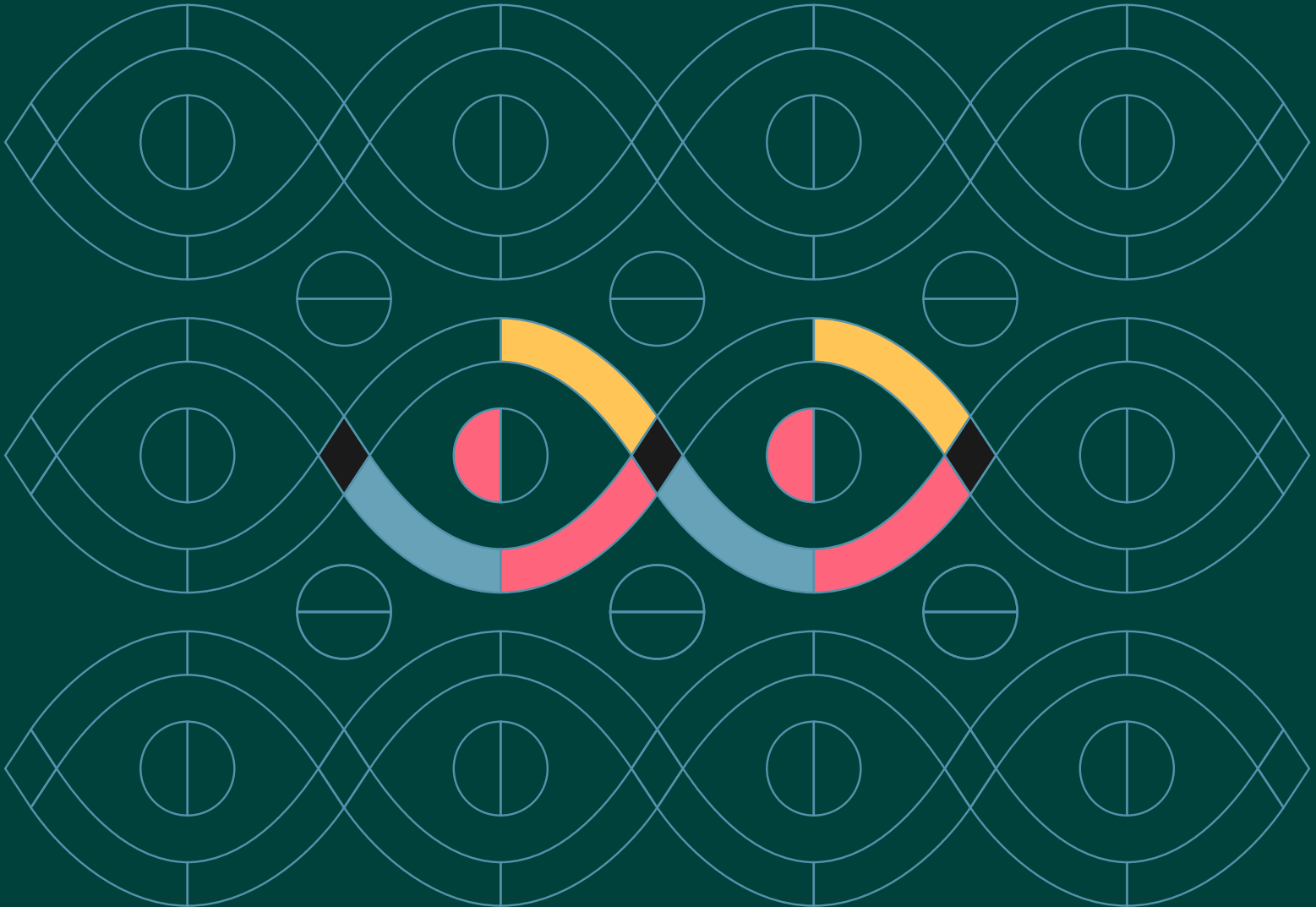


**COVID-19 | Impacts
on Umbrella
Organizations**



**An Essential Part of the
Autonomous Community
Action Movement**



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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, from focus groups with community organizations in the winter of 2021 and from a survey conducted by the Observatoire de l'ACA in late 2021, this report seeks to present some impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on umbrella organizations, based on data collected directly from umbrella organizations as well as community groups.

The symbol  at the bottom of the pages allows you to return to the table of contents.

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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](#).

INTRODUCTION

Within the Autonomous Community Action (ACA) movement, **umbrella organizations** have been created by their members to coordinate and represent their interests on different issues in all relevant forums and governmental bodies. In addition to defending their members' interests, they're also responsible for collective advocacy, with a perspective toward social transformation.

Umbrella organizations are **recognized** for the importance of their mission and their expertise in representing their members' interests and analyzing social issues. In its [Governmental Policy on Community Action](#) (GPCA), adopted in 2001, the Government of Quebec committed to “Ensuring that government departments and agencies contribute to funding the overall missions of the national, regional and local coalitions in their activity sector.” Several of these umbrella organizations are recognized as legitimate counterparts by ministries and governmental bodies and are consulted on issues that affect the community sector.

Umbrella organizations are composed of community organizations and other umbrella groups, rather than having individual members. They can be **differentiated from each other** according to their size (number of members), the territory they cover, the extent of their activities and the nature of the problems they seek to resolve.

There are both sectoral and intersectoral umbrella organizations, and organizations that operate at local, regional, national and international levels. Umbrella organizations have numerous functions, including representation, concertation, rights advocacy, social mobilization, information, awareness-raising, popular education, training, research, etc.

As for all community organizations, the **COVID-19 pandemic** had significant impacts on the internal organization of umbrella organizations, but it also impacted the relationships they maintain with their members and the nature and intensity of the roles they play, particularly as regards the dissemination of information, representation, support and mobilization.

Territorial Scope of Umbrella Organizations

(2020 SURVEY)



Local: 21%
National: 35%
Regional: 44%



A NEW REALITY FOR UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS



A RAPID REORGANIZATION OF ACTIVITIES

As was the case for most community organizations, the first days of the crisis and the first lockdown were a **shock** for umbrella organizations and their teams (see the Observatoire de l'ACA report entitled [A Long Crisis Experienced in Multiple Phases](#)). They were immediately inundated by urgent requests from their members trying to understand the new public health measures and the impacts on their activities.



*In the beginning, our members' needs were things like, "Are we open or not? Are we allowed to do this or not?" In terms of human resources, "Are we paying salaries or not? How should we go about working from home?"**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN CHAUDIÈRE-APPALACHES

Umbrella organizations were confronted with the same three steps experienced by community groups at the beginning of the crisis:

- **Understanding what was going on:** Locating the relevant information, organizing it and communicating it to their members.
- **Reorganizing working conditions:** Resolving technical, logistical and family issues to facilitate in-person and remote work, maintaining cohesion among team members.
- **Maintaining contact** with their members during the lockdown.

The sudden and unexpected arrival of the crisis, and the ensuing uncertainty, generated a great deal of **anxiety** both internally and externally. In retrospect, many people recognized that they had taken action urgently without necessarily having time to reflect.



*In the immediacy of the moment, we had the sense that if we didn't answer members and partners right away, it was a big deal... Everything was moving too quickly. People were passing their anxiety along to us. Looking back, if we had known then what we know now, we would've organized ourselves differently and taken a step back in response to the "urgency" of the situation.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

For many, the crisis meant **cancelling** activities and large-scale mobilizations that had already been planned. Indeed, many of their normal activities became impossible during the lockdown. The need to cancel or delay actions that had required significant preparatory work and were central to their missions became a source of **disappointment** among umbrella organization staff. Similarly, issues with umbrella organizations' internal management often had to be postponed to a later date.

