

Borbáth, Endre; Hutter, Swen

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Mobilizing individuals in crisis: The role of civil society organizations in volunteer engagement during COVID-19

Endre Borbáth ^{a,b} and Swen Hutter ^{c,d}

^aInstitute of Political Science, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg, Germany; ^bCenter for Civil Society Research, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany; ^cInstitute of Sociology, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany; ^dCenter for Civil Society Research, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic created a dual crisis for civil society organizations (CSOs): heightened demand for social support alongside restrictions that limited their capacity to mobilize people. This study investigates how volunteer-based CSOs fostered civic engagement amid these constraints, providing new empirical insights into their capabilities and limitations during times of crisis. Bridging research on both the demand and supply sides of civic engagement, we draw on three original studies – a comprehensive survey of CSOs, a large-scale population survey, and a survey experiment – to map responses to the crisis at both the individual and organizational levels. Our findings reveal persistent social inequalities in volunteering and mutual support, with CSOs primarily engaging men, highly educated individuals, affluent citizens, and those already active in organizations. Despite these pre-existing inequalities, CSO outreach significantly boosted engagement, particularly in more formal settings. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the role and transformation of civil society during periods of crisis, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that CSOs encountered as they navigated the pandemic.


KEYWORDS

Civil society; volunteering; social support; COVID-19; mobilization

Introduction

Previous research has highlighted that for many volunteers, being contacted by an organization is the initial step in their civic engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Varese & Yaish, 2000). However, the literature has largely concentrated on inequalities among those already participating in civil society (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022; Bertogg & Koos, 2021; Dalton, 2017; Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Teorell et al., 2007). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how organizations themselves might strategically mitigate these inequalities by influencing who gets contacted in the

CONTACT Endre Borbáth  endre.borbath@wzb.eu  Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Institut für Politische Wissenschaft, Bergheimer Str. 58, Heidelberg 69115, Germany

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first place (van Overbeeke et al., 2022, p. 36; also see: Meyer & Rameder, 2022). Recent studies exploring inequalities in recruitment emphasize that social class (Dean, 2016), previous volunteering experiences (Høgenhaven, 2025; van Overbeeke et al., 2022), available resources (Meyer & Rameder, 2022), and integration into social networks (Carlsen et al., 2021; Höltnann et al., 2023) are key determinants of being contacted by civil society organizations (CSOs). Consequently, disparities in recruitment practices may reinforce socio-economic inequalities and partially explain variations in individuals' likelihood to participate (Qvist et al., 2018).

To advance this emerging literature, we focus on two dependent variables: (1) the ability of CSOs to reach potential volunteers, and (2) individual volunteering behaviours during the Covid-19 crisis. By doing so, we bridge insights on the mobilizing capacity of organized civil society (the 'supply side' of civic engagement – see Andrews et al., 2010; Han, 2014; Heylen et al., 2020; Meyer & Rameder, 2022; Nesbit et al., 2018) and research on inequalities in participation typically emphasized by civic engagement scholars (the 'demand side' of civic engagement).

The Covid-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture for understanding CSOs' capacity to mobilize volunteers (e.g., Carlsen et al., 2021; Høgenhaven, 2025; Höltnann et al., 2023). During this period, CSOs confronted a dual crisis characterized by heightened demand for social support alongside severe restrictions on their operational capabilities. Public lockdowns and social distancing measures created unprecedented barriers to maintaining volunteer engagement. Simultaneously, at the individual level, fears associated with contracting Covid-19 and restrictions on interpersonal contact likely discouraged participation. Although some organizations connected to governmental institutions or led by strategically positioned actors managed to mobilize successfully, the pandemic presented unique and substantial challenges for volunteer mobilization more broadly (Kim & Mason, 2023; Santos & Laureano, 2022).

The pandemic context also imposed methodological challenges for research, limiting primary data collection. To address this, we rely on three complementary empirical studies, each focusing on interrelated research questions: (1) Which potential volunteers were CSOs able to reach? (2) How significant was organizational outreach ('being asked') in driving formal and informal engagement? (3) To what extent was there untapped mobilization potential? Although using three studies inevitably fragments our analysis somewhat, each provides essential insights for understanding the mobilization dynamics of CSOs. The first employs an organizational survey of CSOs in Germany, revealing the paradox of organizational strain paired with robust individual willingness to volunteer. The second study utilizes comparative, observational survey data from Germany, Italy, and Poland, to profile individuals contacted by CSOs and to estimate the impact of contact on engagement. Finally, a third study from Germany, Italy, and Poland explicitly assesses the causal impact of organizational contact through a survey experiment. While we acknowledge the limits of each study, together they offer a layered perspective on the mobilizing capacity of CSOs: the organizational survey highlights the constraints, the observational data show how these constraints shape patterns of outreach and engagement, and the experimental design illustrates what levels of engagement might have been possible under less restrictive conditions.

Together, these studies allow us to make three distinct contributions. First, we bridge organizational and individual-level perspectives by analyzing how organizations shape

recruitment outcomes. Second, we identify inequalities in recruitment during an unprecedented crisis, providing valuable insights into the socio-economic dimensions of volunteering. Third, we demonstrate empirically the causal importance of organizational contact for individual volunteering decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our results show that even though many CSOs were strained by the pandemic – facing volunteer deactivation and operational obstacles – they still managed to mobilize pockets of engagement, particularly among individuals already inclined to volunteer. Yet only about one-third of the population was ever contacted, indicating untapped potential. In our observational study, people who were explicitly asked by a CSO were much more likely to engage in both formal and informal volunteering, underscoring the importance of direct outreach. A counterfactual test based on the survey experiment further suggests that CSOs could have activated levels of engagement comparable to family or friendship networks had they been able to reach a broader cross-section of society.

In the following sections, we outline our conceptual framework on the mobilizing capacity of CSOs during crises, from which we derive expectations tailored to the Covid-19 context. We then present and discuss results from our three empirical studies, beginning with an organizational-level survey and continuing with analyses conducted at the individual level. Our empirical analysis primarily focuses on Germany, but we also incorporate individual-level data from Italy and Poland to strengthen the generalizability of our findings within a broader European context.

