

# Journal of Rural and Community Development

## Addressing Covid-19 Challenges Through Multi-sectoral Collaboration: The Rural Rebound Case Studies

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**Citation:**

Hernandez Gongora, L., & Ragetlie, N. (2021). Addressing Covid-19 challenges through multi-sectoral collaboration: The rural rebound case studies. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 16(4), 76–86.

**Publisher:**

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

**Editor:**

Dr. Doug Ramsey

**Open Access Policy:**

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# **Addressing Covid-19 Challenges Through Multi-sectoral Collaboration: The Rural Rebound Case Studies**

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## **Abstract**

In early 2020, after the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized Covid-19 as a pandemic, several regional directors of this organization called all sectors of society to work together in supporting Covid-19 responses. In the past year, governments, businesses, not-for-profits, and citizens have been collaborating to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. These impacts look different in rural areas than in large cities. The Rural Rebound case studies included in this paper highlight the experiences, learnings, and recommendations from selected stakeholders in rural Ontario, Canada, reflecting multi-sectoral collaboration. The underlying approach of the Rural Rebound Initiative, developed by the Rural Ontario Institute, is promoting peer-to-peer learning so other rural regions responding to similar concerns can take ideas from the case studies and adapt them to their own context.

Multi-sectoral collaboration is not new or exclusive to Covid-19 responses, but it is a critical element that contributes to overcoming any crisis. The case studies, although different in nature, concurred on the importance of this type of collaboration to build on each other's knowledge and generate solutions that respond to actual needs. Multi-sectoral collaboration also allows optimizing resources such as time, funds, and expertise. More than a year has passed since the pandemic started and there is still uncertainty about the future. Rural stakeholders, as do others, need to keep collaborating, working in partnerships, adapting, innovating, and learning from each other in order to navigate through the uncertainty.

**Keywords:** rural, COVID-19, collaboration, peer learning

## **Relever les défis de la Covid-19 grâce à une collaboration multisectorielle: études de cas sur le rebond rural**

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### **Résumé**

Début 2020, après que l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) a qualifié la Covid-19 de pandémie, plusieurs directeurs régionaux de cette organisation ont appelé tous les secteurs de la société à travailler ensemble pour soutenir les réponses à la Covid-19. Au cours de la dernière année, les gouvernements, les entreprises, les organisations à but non lucratif et les citoyens ont collaboré pour atténuer les impacts de la pandémie. Ces impacts sont différents selon les zones, rurales ou urbaines. Les études de cas sur le rebond rural incluses dans cet article soulignent les expériences, les apprentissages et les recommandations de parties prenantes sélectionnées dans les régions rurales de l'Ontario, au Canada, reflétant une collaboration multisectorielle. L'approche sous-jacente de l'Initiative de rebond rural, développée par le Rural Ontario Institute, encourage l'apprentissage entre pairs afin que d'autres régions rurales répondant à des préoccupations similaires puissent s'inspirer des études de cas et les adapter à leur propre contexte.

La collaboration multisectorielle n'est pas nouvelle ou exclusive aux réponses de la Covid-19, mais c'est un élément essentiel qui contribue à surmonter toute crise. Les études de cas, bien que de nature différente, ont concordé sur l'importance de ce type de collaboration pour s'appuyer sur les connaissances de chacun et générer des solutions qui répondent aux besoins réels. La collaboration multisectorielle permet également d'optimiser les ressources telles que le temps, les fonds et l'expertise. Plus d'un an s'est écoulé depuis le début de la pandémie et l'avenir demeure incertain. Les intervenants ruraux, comme les autres, doivent continuer à collaborer, à travailler en partenariat, à s'adapter, à innover et à apprendre les uns des autres afin de traverser les phases d'incertitude.

**Mots clés:** rural, COVID-19, collaboration, apprentissage entre pairs

## 1.0 Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the WHO (World Health Organization) characterized Covid-19 as a pandemic (2020). A few days later, several of the WHO's regional directors unanimously called for solidarity as a key element in the fight against Covid-19. Among other actions, this call included encouraging communities and all sectors of society to engage and support governments' responses (Kokudo & Sugiyama, 2020). In the past year, multiple sectors of society including governments, businesses, not-for-profits, and citizens, have come together in an effort to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 (Jeong & Kim, 2021).

