

# Challenges and Strategies in NPOs' Operations during Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on life around the world is shocking, and non-profits are not immune to the disruption. Unsurprising consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for non-profit organisations (NPOs) are a drops in funding, staff and volunteers. The funding outlook in many NPOs can only be described as 'rough and scary'. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges some opportunities emerged. Many leaders of NPOs lack strategies to build and maintain a financially sustainable organization to continue providing vital services. Focusing on the NPO's operations strategy, this single longitudinal case study explored strategies the NPO leaders used to maintain survivability during a general economic downturn caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Using observations and in-depth semi structured interviews, questionnaires and organisation's records, this study has shown that for the NPO under study, working from home was feasible. However, not all programs and services offered by the NPO could be digitalised. The pandemic, therefore inspired the NPOs to be more agile, to pivot and approach issues innovatively. It also challenged NPOs to look at their operations differently going forward. While it has been difficult in many ways, it also has been positive in adapting their cultures to be more flexible and paperless. Partnership is one aspect said to be worth exploring in order to keep staff by sharing employee's time and cost of employment. The study makes a contribution by revealing the complex sources that cause challenges for NPOs; stressing the changing nature of challenges during a pandemic; showing the importance of NPOs' willingness to adapt; and conceptualising with organisational theories/views such as: process view of an NPO; organisational resilience and sustainability; performance and change management; resource dependency theory and resource based view.

## Keywords

Operations management, Non-profit organizations, NPO, COVID-19, Pandemic, Strategies and Challenges.

## 1. Introduction

The existence of non-profit organizations (NPOs) has been traditionally explained by the "market failure" theory, thus NPOs are established as community solutions to fill the void of market failure (Valentinov, V., 2008). However, the market failures they address are consistent with the motivations of non-profit magnates. Non-profits have historically had a significant impact on society (Benoy, 2018). They play a vital role in trying to resolve the challenges and inequalities within our communities. In the past decades, the NPO sector has experienced some significant diversity and complexity changes as well as growth. Nonetheless, many NPOs lack strategies to build and maintain a sustainable organization to continue providing vital impactful services. Needless to say, organisations use strategic planning to provide a structured process that defines their success and more importantly, that determines their operational steps to get there and align resources and staff to achieve the goal in any given time. A major obstacle to strategic planning, is finding the needed time to slow down and focus on the *important* instead of the *urgent*. Strategic planning is always important but rarely urgent. Crafting, revising and updating a strategic plan are valuable exercises for a successful non-profit but often these get pushed off for latter. The current pandemic crisis changed the circumstances quickly and radically. Strategic plans have turned into assets such that those NPOs who had active strategic plans in place had a huge advantage towards prioritising resources and providing clarity in decision-making. In these uncertain times the plans have become living documents that are agile and flexible. Non-profits ordinarily struggle to maintain financial sustainability (Bowman, 2011) and create new pathways to accomplish their mission. While innovation has become a core driver for the success and survival of organizations

regardless of their size and nature, many NPOs feel that it is a luxury they cannot afford. In fact, technology and innovation seem out of reach. Researchers have analysed ways non-profits approach achieving sustainability and the penalties of not achieving this goal (Borges, 2017; Bowman, 2011). Likewise this work emerged from on-going studies on continuous improvements in NPOs for sustainability. This paper forms part of a wider research project looking into how non-profit organisations can improve performance by using a unified theory of continuous improvement. The continuous improvement model reflects the idea that organizations should undertake incremental improvements to services, products, and processes and is guided by a few core principles.

The research problem was that there was limited research on leadership strategies for non-profits to facilitate the balance of achieving the organizational mission and sustainability, particularly during a crisis such as a pandemic. Thus, taking care of the dual bottom line of an NPO during a crisis. Both mission impact and financial stability can be achieved through effective and efficient operations management. However, sustainability achievement in NPOs is not an easy task. The purpose of this single case study was to explore the challenges and strategies the NPO leaders used to maintain survivability and impact sustainability during COVID 19 pandemic. An extended purpose of the study was to increase the understanding of how current leaders of non-profit organizations use strategies to achieve sustainability and maintain the mission of the non-profit organization. The final goal of this paper is to motivate and arouse OM researchers to develop significant theoretical and empirical models in this stream of literature.

