



Generosity in Times of Crisis

Helping Behaviors During the
COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany

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We are a collaborative research group involving over 50 scholars from more than 20 countries led by Professor Pamala Wiepking from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in the United States.

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank their international collaborators who participated in this project and/or collected data for the generosity project in other countries: Cassandra M. Chapman, Wendy Scaife, Barbara M Masser, Marie Balczun, and Lucy Holmes McHugh (Australia); Astrid Pennerstorfer and Berta Terzieva (Austria and Germany); Henrietta Grönlund and Anne Birgitta Pessi (Finland); Steinunn Hrafnisdóttir and Ómar H. Kristmundsson (Iceland); Hagai Katz and Galia Feit (Israel); Karl Henrik Sivesind, Daniel Arnesen, and Bernard Enjoras (Norway); Irina Mersionova and Natalya Ivanova (Russia); Sung-Ju Kim (South Korea); Johan Vamstad (Sweden); Pamala Wiepking, Cathie Carrigan and Yongzheng Yang (USA). The series editors thank Una Osili and Femida Handy for their support, as well as the University of Queensland's Business School and the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy for seed grants that helped fund the preparation of this report.

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1. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into a health crisis that has had devastating effects on the global economy and public life in many countries. Little is known about how people have responded to two competing pressures caused by the crisis in many countries: increased community need coupled with decreased financial capacity to help others. We surveyed 1,000 people living in Germany in August 2020 to understand how their generosity behaviours manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. By generosity we mean all forms of behaviour that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).

Four key findings emerged:

1. The most common generosity behaviour displayed by Germans during the pandemic was social distancing (90%). Also very common were informal forms of generosity behaviour like supporting friends, family and acquaintances – two thirds of the population displayed generosity in this way.
2. 44% of the population engaged by donating time, goods or money to non-profit organizations. More people reported to have increased than to have decreased their formal philanthropic behaviour due to the pandemic, further supporting the news about “pandemics of kindness” (Jones 2020).
3. Those that were personally negatively affected by the crisis emotionally, financially, professionally or health-wise were the most likely to increase their formal philanthropic engagement, indicating that the experience of personal hardships fuels compassion.
4. Above personal affliction, the most robust predictor for generosity behaviour during the pandemic is the same than in normal times: Especially people with high levels of formal education and a stable financial background increased their generosity behaviours.

Managerial Implications. Nonprofits may wish to:

- Make more and better use of social media and digital infrastructure.
- Offer low-threshold points of contact for potential volunteers. Many people want to help in times of crises, especially those that are personally experiencing hardship. Yet the social inclusion of new potential volunteers is very difficult online and needs particular attendance.
- Promote cooperation with public authorities and businesses.

Policy Implications. Governments may wish to:

- Initiate cooperation between governments’ agencies, civil society actors and the business sector to make the most effective use of the available resources.
- Flexibly adapt the legislation such that nonprofit organizations can continue their operations. An example is the possibility to vote online, but also to allow exceptions from curfews to enable volunteer work and informal generosity behavior.
- Fund nonprofit organizations so that civil society still exists after the crisis is over.
- Ensure a social security system that provides individuals with the means to engage in generosity behavior.

2. Introduction: COVID-19 and Public Generosity

In early 2020, the world was thrown into a health crisis that had devastating effects on the global economy and social life in many countries: the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing (September 2021), more than 225 million people have contracted the virus globally and over 4.6 million people have died (Worldometer, 2021). By April 2020, more than 3.9 billion people from 90 countries – around half the world’s population – were told by their governments to stay at home to slow the spread of the virus (Sandford, 2020). These restrictions had knock-on effects for people’s social lives, as many people were separated from friends and family for long periods of time. Restricted movement (and associated dampened spending) also devastated many economies, with more than 225 million full-time jobs being lost from the global economy and unemployment rates skyrocketing in many countries (Hassan, 2021). In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global crisis that has severely impacted social and economic life in many countries.

