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NGOs Collaboration Strategies during the Covid-19 Pandemic First Lockdown: Poland and the United Kingdom

Chi Maher

SFHEA- MBA (London Campus)
Head of MBA Programme (London Campus)
York St John University
London, E14 2BA, UK

c.maher@yorks.ac.uk

Anna Czarczyńska

Faculty of Economics
Kozminski University
Warsaw, 03-301, Poland

czarczyńska@kozminski.edu.pl

Abstract

Crises lead to inevitable changes in the direction of optimization. Increasing Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) collaboration with other NGOs, private, public-sector organizations, and the state to develop and provide much-needed social, health, and community services.

Through a case study of four NGOs, and semi-structured interviews with CEOs and Managers the paper examines the role of small NGO actors and strategies, in maintaining broad-based collaborations, developing self-capacity. The paper explains ways of improving the overall inter-organizational connectivity to tackle health, social, and community issues exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic first lockdown. The organizations in our study serve a range of vulnerable populations and demonstrated a deep understanding of their needs during the pandemic.

The research findings suggest that although Covid-19 further highlighted funding difficulties of the sector organizations; collaboration activities with other organizations as a joined-up approach enabled synergies of working together and delivering much-needed services to the community. Public policy pandemic lockdown, which was treated as a stress test, was unsatisfactory. We observed strong collaborations between NGOs and with the private sector, however, evidence is mixed as to how Covid-19 affected collaborations between the state and other sectors.

Keywords: Collaboration, NGOs, Covid-19, Public Policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and since then, the virus has been spreading around the world (WHO, 2019). Combating the COVID-19 pandemic involves public health, social care, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) collaborating to provide services to the community. Collaboration involves organizations working together to achieve a common goal directly or indirectly affecting service delivery. True collaboration requires each organization to give up autonomy in the interest of mutual gain or outcomes. This involves working together sharing communication, cooperation, and changes in actions to support collective goals (OECD, 2020). The impact of the first Covid-19 lockdown impact on small NGOs was unclear, nonetheless, the forecast was that the sector will lose billions in income, thus the need to form collaborations with other agencies was paramount. The onset of the pandemic was a pivotal moment that caused people to become involved in helping others, although they had never done so before. Like any one was also short-lived. Investigating the non-governmental activity dynamic and their collaboration activities during the crisis can be perceived as an indication of social resilience and self-governance capacity (Nyashanuet al., 2020). NGOs can break down state monopoly over crises management, public donation, and relief operation. During crisis times, non-governmental actors carry out aid missions in parallel with statutory agencies (Atouba et al., 2020). However, the public sector, as well as the non-governmental sector, were stretched so they were not able to satisfy all demands, from service users. As a

result, collaboration during this period started formally or informally focusing on a particular client group. The informal collaboration involved information sharing or working together to share resources. The formal collaboration involved contacts such as post-discharge from the hospital, structured counseling service or case management. However, collaboration was impacted during this period due to changes in the environment, resources and time required to develop and embed processes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

NGOs play an important part in each country's economic growth and social cohesion. These organizations support the most vulnerable in our society. Academic research acknowledges the role of NGOs in providing social and humanitarian aid (Weisbrod, 1975) especially to domains in which the government or the market admits failure (Borzaga et al., 2008). From a social and economic perspective, the value-added of NGOs stems from their engagement with the production of goods and services, social integration, health, education, and environmental issues. They contribute to social cohesion, to the accumulation of social capital, to sustainable development at the local, national, and international levels and, most significantly, to poverty reduction (Borzaga et al., 2008). Furthermore, they empower citizens economically and socially in an ongoing process requiring human and financial resources and an enabling public policy framework that calls for policy innovation. Through these activities, these organizations contribute to a framework for sustainable well-being (Maher, 2017) for disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our community. Several authors suggest that NGOs are part of a 'new welfare mix' in which both governments and citizens collaborate and co-design new forms of health, social and environmental services (Brandsen et al., 2006).

Interpretive sociologists suggest that the existence of NGOs is linked to stakeholder interest (Maher et al., 2018), historical social and community needs factors and social welfare policy (Gretebeck, 2020). However, in Poland, sociological perspectives suggest that the development of NGOs is limited due to the dominant role of family, and low level of social trust (Reichel et al., 2009). Polish families do not endorse commitment in the activity of NGOs because the effectiveness of social capital is often lower in informal relationships, as in this case, the risk of maximizing individual benefits is considerably higher (Waniak-Michalak et al., 2016).

