

# 4 trends set to continue or be re-interpreted in the NGO sector

By [Innocent Masayira](#)

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This year, the NGO sector has by and large demonstrated its agility in response to the Covid-19 pandemic by pivoting quickly and assertively to developing needs among beneficiaries, while at the same time coping with lockdown requirements and new social norms associated with the pandemic, such as social distancing.



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However, there were also many NGOs that ultimately succumbed and closed their doors due to shrinking donor allocations as the world's economy contracted due to lockdown restrictions.

Organisations that survived at the height of the strict lockdown regulations earlier this year demonstrated flexibility as the parameters and cost structures of how organisations worked began to shift. For example, many organisations consolidated their activities and the size of their workforce, which resulted in salary cuts and job cuts.

Meanwhile, organisations' ability to project a long-term view have been compromised by the uncertainty that the pandemic presents and instead organisations have had to orient their approach towards emergent strategies as a means of survival and relevance to the beneficiaries that they serve.

## Courageous conversations

This kind of orientation requires that courageous conversations take place in the NGO sector, especially those organisations who will have survived the turbulent waters of 2020. Leaders and teams will have to open up to individual and collective vulnerability in order to get the insights and feedback that they

need so that their sustainability and productive impact in society can be achieved. In other words, old ways of mechanistic measurement and evaluation that may have been the default prior to 2020 will need to be honestly interrogated by organisations in the context of the pandemic, which is expected to continue in 2021. Patterns of leadership that no longer serve and outmoded organisational structures can be expected to be challenged and even re-imagined because NGOs will be expected to make the transition from thinking about providing services efficiently, to thinking about and planning for organisational resilience so that services can reliably be provided.

However, NGOs are still mostly reliant on funding to keep going and the funding landscape in 2020 had been precarious and all indications are that funding pipelines are running dry. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the country's economy and things will get worse before they get better, increasing the financial pressure that NGOs are under. As funds continue to deplete, major decisions will have to be made about who stays and who gets retrenched and programme managers may find themselves with the short end of the stick because they may be viewed as too costly than programme implementors. It is expected that organisations will continue to work with a skeleton staff and trim at the top because that's within the organisational language of cost containment.

For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven that people are working productively from home and many organisations who have the means will be downsizing to support employees working from home, which will in turn increase productivity.

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### Reduced activities

A further reduction in the number of NGOs operating in 2021 can be expected and it is anticipated that activities will be reduced and consolidated in order to sail through the worst of times.

It can be expected that some funders in the short to medium term will still channel their funds to their existing NGO partners, but they will reduce their contributions in the long term. The question that inevitably arises is, what about the continued survival of under-resourced NGOs who have always struggled to pay their employees on a month-to-month basis even before 2020? These NGOs are likely to close their doors in the new year and for good, if they have not done so already. When NGOs begin to close their doors, the beneficiaries they served will be left vulnerable. It is worth remembering that civil society, otherwise known as the third sector, has a significant presence in South African society, with over 220,000 NPOs registered with the Department of Social Development. During the pandemic, mission-driven NPOs served communities which government and businesses were unable to reach. NPOs are accessible to beneficiaries and have proven to be adaptable in response to the needs on the ground. When NGOs shut down, the invisible will become starkly visible - that is, the true reality of inequality of South Africa will become more visible. Many of those in need that NGOs have been providing services to will overburden already strained government resources.

Civil society's role in building stability and growth cannot be underestimated and the sector has come up with novel ways to contribute to solving society's issues. Donor efforts to keep the sector going should be intensified as the pandemic persists.



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Therefore, trends in the NGO sector that may well continue or be re-interpreted in 2021 includes:

- Providing employees with varied, adaptive and flexible roles so that they can be trained in new skills, thus increasing organisational resilience.
- Adapting organisational work culture to be more fluid and agile.
- Increase in remote working for employees to support productivity and cost containment.
- Organisational optimism in the face of uncertainty, including having courageous conversations about new ways of doing things, located in emergent strategies.

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