The pandemic has had two competing effects in relation to the provision of social support to communities in need. On the one hand, the crisis amplified need: many more families than usual found themselves in need of support due to sickness or unemployment, especially families from vulnerable communities. On the other hand, because the global economy was straining and many families were facing difficult times, nonprofits and social programs faced reduced flows of income and support (CAF, 2021). Yet little is known about how people responded to these twin pressures: did the pressures of the pandemic constrain generosity, or were people able to find ways to help each other regardless? The purpose of this report is to answer this overarching question:

How have generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We define generosity as all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).¹ Generosity behaviors therefore include both formal and informal support. Examples of formal generosity behaviors are donating money to charities, volunteering for nonprofit organizations, or giving blood. Informal generosity behaviors include helping people they know, helping strangers, and participating in grassroots community groups.

To answer our research question, we formed a team of researchers working in eleven countries to collect data on the formal and informal generosity practices that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries included in the research project were Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States.

Country reports will be available online at: www.globalgenerosityresearch.com. This series is part of a broader research initiative from “The Global Generosity Project” led by Professor Pamala Wiepking from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in the United States.

In this report, we focus on the German context however we include some high-level comparisons with nine other countries where the same data was collected: Australia, Austria, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden and the United States.

By understanding generosity responses to this particular crisis, we can learn more about how individuals and societies respond to crises in general. Such knowledge can be used to develop policies and practices that ensure Germany will be able to withstand future shocks while maintaining a thriving and harmonious social fabric. To this end, we include a summary of our key findings and recommendations for both nonprofits and government.

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in eleven countries during the second half of 2020 and early 2021, with at least 644 participants per country (range 644 – 5900). In many countries, efforts were made to generate a nationally representative sample of participants.

The German sample covers 1,000 individuals and is representative for the resident population over 18 years of age. Data was collected via an online questionnaire, and the sample is from a recruited web panel, carried out by a market research company (Gallup). The data was weighted to correspond to the age and gender distribution within Germany, and also to the distribution of religious congregation, size of community, highest level of education and profession. This weighted version of the data is used in reporting national findings (sections 4.1 and 4.2), but not in the global comparison, which instead reports unweighted data (section 3).

The sample for Germany consisted of people aged between 18 and 86 years old ($M=48$, $SD=16,8$). 49% of them were male, 51% female, and 0,2% other persons. About 55% have a partner who lives in the same household, 13% have a partner living in another household, and 33% do not have a partner. 18% of respondents have children aged 18 and younger in their household. Two thirds of the respondents stated that they are able to make ends meet very easily, easily or fairly easily.

3.2 Timing and COVID-19 Context

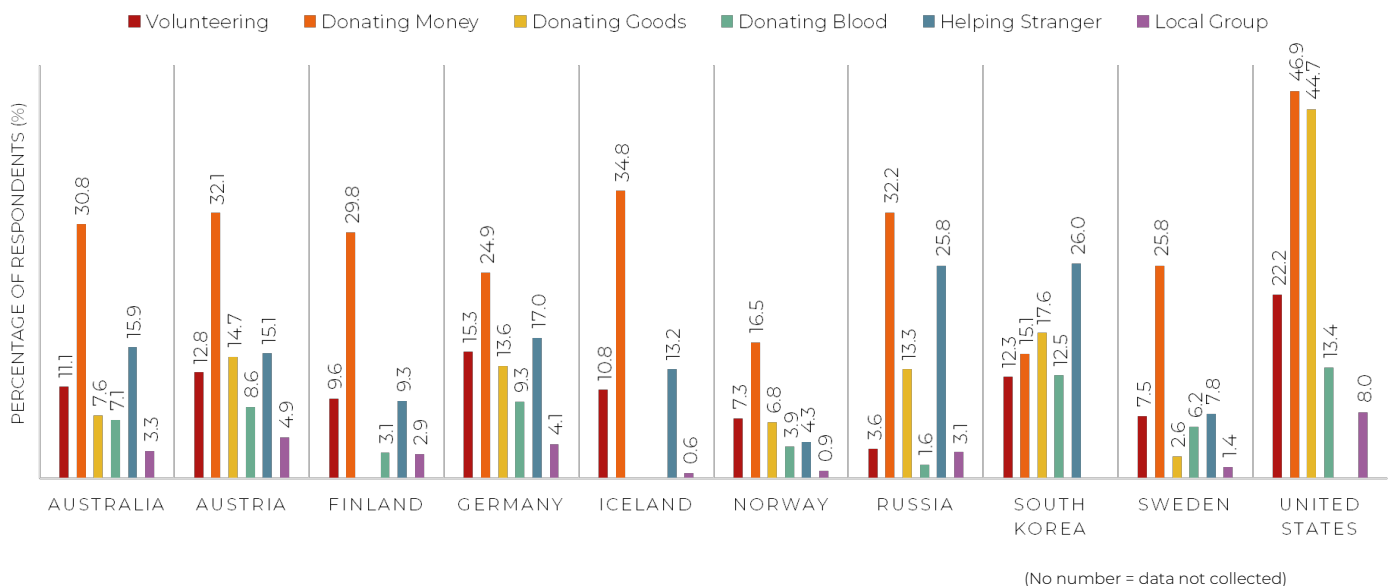
Data were collected between 3 and 14 August 2020. At this point, the worst of the early phase of the pandemic in Germany was over. The first confirmed COVID-19 case occurred on 27 January 2020. In the week of 13 March, borders were closed to non-EU citizens and German states mandated schools and kindergarten closures. Likewise, shops and restaurants remained closed. By March 22, some German states imposed curfews while other states prohibited physical contact with more than one person from outside one's household.

