

**COVID-19
IMPACTS ON ASSOCIATIVE AND DEMOCRATIC LIFE
IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

Significant Challenges in Maintaining the Spirit of ACA

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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 some of the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the associative life of community groups, based on data collected directly from community groups as well as their umbrella organizations.

An essential element of autonomous community action (ACA) organizations' operations is the cultivation of a **dynamic associative and democratic life**. Indeed, in the eight criteria for ACAs presented in the [Governmental Policy on Community Action](#), not only must ACA organizations “maintain associative and democratic processes” and “be rooted in community”, they must also “have a board of directors independent from the public network” and “be free to determine their missions, orientations, approaches and practices.”

Opportunities for members' involvement vary from one ACA organization to another (workshops, committees, Boards of Directors, General Assemblies, etc.). These are **spaces for civic empowerment and participation** for people who experience different forms of marginalization. ACA organizations set themselves apart from purely service-oriented approaches by allowing the people they work with to actively participate in decisions that collectively guide the organization's actions, becoming spaces shaped *for* and *by* their target populations with the goal of social transformation that transcends simply responding to basic needs.

This distinctive quality of ACA organizations was **significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis**. The crisis created major obstacles in member outreach in ACA organizations and in member involvement in different associative activities. Its impacts were felt on multiple levels: in connections to members, in how annual general assemblies were held, in relationships between workers and boards of directors, as well as in decision-making processes.

It should be noted that the results presented in this report should be understood within the specific context of the COVID-19 crisis, which is entirely without precedent. The issues raised here in relation to the associative and democratic life of ACA organizations should not be generalized outside of the context of this crisis.

MAINTAINING TIES WITH MEMBERS AND SUPPORTING THEIR INVOLVEMENT

As described in more detail in the Observatoire de l'ACA report on the impacts of the crisis on community organizations' accessibility, entitled [Staying in Touch with Populations during a Crisis](#), community organizations have developed a wide range of strategies to maintain ties with their community. Moreover, the challenges they encountered in **maintaining ties with their members** were generally similar in nature. Indeed, for many community groups, the members of the organization, meaning people who joined in order to participate in its associative life and have an influence on its mode of operations, are also members of the populations it works with.

The first reflex for many community organizations was to start phone brigades with their members to maintain a connection and understand their needs to make sure they could participate even during the crisis. After that, given the lack or very limited nature of in-person contact, community organizations implemented **new strategies for regular communication** with their members via newsletters or written messages (by mail or email), phone calls or social media.



We cover 14 municipalities, including small villages. We went through our list of members, we have 314 members. We called each one of them and also started a list of the women who wanted us to call them back.

Group in Montérégie



In terms of **member participation in activities and organizational bodies**, the crisis presented several challenges for community organizations, who found themselves navigating **two major tensions** (see our other report entitled [Health Risk Management Within Community Organizations](#)):

- Fear of infection from holding activities in person
- Isolating some people by transferring activities to virtual formats



I'm pretty nervous about this. We've been saying that the digital divide is a dire problem for participation in these times. We want to encourage participation, but every time we do, we're kind of fearful. At the same time, we don't want to leave people behind. But, when I find myself in a room with only three people, I'm stressed for me, for them, and for our responsibilities as an organization.

Group in the Capitale-Nationale region



Thus, organizations implemented different means to support their members' involvement, including development of skills in **virtual communications** or computer equipment loans.



Before, we would meet twice a week in our offices. Early on, in early April, we made a list of who those activists were. We looked at the equipment they would need to participate in the meetings over Zoom. After that, we created a service to loan out computer equipment. For some of them it was headsets, tablets or webcams. This meant that some could still participate, which was very appreciated.

Group in Montréal



This context saw a **drop-off in member involvement** in community organizations' internal associative activities. However, in spite of the many challenges, a large share of community organizations (86% of IRIS survey respondents) succeeded in maintaining active internal committees.

Formats for Associative Activities

During the first lockdown, the **community groups** who continued to organize internal committee meetings (86%) made use of the following formats:

- 68% completely remote
- 29% remote and in person
- 2% completely in person

In contrast, 14% of respondents indicated that their meetings were cancelled.