Political science academics acknowledge that the existence of NGOs demonstrates the realization by several past and present governments that the state's capacity to meet modern social problems is limited (Westall, 2010). Thus, NGOs helps successive governments to achieve their objectives to develop the social economy. The individual agency approach argues that NGOs have considerable discretion in their use of resources. Their unique functions are:

- a) specialization in a problem, a group of people or a method of intervention;
- b) advocacy;
- c) consumerism and other forms of volunteerism; and
- d) service provision, which is seen as the most pervasive and least distinctive function (James et al., 2013).

Non-profit sector literature suggests that NGOs are effective because they target the unmet needs of local people that the public sector and/or private sector often do not provide (Chen et al., 2013). They make positive contributions to the regeneration of deprived areas by addressing gaps in public services, combating socio-economic exclusion, and facilitating local democratic structures based on empowering individuals to make decisions at the local level (Maher, 2017). They help build citizenship (participation and membership in the community) by engaging citizens in the development of their communities. They offer a unique way of social organizing, based on the values of 'independence' (freedom of association), altruism (concern for others) and community (collective action) (Baines et al., 2020). They play a key role in tackling inequalities in access to health and social care, promoting social and economic inclusion of disadvantaged individuals and local communities (Maher, 2019). Often small NGOs collaborate with larger NGOs, private, public-sector organizations, and the state to develop and provide much-needed health and social care services.

The theoretical rationale for collaborations can be identified from various experiences and attitudes of diverse actors within these interactions; macro forces and micro factors (de Waal et

al., 2011). The macro perspective assumes that organizations' collaborations are formed due to decreased trust in the state's ability to solve social problems, access to limited Government funding, and one organization's inability to single-handedly tackle the growing complex societal issues (Maher et al., 2016). On the other hand, the micro perspective presents two compelling explanations of strategic intents, which are rooted in either a utilitarian rationale or an altruistic viewpoint (Felicio et al., 2013).

The utilitarian rationale can be associated with the argument that collaborations are formed due to a lack of critical competencies. Several authors argue there are several benefits organizations can achieve from strategic collaborations, these include, resource and expertise acquisitions, competitive advantage, market positioning and access to new markets. On the other hand, the altruistic rationale suggests that collaborations are formed due to the need for tackling social problems that exceed the scope of a single organization (GUS, 2020). Thus, rather than a utilitarian perspective of collaboration, which emphasizes competitive results, the altruistic approach emphasizes the chances of addressing social issues successfully.

The literature searches for this research found no empirical research conducted with small NGOs that seek to provide their collaborative activities during the Covid-19 first lockdown in March 2020. However, there has been some research on Grassroots Cooperation During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland (Achremowicz et al., 2020). Attitudes toward vulnerable populations in the time of COVID-19 (Grzelka, 2020). Third sector trends survey: Covid-19 and its potential impact on the third sector in the North (Chapman et al., 2020), UK charities and the pandemic: navigating the perfect storm (Hyndman, 2020); How to support vulnerable citizens during the COVID-19 lockdown (Oe et al., 2020). These studies described NGOs activities and they were networking and co-operating with other organizations to provide much-needed services during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Due to the scarcity of literature, we do not know whether small NGOs collaborations during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown are rooted in the micro perspective that suggests limited Government funding and limited state ability to solve growing social problems brought about by the Covid-19 crisis or the altruistic perspective which argues the need for tackling social problems during the pandemic exceeding the scope of a single organization. Given the limited empirical and theoretical understanding of NGOs collaboration during the Covid-19 first lockdown, this research is of particular significance to the NGO sector and the Third sector literature.

Thus, the research aim is to understand collaboration strategies employed by small NGOs during the first Covid-19 lockdown to overcome operational challenges.

The research objectives are to:

- i. identify challenges; small NGOs were facing during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.
- ii. as certain types of collaboration strategies employed by small NGOs during the first Covid-19 pandemic.
- iii. assess levels of public policy produced to support small NGOs during the Covid-19 pandemic first lockdown.

2.1 Increased Demand for NGO Services during Covid-19

Extremely networked and energized non-governmental organizations played a crucial role during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK and Poland. The lasting impact is still not yet known. It is a sector with many small organizations, each employing only a handful of staff members. NGOs are facing their biggest challenge; providing services through the Covid-19 global pandemic; staff coping with the personal challenges while trying to deliver their organizations' services where the only guarantee is that the way they will work in future will be different. These organizations often have less resilience to business continuity challenges, in addition to the points above. Many may have carried out little thinking or planning around their business continuity before the Covid-19 pandemic (Barker et al., 2020). They may not be insured for business interruption and may have limited financial reserves presenting due to precarious public services contracts arrangements (Maher, 2018a). There is a danger that staff and volunteers will want to continue to work/volunteer

even when they are feeling ill themselves, as they will be concerned that no one else can take on their roles (GUS, 2020).