Collaboration has been identified by researchers as a critical factor in crisis management as it might enhance response capacity (Nohrstedt, 2018). The term collaboration is usually used interchangeably with other concepts including coordination and cooperation (Motsi, 2009); however, several authors see them as different stages in the same spectrum (Frey et al., 2006; Gajda, 2004). Castañer and Oliveira (2020) reviewed more than 300 relevant articles discussing collaboration, coordination, and cooperation. The authors found the following common attributes in the various definitions of collaboration: (a) negotiation, (b) bilateral communication, (c) joint learning driven by knowledge exchange, (d) equal-symmetric contributions from partners, (e) commitment, and (f) fairness. According to Sawalha (2014), collaboration in the context of crisis management is defined as “the capacity of organisations, societies, and countries to coordinate and join efforts, prior to, during, and after major incidents, in an attempt to prevent or, at least mitigate adverse consequences through effective utilisation of technology, unique leadership, teamwork, and communications” (p. 319). In the specific context of Covid-19, Cyr et al. (2021) found evidence that collaboration between state and non-state actors contributed to preventing deaths and reducing other negative health related outcomes. The authors argue that “collaboration allowed governments to pool from other stakeholders the resources they lacked” (Cyr et al. 2021, p. 21). Examples of these resources are knowledge and expertise from the academic, private and non-for-profit sectors.

Collaboration, especially between the public and private sectors, poses challenges related to the diversity of stakeholders. Caldwell et al. (2017) identified “outcome misalignment” (p. 909) as one of the main challenges of multi-sectoral collaboration. This means that the organizations involved in collaborative work might not share the same goals. While the goals of public organizations involve achieving social benefits, private companies usually intend to maximize profit. In the context of crisis management, Eide et al. (2012) found several challenges in inter-agency collaboration that can be classified in three categories: “(1) efficient communication between participating actors, (2) establishing and maintaining a shared situation awareness, and (3) achieving organizational understanding.” (p. 7). However, these authors argue that it is possible to bridge the diverse interests of organizations and mitigate these challenges.

Globally and in Canada, Covid-19 has impacted rural areas differently than cities (Hall et al., 2020). Compared to their urban counterparts, rural people around the world are more vulnerable because of the lack of access to well-equipped health centres and the high rate of population at risk such as the elderly, indigenous people, and people with previous health issues. In addition, working from home or social distancing may not be an option for workers in the primary sector. Even if rural

people were able to work and/or study from home, they face low internet access and lack of adequate devices to connect (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). In Canada, while 35% of businesses in urban areas offered the possibility to work from home, only 17.5% of rural businesses were able to offer this option. By the same token, while 13.2% of urban businesses made more than 30% of their sales online, only 6.3% of rural businesses were able to do the same (Smailes et al., 2021).

Even though the urban–rural digital divide was amplified by Covid-19 (Weeden & Kelly, 2020), rural areas in Canada performed better than large cities in terms of maintaining the levels of employment and remaining operational. In rural and small towns, a smaller impact on rural employment compared to urban employment has been observed for most of the months since the pandemic started (Rural Ontario Institute, 2021a). While almost 50% of the rural businesses remained operational during the pandemic only 40% of the businesses in large cities did the same (Smailes et al., 2021).

This article describes two case studies that are included in the Rural Rebound Initiative developed by the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) in early 2020 and presents the main benefits and challenges of multi-stakeholder collaboration identified by the participants of the initiative.

## **2.0 Methodology**

We utilized a case study method to explore, describe and understand the selected case by collecting qualitative data. This article focuses on the Rural Rebound Initiative which includes two case studies. This study can be classified as descriptive and intrinsic (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It is descriptive because it intends to illustrate the learnings and recommendations from rural stakeholders participating in this initiative on how their rural communities responded and adapted to the unique economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is intrinsic in its motivation because we have a genuine interest in understanding this case as we were directly involved in the design and implementation of the initiative.

### **2.1 The Rural Rebound Initiative**

ROI is a Canadian charitable not-for-profit organization established in 2010 through the amalgamation of The Centre for Rural Leadership and The Ontario Rural Council. Its mission is “developing leaders and facilitating collaboration on issues facing rural and northern Ontario” (Rural Ontario Institute, 2021b). ROI is managed by a board of no less than three and no more than 12 directors (Rural Ontario Institute, 2017). Cummings et al. (2013) state that “the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) has played an active role in the area of leadership development in Ontario by developing and delivering the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP)” (p.3.)