Many ACA organization members are people living in poverty who have felt the full brunt of the **digital divide**, preventing them from being able to participate in activities that now take place online. Lending out equipment is not always enough, because users need Internet access to benefit from it.



One organization got emergency funding to be able to send cell phones, tablets, cameras. We've got all that stuff, but even if we bring it to people, they don't have access, they don't pay for Internet. A lot of our members are single mothers with very little bandwidth that has to go to their kids who need it for school before anything else. The digital divide has been a real issue.

Group in Montréal





As described in more detail in our report entitled [*Actions from Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: Essential, Yet Unrecognized*](#), community organizations were faced with challenges around organizing **collective activities** that involve physical spaces and discussion periods, notoriously difficult to convert to virtual models. Indeed, members and activists seemed less interested in these activities when they were held online. With fewer possibilities for discussion, the activities lost some of their meaning. In addition, online formats come with the challenge of requiring a quiet moment in which to focus, especially difficult for parents in the context of a lockdown.

All the same, many community organizations demonstrated **great creativity and ability to adapt** to continue member outreach despite the challenges of the crisis. Organizations who were able to do so continued to hold in-person activities to counteract the barriers related to virtual member engagement. This was possible for organizations with spaces large enough to allow for social distancing. Others were able to take advantage of warm weather in the summer to use outdoor spaces.



We caught a break in the summer. We could see our members, we could talk about the four demands we wanted to bring forward in the fall, and we prepared things with them. I think conditions for membership involvement will be more interesting this fall. Maybe it's not OK, but we still see our members every two weeks in a large space, where we can be at least 15 people 2.5 meters away from each other, with masks on, so we are able to maintain this level of involvement.

Group in Montréal



Many community organizations were also forced to cancel or transfer their **social and recreational activities** with members to much less satisfying online formats, despite these activities' crucial role in member outreach and engagement. Several individuals expressed a feeling of having lost the spirit at the heart of their organization.



Our membership is primarily our service users, and these people can often be brought in to participate in the more playful and fun activities. We do syringe cleanups in the community, it's always great when we come together and talk about the importance of getting involved in our structures. The community breakfasts we did once per week all stopped. We did activities that were a little more fun and outreach-oriented so people could feel at home in our space. All of that came to a halt, and for me, that was the biggest catastrophe of the pandemic.

Group in Montréal



Moreover, **informal interactions** between staff and members were also limited at a time when these were more crucial than ever to understand what was going on within the organization and in the lives of the people it works with. This **proximity** with communities, a defining trait of ACA organizations, was put at risk by the crisis.