Given their inability to continue with their normal activities, umbrella organizations quickly revised their action plans and shifted into **crisis management mode** in order to provide their members with information, tools and reassurance. According to the [survey](#) led by IRIS at the end of 2020, in partnership with the Observatoire de l'ACA, 64% of umbrella organizations maintained or increased their activities between April and June 2020, despite the strict lockdown and the reorganization it required. During this time, all of their energy was focused on the pandemic.

Impact on Activities of Umbrella Organizations During the First Lockdown

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

Complete cessation: 3%

Continuation: 26%

Reduction: 33%

Increase: 38%

For many umbrella organizations, adapting their activities meant **switching to virtual or remote operations**. This change happened more or less quickly depending on the initial capacity of the umbrella organization (e.g., availability of computer equipment), the nature of its activities (e.g., popular education is very difficult to organize virtually) and the obstacles it faced in reaching individuals (e.g., level of comfort with digital tools). According to the IRIS survey, umbrella organizations estimated that, on average, 81% of their activities could be conducted remotely, which was much higher than community groups (56%). Indeed, prior to the crisis, 41% of umbrella organizations were already holding individual activities remotely (e.g., phone-based support) and 33% of them were doing group activities remotely (e.g., online training sessions). Having said that, this sudden change posed numerous challenges for umbrella organizations, which are addressed in the various sections of this report.

*It was a mad frenzy; we had to completely re-think our ways of working and transform them for a virtual environment.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The crisis meant that staff at the umbrella organizations had to become familiar, or further develop their knowledge and skills, with **digital communications and virtual tools**. For many of them, the pandemic was an opportunity to implement virtual activities that had already been planned but which kept getting pushed back due to a lack of time. In contrast with community groups composed of individual members, many of whom are victims of the digital divide, it was much easier for umbrella organizations to reach their members, by contacting their staff. Indeed, for many umbrella organizations, their members were **already well equipped** to adapt to a virtual environment for work and meetings.

*We cover the entire province, so it can be intense. Even though my board was familiar with Zoom, my members had no real experience with it. All at once, we were holding webinars, training sessions. We had been planning to start doing it for years and then it suddenly became possible. We're still holding them now, just on subjects other than the pandemic.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

In the end, umbrella organizations had to adopt new action plans to address a new context that has become their reality (see the section on the multiple roles played during the crisis).





LIMITED ACCESS TO EMERGENCY FUNDS

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on different revenue sources and gave rise to unexpected costs for most community organizations. Issues related to funding were covered in two reports by the Observatoire de l'ACA, entitled [*Financial Precarity of Community Organizations Exacerbated*](#) and [*Financial Support for Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: An Inadequate Response*](#).

From the very start of the crisis, umbrella organizations put pressure on the Government of Quebec to quickly secure confirmation that it would maintain **core-mission funding** for community organizations, which happened on March 18, 2020. The stability of this funding was essential for community groups. For those that receive sufficient core-mission funding, it had a stabilizing effect during the crisis, allowing them to retain most or all of their team members as employees.

Throughout the crisis, umbrella organizations worked to influence the available **emergency funding** to better adapt it to the needs and realities of community groups. Following pressure from various umbrella organizations, some of the provincial ministries that provide core-mission funding developed general emergency funds open to all of the community groups benefiting from their program.

In general, emergency financial support processes operated rather **inefficiently**, due to the complexity of an ever-growing number of funds, their poor fit with groups' actual needs and realities, and the administrative burden created by application and reporting requirements. By the end of 2020, 61% of autonomous community organizations had received additional funding due to the crisis. By the end of 2021, this figure had risen to 71%. As such, despite their stated needs, 29% of community organizations hadn't received any financial aid related to the crisis, nearly 2 years after it began.

Impact on Financial Resources of Umbrella Organizations during the First Lockdown

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

43% OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

reported **losing at least one form of funding** (projects, services agreements, fundraising and others), with a total average loss of **\$13,805** per organization on an average total income of \$273,933 (median \$174,270).

80% OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

reported **having additional expenses**

- **60%** of umbrella organizations had to buy additional **computer equipment** for staff and **42% office supplies** so staff can work remotely.
- **44%** of umbrella organizations had to buy **protective equipment** for staff and **41% social distancing and disinfectant supplies** for physical spaces.

For umbrella organizations specifically, four out of five (80%) experienced increased costs between April and June 2020, while almost half (43%) also lost revenue. Yet most of the **emergency funds were closed or offered extremely limited access to umbrella organizations**. According to the IRIS survey data, 72% of umbrella organizations reported receiving no emergency funds by the end of 2020. The [survey](#) led by the Observatoire de l'ACA at the end of 2021 revealed a significant increase (+30%) in the number of umbrella organizations that had to access additional funding related to the crisis, as compared to the previous year (from 28% to 58%). This increase could be explained by the fact that many support funds only become available in 2021.



*What's remarkable is the lack of any financial recognition for organizations that provide services to their members rather than the general population. There's a pressure there. If we want our community groups to be better organized, we need our umbrella organizations to be better organized. With each of the programs put in place, we saw the same damn thing: "Do you provide any services?" Yes, I do, but they're for my members! We were basically excluded altogether! It's shocking because we saw the needs, but we were completely powerless!**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

In the end, 42% of umbrella organizations had no access to financial support related to the crisis two years after the pandemic began, even though 77% of them reported **additional financial needs** for the year underway. On average, umbrella organizations needed an additional \$151,530 in funding in 2021-2022, primarily related to staffing needs.

Throughout the crisis, umbrella organizations have focused on the **importance of increasing core-mission funding**, which would allow community organizations that are adequately funded to weather these types of crises. Many had hoped that the recognition so often expressed by elected officials over the course of the crisis would translate into significant funding increases for ACA organizations. Yet, no significant improvements were seen until the March 2022 budget announcement and the launch of the Government Action Plan on Community Action 2022-2027 in May 2022. Even then, these announcements were underwhelming, as the movement was disappointed that the new investments are far from meeting the needs that had been expressed ([communiqué](#) from the RQ-ACA on May 14, 2022).



SMALL TEAMS UNDER PRESSURE

One common characteristic among umbrella organizations is their **small number** of permanent staff. According to the 2020 IRIS survey, umbrella organizations had an **average of 4.7 employees** working for them, with a median of only 4.3. Unsurprisingly, in the 2021 survey by the Observatoire de l'ACA, 84% of them communicated their **need for additional funding to hire new staff**, with an average need for an additional 2.3 employees.



*I work around twenty hours per week; my colleague works around ten hours. Together, we make up about one full-time staffer. The board decided to use a significant part of its savings to hire a liaison officer, but we know that without additional funding we won't be able to continue funding the position over the years to come.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

As was the case for all community groups, umbrella organizations have experienced **significant challenges recruiting and retaining** staff. Indeed, they have an even higher rate of turnover than community groups (37% versus 30%, respectively). This meant that, when the pandemic began, many individuals had only recently been hired to their positions and, as it continued, many staff began working in the context of the crisis. The integration of this new staff was then complicated by the realities of remote work, making it more difficult for them to understand what members were experiencing and the issues facing the umbrella organization. In the 2021 survey by the Observatoire de l'ACA, 81% of umbrella organizations reported difficulties retaining staff and 85% were having trouble hiring. As such, 72% of umbrella organizations reported that they had to improve working conditions in order to maintain staff during the crisis. Further, by the end of 2021, 75% of these organizations expressed a need for additional funding to increase the salaries of their current staff.

Impacts of the Development of Activities on the Staff of Umbrella Organizations during the First Lockdown

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

63%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS HAD TO

reorganize activities and tasks of some or all of their staff.

25%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS HAD TO

increase the work hours of some or all staff members.

