

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This paper argues the resilience action of community foundations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds on the assumption that community foundations are flexible, adaptive, and efficient structures that can respond to the needs caused by emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on identifying the plans and operations carried out by community foundations in adapting, responding, mitigating, and addressing needs in their local communities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also investigates their role towards other stakeholders, to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

Despite the positive effects that restrictive measures had to curb the spread of the disease, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the global population, particularly emphasizing inequalities through its impact on vulnerable and marginalised communities. Community foundations played a unique role in responding, mitigating, and addressing needs in their local communities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, responding to the health, social and economic challenges within their constituencies.

This research paper aims to highlight some interventions undertaken by community foundations, focusing particularly in Europe, to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, by highlighting interventions undertaken internally and towards their constituencies and other actors. It argues their resilience in response to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds on the assumption that community foundations are flexible, adaptive, and efficient structures that responds to the needs caused by emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Their resilience consists of the changes of the strategic plans, financial and operations carried out in responding, mitigating, and addressing needs in their local communities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic situation. It also investigates their role towards other stakeholders, to mitigate and solve the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper's goal is to provide information and enhance knowledge of the community foundations' responses to address various community needs as a result of the pandemic. It also aims to highlight the resilience of community foundations, increase the understanding of levels of generosity, and leverage and unleash additional philanthropic support for community wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

This paper was prepared in the time frame of ECFI Learning Lab for Changemakers during July to November 2021. It covers the developments from the start of the pandemic situation for the period 2020 - 2021. The methodology employed consisted of gathering and analyses of primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained from the conversations with ECFI Learning Lab for Changemakers collaborators and with four community foundations practitioners from coming from Bosnia & Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Italy, and Slovakia. The secondary data consisted of the literature review of the ECFI knowledge centre, academic articles, publications, reports, studies, and journals.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS:

- It was envisaged more interviews with community foundations but because of the busy period for community foundations and the timeframe for the preparation of this paper, only four interviews with community foundations were conducted.

FINDINGS

What is resilience?

Resilience has been defined as “*an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change*”.¹ Used since the 1950s in the natural science academic circles and later on in international development, resilience seeks sustainability in an environment (and not only physical) that is not in the normal condition.² Referring to non-profit organisations, resilience is the ability to respond effectively to change, and adapt successfully to new and unforeseen circumstances while staying true to the mission. At their best, resilient non-profits respond to disruptions as tipping points, rather than tragedies, finding new opportunities to learn, grow, evolve, and, ultimately, better serve their communities³. And referring to people and community members resilience means several processes and systems,⁴ to absorb disturbance and still retain basic function and structure. And in this term, building resilience means connecting and having the consensus of people (thus creating community values) to adapt to “new” circumstances⁵. On the other side, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need to increase resilience in the population to manage and reduce the adverse effects of the crisis.⁶

What are the initiatives and actions launched by the community foundation to respond to COVID-19?

1. Adaptive measures

The measures enacted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 impacted the daily work of community foundations (CFs). They responded quickly to address the most pressing needs within their localities by establishing COVID-19 funds, working with donors and institutions, and developing partnerships with other organisations.⁷ In the United States over 557 COVID-19 relief funds have been created in the wake of the virus.⁸ The adaptive measures enacted by CFs were characterised by the following features:

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>

² <https://www.partnersglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resiliency-Framework.pdf>

³ <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/36542/36542.pdf>

⁴ <https://time.com/5944931/how-to-build-resilience-in-a-crisis/>

⁵ <https://www.resilience.org/six-foundations-for-community-resilience/>

⁶ <https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/ten-considerations-for-effectively-managing-the-covid-19-transition>

⁷ Community Foundations Canada (2020), “*When a Crisis Strikes: A Guide to Community Foundations*”, [Online] https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CFC-Crisis-Management-Report_2020.pdf

⁸ Candid (2020) “Funds for coronavirus relief” [Online] <https://candid.org/explore-issues/coronavirus/funds>

