exchanging information and coordinating emergency actions. The experiences of autonomous community action (ACA) organizations with regard to these bodies' composition, operations, and impacts **varied** from region to region.

Moreover, given the way the crisis monopolized the resources of community organizations and various stakeholders, most existing community round tables put their activities on hold during the first lockdown. As the energy stemming from partnerships was funneled into these temporary crisis units, it is crucial to **learn from** these experiences in an effort to reinforce the ways that regular collaborative bodies function in the long term.

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' experiences within crisis units, based on data collected directly from community groups as well as their umbrella organizations.

The pandemic's impacts on community groups' relationships with external parties are addressed in the first report covering the impacts on relationships with external parties, entitled *Between Solidarity and Threat to Autonomy*.

INVOLVEMENT FROM A DIVERSITY OF ACTORS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of intersectoral collaborative bodies and round tables varied across different areas. In some areas, there was very little communication between different stakeholders, while in others, new collaborative bodies were springing up **very quickly** to address pandemic issues, both at the regional and local levels. They were often referred to as "**crisis units**" to convey the exceptional nature of the situation and the emergency measures created in response. In some cases, these bodies were based on pre-existing structures, while in others, they were entirely new. Their **degree of formality** and **composition** were therefore **extremely variable** from region to region.

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> We collaborated quite a bit across the region with the social and community crisis unit, to ensure that it made information accessible to everyone. We saw it coming, and on our end, we quickly went into solutions mode. There was a 3-4-day period of hesitation, but after that, we quickly took charge. *
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> **Group in Montérégie**
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Many people who spoke with us noted the **increase in collaborative structures** during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to intersectoral bodies, collaborative structures developed in the context of the pandemic were sometimes **thematically** tied to a type of mission (food security, for example) or a target population (like seniors).

Local and regional umbrella organizations, such as neighbourhood round tables (tables de quartier), community development corporations (CDC) and community organization regional tables (TROC) have been very involved in creating, facilitating, or representing the community sector movement within these new collaborative structures.

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> When it came to the crisis unit, we also really worked in partnerships. We saw that for the CDCs, members gave us a lot of information, versus the CIUSSS, the MRC and other partners around the table. This placed us in a leadership position when it came to information, and we also had an ear to what was really happening on the ground. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Estrie**
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The **participation of community groups** in crisis units has been **variable**. Many people who met with the Observatoire de l'ACA have highlighted community organizations' high level of adaptability and their proactive disposition as helpful factors for cooperation. For many community groups, meeting **virtually** has also led to an increase in participation. Not only does meeting online mean less commuting, but it also allows for work teams to better distribute the labour of representing their organization.

However, many community groups and certain external parties were so monopolized by the crisis that they were **barely available** for collaborative activities. For some community organizations, the increase in collaborative bodies added to their already-full plate, and resulted in people being over solicited and overworked (see our first report on the impacts on relationships with external bodies, entitled *Between Solidarity and Threat to Autonomy*). A number of people mentioned the intensity of collaborative work and the high frequency of meetings during the pandemic. In this context, the **potential of maintaining** these new collaborative bodies has been called into question, especially when in-person meetings—which tend to be more draining—become the norm again.

> The other thing was the crisis committees. You talk about all the different MRC and each MRC has their social development tables and each put together a crisis comity.
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> We are zero to 5, youth, food security, seniors, literacy, so we were pulled in every different direction because every second day there was a crisis comity, zoom meeting on food security and the next day it was… "Oh, my gosh, who's gonna do my regular work?"
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> **Group in Gaspésie**

According to the IRIS survey, 13% of community groups undertook **new collaborative activities** within their communities. Community organizations that target people living with a disability and those that work with people experiencing poverty have seen the largest increase of participation in new collaborative activities, at 16% and 17%, respectively.