9%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS HAD TO

hire more staff, on a temporary or permanent basis.

The COVID-19 crisis was synonymous with **multiple challenges** for staff (see the report from the Observatoire de l'ACA entitled [A Long Crisis Experienced in Multiple Phases](#)). Specifically, they had to **adapt** to a reorganization of their work methods. At the start of the crisis, the umbrella organizations' teams that were already well equipped for **remote work** were able to adapt to the sudden lockdowns more quickly. But not every umbrella organization was so well equipped. According to the 2020 IRIS survey, 73% of them had more difficulty planning activities and 64% faced more challenging communications among their staff, from April to June 2020, when compared to previous years. Many of the staff at umbrella organizations also experienced an **increased workload**. According to the 2020 survey, work meetings were either maintained or increased in 65% of umbrella organizations and were mostly held at a distance (73% only held remote meetings).

The crisis also made it more difficult to **balance personal and family life**. Because virtual communication is often more informal, and more frequent, it tends more often to intrude on workers' personal lives. According to the 2020 survey, maintaining a balance between family, work and personal time was more difficult for 63% of umbrella organizations during the first lockdown (April to June), when compared to the pre-pandemic period.



*We've had this in place for a long time, I have all of the members' cell numbers in case of emergency. Now we work that way all the time. We don't really call the organizations anymore. It's a change; you have to learn to look and see who's calling and to tell yourself to stop at 4 p.m. It's up to us to manage it; we need to set our own limits.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN LANAUDIÈRE

The staff at certain umbrella groups also felt **pressured by their members** to find answers to their questions quickly in a context of uncertainty. Umbrella organizations became the primary point of reference for their members, who expected them to have all the answers on a vast array of subjects. Staff also felt a lot of pressure to respond favourably to every meeting request from partners, as well as requests for action and support—and to always respond urgently. Not only did this multiply their workload, it affected their mental load and well-being.



*Questions covered so much: governmental measures, remote working policies, what to do in response to cases of COVID, provincial and federal grants. As soon as a press conference ended, there was this expectation that it would be instantly analyzed. Because the government's measures changed constantly, documents often arrived late and the community groups were often the ones to pay for that. It put a lot of pressure on our team to always have the answers to so many questions. It's as though everyone just expected that to be our role, and it was really demanding.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Impacts of the Crisis on the Umbrella Organizations' Teams

(END OF 2021)

100%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

report difficulties with **workloads** among their staff.

97%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

are experiencing difficulties with **feelings of fatigue or burnout** among their staff.

51%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

report difficulties related to **mental health issues** among their staff.

As the crisis lingered and the scope of the tasks to be completed ballooned, overcommitment turned into **burnout** among umbrella organization staff, especially as they managed the **anxiety** of seeing how the crisis was impacting their members and the populations they serve. According to the 2020 survey by IRIS, 76% of umbrella groups found it difficult to achieve a realistic workload and 71% found it difficult to maintain a sense of satisfaction about the quality of their own work during the first lockdown (April to June), when compared to the previous years. One year later, in the survey conducted by the Observatoire de l'ACA at the end of 2021, 100% of umbrella organizations reported experiencing difficulties related to workload, 97% related to fatigue and burnout, and 51% related to mental health issues.



*I feel like we've been on the final sprint since March and it never lets up. In the community groups, because they have so many needs, and because our partners seem to have woken up at some point and decided they need to meet with us on Zoom all day.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION



GREATER INVOLVEMENT FROM BOARDS OF DIRECTORS

The **Board of Directors** at an umbrella organization is generally composed of individuals representing the member organizations and they are often people who hold a directing or coordinating position within their own community group. Board members at umbrella organizations were heavily solicited throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, their **involvement** and the **mutual support** they provided and received from staff at the umbrella organizations was deeply appreciated.



*When board members had an issue, we could support them; when I was facing a challenge, they would support me too.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MONTRÉAL

Several umbrella organizations adopted more **flexible decision-making processes** on their boards during the crisis. It was important that they target the issues to be addressed, such as discussing how to reorganize working conditions and processes within the organization, in order to **avoid overstretching** their board members. In reality, many board members at umbrella organizations were **already wrestling with, and sometimes exhausted from, managing the impacts of the crisis on their own community groups**. Changes to the democratic strategies in use within umbrella organizations were easier to make when existing **relationships of trust** were already strong, such as when members had already been in place prior to the crisis. This was especially important in the context of virtual meetings, which are generally less favourable for deliberation.



*The board was especially involved in everything related to the organization of work and measures to help balance work with family life. I sometimes felt uncomfortable asking them to do more, knowing they were already doing so much. When I had questions or things to discuss, I tended to reach out more often to my president to vent and check in with her. Scheduled meetings were all held, but nothing additional.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MONTRÉGIE

Board Meeting Formats

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

During the first lockdown, **umbrella organizations** held board meetings using the following formats:

81%
COMPLETELY
REMOTE

18%
REMOTE
AND IN PERSON

1%
MEETINGS
CANCELLED



*As an organization, I had no one! My board was all directors from other organizations that were themselves in the process of falling apart and drowning in it all!**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Umbrella organizations' Boards of Directors had to deal with a lot of **complex, sensitive and urgent** questions. **Internally**, questions around working conditions and health risk management represented a source of uncertainty and potential tension for the relationship between staff and board. **Externally**, issues created by the pandemic's impacts on populations and community organizations, as well as the level of advocacy required, forced boards to have more frequent meetings to analyze the situation and react quickly. On the other hand, board meetings were also an opportunity to share information on different situations on the ground and to stay up to date with the needs experienced by the umbrella organizations' members.



*An increased frequency of calls with the board members to get their feedback on political positions that had to be taken quickly. Something would pop up in the morning, we'd need to have a position that afternoon and it would be settled by that night.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MONTRÉAL



RENEWED ASSOCIATIVE LIFE

Maintaining a dynamic democratic and associative life is essential for ACA umbrella organizations, as they offer a space to **collectivize challenges** and work to defend the **collective interests** of their members.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on associative life have been different for umbrella organizations compared to community groups. The challenges that the latter experienced in supporting the participation of their members and in maintaining their associative activities are documented in the report by the Observatoire de l'ACA entitled [Impacts on Associative and Democratic Life in Community Organizations](#).

For several umbrella organizations, the crisis resulted in fewer challenges for their associative life. Instead, it became synonymous with renewal. In the end, changes made to the ways meetings were held during the crisis made participation more accessible. Public health measures naturally led to the use of virtual meetings, which removed geographical barriers to accessibility. Umbrella organizations that have members spread across a large geographical area saw the most significant increases in participation. So, most umbrella organizations were able to maintain their members' participation in annual general meetings, due to their virtual nature.

Holding Annual General Meetings

(END OF 2020)

86% of umbrella organizations required to hold their AGM prior to June 30, 2020, decided to move forward with it in spite of the public health situation. They adopted the following formats:

79%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

6%

REMOTE
AND IN PERSON

2%

COMPLETELY
IN PERSON



*It was actually kind of an opportunity, since the groups didn't have to drive two hours to come to a meeting anymore. The first meeting we held, we had 84 people on my Zoom. It had been more than 10 years since we had seen that within the organization.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN CHAUDIÈRE-APPALACHES

Especially at the beginning of the crisis, the issues related to information made it essential to maintain a very regular link with the members. As such, umbrella organizations experienced an intensification and diversification of their communications and meetings with members (see the section on [Informing](#)). Most succeeded in maintaining their internal committees and collaborative bodies, in addition to developing new spaces for discussion among members using virtual spaces. It took creativity to enable discussions among their membership, such as using new platforms. Several umbrella organizations took advantage of different meeting formats to allow for different levels of engagement. The use of in-person meetings was also prioritized whenever possible.