The measures taken proved effective in containing the spread of the virus and many of the measures imposed were gradually relaxed between mid-April and early May. The number of new infections per day dropped from more than 2,000 (and up to 6,000) cases per day between mid-March and mid-April to less than 500 by mid-May. It remained at this low level in May and June, but started to rise again in the last days of July. In the first two weeks of August, at the time of data collection, the number of new infections per day was again around 1,000. A possible second wave of the pandemic was under debate by then, but it was not yet clear that this would be inevitable. Therefore, the surveyed population was not yet aware of a new worsening of the situation, which eventually peaked at the end of December 2020 with more than 34,000 new infections per day (Robert Koch-Institut, 2021).

4. Global Comparison

As seen in Figure 1, manifestations of generosity behaviors varied across national contexts. We asked participants which generosity behaviors they had engaged in since the beginning of the pandemic. Some countries did not ask about all behaviors. In most countries, donating money was the most common generosity behavior reported. This also applies to Germany, where a quarter of all adults have donated money. In Austria, Australia, Finland, Iceland, and Russia, however, the proportion was somewhat higher, with one-third of all adults donating money to an organization. In contrast, the proportion of the population volunteering in Germany (15%) is higher than in all other countries surveyed (with the exception of the USA). Germans were the third highest of all countries to report forming local groups (4.1%), similar to Austria.

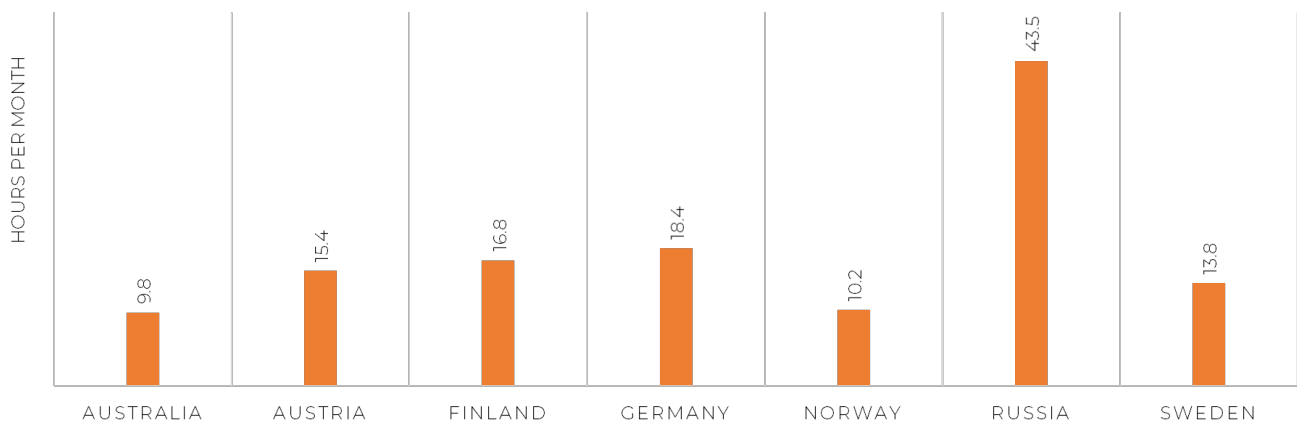
Figure 1. Generosity responses during pandemic