In April 2020, ROI started a project called the Rural Rebound Initiative. This initiative collected, curated, and shared stories featuring examples of innovation for responding, adapting, and recovering from Covid-19. These stories were driven by citizens, local governments, businesses, or community organizations from across rural Ontario. The collected stories and other useful resources and tools are shared on the Rural Rebound section ([www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/ruralreboundcovid19](http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/ruralreboundcovid19)) of ROI’s website. The purpose of the Rural Rebound Initiative was to promote peer-to-peer knowledge exchange as ROI expects that rural stakeholders will look at these stories to take ideas and recommendations and adapt them to their own context.

ROI used two strategies to collect stories: (a) submissions from rural actors through a survey that was available on the website; and (b) gathering stories from newspapers, social media, websites, newsletters, partner organizations, and other communication tools. Most of the stories featured at the Rural Rebound site were collected using the second method. The topics showcased in the stories are diverse such as farmers advertising and selling their products on social media because the farmer markets were closed, indigenous communities donating fish to local food banks, or local companies manufacturing protective gear or hand sanitizer. The Rural Rebound Initiative did not intend to collect stories showcasing multi-stakeholder collaboration specifically, however this was a common topic among them.

ROI received only two responses expressing interest in a follow-up discussion. The actors who submitted their stories self-identified their projects as innovative and/or successful. Given the small number of responses, ROI designed and conducted semi-structured, in-depth virtual interviews with the stakeholders involved in each project in order to gather detailed information on each of them. The interviewees were asked to discuss the following topics:

- Setting the context: key sectors contributing to the region's economy and the main impacts of Covid-19.
- About the project: starting date, description of the project–initiative, stakeholders involved, main outcomes next steps.
- Learnings and recommendations: value of the initiative, benefits and challenges, recommendations and suggestions for other rural communities working on their economic recovery.

The interviews were conducted in June and July 2020. These two case studies are also posted on ROI's website. They include a link to watch the complete interview and a written summary of the interviews.

### **3.0 The Rural Rebound Case Studies**

The two case studies described below showcase the following initiatives: the Supporting Oxford Platform and the Northumberland Economic Recovery Task Force. The interviewees from both initiatives, although different in nature, reported multi-sectoral collaboration involving partnerships between the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors as a key element to address various economic challenges in their communities amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### ***3.1 Supporting Oxford: A Project Created With Collaboration and Love***

Oxford is a County located in southwestern Ontario, Canada. This county includes eight communities. Oxford's rural areas are rich in natural resources, history, and farming communities. The interviewees reported that the key economic sectors in Oxford's economy are: automotive and manufacturing, agriculture and food processing, and tourism. Examples of the local businesses in Oxford County are the farms that have added tourism to their operation, cheese producers, maple syrup producers and farm equipment manufacturers. According to the interviewees, the main impacts of Covid-19 in the economy are workforce shortages in agriculture, supply chain challenges and production schedule modifications in manufacturing, and businesses in the tourism sector having to find new ways to engage with consumers as a result of the health restrictions. One of the interviewees highlighted

that despite the challenges, many local businesses in Oxford County reported that the demand for their products exceeded the supply in the early months of the pandemic.

The interviewees described the initiative as follows: Supporting Oxford (<https://www.supportingoxford.ca/>) is an online directory for local businesses impacted by Covid-19 where they can submit their business information and offers an alternative way to reach consumers. This project was the result of collaborative work between the not-for-profit Community Futures Oxford and a local digital marketing expert. Two departments of the local government, Tourism Oxford and Oxford Connections, were also working on ideas to support local businesses. They connected with the managers of the platform to have periodic conversations on how a campaign to promote purchasing local would look like. Tourism Oxford re-directed their regular campaign budget to push the Supporting Oxford platform as it already had the directory of businesses and an audience. The outcomes of this partnership were: over 600 thousand impressions with the digital campaign, the click-through rate was above industry average, and the business community felt heard and supported.

From the viewpoint of the interviewees, the main benefit of this initiative was that Supporting Oxford tackled the problem of people wanting to support local businesses but not necessarily wanting the traditional experience of shopping. Having a presence online and making it consumer focused is critical in the Covid-19 era. This online platform helped businesses connect with their consumers and made it easier for consumers to find what they were looking for as it was a ‘user-friendly’ digital tool. The platform included categories such as: (a) food and drinks, (b) online fitness, (c) non-medical grade masks, (d) garden centres, and (e) golf courses, among others. The categories were broken down by location as well. The businesses were encouraged to update their listings with new guidelines and operating hours as Oxford moved through the different stages of the re-opening. The interviewees recognized that the platform is helping businesses to enhance their online presence but there is also a digital shift in business operations that includes other tools, for example, online booking options or contactless payment. Rural businesses still need support to incorporate these options into their operations.