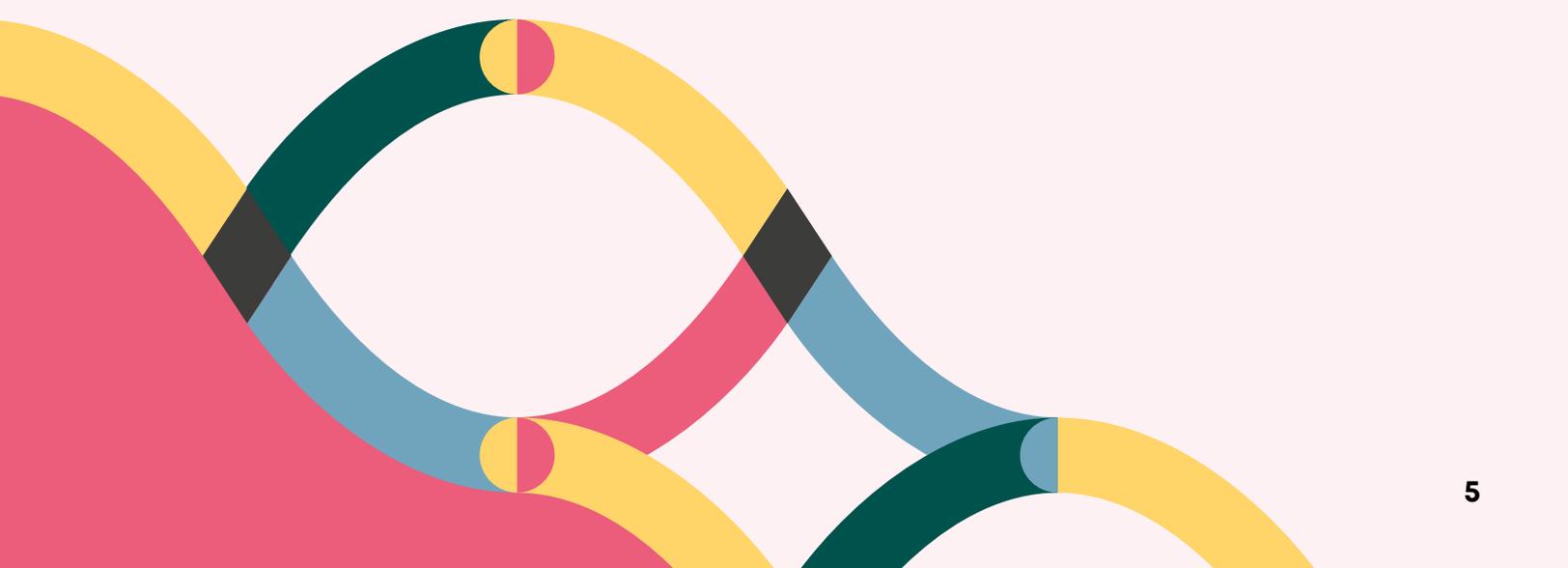


Our experience amongst ourselves and with members isn't just going to meetings, making decisions and going home. There's all of this informal stuff around it, and that's what makes people want to get involved. The informal part completely disappeared because it's incredibly awkward to try and do informal stuff over Zoom. This whole informal aspect and the fun part of the meeting were taken away, and that makes people less interested in participating.

Group in the Capitale-Nationale region



Lastly, in an effort to limit the negative impacts of the crisis on membership numbers, many community organizations decided to support their membership's involvement by temporarily authorizing a one-time **automatic membership renewal** for this year.





MAJOR STRESSORS RELATED TO AGM

Barriers to member participation related to health risks and the digital divide came to a head when it came to organizing annual general meeting (AGM) in community groups. Not only does this event constitute a **legal obligation**, it is also a **special occasion** in which to highlight the previous year's accomplishments and collectively orient the coming year's actions. The COVID-19 crisis severely complicated the organization of this essential body in the associative life of ACA organizations, often to the point of denaturation.

Uncoordinated and Confusing Guidelines

Organizing AGM has been a **major source of stress** throughout the crisis. While community organizations devoted considerable energy to supporting populations, the stress generated by end-of-year reporting requirements could have been completely avoided if funding partners had a better understanding of the situation. Many refused to acknowledge the challenges faced by community organizations in passing resolutions, producing financial reports or holding their AGM.

In terms of reporting requirements for mission-level funding, guidelines from different ministries were **not coordinated**. Throughout the crisis, representatives from umbrella organizations **spoke out constantly** about the absence of clear province-wide directives and the need for a coherent and adapted approach from the Quebec Government (see the March 23, 2022 [letter from the RQ-ACA](#)).

According to government ministries, **varying guidelines** were provided to community organizations. For example, in a [letter](#) sent on March 27, 2020, the *Secrétariat à l'action communautaire autonome et aux initiatives sociales* (SACAIS) asked organizations to provide all documents available for reporting requirements via the standard portal, flagging and providing justification for any missing documents, and to specify the date on which these documents would be provided. For its part, the *Ministère de la Famille* announced in a [letter](#) dated April 2, 2020, that the deadline for reporting was postponed by three months, starting from the initial deadline, for every community organization to which it provides funding. The AGM dramedy was especially complicated for community organizations funded by the *Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux* (MSSS). Indeed, in May 2020, following intense negotiations, umbrella organizations were able to get confirmation that “*deadlines for reporting requirements, including AGM, [will be] postponed to 4 months following the suspension of emergency measures, without including the summer period*”. However, the MSSS went back on its commitment in September 2020, indicating that “*reporting requirements for PSOC (overall mission) must be submitted by December 31, 2020 for community groups and umbrella organizations with fiscal years ending on or before June 30,*” in accordance with the MTESS directive issued on June 26 (see below).