Continuity of Internal Committees

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

95% of **umbrella organizations** have maintained their internal committee meetings despite the pandemic context. Among these, here are the formats that have been used:

80%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

20%

REMOTE
AND IN PERSON

The move to online venues, with the attendant possibility of holding meetings quickly and frequently, created new opportunities to share information and allowed umbrella organizations to **keep up to date on the needs of their members, as well as their experiences on the ground.**



*We were also able to get feedback from the field much more quickly. These were things that we didn't have before and that have served to reinforce the organization. We've never had so many members at our AGM, members who live far away and never came before. There were actually a lot of positives that came out of this change.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Umbrella organizations have also focused on **mutual aid** among their members and organized **collective analyses and actions**, especially through the development of communication tools allowing individuals to hold discussions among themselves (see the section on [Supporting and Equipping](#)), such talking about the repercussions of the crisis and new practices being put in place, or to ensure more effective collective efforts raising awareness among the population regarding public health measures in a given area.



We're very lucky that here, there's a very strong community network with community organizations. So, pooling resources, interpreting the ever-changing gray area directions from the government for community centers was a weekly puzzle that we figured out together and made decisions for the whole community, so that one group wasn't doing something different than another. So that was very, very supportive. We're very lucky to be supported by the other community organizations and make those decisions together, instead of in a silo.

COMMUNITY GROUP IN MONTRÉAL

In addition to maintaining links among community groups, umbrella organizations also focused on **partnering with** and **supporting** other umbrella organizations, either by sector or by region, especially around information sharing. One objective that was often mentioned was to ensure **complementarity** so as to avoid redundancy in their actions and not over-solicit community groups. Inter-organizational collaboration also allowed them to better understand their respective fields of expertise. Despite their sometimes divergent perspectives on shared issues, umbrella organizations were able to collectivize their communications to ensure improved coordination among the different umbrella organizations in their sector or area.



*What was most difficult, or most tiring, was the mix of the CDC, community organizers, development agents, all of these people who wanted to help the community groups so much that, at a certain point, they had to say “give it a rest!” It forced us to review our priorities, who’s doing what and the ways we were doing it.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN ESTRIE

Local and regional umbrella groups were also able to get support from **national umbrella organizations**, both formally and informally. For smaller teams, the staff at the national organizations often served as colleagues during the pandemic, especially to be able to vent about the challenges they were facing. These relationships were therefore strengthened and a number of people became even more intensely engaged in the activities of their national umbrella organization.



*My colleagues [at the national umbrella organization] were the ones I could vent with. I was able to sit on committees with them. It helps you to see things differently when someone calls you up to check in. It was a really great collaboration; they really were my colleagues throughout the pandemic. It would have been so much harder without them.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN CHAUDIÈRE-APPALACHES

However, it was actually **more difficult** for certain umbrella organizations to maintain the quality of their associative life. Many of them had to contend with reduced availabilities among their members and a break in the regular relationships they maintained through physical presence and proximity. In the 2020 IRIS survey, 33% of umbrella organizations reported difficulties transposing their activities into the context of social distancing. A number of them quickly understood the importance of offering **informal spaces** and putting an emphasis on **individual support**, as compared to their normal operations prior to the pandemic (see the section on [Supporting and Equipping](#)).



*At the start, what we found difficult was maintaining contact with our members. We were used to crossing paths and having regular contact. We weren't able to take the temperature on things anymore. We really had to create opportunities to see and talk with them. We created surveys, held informal meetings that didn't have that many members present, although those who needed them were there.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

Several umbrella organizations also realized that they had members that were facing challenges related to the **digital divide**. In the 2020 IRIS survey, 21% of umbrella organizations reported that the technology required to hold remote activities wasn't available for the people they were trying to reach. As a result, umbrella organizations had to provide the required tools and support to their less well-equipped members. The organization of virtual meetings also placed a **heavy logistical and technical burden** on umbrella organizations' staff.

Once they were actually underway, virtual meetings resulted in **more cumbersome and less well-developed discussions**. By their very nature, these meetings have to be shorter. While this can facilitate participation from those who are particularly busy, it also means less time to dig deeply into subjects. Open and dynamic discussions, which encourage an effervescence of new ideas, were very difficult to hold in a virtual environment.



*It was very difficult to hold an online GA with substantive debate. Adopting financial statements is one thing, but for real debate to occur, you need to be properly equipped, have breakout rooms. It isn't always easy to have facilitators on a Zoom call, it's much harder.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

A number of activities led by umbrella organizations **lost something of their essence when held at a distance**, such as developing collective projects or facilitating popular education (see the section on [Mobilizing](#)). The **loss of informal** spaces in a virtual setting was also cited as a barrier to developing meaningful relationships and mutual aid. The combination of these factors led many individuals to feel like their work had **lost its meaning**.



*There are issues that are more difficult to cover online. We were supposed to travel around with a workshop on racism last spring. But in the end, we decided to cancel it. We were hesitant about doing it virtually, because it's such a sensitive topic. The facilitators need to be able to feel out the room—are people feeling uncomfortable? Is there discomfort? Are there things that need to be said to bring everyone up to speed? Are things going off the rails? Autonomous popular education is really one sphere where we haven't managed to innovate yet.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

When it comes to the **issues addressed** through democratic bodies, the pandemic raised many difficult questions for both umbrella organizations and their members, including funding, public health measures, etc. There were different perspectives on the demands that should be put forward within any given sector, such as on emergency funds. At times, it was also challenging to agree on the adaptations to be made. The pandemic was also experienced very differently depending on the region, which made it difficult to conduct a collective analysis to determine shared needs and strategies. The focus on crisis management also reduced everyone's ability to develop a long-term vision of the actions that should be taking.



*Every time we spoke about our practices, I had this feeling all year that we were always a step behind. All of a sudden, we were stuck in this extremely short-term vision. It took immense effort to lift our eyes to the future.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE CAPITALE-NATIONALE REGION

It's clear that the new tools, both virtual and hybrid, that were developed and tested during the pandemic to allow the democratic and associative lives of umbrella organizations to continue to thrive **are here to stay**—especially for province-wide organizations with a membership that is spread across Quebec. There also seems to be indications that a hybrid model will be prioritized by numerous umbrella organizations in the future.



MULTIPLE ROLES PLAYED BY UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS



Roles Played by Umbrella Organizations



INTERLOCUTORS

Member community groups

Non-member community groups

Other umbrella organizations

- In the same sector
- From other sectors
- In the same region
- Of which we are members

Public networks (health care, education, etc.)

Public institutions (municipalities, ministries, etc.)

- Administrative level
- Political level

Elected officials and political parties

Public and private foundations

Other social actors (NPOs, unions, etc.)

Média

Academic and research sectors

THEMES COVERED DURING THE CRISIS

Situations of community groups

- Public health measures for community groups
- Managing health risks and uncertainty
- Adapting activities
- Funding (reporting requirements, emergency funds, etc.)
- Autonomy
- Recognition
- Work reorganization
- Staff management
- Individual challenges: anxiety, burnout, isolation

Situations within populations

- Public health measures for individuals
- Public policies and support programs
- Living conditions and unmet needs
- Inequality and discrimination
- Community development
- Civic life and democracy
- Rights



INFORMING

Umbrella organizations have traditionally played a role in disseminating information to their members, especially through newsletters, often sent out monthly. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, this role took on **unprecedented importance**.

Community groups were receiving vast amounts of **contradictory information** and umbrella organizations played a crucial role in helping them make sense of it. Their first challenge was finding **new ways to communicate** with their members, who were often difficult to reach through normal means.



