

A Post-COVID-19 Agenda for Nonprofit and Social Economy Research

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines six areas of research that would help Canada's social purpose sector recover and move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the sector needs big picture thinking about its role in a post-pandemic world. Second, it needs research on the needs currently being met—or left unmet—by social purpose organizations. Third, it needs research that helps social purpose organizations measure and communicate their value and impact. Fourth, researchers could examine the sector's advocacy efforts during the pandemic and the results of these efforts. Fifth, there is a need for research on the larger ecosystem in which social purpose organizations operate. Finally, the pandemic presents an opportunity to study how different organizations responded to a crisis and to learn from their experiences.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit six objectifs de recherche qui pourraient aider le secteur à vocation sociale à se rétablir et à progresser à la suite de la pandémie du COVID-19. Premièrement, il faut développer une vision globale sur le rôle que peut jouer ce secteur dans un monde post-pandémique. Deuxièmement, il faut effectuer des recherches sur les besoins que les organismes à vocation sociale peuvent—ou ne peuvent pas—rencontrer. Troisièmement, il faut aussi effectuer des recherches qui aideraient les organismes à vocation sociale à évaluer et à communiquer leur propre valeur et leur impact. Quatrièmement, les chercheurs devraient analyser les plaidoyers du secteur pendant la pandémie et quels étaient leurs effets. Cinquièmement, il faut examiner l'écosystème dans lequel les organismes à vocation sociale agissent. Sixièmement, il serait pertinent d'étudier comment diverses organisations ont géré la crise afin que l'on puisse apprendre de leurs expériences.

Keywords / Mots clés Charities; Nonprofits; Social economy; Research agendas; COVID-19 / Organismes de bienfaisance; Organismes sans but lucratif; Économie sociale; Programmes de recherche; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The world is currently facing an unprecedented and unanticipated crisis that is likely to affect individuals, communities, and nations in ways we cannot yet even begin to imagine. In the first four months of 2020, almost four million people

worldwide contracted COVID-19 and more than a quarter of a million died of it. In Canada, there were more than sixty thousand confirmed cases and more than four thousand deaths. To limit the spread of the virus, nations closed their borders and shuttered their economies and societies to an extent never seen before. Of course, charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises have not been immune to the effects of the pandemic. Although the full impact of the crisis will likely not be known for many years, the early evidence suggests that the sector will be forever changed. Scholars who study nonprofit organizations and the social economy have an important role to play in helping sector leaders and policymakers understand what has happened, what can be learned from it, and how to plot a route forward, not just to recovery but to a stronger, more resilient future. This short article offers some areas of research that will be valuable for those trying to navigate through and beyond these uncertain times.

THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF COVID-19

In late April, Imagine Canada surveyed 1,458 charity leaders to determine some of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the sector (Lasby, 2020). The survey found that 69 percent of charities were experiencing a decrease in revenues. This is more than twice the percentage of organizations that reported decreased revenues following the 2008 economic downturn. The average revenue decline was also much larger than it was in 2008–2009: 31 percent compared to less than one percent. Moreover, virtually all revenue streams have been affected. This will make the dominant strategy charities used to cope in 2008–2009—making up lost revenue from one source by turning to other sources—much more challenging today.

Declining revenues are, of course, just a leading indicator of the impact the pandemic will have on charities and nonprofits, the people they employ, and the people and causes they serve. By late April, 30 percent of charities with paid staff had already experienced lay-offs, and 27 percent had reduced staff hours. And this is likely just the beginning. More than half of surveyed organizations said there may be lay-offs coming, either on top of the ones that have already occurred or as a new measure to cope with declining revenues. Most charities have also been forced to make changes to their programs. More than half had transitioned in-person programs online or increased their emphasis on existing online programs, while 42 percent said they had developed entirely new programs in response to the pandemic. And future programming is tenuous. Forty-five percent of leaders expect their organizations' financial situation to worsen over the next three to six months, and a further 17 percent said they do not know what future holds for them.

WHAT CAN SCHOLARS DO?

Imagine Canada's survey (Lasby, 2020) explored only the most immediate and visible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on one segment of Canada's large social purpose sector.¹ The full impact of the pandemic on the sector and society will not be understood for many years, perhaps decades. This represents a major opportunity—and a major responsibility—for those who study charities, nonprofits, and the social economy. The sector needs practical, relevant, and engaged scholarship now more than ever before. Society needs scholars to help it recover and move forward to build the kind of country most Canadians want: a country that takes care of its vulnerable citizens; a country that combines economic prosperity with environmental responsibility; a country where people give, volunteer, and participate in civic life; and a country where charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises are considered as essential to society as restaurants, liquor stores, and hair salons.