References on the AGM dramedy in the health and social services sector:

Table des regroupements provinciaux d'organismes communautaires et bénévoles (TRPOCB), [Reddition de comptes durant la COVID-19 : Résultats des démarches – gain le 11 mai](#), mai 2020.

Coalition des Tables régionales d'organismes communautaires (CTROC), [Report de la reddition de comptes annuelle 2020](#), mai 2020

Réseau québécois de l'action communautaire autonome (RQ-ACA), [Reddition de comptes : Une pression de moins sur les épaules des organismes du PSOC !](#), mai 2020.

Table des regroupements provinciaux d'organismes communautaires et bénévoles (TRPOCB) et Coalition des Tables régionales d'organismes communautaires (CTROC), [Message de la Table et de la CTROC sur la décision du MSSS sur la reddition de comptes](#), septembre 2020.

On April 27, 2020, the *Ministère de la Justice* announced in a [press release](#) that a new temporary measure would be implemented to allow for remote general assemblies, meetings or sessions to be held that would otherwise normally be prevented by laws or bylaws. This announcement **legalized remote AGM and meetings of the Board of Directors**.

On May 29, 2020, a [press release](#) from the *Ministère des Finances* added a layer of complexity to the situation: “If the annual assembly is held more than four months following the end of the fiscal year, the Board of Directors must fulfill its obligation to the membership by presenting, in addition to the annual report, an interim report dated fewer than four months prior to the assembly date”. This obligation to present **interim financial reports** in situations of delayed AGM led to differing interpretations within funders and to differing guidelines from ministries. Umbrella organizations were forced to issue a reminder that this internal document presenting a recent overview of income and expenses, was strictly for the use of the membership and not intended for funding partners ([update from the TRPOCB](#)).

It was not until June 26, 2020 that the MTESS requested that ministries and government organizations show some **flexibility** in their application of administrative requirements and authorize, when possible, postponing the deadline for reporting requirements to no later than December 31, 2020.

« We postponed our general assembly in the spring, and then this fall, we decided we'd have to do our general assembly in October. We did it, but we learned in November that we didn't have to, in the end. We did put people at a bit of risk. The announcement to postpone general assemblies came too late.

Group in Bas-Saint-Laurent



After so much stress and energy spent, to the detriment of activities, the **authorization to postpone** AGM finally came, but **much too late**. In a [letter](#) dated November 11, 2020, the MTESS requested that ministries and government organizations allow for reporting documents to be submitted despite having only been approved by the board of directors and not the AGM, prior to the December 31, 2020 deadline for fiscal years finishing between the December 31, 2019 and the December 31, 2020.

A Diversity of Tactics for AGM

Given the lack of clarity from funders, community organizations adopted **diverse strategies** for their 2020 AGM:

- Some kept their AGM in virtual formats, maintaining normal timelines, doing their best to maintain member participation according to their situations;
- Others decided to postpone their AGM until the fall of 2020 to be able to hold them in person. As the crisis continued, these organizations finally held them in conditions that were just as difficult;
- Others still decided to postpone and had still not held their AGM by the fall of 2020, as in-person assemblies were not a possibility.



We did our AGM with a hybrid format and it was a success, but it was incredibly stressful. We felt uncomfortable saying that we wanted to do a hybrid format so people affected by the digital divide could participate, but at the same time, we were so aware that if one person shows up with COVID, we're putting everyone in danger! What are we supposed to do? At the same time, is it our role to tell people 65 and older not to come, and to limit their autonomy by deciding for them? I found that issue really tricky. We pulled it off and no one caught COVID, but it was kind of a roll of the dice.

Group in Montréal



Some community organizations were able to organize in-person AGM with social distancing measures, while others adopted a hybrid format (remote and in-person), and the majority opted for an exclusively online format. It should be noted that online AGM cause many to be **digitally excluded**, even when support like equipment loans and training is available. Moreover, online formats do not allow for the active participation of all members in what is intended as a deliberative and democratic process. According to the accounts we collected, the highest levels of satisfaction were noted among those who were able to hold in-person AGM.