Expectations on the Mobilizing Capacity of Volunteer-Based CSOs during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The literature on civic engagement during the pandemic tends to show exceptionally high levels of mutual aid and solidarity at the individual level (Andersen et al., 2022; Bertogg & Koos, 2021; Carlsen et al., 2021). Under heightened pressure to address the increasing need for support (Andersen et al., 2022), many citizens – also many from those who were not previously socially engaged – became active in what Høgenhaven (2025) call ‘crisis volunteering,’ i.e., voluntary activities aimed at tackling immediate needs arising from a crisis. However, this does not imply that inequalities in engagement or in who receives support have disappeared (Ferwerda et al., 2023). Differences according to gender (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022), education (Dederichs & Kruse, 2023), and social network size (Carlsen et al., 2021; Höltnann et al., 2023) stand out, pointing to the persistent role of pre-existing inequalities in participation (e.g., Borbáth et al., 2021; Lahusen & Grasso, 2018). Missing from this line of inquiry is a comparative analysis of the role of organized civil society in channelling and mobilizing support in times of this global crisis.

By organized civil society, we refer to formally registered public or nonprofit organizations, as well as informal grassroots groups, that rely on volunteer networks to sustain their activities (e.g., Nesbit et al., 2018). This includes membership-based organizations with formalized, long-term volunteer arrangements, as well as groups characterized by informal, short-term, and often more spontaneous engagement. Existing empirical evidence suggests that volunteer-based organizations faced a deep crisis in channelling social support during the pandemic (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022), with CSOs often being replaced by online coordination forms (Carlsen et al., 2021). Even

mobilizing their previously existing volunteer networks proved challenging for many CSOs (Dederichs & Kruse, 2023).

Despite the theoretical importance of recruitment in explaining participation, ‘who gets contacted’ as a dependent variable remains under-researched, with very few studies bridging organizational and individual-level perspectives. Studies focusing on the supply side highlight the importance of members and activists (Andrews et al., 2010; van Overbeeke et al., 2022) even as organizations professionalize (Heylen et al., 2020). Han (2014), for instance, argues that successful organizations need to focus on both recruiting new participants and training their activists. Organizations often face a trade-off between targeting volunteers from a relatively homogeneous background who can easily integrate versus a more heterogeneous set of volunteers who may be harder to train (e.g., Dean, 2016). This contributes to inequalities in recruitment, documented by studies pointing to differences based on social class (Dean, 2016), previous volunteering experiences (Høgenhaven, 2025), resources (Meyer & Rameder, 2022), and social networks (Carlsen et al., 2021; Höltnann et al., 2023).

As a result, civic engagement in general – and volunteering in particular – is marked by structural inequalities: volunteers tend to be disproportionately male, better educated, and possess higher income and social capital (Andersen et al., 2022; Brady et al., 1995; Chambré, 2020; Wilson, 2012). However, organizations and fields vary in their capacity to mitigate these inequalities. For instance, Meyer and Rameder (2022) show that in Austria, women are over-represented among volunteers in religious organizations or social services compared to fields like politics and sports, and that volunteering in these areas is less strongly shaped by occupational inequalities but more strongly shaped by educational inequalities. In the sphere of political participation aimed at influencing governance (Verba et al., 1995), Brady et al. (1999, p. 154) find that outreach patterns often reproduce membership inequalities, noting that: *‘The process of citizen recruitment brings into politics activists who closely resemble those who would have taken part spontaneously. Political recruitment does not mobilize the marginal and dispossessed’*. For forms of engagement closer to civic participation (for a more in-depth discussion of the distinction between political and civic engagement, see e.g., Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014), Frey and Meier (2004) indicate that organizational identification strongly influences willingness to donate. Pre-existing networks are thus central to organizational mobilization (e.g., Carlsen et al., 2021; Höltnann et al., 2023; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987), making membership a key predictor of whether individuals respond to organizational requests (Qvist et al., 2018).

However, this literature does not focus on differences between crisis and regular times, though there are reasons to believe inequalities are less significant during crises. Research demonstrates that disasters lead to extraordinary spikes in spontaneous and classical forms of engagement (Clarke, 2015; Marjanovic et al., 2009; Penner et al., 2005; Simsa et al., 2019; Steffen & Fothergill, 2009). Individuals frequently adopt new, spontaneous forms of action during crises (Andersen et al., 2022), often creating a situation with too many volunteers for organizations or official channels to manage (Simsa et al., 2019).

Although calls to engagement come from various spheres, CSOs are key mobilizing actors (Han, 2014). Volunteer-based CSOs vary significantly in mobilizing capacity – their ability to provide engagement opportunities for willing participants. This variation partially results from CSO’s relationships with state or public administration, which

during crises may be cooperative (inclusionary) or competitive (exclusionary). Studies on natural disasters (Marjanovic et al., 2009) or terrorist attack (Penner et al., 2005; Steffen & Fothergill, 2009) show that CSOs can adapt significantly to contribute to crisis relief (Rodríguez et al., 2006; Wang & Ganapati, 2018), even when state relations are competitive.

Compared to other crises, the Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented (not only) for civil society (Ferwerda et al., 2023). Social distancing posed significant challenges for interpersonal contact, assembly, and public space utilization, all essential for organizing civil society. Unlike previous crises – natural disasters or socio-political emergencies – organizations could not fully deploy their mobilization repertoires during Covid-19, facing stark operational limitations (e.g., Andersen et al., 2022). Instead, CSOs were partly replaced by online coordination forms (Carlsen et al., 2021), and the state stepped in to organize and enforce pandemic-related measures.

From individuals' perspectives, the pandemic posed similarly unprecedented challenges. Social distancing, fear of the virus, and pandemic-related burdens such as household Covid-19 cases, childcare responsibilities, other caregiving tasks, or direct financial losses complicated engagement in helping behaviours. These burdens had multifaceted implications for individual availability for civic engagement and volunteering (Andersen et al., 2022; Bertogg & Koos, 2021; Borbáth et al., 2021; Ferwerda et al., 2023; Höltnann et al., 2023).

More specifically, the pandemic might have affected CSOs' mobilization capacity in two ways. First, as Høgenhaven (2025) has shown CSOs experienced partial deactivation of existing volunteer networks alongside activation of new volunteers motivated especially by crisis-related tasks. Second, individuals were confronted with an increased need to engage, potentially driving individual-level forms of civic engagement independent of CSO constraints. The pandemic thus potentially reinforced longer-term trends in civil society, favouring informal and spontaneous engagement over formal, organized participation (Qvist et al., 2018).

Building on the above discussion, we formulate specific expectations regarding our three research questions. Given the empirical nature of our paper, we treat these as guiding expectations for our multi-step analysis. First, regarding who volunteer-based CSOs could reach, we assume organized civil society was severely restricted during the pandemic. This restriction implies that CSOs primarily relied on their established networks of volunteers rather than reaching out to new target groups. To examine this expectation, we differentiate between pre-existing socio-economic inequalities (gender, education, income) and pandemic-specific burdens (for evidence on differential effects also see: Ferwerda et al., 2023). The latter includes having a case of Covid-19 in the household, childcare at home, other care commitments, or a negative income change. Introducing these burdens allows us to identify whether the crisis created additional inequalities. Thus, we expect CSOs to reach out to their previous members and the 'usual suspects' in terms of socio-demographics (male, highly educated, affluent) to get engaged (H1).