Theoretical frameworks such as resource dependency and resource based theories, change management theory and the process view of an organisation guided the study. These theories helped develop the main research question of, how has COVID-19 pandemic impacted on non-profit organizations and what leadership strategies, if any, have been employed to maintain sustainability and organizational mission? Findings of this study might contribute to positive change by providing information to NPO leaders to help improve their strategies and sustainability for service organizations during general economic downturns.

This article, describes the results from a rich single longitudinal case study as the methodology, applying inductive and deductive reasoning approaches. The next three sections contain a brief literature review, a description of operations management issues in NPOs, and a discussion of methodology. The remainder of this article presents observations from the case study on applying relevant theories to the NPO. From these experiences preliminary conclusions have been drawn.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Aspects

Recently, the operations management (OM) community has started to pay increasing attention to the analysis of non-profit operations. Yet, what is it about this type of operation that makes it particularly interesting to OM scholars? This question is often addressed by studying the objectives, actors, and main activities of non-profit operations and the most common challenges they face.

Non-profit scholars and managers mostly know that non-profits need the public's trust for legitimacy, for effectiveness, and for non-financial as well as financial support.

### *Operations management in NPOs*

All organisations worry about how to survive and continue their success in the future. A business strategy is often considered as a plan or set of goals that defines the long-term path and actions needed to ensure the organization's future success. However, no matter how big these plans or goals are, business strategy can only be effective if it emerges in the operations of the organization. The long-term path of an organization's strategic lifeline is actually a set of thousands of organization's day-to-day operations and operations strategy is a tool designed to ensure the competitiveness of the organization. The strategy of the operations seeks to organize the organization's resources and form a model of sustainable operational decisions that will lead to the proper functioning of the organization for effective competition and future success. Although today's successful organizations have increasingly used operational strategies as tools for sustained success, the distinction in the scientific work between the concept of operation strategy and operations management is not clear. Resources that address the concept of operations strategy in a comprehensive manner are still very limited.

For easy navigation through the various parts of a non-profit operation, Gemma Berenguer (2019), took a process view of operation (see fig 1). It has the basic structure of any operation consisting of suppliers, the provider (NPO), and customers (beneficiaries), with the addition of donors. Beneficiaries are the recipients of the good or service the non-profit operation provides and might or might not pay for it. Quite often, in non-profit operations, donors are driven by their own incentives and roles, and they may become a very powerful force. There are usually, common major challenges that concern donors but they are not focused on in this article.

Non-profit business models, involve both financial and mission impact. They are about how an NPO's activities (programs & fundraising) fit together and leverage each other. Every activity has both an impact strategy and a revenue strategy. Nonetheless, a key aspect concerns performance measurement.

#### *Strategic performance measurement*

The managers and constituents of non-profits have become more concerned about measuring and managing organizational performance. Financial measures alone, or even complemented with an assortment of ad hoc non-financial measures, are no longer adequate to motivate and assess mission accomplishments. NPOs are under increasing pressure to prove to their constituencies that they are achieving their missions and goals in an efficient and effective way (Murray [2005](#), in Verschuere (2020)). This environmental pressure on NPOs by their funders, clients, regulators, and other stakeholders is one of the primary causes of the growing interest in organizational performance. Robert S. Kaplan (2001) described the adaptation of the balanced scorecard to the NPO sector. He advocated that success for non-profits be measured by how effectively and efficiently they meet the needs of their communities. Financial considerations have an enabling or limiting role but are hardly the main objective. At a micro, programmatic level, NPOs can have innumerable measures to track and control local initiatives but, the measures will not relate to overall organizational mission and objectives. In their final book chapter, Cameron and Whitten (1983) (in Robert S Kaplan (2001)) offer two conclusions about organizational effectiveness: (1) "There cannot be one universal model of organizational effectiveness" (pp. 262–267); and (2) "It is more worthwhile to develop frameworks for assessing effectiveness than to try to develop theories of effectiveness" (pp. 267–269).