Holding Annual General Meetings

82% of community groups required to hold their AGM prior to June 30, 2020, decided to move forward with it in spite of the health situation. They adopted the following formats:

- 67% completely remote
- 15% remote and in person
- 18% completely in person

Generally speaking, community organizations experienced this pressure to hold AGM as a **lack of trust** from funders in all of the other internal accountability measures in place. In this way, funders hampered the work of ACA organizations by monopolizing their staff's time with preparations for low-priority AGM. In addition, by failing to recognize that it was impossible for many community organizations to use an online format, they also put people at risk of contracting COVID-19 during a global pandemic.

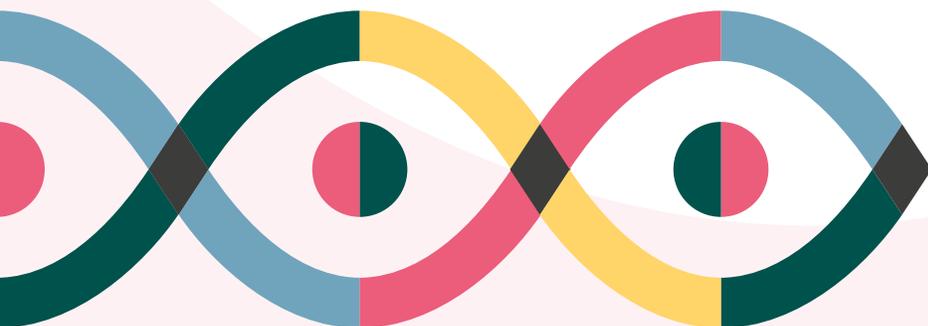


I think it was the worst AGM that I've ever done. Normally for us, the AGM is kind of festive, people come to see what the team has done, the team presents our activities report and we eat together. All of that was totally gutted, and for me, that was the biggest impact on ACA.

Group in Montréal



Ultimately, many AGMs that were held **had disappointing** participation levels with low, or even counterproductive, returns from outreach in cases where the format caused members to lose interest and eroded existing bonds of trust. Democratic life within organizations lost its meaning as certain populations were excluded, whether due to the digital divide and online formats, or due to health risks with an in-person format. By mandating AGM that did not allow for meaningful exchanges and the full participation of all members, the assemblies themselves **lost an element of their collective vision** as spaces for civic participation unique to autonomous community action.



VARYING LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT FROM BOARDS

In terms of democratic operations outside of AGM, the board of directors is the body responsible for bringing together administrators officially elected in the AGM, as well as the organization's leadership, director or coordinator. This body's operations were also affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Situations were **highly variable** from organization to organization: some board members were very involved and provided a great deal of support to coordinators, while others were no longer available and at times were difficult to reach.



The associative and democratic life plays a really major role in our organization. In terms of the Board of Directors, we were able to hold pretty efficient meetings. I had three people on a conference call, the others over Zoom, with the phone right next to the speaker so everyone could hear everyone. I'd say the first two board meetings were a bit cacophonous, but after that, things smoothed out, people got used to it.

Group in Montérégie



Risks for viral transmission meant that the possibilities of in-person meetings were limited. As such, community organizations supported their board member participation using new means of **remote communications**, and at times providing the needed equipment. For organizations whose members were already "connected", available and comfortable with computers, the situation was much easier and board operations were not significantly impacted. However, the **digital divide** also affected many board members, limiting their access to remote communications and their participation in meetings.



The biggest challenge was really managing the board, because we only had three directors who had Internet access. We had three board members over Zoom and two on speakerphone. The people who weren't there got everything by mail, but the postal delays were extremely long, so it was much more complicated. In Lanaudière, there are some places that just don't have Internet access at all. Some people still have rotary phones. There's even one area where it's still just one line for the whole street. It's a major issue for us right now.

Group in Lanaudière



Furthermore, the impacts of the crisis on their personal lives also hampered the participation of some board members who are more marginalized than others due to several **social and economic factors**. Being involved on a board of directors took a back seat for these people directly affected by the crisis.



My board is 9 people, 8 of whom are on social assistance...They're honestly great, even extraordinary, but when dealing with their own issues like you say...Managing a crisis when you yourself are in crisis...oof

Group in Montérégie



Board Meeting Formats

During the first lockdown, community groups held board meetings using the following formats:

- 70% completely remote
- 25% remote and in person
- 2% completely in person

2% of respondents indicated that their meetings were cancelled.

