PRACTICE NOTE

Philanthropy during COVID-19: Learnings and recommendations for philanthropic organizations navigating crisis

DeeAndria Hampton[1] | Pamala Wiepking[1,2] | Cassandra Chapman[3] |
Lucy Holmes McHugh[4] | Daniel Arnesen[5] | Cathie Carrigan[1] |
Galia Feit[6] | Henrietta Grönlund[7] | Steinunn Hrafnsdóttir[8] |
Natalya Ivanova[9] | Hagai Katz[10] | Sung-Ju Kim[11] |
Ómar H. Kristmundsson[12] | Julia Litofcenko[13] | Irina Mersianova[9] |
Michaela Neumayr[13] | Anne Birgitta Pessi[7] | Wendy Scaife[14] |
Karl Henrik Sivesind[5] | Johan Vamstad[15] | Yongzheng Yang[16]

[1]Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

[2]Center for Philanthropic Studies, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[3]UQ Business School, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia

[4]College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

[5]Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway

[6]Institute for Law and Philanthropy, Buchmann Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

[7]Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

[8]Faculty of Social Work, School of Social Sciences, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland

[9]Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

[10]Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, Israel

[11]School of Social Work, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

[12]Faculty of Political Science, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland

[13]Institute for Nonprofit Management, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

[14]Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Gardens Point Campus, Brisbane, Australia

[15]Center for Civil Society Research, Marie Cederschiöld University, Stockholm, Sweden

[16]School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Correspondence
Pamala Wiepking, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University, University Hall, Suite 3000, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA.
Email: pwiepki@iu.edu

Abstract

This practice paper articulates the key learnings for philanthropic organizations based on their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Which actions can philanthropic organizations take to best support community needs during times of crisis? To answer this question, we synthesize information about how philanthropic organizations responded during the early COVID-19 crisis (spring——fall 2020) across 11 countries: Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Sweden,

the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America. Results indicate four key actions that we recommend philanthropic organizations take during times of crisis: (1) Assess community needs; (2) engage with volunteers and donors; (3) communicate effectively and strategically with volunteers, donors, and the public; and (4) focus on equity.

Practitioner Points

To best support community needs, we recommend that philanthropic organizations focus on the following key actions when faced with a crisis:

- Innovate and keep fundraising. Use (technological) innovations to remain engaged with existing donors and volunteers, and to attract new ones. Innovations include shifting to online platforms and promoting in-kind giving to address local needs.
- Communicate. Philanthropic organizations are uniquely positioned to identify local needs and share with service providers. They can also serve as community hubs to disseminate verified information during a crisis. Furthermore, philanthropic organizations can leverage (social) networks of those who they currently serve to reach the wider community.
- Focus on equity. Philanthropic organizations have the flexibility to respond to the diverse needs within their communities. It is especially important during times of crisis that they ensure that vulnerable or underserved populations are provided access to the information, services, and support they need to not only survive but also thrive, even in times of crisis.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 health pandemic spread quickly. Globally, people experienced the devastating consequences of the crisis. People fell ill; people died. Normal, daily activities came to a halt in most countries. During those first few months, governments often could not adequately address the many societal needs that arose due to the pandemic (Brousselle et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2020). Governments prioritized limiting the spread of the disease and providing access to health care resources, including protective materials, health care personnel and the infrastructure to care for those that had fallen seriously ill (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). To address the broader needs of communities——such as food insecurity caused by loss of employment or the emotional and psychological support needs of people who contracted the virus and had to quarantine——local communities often came together to respond (Paarlberg et al., 2020).

The willingness of local communities to rise to the occasion and meet extraordinary needs may be the silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the world people engaged in and witnessed extraordinary acts of generosity. In many cities, people applauded doctors and nurses from their balconies daily as they changed shifts, in recognition of the risks they took in serving others on the front lines. There were countless other examples of individuals supporting one another in their local community. To illustrate the diverse generosity responses, Figure 1 shows just four examples of how people addressed local needs during the pandemic.

Despite the devastation, there have also been positive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning, people have helped

one another, donated money, given their time, and worked shoulder-to-shoulder to address some of the most pressing issues that our communities faced. These solidarity efforts were often facilitated by (emerging) philanthropic organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic thus allowed a unique opportunity to study which generosity behaviors emerge in times of crisis, and how philanthropic organizations can best support community needs during difficult times.

In April 2020, with researchers from 11 countries, we embarked on a research journey to study these exact questions. In this practice paper, we synthesize learnings from this project and the implications for philanthropic organizations. Specifically, we ask which actions philanthropic organizations can take to best support community needs during times of crisis. We use the term "philanthropic organizations" here to refer to both formal (nonprofit) and informal (grassroots) organizations that are active in civil society.