*It was this continual wave of emails and looking up information to send to our members, both for their operations as an organization and to meet the needs of individuals, with a very specific focus on public health measures. In the beginning, we were on alert seven days a week.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The **means of communications** in use **intensified**, both in terms of the information that was disseminated and the opportunities for discussion. The context of the crisis also led certain umbrella organizations to **open up their communications and activities more generally** to different community groups, beyond their specific members. In so doing, the crisis offered umbrella organizations the chance to reach new audiences.



*The pandemic forced us to find alternative means to communicate with our members (Zoom, FB group, more frequent newsletters, a special section of our website on COVID, etc.). We normally hold three province-wide meetings a year; during the pandemic we were sometimes meeting every week. We had to cover so many different topics, from interventions to reporting requirements. We've never been in such close contact with our members.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

There were many different means of communication used by umbrella organizations to reach their members on issues related to COVID-19:

- Emails and regular newsletters
- Formal and informal virtual meetings
- Special sections on their websites dedicated to COVID
- Social media



*I very quickly adopted the position I would need to occupy, as captain of the ship, and quickly turned to my CDC and my umbrella organization to see what they were putting in place to share information.**

COMMUNITY GROUP IN MONTÉRÉGIE

Umbrella organizations were trying to **respond to specific questions** from their members who, lacking clear information and availability from other interlocutors, turned to their umbrella organizations to get answers on a wide variety of topics. Umbrella organizations depended on relationships of **mutual aid** (with their members and with other umbrella organizations) and had to demonstrate **resourcefulness** to find all of the information required, regardless of its source (political or administrative interlocutors, at the local, regional or national level, etc.).



*All of the information that came down from the CISSS and CIUSSS, at least for the province-wide umbrella organizations, we only found out about because a member would share it with us. Otherwise, we had no idea what information was being given out on the ground. On the other hand, we were getting information from the Health and Social Services System or the government, and we were left to try and put it all together since the measures were often contradictory and our members needed clarity. We spent a lot of time accompanying our groups, both individually and collectively.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

As mentioned earlier, umbrella organizations also had to get organized in order to limit their communications with community groups and avoid overloading them through multiple channels of information. They made use of the complementarity of their actions and those of other umbrella organizations, within the same area or sector, to reduce the frequency of their communications or to focus in on a more specific issue area.



*We listened to the community groups, we organized ourselves regionally and we would communicate through a single source of information that was simplified and clear. We significantly reduced our communications and worked in partnership.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

In terms of the themes covered, umbrella organizations played an important role in informing their members about **administrative issues related to their funding programs** (reporting requirements, emergency funds, etc.) (see the section on [Advocating](#)).

A specific aspect of this crisis was the work required to translate information on **public health guidelines and government measures**. In practice, the information needed to address the crisis was particularly confusing and constantly changing (see the report on [Health Risk Management Within Community Organizations](#)). The primary issue was therefore to locate the information, especially from the Health and Social Services System, since the Public Health Director was responsible for the public health measures put in place. In the first few weeks, different information, guidelines and instructions were being disseminated by public health authorities, the CISSS and CIUSSS networks, the different ministries, municipalities, etc. Staff at the umbrella organizations therefore had to collect all of this sometimes-contradictory information that was often developed for other activity sectors, organize and adapt it to the realities of their members, and then simplify and disseminate it. By combing through and interpreting the guidelines, umbrella organizations helped their membership face the uncertainty of the situation and manage fears among their staff and members.



*We also had a need to respond to our members, given the uncertainties and concerns they held. In the first weeks and months, it required us to analyze everything that was requested, to simplify the information and to sort through it. I've never read so many documents in my life, I think. But we succeeded in transferring all of the information possible to our members, making sure we could reassure them instead of worrying them or drowning them in information, because it was easy to get lost in it all.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Umbrella organizations have also played an important role in **keeping communities informed**, either directly or via their members. The importance of external communications was clearly shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had significant impacts on individuals' isolation and their ability to seek out information (see the Observatoire de l'ACA report entitled [Loss of Access to Information and Resources](#)).

Community groups participated actively in **disseminating and simplifying information** within communities. From the earliest days of the pandemic, access to reliable and comprehensible information was essential to helping people adapt to the crisis and to helping communities organize. Umbrella organizations supported community groups in responding to the sheer volume of information available, helping them to understand, summarize and simplify it. There was also the additional challenge of sharing information with marginalized populations in the context of lockdowns, especially those facing **challenges with communication** (access to materials, literacy, etc.).

Different external communications platforms were developed and integrated through the Internet (websites, social media, etc.), media outlets (community newspapers, radio shows, etc.) and public spaces (pamphlets, kiosks in parks, speaker trucks, etc.). Community groups worked to ensure that populations experiencing **challenges accessing** information could receive it in different languages, in simplified language, orally (video) and in sign language (LSQ and ASL).

Umbrella organizations also had to be creative with their **external communications**. They focused their efforts on communication and awareness-raising tools that would allow them to reach as many people as possible: letter-writing campaigns, email campaigns, open letters, videos, etc. Some developed partnerships with local media. Others focused more on social media and visual communications (e.g., “meme” campaigns on social media). According to the 2020 IRIS survey, promotion and awareness-raising activities were maintained or increased among 59% of umbrella organizations and were primarily conducted remotely (90% were exclusively remote). Some umbrella organizations even reported being **more regularly solicited** by journalists than usual.



*There were also journalists who would call at all hours. I had appointments on Sunday morning at 7:00 a.m. in English after getting the information five minutes beforehand.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic posed new **challenges** to the external communications of umbrella organizations, as they had less visibility in the media. Many of them highlighted how they had lost their normal opportunities for visibility, which allowed them to put forward what local community groups were doing (e.g., the cancellation of activities for Community Literacy Week). It was also difficult to highlight the actions taken in response to the crisis, since these new ways of doing things weren't what the media is used to covering. Nonetheless, several persons noted that, even if the window for media access shrunk for province-wide umbrella organizations, the crisis still allow a number of local community groups to put forward their own actions in their local media.



ADVOCATING

Umbrella organizations did more than just share information on public health guidelines and government measures related to the crisis. They also set themselves the objective of **influencing** them. Indeed, by the very nature of their missions, umbrella organizations are in constant contact with governmental bodies and public authorities to defend the interests of community groups and the communities they serve. Throughout the pandemic, they were therefore able to transmit information and bring demands related to the situations that community groups and communities were facing on the ground up to public institutions (the health care and education systems, ministries, municipalities, etc.), collaborative bodies, elected officials and the media.



*What we felt was important was to support and help our member in their reflections and analyses on worsening inequalities. Since day one, we've all know that this is more than a health crisis. It's a socio-economic and political crisis as well. The groups all see it, they're working on the ground with people who are living it. In just a few months, we were able to develop a tool to support reflections on growing inequalities, with an eye to combating poverty. Following that collective reflection, we hope to be able to develop a collective mobilization.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MONTRÉAL

Still, the **advocacy structures** within the ACA movement **are complex**, as they are organized both across sectors and regions. Given the urgency of this crisis, certain umbrella organizations had to get involved in new spheres of influence to ensure that their information and demands were being brought to the correct venues.

Umbrella organizations and their members played a crucial role in documenting the **impacts of the crisis on communities and on exacerbating existing inequalities**. According to the IRIS survey, activities related to the analysis of social issues were maintained or increased in 76% of umbrella organizations during the first wave of the pandemic (April to June 2020), despite the lockdown at that time. Using data collected in the field, numerous studies were published by different ACA sectors to shed light on the impacts of pandemic on the populations they serve, to advocate for their needs and to defend their rights (see our [thematic reports on the pandemic's impacts on populations](#)). On the other hand, the umbrella organizations that the Observatoire de

l'ACA met with found it difficult to influence political decision makers when it came to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, this was the case for umbrella organizations working to defend the rights of persons with a disability who lost access to services or received limited financial support. In general, advocacy efforts undertaken on issues that were further removed from the government's immediate preoccupations during the pandemic (e.g., emergency health care and the economy) received little attention.