Second, we explore the importance of CSO contact for formal versus informal engagement. During the pandemic, informal, often digitally mediated forms of civic engagement emerged alongside traditional networks (Bertogg & Koos, 2021; Carlsen et al., 2021; Höltnann et al., 2023). Platforms such as Telegram channels,

Facebook groups, and neighbourhood services connected willing volunteers directly, bypassing traditional CSOs (also see Kavada, 2022). Thus, we expect that for these forms of informal civic engagement, pandemic-related rules of social distancing were less critical than for organized civil society. As we previously argued, the pandemic strongly impaired CSO's internal structure personnel, and made conducting organizational outreach more challenging. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *CSOs have the most important linking function for formal volunteering. They play a less important role in more informal forms of social support between strangers during the pandemic (H2).*

Third, we assess to what extent CSOs fulfilled their mobilizing capacity during the pandemic. Given the dual crisis of increased demand for support coupled with operational constraints, we hypothesize that *CSOs could not reach their full mobilizing capacity (i.e., ability to reach out to individuals to become engaged) (H3).*

Data & Methods

Collecting data in the volatile context of the pandemic proved challenging. Hence, the empirical evidence we rely on is drawn from three empirical studies. First, we conducted an organizational survey by sampling both formal and informal CSOs. Because of the effort involved, we were only able to collect these data in one country, Germany (see Hutter et al., 2021). We then complemented the organizational perspective with individual-level data on volunteering from three countries: Germany, Italy, and Poland. In Germany, we also fielded a second wave in a panel design for the individual-level survey used in Study 2.

We selected the three largest EU member states in Northwestern, Southern, and Central-Eastern Europe because they differ, among other factors, in patterns of civil society organizations (Foa & Ekiert, 2017), long-term civic engagement patterns (Mascherini et al., 2011), and pandemic-related grievances (Greer et al., 2021). In Poland, volunteering traditions are strongly influenced by the Catholic Church: a significant share of volunteers serve through church-affiliated charities or parish initiatives, where service is often framed as a religious duty or calling. This leads to a positive correlation between religious observance and civic engagement (Fałkowski & Kurek, 2020; Sadlon & Rymśa, 2024). In Italy, there is a marked North – South divide in volunteering culture. Northern regions tend to have more robust, formalized civic participation – volunteer rates in northern areas are multiple times higher than in parts of the South (e.g., Guidi et al., 2021) – whereas southern communities often rely on informal support networks and family-based assistance (Putnam et al., 1994). In Germany, volunteering commonly bifurcates into formal, long-term commitments within membership-based associations (the classic Ehrenamt, such as serving in volunteer fire brigades, e.g., Simonson et al., 2017), and more spontaneous or project-based engagements outside those structures. Despite these differences in volunteering traditions, we focus on cross-country similarities to gain insights that may extend to other European contexts. Therefore, all analyses in the main text include country-fixed effects. Where relevant, we discuss country-level differences based on the analysis presented in Appendix B. Table 1 provides an overview of the empirical evidence and data sources used.

Table 1. Overview of the data sources.

	Data	Unit of analysis	Coverage	Period of data collection	Context
Study 1	Org. survey Mass survey (panel)	CSOs Individual citizens	Germany Germany	Nov. – Dec. 2020 Wave 1: Oct. – Nov. 2020; Wave 2: Mar., 2021	Descriptive evidence to illustrate the dual crisis faced by CSOs
Study 2	Mass survey	Individual citizens	Germany, Italy, Poland	Oct.–Nov. 2020	Test for H1 & H2
Study 3	Vignette experiment	Individual citizens	Germany, Italy, Poland	Mar. 2021	Test for H3 & robustness test for H2

Study 1: Descriptive Evidence on the Crisis of CSOs

We fielded the organizational survey between November and December 2020, collecting information from 1066 CSOs (27% response rate) active in Germany. The survey was innovative in inviting both formal volunteer-based CSOs (i.e., classical associations and welfare organizations) and more informal CSOs (e.g., initiatives and social movement actors). Methodologically, we sampled 55 locations from all 16 federal states, including every state capital. For the 13 non-city states, we additionally sampled another major city (>500,000 inhabitants), a medium-sized town (>100,000), and a rural location (<100,000).

We used separate methods for sampling formal and informal CSOs. For the informal actors, 641 initiatives and networks with email addresses were identified through a systematic online search within the 55 locations, and all were contacted.¹ More formal organizations were sampled via the official commercial register (Handelsregister), which initially yielded 79,400 registered associations for the selected locations. We narrowed this list by sampling according to fields of activity.² From a randomly drawn sample of 4162 organizations, 3850 associations, and initiatives were invited and reminded – up to four times by email and telephone – to complete the online questionnaire. Representatives of 1066 organizations completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 27.7%, which is somewhat lower than the mean response rate of 34% identified by Fulton (2018) for published studies surveying organizations; yet, still higher than the major general survey of civil society organizations in Germany ZiviZ with response rates of below 20% (Schubert et al., 2023). In terms of sectoral distributions, the data does reflect the general patterns uncovered by previous studies (e.g., Simonson et al., 2017). All questions in the questionnaire were mandatory (for further details, see Hutter et al., 2021).

To report the aggregate pattern of individual-level behaviour, we distinguish between formal and informal forms of civic engagement based on items from a broader battery on civic engagement (see item wording and further information in Appendix C). The items encompass more formal modes, where CSOs tend to play a stronger mediating role (e.g., volunteering, donating), and more informal modes (e.g., emotional support, shopping for others, financial help, childcare for others, and symbolic forms of support). We distinguish three time points by relying on the retrospective item included in Wave 1 (reference period: 2019, the year before the Covid-19 crisis), the values in Wave 1 (reference period: since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis), and the values from Wave 2 (reference period: November 2020 up to the interview in March 2021).

Study 2: Individual-Level Survey

We fielded a representative individual-level survey in October 2020 in all three countries (Germany: October 14 – November 04; Italy: October 08 – October 26; Poland: October 06–October 25). The survey was conducted with members of an online access panel, recruited by the survey firm Respondi. Data were collected with quotas for age, gender, education, and region (east – west), based on Eurostat statistics for 2020, ensuring representation of 18- to 69-year-old residents. Since some quotas did not match perfectly, we applied socio-demographic weights to balance all of these variables. In Germany, we collected additional information in a second wave within a panel design in March 2021 ($n = 1004$).³ The individual-level survey aimed to measure civic and political engagement during the pandemic.