In the UK many small NGOs were faced with a significant increase in the demand for their services, a limited increase in funding (NVCO, 2020). Organizations with a high proportion of their income coming from grants tend to operate with a relatively steady income, and that is not directly linked to the number of people using their services during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This operating model has been a poor fit with previous UK Government funding structures to support NGOs following disasters, which have often required organizations to show a decrease in their income to be eligible. But during this period Government could not reallocate funding, as a result, many small NGOs were experiencing increased demand for their services as the statutory sector (health and social care) services become stretched.

In addition, these organizations were changing how they deliver services (for example, providing telephone support or via Skype), as they are unable to deliver parts of their normal service face-to-face. They also discover that new services were needed to meet the emerging demand brought about by the Covid-19 virus. There is evidence that some funders were unwilling to allow flexibility if targets (particularly from contract funding) cannot be met due to restrictions. These organizations are facing financial penalties from the funder as a result (whilst staff costs remain the same).

Although, the UK Government's announced a support package of £750 million to help UK NGOs in 2020. This is a huge sum of money at face value, yet it is less than 19% of the expected £4 billion shortfalls needed by the sector. This left a massive funding gap that NGOs were struggling to fill (Alexander et al., 2010). Particularly, for small NGOs who are likely to face challenges in maintaining their normal services and activities if a high proportion of staff is unavailable due to self-isolation, illness, or caring responsibilities. These were a few challenges unique to many small NGOs were facing during that period.

In Poland, 89, 4 thousand NGOs were working in 2020. Between March and August 2020 14.1% of these organizations were undertaking additional services in addition to their normal services during the first COVID-19 epidemic lockdown. The corona virus pandemic further affected the functioning of NGOs to varying degrees – some NGOs continue to carry out their activities as business as usual, others have modified, restricted, or suspended their services. A survey (Klon-Jawor, 2020) found that 33% of organizations say they have stopped all activities so far. Another 27% of these organizations have suspended most of their activities. This means that more than half of the non-governmental sector does not carry out most of its pre-pandemic activities. The main needs of any organization during this time are financial support, the flexibility of donors and reliable information from the state and local governments. The extent to which organizations carry out their activities so far is related to their size and the locality from which they originate. Organizations in the rural regions were twice as likely to suspend existing activities than those in larger towns and cities. Taking new action in response to the pandemic divided the non-governmental sector into two segments:

- a) organizations that have already planned how to survive during a crisis and
- b) other organizations that have not taken any actions, nor have any plan to cope with a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is important to note that these differences became most apparent at the first Covid-19 lockdown first lockdown as the demand for health and social care escalated, whilst these organizations' resources have decreased. It is important to note that the sector organizations have been working in areas that have been virtually abdicated by the state. The sector organizations have been bridging the gap between public and private sectors service provisions.

The next section will discuss the research design, data collection and data analysis strategies employed to understand collaboration strategies implemented by small NGOs during the first Covid-19 lockdown to overcome operational challenges.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was designed to allow the collection and analysis of data on the various factors that influence the collaboration strategies employed by NGOs during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This process intends to answer the research questions and to further the body of knowledge on why small NGOs collaborate with other entities during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The formation of the study research design was guided by the research aim and objectives. This study employed a multiple case study design (Creswell et al., 2003). of four small NGOs in Poland and the UK. The exploratory nature of this research influenced the author's decision to choose a multiple case study design. It provides the means to explore and explain a contemporary phenomenon of which little is currently understood. Yin (Yin, 2018) has argued that a case study design is most likely to be appropriate for "what, "why", and "how" questions. In this research, the research questions are:

What are the challenges facing small NGOs during the Covid-19 pandemic first lockdown?

Why did small NGOs develop specific types of collaboration strategies during Covid-19 first lockdown?

How did public policy support small NGOs collaboration during the Covid-19 first lockdown?

The most unique aspect of the adopted case study design is its ability to deal with a variety of evidence which will contribute to understanding factors that influences organizations decision to collaborate with others. Yin (Yin, 2018) points to the technically critical features of a case study as an empirical inquiry that: 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. It may be used to explore situations in which the problem being investigated has no clear, single set of outcomes. The choice of a multiple case study design enabled the authors to draw information from various sources from the organizations to account for the diverse levels of internal and external factors that influenced their collaboration strategies and decisions. Yin (Yin, 2018) adds that the advantages of multiple case study design are that analytic results concluded independently from two or three cases are more powerful and compelling and as a result, the overall study is more robust. The conclusions from the multiple case study results form part of the research findings. The next section discusses the case study organization selection procedure, background, staffing, activities, and funding and income sources.