2 | STUDY METHODOLOGY

Philanthropy researchers across 11 countries studied the generosity responses emerging during the early COVID-19 crisis in their own country. The eleven countries included in this project are Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Sweden, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America.[1] In total, 44,159 people from the 11 countries shared their practices, experiences, and perspectives of generosity during the early days of the pandemic. In 11 national reports, the researchers first compared generosity behavior data for their country with data from

FIGURE 1 Images from generosity behaviors displayed across the world during the early phases of COVID-19. Captions and credits: Top left: Helping those in need in Rwanda. Credit: Pacis creativity, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons; Top right: Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Mask Force volunteers have distributed more than 400,000 free masks to riders in New York, U.S. Credit: Metropolitan Transportation Authority of the State of New York from United States of America, CC BY 2.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0, via Wikimedia Commons; Bottom left: Volunteers from Misericordie and the National Emergency Support install prefabricated modules in front of the Emergency Department of the "Carlo Poma" hospital to increase its accommodation capacity in Mantova, Italy. Credit: Dipartimento Protezione Civile, CC BY 2.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Bottom right: Volunteers packaging essential grocery items for free distribution during the lockdown period of 2020 coronavirus pandemic in Kerala, India. Credit: Praveenp, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

the other participating countries. Second, they expounded what both philanthropic organizations and governments could learn from the findings, with the goal of facilitating people's future generosity responses more effectively, especially during crises. This practice paper synthesizes key findings relating to the lessons for philanthropic organizations across the 11 country reports.

3 | RESEARCH FINDINGS

We identify four recommended actions for philanthropic organizations facing times of crisis, identified across the 11 countries studied: (1) Assess community needs; (2) Engage with volunteers and donors; (3) Communicate effectively and strategically with volunteers, donors, and the public; and (4) Focus on equity.

3.1 | Assess community needs

Philanthropic organizations may emerge as expressions of the needs and preferences of heterogeneous groups or populations (Weisbrod, 1975), or result from either their trustworthiness (Hansmann, 1987) or social entrepreneurs' "innovative, opportunity-oriented,

resourceful, value-creating" actions (Dees et al., 2001, p. 4). One strength of philanthropic organizations is their proximity to and insight into the needs of the community they serve.

We found that during the pandemic organizations were flooded with requests for assistance, some of which fell outside their mission or regular service provision. Finnish researchers suggest that, as a first step during a crisis, philanthropic leaders map community needs and best practices of existing (grassroots) organizations addressing these needs. Next, they should communicate what they learned to governments and local officials (Grönlund et al., 2021). The implication is that philanthropic organizations facing crisis need to assess the felt needs of their communities to enable the provision of appropriate services, programs, and resources. Finally, when faced with exceptional need and inadequate resources, German researchers recommend that philanthropic organizations "intensify or promote cooperation with public authorities and businesses to gain access to resources not otherwise available" (Neumayr et al., 2021, p. 15).

3.2 | Engage with volunteers and donors

Philanthropic organizations also need to engage with their volunteers and donors–the backbone and lifeblood of any organization.

Brudney (2016, p. 688) assesses, "One of the most distinctive features of the nonprofit sector is its ability to harness the productive labor of literally millions of citizens in service to organizational goals, without the benefit of remuneration." However, the productivity of that labor is dependent upon organizational staff not only being clear on what their communities need, but also how best to prepare and train volunteers to help meet those needs.

During a time of crisis, when organizations may be called to meet needs that fall outside their regular missions or activities, it becomes especially important to be responsive and flexible in order to keep supporters engaged. The most common recommendation from our study, therefore, made in 8 of the 11 national reports, is for philanthropic organizations to innovate or offer new ways for volunteers and donors to engage with them in service to the community.

While fundraising was affected by the pandemic, there remained alternative options to continue raising funds, for example, through digital platforms. The creative use of technology may also have inspired giving among younger generations, who, like those in South Korea, gave more generously during the pandemic than before it (Kim, 2021).

Volunteering, on the other hand, became extremely difficult during the infectious health pandemic. The most frequent reason given for decreased volunteering during the pandemic was related to lockdown and social distancing restrictions. Online platforms matching volunteers with community needs supported continued volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic (Spath, 2021; Trautwein et al., 2020). In addition, "newer" forms of volunteering——like virtual and episodic——helped minimize the negative impact on volunteering rates resulting from things like the restrictions placed on philanthropic organizations (e.g., social distancing, stay-at-home orders) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kulik, 2021). Researchers from Iceland recommended that philanthropic organizations "[b]e quick to offer new ways of volunteering such as digital volunteering and flexible, short-term activities. Bearing in mind that the most common reason for not volunteering is a lack of opportunity" (Hrafnsdóttir & Kristmundsson, 2021, p. 14).