For this analysis, we draw on three dependent variables, which we introduce sequentially. The first variable is whether respondents were contacted by a CSO to become engaged. To improve the item's validity, we primed respondents by first referencing CSOs and then asking: *'Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, initiatives, clubs, and aid organizations have approached individuals to support other people. How often have these organizations contacted you to support other people?'* Responses ranged from 'never' to 'very often' on a five-point scale. We use this item to test our first expectation. Building on a distinction between members and non-members, we examine whether CSOs reach non-members with different socio-demographic profiles than their regular members, and whether those who are contacted and volunteer differ systematically from those who volunteer without being contacted.

Next, we focus on two variables representing volunteering behaviours during the pandemic. We asked respondents how often they had engaged in *'voluntary work for an initiative, aid organization or association'* (also on a scale from 'never' to 'very often') since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This item was part of the broader civic engagement battery also used in Study 1 (see Appendix C). Among those who indicated any form of civic engagement, we then asked: *'You have indicated that you have supported people who do not live in your household since the beginning of the Corona crisis. Have you supported the following groups of people?'* Answer options included 'family and friends,' 'neighbours,' 'previously unknown people,' and 'people living outside your [country].' We use this item to test our second expectation by comparing the effect of *'being asked by an organization'* across different spheres of helping.

Finally, we rely on socio-demographic variables and Covid-19-specific burdens to map inequalities in contact and engagement. The socio-demographic variables include gender, education, age, age squared, income, and region, which prior literature identifies as critical indicators of socio-economic status (e.g., Brady et al., 1995; Teorell et al., 2007; Wilson, 2012). Covid-19-specific burdens include whether respondents experienced a Covid-19 infection themselves or in their household, had children at home, had other caregiving responsibilities, or experienced a negative income change during the pandemic (e.g., Höltnann et al., 2023).

Study 3: Survey Experiment

To test our third expectation, we conducted a separate vignette survey experiment in March 2021 in all three countries (Germany: March 04 – March 16; Italy: March 10 –

March 17; Poland: March 10 – March 16).⁴ In the experiment, we randomized four mobilizing actors – ‘our friends and acquaintances,’ ‘members of a local aid organization,’ ‘members of a national aid organization,’ and ‘representatives of the local administration’ – and asked respondents about their likelihood of becoming engaged. The experiment provides a counterfactual scenario illustrating how organized civil society’s mobilizing capacity might operate if it could reach all members of society equally, free from structural constraints on outreach.

Respondents were shown the following instructions before the vignette (see Appendix C): ‘Here are various groups of people who want to address the problems and needs of older people (RECIPIENT) in the Corona crisis. Here, we show you the fictitious description of such a group. Please take a close look at this description.’ The vignette then read: ‘Members of a local civil society organization (MOBILIZING ACTOR) feel angry (EMOTION) because of the difficult situation of older people (RECIPIENT) in the Corona crisis. To help them, the group is asking for your support’. After reading, respondents indicated ‘How likely is it that you would volunteer in support of this group?’ using a scale of 0 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely). Each respondent answered this question twice, following two randomly selected vignettes.

Our analysis focuses on the effect of CSOs’ mobilizing capacity.⁵ For the treatment, we selected two natural comparison actors who might also ask others to help: (1) friends and family, and (2) the state (here, the local administration). We expect mobilizing power to decrease with diminishing proximity to respondents’ everyday lives and sense of obligation. Given the central role of duty and affection in familial and friendship-based solidarity, we anticipate friends and family to have the strongest mobilizing potential (Komter & Vollebergh, 2002). Beyond the private sphere, however, CSOs play a natural role in organizing social solidarity (civic engagement and political solidarity). Therefore, we expect CSOs to have greater mobilizing power than the state but less than family and friends. Finally, the local level became especially central due to widespread contact restrictions and limits on regional travel, so we expect local CSOs to hold more mobilizing power than national ones.

We use the experimental data for two purposes. First, the random assignment of the mobilizing agent allows us to test the causal effect of being asked by a CSO on the likelihood of volunteering – serving as a robustness check of findings from the observational survey. Second, we use the data to examine our third expectation on CSOs’ mobilizing capacity. Specifically, we compare volunteering levels in the group receiving a CSO vignette with volunteering in the observational data. The estimate from the experimentally treated group indicates how being contacted by an organization might lead to volunteering in a scenario where CSOs could reach a representative (randomly selected) cross-section of society.

Empirical Results

Study 1: Descriptive Evidence on the Crisis of CSOs

We begin by presenting descriptive evidence on the dual crisis faced by CSOs. Results from the organizational survey show that the entire spectrum of German volunteer-based CSOs was negatively impacted: around 40% of the surveyed organizations had to halt their

activities during the first lockdown in spring 2020, and about 10% had not returned to normal operations by the end of 2020. By then, most organizations also reported uncertainty about their future, expecting the crisis to have medium-term effects on public and private sector funding, donations, memberships, and volunteer reactivation.

More specifically, our survey of organized CSOs indicates that a majority struggled to continue their ongoing work (82%), had difficulties implementing Covid-19-related measures (64%), and faced challenges in maintaining public attention (54%) and reaching their target groups (51%). These issues were relatively similar across organizations working in political (protest and interest representation), leisure (free time and event organizations), social (civic help, advice, and mediation), or other (information, infrastructure, etc.) domains.

Focusing on how the pandemic affected CSOs' volunteer networks, we asked organizations whether volunteers in different age groups (young, middle-aged, elderly) were activated or deactivated because of the crisis. As shown in Figure 1, there was widespread volunteer deactivation – 42% to 61% of organizations reported that volunteers had stepped back – while newly activated volunteers (predominantly young) were noted, but at much lower levels. Overall, these findings highlight the severe constraints CSOs faced in mobilizing engagement during the crisis.

Even though organizations experienced setbacks in their day-to-day activities and volunteer capacities, many managed to respond to the crisis. Specifically, 37% of the surveyed CSOs reported offering Covid-19-related assistance, ranging from neighbourhood help to online sports programmes, and about 14% provided face-to-face support.