The extent of generosity behaviors varied significantly across nations. Respondents in different countries showed large differences in terms of the number of hours they volunteered each month² (see Figure 2). Adults in Germany spent an average of 18.8 hours per month in the period from March to May 2020, which is similar to the levels in Austria and Finland.

Of the hours volunteered per month (Figure 2), Russia stands out with 43.5 hours, about 2.5 times more hours than volunteers in Austria, Finland, Sweden and Germany. Yet Russia also had the lowest percentage of volunteers during the pandemic (Figure 1: 3.6%), compared with 22.2% of Americans, 15.3% of Germans and 12.8% Austrians.

Figure 2. Average number of hours per month spent volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic



5. National Findings

The key purpose of this report is to examine how people in Germany responded to the COVID-19 crisis; in particular, how individuals came together to help support those directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Below we consider the different forms of generosity behavior that were common in Germany during the pandemic and how these generosity behaviors changed during the pandemic. We then discuss a particular example of how generosity manifested in Germany during the crisis.

5.1 Generosity During COVID-19

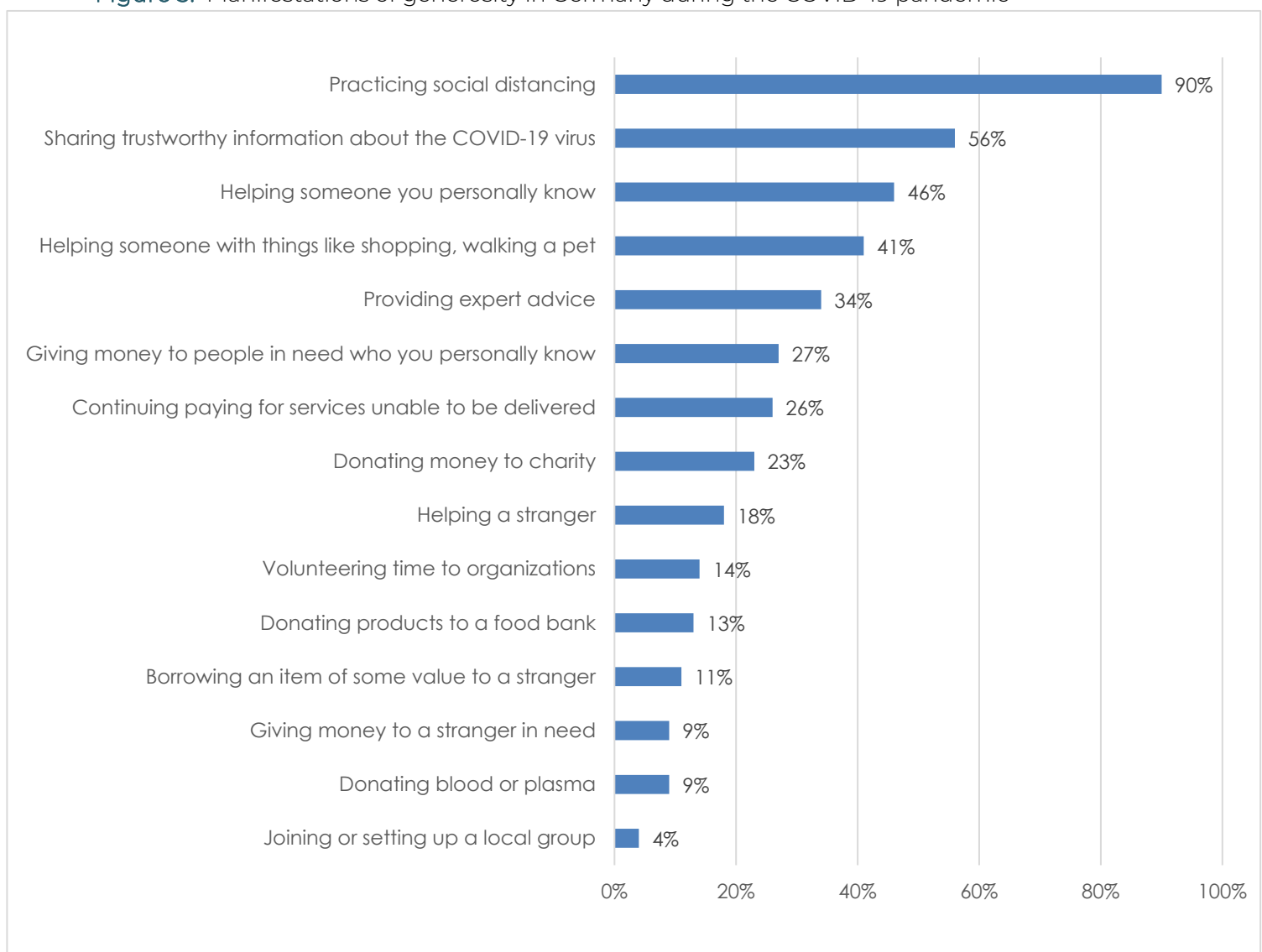
In this section, we look at the generosity of the German population in detail. Figure 3 illustrates that 90% of the population shows generosity behavior by practicing social distancing. Social distancing is only a passive way to support others, yet it indicates that almost everyone was keen to follow the governmental policies in the first months of the pandemic and thereby helped to contain the spreading of the disease.