Proportion of Community Organizations that Developed New Collaborative Activities by Sector

Sector	Percentage
All community groups	13.2%
Recreation and Sports	23.5%
Collective Rights Advocacy	22.7%
Health and Social Services	11.7%
Family	9.3%
Education	8.6%
Culture and Communications	0%
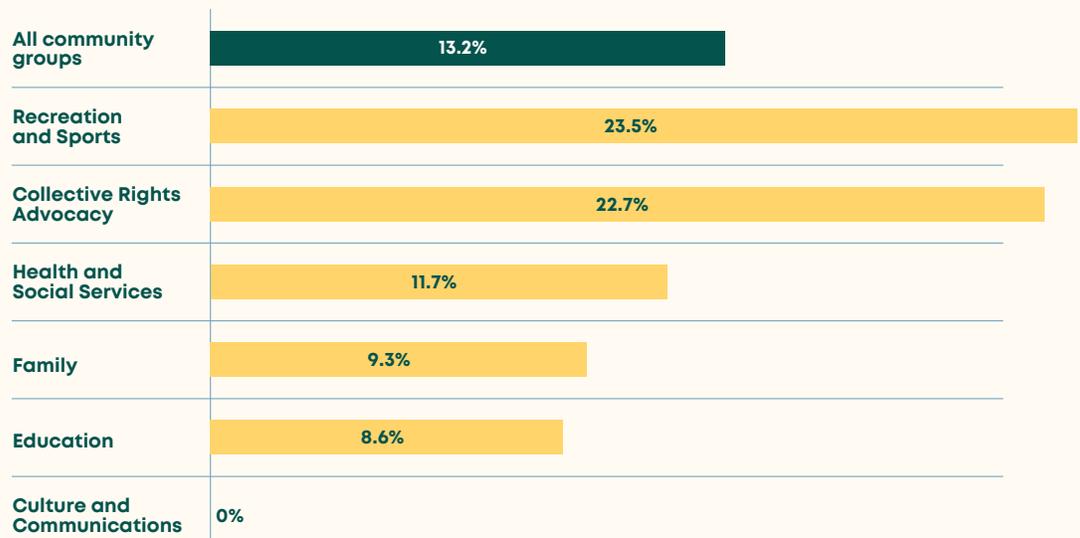
DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO WORKING TOGETHER

In areas where the crisis units worked well, partners were able to coordinate their efforts thanks to **clear communication** and **shared goals**. Individuals who met with us identified already well-established regional and local collaborative structures as a factor that made it easier for them to work together—in these situations, the different organizations involved already knew each other before the pandemic hit.

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> We received support. As early as the first week, we had Zoom meetings with the CISSS, the City, meals on wheels. We had a Zoom meeting every week to know what was happening and what everyone needed in terms of support. I'm grateful for the teamwork that set this up so early on—it's a habit that is upheld to this day. *
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> **Group in Laval**
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This, however, wasn't always the case—**in some instances, relationships** between members in a crisis unit were **difficult**. Many community organizations have expressed feeling dissatisfied about the possibility of implementing actions within these structures, as they sometimes led to disappointing results.

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> When we got to the crisis unit, people weren't laying their cards out. When we tried breaking down walls, folks got mad. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Lanaudière**
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The type of **leadership** exhibited within collaborative bodies greatly influenced their level of success. A number of people we met with specified that individuals make more of a difference than institutions when it comes to bringing the energy necessary to make actions materialize on the ground. More specifically, a number of community organizations have pointed to the size and administrative complexity of some institutions as barriers to cooperation. The possibility of building **significant relationships** in one-on-one meetings with certain actors—in addition to collective meetings—was mentioned as another helpful element for collaborative bodies. This approach however leads to more political and strategic steps to take on an individual level, when these should have and could have occurred in group settings, within the crisis units themselves.

> « The collaborative leadership undertaken by certain individuals, beyond their organizations—some people really made a difference. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Saguenay – Lac-Saint-Jean** »

Finally, **the complexity of regional dynamics** was also mentioned as a barrier to cooperation. Given that different networks often operate along different territorial boundaries within a same area, with considerable overlap, it becomes that much harder to define which structure is responsible for what.

> « It comes back to this "schizophrenic" principle because, as I was saying, both Centraide du Grand Montréal and Centraide Lanaudière would call, then neither would know who was responsible for which territory. It wasn't even clear which of their budgets covered the south of Lanaudière. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Lanaudière** »

IMPLEMENTATION OF VARIOUS INITIATIVES

One of the first actions led by local collaborative bodies was the creation and sharing of a **list of available resources** according to area of operation, type of resource, and language. Community organizations greatly appreciated these new tools, which allowed them to quickly identify services and activities that were offered, when they were offered, and to whom.