Effectiveness can be defined as the ratio between the objectives an organization sets and the outcomes that are the result of its efforts, while efficiency can be defined as the ratio between organizational inputs and outputs. Measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of NPOs is complicated by factors such as goal ambiguity, multiple stakeholders with diverse expectations and perspectives, and the nature of the goods or services NPOs provide.

Herman and Renz (2004), developed a scale to measure NPO effectiveness with its different dimensions. They gave nine distinct dimensions of effectiveness: financial management, fundraising, program delivery, public relations, community collaboration, working with volunteers, human resource management, governance relations, and board governance.

The question, under which circumstances are NPOs effective and efficient, has been addressed by considerable literature. Three sets of variables have been identified that are thought to have an effect on the effectiveness and efficiency of NPOs (Herman & Renz, 2004; Schmid, 2002; Forbes, 1998): the practice and the efficiency of the *board of the organization*, the *management practice*, and *organizational characteristics*. More recent research supports the hypothesis that *effective board practice* (e.g., the use of prescribed board practice such as involvement in strategic planning, using meeting management techniques, and low internal conflict) is related to organizational effectiveness. In addition to that, there is a substantial amount of evidence that relates effective *management practice* (e.g., planning, measuring results, independent audit) to organizational effectiveness.

#### *Resource dependency and resource based view*

Resource dependence theory (RDT) has long been a primary framework for understanding organization-environmental relations. Resource dependency focuses on the link between organisations and their environment. Resource dependency theorists claim that organizations are limited by a range of external pressures (Pfeiffer and Salancik, 1978; Pfeiffer, 1981) in Bernd Helmig et al (2004). The theorists also point to the interconnections between the environment and organizations. This theory stipulates that organizations must be responsive to external demands and expectations to survive. RDT recognizes the influence of external factors on organizational behaviour and, although constrained by their context, managers can act to reduce environmental uncertainty and dependence. Likewise, earlier works identified organizational resources as important (e.g., [Penrose, 1959](#) in [Jay B. Barney \(2011\)](#)), but a resource based view (RBV) of the firm did not begin to take shape until the 1980s. The 80s were dominated by frameworks that focused externally, such as Porter's (1980) five-forces model, but the gradual emergence of the RBV began to redirect attention inside of organizations (Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, and Yiu, 1919).

#### *Organisational sustainability and resilience*

Sustainability: - An organisation or system's ability to meet needs now without compromising its ability to meet future needs. For non-profits, financial sustainability and programmatic sustainability cannot be separated. Ordinarily, it's not enough to have a high-impact programme if there's no effective strategy for sustaining the organisation financially. Neither is it enough to be financially stable. Non-profit organisations are built for impact, not for financial stability (Jeanne Bell et al, 2010). However, in recent years, the term sustainability is being adopted by many non-profit and government organizations. Sustainable development (SD) concept involves social, economic and environmental development (Govindan, 2016). It is believed that sustainability in the future will be a major source of competitive advantage, so, the amount of investments in sustainability is increasing in all industries and organizations (Hsu 2017 and Hopkins in Chandra (2020)). Stochetti (2012) highlighted that the development of sustainability management

and performance of an enterprise is an open door for the organizations' improvement and development as opposed to a risk. Its advantages can expand the organization's reputation, increment in labour relations, draw in more assets, and diminish the worries of partners for organizations (Lee, 2012). However, sustainability achievement in NPOs is not an easy task.

Organizational resilience refers to the ability to respond productively to significant disruptive change and transform challenges into opportunities (Witmer, 2016). Resilience refers to the ability to respond to competing priorities with mindfulness, optimism and energy. It is the ability to adapt and succeed, regardless of the circumstances. Resilient organizations are the ones that have a broader array of options and are prepared to shift depending on how the future plays out. There is a gap in the literature about resilient non-profit organizations and its application for identifying organizational conditions for successful adaption to external variables that threaten their existence.