3.1 Case Study Organizations

This section will introduce the four case study organizations. Information for each organization was gathered from primary sources (such as interviews with CEOs and managers) and secondary sources (the organization's annual reports and policy documents). To be eligible for inclusion in this research, each organization had to be independent and not part of a larger NGO. Each organization also had to have less than 50 employees or have a turnover or balance sheet total that does not exceed 10m Euros (European Commission, 2020b).

Case Study A Summary

Background

Established in 2016 in Warsaw, with the founders' resources and crowdfunding. Managed by the foundation co-created with refugees with one full-time manager and three full-time workers. By proposing fair terms of employment and training organization was giving newcomers a better and safer start on the Polish labor market.

Services provided include:

Support refugees during crisis

Educational and cultural programs

Lectures, workshops, and film screenings

Giving refugees and immigrants in Poland jobs and training opportunity

Cultural integration and assimilation

Social impact breaking stereotypes and xenophobia

Artistic transcultural activity and post-trauma recuperation

<p><i>Legal status, income sources and organizational structure</i></p> <p>The organization is a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee and has a turnover of 30.000 PLN per annum. In May 2016 obtained from the crowdfunding action 29780 PLN from 383 persons. Own resources of the foundation invested in that project were only 2000PLN in 2017. In May and June 2020 organization received 1982 PLN of public support in the form of social contribution redemption. The organization employs 8 workers (3 full-time and 5 part-time), one CEO (full-time), one operational manager (full time) and a Board of Trustees of four members. The organization is currently working on developing food delivery, catering actions and own and artistic production selling at the local point.</p> <p>Source: The organization's Annual Reports and Accounts KRS, public documents, and interview with CEO</p>
<p>Case Study B Summary</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Established in 1994 in Central Poland. The organization was founded with the financial support of The German Marshall Fund of the United States. The organization started its work in January 1995. Actions were supported by other institutions, such as Stefan Batory Foundation, The Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute, and Levi Strauss Foundation. The organization realized projects with multiple partners, including EU Daphne Funding Programmed, Warsaw and Masovian Voivodship Employers Union or Prison for Women.</p> <p>Services provided include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To initiate legislative changes to improve women's situation and guarantee gender equality in Poland To provide legal, social, and practical support for women looking for help To provide psychological services to discrimination victims a and 24-hour helpline for women To organize meetings and workshops on women's rights, disseminate information and research <p>The organization is a registered charity as a Foundation and has a turnover of 48000 PLN per annum. Currently have 7 different divisions all over Poland. In years 2014-2020 has realized UE projects with more than 0, 5 million PLN financing and use the private donation funds 330000 PLN per annum. In the year 2020 from August to September received 48.000 PLN of public aid in form of social security contribution redemption. Foundation started with three persons employed, now is more than 20 persons fully employed and over 100 cooperated experts, temporarily volunteers and a Board of Trustees of five members.</p> <p>The main problem the organization has faced in the last two years is the growing need for their services due to pandemics and lockdowns and diminishing support from the local government (growing office maintenance costs and cancelled public funds for that activity form). It is currently exploring stronger cooperation with other organizations and professionals offering voluntary support.</p> <p>Source: The organization's Annual Reports and Accounts KRS, policy documents, CEO's interviews, and public campaigns.</p>
<p>Case Study C Summary</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Established in 1991 in the Southeast region of the UK, to provide counseling and support for drug users and their families using Department of Health funding for one project manager (full-time), one counselor (full-time) and one administrator (part-time). With the growing demand for their services and increased funding from the Local Government (LA), the organization in 1997 moved from its offices above a shop on the high street to its present premises which have a mixture of office space for staff, counseling rooms and group/therapy rooms. Services provided include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment and advice service Gym (for clients) and community cafe Methadone prescribing and vaccination clinics Needle exchange service Structured day-care Hostel for clients who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless <p>Legal status income sources and management structure</p> <p>The organization is a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee and has a turnover of £1.3 million per annum. £1.1 million of the organization's income comes from contracts with the Department of Health and the LA. £45.000 is from the earned rental of its premises to other</p>

Third sector organizations and local groups for events. £50.000 is earned income from the organization's community café that is open to members of the public (the café is registered as a CIC). £100.000 comes from grants from the National Lottery Funds and 5k from individual donations. The organization employs 40 workers (24 full-time and 16 part-time), one CEO (full-time), one HR manager (part-time), six full-time operational managers (of which three are 12-month temporary contracts), 22 volunteers and a Board of Trustees of eight members. The main problem faced in recent years concerns financial resources and the sustainability of their income sources.

