

Ensuring Equity-Based Pandemic Preparedness Civil Society Strengths



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Introduction

Equity-based pandemic preparedness recognizes that responses to health crisis can worsen existing social, economic, and health inequities, as well as create new ones.¹ However, this doesn't have to be the case. A team-based approach – including all sectors of government and civil society – can provide a robust response to pandemics and protect against inequitable outcomes. In sports, every player must excel in their role while also working in harmony with teammates. Similarly, effective pandemic response demands collaboration across sectors, communities and levels of government. Just as sports teams develop strategies by learning from past games and assessing both team capacity and conditions, preparing for a pandemic requires a balance of detailed planning and adaptability – as well as a great deal of practice working together.

The important work of non-profit organizations, religious communities and other civil society organizations (CSOs), plays a crucial role in not only responding to infectious disease outbreaks, but also to the inequities health crisis often exacerbate.² This research brief outlines practical strategies to tackle critical issues that CSOs are particularly well placed to address, such as combating racism and discrimination, addressing intimate partner violence, and implementing effective equity-based health communications. CSOs can mobilize community resources, advocate for marginalized populations, and facilitate access to vital information and services. By leveraging their grassroots connections and expertise, CSOs can help create a more resilient and equitable pandemic response, ensuring that no community is left behind.



Methodology

This brief is prepared as a supplement to 'The Pandemic Preparedness Playbook: Ensuring an Equity-Based Response.'⁷ The playbook was developed through a three-stage process. First, an extensive literature review of Canada's pandemic response was conducted, prioritizing studies with intersectional or equity-focused approaches to identify common themes, recommendations, and gaps. Second, a policy document analysis examined equity considerations across socioeconomic, health, public safety, and travel domains. Lastly, key informant interviews with federal policy actors and civil society organizations provided insights that were integrated to ensure the research captured lived experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic response.

The why and what of equity-based pandemic response?

- Canadian organizations are recognized as leaders in advancing equity-based pandemic interventions, including within pandemic response.^{3,4}
- However, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how, even when such initiatives are mobilized, pandemic response can worsen preexisting socioeconomic vulnerabilities related to gender, race, class, and age, impacting access to resources such as education and income, and influencing health outcomes.⁵
- Equity-based pandemic preparedness aims to build on learnings during COVID, to inform tailored pandemic response that meets the needs those most at risk, fostering a more resilient and equitable crisis response system.
- In doing so it applies an intersectional approach that recognizes social positions related to gender, race, age, etc. as inherently related and reflective of overlapping systems of oppression.^{6,7}





Opportunities for Civil Society Organizations

Like sports teams that practice more than they play, pandemic preparedness requires constant strategy development and learning to ensure readiness when a crisis hits. Based on our research, three priority areas for CSO actors were identified to address the secondary effects of pandemics:

1. Prevent Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Public health emergencies can exacerbate IPV, especially among women and gender-diverse individuals.⁸ CSOs can lead efforts to prevent and respond to IPV during crises.

Strategies:

- Establish partnerships with local IPV providers to create a coordinated response that ensures the specific needs of various communities are met.
- Work with local authorities to develop initiatives that ensure the availability and safety of childcare options, particularly for families experiencing conflict.
- Advocate for dedicated emergency funding to support IPV services, prioritizing organizations that assist marginalized groups, including Indigenous women and girls.

2. Defend Against Racism and Discrimination

During public health crises, social tensions can escalate, often resulting in increased racism and discrimination against marginalized communities.⁹ CSOs are crucial in addressing these challenges, advocating for inclusive policies and community solidarity.¹⁰ By actively working to counteract scapegoating and violence, CSOs can help ensure that all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their background.

Strategies:

- Engage with municipal and provincial authorities to ensure that social support measures consider the needs of racialized populations and involve community leaders in efforts to prevent discrimination.
- Collaborate with law enforcement and local organizations to develop resources and training aimed at effectively addressing hate crimes.
- Monitor social media for racist and hateful content related to infectious diseases which targets priority populations; develop strategies to counter this content working with both government regulators and private companies.

3. Equity-based health communications

Health communication is a dynamic process that extends beyond merely delivering information; it involves a two-way exchange that fosters contextual understanding.¹¹ This interaction allows for feedback, encourages dialogue, and empowers communities to express their concerns and needs.¹²

Strategies

- Develop a plan, including human and financial resources, to review public health communications to ensure they are appropriate to communities served, and do not perpetuate stereotypes or contribute to stigma and discrimination. Work with healthcare communicators to improve communications
- Foster a network of CSOs that can help translate public health messages into common languages in your jurisdiction and that are culturally appropriate.
- Advocate for the establishment of an emergency fund to support CSOs that assist priority populations in accessing and understanding public health information during crisis.

Working as a Team

Just as in sports, where each player must excel in their role while collaborating with teammates, effective pandemic response requires strong partnerships among government, public health and community rightsholders. Provincial actors can prioritize equity-focused collaboration by ensuring that responses are inclusive and consultative.

A. Understand the Context

CSOs play a crucial role in pandemic preparedness by fostering a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of diverse populations. Recognizing systemic inequities and cultural norms within affected communities is essential. In Canada, this includes addressing the ongoing impacts of colonization and advocating for the integration of cultural safety and humility training in municipal preparedness initiatives.

B. Engage with Diverse Perspectives

Just as a successful sports team benefits from diverse specialists, an effective pandemic response thrives on the active engagement of varied communities and stakeholders. CSOs can foster interdisciplinary collaboration, ensuring that diverse voices inform inclusive policy development. This involves collaborating across sectors—public health, education,

and community organizations—to create well-rounded, evidence-based solutions that reflect the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

C. Keep in Mind Overall Equity Goals

Pandemic policies must address immediate response needs while aligning with long-term equity goals. CSOs should advocate for a shared understanding of policy objectives, addressing both short- and long-term needs without compromising equity. This holistic approach will ensure that broader equity objectives are embedded in emergency response strategies.

D. Culturally Competent Communication

Effective communication is critical during a pandemic, and messages must be culturally tailored to resonate with diverse populations. CSOs should help develop communication strategies that reflect the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity of their communities, ensuring that public health messaging reaches and is comprehensible to all.

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