#### *Change Management*

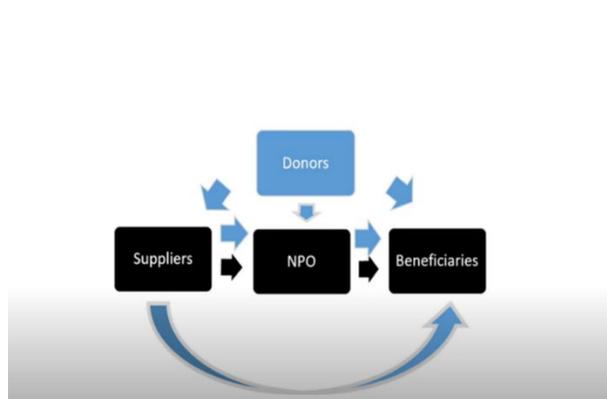
Change infiltrates the environment of non-profit organizations. It is a reality that NPOs cannot afford to ignore. The reality of change means that non-profits should understand change in the external environment and position the organization to effectively adapt in a timely manner.

Insights into why change in NPOs is unique and contextual factors that shape the dynamics of change in the sector have been detailed by Akingbola (2019). The same author describes the nature and drivers of change in NPOs as well as the specific characteristics of change and strategies that NPOs implement to manage change. Lack of resources and dependence on donor funding are cited as the key challenges. The need for change to processes and tools has not been understated.

Since non-profits are unique in terms of their characteristics and processes, change management in them is guided by the flow in their unique supply chain. Existing change management models have been developed from research undertaken largely within the for-profit sector, with little reference to the unique challenges of the non-profit sector. Literature has identified a number of characteristics of change management that may be unique to the non-profit sector. Key characteristics in planned change models when applied to non-profits include:

- formal reflection for change agents and change recipients,
- development of trust, and confidence in the organisation before the actual change,
- focussing on the individual experience of change, and
- the sequencing of events from a planning perspective.

Effective people management is critical to the success of any organizational change effort. More than ever, non-profit organizations are embracing strategy in order to navigate the rapid change in their operating environment. Figure 2 shows a summary of the literature and theoretical reviews used in this study.



**Figure 1:** NPO Supply chain *Source- Berenguer (2019)*



**Figure2:** Summary of the literature and theories used.

### **3. Methodology**

This study used a qualitative exploratory approach using a single longitudinal case study. Qualitative case study methodology enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of intricate phenomena within some specific context. One purposively selected NPO in SA participated in the study. NPO with more than 15 branches nationwide, supporting over 5000 beneficiaries and with up to 250 employees. Textual data were collected for research and analysis. Semi-structured interviews (face-to-face and telephone), questionnaires and the NPO's documents and website were the main sources of both primary and secondary data. Questions were designed in such a way as to

spark a futures-thinking process, assess current critical uncertainties and identify new realities. The collected research data was used to examine the knowledge about the NPO and experiences of its programs as well as people. Qualitative analysis methods were used applying inductive and deductive reasoning approaches. To use inductive reasoning, it was necessary to begin with specific observations and measures so as to detect patterns and regularities, formulate some tentative hypotheses that could be explored, and finally end up developing some general conclusions or theories and frameworks.

To study what the NPO's staff on the ground, in the midst of the unfolding crisis, were seeing and experiencing and what they anticipate might be coming over the horizon, questionnaires and interviews were used. Content analysis was to organize and elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it. The knowledge was also sufficient for thematic analysis to be done.

## 5. Results and Discussion

There has been an initiative underway before the pandemic is continuous improvement for sustainability. This, most probably, positioned this NPO to respond in the manner they did. The NPO never stopped operating.

From the analyses of the answers to the questionnaires and interview responses by management, it was evident that the organisation experienced a decline in revenue (grants, donations, etc.), a shortage of cash flow and an increase in expenses. This is typical of NPOs during a crisis. These are ordinarily due the increased demand and shortage of input materials. Using the supply chain mode for an NPO according to Berenguer (2019), input materials come from suppliers and donors. Staff and volunteers were affected and the NPO had to consider laying off some of their staff as a way to reduce their salary costs. In the face of these challenges, they did not reduce their intakes.