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> Another thing than I thought was interesting in terms of collective actions was, I think, for the first time ever we would see a list, everybody kind of created like a call list. So, you can call all of these organizations if you need food. You can call all of these organizations if you need access to mental health support. So, I thought that that was a really powerful collective action because you can rarely look for one piece of paper and find everything in one MRC.
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> **Group in Estrie**
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Participating in different structures made it possible for community organizations to better identify which other resources were available in their area, **preventing them from spending energy** answering every single request received and responding to every need expressed. By recognizing and respecting each other's expertise, there was a sense of solidarity among community organizations within the ACA movement.

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> There are positive things that have come out of it. When alarms were ringing that it wasn't going well in a given situation or sector, there was no choice but to develop strategies. I think that was the best thing to come out of it. It's as though everyone started holding hands, all of a sudden. It doesn't feel like everyone is alone in this. I think people are more united. I find that it really brought people together in the community sector, the community round tables and all that. *
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> **Group in the Laurentides**
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Certain crisis units also led to the **creation of new projects**. In this context, access to funding became crucial to allow collaborative bodies to go beyond mere information sharing, to help them turn pandemic-related actions into reality. The accounts we collected illustrate the inspiring success stories of some projects that were developed, some of which are ongoing. For many community organizations, however, the longevity of projects developed during the crisis with help from collaborative bodies is a point of concern.

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> People living in rural areas weren't going to food banks for a number of reasons, including transportation issues. Now, we deliver goods from the food bank in rural areas. Rural communities mobilized themselves with volunteers and municipal committees to distribute food, so that's pretty positive. We realized that we were all able to work together, so we'll maintain this cooperation over time. *
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> **Group in Bas-Saint-Laurent**
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CONCERTED ACTION BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

ACA organizations' **experiences** with crisis units were extremely **varied** and even contradictory, depending on the area.

By deepening ties with certain stakeholders and recognizing the work and expertise of ACA organizations, some new collaborative bodies generated **substantive results**, sometimes even giving way to projects and initiatives that are set to last beyond the pandemic. These experiences occurred in an exceptional circumstance that required solidarity and showed the importance of everyone's involvement, while simultaneously highlighting the possibility of quickly implementing concrete solutions.

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> It's something that we really appreciated—having our expertise and the community sector's role recognized. I think partners really saw the necessity of the work led by community organizations in the context of the present crisis. It wasn't without its challenges, because sometimes the line between "We'll delegate leadership" and "We'll recognize your expertise" is quite thin. Depending on the partner, sometimes it was about recognition, sometimes it was about simply delegating. But I'd say that most of the time, they gave us recognition. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Saguenay – Lac-Saint-Jean**
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That being said, crisis units are spaces for coordination created during emergencies to respond to urgent needs in exceptional circumstances. These spaces were therefore **most preoccupied with emergency services**, to the detriment of structuring actions. Particularly in the early pandemic era, it was difficult to redirect the collective stress and anxiety into long-term actions that would contribute to the fight against socioeconomic inequality and lead to social development within an area or a community.

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> Social development is an issue that is always overlooked. Slowly, the focus shifted to social issues that community organizations encountered, so that actions answered to emerging needs and new needs, as well as longstanding needs. *
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> **Umbrella organization in Montérégie**
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There are still **serious concerns** about the way these structures work, such as:

- Using the balance of power to funnel community organizations' efforts into addressing the lack of public services (see also our first report covering the impacts on relationships with external bodies, entitled *Between Solidarity and Threat to Autonomy*);
- Putting more energy into services (e.g., food distribution) than into social transformation efforts (e.g., developing communities' food sovereignty);
- Increase of certain stakeholders' leverage, without regard for processes of representative democracy within the community sector movement.

Energy invested in crisis units must therefore not hamper the development of **partnerships that are sustainable, egalitarian, respectful of community organizations' autonomy**, and **adapted to communities' needs**. In accordance with their mission of social transformation, ACA organizations defend the protection of **legitimate representational structures** within the ACA movement, and the development of **coordinated, structural** and **comprehensive actions** that fight against issues like poverty, the housing crisis, and food insecurity.

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 that are followed by an asterisk 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