Contrasting this organizational-level perspective, individual-level data reveal a different picture. Although contact restrictions and partial lockdowns could have led

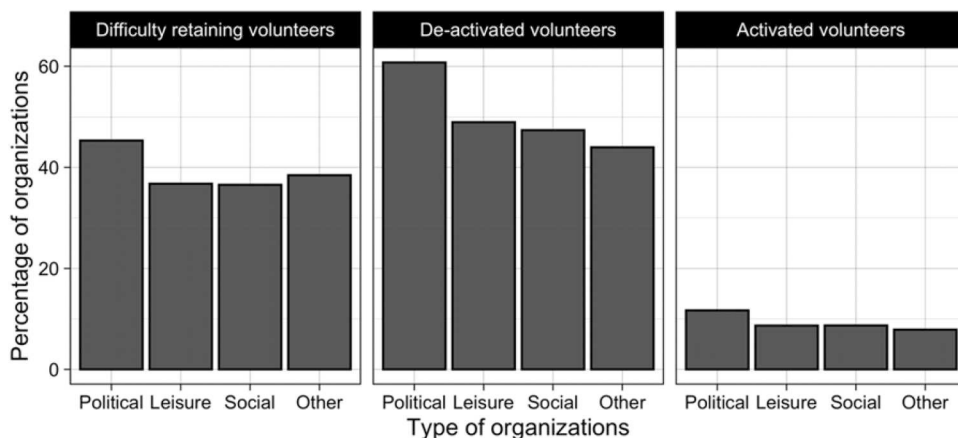


Figure 1. Fluctuation of volunteers in civil society organizations during the Covid-19 crisis in Germany. Note: The figure shows the percentage of organizations reporting difficulties in retaining volunteers and experiencing either deactivation or activation of volunteers. Original question: 'Did the different age groups engage more or less than before the Corona crisis? Or was their engagement unchanged?' (A) Young people and young adults (14–29); (B) Adults between 30 and 65; (C) Adults over 65. Scale: more engagement, no change, less engagement. The values represent the percentage of organizations, averaged over the three age groups. Source: CSO organizational survey in Germany (Nov.–Dec. 2020).

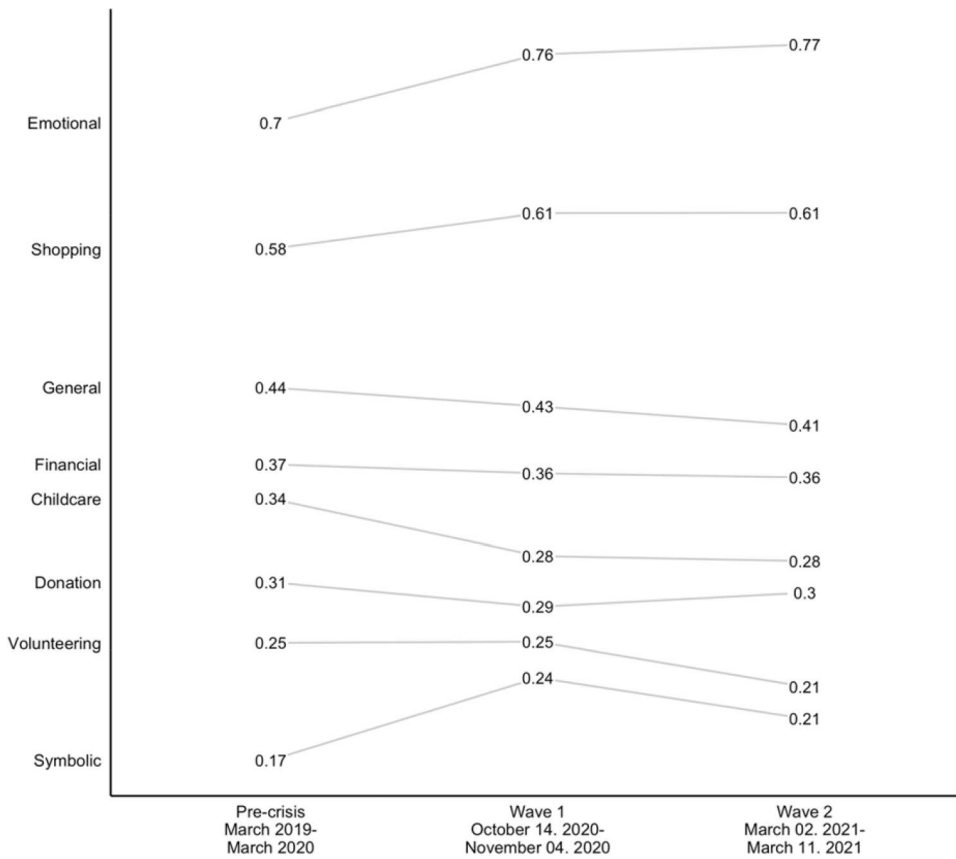


Figure 2. Share of the population that engaged in solidarity acts over time in Germany. Note: The figure shows the share of respondents who engaged in different solidarity actions in Germany. The results are weighted by socio-demographic and nonresponse weights. See Figure 1 in Appendix A for a version of this figure showing how levels of engagement varied over time. Source: Individual-level panel dataset for Germany (Nov. 2020 & March 2021); see the Data and Methods section and Appendix C for further details.

to a sharp decline in both formal and informal engagement, Figure 2 shows that rates of engagement remained relatively stable compared to pre-crisis levels. Based on a retrospective survey item, around 25% of Germans reported having volunteered in the year before the crisis – a share that stayed roughly constant in the first wave following the initial lockdown and only marginally declined to 21% in the second phase. Informal helping behaviours (e.g., grocery shopping) slightly increased or did not drop as much as one might expect under assumptions of avoiding personal contact (e.g., childcare). Although these results are partly based on self-reported recollection, they align with Bertogg and Koos (2021) and suggest that individual-level acts of solidarity persisted (also see Andersen et al., 2022; Borbáth et al., 2021) despite the challenges facing organized civil society. Overall, this trend points to the growing importance of informal and crisis-related civic engagement.

In sum, the evidence from organizational and population surveys in Germany supports the notion that the pandemic was a dual crisis for civil society. CSOs were hit

hard in various areas – ranging from difficulties in implementing ongoing projects to waning public attention and volunteer losses – and the share of newly activated volunteers was considerably lower than that of those who stepped back (for the UK, see also Dederichs & Kruse, 2023). In contrast, individual-level data indicate that informal forms of civic engagement remained notably stable compared to pre-pandemic times. Taken together, the apparent stability of individual engagement during an organizational crisis further motivates our focus on the mobilizing capacity of CSOs, particularly by examining ‘being contacted’ and ‘volunteering’ as key dependent variables.

Study 2: Individual-Level Survey

In this section, we first ask whom CSOs reach (i.e., who was asked) and whether those reached differ from the ‘usual suspects’ of civic engagement. We then explore the effect of ‘being asked’ on various forms of pandemic engagement (formal volunteering, helping strangers, helping strangers outside formal volunteering, and helping family and friends).

