



Generosity in Times of Crisis

Icelandic Helping Behaviors During
the COVID-19 Pandemic

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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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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 644 Icelanders in September 2020 to understand how their generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. By generosity we mean all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).

Three key findings emerged:

1. Generosity behaviors were common during the COVID-19 pandemic and manifested in diverse ways, both in Iceland and around the world. The most common generosity behaviors were: (a) informal helping of friends and family and (b) formal helping through established nonprofits.
2. Icelanders donated especially to nonprofits that focused on health and social services, followed by charities offering international assistance.
3. Even though people reported that their involvement/donation had decreased rather than increased due to the pandemic, when comparing with pre-pandemic statistics we cannot conclude that there have been any radical changes in generosity behavior.

Managerial Implications. Nonprofits may wish to:

- Map needs across the affected communities in which they work, making sure inclusion of underrepresented populations is a priority.
- Making the opportunity to volunteer more accessible and finding new ways to volunteer such as online volunteering and using social media.
- Communicating clearly how people can both provide help and receiving it.

Policy Implications. Governments may wish to:

- Providing favorable legal framework and financial support for nonprofits and volunteers.
- To make the most of available resources by stimulating collaboration of nonprofits, government organizations and private businesses.
- Provide rapidly direct support to the not-for-profit sector if new policies will affect the sector's traditional sources of support.

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 Icelandic context; however, we include some high-level comparisons with nine other countries where the same data were collected: Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, 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 that Iceland 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 Iceland and many other countries, efforts were made to generate a nationally representative sample of participants. The Icelandic sample was nationally representative with regard to age, gender, and geographical distribution of respondents.

In Iceland, 644 completed a short online survey about their generosity behaviors since the start of the pandemic. Gallup implemented the survey using a random sample from their panel of Icelanders. The sample included 315 males and 329 females. Participants were all at least 18 years old ($M = 53$ years, $SD = 17$). Two-thirds (64,4%) lived in the capital, 58,7% were married, and 68.5% had no children under 18 years old living at home. The majority (85,2%) said their household was able to make ends meet between fairly and very easily.

3.2 Timing and COVID-19 Context

The first confirmed case in Iceland was on the 28th of February 2020. First major restrictions were set on the 13th of March 2020 when all universities and upper secondary schools were closed, with a maximum of 100 people allowed to gather, introduction of mask mandates, and social distancing requirements in preschools and primary schools.

Unemployment rates rose from 3.5% in September 2019 to 9% in September 2020.

Unemployment particularly affected the tourism sector where 2082 were unemployed in September 2020 compared with 666 in September 2019 (Directorate of Labour, 2021). Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased 6.5% in Iceland in the year 2020 compared with 2.4% growth in 2019, considered population increase the decrease is 8% (Hagstofa Íslands, 2021).