Source: The organization's Annual Reports and Accounts, policy documents and interview with the HR manager

Case Study D Summary

Background

Established in 1992 in the Southeast region of the UK, with one team leader (full-time) one counselor (full-time) and one advice worker (part-time) with funding from the Home Office. In 2001 the organization expanded its services with funding from the Regional Health Authority to develop community methadone prescribing services for drug-using ex-offenders. Services provided include:

Open access drop-in facilities that provide information and advice

Structured one-to-one and group counseling service

Structured day program

Career support service

Outreach sports for drug users and drug ex-users

Training and employment support programs for drug users/offenders

Legal status, income sources and management structure

The organization is a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee and has a turnover of 850k per annum. £550.000 of the organization's income comes from the LA. £10.000 of the organization income is from earned income from membership subscriptions and the sale of self-awareness information booklets on drug and alcohol use. £150.000 comes from grants from the National Lottery Funds; £113.000 comes from charitable trusts and £27.000 from individual donations. The organization employs 17 people's equivalent full-time workers (22 part-time), one CEO (full-time), six full-time operational managers (all are on 12-month contracts), 30 volunteers and a Board of Trustees of eight members. The main problem the organization has faced in the last 12 months is the reduction of its contracts from LA. It is currently exploring to retain managers in the long term and how to increase their earned income activities.

Source: The organization's Annual Reports and Accounts, policy documents and interview with CEO.

3.2 Summary Case Study Organizations 'Characteristics

Organization Year Established	Number of Employees	Funding Sources	Number of Participants
A (2016)	10	Crowdfunding Fundraising activities Social services	4
B (1994)	20	EU funding Social Services	6
C(1991)	40	Department of Health Local Government National Lottery Fundraising activities	8
D (1992)	17	Membership subscriptions National Lottery Donations	6

TABLE 1: Authors 'Classification.

The evidence suggests that the four case study organizations also complemented the income that the organizations received government contracts or the EU, with on-going fundraising activities such as membership subscriptions, trading subsidiaries (café and training services) and hiring of facilities. This indicates that these organizations were not financially stable. The exact analysis of the extent of Covid-19 impact on NGOs collaboration strategies is still unclear, answers aim to do so.

3.3 Data Collection Method and Approach

The research adopted a cross-sectional data collection approach, entailing the collection of data in a research time to produce evidence in a timely manner (during the first Covid-19 lockdown) rather than to explain the pandemic and its effects on NGO collaboration strategies after the event. The UK and Poland went into Lockdown in March 2020, with rules coming into place stating the following: shopping for necessities; once a day for exercise; medical needs or providing care and travelling to or from work (if you cannot work from home). These rules that have been put in place have majorly affected the way in which NGOs were delivering services.

Given the aim and objectives of the research and insufficient prior research on the subject matter, the authors decided to adopt a qualitative method to understand the challenges small NGOs are facing during the first Covid-19 lockdown and collaborative strategies developed to cope with these challenges. A quantitative approach would not have produced adequate data from which to draw sound conclusions and it would have been difficult to make anything other than superficial of the collaborative strategies these organizations employed to overcome their challenges.

The researchers collected data from the following sources:

Documentary evidence: (such as annual reports and accounts, organizational history, activities, and policies) contained useful information regarding organizational mission and management structure, organizational activities, and income generation sources, which allowed the authors to understand organizational factors that influence their collaborative strategies.

In addition, the authors retrieved 688 media reports from the databases Google and Google Scholar. The search terms applied covered policy measures (search string: "Policy measure*" OR "government* support" OR "bailout" OR "government* funding") linked to the COVID-19 crisis (search string: Covid 19 OR Corona virus) focusing on published articles between December 31, 2019, and March 28, 2021. The next step was to apply several inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify the relevant articles, leading to 142 articles to be analyzed. Information from these documents enabled the authors to develop a deeper understanding of the four case study organizations' activities, contractual arrangements and policies that influence their collaboration strategies.

Semi-structured interviews with key informants such as CEOs and managers helped to address the research questions. All interviews were undertaken online due to Covid-19 restrictions. Interviews ranged from 45 to 62 minutes with an average of 60 minutes. At the end of the interview, the authors asked participants if they were satisfied with the interview. The authors also allowed participants to indicate any additional information that they considered relevant to the research. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded with the permission of each participant.

The authors obtained an electronic signed informed consent from each participant stating their willingness to participate in the research. Each participant was informed that they had the option to withdraw at any time from the research but none of the participants chose to do so. To maintain anonymity, participant names and addresses of participating organizations are not included. The authors identify each participant with a number and organizations with an alphabet. This was to ensure that readers could not identify the views of specific individuals or organizations. Also, ensuring that participants did not restrict their disclosure was an important consideration for the research and involved the assurance of confidentiality (European Commission, 2003). All responses were coded to a particular interview question this helped to improve the rigor of the data analysis process by validating the authors own impressions of the data.

The next section explains the results and findings of the fieldwork.

