

BEST PRACTICES OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN COMBATting COVID-19

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of socio-economic crises, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have proven their essential role in supporting vulnerable categories within communities. The COVID-19 pandemic pushes the boundaries of the medical system and its limitations, thus causing an unprecedented case of social distancing, elevating rates of stress and depression among the population, and contributing to high levels of anxiety regarding the provision of necessary resources to secure a livelihood, respectively. In the context of this pandemic, evaluating the best practices of NGOs and redefining their relationship with public institutions may provide solutions for the sustainability of local communities. Based on Resource Dependence Theory applied by NGOs, this research plans to emphasize the humanitarian initiatives undertaken during socio-economic crises. Salient best practices supporting the strategy to combat the effects of COVID-19 pandemic were analysed from a managerial standpoint.

Keywords: Nongovernmental organization (NGO), Best practices of NGOs, COVID-19 in Romania, Resource Dependence Theory, Humanitarian Aid COVID-19

JEL Classification: A13, L31, I18

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-10 was first identified on 12 December 2019 in Wuhan, and since then the virus has been spreading around the world (WHO, 2020). At present, there are over 2,064,815 confirmed cases and 137,078 deaths – the number of cases continues to increase (Google COVID-19, 2020). This unprecedented situation engendered the swift collapse of many medical systems. Combatting the COVID-19 pandemic entails the distribution and implementation of the best available practices to support employees from the medical and social protection system, the unemployed, but especially socially vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and people with pre-existing medical conditions (OECD, 2020). Since 27 February 2020, when Romania recorded its first case, until 12 April 2020, there have been 7,216

confirmed cases and 372 deaths (Google COVID-19, 2020). The main measures adopted nationwide are public information campaigns, population testing, quarantine, and isolation (MSR, 2020). Schwartz and Yen (2017) point out a connection between sustainable development and socio-economic crises, highlighting the direct role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in offering support to various vulnerable groups. In practice, NGOs are entities which, in extreme situations, can provide vulnerable groups with the material and human resources needed in overcoming adversity (Prasad et al., 2016; Schwartz and Yen, 2017). In this manner, the NGO becomes a key stakeholder between public institutions and the population (Portney and Cuttler, 2010). The NGO is both a relevant resource provider for public institutions and an active participant supporting vulnerable groups and ensuring their access to necessary resources. The literature is extremely scarce regarding the role of NGOs as resource provider during socio-economic crises, although practical examples and recent situations clearly indicate the existence of such a connection.

The aim of the research is to identify the best practices of NGOs that help to combat the COVID-19 crisis and to support the public medical system on an emergent market – Romania. Based on the Resource Dependence Theory, the authors underline the role and responsibilities of NGOs in a crisis such as a pandemic. At the same time, the authors underline some of the best practices employed by NGOs in Romania. Finally, recommendations are put forward, which can be extrapolated to other relevant markets.

1. Literature review

1.1. The role of nongovernmental organizations in contemporary society

Academic research acknowledges the role of NGOs in providing social and humanitarian aid (Salamon, 1987; Atouba and Shumate, 2020) especially to domains in which the government or the market admit failure (Weisbrod, 1975). Volunteer Failure Theory considers the non-profit sector of utmost importance in terms of disaster intervention, also highlighting the dependence of NGOs on public funding (Salamon, 1987), without which they cannot achieve their goal.

Contemporary global challenges and the growing interest for sustainable development in the social domain highlight important role of NGOs in human development (Ceptureanu et al., 2018). Bromley and Mayer (2017) show that boundaries between the non-profit, the public, and the competitive sector are not always clearly delineated. Organisations are oftentimes involved in offering humanitarian aid through strategies of corporate social accountability (Ballestros and Gatignon, 2019). Moreover, in crisis situations, the need of collaborative involvement between institutions and NGOs is self-evident (Schwartz and Yen, 2017), and business practices are undertaken by NGOs to reach their objectives (Bromley and Mayer, 2017; Prasad et al., 2016).

