

Community Futures Fraser-Fort George COVID-19 Outreach Program:
Regional Specific Insight: Prince George
Amelia Merrick, Lead Regional Business Liaison and Regional Business Liaison
for Prince George

For more information:

COMMUNITY FUTURES FRASER-FORT GEORGE

telephone: 250.562.9622

email: general@cfdc.bc.ca

While many businesses and organizations in Prince George are resilient, this research indicated that 42% need help. New businesses, women-led businesses, microbusinesses (<5 staff), and organizations in Prince George are the most vulnerable and were largely excluded from COVID-19 support programs.

According to 52 in-depth interviews, 58% of businesses in Prince George are doing okay or are flourishing and 62% are confident that they will survive the next 12 months. Almost every business and organization indicated that they have experienced stress, but many have found ways to adapt and find support in their community or through the federal and provincial government programs: they see the light at the end of the tunnel. 20% of businesses even said that they have seen an increase in revenues.

When looking at the businesses and organizations who said they are flourishing, interesting trends emerged. The businesses had strong internal capacities and were far more likely to demonstrate digital literacy. They had an online presence and 72% of them offered remote sales and secure orders before the pandemic (compared to an average of 31%). Those who were a little less savvy with social media said that they had access to paid professional technical support. These businesses were confident in their ability research and navigate COVID-19 information and supports.

The flourishing organizations also demonstrated informational literacy. Like other organizations they said the amount of information about COVID-19 and the funding programs was overwhelming, but they knew how to access it and question the information's veracity. They also had access to networks who could help them decipher or distill complex information so that it was manageable.

These flourishing businesses and organizations were more than twice as likely to access government support compared to the average: 43% of them received CEBA (average = 18%) and 30% received wage subsidies (average = 15%). These organizations said they were able to hire bookkeepers, accountants, or lawyers to help process the overwhelming paper work. In some cases, their banks even did it for them – for free.

Finally, these organizations demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy. They were far more likely to say that they were prepared (83%) compared to the whole group (19%). And they were confident in their ability to adapt to the changing context: in fact, 100% of them made changes to the way they were operating. They indicated that while the work increased because of COVID-19 they still had a reasonable and fair distribution of labour. Many of the flourishing

businesses and organizations talked about their strong team culture and said that they were open and willing to learn together.

In addition to having strong internal capacities, the flourishing businesses and organizations benefited from mature operational landscapes. They were part of powerful networks and associations who were able to provide timely and targeted information and advice about how to manage COVID-19 protocols; access to like-minded businesses and organizations to share strategies, protocols, ideas, and tips; and a powerful lobby to policy makers regarding COVID-19 protocol management and funding parameters. These flourishing organizations were often part of interconnected markets, many of which extended beyond PG, and they sometimes had the benefit of strategic co-location. These businesses came from many sectors, but rarely did they mention competition from big businesses, like Amazon. With strong internal capacities and a mature operating landscape, flourishing businesses and organizations were more likely to say that their voices were being heard and that the institutional environment was supportive to them.

This experience was very different compared to the most vulnerable businesses and organizations. Those most vulnerable in PG demonstrated compromised internal capacities, including poor digital and information literacy, unreasonable distributions of labour, and lower levels of self-efficacy. Furthermore, the landscape in which they operate is underdeveloped and characterized by hyper-localization (of markets and supply chains), ad-hoc networks, disjointed business resources, unavailable (e.g., non-existent, unaffordable, inaccessible) wellness and child-care programs, and the domination of big businesses. Compromised internal capacities combined with an underdeveloped landscape meant that the voices of these northern businesses and organizations were not heard by key decision-makers. COVID-19 policies and programs were not designed to support our unique context.

