

2021 SURVEY

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENEVA-BASED NGOS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While Geneva-based NGOs managed to adapt to the new context by accelerating their digitization and adopting new ways of working, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a range of challenges to organisations' operational capacities, forcing them to close, scale back and adapt their programmes. According to this survey, international Geneva NGOs effectively transitioned to online platforms, reporting an increase in outreach and participation, however it seems that this greater reliance on digital connectivity came with a cost: a lower impact and capacity to influence. It is therefore not surprising to see that NGOs noted a marked enthusiasm to resume in-person meetings and conferences in Geneva.

If the NGOs' operations and their relationships with the UN organisations have been strained, the data shows that the overall sector did not yet face a massive drop of revenues and that the layoffs of Geneva-based staff have been moderate. This resilience is further demonstrated by the fact that only a minority of NGOs consider the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their operations to be severe and to represent a significant risk for the organisation.

However, this rather positive picture, mainly due to the traditional NGO funding mechanisms as well as the public schemes put in place in the context of COVID-19 (such as the RHT), may be misleading in the long term. Concern was expressed in relation to future forecasting given that in the past, NGOs have experienced financial and national budgetary crises after a considerable delay.

Based on the results of this survey, the impact of COVID-19 on the future role of NGOs in International Geneva seems to depend on (a) how governmental donors will react and arbitrate between the various public policy priorities in the coming years (the fear of public budget crisis impact on NGO funding being high) and (b) on how other actors (mainly the UN System) will adapt to the "new normal" and engage with their civil society partners in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) represent a key constituent of International Geneva along with the International Organisations (IOs) and Diplomatic representations of member States. COVID-19 and measures taken in response to the pandemic have had a tremendous impact on the work of all entities, including NGOs. One year after the outbreak, the International Geneva Welcome Centre ([CAGI](#)) in collaboration with the United Nations Office at Geneva ([UNOG](#)), conducted a second survey to gather information from Geneva-based NGOs on the impact of the pandemic on their activities. It follows up on the [initial impact survey](#) undertaken in May 2020.

Methodology and Demographic

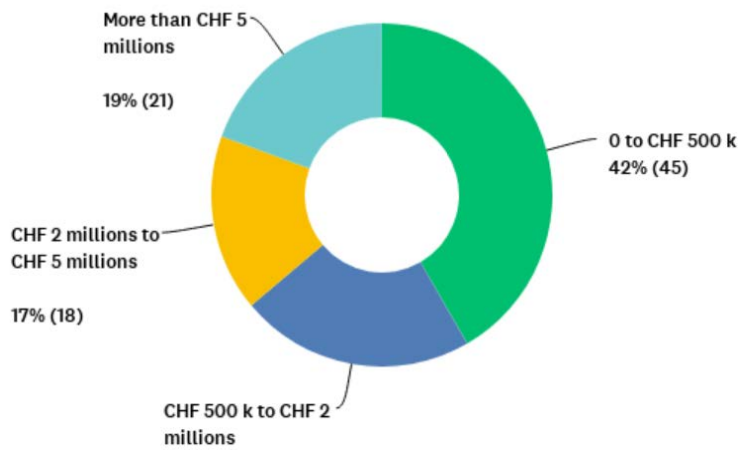
The survey was open from 8 March to 22 March 2021. The invitation to complete the survey was sent to 470 Geneva-based international NGOs.

108 NGOs of differing sizes and active in all sectors of international cooperation took part to the survey¹.

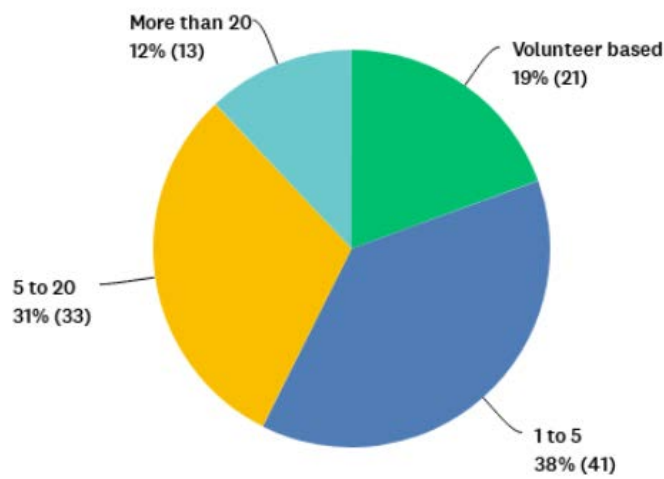
Firstly, it is important to highlight that most Geneva-based NGOs are small and medium-sized entities (SMEs), especially in comparison to the much larger United Nations (UN) agencies and related organisations. This is reflected in the respondent NGOs, among which 80% have less than 5 million CHF annual revenue and 90% employ less than 20 staff in Geneva.

Half of respondent NGOs are active in human rights and humanitarian affairs. The other respondent NGOs are active in the fields of health, environment, labour, disarmament, peace and security.

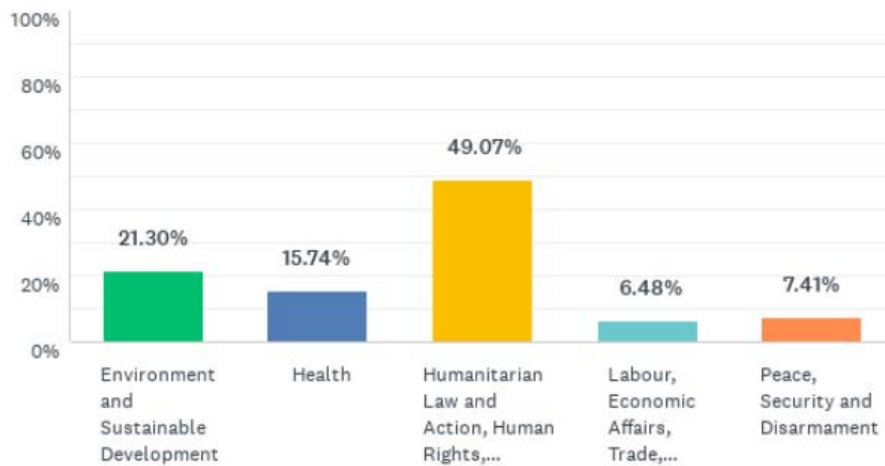
¹ In May 2020, 124 NGOs with very similar characteristics responded to the first survey. 55 NGOs completed both the 2020 and 2021 surveys.



Annual turnover of respondent NGOs (2020)



Number of employees (2020)



Main sector of activities

GENERAL IMPACT

One year after the outbreak of the pandemic, 97% of NGOs continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

A majority of respondents (67%) consider the overall impact of COVID-19 on their operations to be mild which is an increase from 54% in May 2020. After the first shock, NGOs seem to have adapted to the new reality. The impact was nevertheless felt more strongly by volunteer-based organisations and large organisations (more than 20 employees) which were 38% to rate the impact of COVID-19 on their operations as severe.