Supporting Oxford is an example of collaboration between the not-for-profit, private, and public sectors. According to the interviewees, this initiative is based on very strong partnerships that built on reliability, dependability, and trust among organizations. The interviewees identified openness, full transparency, communication, and clear identification of roles as key elements in this partnership. They highlighted that all organizations involved in the project work with different people. By working together, they were helping more people than they would have if they were working on their own. The interviewees did not identify any challenges aside from not being able to agree with a hug and a handshake, as in-person meetings were not permitted.

The interviewees provided the following recommendations that people working in collaboration with other organizations supporting local businesses can follow:

- Partner in new ways, try new things.
- Pick up the phone, call your business community and ask how you can help. Then call some community partners, ask *are you hearing the same things?* And *what can we do about it?*

- Build on relationships and collaboration. True collaboration feeds on expertise, knowledge, and ideas. You don't have to know everything or do everything by yourself.
- Use data to support your ideas.
- Enter partnerships with the intent to take action on whatever it is that you are bringing to the table.
- Move quickly and adapt as you go.

### ***3.2 Northumberland Economic Task Force: Working Together for the Benefit of the Business Community***

Northumberland is a County in southeastern Ontario, Canada, which includes seven townships and municipalities. The interviewees mentioned that tourism constitutes a significant part of Northumberland's economy. The main impacts of Covid-19 in Northumberland's economy as reported by the interviewees were:

- Access to high-speed internet. For example, in the manufacturing sector, 25% of the workforce were sent home but half of them ended up going back to work because they couldn't connect to internet.
- Businesses' ability to offer online shopping options. People were not feeling safe with face-to-face interactions. The clients wanted to shop online but businesses, especially the small ones, were not offering online options or they needed to enhance their online and social media presence.
- Issues related to childcare for people re-integrating to work and workers' mental health.

The interviewees described the Northumberland Economic Recovery Task Force as a private-sector-driven initiative facilitated by the Economic Development department of the County. The task force had two co-chairs representing the private and public sectors and six working groups representing the key economic sectors in Northumberland's economy: (a) micro and small businesses, (b) agriculture and food processing, (c) development and construction, (d) tourism, (e) professional services, and (f) manufacturing. The working groups included 63 business owners representing around 250 businesses. Representatives of the public sector, such as the county Warden and municipal staff, not-for-profits and community organizations were also part of these working groups. In July 2020, the task force members presented a report<sup>1</sup> containing their final recommendations to guide the economic recovery of Northumberland, including directions such as 'tackle broadband deficits', 'power transition to online', 'fuel consumers' confidence', and 'invest in workforce mental health'.

When discussing the success of this initiative, the interviewees highlighted the benefits of having multi-stakeholder engagement such as developing recommendations that are addressing similar issues across sectors, identifying specific issues in the communities of the county through the help of the municipal staff, and having a link to the political world through the elected authorities that participated in the task force. The interviewees also recognized the value of having an initiative led by the business community as a key factor for the success of this

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<sup>1</sup> The Northumberland Economic Recovery Task Force Recommendations final report is available online at: [https://www.northumberland.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Documents/NC\\_RecoveryReport\\_Jul2020\\_Final\\_eBook.pdf](https://www.northumberland.ca/en/business-and-development/resources/Documents/NC_RecoveryReport_Jul2020_Final_eBook.pdf)



initiative. As a result, the voices of the businesses were heard and the recommendations were directly targeted at the needs of businesses. In addition, the business community took ownership of the implementation of the recommendations to help the county come out of the pandemic and they have agreed to come back to the task force if needed. This was considered by the interviewees as a validation of the process. Another advantage was that the process was fast as opposed to a government-led initiative that might have moved slower. The organization of the task force and developing of recommendations took less than three months, from mid-April to end of June 2020.