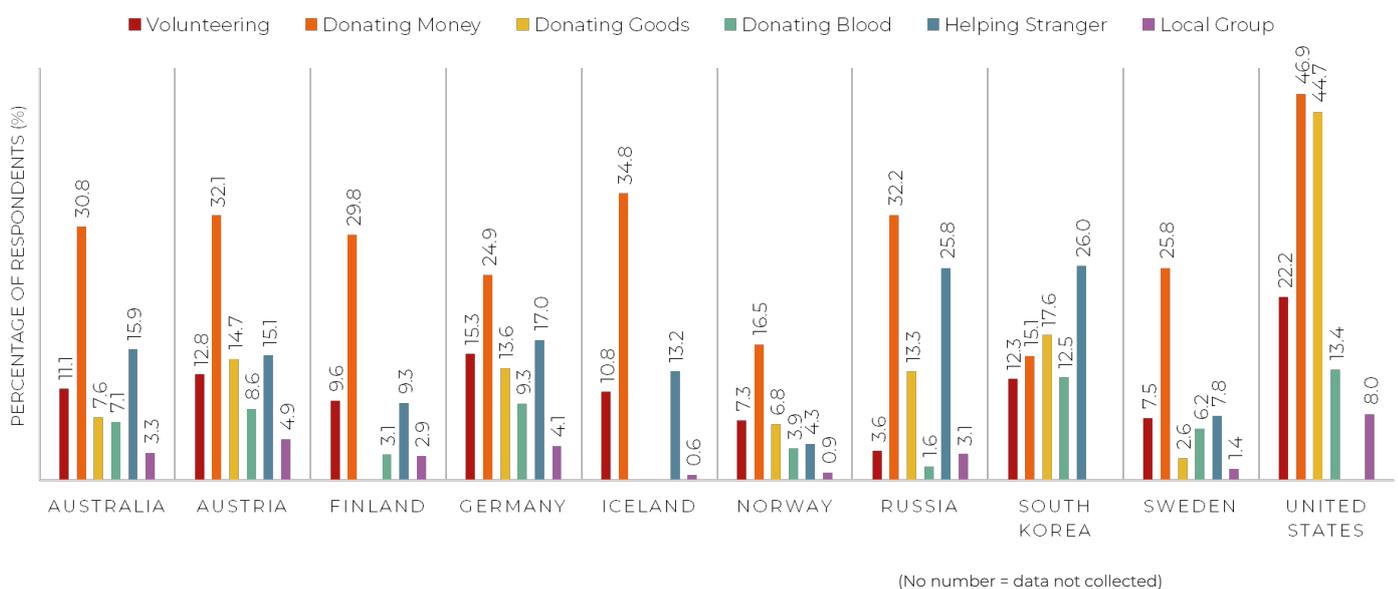
The Icelandic survey was active from 8th to 21st September 2020. At that time of the data collection in Iceland the Covid-19 pandemic was progressing into the 2nd wave, which reached its peak in mid-October. While restrictions were lifted on the 7th and time in quarantine shortened on the 14th of September, all pubs and restaurants were closed from 18th to 27th of September due to increased infections. Thus, at the time of collection, the Icelandic public were still very much experiencing the impacts of the pandemic on their daily lives.

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. The questionnaire in Iceland was somewhat different from other countries as it did not include questions about donating products or blood. In most countries, donating money was the most common generosity behavior reported, and this was also the case in Iceland. Helping a stranger and volunteering were the second and third most common forms of generosity behavior reported in Iceland, respectively. However, very few Icelanders had set up or joined a local group.

A natural reference point is to compare Iceland to the other Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), as they are somewhat similar to Iceland in terms of culture, economy, and politics. The numbers for volunteering seem to be similar, although Iceland ranks the highest of the Nordic samples. Reported rates of donating money and helping strangers were also higher in Iceland than in other Nordic countries. However, setting up or joining a local group was lower compared to the other Nordic countries. Overall, Russians and South Koreans were more likely to help strangers, and Americans were more likely to donate money, goods, and time.

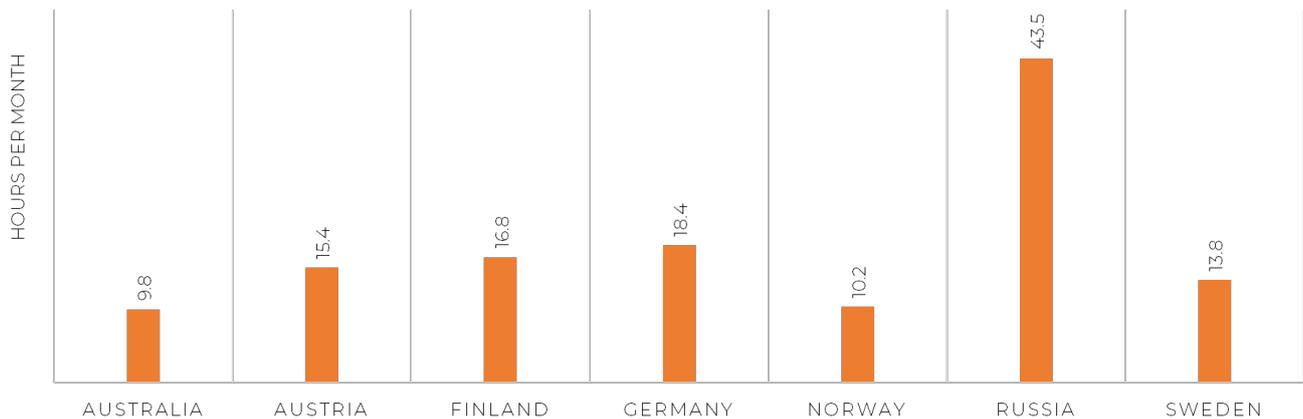
Figure 1. Generosity responses during pandemic



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 month (see Figure 2). The findings for Iceland revealed that 139 respondents volunteered (21.7%) in the last 12 months, of which 83.5% had volunteered more than 3 times during the 12 months. 10.8 % of the total sample reported that they had volunteered especially because of Covid-19. Respondents were also asked how many hours they spent volunteering last time they volunteered: most (81.2%) reported that they spent 5 hours or less.