*It's as though we were caught between the population's distress and the health care system, and that was a pretty big shock, pretty intense. Without access to the health care system, the population turned to community groups, and groups turned to umbrella organizations and larger community bodies to try to push the social issues higher up. Groups were telling us about this distress and asking us to do something to save people.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MONTRÉAL

Umbrella organizations also **documented their members' realities** on the ground throughout the pandemic using various methods of data collection (surveys, phone calls, meetings with members, etc.). Based on their findings, they could then call for specific support measures, especially around the implementation of emergency funds. Several umbrella organizations also **called out efforts by the government to subcontract or instrumentalize** the ACA movement to address shortcomings in public systems. In effect, several relationships that were described as partnerships actually tended more towards external pressure to provide more emergency services (see our report on impacts on external relationships entitled [Between Solidarity and a Threat to Autonomy](#)).



*We were checking, "Have you had more calls? What is it like? What's going on?" We surveyed our members, "Have your experiences changed?" Either because journalists were calling us, because the ministry was asking us or simply because we wanted to know as an umbrella organization.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

For some province-wide umbrella organizations, tensions were seen between members due to **differences in their experiences** with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as between regions or between sectors. This sometimes made it difficult to develop shared strategies or a coherent analysis of the community groups' needs.

Umbrella organizations also **acted as advocates to secure recognition and funding** for community groups, especially with the government ministries responsible for their core-mission funding and with other funders. This included communicating, to stakeholders at different administrative and political levels, the realities faced by community groups regarding administrative and reporting challenges, such as obstacles to holding an annual general meeting. Faced with different guidelines in different ministries, umbrella organizations had to constantly advocate for their members, call out the absence of clear province-wide guidelines and seek a coherent approach from the government that was adapted to the realities of community groups on the ground (see the report on the [Impacts on Associative and Democratic Life in Community Organizations](#)).



*There was something satisfying and a bit pathetic where, all too often, I would be the one informing the person responsible for the PSOC about what was happening at a provincial level because the message wasn't being passed through their internal mechanisms.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE LAURENTIDES

However, **relationships with government bodies** were often **difficult**. In practice, public systems and government bodies were heavily destabilized by the crisis, which resulted in problems with their internal communications, especially between different levels of the system (ministries and regional structures). Umbrella organization staff had to deal with counterparts who were poorly informed, exhausted and constantly changing (high rates of turnover and a practice of offloading). They also observed communication problems between political and administrative units within government bodies.



*There were frustrations. At the provincial level, we had a lot of difficulty. First of all, there were a lot of civil servants at the ministry who were requisitioned for COVID, they were offloading things. To some degree it was understandable, but after a while... we were asking them questions and they weren't able to answer them. There were so many people who changed positions. It was really hard.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Some umbrella organizations were **profoundly over-solicited and bombarded with information** by their counterparts in government. Several also reported a **lack of understanding** among external interlocutors for their realities and the actual limits to their ability to take action (see the section on [Small Teams Under Pressure](#)).

Other umbrella organizations instead experienced an **absence of communication** from their counterparts in government. Some reported a **lack of recognition** for their role as representatives of the community sector and their mandate to defend the interests of community groups and communities, which sometimes went as far as flagrant disregard for their critical voice on government actions (despite its specific inclusion in the GPCA). The lack of trust in umbrella organizations sometimes resulted in their interlocutors withholding information.



*Whenever we were given directives, they would reproach us for communicating them to our members, calling it a non-official communication. Even though the information we were sharing was true. We weren't making a mistake. They were upset that we were a step ahead of the ministry's own communications. But from the point of view of our own work, there was a certain sense of satisfaction in sharing information that everyone on the ground was asking us for.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Experiences with **elected officials** were also **variable**. During the crisis, several umbrella organizations noted that it was sometimes easier to get information from their political counterparts. They would therefore address the ministers' cabinets directly to try and have their members' needs sent up the grapevine (rather than going through normal administrative channels).



*What it did allow, though, was that we had more or less regular meetings with the minister's cabinet. We had a contact person there who would send us the new guidelines pretty quickly; we would have them within 24 hours. He'd ask us, "What do you think of this or that?" It strengthened that relationship.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The transition to **virtual settings** also made certain elected officials more accessible. According to the IRIS survey, most umbrella organizations' advocacy efforts were undertaken remotely (89% were exclusively remote) during the first wave (April to June 2020).



*During the pandemic, I don't really know how it happened, but we met with a lot of MNAs. It's as if everyone had the time to meet with us. We'd contact them about an issue and then, finally, they'd end up being the ones to contact us to get an overall perspective and grounding.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE CAPITALE-NATIONALE REGION

For other umbrella organizations, communications were made more **difficult** due to the rapid turnover of staff in ministerial cabinets. Even when held regularly, discussions brought few concrete benefits to community groups and communities. The overall discourse around recognizing the devotion and work undertaken by community groups rarely translated into actions offering real support. Some umbrella organizations even attempted to play on the public image of their political counterparts to de-escalate their rhetoric and thwart efforts to use political capital from the ACA movement with the general population.



Things were very unstable at the minister’s cabinet, especially after the minister changed. We had to systematically recreate our relationships. We’re on our third political attaché and it’s becoming really challenging to develop a relationship of trust when the people in these positions lack any real stability. It’s another point of frustration for us. One our core functions is to bring information from the ministry back to community groups. It proved extremely challenging for us.*

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on community groups’ **external relationships** were documented in reports by the Observatoire de l’ACA entitled [Between Solidarity and an Autonomy Under Threat](#) and [A Wide Range of Experiences within Crisis Units](#). As was the case for so many community groups, the COVID-19 pandemic allowed certain umbrella organizations to consolidate their **existing partnerships** and develop **new collaborations** with partners outside the ACA movement. This was at least partially due to the ease of participating in a variety of different events taking place virtually. This exceptional period was seen by certain umbrella organizations as favourable to strengthening solidarity and developing a better understanding and recognition of the ACA’s work among different actors. Certain relationships, while framed as partnerships, have also **added external pressure** and threatened umbrella organizations’ autonomy.

External Pressure Reported by Umbrella Organizations

(END OF 2021)

51%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

reported feeling pressure from external parties to modify their activities during the crisis.

53%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

reported feeling pressure from **public networks**.

39%

OF UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

reported feeling pressure from **provincial ministries**.



*We had to revisit all of our practices to offer online services to teenagers as requested by our premier at his press conferences, without any consideration for what we were doing on the ground.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE CAPITALE-NATIONALE REGION

Some umbrella organizations are also involved in inter-sectoral and inter-network **collaborative bodies**. Indeed, community groups' proximity to the population and the ties they have built with different stakeholders in their regions constitute an important strength of the ACA movement. The detailed understanding they've developed on these issues is collectivized within umbrella organizations, allowing them to make crucial contributions within a number of collaborative bodies.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the umbrella organizations took on leadership roles in **crisis units** created to share information and coordinate urgent actions. Many 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, and representing the community sector movement within these new collaborative structures. According to the IRIS survey, 53% of umbrella organizations maintained or increased their collaborative activities during the first wave (April to June 2020), with most of these activities being held remotely (92% exclusively remotely). What's more, 25% of umbrella organizations reported developing new collaborative activities during this same period. Some even offered **direct support for collective action**, getting involved in planning, researching funding and implementing projects within a given region.