Starting with our first research question, we examine who was contacted by a CSO during the pandemic. Our data show that around 35% of respondents were contacted by a CSO, with limited variation across countries (38% in Poland, 35% in Italy, and 33% in Germany). We analyze CSO members and non-members separately, as mobilizing non-members poses a greater challenge than mobilizing members. Among those contacted, the percentage who are members is highest in Germany (52%), followed by Italy (42%) and Poland (40%). To understand the profile of this group, we ran an OLS regression of ‘being contacted,’ controlling for country-fixed effects.⁶ Figure 3 presents the results.

The results show that, in line with our first hypothesis, the ‘usual suspects’ of civic engagement – more likely to be male, highly educated, higher income, and living in big cities or mid-sized towns – were the ones contacted by a CSO during the pandemic. We also tested crisis-specific burdens and found that loss of income decreases the likelihood of being contacted, while household infections and care work at home increase it. Neither having children at home nor age had any effect on being approached by a CSO. These findings indicate that socio-structural inequalities persist, even when accounting for crisis-specific factors.

The profiles of contacted members and non-members differ in two respects. First, CSOs struggled more to reach lower-income members and members in rural areas, whereas this pattern did not apply to non-members: low-income individuals and rural residents in the non-member group were also contacted. Second, the crisis-specific burdens of income changes and Covid-19 infections influenced CSOs’ ability to contact members more strongly than their ability to contact non-members. Specifically, the negative effect of income loss and the positive effect of household infection were larger for members than for non-members. We see this as evidence that CSOs reach a slightly less heterogeneous group among their own members than among non-members. It may reflect a conscious effort by CSOs to use the pandemic as an opportunity to engage a broader segment of society beyond their existing membership (Kim & Mason, 2023). Nevertheless, these findings confirm our first hypothesis that recruitment remains biased in favour of the ‘usual suspects’ of inequality research.

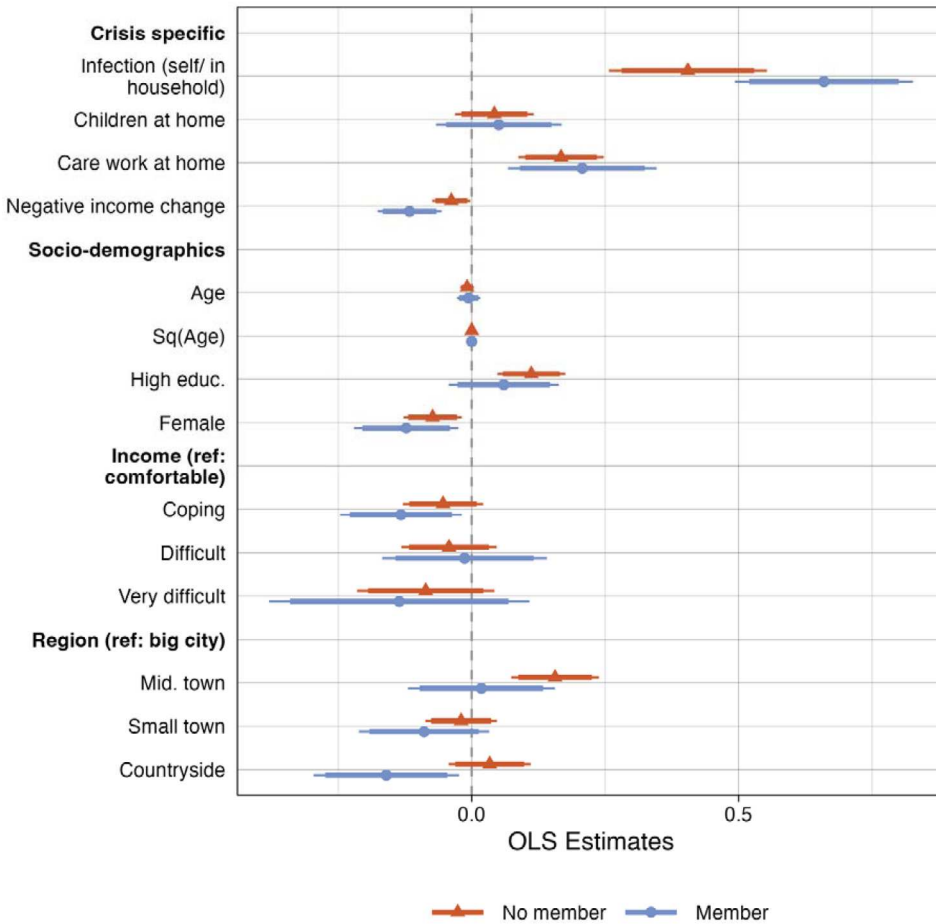


Figure 3. Who was contacted by civil society organizations during the pandemic? Note: The figure shows marginal effects from the OLS model presented in Table 1 in Appendix A. The dependent variable is 'being contacted by a CSO.' The thicker error bars represent 90% confidence intervals, and the thinner error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The results are weighted by socio-demographic weights. Source: Individual-level survey, Oct.–Nov. 2020.

As a robustness check, we ran the model separately for each country (see Appendix B). The results show that household infection and care work at home have significantly positive effects only in Germany and Poland. In Italy, the effect is positive but not statistically significant, and there is no effect among non-members. The positive relationship is consistent with earlier findings: as Höltnann et al. (2023, pp. 19–20) show, many in Germany who received help also provided support to others. Regarding differences between members and non-members, we observe the strongest effects in Germany. In Italy and Poland, the main difference is that CSOs have more difficulty mobilizing rural members.

As a further robustness check, we ask whether there are differences among those who became engaged in the pandemic, depending on whether a CSO contacted them. In other words, did organizations succeed in mobilizing a different group than those already likely

to engage? To answer this question, we conducted a logistic regression with country-fixed effects in a split-sample design for classical volunteering, estimating separately for those contacted and those not contacted by CSOs. The results (see Appendix A, Figure 2, and Table 2, as well as Appendix B for country-specific analyses) show that differences in volunteering by CSO contact are minimal and mainly relate to gender and income loss during the crisis. Especially in Germany, women are less likely to volunteer when contacted than men but are more likely to volunteer when not contacted. Income loss decreases the likelihood of volunteering among those contacted and increases it among those not contacted. Beyond these two factors, volunteers look very similar, regardless of whether they were contacted by a CSO. Overall, this points to persistent inequalities in participation and underlines the limited capacity of organized civil society to mobilize groups that would otherwise not participate.

Next, we ask how ‘being asked’ (our independent variable) contributes to engagement and whether it affects different spheres of helping. We ran four logistic regressions with country-fixed effects. Figure 4 below shows the marginal effect of CSO contact on volunteering, helping strangers, helping neighbours, and helping family or friends.