During crisis, philanthropic leaders should minimize barriers to volunteers' ability to engage with the organization and ensure that they are well-equipped to perform their duties. Austrian researchers noted that "[t]he lower the threshold and the less bureaucratic it is to get involved in the short term, and the more clearly the help needed is defined, the more people are prepared to get involved" (Neumayr & Meyer, 2021, p. 15). However, regardless of the severity of the crisis or urgency of the need for volunteers, philanthropic leaders need to ensure that their organizational capacity is sufficient to support the influx of volunteers. Arguably, volunteer management is more necessary than ever in times of crisis and change: to create short-term, immediate action and maintain relationships for the longer term with critical human resources.

Finally, volunteers are frequently both donors and fundraisers for philanthropic organizations (Freeman & Breeze, 2022). Russian researchers reflect on a recently emerged cohort of volunteers, offering the following insight that speaks to the crucial role that volunteers can play and the dividends a philanthropic organization can reap from investing in them. They write, "Provide them with opportunities for professional development and become potential drivers in the engagement of broader categories of population in helping and generosity behavior" (Mersianova & Ivanova, 2021, p. 16). By investing in developing their own organizational capacity (i.e., staff, capital, information, and other technology), along with a well-trained and resourced volunteer base, philanthropic organizations will better be prepared to face future crises.

3.3 | Communicate effectively and strategically with volunteers, donors, and the public

The third area of insight concerns the type, amount, and target of communication efforts undertaken by philanthropic organizations. Accurate and consistent communication can help build trust in philanthropic organizations (Wiepking & Handy, 2015). During times of crisis, philanthropic leaders need to communicate effectively and frequently about how donors, volunteers, and the general public can get or remain involved. It is also crucial that they effectively communicate what their organizations are doing to meet community needs and how they are deploying the resources that have been committed to them.

Once organizations have assessed or mapped community needs, they are positioned to relay that information to and seek support from governments and businesses in cross-sector collaboration (Zhang et al., 2020). Additionally, they can use the social networks of their existing clients to spread awareness of vital and reliable information to vulnerable or marginalized populations (Sivesind & Arnesen, 2021). They can also use their community embeddedness to tap into the social networks of existing clients, to reach new clients and ensure that people are aware of what services and resources—both private and public——are available to them and how they can be accessed (Grönlund et al., 2021). To fulfill this important role, however, philanthropic leaders must use all communication means possible, including word of mouth through clients' personal networks, the organization's own website, and (social) media.

3.4 | Focus on equity

It is important that philanthropic organizations focus on equity and meeting the needs of vulnerable, underserved, or disadvantaged populations. One such population are children and youth, who especially suffered during the pandemic as schools were closed for months in many countries. This led to numerous mental health problems among young people and a decline in school performance, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged children, and it also affected their experience of violence (UNICEF and Save the Children, 2021). Researchers in Norway note an "increased awareness of the social implications of lockdown and the pandemic, in particular a decrease in wellbeing among youth and children" (Sivesind & Arnesen, 2021, p. 11), and the additional challenges for children that already lived in problematic family situations. In response to this need, voluntary organizations in Norway were able to develop new and flexible activities in which the children and youth could engage and be supported: a chat-line for children and youth with parents who are substance abusers (Sivesind & Arnesen, 2021).

Another vulnerable population with increased needs during COVID-19 were women and girls (Anderson et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2022). One of the unintended consequences of social distancing and shelter-in-place orders implemented by state and local governments was an increase in gender-based violence, a term used to describe both sexual violence and intimate partner (or domestic) violence. Although researchers in our study did not highlight any organizations that address gender-based violence, its prevalence and increase during the pandemic suggest that greater resources should be provided to those organizations that support survivors of gender-based violence. Of course, management of philanthropic organizations must also be more alert to this issue among their own stakeholders, such as beneficiaries/clients, staff and volunteers.

A third vulnerable population whose needs philanthropic organizations can meet are the elderly–especially those who are isolated or low-income. During the pandemic, elderly individuals living alone became especially vulnerable due to both their higher risk for contracting the COVID-19 disease and the consequences of social distancing or sheltering in place (e.g., inability to visit family and friends, shop for food and medicine, or receive other needed services). Researchers from several countries in our study, including Iceland, Israel, Russia, Sweden, and the United States, provide case studies of philanthropic organizations that made efforts to provide assistance, companionship, and services to elderly individuals in their communities (Hrafnsdóttir & Kristmundsson, 2021; Katz & Feit, 2021; Mersianova & Ivanova, 2021; Vamstad, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). The programs that are described in the case studies serve a variety of needs, from addressing health and safety concerns of residents in geriatric institutions to providing safe social interaction, meals, and assistance with errands and shopping for elderly people still living in their own homes. Israeli researchers note "philanthropists, nonprofit organizations, volunteer organizations and a host of corporations….[to which] [s]oon after its initiation, local municipalities and government lent their support…through additional funding" (Katz & Feit, 2021, p. 14). This cross-sector collaboration is a prime example of what can be accomplished to meet the needs of the most vulnerable due to the innovation and responsiveness of the philanthropic sector.