The interviewees discussed some of the challenges that the task force faced as a result of the involvement of multiple and diverse actors and how they mitigated these challenges. For example, individual organizations might have different priorities or potentially competing agendas but when context was provided and explanations were heard, the stakeholders came along. As one of the interviewees explained: “people put their community first; they said: *how can I help?* People left their personal agendas and egos at the door and we had the job done”. In addition, there was concern from some stakeholders that not all the key points suggested by them were taken into account by the task force. In this regard, the stakeholders were informed that the recommendations were drafts; the term ‘living document’ was used implying that the document might change when needed. Finally, the interviewees mentioned that they were somewhat frustrated by the fact that they were not able to have in-person meetings. They recognized that most of the members of the task force value human contact and at some point they were experiencing ‘Zoom fatigue’.

The interviewees highlighted the following learnings from participating in this initiative, expecting that other rural regions that are currently involved in economic recovery from Covid-19 might take some ideas and adapt them to their own contexts:

- Making it a private sector driven initiative was key to get the level of involvement that we got and getting the level of commitment in the implementation of the recommendations.
- The ultimate beneficiary has to be the business community because they are the ones that are employing the people and unless we have those people back to work, you are not going to have your economy recovered.
- The participants were happy to present an opinion, review some ideas, and move forward with an actionable item as opposed to get caught up in a heavily bureaucratic process.
- We didn’t need to ‘re-invent the wheel’. There are already programs that are available to address many of the identified needs.

#### **4.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

Multi-sectoral collaboration is not new or exclusive to Covid-19 responses, but it is a critical element that contributes to overcoming any crisis or complex problem. The stories ROI collected and shared showcase collaboration among different sectors such as community organizations, local or regional governments, businesses, and citizens. The interviewees participating in the case studies, although different in nature, concurred on the importance of this type of collaboration to build on each other’s knowledge and expertise and generate solutions that respond to actual needs.

These case studies show how multi-sectoral collaboration allows the leveraging of resources. In crisis management, time is a limited resource. In the case of Northumberland, the Economic Recovery Task Force minimized the time required to develop its recommendations because the different stakeholders were able to identify the specific needs of sectors and communities in a considerably short time. Documents, as well as projects, are dynamic, and thus can adapt and can change over time. Moving fast and making adjustments when required is a good strategy to obtain tangible results in a short period of time. The Supporting Oxford initiative is another example of resource optimization. The funds re-directed to promote the platform, that otherwise might have been lost, contributed to reaching out a wider audience and connecting local businesses with consumers. This initiative also leveraged intangible resources such as knowledge and expertise as the involved stakeholders entered the partnership bringing a different set of skills that contributed to the success of the project.

As discussed above, initiatives involving multiple stakeholders from different sectors have many benefits. However, this type of collaboration might also pose challenges such as competing interests or agendas. Both case studies demonstrated that communication is a vital component in collaborative work as it contributes to clarifying the objectives of the project and the roles of all the actors involved. Good communication was identified as necessary for the creation of trust among partners and willingness to work together to achieve common goals. The case studies also highlighted a challenge that is particular to the Covid-19 era: the restrictions to conduct in-person meetings. Although online meetings allowed both initiatives to achieve successful outcomes, the value of human interactions was recognized. When moving forward to the recovery from Covid-19, it will be important to find a balance between the use of technological tools to facilitate discussions and the opportunities to meet in person not only to work on collaborative projects but also to celebrate the outcomes.

Looking back at ROI's process to collect stories for this initiative, there is an important lesson for researchers involved in documenting Covid-19 or any other crisis. ROI launched the Rural Rebound site in April 2020 and started encouraging people to share their stories through a short online questionnaire. ROI was expecting to receive plenty of stories but actually did not receive as many as anticipated. As mentioned above, most of the stories and resources that are on the Rural Rebound site were gathered from newspapers, social media, and online searches. Reflecting on this issue, it is possible that rural stakeholders were busy trying to navigate the uncertain times and adapting to the rapid changes. They probably did not have the time to stop and say: "let's share our story". Sometimes researchers want to analyze and report current issues, but the people involved are not ready to share their stories. Perhaps sometimes we, as researchers, need to take a step back and just wait for the right time.

From the first lockdown and throughout all the stages of the re-opening, and then the second and third lockdowns, rural areas in Ontario had to come up with strategies to mitigate the economic and social impacts of Covid-19. More than a year has passed since the pandemic started and there is still uncertainty about the future. Rural stakeholders, as do others, need to keep collaborating, working in partnerships, adapting, innovating, and learning from each other in order to navigate through the uncertainty.

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