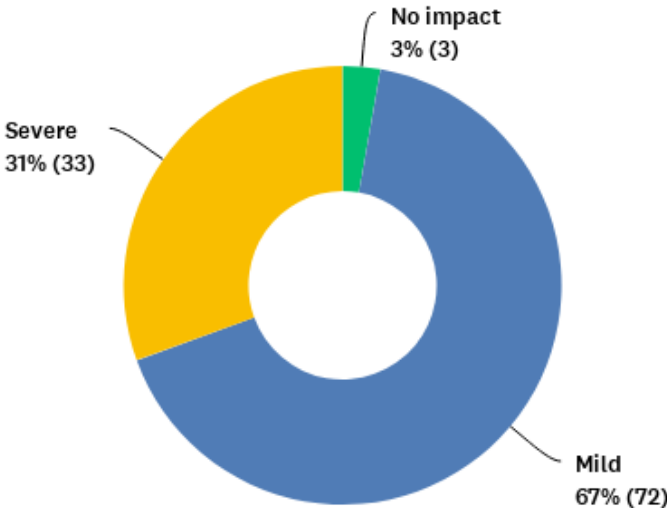
Programmes continue to be severely disrupted

- *Suspension and reduction of programmes*

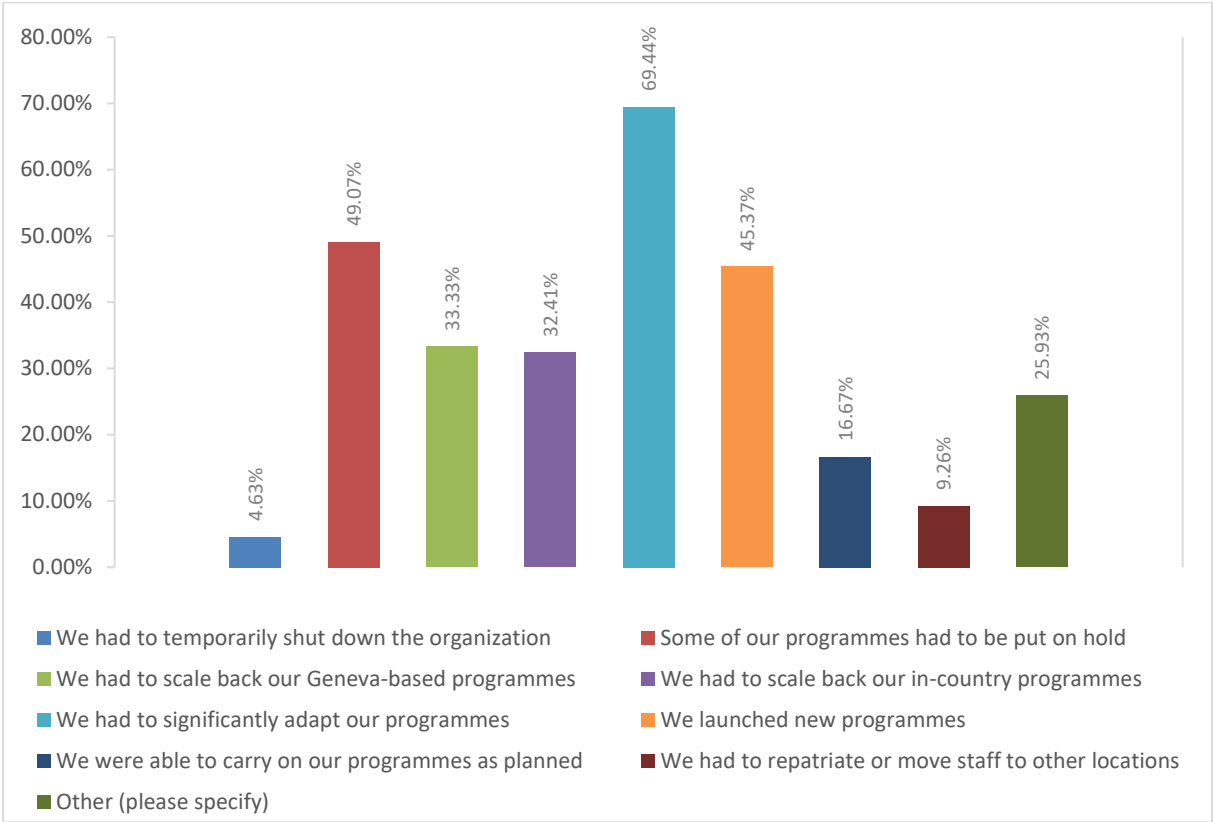
Almost half of the NGOs had to put some of their programmes on hold, and 1/3 of respondents had to scale back both their Geneva-based and in-country programmes.

- *Important adjustments and flexibility required*

In response to the crisis, nearly 70% of NGOs had to significantly adapt their programmes, including adjusting them to online settings, and 45% put in place new programmes, notably related to COVID.



How would you rate the overall impact of COVID-19 on your organisation's operations?



What were the impacts of the pandemic on your organisation's operations?

IMPACT ON OPERATIONS

An online shift accelerated by the pandemic

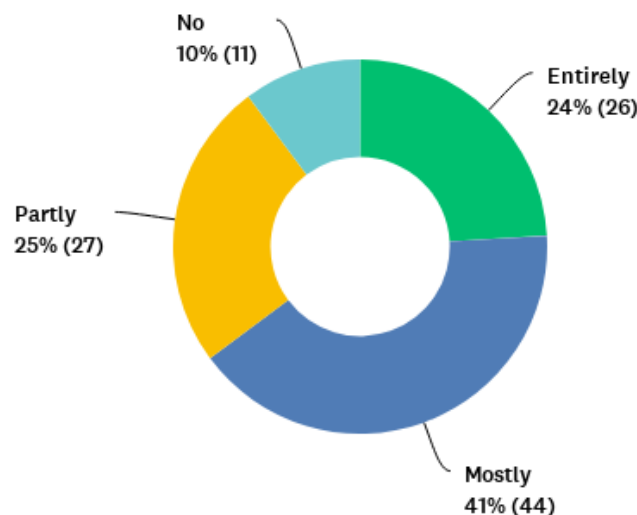
Like many other actors, the pandemic has forced NGOs to accelerate their digitalization equipment and knowledge. A clear shift to online working took place in order for the NGOs to continue operating during this period. 90% of the respondent NGOs managed to organise online, in whole or in part, the meetings and conferences that they were planning to hold in Geneva in 2020. The majority had access to the necessary equipment and infrastructure, and had the skills and expertise to organise such virtual meetings and conferences, with smaller NGOs comparatively less equipped and proficient. More than 40% did however require a specific training to acquire those skills.