While not directly comparable, in some of the other countries included in the study, respondents were asked how many hours per month² they had volunteered since the start of Covid-19. 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 Icelanders 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 Iceland during the pandemic and how these generosity behaviors changed during the pandemic. We then discuss a particular example of how generosity manifested in Iceland during the crisis.

5.1 Generosity During COVID-19

Participants answered eight questions on generosity behaviors during the pandemic, starting with “Have you done any of the following due to the COVID-19 pandemic?”

The most common generosity behavior due to the pandemic was helping someone you personally know, like family members, friends, neighbors, which 42.3% indicated having done. This is not surprising, because it is common that people would prioritize helping those closer to them first.

Donating money to a charity was the most common formal generosity behavior, with 34.8% of Icelanders sample saying that they had done so. When comparing these figures with the year, 2020, 56% of Icelanders reported that they had donated money to a charity in the previous month (CAF, 2021).

However, considering the difference in time periods and methodology of these studies we cannot conclude that there has been a decline in donating during the pandemic.

Rates of volunteering for organizations were lower than usual, with just 10.8% reporting having volunteered during the pandemic. In comparison, 21.7% said they had volunteered during 2019. Other sources indicate even higher typical volunteering rates—for example, around a third of the Icelandic population in 2009-2010 (Hrafnisdóttir, Jónsdóttir & Kristmundsson, 2014), 32% in the Eurostat survey for year 2015 (Eurostat e.d.) and 36.9 % according to the European Social Survey in 2012 (ESS, 2012). The limitation of these studies is that they use only one question to measure organized volunteering. There are no recent national surveys on volunteering in Iceland. Together, these figures indicate that volunteer practices were very likely disrupted by the pandemic. Such a decline is perhaps not surprising because many volunteering organizations closed their doors or halted their activities during the pandemic, especially sport and leisure organizations.

Icelanders were not very active in helping someone you don't know who needed help (13.2%) nor giving money to strangers in need or 12.3%,

Among the least common generosity behaviors were setting up or to join a local group to help with the crisis (only 0.6% had done this) and lending someone they didn't know money or other valuables (only 8.2%). These behaviors are possibly less common at any time. Figure 3 shows the generosity behaviors that were most and least common in Iceland during the early phase of the pandemic.

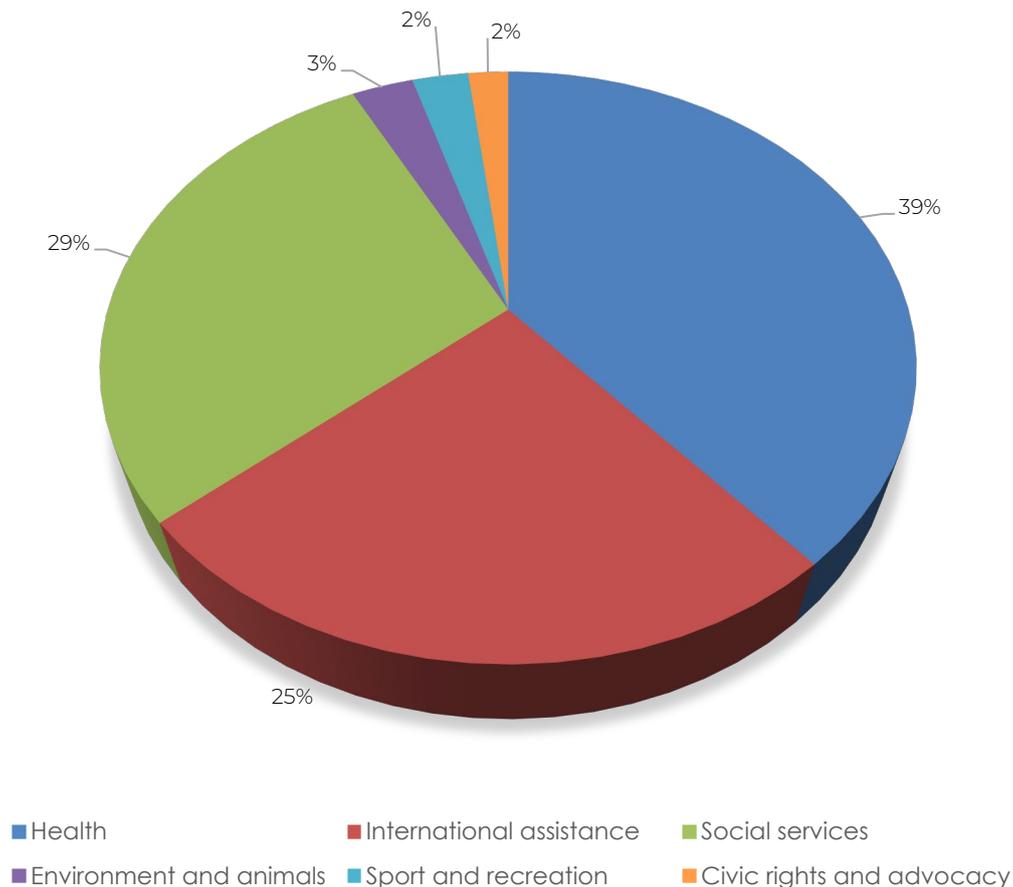
Figure 3. Icelanders' generosity behaviors during the pandemic