Supporting the involvement of board members during the crisis was extremely demanding for coordinators trying to ensure that the proper deliberative processes were followed. An essential element was providing relevant information so that board members could make informed decisions and support coordinators by taking on a portion of the mental load related to decision-making, which had major consequences for target populations (access to the organization) and for staff (health and financial risks).



It was really during the lockdown that we realized how major the digital divide was, both for the people we serve and our members. We noticed this huge digital divide, so we did several board meetings via conference call. When you have 9 people on a call, it requires a huge level of focus. We had some board members resign because they just weren't up for having board meetings over the phone. Normally our in-person board meetings are a full day, because we really take time and eat together. With it being over the phone, it was two hours, so it was just a huge information overload.

Group in Montérégie



Some community organizations implemented **new one-off democratic strategies**. For example, rather than targeting consensus from all board members, a decision could be applied as soon as the majority of board members consented, even if the coordinator had not yet received a response from everyone.

In some cases, the involvement of the board chairperson made a difference in supporting the coordinator and allowing for rapid communication in order to make certain decisions. However, these new types of operations require a certain level of trust between board members.



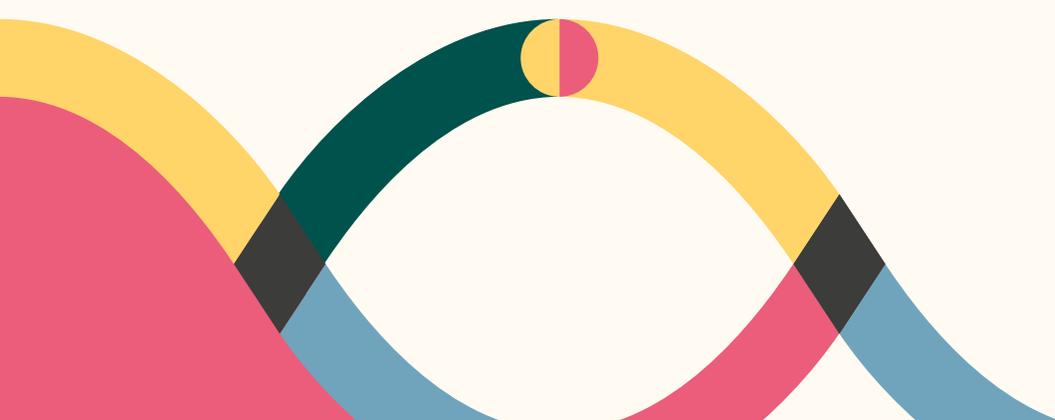
My responsibilities are pretty clear, my role is well-defined, their role is well-defined, I know where my limits were in terms of decision-making. I felt really supported by my board. What I'm about to say kind of sucks, but sometimes I would send things in for decisions and I didn't get everyone. Some people didn't have email or Internet, I'd leave messages, but they'd call back at night. Once I had a majority, we usually went ahead with the decision.

Group in Montérégie



Community organizations where **roles and responsibilities** of coordinators and the Board of Directors **were clearly defined** prior to the crisis appear to have experienced fewer challenges in the implementation of simplified democratic processes, even, in some cases, permitting unilateral decision-making from coordinators. Unfortunately, other organizations experienced more difficult situations, in which board members retreated completely and left everything up to coordinators.

Umbrella organizations from a range of different sectors shared **various tools to support community group boards** during this exceptional period of time, including tools for financing (surplus management, emergency programs and funds), reporting requirements (holding AGM) and working conditions (requirements for telework, health risk management, etc.). As early as March 16, the [*guideline communicated by the RQ-ACA*](#) and its members was to *"maintain current salary levels at 100% to avoid adding stress, even if there is a drop in productivity or hours worked, as well as in cases of employees who contract the virus and are quarantined, or have symptoms and are placed in preventative isolation. We confirm that this will have no effect on subsidies from the Quebec Government."* Coordinators had many questions about governance for their group during the first wave, in particular about the legal frameworks around decision-making. Several relied on mutual support networks to help answer their many questions.