The results indicate that civil society actors have the strongest (steepest) mobilizing effect on volunteering and helping previously unknown others in all three countries. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the primary mobilizing sphere of civil society actors lies beyond the private domain: their greatest relevance is in matching demand and supply for formal volunteering (Quadrant 1). However, CSOs also facilitated helping strangers (Quadrant 2), neighbours (Quadrant 3), and family and friends (Quadrant 4), albeit to a lesser extent. The probability of volunteering rises from 7% with no contact to 48% with frequent CSO contact. By contrast, helping strangers goes from 6% (no contact) to 32% (frequent contact). Organized civil society plays the smallest role in helping neighbours and family/friends – two groups supported by 27% and 60% of respondents without CSO contact. With frequent CSO contact, those probabilities increase to 56% and 75%, respectively.

As a final robustness check on the role of CSO contact beyond formal volunteering, we constructed an additional indicator to capture respondents who helped a stranger without volunteering. This measure, which excludes any overlap with classical volunteering, offers a proxy for more informal forms of help during the pandemic. We present these results in Appendix A (Table 4 and Figure 3), including volunteering and helping strangers as baseline comparisons. We find that CSOs also mobilized respondents in this ‘strangers-helping-strangers’ context, albeit to a lower degree: the probability of helping strangers outside formal volunteering rises from 2% (no CSO contact) to 22% (frequent CSO contact). We conclude that CSOs acted as mediators primarily in formal volunteering and, to a lesser extent, in more informal settings of ‘strangers helping strangers’ during the pandemic.

Study 3: Survey Experiment

In the final part of our analysis, we turn to the survey experiment. On the one hand, we interpret these experimental results as a robustness check for our test of H2 presented above. On the other hand, as previously discussed, the experiment allows us to estimate CSOs’ potential to mobilize when they can reach everyone in society equally.

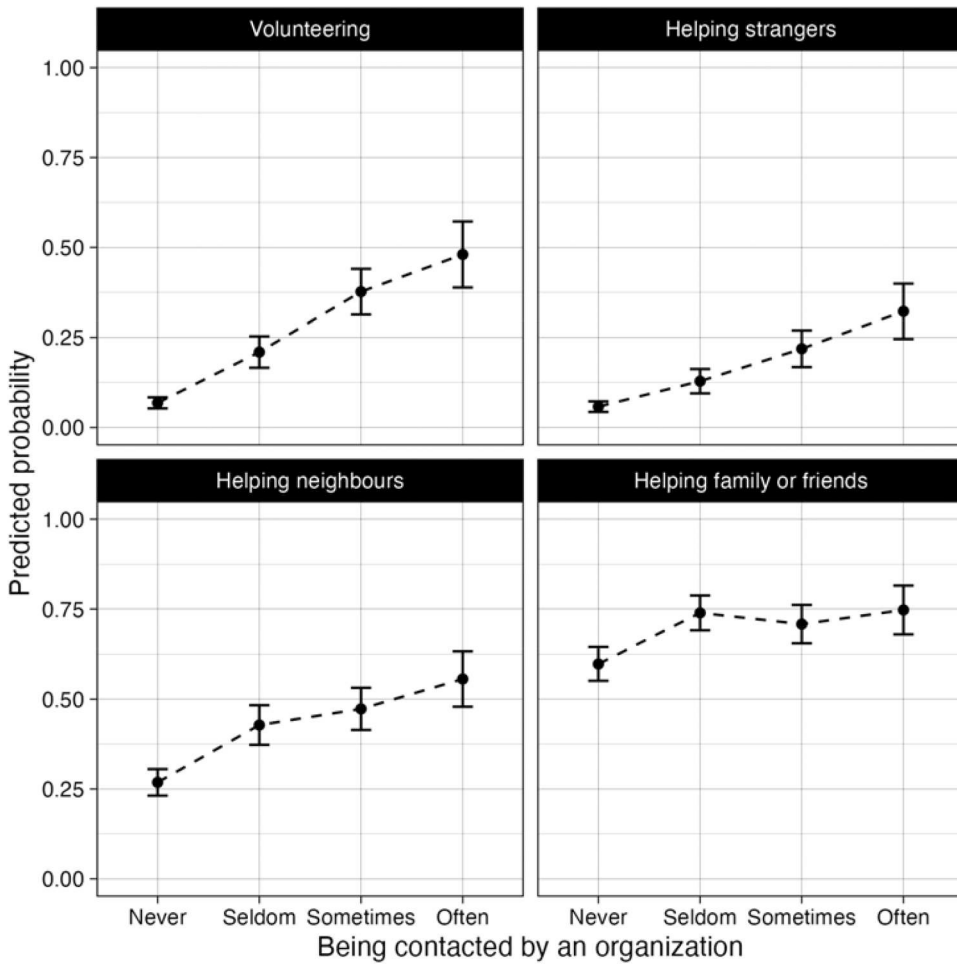


Figure 4. Effect of being contacted across different forms of engagement. Note: The figure shows predicted probabilities based on the model in Table 3 in Appendix A. The results are weighted by socio-demographic weights. Source: Individual-level survey, Oct.–Nov. 2020.

We analyze the experiment by estimating a linear regression model, clustering standard errors by respondent because each participant evaluated two vignettes. We include fixed effects for country, vignette round (first or second), and the other treatments. Figure 5 shows the average treatment effect of the mobilizing actor.

Under this counterfactual scenario, the effect size we identify closely mirrors the effect size from our observational data: in both cases, the average probability of engagement when asked by a CSO is around 50%. However, in the observational data, this 50% participation rate is only reached among respondents who reported being contacted often by a CSO (see Figure 4). In relative terms and consistent with our expectations, local CSOs' mobilizing power lies between the private sphere (family and friends) and the state,⁷ and local CSOs have a greater capacity to mobilize than their national counterparts.