Based on the survey results, to keep their programs and activities within their mission and vision, the NPO's leadership were quick to revisit their strategic plan. Interviews with the leadership of the NPO revealed that the key issues of focus were:

- making sure that their programs and activities remain within the parameters of their vision, strategy and objectives
- evaluating both internal and external factors that may need changes or affect their ability to deliver on mission
- detecting possible scenarios and developing contingency plans to assist delivering on impact

Constant revision of their strategic plan benefited the NPO through:

- realigning their purpose and setting realistic goals
- adapting quickly to the changing environment and
- exploiting their strength to increase efficiency by making sure employees know where the NPO is heading to and what is expected of them

The revisions also enabled them to detect that some original near-term objectives and tasks were suddenly obsolete and un-actionable in the light of COVID-19. To stay true to the NPO's mission, everyone was included in discussions and they consistently communicated to all parties. To stay true to the NPO's mission, everyone was included in discussions and they consistently communicated to all parties. The results of the survey confirmed that new opportunities could also be identified.

Decisions on desired changes were taken based on the contribution of the factors to the mission. With the mission in every employee's vision, the NPO constantly readjusted their strategic plan. The strategic plan was almost alive in the NPO and it was used to detect possible consequences and develop contingency measures to deliver on impact. As a result the NPO had to devise new operating plans to carry on with their programs while protecting and caring for its people. Thoughts mostly on survivability not sustainability. The NPO turned to working remotely. Staff managed the virtual tutoring space, ensuring effective learner and tutor participation. They arranged for investment towards remote working (i.e., laptops, tablets and other remote technology devices). Working remotely gave rise to many new challenges that included making sure that they adhere to the responsibilities surrounding this new way of delivering their services.

Ordinarily, there is a temptation to believe that, during stormy times, activities like strategic planning, learning engagements and conducting evaluations get in the way of the good work non-profits do, or at the least that they are luxuries NPOs can't afford in times of crisis. This is not what was observed with this NPO, they were very quick to use the plan as a guiding tool during the uncertain times caused by the pandemic.

Due to the fast changing environment, their strategic planning efforts included activities that needed to be done both immediately and in the short- as well as long term. A critical aspect of their short-term strategy was an honest and in-depth analysis of impact. This was possible because of the clarity they have on the measurement of their impact. The NPO has Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that show where they are in relation to their reasons for existing. NPOs understands the real difference they are making in the lives of the individuals that they are funded to serve. They thus,

focused intensely on measuring the value of what they do. Failure to measure impact would endanger sustainability. To achieve this, leadership ensured that employees through the organization are devoted to the measurement and analysis, and in taking key steps to improve performance when indicated. This sort of detailed examination helped to drive the inception of crucial tactical activities required for investment such as technology and training.

Data analysis of interview transcripts, questionnaires' responses, organizational documents and the organization's website revealed partnerships as a strategy used to maintain survivability (impact sustainability) during the pandemic. Worth noting was the partnerships with the parents of the learners. They leveraged their relationships with parents, requesting them to avail their phones to their children during this period. Another theme that emerged from the results was that of innovation/ filling in the gap. This finding reinforced that non-profits need to adapt to the ever-changing economic environment to maintain sustainability.

Using the framework of resilience, themes that equipped this NPO to successfully adapt to operations changes were identified. They included: commitment to the mission, improvisation, community reciprocity, servant and transformational leadership, hope and optimism, and general transparency.

The NPO found ways to weather the changes that came with COVID-19. Social distancing and quarantine made the implementation of operations strategies difficult, halting incoming donations, volunteers, and opportunities to hold face-to-face events. They improvised using existing resources. Our work shows that the NPOs is resilient as it adapted to market changes and stayed relevant. They took the obvious steps to i) smarten up their online presence to maintain their functionality and visibility; ii) pursue online streaming for engagement and iii) be creative within the COVID-19 confines.