4. FINDINGS

This section explains the result of the fieldwork undertaken to understand and collaboration strategies, employed by small NGOs during the first Covid-19 lockdown to overcome challenges exacerbated by the epidemic in Poland and the United Kingdom. The study represents an original contribution to knowledge and understanding of small NGOs collaboration strategies during that period. The results will be discussed under the heading of each research question.

Research Question 1: What are the challenges facing small NGOs during the Covid-19 pandemic first lockdown?

We aim to capture and share some of the lived experiences of how the sector CEOs and managers coped with the challenges of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Feedback evidence reveals that resources and funding difficulties were amongst the main challenges these organizations were facing during this period. Polish participants reported:

“The last few months have been very difficult for us as well as many others. Losses resulting from two months of closure, cancellation of all catering and uncertainty when the situation returns to normal leave us with no way out. In times of pandemic, it is even more difficult to be a person with non-EU citizenship in Poland. In addition, the lack of support from the anti-crisis program and the current restrictions (we can legally have six people) will not give us a real chance of survival” (Case Study A: CEO: Participant: P1).

“In mid-March, we were given a top-down order to close the facility. We operate under very strong restrictions; most of our patients are seniors. It costs PLN 20,000 to operate. PLN 1 000 per month. Grants cover only half the amount, the rest of the organization must earn itself, e.g., selling books. In a pandemic, this proved impossible” (Case Study A: Manager - Participant: P2). Similarly, UK participants reported:

“The situation is desperate. I’m trying to minimize the demise of the organization and focusing on keeping our core services open. More than half of our staff has been furloughed. The level of uncertainty is hard” (Case Study D: CEO - Participant: 12).

Our future is uncertain. Two of our centers are closed and if things don’t improve soon these centers will close permanently. Pandemics such as this have been predicted for some time and the impacts of the pandemic have been so catastrophic due to reduced funding to the sector since austerity measures were introduced in 2015, So the sector is very vulnerable to a global crisis such as Covid-19” (Case Study D: Manager - Participant: 15).

These accounts demonstrate the long-term effects of how Governments’ reduction in public sector funding is severely affecting many small NGOs as they face further financial challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic; with limited income to invest in organizational infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the sharpest and deepest economic contraction in the 21st century (Maher, 2013). Over the past few years, the financial climate has forced several of these organizations to accept a reduction in public funding, which has led to managerial and staff reductions. In addition, most of UK staff has seen limited pay scale increases for a few years (Maher, 2015). In Poland, these organizations had to adapt to new conditions, change the way they work or give up some activities. Unlike larger organizations, Polish organizations do not normally receive many State grants; they are mostly financed by individual donors and large cooperation’s (Czarczyńska, 2015).

Since the beginning of the first lockdown, there were more people requiring health, social services support for mental health, isolation, and social care. The demand for NGOs services escalated, whilst their resources decreased. In addition, it is important to understand that services offered by these organizations were especially required during this period (Leite et al., 2020). Yet several organizations were fighting for survival as sources of income have dried up overnight. Those with reserves were using their reserves to prop up services; smaller organizations without reserves were at risk of imminent closure due to limited income generation activities.

However, an alternative view of coping with challenges was expressed by a few participants, for example, a UK participant reported:

"I have found myself energized by the challenges of having to deal with issues brought on by the crisis. I have swiftly become more agile and confident in my decision-making skills and have found new ways of managing and supporting staff" (Case Study C: CEO - Participant: 8).

The above evidence suggests that some CEOs flourished and found positive ways of coping with the pandemic crises. These individuals can re-design projects and delivery styles and successfully navigate changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic to normal working practices. Furthermore, they take advantage of these opportunities to refine organization activities and eliminate inefficient practices. These positives demonstrate rapid adaptation, resilience and innovation during these difficult times and developed new ways of supporting staff and service recipients and how they continued to rise to each challenge.

Research Question 2: Why did small NGOs develop specific types of corroboration strategies during Covid-19 first lockdown?

Collaboration is about working together to achieve an agreed outcome in a mutually beneficial way. It requires a group of independent organizations working together to achieve a common purpose (Thomson et al., 2006). Implementing this requires knowledge, internal assessments, assuming responsibilities and value creation. About types of collaborations strategies NGOs employed during the Covid-19 crisis, Polish participants reported:

"With the joint effort of the team, friends, and people to whom the mission of the Kitchen is close, we are back on our feet. It was thanks to the commitment of the people supporting us, the benefits, the support of our solidarity dump, and daily warm words of encouragement that we managed to survive we decided on a new formula. We are changing the formula of action to shop which, like a bistro, will become a workplace for refugees, will also allow us to sell more products prepared directly by people with migration experience" (Case Study B: CEO - Participant: 6).