Adjustments of CFs strategies to the “new” normal

Despite the preventive measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, CFs responded fast, by adjusting their annual plan and strategies even in a very short time⁹. According to the interviews with CFs, their annual plan changed rapidly, by redirecting efforts and funds when the first cases of coronavirus were announced. Their board members also responded quickly to approve the plans and strategies by being more vigilant to respond to the social and economic needs of their communities. Those community foundations that have dealt with previous natural disasters (floods, earthquakes) were more prepared and ready to respond to the pandemic situation. For instance, the Tuzla Community Foundation, having faced natural disasters, has a Solidarity Fund, created in 2008 by the board members, enabling it to respond quickly to emergencies.

Adjustment of CFs activities to the “new” normal

The lockdowns and social distancing enacted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have pushed community foundations to adapt and improve their digital presence and practices. Community foundations shifted their activities from in-person to online meetings, surveys, training, and networking. In addition, crowdfunding platforms (such as the case of Italy) were utilised to launch several community initiatives by addressing local pressing needs, particularly in the health sector. Different tools for communications were used to conduct the day-to-day activity. For grantees and grassroots organisations, the main communication tools were mainly by phone and email.

For communication with donor advisors, partners, donors, and partners from other foundations community foundations used Microsoft Teams software, Zoom app, or GoogleMeet. Using online tools and technologies have increased the level of security for the future, that if such pandemic circumstances would occur, the community foundations will quickly switch to digital operations¹⁰. From the conversation with community foundation practitioners two positive aspects emerged from the shift to digital: a) going online gave the opportunity and possibility for community foundations to have high participation of community members; and b) internally, the pandemic situation has contributed to improving skills of online communication tools.

⁹ [How Czech foundations and endowment funds responded to the Covid 19 pandemic - Via Clarita Via Clarita](#)

¹⁰ https://www.localsolutionsfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Post-Covid-World_summary-poster.pdf

In the fall of 2020, ECFI launched the Digital Transformation Challenge pilot program. The program supported 14 community foundations in Europe on their digital change process¹¹.

Nevertheless, one challenge faced with this regard was reaching senior people and people coming from marginalised groups due to the lack of electronic devices, internet access, and abilities to use technology.

Flexibility in grant schemes

From the literature reviews and information from the interviews with community foundations, *flexibility* is another ability manifested by community foundations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community foundations simplified the content of the contract with their grantees, processing, and reporting and reflected the most needed of our grantee which was to extend the duration of the timeframe. In addition, frequently they changed the use of grants related to new challenges and new possibilities to open space for the grantees.

2. Engagement with their consistencies.

Engagement with local communities

The literature review and conversations with community foundation practitioners shared the same patterns relating to the ways of engagement to reach their constituencies.

Community foundations used different tools for communication according to the audience. For the grantees and grassroots organisations, the main communication tools were mainly by phone and email. For communities living in remote areas, printed letters and SMS were used in order to have their voice and gather their needs. For communication with donor advisors, partners, donors, and partners from other foundations we used Microsoft Teams software, Zoom app, or GoogleMeet. They did not face any problems using these online platforms.

For community foundations whose work is based on meeting people within the communities, the COVID-19 restrictions made their work much more complicated. They have managed to provide consultations for grantees online, as well as communication with donors or grantees, but they were faced with some limitations

¹¹https://www.communityfoundations.eu/fileadmin/ecfi/knowledgecentre/Knowledge_Database/Digital_Transformation_Challenges_summary_report.pdf

concerning important issues. For instance, the community foundations in Slovakia found dealing with controversial issues within the community challenging online.

Engagement with business and civil society organisations

Even though COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the productions and services provided by businesses, generosity and solidarity increased in every country.

Community foundations played the facilitator role and acted as a “hub” to build bridges among civil society organisations (CSOs) and the business sector, particularly in relation to health and social issues. They have supported CSOs working with vulnerable groups, particularly with women, children, youth, and elderly people. They supported health care centres with the equipment of masks, which were produced by a small IT company, and clothing for emergency services. They provided disinfectants masks and thermometers for schools. CSOs also campaigned government asking for subventions to give to small businesses, and to support CSOs working with vulnerable groups.