Online meetings better in reach but with limited opportunities for interaction

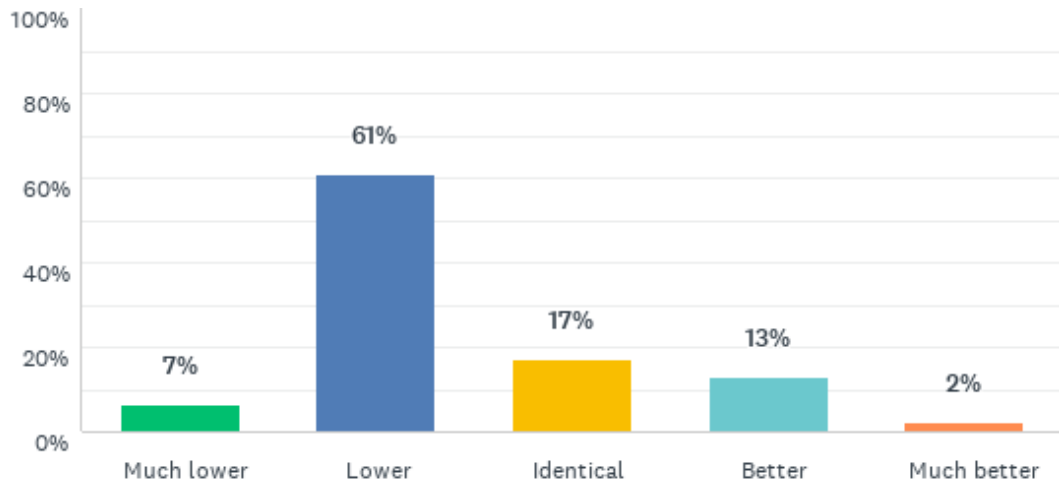
68% of respondent NGOs nevertheless rate the impact of those virtual meetings as lower or much lower in comparison to in-person meetings, noting that while virtual meetings increase accessibility and allow for broader participation, opportunities for in-depth exchanges and informal interactions – two key elements of the ecosystem of International Geneva – are reduced in online settings. A number of respondents indicate that this makes relationship and trust building difficult, concerned it may in turn affect their capacity to impact.

Eagerness to resume in-person interactions

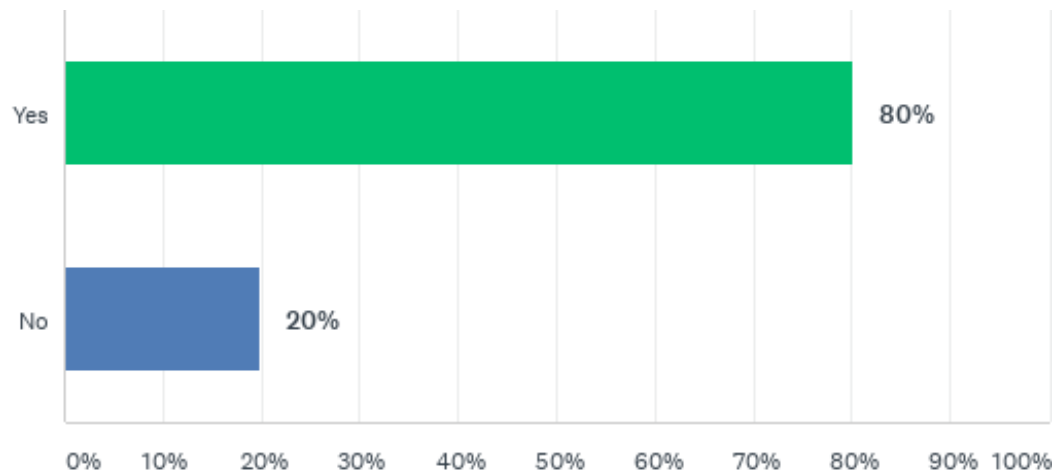
The majority of NGOs wish to resume organising in-person meetings and conferences in Geneva in whole (30%) or in part (60%) in 2021 should the situation allow it. Unsurprisingly, NGOs most negatively impacted by the crisis in their relationship with the UN and other IOs are the most eager to resume most events in Geneva in person.



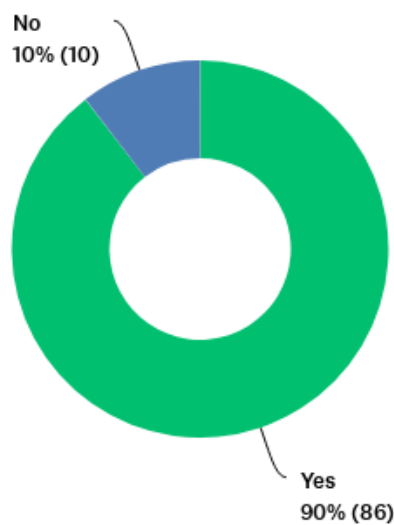
Were you able to organise online the meetings and conferences that you were planning to hold in Geneva in 2020?



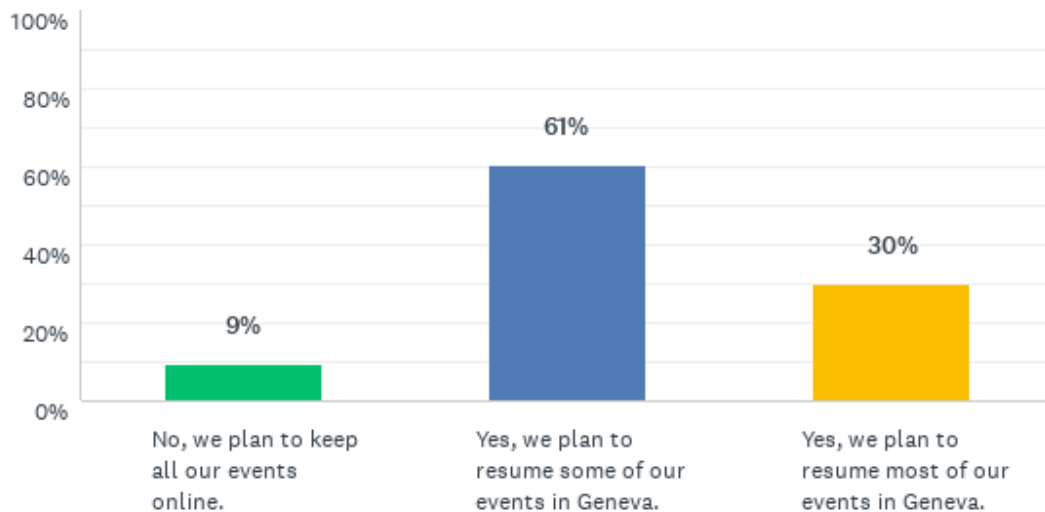
If so, how would you rate the impact of those virtual meetings in comparison to in-person meetings?