Another 56% reported sharing trustworthy information (in their opinion) about the disease. Thereby, not only helpful information and guidance in uncertain times is circulated, but also networks of solidarity are re-affirmed and established. Social distancing could create isolation, but sharing information about current events had the possibility to draw people closer together in their shared faith. Noticeably high was the proportion of the population that engaged in informal volunteering (see Figure 3 below). Almost two out of three respondents (61%) supported someone they know: In about 40% of those cases, this informal support included giving money. In about 60% of cases, the personal support took the form of doing the groceries or walking the dog. In other cases, the support might have been purely on an emotional level.

The extent of 'conventional', formalized engagements through donations and volunteering, on the other hand, is more restrained. Around 44% of the German population engaged in some form of organized philanthropic engagement: 23% donated money to a charity, and 9% gave money directly to strangers. 13% donated in kind to food banks, and 9% of respondents donated blood or plasma. One out of seven respondents (14%) volunteered in an organization during the first months of the pandemic. Additionally, 4% of Germans joined or set up a local group that was established particularly to provide support during Covid-19. Other manifestations of generosity, such as providing expert advice, were also widespread (34%). Additionally, one out of four Germans supported companies and non-profit-organizations by paying for services that could not be delivered.

Summing up: Generosity in the early months of the pandemic in Germany mainly took the form of obeying the rules. Informally supporting family, friends and neighbors was also quite common, about two thirds of the population engaged in this form of generosity behavior. Formal philanthropic engagement, on the other hand, was not so widespread, with only around 44% of Germans donating money, goods or time to and in organizations. **Figure 3.** Manifestations of generosity in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. Manifestations of generosity in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic



5.2 Changes in Generosity

To learn more about changes in generosity due to the pandemic, we asked directly if people had donated and volunteered differently since the outbreak of the pandemic compared to previous years. As can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3, more than three quarters of the population did not change their behavior, suggesting a high level of continuity in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. However, it must be remembered that the majority of this group neither volunteered nor donated money before the pandemic. If we look only at those who were philanthropically engaged before the pandemic (see purple columns), we see large behavioral changes. Thus, the largest behavioral changes due the pandemic were observable among those who were already engaged in generosity behavior before. Those who were philanthropically engaged before the pandemic often increased their efforts during the pandemic. One out of two people who volunteered for an organization in 2019 changed their volunteering commitment due to the pandemic. 23% became more involved, 16% volunteered in a different way, 6% for different causes, and 18% decreased their engagement. Changes in donation behavior were a little less widespread, indicating that crises 'in the own front yard' are more conducive to direct action than to giving money. Overall, however, donations show the same trend as formal volunteering: 19% of those that donated in the year before the pandemic increased their donations, 8% donated to more causes, whereas only 12% reduced their donations. From this perspective, the ruptures in the nonprofit sector seem to be profound. Noteworthy, more people increased than decreased their volunteering engagement as well as their donations, supporting reports about a "pandemic of kindness" (Jones, 2020).



What distinguishes those that increase their donations and volunteering engagement, from those that do not alter their behavior, from those that decrease their engagement during the pandemic? To answer this question, we tested whether there were features of respondents (age, gender, income, place of residence, effects of COVID-19 on personal life) that explain one or the other behavioral change observed (Litofcenko et al., 2021). We found that the main factor leading to changes in formal generosity behavior was people being personally affected by the crisis. Thereby, it didn't matter so much whether the effect on the personal life was only at the emotional level, or also professional, financial or health-related - those that reported that they were personally strongly affected were much more likely to alter their behavior. Hence, it does not seem to be primarily the collective crisis that causes people to act, but rather the experience of profound change in one own's personal life.

The direction of observed changes in donations and formal volunteering was somewhat counterintuitive: Those *negatively* affected were more likely to *increase*, whereas those who were *positively* affected *decreased* their philanthropic engagement. Thus, personal suffering seems to spark compassion and generosity more strongly than the endowment with resources such as time and money. These results are in line with psychological studies highlighting the important role of personally experiencing hardships for the development of compassion (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020; Lim & DeSteno, 2016).

Effects of available resources are also present, but of smaller magnitude overall than the effect due to being personally affected: The higher the level of formal education, the higher the likelihood of reacting to the crisis with increased levels of philanthropic engagement. The same holds true for household income: Respondents reporting that it is easy for their household to make ends meet are more likely to increase their donations.

Regarding age, we see that respondents younger than 30 years have the highest propensity to change their behavior, in either direction. Respondents over 60 years old are among those that most often increase their donations. This group has the highest financial resources, thus does not need to worry for their own financial future. Above that, older people were shown to care more than younger cohorts did for the well-being of the collective during times of crisis (Roberts & Maxfield, 2019). Simultaneously with increasing their donations, the oldest cohorts reduced their volunteer engagement, though – probably because health-related risks of the pandemic were highest for them.

5.3 Case Study

Many governments were criticized during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic for their authoritarian style of communication and enforcements of containment measures. The following example shows that, on the contrary, the German government was very fast in setting up a participatory bottom-up process to tackle COVID-19 related challenges: The “*WirVsVirus*” [us against the virus] – Hackathon (WirVsVirus 2021). The Hackathon was under the patronage of the Federal Government and was initiated, organized and implemented by various companies and nonprofit organizations (Tech4Germany, Prototype Fund, Impact Hub Berlin, ProjectTogether, SEND e.V., Initiative D21, Code for Germany) on a purely voluntary basis.

Citizens, associations, companies and public administration agencies were invited by mid-March 2020 to submit issues they were currently dealing with due to the pandemic. Everyone with time and access to the internet could participate in the 48-hours-hackathon from 20th to 22th of March. 28,000 people worked together during the hackathon in project teams to find and propose solutions to around 1,500 submitted issues.



Hackathon Image. Consulting for Legal Professionals (2020)

Following the hackathon, the organizers created an implementation program, again under the patronage of the head of the Federal Chancellery: 147 solution approaches were accompanied in their effective further development and implementation from April to October 2020. To this end, all project participants were given unbureaucratic access to expertise and resources. The goal was to create an environment for bringing together the different projects, testing ideas in a coordinated manner, and quickly learn which solutions are most effective.