According to the conversations with CFs practitioners, community foundation support organisations (CFSOs) have been very helpful and guiding CFs on how to be more prepared to engage with citizens. For instance, The Usta Community Foundation in the Czech Republic mentioned that the Community Foundation Association of Czech Republic, a CSFO, helped them with programs on this issue leading to more resources and endowment funds.

Also, trust from local organisations and businesses has increased during these two years. For instance, one of the main problems associated with the pandemic related to education. For almost for the whole year there was remote education. Students and pupils didn't go to school. It was a problem because more than 10,000 students in Czech Republic did not have access to the internet and even they did not have proper notebooks or smartphones and for the Usti Community Foundation , it was another challenge. Community foundations (Usta Community Foundation) played an intermediary role and were able to link some producers or to some national foundations who were able to provide. They functioned as local coordinators, who know the needs of local schools and those of single-parents, a target group that faced many problems during the pandemic situation.

Engagement with public institutions

Conversations with CFs practitioners highlighted the fact that in normal times, community foundations choose to work separately from government and public

institutions, because of several reasons such as internal decisions, level of corruption, public mistrust, etc. But during the pandemic times, they aligned their actions with local municipalities, regional institutions, civil society organizations, and volunteers. In addition, well-connected small communities and volunteers are more flexible and effective in providing help in urgent situations.

During the pandemic, however, community foundations joined forces to advocate for and address community needs. For instance, the Usta Community Foundation became a member of the platform humanitarian organisations in its region, called the Crisis Management Portal. The Panel of Humanitarian Organisations of the Ústí and Labem Region is an informal working group serving as a platform for providing comprehensive care to citizens in solving Emergency and Crisis problems¹².

The Tuzla Community Foundation advocated with the government to have relief funds for small local businesses and NPOs for the COVID-19 pandemic. They went to the relevant institutions and “opened doors” for dialogue for example the Institute for Public Health supported them to access the Ministry of Health. Community foundations operated as multi-taskers undertaking holistic type of work, - firstly assessing the needs, then determining local capacities, and then talking with the particular stakeholders.

3. Financial sustainability of community foundations.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected productions and services provided by businesses which impacted on the financial viability of community foundations. Based on the conversation with community foundations practitioners most of their donors were corporate donors. For programs of community foundations (for instance: in Czech Republic and Bosnia and Herzegovina) some grant programs have been terminated because of the lack of funding from donors, while for some other programmes, particularly related to marginalised groups, community foundations did not face any challenges to increase funds because businesses and other donors were willing to donate and increase the pot of funding. Community foundations used crowdfunding platforms and set up new public collections by being transparent and accountable towards their donors.

¹² <https://pkr.kr-ustecky.cz/pkr/panel-ho/>

CONCLUSIONS

- ✚ **Changes and adaptations** of annual plans, strategies, types of funds, the flexibility of support, and processes are possible to put in place even in a short period of time
- ✚ Shifting operations from onsite to online contributed to having **high participation of community members** in discussion meetings. Positive outcomes like **new skills in using new technologies** for communication, meetings, fundraising
- ✚ **Different tools** (SMS, printed letters, postcards, and phone calls) particularly for **senior people and people coming from marginalised groups**
- ✚ Nevertheless, for some important **community issues, particularly those controversial**, the **online space showed to be difficult to manage**
- ✚ Concerning **stakeholder's relations** community foundations are a **trusted entity**
- ✚ Because of the issue of corruption and mistrust that most countries face, there is a "hesitancy" for **cooperation by community foundations with public institutions.**
- ✚ **There was a great wave of generosity and solidarity** - nevertheless, it **did not improve the significantly financial viability** of community foundations
- ✚ With the uncertain future, **financial planning is considered essential to building resilience**

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