So, if you study this sector, you may want to take a good look at your current research agenda and ask yourself this very important question: Is my research going to make a difference in a post-pandemic world? If you are concerned that it might not, you are not sure, or you just need some inspiration, this article outlines six areas of research that are crucially important. Each of these areas contains thousands of potential individual research projects that could be of interest to

scholars in many different disciplines, so please share these ideas widely. The world is being reshaped, and Canada's charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises have an important role to play. But if they are going to do that, they need good research.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PURPOSE ORGANIZATIONS IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

To start at the most macro level, there is a need for some serious big picture thinking about the role of social purpose organizations in a post-pandemic world. These organizations could be important players in the creation of a greener, more sustainable, and more equitable society, but they are generally left out of the discussion, at least at the national and international level. If they are thought of at all, it is usually after all the major decisions have been made and they are typically seen as organizations that could deliver pre-determined "supports" more cheaply than government and/or cater to individuals and communities that businesses have no interest in serving (e.g., the poorest, youngest, oldest, most troubled, most remote, etc.). Research that demonstrates the role, value, and contributions of charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises to Canadian life is desperately needed, along with data, stories, and arguments that make local, provincial, and national decision-makers sit up and take notice.

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING NEED

There is a dearth of macro-level research on how social purpose organizations are meeting the challenges that result from economic disruption, a deteriorating environment, ever-more-rapid changes in technology, an ageing population, and growing income inequality, issues that most likely have been, or will be, exacerbated by the pandemic. What needs are social purpose organizations meeting that are not being met by governments or businesses? What needs are they unable to meet because of inadequate resources, outdated legal and regulatory frameworks, or other structural or attitudinal issues? What groups are presently well served and poorly served? What has changed as a result of the pandemic, and what may change in the future? What are the likely consequences of failing to adequately support these organizations?

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING VALUE, IMPACT, INNOVATION, AND PRODUCTIVITY

There is a need for research that helps social purpose organizations measure and communicate their individual value and impact, and research that explores how to measure the innovation and productivity of the sector as a whole. Research could and should also be done on ways to improve efficiency and effectiveness. This work is key to helping social purpose organizations continue to deliver their missions in a rapidly changing world. It is also key to reshaping outdated opinions about the role and value of the sector vis-à-vis business and to overcoming counterproductive attitudes about overhead, surpluses, competence, and professionalism. These attitudes have been hurting social purpose organizations for years and have contributed to the challenges they are facing as a result of the pandemic.

PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY

As soon as the pandemic hit, leaders of social purpose organizations across the country mobilized to ensure that governments at all levels considered the needs of their organizations and clients in their policy responses. These efforts met with some success in the early weeks of the pandemic. Charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises were, for example, included in the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, and the federal government established the Emergency Community Support Fund for organizations delivering essential services to vulnerable populations. Sector leaders faced an uphill battle, however, in getting decision-makers to understand the unique challenges faced by their organizations and to understand that the sector is more than a conduit to deliver services to those in need. Recording and analyzing these efforts and their results would be an extremely useful line of research.

ECOSYSTEM RESEARCH

Canada's charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises exist within a large but also disjointed and underdeveloped ecosystem that includes foundations, philanthropists, and investors; allied professionals, such as lawyers, accountants, fundraisers, consultants, and advisors of all types; a wide range of capacity-building, umbrella, intermediary, and infrastructure organizations; rating and accreditation bodies; and researchers, educators, and related institutions. There are also many local, regional, provincial, national, and international networks that seek to support the sector and advocate on its behalf. Research that helps us understand this ecosystem better would be invaluable at this time. What parts of it are working well? What parts are failing? Where are the gaps? Ultimately, what is needed to make the system healthy, vibrant, and resilient?

ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Finally, the pandemic presents a unique opportunity to study how individual organizations of all sizes and types responded to the crisis and to learn from their experiences. The list of research ideas here is almost endless. How did different organizations adapt and how successful (or not) were they? What leadership, governance, fundraising, financial management, and human resources practices helped and hindered organizational responses? How did nonprofits respond differently than businesses? How will the pandemic change organizational practices? What made some organizations more resilient than others, and what can we learn from that to build stronger and more resilient organizations—and a stronger, more resilient sector?

CONCLUSION: WE NEED SCALE

More than anything, the social purpose sector needs large-scale, high-quality, multi-year, multi-disciplinary, macro-level research. It needs research that helps policymakers better understand the sector and the role it can play in creating a more sustainable and equitable future. It needs research that helps sector leaders understand how they can fulfill their organizational missions more effectively in challenging and uncertain times. This requires funding. It requires collaboration. It requires long-term planning and committed execution. Are you up to the challenge? Will you help us?

NOTE

1. This term is used to refer to the sector that includes charities, nonprofits, and social enterprises.

REFERENCE

Lasby, David. (2020). Imagine Canada's sector monitor: Charities & the COVID-19 pandemic. Toronto, ON: Imagine Canada. URL: https://imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20Sector%20Monitor%20Report%20ENGLISH_0.pdf [May 7, 2020].

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