Beyond their basic mobilizing effect, the main limiting factor is the share of the population CSOs were actually able to reach during the pandemic. As noted, our survey

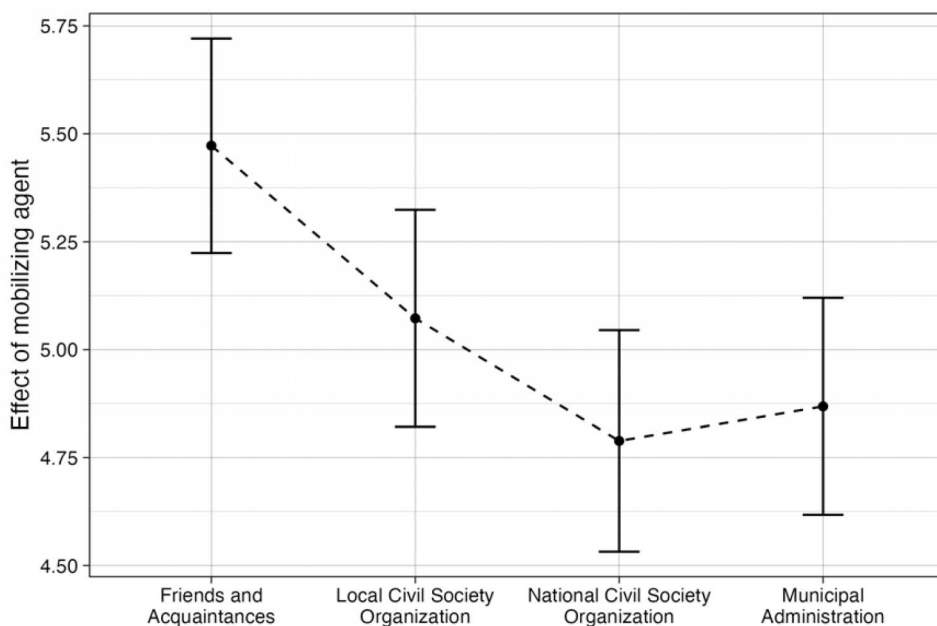


Figure 5. Experimental effects of different mobilizing actors on becoming engaged. Note: The figure shows the main effects of different mobilizing actors on the likelihood of engagement, based on Table 5 in Appendix A. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Source: Vignette experiment, Mar. 2021.

indicates that about one-third of society was contacted at least once by a CSO. Coupled with our evidence of the multiple constraints on organized civil society – shown by our organizational survey and the ongoing biases in who could be contacted and who ultimately volunteered – this finding suggests that while CSOs did mobilize during the pandemic, they could have reached a broader audience had they not been hindered in their daily operations. We interpret this as support for our third hypothesis, namely that civil society was unable to fulfil its full mobilizing potential during the Covid-19 crisis.

Conclusion

What have we learned about the mobilizing capacity of organized civil society during the Covid-19 crisis? To answer this question, we adopted an original multi-step design focusing on CSO recruitment efforts for volunteering. Despite the pandemic-related challenges in data collection, our comparative analysis of three European countries offers three key insights.

First, we found that CSOs largely reached the ‘usual suspects’ of civic engagement, reproducing existing inequalities rather than broadening outreach. Even among volunteers, those contacted by CSOs resembled those who volunteered without being contacted, indicating a limited capacity to bridge the inequality divide. In this regard, we advocate including survey items on whether individuals were contacted by a CSO, enabling more precise measurement of organizational agency and how it reinforces or mitigates structural inequalities.

Second, we examined how organizations mobilized or connected individuals through both formal and informal engagement. Being asked by a CSO proved crucial for activating volunteers, and organizations also helped facilitate ‘strangers helping strangers’ beyond their core membership. Despite substantial challenges – highlighted by our descriptive evidence – CSOs still served as mediators, promoting volunteering and more informal forms of help during the pandemic.

Lastly, a counterfactual test showed that while civil society has a strong mobilizing potential, comparable at times to family and friendship networks, CSOs were constrained in reaching everyone who might have participated. Our data suggest that only about a third of the population was contacted, reflecting both pandemic-related and organizational limitations on outreach.

Two main limitations stand out: We could only conduct the organizational survey in Germany, and our focus was on relatively short-term effects. Thus, future research should investigate whether deactivated volunteers return to organized civil society settings and how the pandemic might intensify informalization processes in the long run. In addition, while our multi-study design allows us to combine insights across different levels and methods, it also introduces challenges of integration – for example, differences in timing, country coverage, and measurement across studies limits direct comparability. However, carefully designed combinations of individual- and organizational-level data over time could further reveal which outreach strategies sustain engagement and how CSOs adapt or fail to adapt to new challenges across crisis and non-crisis contexts.

These findings also carry practical implications for civil society organizations, local authorities, and other stakeholders facing crises such as pandemics or natural catastrophes: they underscore the need to invest in more targeted and inclusive outreach strategies – especially those bridging digital and face-to-face communication –, because they may help volunteer-based CSOs engage people beyond their usual networks in crisis situations. By working closely with community groups and local governance structures, organizations can coordinate resources more effectively and amplify their impact. Investing in collaborative approaches may thus help address inequalities in civic participation and add to the overall crisis response capacity. Furthermore, systematically tracking who participates and who is left out in such situations may allow organizations to identify and address persistent inequalities in volunteering in the long-run, thereby maximizing the positive impact of organizational outreach.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes both to academic understanding and to practical insights for civil society organizations facing mobilization challenges in times of crisis. For the scientific literature, we highlight and empirically demonstrate the role of organizational outreach in reinforcing or mitigating social inequalities in engagement, especially during moments of heightened need. For the civil society sector, our study underscores the crucial role of outreach strategies in sustaining engagement, even as CSOs face substantial operational constraints.

Notes

1. The latter was based on keyword searches for the German terms for citizens’ initiative (Bürgerinitiative), neighbourhood assistance (Nachbarschaftshilfe), corona assistance (Coronahilfe), protest, and alliance (Bündnis) in combination with the locality name.

2. To reflect the breadth of civil society while also focusing on fields where active volunteer involvement is central, we selected the following categories (based on the survey by Priemer et al., 2017): Culture/Media, Sport, Social Services, Civil Protection/Disaster Management, Environmental Protection/Nature Conservation, International Solidarity/Human Rights, and Citizen/Consumer Interests.
3. To account for differences in sample size, we rely on nonresponse weights to ensure that the reinterviewed subsample does not significantly differ from the original sample.
4. Both the design and the hypothesis were preregistered with the Open Science Framework at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/QK7H4>. The sample sizes are roughly equal across the three countries (1,000 in Germany, 898 in Italy, 900 in Poland).
5. As a collaborative project, the design included other treatment options that were analyzed elsewhere. In this paper, we address Q1 and Q2 from our preregistered plan and test our associated hypotheses.
6. The results are robust to an ordered logit specification. We opted for presenting an OLS model since it represents a more parsimonious specification which allows us to directly interpret the estimated coefficients as marginal effects.
7. Relative to the state, the difference is the largest in Italy and Poland and the smallest in Germany.

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Data Availability Statement

All data and replication materials will be made publicly available on the Harvard Dataverse upon publication.

ORCID

Endre Borbáth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2980-8586>

Swen Hutter  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1107-1213>

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