Does your organisation have access to the necessary equipment and infrastructure to organise online or hybrid meetings?



Does your organisation have the skills and expertise to organise virtual meetings and conferences?



Should the situation allow it, do you plan to resume organising in-person meetings and conferences in Geneva in 2021?

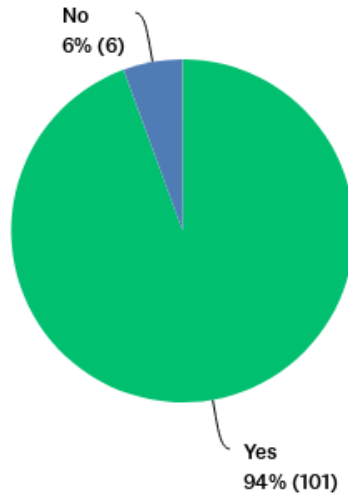
Strained relationship with the UN

Among the NGOs which regularly engage with the United Nations and other International Organisations (94% of the respondents), 2/3 continue to deplore the negative impact of COVID-19 on these interactions, a ratio which has stayed stable since the first survey in May 2020. Advocacy work and joint activities and programmes continue to be the most impacted by the ongoing crisis.

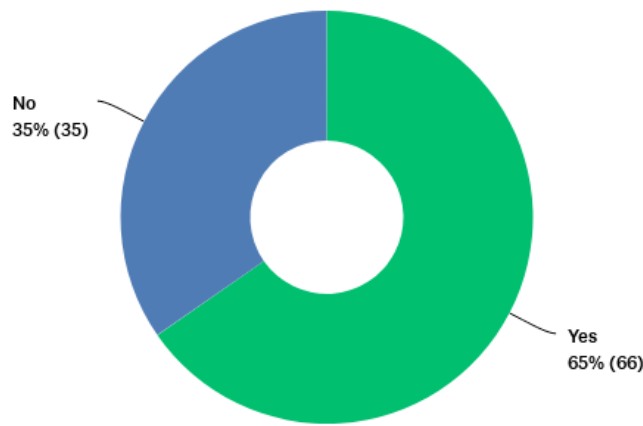
While the vast majority of NGOs are satisfied with both the information and tools for remote participation in the meetings and conferences organised by the UN and other International Organisations – which NGOs note have generally improved over time – experiences appear to differ between institutions.

NGOs working in the field of human rights and humanitarian affairs have been particularly affected, as did small and volunteer-based NGOs, while those in the field of Health indicate significantly less negative impact.

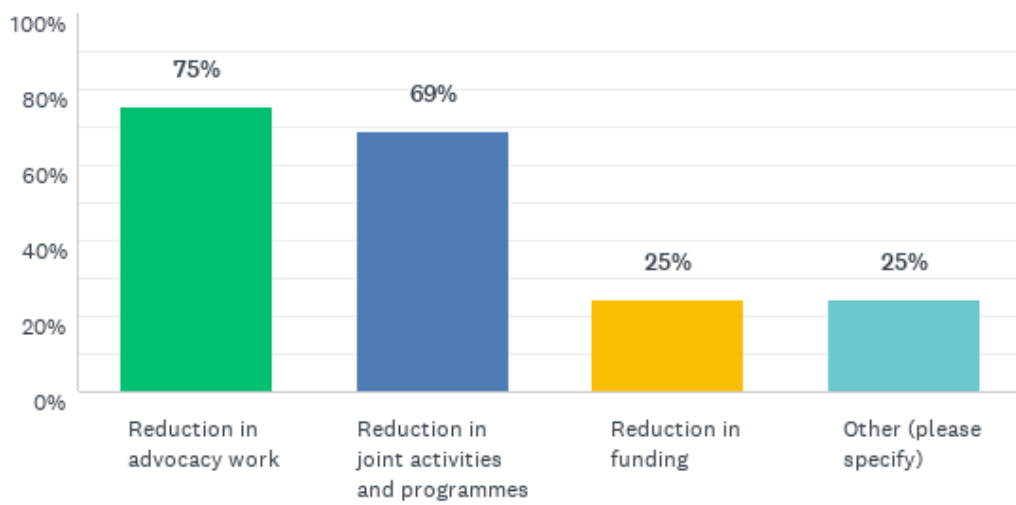
Most NGOs were also able to involve more partners from the field in the Geneva discussions thanks to the generalisation of teleconferencing, in line with their intention to do so expressed in the first survey at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis. Those that were not able indicated technical challenges faced by their field partners, the complexity of processes, and issues with translation. Some NGOs also felt that while they may have been able to involve more of their local partners, participation beyond observation had not increased.



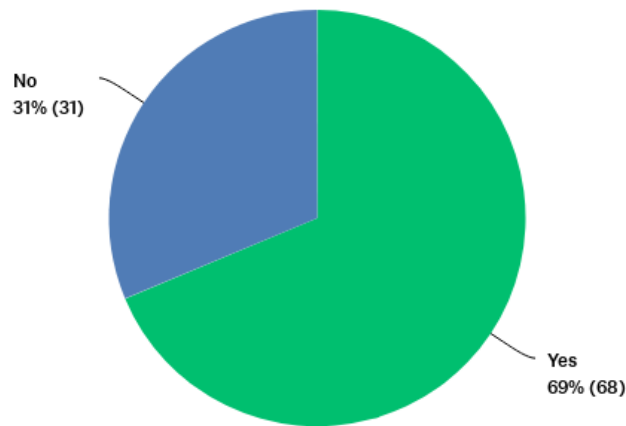
Does your organisation regularly engage with the United Nations and other International Organisations?



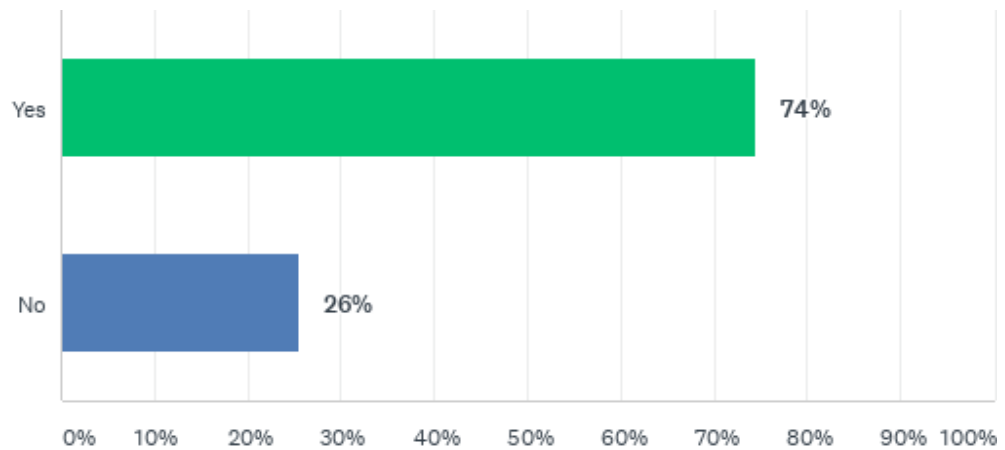
Did COVID-19 have a negative impact on your engagement with the United Nations and other International Organisations?