"We had to lay off two people. This is a painful decision at such a time, but we calculated the costs, and another choice was not. That didn't solve the problem anyway, we did our best not to drown. Another foundation gave us funds to sew masks, which allowed us to survive from May onwards. We asked people for help. They did auctions and they put up a coffee machine for sale, and the director even put her private bike up for auction. Thanks to this, it was possible to manage large premises, which the foundation rents from a city company" (Case Study B: Manager - Participant: 8).

UK participants added:

"The collaboration with various organizations on a joined-up approach to service delivery has helped, and we see the greater good and synergies of working together during this crisis and in the future. I'm inspired by the creativity; innovation and equal approach to collaboration focused on ensuring we all survive this crisis" (Case Study D: CEO - Participant: 18).

"We are pursuing a course of broadening our funding sources to improve our financial sustainability through accelerating corporate collaborative activities. The dedication and commitment demonstrated by all our collaborative organizations is very inspiring" (Case Study C: CEO - Participant: 10).

Our research found collaborations across sectors and within sectors that went deeper than previously and a growing sense of the urgency of the situation; combined with strategic alliances, greater sharing of information to survive the crisis. The evidence suggests that building collaborations helped these organizations to survive the turmoil of the pandemic. It also supports the altruistic approach that suggests that organizations form collaborations to address social issues successfully (Barroso-Méndez et al., 2020). Collaborative activities form a significant part of an organization's survival tactics, much of which is moving from accidental to incidental to intentional gathering resources required to continue to provide support to service recipients. Thus, building collaborations became an essential 'cog of connection' between organizations. For most the pandemic required CEOs and managers to listen actively, accept advice, communicate their views, and accept compromises.

Research Question 3: How did public policy support small NGOs collaboration during the COVID-19 first lockdown?

During the first Covid-19 lockdown NGOs were facing a dramatic fall in income and were facing increasing demands on their services because of the pandemic.

In Poland, most COVID aid schemes treat NGOs as ordinary companies, although they cannot pay bonuses or set aside money for worse times. The system of financing NGOs is complex, different for each organization and, especially for small NGOs very unstable. Polish participants reported:

“Our organization has benefited only from the anti-crisis government program, in the form of exemption from social contributions. Other possibilities are unknown to me” (Case Study A: CEO - Participant: 7).

“No institutional support. Only screenshots, and private support of individuals and other organizations. Unfair competition for very stripped-down funds between NGOs” (Case Study A: Manager - Participant: 3).

Several of the study participants were concerned that the parameters for funding provided by the government favored those working in the private sector, which means that they will receive limited support. In the UK, the Government announced that NGOs are eligible to access funds for businesses such as the Corona virus Job Retention Scheme and The Corona virus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (Mayhew et al., 2020). However, barriers to small NGOs accessing these support schemes were limited. UK participants reported:

“Although we have received a small amount of funding from the government... it does not go far enough to cover the increasing demands of our services right now. The problem with the furloughing scheme is that you are laying staff off when demand for our services is increasing. We have been trying to contact our main funder [the government] about our predicament during this crisis, but so far there has been no response. The future is uncertain as we are at the mercy of our funder, we have no control of this. I want the organization to be here in next coming years” Case Study D: CEO - Participant: 20).

“We are a relatively small organization supporting people with physical and mental health needs; this requires more funding now and, in the future, ... but we have less funding coming in, so we have serious concerns for our future. We face an immediate financial cliff edge; we don't know if we will be able to pull together the funding required to see us through this financial year. Some organizations have already gone bust at the same time as increased demand for their services”. Case Study D: Manager - Participant: 21).

“The longer financial impact is enormous ... our funder and the government have not grasped the true level of services provided by organizations supporting the long-term needs of people experiencing mental health difficulties in the community. When we are all gone there will be an awakening of the reality of, we do and have been doing with very limited funding” Case Study C: Manager - Participant: 18).

There were key concerns from key informants about limited state funding to support front-line services delivery, staff support, new approaches to working and how much energy to put into collaboration strategies when things are so uncertain. There were concerns over financial security by UK participants when there were increasing demands on the organization's services. The situation put pressure on organizations to stretch and provide more activities than they planned. These organizations were in desperate need of their organizations to survive.

An alternative view was presented by a UK participant.

I understand the capacity of the government to fund organizations in the different sectors during this crisis. However, it is not so easy to re-start another NGO as it is to re-start a private sector business. The government need to understand the key services that we provide to people with long term health needs, and these services are in greater need during this crisis and in many

years to come. Our funder [Charitable Foundation] has been great. We managed to receive our full funding this year. They have very understood and helpful (Case Study C: Manager - Participant: 22).