Other vulnerable groups that were identified in our research included immigrants (whether documented or undocumented), racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, those with mental health vulnerabilities, and those who held low levels of trust in government or institutions. Due to philanthropic organizations' proximity and ability to be responsive to diverse groups, they may be able to provide targeted services and information to bridge the gap between underserved groups and public institutions. Researchers from Norway suggest, "Because many organizations are trusted sources of information, they can fill in government's information services with helplines and reach immigrants with information in their own languages" (Sivesind & Arnesen, 2021, p. 14). Swedish researchers offer a related perspective. Writing about the "Good Neighbors" program, which was launched in March of 2020, the authors point out that the program was especially beneficial for "people with an immigrant background living in crowded living conditions," a group that had "proven to be especially difficult for local authorities to reach with information about the pandemic" (Vamstad, 2021, p. 16). Australian researchers note that the local

knowledge that philanthropic leaders possess can be of particular use to help governments support citizens (like the elderly or homeless) who may lack close social networks (Chapman et al., 2021).

Finally, philanthropic organizations can address equity concerns by other means besides the direct services they provide to clients. Expanding on the implications of trust-related theories of the philanthropic sector, Austrian researchers offer that philanthropic organizations "can get more people involved in informal helping behavior if they can support the coordination of such initiatives and use their reputation to increase trust in such initiatives" (Neumayr & Meyer, 2021, p. 15).

4 | CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS DO TO SUPPORT LOCAL COMMUNITY NEEDS DURING TIMES OF CRISIS?

Based on our comparative, multinational research project studying generosity in times of crisis across 11 countries, we recommend that philanthropic organizations be prepared to take the following four actions in times of crisis

4.1 | Innovate

Philanthropic organizations need to be prepared to find new ways for volunteer and donor engagement. Examples that proved successful during the COVID-19 pandemic included shifting to online platforms and promoting in-kind giving. Innovations can be used to lower barriers and make it easier for existing donors and volunteers as well as new ones. We advise philanthropic organizations not to wait until the next crisis but think now about which innovations can help them more successfully support local communities in times of need. Organizations should keep track of innovations and create a standard operating procedure for future use during a crisis. People may be happy to be included in a register of potential volunteers to assist in crises. Past staff, event participants, or major donors, for example, may be segments willing to sign up to be activated as volunteers if needed during a crisis.

4.2 | Keep fundraising!

People want to give during times of crisis and great need. The single greatest reason that people do not engage in generosity behavior is that they have not been asked to do so. Continue to invite people to engage to maintain capacity and ensure sustainability. Also, diversify your funding streams, including focusing on acquiring more unrestricted grants, which can be used flexibly in times of crisis (Powell et al., 2023).

4.3 | Communication is key

Philanthropic organizations should ensure that people know who is in need, how to get involved, and what services they can offer to

support them. Philanthropic organizations are uniquely positioned to serve as community hubs to disseminate verified information during a crisis. Philanthropic organizations can also leverage (social) networks of those who they currently serve to reach the wider community.

4.4 | Focus on equity

Philanthropic organizations have the flexibility to respond to the diverse needs within their communities. It is especially important during times of crisis that they ensure that vulnerable or underserved populations are provided access to the information, services, and support they need to not only survive but also thrive, even in times of crisis.

ORCID

DeeAndria Hampton https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8200-8529
Pamala Wiepking https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5813-8366
Cassandra Chapman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8488-6106
Lucy Holmes McHugh https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1239-9525
Daniel Arnesen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2026-1684
Cathie Carrigan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3801-8519
Galia Feit https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9020-6293
Henrietta Grönlund https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4106-898X
Steinunn Hrafnsdóttir https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8069-6244
Natalya Ivanova https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5225-8367
Hagai Katz https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4750-0347
Sung-Ju Kim https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3122-6542
Ómar H. Kristmundsson https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4362-8506
Julia Litofcenko https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7484-739X
Irina Mersianova https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0275-4717
Michaela Neumayr https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5947-9325
Anne Birgitta Pessi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1312-9538
Wendy Scaife https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4876-4718
Karl Henrik Sivesind https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4752-8625
Johan Vamstad https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1453-6186
Yongzheng Yang https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6946-0919

ENDNOTE

[1] All reports are publicly accessible at https://www.globalgenerosityresearch.com.

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