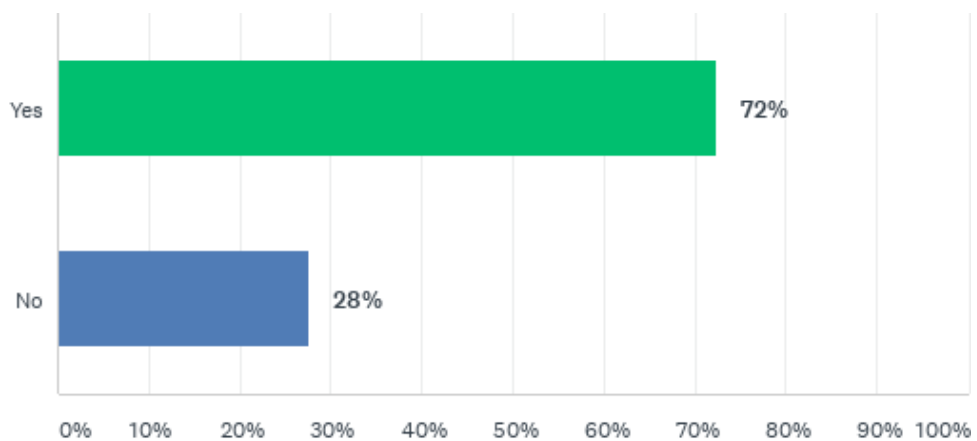
If so, what was the most significant impacts?



Are you satisfied with the tools for remote participation in meetings and conferences organised by the United Nations and other International Organisations?



Are you satisfied with the information available regarding remote participation provided by the United Nations and other International Organisations?



Were you able to involve more partners from the field in Geneva discussions thanks to the generalisation of teleconferencing?

IMPACT ON FUNDING

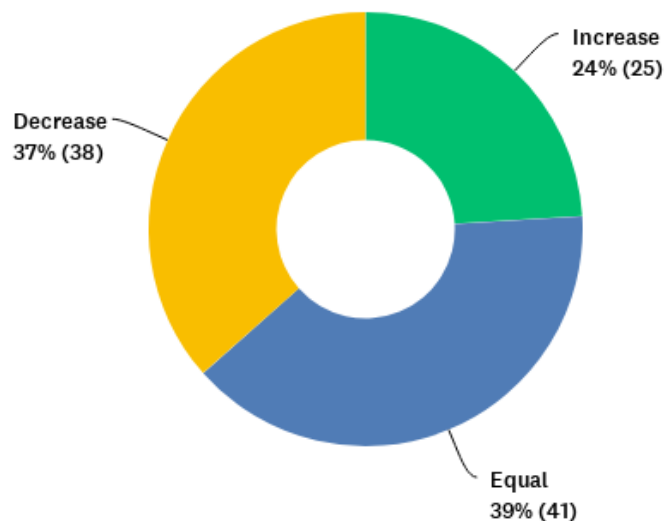
A mixed picture

The NGO sector did not face a massive drop of its revenues with only 37% of NGOs that faced a diminution of their revenues in 2020. They were 57% to fear such a drop in their revenues at the outbreak of the crisis in May 2020, which shows that 2020 proved to be better than expected. However, for half of those who faced a loss, the drop in revenue was significant (more than 20% loss of revenue), with serious consequences, such as cutting staff or adjusting projects.

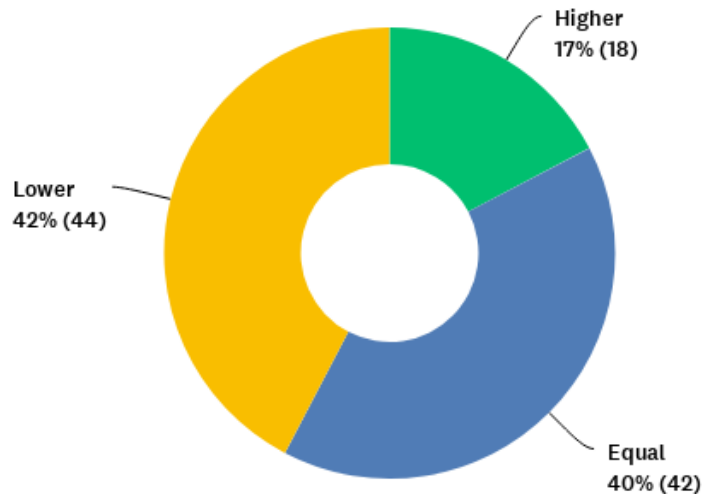
Another 40% of respondent NGOs saw their revenues stay stable and – in what could seem as a paradox – ¼ of respondent NGOs saw an increase of their income in 2020. Those NGOs are of all sizes and sectors. This increase can, amongst others, be explained by the multiyear NGO funding cycle and the fact that 2020 funding was often the result of previous years' commitments and contracts.

Yet, it is worth noting that 2020 budget targets were only partly met (42% of NGOs did not meet their budget). In conclusion, if 2020 did not see a plunge in NGO revenues, it certainly put an abrupt end to the budget rise that the NGO sector saw in the last couple of years.

Lastly, data do not show any significant differences amongst the sectors regarding funding. Health actors did not enjoy a better treatment than other sectors. The evolution of funding of each organisation is a consequence of many factors in which the sector plays a role but the structure of funding sources and the type of activities (advocacy, capacity building, service provider, field programmes, etc) matter very much too.



Evolution of NGOs income in 2020 in comparison with 2019



Organisation's income in 2020, in comparison with 2020 budget

A high dependency towards national public funding

70% of the respondent NGOs receive some government funding. Even more importantly, governments are the main source of funding for 40% of the Geneva-based NGOs. If we add funding coming from international organisations (themselves being mostly funded by governments), more than half of respondent NGOs are primarily funded by taxpayers' money.

As we will see in the forecasting chapter, this particularly high dependency on public funding (which can be explained by the type of work that NGOs are doing in Geneva or from Geneva) creates a high uncertainty for the coming year.