The evidence is mixed as to how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected relationships and collaborations between the sector organizations, individuals, and funding bodies. Although, some of the study participants expressed sympathy with the government predicament during the pandemic. In this regard and preparing for a future crisis, the state needs to remember the ongoing contributions the sector organizations contribute to the 'public good' community, health, and social services.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper provides critical insight into the pandemic's first lockdown effect on NGOs in Poland and the United Kingdom and their role as a vehicle of a collaborative society. Covid-19 restrictions affected the lives of most citizens. In that critical moment, the non-governmental organizations could satisfy the needs that were not met by other state entities (Reichel et al., 2009). There was a startling realization that small NGOs had become largely dependent on local and governmental administration bodies funding and indirect support (Waniak-Michalak et al., 2016). As a result, financial resources fluctuated in most organizations. However, NGOs worked following the original idea of the foundations of NGOs humble mission and 'can-do attitude, even expanding the range and capacity of actions undertaken. There are actions during the Covid-19 pandemic that clearly supports the altruistic collaboration rationale which suggests that collaborations are formed by the study case study organizations due to the need for tackling health and social problems that exceed the scope of a single organization; rather than a utilitarian perspective of collaboration, which emphasizes on competitive reasons (Felicio et al., 2013).

During the first Covid-19 lockdown we could observe a flourishing time for small NGOs acting with minimal resources and, in the case of Poland, small NGOs collaborating directly with governmental agencies. Most organizations continued to implement creative methods, such as the use of technology as a more efficient collaboration tool to deliver services, compensating standard activity channels.

The UK government was exposed as being unable to produce enough personal protective equipment for frontline staff. Some NGOs had to do with homemade masks. These insufficiencies were caused by years of austerity programs and neoliberalism which promoted the fragmentation and disarticulation of a wide range of systems in our society (Maher, 2017). These difficulties were further exacerbated by the lack of state planning capacity for pandemics such as Covid-19.

The research findings have also enhanced our understanding of how NGOs demonstrated rapid adaptation, innovation and had to reinvent themselves during a crisis. The outcome of pandemic shock depended strongly on these organizations' maturity and agility, and this study demonstrates that it was the catalyst for a change. However, collaborations strategies taken by NGOs in Poland and the United Kingdom to assist the most vulnerable in our society if harnessed could have important implications for building social capital. Building social capital, with NGOs beyond the Covid-19 pandemic experience should be a key public policy in the post-pandemic period as a new model of state crises management preparation. Governments need to support non-governmental organizations transparently in an open way within the framework of collaboration, promoting civil society self-relied capacity.

NGOs self-organization capacity is very strong; however, the overall efficiency depends also on the local context and the culture of giving level. In the case of Poland, we observe the strong individual capacity of improvement based on stronger involvement and closer collaborations developed mostly due to private sector networking, while in the case of the UK we could observe stronger collaborations with local governments and Health Care Trust. If the UK Government can honor its "leveling up" agenda, it should fund small local NGOs properly to help them achieve these endeavors and help re-build planned support post-Covid-19. All four case study organizations provided evidence of collaboration strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic first lockdown. In all cases, they have been adapting and developing collaborative strategies to meet the needs of service recipients and organizational survival.

In both countries, we could observe fast development of managerial skills and cooperation capacity during this period; as a result, there is evidence of higher efficiency of the organization activity and improving the utility of the limited resources. The first lockdown was a period of extraordinary action showing the very high managerial capacity of small NGOs, while at the level of public-civil cooperation we could find some limitations and weak points such as the decision-making process, lack of communication and not equal and fair legal environment for NGOs activities.

The first lockdown was also a collective experience of uncertainty and threat, which resulted in increased identification with other people in the same difficult situation and led to the activation of helpful, pro-social behavior to develop collaboration with other organizations. Going forward, the state should not view collaboration as a means of cost-cutting and reduction in NGOs funding. Collaboration should be recognized as a means of improving efficiency and effectiveness. The state should support organizations that formed collaborations with other entities to regularly monitor their effectiveness and prepare to respond to changes in demand for services.

This study is limited by the sample and the specific moment, as this study was carried out in two European countries. Future research could also focus on understanding the collaboration dynamic between different agents and the spillover effect of that process and set out a plan of action to develop positive values that comes from collaboration practices.

All Polish research participants were women, and we could observe besides the core interest of this research also other phenomena worth investigating such as the feminization of unpaid work and maternal gate keeping pressure limiting social activity capacity.

Overall, the research findings suggest that pandemic was a stress test for the local communities and the cooperation capacity alleviating social dysfunctional ties through NGOs activities in the more collaborative society, which would in time lead to the greater power of confidence to develop closer relationships with other sectors and the state.

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