As donating money to charities was the most common generosity response in the pandemic, it is interesting to know where the donations were directed. A total of 98 charities were mentioned in this regard, which were subsequently categorized into 10 sub-types: Health, Religion, Social services, International assistance, Civic rights and advocacy, Culture/Arts & Humanities, Education and Research, Environment and Animals, Sport and Recreation, and Other (philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion).

Figure 4 shows the sub-types that were most commonly mentioned as being the recipients of donations during the pandemic. Over a third (39%) of donations were directed to health-related nonprofits, a quarter of donations each to social services (29%) and international assistance (25%), while only 2% of respondents said they gave to civic rights and advocacy nonprofits. Only the six most common sub-types are shown in Figure 4. The other four sub-types were only mentioned by less than 1% of the sample.

Figure 4. Charitable causes most commonly donated to

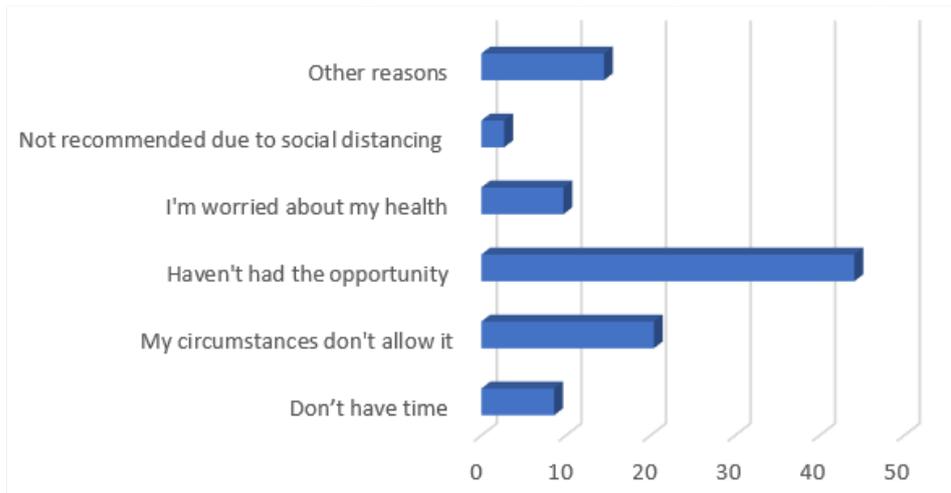


5.2 Changes in Generosity

When comparing with research on donating and volunteering in Iceland before Covid-19, the results indicate some decline in both. However, it is difficult to compare research that use different methodology, measurements and time frame to draw any definite conclusions about changes in generosity behavior. However, the restrictions and lock downs have probably had effect on volunteering as many non-profits were shut down.