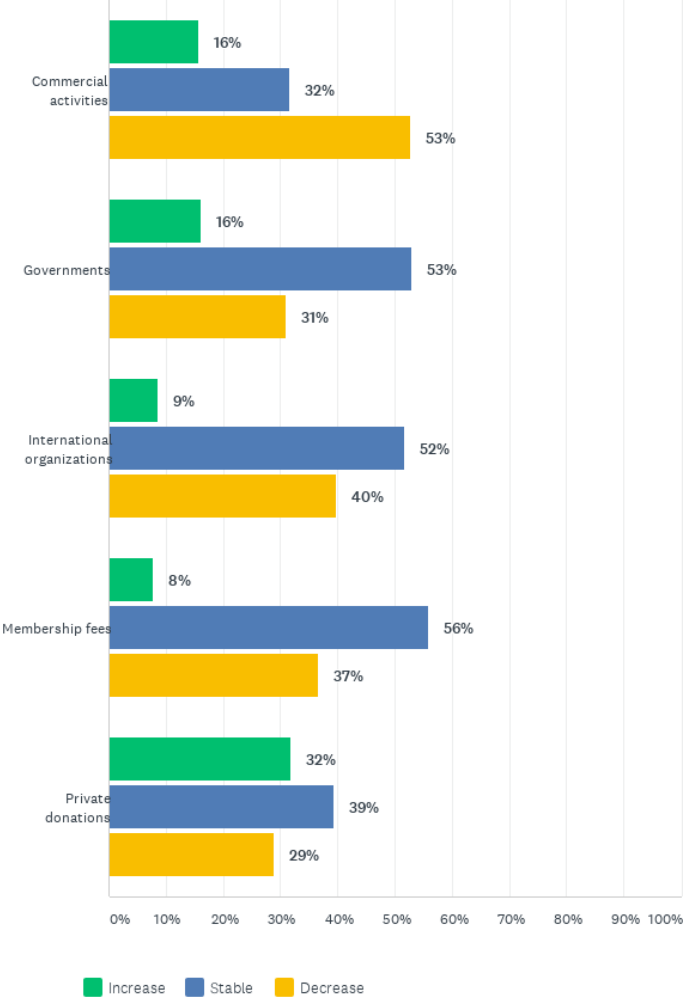
Private donations and membership fees are other important sources of funding while commercial activities stay relatively modest with only 22% of NGOs getting part of their funding through commercial activities.

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A	TOTAL	SCORE
Commercial activities	3.85% 4	4.81% 5	7.69% 8	2.88% 3	2.88% 3	77.88% 81	104	3.17
Governments	39.42% 41	19.23% 20	5.77% 6	4.81% 5	0.00% 0	30.77% 32	104	4.35
International organizations	13.46% 14	24.04% 25	16.35% 17	3.85% 4	0.96% 1	41.35% 43	104	3.77
Membership fees	15.38% 16	17.31% 18	11.54% 12	6.73% 7	2.88% 3	46.15% 48	104	3.66
Private donations	26.92% 28	21.15% 22	13.46% 14	8.65% 9	0.96% 1	28.85% 30	104	3.91

*Sources of funding of Geneva based NGOs
(1 = most important source of income. "N/A" = not applicable)*

Evolutions of the sources of funding in 2020

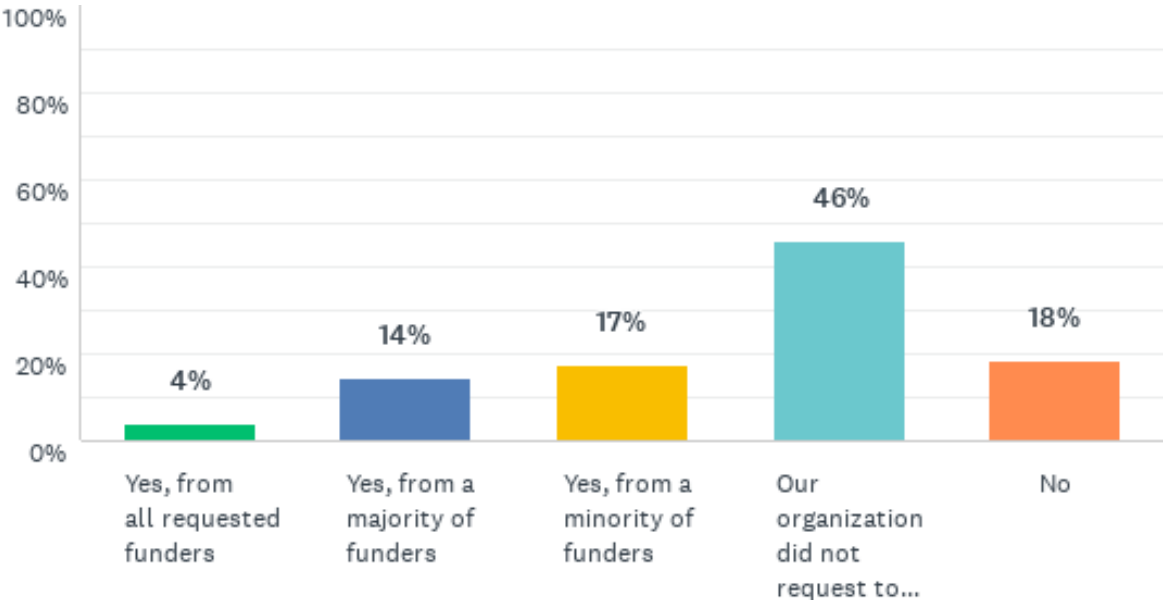
At the exception of commercial activities, which strongly dropped in 2020, all sources of funding seem to have been mostly stable last year. Membership fees and funding coming from Governments and international organisations were rather downstream while private donors were the most prone to increase their funding.



Evolution of each source of funding in 2020

Donors' flexibility

More than half of NGOs asked their donors to lift restrictions on their funding. 2/3 of them received positive feedbacks from some or all of their donors.



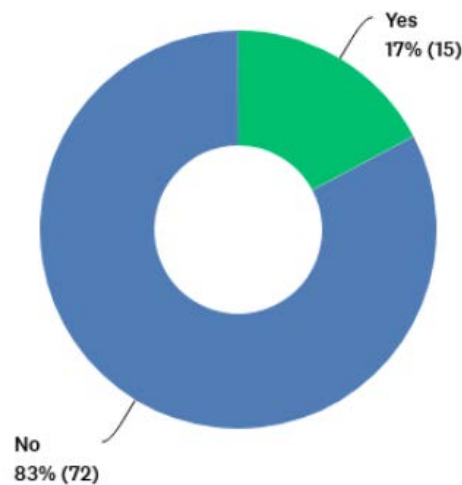
Have donors agreed to lift restrictions on funding (eg. from earmarked to un-earmarked)?

IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT

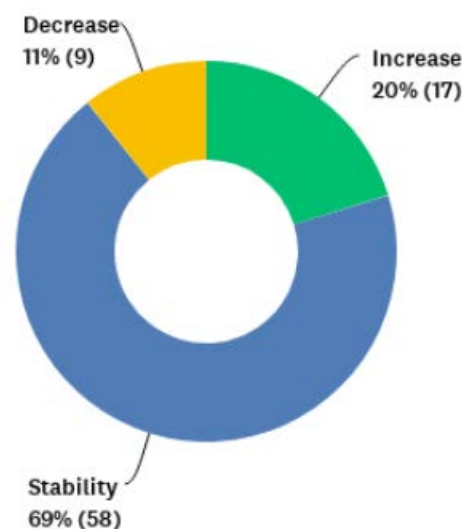
Employment has been relatively preserved for now

Mostly thanks to the unemployment benefit scheme (RHT) put in place by the public authorities and the continuity of funding, the COVID-19 crisis has only had a moderate negative impact on employment since the outbreak. Less than 20% of respondent NGOs had to reduce their Geneva-based staff in Geneva. Looking into the type of job cut, internship positions were reduced because of the obligatory home office policies, and back-office administrative functions faced cuts too.

Looking into 2021, more than 2/3 of respondent NGOs envision to keep their staff level with only 11% forecasting a reduction of their Geneva-based staff and even 20% envisioning an increase of their Geneva-based team.



*Did you have to reduce the number of staff in Geneva since the outbreak started?
(volunteer-based NGO excepted)?*



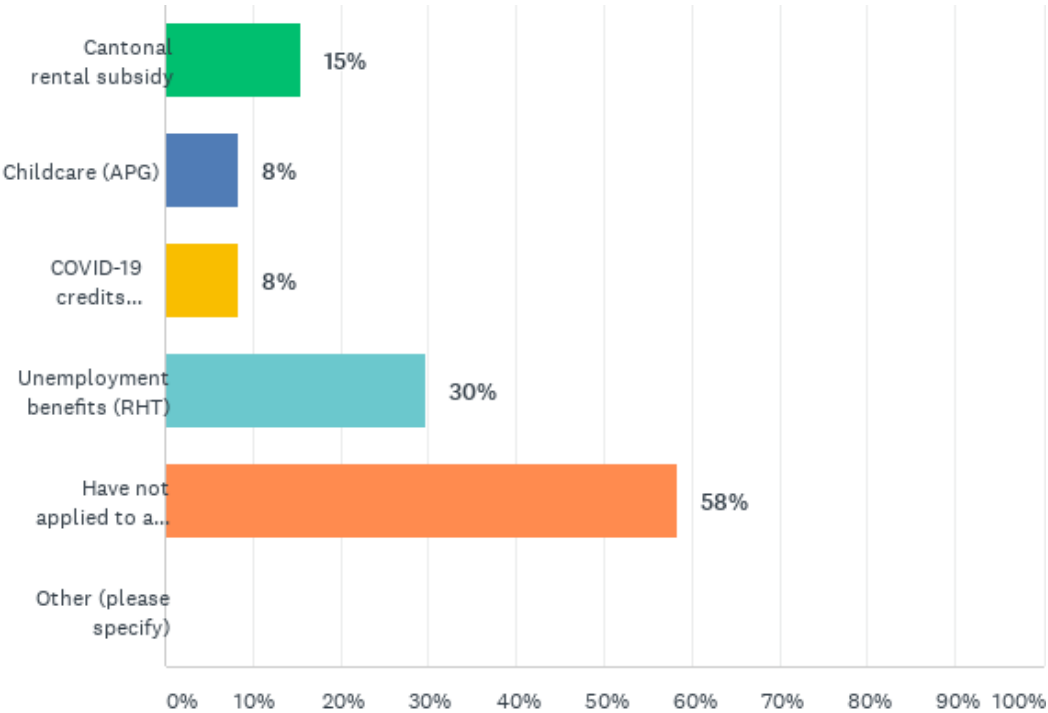
*Geneva-based staff employment forecast for 2021
(volunteer-based NGO excepted)*

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES' SUPPORT

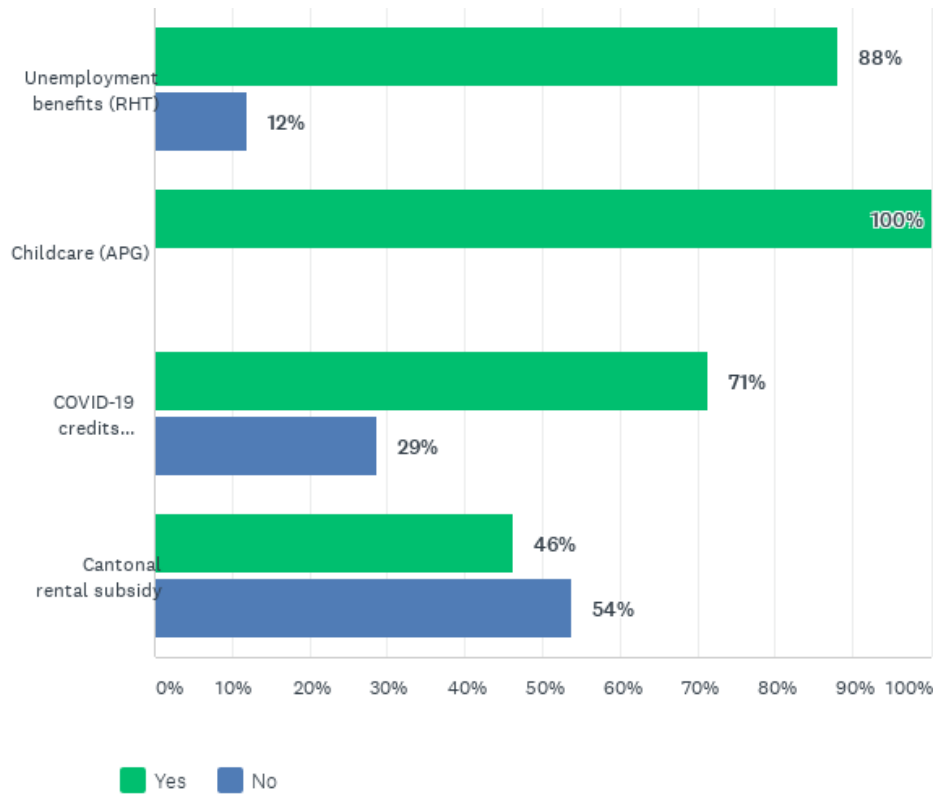
Presenting a very similar picture as in May 2020, close to 60% of the NGOs that employ staff in Geneva did not use any of the schemes put in place by public authorities in the context of COVID-19. By far the most used scheme and considered by some as "life savers", the Unemployment benefit (RHT) has been requested by 30% of respondent NGOs employing personnel in Geneva, with a very high success rate.

15% of NGOs employing personnel in Geneva requested a Rental Subsidy with a limited success rate. It is worth noting that 7 respondent NGOs requested a COVID credit in spring 2020 with a success rate of 70 %.

Even if most NGOs were appreciative of the supports put in place, there was a common feeling that those schemes were not thought and adapted to the NGOs funding and business model.



Which of the following schemes in response to the COVID-9 has your organisation applied to?