Some Examples of Publications Aimed at Supporting Community Group Boards:

Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine (CDEACF), [COVID-19 : des ressources pour soutenir les organismes](#), site web.

Coalition des Tables régionales d'organismes communautaires (CTROC), [Bulletin Spécial COVID-19](#), mars 2020.

Regroupement des organismes en défense collective des droits (RODCD), [Page dédiée à la COVID-19](#), site web.

Réseau québécois de l'action communautaire autonome (RQ-ACA), [La COVID-19 et l'ACA](#), site web.

Table des regroupements provinciaux d'organismes communautaires et bénévoles (TRPOCB), [COVID-19 : Informations pour les OCASSS](#), site web.

Table nationale des Corporations de développement communautaire (TNCDC), [Page web dédiée à la COVID-19](#), mars à juin 2020.

Coordinators reached by the Observatoire de l'ACA emphasized **two helpful elements** to be applied with boards of directors during crises: not hesitating to explicitly ask for help from members of your board, and taking time to obtain all relevant information before making decisions, even when under a huge amount of pressure to act quickly.

Another helpful factor addressed by coordinators and staff was excellent **communication between staff and boards** about the challenges and fears they experienced. Indeed, staff were often faced with major issues on the ground about transmission risk all while having to ensure that they avoided excluding people from their activities (see our report entitled [Health Risk Management Within Community Organizations](#)). In contrast, distance between board members and staff sometimes led to a loss of trust due to a perceived lack of transparency.



One thing we tried to put in place that I think was helpful, was being as transparent as possible with our board on how we're experiencing it as workers. We brought up the mental load from dealing with the risk of COVID pretty often, which led to, in one case, taking an extra week off at Christmastime. I think being transparent in what we're experiencing and being vulnerable, saying "No, we're not dealing with this so well and we're messing up," it helps us as a team, and we have a really understanding Board of Directors who see that it's not easy to handle this stuff day-to-day.

Group in Montréal





Staff were also faced with important considerations on the nature of activities to implement in terms of immediate needs, all while trying to preserve the organization's mission of social transformation. In addition, **decision-making within teams became more complicated** when workers could no longer be present at the organization at the same time due to health measures (different shifts). In this context, it was crucial for board members to understand the issues faced by staff on the ground so they could make decisions in alignment with ACA values, especially in terms of requirements in the context of remote work and protecting staff from health risks.

Board decisions on working conditions had an enormous influence on workers' quality of life. Decisions that aligned with their daily experiences and level of exhaustion were appreciated and seen as recognizing the value of their work. Conversely, in some organizations, board decisions were poorly received by staff. Members of the board were seen as out-of-touch with the reality on the ground and disconnected from the organization's values. Some board members were reticent to make decisions that would influence the organization's financial situation, including improvements to remuneration.