*We're a very small RCM. The projects that emerged from the collective, the crisis unit, the community kitchens, etc., the groups said, "We'll do it, but we won't lead the projects." We participated actively in funding requests, supporting groups. It's a role that we often played, and that we're still playing actually. I'm sick of writing reports and doing the accounting, but that's the need so that's what we're doing right now.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN ESTRIE

Having said that, involvement in the crisis units came with its own set of **challenges**. Relationships were sometimes difficult within different collaborative bodies. Some of the people we met with preferred to focus on developing strong relationships “one-on-one” with certain individuals. However, this approach 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.

Finally, outside the structures directly related to crisis management, umbrella organizations noted **a general slowing down of partnerships and coordinated actions**. Further, the crisis units tended to **focus on emergency services** to the detriment of structuring actions. When the pandemic began, it was especially difficult to redirect the collective stress and anxiety into long-term actions that would contribute to the fight against socio-economic inequality and lead to social development at a regional level. That said, crisis units were spaces for coordination created during emergencies to respond to urgent needs in exceptional social circumstances. Significant concerns have been voiced about the operation of these spaces (see the report by the Observatoire de l’ACA entitled [A Wide Range of Experiences Within Crisis Units](#)). Energy invested in crisis units must therefore not hamper the development of partnerships that are sustainable, egalitarian, respectful of community groups’ autonomy, and adapted to communities’ needs.



*We had to demonstrate a lot of creativity, perseverance and a strategic mindset to maintain and mobilize partners in our projects. Anything that isn't directly linked to meeting the most basic needs is a real struggle. The start of the school year offered a brief respite, but now we're seeing a new slowdown.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN MAURICIE



SUPPORTING AND EQUIPPING

As part of their mission, umbrella organizations **support and equip member organizations** for different aspects of their operations. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, this supporting role occupied a significant amount of their energy. As has been mentioned already, their staff spent a lot of time offering direct support to members on both an individual and collective basis.

One of the first objectives for umbrella organizations was to support their members in managing the **radical transformation of their internal operations and activities** (see the report by the Observatoire de l'ACA entitled [Actions from Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: Essential, Yet Unrecognized](#)). In the context of an unprecedented lockdown, there was significant variation in the ability of different community groups to adapt, depending on the availability and layout of their physical spaces, the equipment available to them, the size and composition of their teams, the types of activities they hold, the populations they serve, etc. Umbrella organizations witnessed a lot of **distress** among their member organizations, especially for those who were drastically disadvantaged by the ways they normally operate or the populations they serve.



*Many community organizations had outdated equipment: no microphones, no webcams, no laptops, no Dropbox. We had to accompany them and help them to learn these new technologies, Google Drive, Zoom.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Some umbrella organizations even offered **direct support to complete certain tasks** at their member organizations, including for community groups who were the most overwhelmed or to support a director who only recently began their position.



*Since the fall, we've primarily focused on the organizations who are being overwhelmed. We offer support, for example for organizations working on mental health, wherever we feel like things are close to breaking. We mostly try to support organizations who are struggling to stay above the water.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

Umbrella organizations from all sectors supported community groups **across a number of thematic areas** during this exceptional period of time, such as financing (surplus management, emergency programs and funds), reporting requirements (holding AGAs), working conditions (requirements for telework, health risk management, etc.), various practices, collective actions and mobilizations, associative and democratic life, etc. Umbrella organizations also supported community groups that needed help with working remotely and developing virtual activities.

Through their activities and support tools, umbrella organizations intentionally sought to promote practices that were **consistent with the values of the ACA movement** among their members. As such, several of them developed and distributed orientations for the implementation of equitable and feminist working conditions. 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 Government of Quebec."



*The [province-wide umbrella organization] shared a lot of information about how to manage human resources during the pandemic, which was extremely helpful. We all know that people had their children at home, some people are family caregivers, and they were worried about the health and safety of those close to them. There were issues to address simply because workers are also humans who have to wear a lot of hats. So, we sent a letter from our Board of Directors to all of the members to offer suggestions or guidelines for how to recognize the responsibilities of our workers and respect the fact that not everyone will be able to stay 100% present. That was even the case in our own staff. So, there was a lot of reorganization that had to be done at that level and a real need to share.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE CAPITALE-NATIONALE REGION

For their collective efforts, umbrella organizations focused on **activities to share** experiences from the field as well as feelings. They also tried to encourage **mutual aid** among the community groups. They adopted a **perspective of empowerment** in their support work, reassuring and encouraging the staff at member organizations while trying to help them avoid burning out. Several of them noted the importance of offering informal spaces for discussion that allowed members to express their emotions and vent. These types of spaces were important for both managers and community workers of the members. Some umbrella organizations even qualified this strategy as a type of “turning inward” by the movement to regain its strength and ability to act.



*Whenever we communicated with our members, whether during official meetings or not, we would always set aside time to talk among ourselves. The takeaway from those meetings was often, “Thank you, it was really helpful! It feels good to just vent.” We would almost call meetings just to have those moments together. We had to find a topic, but people really appreciated it.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Umbrella organizations also took advantage of the crisis to develop **new virtual tools** to better support their membership. A virtual environment allowed them to reach more people and be available asynchronously, according to each person’s availabilities. Umbrella organizations offered numerous **training sessions, communities of practice** and **toolkits** in response to the challenges faced by their members in the field. According to the IRIS survey, despite the urgent situations to be managed, 20% of umbrella organizations developed new training activities during the first wave (April to June 2020).



*We were asking ourselves how we could help the groups. We created a toolkit, which actually ended up being disseminated quite widely, so that the community workers on the ground could benefit from the documents. It covered things like the importance of taking care of yourself, how to conduct interventions remotely, and how to reorganize work remotely.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

Examples of Publications from Umbrella Organizations Aimed at Supporting Community Groups:

Coalition des Tables régionales d'organismes communautaires (CTROC),
Bulletin Spécial COVID-19, march 2020.

Regroupement des organismes en défense collective des droits (RODCD),
Page dédiée à la COVID-19, website.

Réseau québécois de l'action communautaire autonome (RQ-ACA),
La COVID-19 et l'ACA, website.

Table des regroupements provinciaux d'organismes communautaires et bénévoles (TRPOCB),
COVID-19 : Informations pour les OCASSS, website.

Finally, umbrella organizations also received numerous **requests from the general public**. According to the 2020 IRIS survey, 83% of them maintained or increased their welcoming and listening services, most of which were delivered remotely (70% exclusively remotely). Accompaniment and referral services were maintained or increased at 66% of umbrella organizations, mostly remotely (81% exclusively remotely). What's more, some umbrella organizations that didn't normally offer this type of support responded to the sheer volume of requests by developing direct links with the public. Among the umbrella organizations that responded to the IRIS survey, 17% began offering new accompaniment and referral services to meet community needs and 12% added new welcoming and listening services.



*We always get calls from families and parents, but we really got a lot. We were getting emails from people experiencing all kinds of challenges: single moms without daycare, couples that were splitting up, people with shared custody. We not only had to maintain regular contact with the Ministry of Families, which finances our groups, but also with the Ministry of Justice just to have answers to all the questions.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION



MOBILIZING

The mobilization of members around the defense of their interests and social struggles represents a key dimension of an umbrella organization's mission. But the COVID-19 pandemic posed **numerous challenges** to completing this role in a time when it was absolutely essential. The staff at umbrella organizations felt a **lot of pressure** to be creative and develop new ways of mobilizing in an unprecedented and unfavourable environment.

At the start of the pandemic, any mobilization activities already planned by an umbrella organization had to be **cancelled so they could focus on other responsibilities**. According to the IRIS survey, 82% of umbrella organizations suspended or limited their social mobilization activities during the first wave (April to June 2020).