This research also indicated that a relationship exists between the health of organizations and the economy. 75% of organizations had to reduce, change, or cancel in-person programming, which had significant impact on our community: there were no music, sports, or special interest group gatherings. Children no longer had after school programs, which added strain for many working mothers. There were fewer community events, which provide space for people to build trust across differences, share ideas, and mobilize. Social service agencies had to step in and fill gaps when treatment facilities or counselling programs were cancelled. Many organizations saw a sharp increase in demand for their services and they were stretched beyond their capacities. As a result, we've seen an alarming impact on our mental health, increased divisiveness, and a rise in overdose deaths. Clearly, the resilience of our community rests not only on economic

prosperity but also the ability to live in a vibrant community with robust social programs that include music, recreation, and wellness.

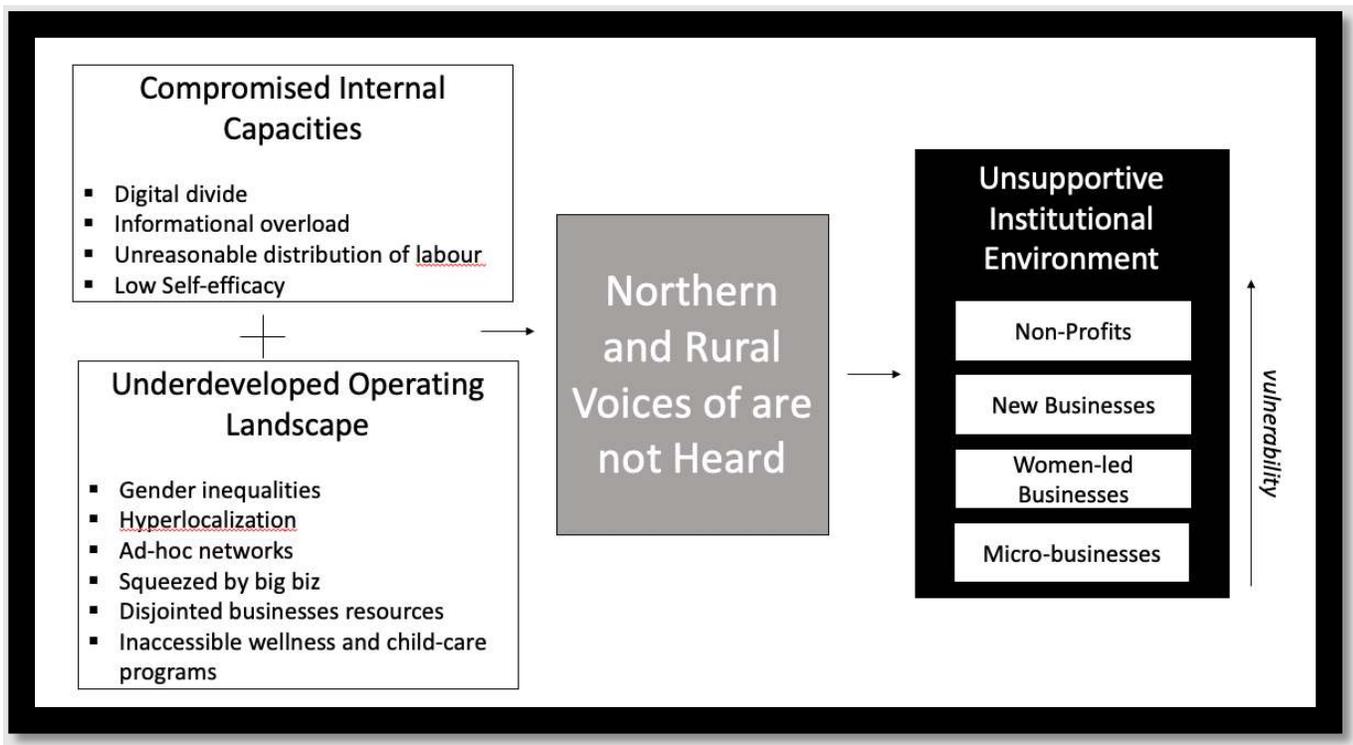


Figure 1: Factors the contribute to business/organization vulnerability in FFG