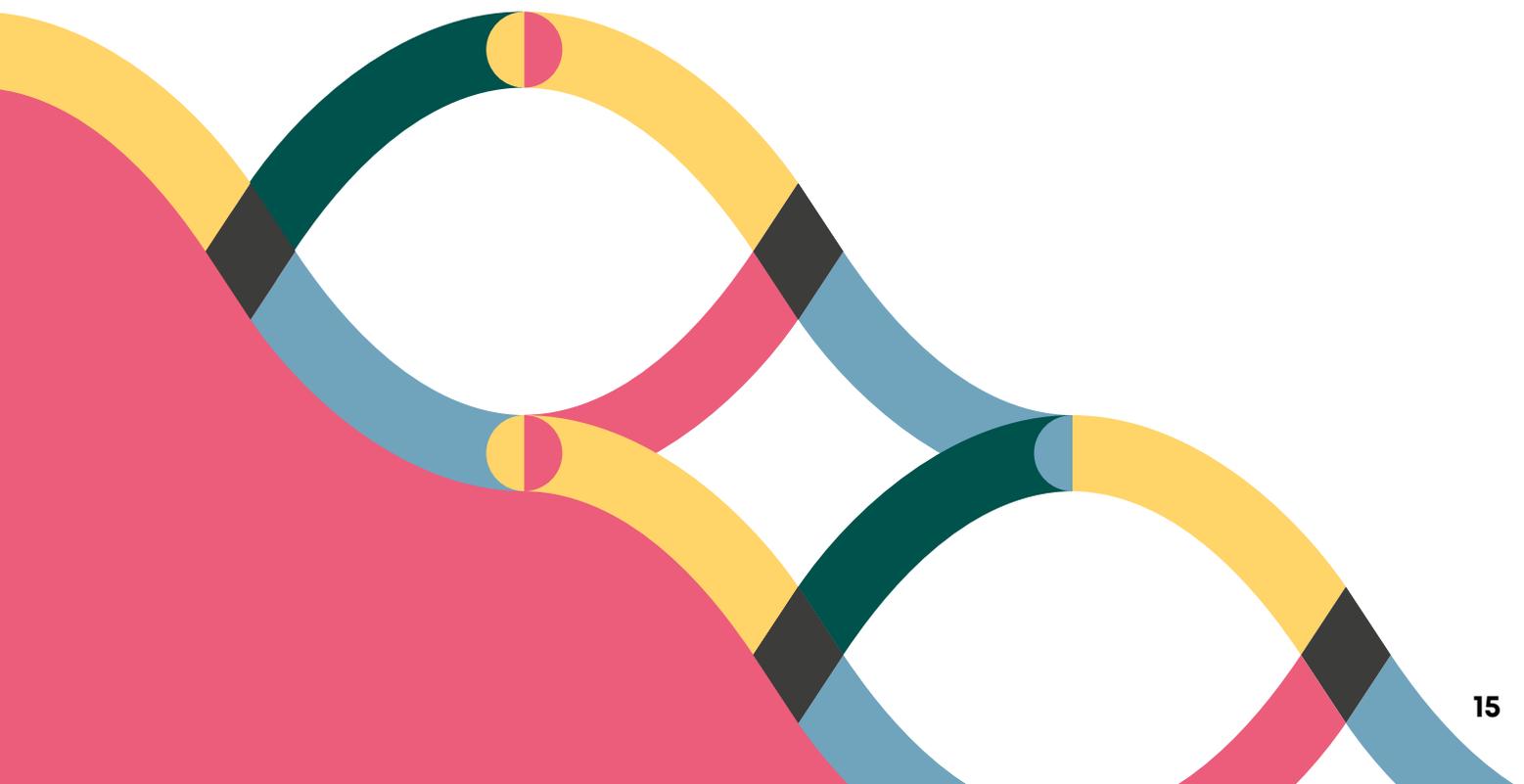
In the end, given the complexity of the issues at hand and the ever-extending crisis, many community organizations were able to benefit from the **renewed implication** of members currently sitting on their board of directors. The goal was to ensure the **organization's stability**. Indeed, high member turnover on boards presents an additional barrier to creating bonds of trust and awareness of the issues. For community organizations who already had difficulty recruiting for their board of directors, the crisis only exacerbated the problem.

CHALLENGES MAINTAINING DEMOCRATIC OPERATIONS DURING CRISES

The COVID-19 crisis had impacts on the types of relationships that community organizations could have with their members. Activism, involvement in collective actions and feelings of belonging were all dampened, replaced by individual counseling and use from a service provider. Faced with focusing their energies on responding to crisis-related emergencies and in addition to the many barriers to creating collective spaces for discussion both formal and informal, many community groups felt that their **associative and community life** took **a back seat**, despite its central role in autonomous community action.

Government guidelines on reporting requirements, due to their lack of clarity and failure to adapt to community groups' realities, led to **significant additional stress**, especially around the issue of AGMs. This could have been avoided. As the crisis lingers, challenges around how to preserve an inclusive and engaging associative life remain. ACA organizations require more **understanding from funders** that, along with **respecting their autonomy**, allows them to implement democratic bodies that correspond with the lived experiences of their membership and with their collective deliberation goals.

Associative life is one of the **defining elements of ACA** that cannot be set aside in times of crisis, just as little as their mission for social transformation. In fact, community organizations emphasize the importance of recognizing its relevance precisely during crises, to help guide their actions in accordance with the lived experiences of the people they work with, and help maintain their roots in the community.



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:



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