The implementation program was financed with EUR 1.6 million of public funding, EUR 900,000 of private funding and EUR 800,000 mobilized through a crowd-funding campaign. At least 70 open social innovation projects that were part of the implementation program were still actively put to work by December 2020. Among them are apps that digitize and speed up infection reporting and processes in health departments, connect people interested in volunteering and social service nonprofits looking for volunteers, or enable nursing home residents without technical expertise to receive video calls on their mobile devices. One of the most successful projects is UDO, a chatbot to apply for short-time allowance for employers, which was integrated by the German Federal Employment Agency on their website just two weeks after the hackathon. The hackathon is a prime example for efficient and generous cooperation between civil society, entrepreneurship, business and government during times of emergency (Mair, 2021).

6. Conclusion

In this section we briefly summarize the findings about Germans' generosity behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate potential implications both for government policy and nonprofit management.

6.1 Key Findings

There are four key findings from this report:

1. The most common generosity behavior displayed by Germans during the pandemic was social distancing (90%). Also very common were informal forms of generosity behavior like supporting friends, family and acquaintances with emotional support, doing groceries, walking the dog and giving money. Two thirds of the population displayed generosity in this way.
2. 44% of the population engaged by donating time, goods or money to nonprofit organizations. More people reported to have increased than to have decreased their formal philanthropic behavior due to the pandemic, further supporting the news about "pandemics of kindness".
3. Those that were personally negatively affected by the crisis emotionally, financially, professionally or health-wise were the most likely to increase their formal philanthropic engagement, indicating that the experience of personal hardships fuels compassion.
4. Above personal affliction, the most robust predictor for generosity behavior during the pandemic is the same than in normal times: Especially people with high levels of formal education and a stable financial background increased their generosity behaviors.

6.2 Implications for Nonprofits

Results suggest that many people in Germany found ways to behave in a generous and compassionate way towards their fellow citizens, despite social distancing and containment measures like curfews. Digital infrastructure played a crucial role: For example, as personal meetings were not allowed any more, government changed the regulations regarding the governance of associations in a way that business could be conducted digital only. Another example are numerous digital help groups that emerged through social media: Many of these groups aimed at also reaching the older cohorts of "digital foreigners" that had no internet access and were most in need of help, but their core operations team had to work in the digital world.

During times of crisis nonprofit organizations can:

- Make use of social media and digital infrastructure to enable the formation of flexible networks. The switch to the digital world allows connecting resources across regions and possibly bridging the urban-rural divide.

- Offer low-threshold points of contact for potential volunteers. Many people want to help in times of crises, especially those that are personally experiencing hardship. Volunteering offers an opportunity for those to stabilize their connections to society and thereby their own mental health (Sin et al., 2021). Yet the social inclusion of new potential volunteers is very difficult online and needs particular attendance (Liu et al., 2016; Tierney & Mahtani 2020). Otherwise, the positive effects for the volunteers as well as for the organization cannot be realized.
- Intensify or promote cooperation with public authorities and businesses to gain access to resources not otherwise available, to serve as a bridge between their groups and other relevant actors, to broaden the scope of their activities and to build stable relationships of trust.

6.3 Implications for Government Policy

Results of the case study suggest that the government has an important role in bringing about cooperation with civil society actors and the business sector. The credibility gained through the involvement of high-level government agencies is especially important in times of uncertainty and crises. Further on, flexible jurisdiction is necessary to allow the continuous and effective conduct of operations of civil society (see section 5.2. above). We also found that generosity behavior is more likely when individuals experience higher levels of financial security.

Thus, during times of crisis governments can:

- Initiate collaboration between governments' agencies, nonprofit organizations and the business sector to make the most effective use of the available resources.
- Flexibly adapt the legislation such that nonprofit organizations can continue their operations. An example is the possibility to vote online, but also to allow exceptions from curfews to enable volunteer work and informal generosity behaviour.
- Fund nonprofit organizations in such a way that civil society can weather a crisis well.
- Ensure a social security system that provides individuals with the means to engage in generosity behaviour.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Notes

1. A full overview of generosity behaviors can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/mznqu/>).
2. Due to unusual outliers, the data has been winsorized for two countries at the 99th (Australia) or 95th (Russia) percentile.



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