The NPO made a commitment to carry on with their operations so as to make sure that their beneficiaries are least affected. Their aim was to enable their beneficiaries to realise their potential by succeeding in school and accessing post-school education/work. Therefore, their work couldn't be more important – even though schools were shut and they couldn't run tutoring sessions as usual. Tutoring continued with the use of online platforms, study material and support from parents to ensure that the NPO's mission becomes a reality. Their team worked tirelessly, from home to ensure that the organization keeps running smoothly. The NPO adapted their services in line with current developments. Through the use of WhatsApp, they created groups for learners, grouped by grade and by subject streams, to enable academic support to continue. Learners were able to post questions and the NPO facilitates learning using the virtual space. Before the lockdown, study guides had been distributed to students, so they had study resources they could use offline, while at home.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

COVID-19 has essentially changed the world. The change has been fast and global. The NPO under study made numerous changes to their operations management model in an effort to continue helping their beneficiaries. The changes have required new levels of resilience in the NPO's entire supply chain (suppliers, donors, beneficiaries and the NPO itself).

This study provides insights into strategies that NPOs can pursue during an economic downturn. Our analyses show that there is no body of management theory that deals with NPO strategic choices. The findings of this study demonstrate that:

- Challenging times, particularly those that cause major disruptions, are situations that need leaders to learn and adjust course quickly, while centring critical decisions on data to the greatest extent possible.
- Having a strategic plan that is a flexible "living document" that is reviewed often and used by leadership and staff makes an NPO stand not only apart but ahead when navigating through a crisis such as a pandemic.
- Continuously adapting strategies as the learning goes on can eventually create impact both now and well into the future.
- In uncertain times, selecting a single best plan of action is unrealistic while strategic flexibility becomes a core management concept to pursue

These findings suggest that the resilient characteristics displayed by this NPO equipped them to productively respond to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Consequently, using resilience as a process and not simply an outcome after recovery, non-profit organizations can have the ability to continuously respond to challenges and provide uninterrupted and valuable services to society. In response to the constantly changing environment NPOs need their resilient capacity to be innovative and creative as they operate in uncertain and unstable environments. The study also shows that, if resources and strategic decision-making are dedicated to alleviating the effects of COVID uncertainties, an NPO can implement strategies often used in for-profit organisations.

Although in the time of Covid-19, most NPOs have seen donations drop, doors close, and cash reserves decrease and generally the pandemic has brought many huge uncertainties, it has also been a time of opportunities. It has been a time to reimagine who and what your organization is about.

Existing theoretical frameworks could be applied for the purposes of identifying NPO conditions for successful adaptation of external variables that threaten the existence of the organisation. The NPO in this study demonstrated the ability to adapt and succeed, regardless of the circumstances. The NPO strives to do better all the time. The board, the management and existing operations processes of organisation played a major role.

From the finding of this study, it is possible to understand that if an organisation has a stable structural arrangement, appropriate staffing levels, funding, technology and strategic plans then it may have greater capacity to respond and adapt to sudden disruptions. The findings of this study might contribute to positive social change by providing information to NPO leaders to help improve operational strategies and sustainability for impact during general economic downturns.

The longitudinal study showed that the NPO was constantly testing their thinking whenever circumstances changed and used scenario thinking to develop the capacity to adapt. For them strategic planning was about setting the groundwork for what they will learn along the way. While it is difficult for any NPOs to know how local, national, or even global events will affect society, the economy, or their own field six months or a year later, the NPO under study is navigating the uncertainty caused by COVI-19 with greater confidence by building scenario plans that can help them continue to pursue their mission.

The pandemic has somewhat pushed the NPO under study to plan for the immediate, medium- and long-term? They were able to continue delivering their services because they communicated with clarity, re-evaluated their operations, closely monitored cash flows, collaborated for impact and prioritised technology. The idea of NPOs becoming data driven is not necessarily new. Good data and accompanying analyses give rise to good tactics and ability to weather the storms.

For NPOs to ensure their relevance, it is recommended that:

- NPOs look at their operations differently going forward
- NPOs be more agile to pivot and approach issues innovatively
- NPOs consider exploring partnerships in order to share resources such as staff
- Some of the NPOs programs be digitalised

Risk assessment, risk mitigation, contingency planning and risk monitoring be accommodated in NPOs.

There is need to articulate a multi-dimensional framework for measuring and managing NPO effectiveness. A Strategic Flexibility Analysis (SFA) framework can also be used.

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