Were you successful in your application?

SOME POSITIVE OUTCOMES NONETHELESS

Innovation and digital leap led by disruption

The pandemic and the measures to counter it drastically disrupted the work of NGOs. Yet, NGOs were able to innovate and adapt their operations to the situation. They experienced an overdue digital leap that led to some efficiency gains and better outreach.

A time to reflect and rethink

Some NGOs also took the opportunity to rethink their business model and long-term goals in order to adapt to the "new normal" and stay relevant in the future.

A new way of working

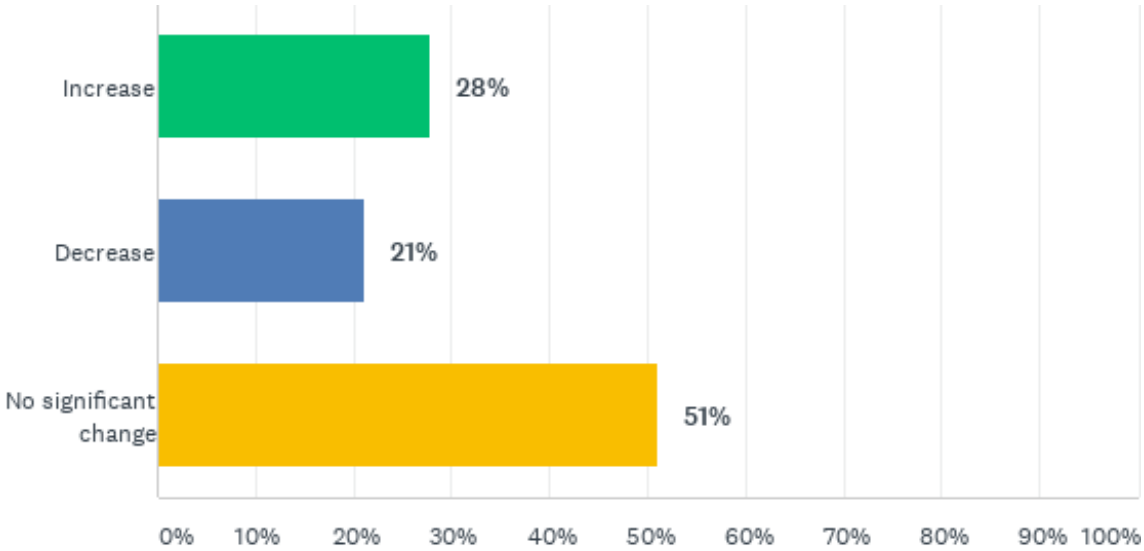
Finally, NGOs highlighted the fact that the pandemic imposed less travel for their staff, consequently leading to some positive environmental impact and better work-life balance. Working methods and arrangements were rethought with an overall generalization of work from home practices, which many NGOs foresee to stay in place after the pandemic.

PERSPECTIVES

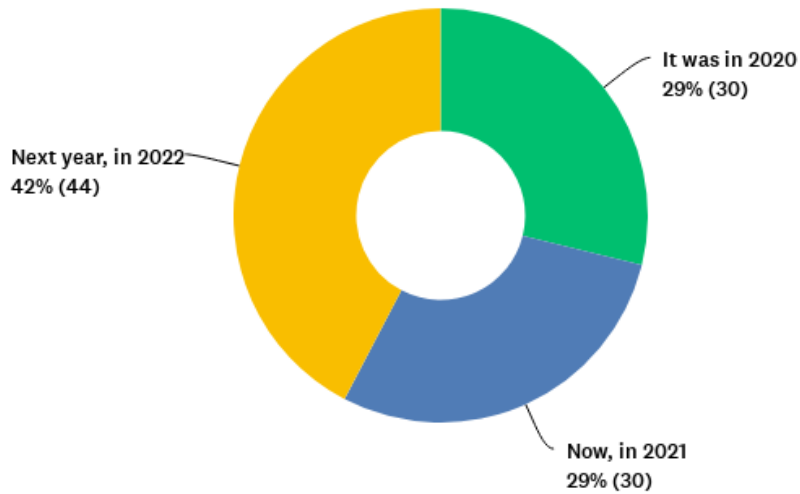
A high uncertainty

Half of NGOs forecast that funding would stay stable in 2021 while more than ¼ NGOs are expecting an increase of funding. However, only a minority of NGOs (29%) estimate that the worse has passed and 42% estimate that the highest danger will come in 2022. This reflects the funding structure of Geneva-based NGOs (highly dependent on public funding) as well as the fundraising cycle, many NGOs indicating that the pandemic significantly disrupted fundraising efforts and engagement with new donors and partners.

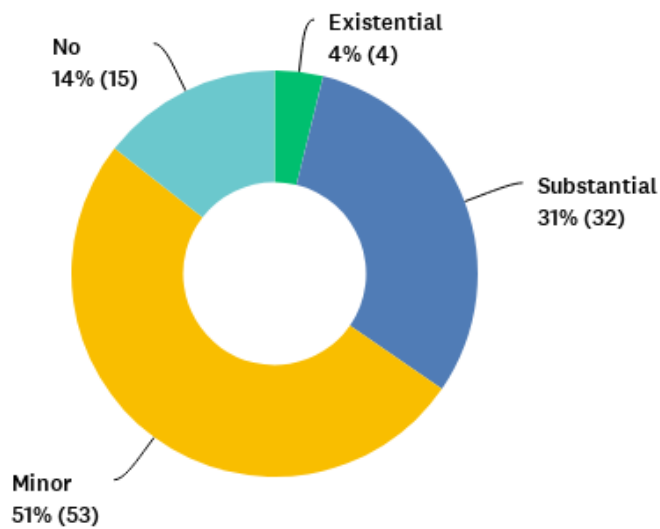
1/3 of NGOs consider the situation as posing a significant risk (they were more than 50% to do this assessment in May 2020, showing resilience and adaptation of the NGOs in the last 12 months).



Organisation's income forecast for 2021 (in comparison with 2020)



When do you consider this risk to be at its peak?



Do you believe the situation could pose a risk to your organisation?

International Geneva - an ecosystem in danger?

When asked about the impact that the COVID-19 may have on their work in Geneva in the medium term, NGOs share a general fear that the Geneva Ecosystem may be put at risk by a reduction of the density of actors and the depth of in-person discussions. There is a feeling that Geneva's key assets (ie. the critical mass of actors and the direct access to multilateral organisations, States representatives and decision-makers) will be reduced and constrained by new ways of working, as the balance between online and face-to-face activities will be permanently changed. Consequently, the added-value of being based in Geneva will diminish. Couple of NGOs already indicated considering moving Geneva-based positions or the entire organisation to lower cost locations (especially as the pandemic showed that remote work-from-home practices were possible and sometimes appropriate and cost effective), or being pressured by stakeholders to do so.

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