*When it comes to mobilization, everything was put on ice; it was very quiet in the first few months. In the summer, we produced a two-pager on how to mobilize during COVID. A lot of groups told us that they didn't really know how to reflect on that.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

One major obstacle to mobilizing umbrella organizations' membership was the fact that the **community groups were completely overtaken** by the impacts of the crisis. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, all of their energy was concentrated on managing the impacts of the crisis, responding to emergencies, and adapting their activities and ways of operating. The internal responsibilities at each group took up a lot of space, leaving mobilization on the back burner at least temporarily (see the report by the Observatoire de l'ACA entitled [Actions from Community Organizations in Times of Crisis: Essential, Yet Unrecognized](#)).



*From the start, mobilizing stakeholders was difficult. That's actually why we put so many processes on pause. Community groups were completely focused on adapting their internal operations. They didn't have any time to get involved in collective initiatives or the umbrella organization's activities.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

Virtual Shift in the Collective Activities of Umbrella Organizations

(APRIL TO JUNE 2020)

During the first wave, umbrella organizations had to remotely transfer the following activities:

96%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

for social issues analysis
activities

92%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

for concertation

90%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

for social
mobilizations

89%

COMPLETELY
REMOTE

for popular education
activities

In the context of lockdowns, collective actions had to be **shifted to virtual** forums, requiring immense **creativity** from umbrella organizations' staff and members. There was therefore an interruption followed by a reorganization and reinvention of practices in this field, such as virtual actions, online press conferences, etc.



*After dealing with these priorities, we saw a renewed interest among community groups for collective actions, especially with growing concern around a number of social issues. That left us to find mobilization strategies that would work at a distance: personalized contact by phone, facilitated online meetings, various methods of consultation, shared tools for work (e.g., Google Docs), etc.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN SAGUENAY-LAC-SAINT-JEAN

The shift to virtual methods quickly presented **serious limitations**. As a result of the digital divide, many people were de facto excluded from these activities. Further, at a distance, it proved difficult to build meaningful analysis as a collective. Virtual environments were particularly ill suited to popular education activities, as they depend on a lot of time and discussions. According to the IRIS survey, 62% of umbrella organizations suspended or limited their popular education activities during the first wave (April to June 2020). However, 13% of them reported developing new popular education activities over the same period.



*We're trying to re-mobilize, but mobilizing over Zoom isn't the greatest. We're doing the best we can by sharing information and working to improve access. But this year, what's new is that, during the Day for Social Justice, we want groups to go and do something in their physical spaces, if they're able to access them, even if it's just putting up a sign, putting up the poster for Engagez-vous, talking with their members. We want to gradually sow little seeds and, eventually, we'll be able to take it further.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN CHAUDIÈRE-APPALACHES

Collective and civic mobilization activities were also made **more complex by the public health measures**. Mobilization activities require a lot of advance preparation that has to begin months beforehand. Umbrella organizations therefore had to develop new mobilization strategies in response to changing public health measures. Many of them focused on organizing activities that would not have to be cancelled, even if public health measures were to suddenly increase. They also had to contend with diverging opinions on public health measures that were unclear and sometimes even contradictory. It was sometimes difficult to determine what was allowed and what wasn't. Some members wanted to organize protests while others opposed the idea in order to respect public health measures. Umbrella organizations were left to try and reconcile positions that were, in some cases, diametrically opposed. The rise of grassroots campaigns against public health measures also made it more complicated to occupy public space. It became difficult to publicly express an informed critical position to government actions on the crisis without being lumped into ongoing movements against the public health measures. Finally, many individuals were disappointed by the weak impact of mobilization activities that were fully adapted to public health measures, such as virtual protests or videos on social media.



*If we do a demo, is that going to be poorly received by the population? There was a minute there where it was as if the streets belonged to the anti-maskers. You almost had to put it right next the title of the event that it wasn't against the public health measures. It led to a lot of challenges in organizing people.**

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION IN THE CAPITALE-NATIONALE REGION

Many people also noted how **burnout** among staff and activists became a barrier to mobilization. Many of the people we spoke with during the second lockdown, in winter 2021, reported a lack of energy and motivation within the movement. Umbrella organizations staff found it even more difficult to find inspiration to motivate and mobilized their members through unusual and difficult conditions when they themselves were exhausted and overworked (see the section on [Small Teams Under Pressure](#)).



*At the moment, those groups are kind of running on fumes. We're paid; this is our job. But for community groups where people give their time for the cause, things aren't going well. The energy isn't there. There is a lot of attention going to the pandemic and it's like every other social struggle has been cast aside.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a pivotal moment for community groups mobilizing around the **defense of their own interests**, especially as part of the joint [Engagez-vous pour le communautaire](#) campaign. This type of mobilization was largely set aside at the start of the pandemic, with certain mobilization issues that predated the crisis worsening for a number of umbrella organizations. As such, even if the umbrella organizations we met with in winter 2021 expressed a general mobilization fatigue, it then turned around to take on unprecedented force as the crisis continued. The absence of concrete benefits that followed from the lip-service that external stakeholders and political actors paid to the importance of the community sector led to widespread indignation within community groups. Their involvement in the *Engagez-vous pour le communautaire* campaign grew steadily through 2021, culminating in a historic mobilization in winter 2022 and a wave of rotating actions over four days that included strikes and closures among 1,400 organizations in 17 regions across the province.



CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis had impacts on the relationships between umbrella organizations and their members. With the lockdown situation, they were compelled to diversify and intensify their means of communication and opportunities for discussion. The development of virtual activities notable allowed for broader participation. They also developed tools to animate their associative life that will offer benefits for years to come.

On the other hand, both umbrella organizations and their membership were confronted with the digital divide and the impacts on personal and family life caused by remote work. By focusing on direct support and an open sharing of how people were feeling, umbrella organizations succeeded in stepping up their supporting role at a time when many people were being overworked and burning out.

In addition to collecting, analyzing, simplifying and disseminating a huge quantity of information from multiple sources, umbrella organizations also had to be very active in their role as advocates. Throughout the crisis, they were able to transmit information and demands related to the situation of community groups and populations on the

ground upward to public institutions (health care and education systems, ministries, municipalities, etc.), collaborative bodies, elected officials and the media.

Forced to focus their energies on responding to crisis-related emergencies, in addition to the many barriers to creating both formal and informal collective spaces for discussion, many umbrella organizations felt that their collective activities took a back seat. The efforts taken to reinvent mobilization practices resulted in very few concrete gains. These experiences tended to reinforce the importance of in-person activities to imbue actions with meaning and gain a real position of strength over governmental bodies. After everything they went through, the depth of the challenges faced by community groups and the communities they serve during the pandemic led to a historic mobilization of the ACA movement in winter 2022.

Considering everything that happened, the crisis clearly demonstrated the **depth and diversity of roles played** by umbrella organizations, resulting in broad recognition for their actions from both external parties and their own members.



*We conducted a survey of our members for a strategic plan. What better time could there be to ask our members what they think of us, now that they've seen us around more than ever before? The role of the umbrella organization used to be somewhat vague, but now our members are able to articulate it clearly.**

QUEBEC-WIDE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION



DATA SOURCES

The Observatoire de l'ACA is a large-scale research-action project by and for Autonomous Community Action (ACA), aiming to produce knowledge relevant to the ACA movement, to enhance and support its action.

As part of the research work aimed at documenting the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on ACA organizations in Quebec, the data used in this report are drawn from analyses conducted in summer 2022 from:

QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

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

QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT

Online survey conducted by IRIS from October 23 to December 14, 2020
(740 RESPONDING ORGANIZATIONS)

Online survey conducted by Observatoire de l'ACA from November 5 to December 17, 2021 (549 RESPONDING ORGANIZATIONS)

DOCUMENTARY COMPONENT

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



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