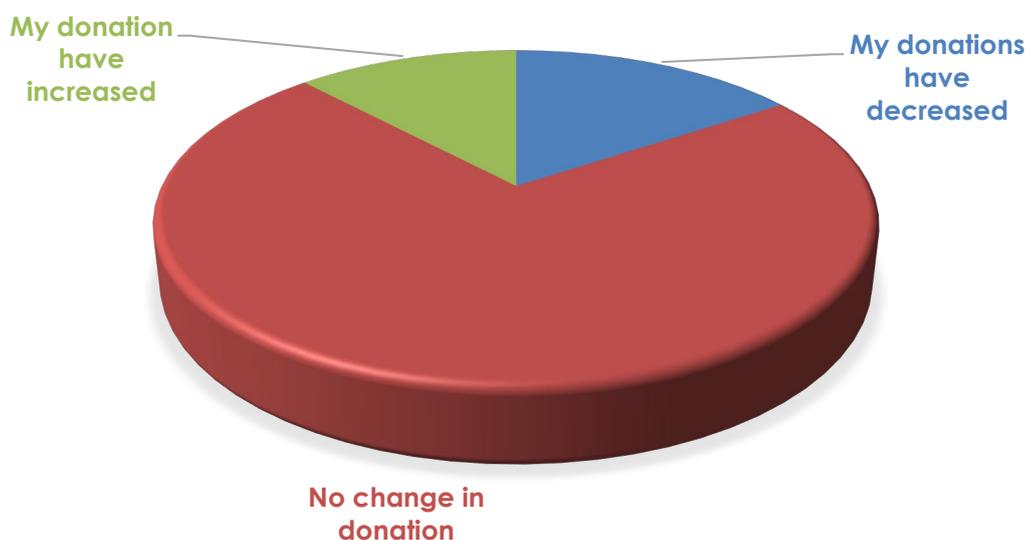
When Icelanders were asked the reasons why they did not donate or volunteer during the pandemic, most replied that they did not have an opportunity in doing so or 42%. The second most common reply was 'my circumstances don't allow for it' and the third was other reasons. This is perhaps not surprising as there were several restrictions in the country (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Reasons for not donating or volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic



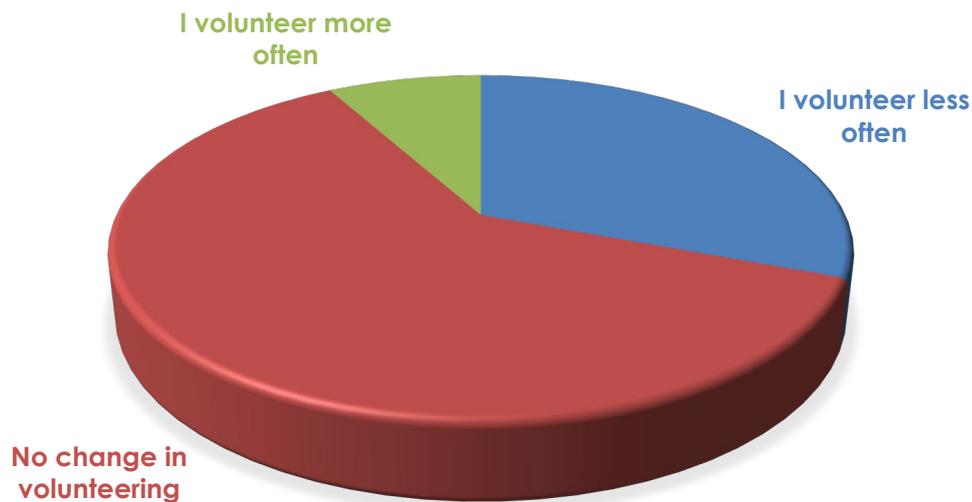
On the topic of donating money to charity 64.1 responded no change in donations in the last 12-month period, while 12.9% claimed that they decreased their donation and 9.9% increased their donation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, see Figure 6.

Figure 6. Changes in charitable giving (donations of money) during the COVID-19 pandemic



The respondents that were engaged in volunteering in the last twelve months were asked if their involvement had changed due to the pandemic. As shown in Figure 7, 31% responded that their involvement had decreased, 8% that it had increased and 61% that it was the same.

Figure 7. Changes in volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic



5.3 Case Study

In the beginning of the pandemic there were reports in the media about individuals and groups of people who reached out and provided support to people in need. Some informal Facebook groups were established locally, where people could reach out and coordinate help. The Icelandic Red Cross was very fast in responding to the pandemic, as it is a part of the national task force and continued to support vulnerable and marginalized people through the pandemic by providing basic health care, emergency shelters, etc. Additionally, they established quarantine centers on behalf of the Icelandic authorities that were run by staff and volunteers. They also used innovative methods to continue supporting vulnerable groups, including using social media and phoning people that were isolated.

One particularly interesting initiative was the project, “Spjöllum saman” (Talk together), that was run by the Reykjavík city welfare services and the Association of Elderly. In the project, social work students from the University of Iceland volunteered to help diminish isolation among disabled and elderly people. The faculty advertised for volunteers in social work and 35 students took part in the project. Volunteers called all people aged 85 years old and older that lived alone and had been receiving welfare services from the city. They chatted about daily life, situations, and challenges. The telephone calls didn't replace any welfare services or nursing provided by the city, but rather added value to those services.

Ásdís, one of the volunteers, mentioned that this was an opportunity to get insight into people's lives: *“You feel that people are very lonely and want this situation to end, they can't take part in their routine social life nor get their families for a visit. This is a job that continues to give back, you receive so much gratitude as well as interesting life-stories from the people you talk to”* (Háskóli Íslands, 2020).



A volunteer from the project “Talk together” talking to an elderly citizen.
Image: Reykjavík City Welfare Services (2020).

6. Conclusion

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

6.1 Key Findings

There are three key findings from this report.

First, the ways that generosity manifests seemed not to have changed much during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iceland. If anything, though, generosity has declined slightly. Asked about monetary donations to charities, 64.5% claimed their giving was the same as before the pandemic, 12.9% claimed that they had decreased their donations, and 9.9% claimed they had increased their donations due to the pandemic. A similar pattern emerged in volunteering: of the 21.7% that were engaged in volunteering, 61% claimed their involvement was the same, 31% reported a decrease, and 8% an increase in their volunteering. It can be concluded that the traditional generosity behavior did not change much during the pandemic, however because of restrictions and close downs some voluntary organizations did not operate. People are resilient and continue to volunteer if they have the opportunity to do so during crisis.

Second, Icelanders prioritized supporting nonprofits that were related to health, social services, and international assistance. This reflects upon the important role nonprofits have in meeting social challenges by developing welfare and health related services to different patients and disadvantaged groups.

Third, the most common generosity behaviors in the pandemic were helping friends and family and formal helping through established charities and nonprofits. However, these are probably behaviors that are most common at any time.

6.2 Implications for Nonprofits

Results suggest that people want to engage in generosity behaviors, even during times of crisis. They may seek to care for friends and family first but will also look for formal opportunities to distribute care to others in need. This is where nonprofits step in.

During times of crisis not-for-profits can:

- Map social challenges and needs related to the Covid-19 in the communities they work, making sure that their services or contribution is in line with those needs.
- Be 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.
- Communicating in effective ways where people can seek help and where to volunteer.
- Provide information on the needs of vulnerable groups to public authorities, private businesses and the general public.

6.3 Implications for Government Policy

Results suggest that government policies – especially around social distancing requirements, lockdowns had some impact on people’s generosity behaviors. For example, people volunteered less because of social distancing requirements and lockdowns. Although respondents seemed to donate less during the pandemic, this was still the most popular form of generosity behavior, which underlines the importance and role of nonprofit organizations in Iceland. That important role needs to be openly supported in government policy.

During times of crisis, governments can:

- Provide favorable legal framework and financial support for nonprofits and volunteers.
- To make the most of available resources by stimulating collaboration of nonprofits, government organizations and private businesses both in times of crisis and in normal times. This can enhance the collaboration during times of disasters and make the reactions more efficient during the next crisis.
- Provide direct support to the not-for-profit sector if new policies will affect the sector’s traditional sources of support.
- To take especially care of people in vulnerable situations that can be left behind in times of disasters.

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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.



Vaxandi is a center for social innovation at the University of Iceland. Its aim is to enhance understanding of social innovation and awareness of the role and contribution of the third sector and social entrepreneurship in Iceland.

Social innovation refers to new or changed ways of meeting the needs of society through the contribution of users and other stakeholders.



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