1.2. Resource Dependence Theory implications in the domain of NGOs

Humanitarian aid initiatives have been previously studied from a Resource Dependence Theory standpoint (Prasad et al., 2016). The aim is to monitor the manner in which NGOs obtain the necessary resources to achieve their assumed mission or to support humanitarian causes (Prasad et al., 2016) due to the fact that, by its own structure, the NGO does not have sufficient resources to reach their goal (Salamon, 1987). This theory illustrates the manner in which organisations obtain and preserve resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). At the same time, this theory allows the research of the NGOs' reliance on the resources of other parties interested in fulfilling their mission and offering humanitarian aid, contributing to the understanding of operational processes from the perspective of a dependency relationship between NGOs, state institutions, business environment, and the community (Prasad et al., 2016). Communication (Lai and Fu, 2020) and organizational accountability through transparent reporting (Lai and Fu, 2020; Atouba and Shumate, 2020) contribute positively

towards the collaboration of the organisation and its stakeholders in obtaining the necessary resources.

1.3. Management processes in the involvement of resources relative to stakeholders

Management activities in supply chain humanitarian initiatives involve a variety of processes through which NGOs appeal to interested parties for the acquisition of resources (Prasad et al., 2016). Mutual humanitarian aid activities are represented by (a) fundraisers through individual donations (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011), organisational donations (Ballestros and Gatignon, 2019), and public donations (Ceptureanu et al., 2018); (b) the supply of services and goods to vulnerable categories (Weisbrod, 1975; Salamon, 1987); (d) participation of volunteers (Nemțeanu and Tarcza, 2016; Touley and Hooks, 2020), and (e) public information campaigns through social marketing (Kotler and Lee, 2007). Management processes of humanitarian initiatives by NGOs corresponding to management activities are the following: communication (Lai and Fu, 2020), resource acquisition, resource distribution, reporting of results as a key element of NGO accountability (Kennedy, 2019). Communicating the mission of the NGO represents the main driver of resource acquisition for the achievement of assumed objectives. Volunteers as stakeholders are characteristic to the non-profit sector, and they are sensitive to the organisation's mission. The lack of legitimate actions and responsibilities of an organisation can determine the volunteers to abandon their involvement in various NGO activities (Touley and Hooks, 2020). Along with the content and legitimacy of the mission in the socio-economic context, communication means play an essential role. The swift development of the Internet and easy access to information facilitate the development of the policy framework of NGOs, thus succeeding in increasing their audience and in addressing continuously more stakeholders. Social presence not only on websites but also on social media facilitates the communication of tailored humanitarian messages towards targeted stakeholder (Lai and Fu, 2020).

The development of Internet and smartphones has influenced over time the various methods employed for the attainment of financial resources necessary for the organisation's mission. Fundraising through mobile phones and Internet has contributed in recent years to a significant support for humanitarian causes, such as disease control, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises (Bellio, 2013).

Another tool employed by public institutions and NGOs to promote the adoption of new behaviours is social marketing, which has proven effective in public information campaigns, in combatting traffic accidents, consumption of alcohol, tobacco or drugs, along with other social issues (Kotler and Lee, 2007). Social marketing is a tool with direct positive implications in informing the population regarding the adoption of behaviours necessary for the prevention disease transmission (Pastrana and S, 2020).

The results of humanitarian and social initiatives of NGOs in crisis situations are important both to beneficiaries (Prasad et al., 2016) and the resource providers (Lai and Fu, 2020). Such results are countless, varying significantly due to their cause: monetary donations, donation of goods (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011), supply of services and goods where the state cannot intervene (Weibross, 1975; Salamon, 1987), participation of volunteers (Nemțeanu and Tarcza, 2016; Touley and Hooks, 2020), etc.

The accountability of non-profit organisations shows high impact in relation to the interested parties (Lai and Fu, 2020). For instance, volunteers tend to get involved long-term in an organisation only if they trust the leadership, their activities and mission (Nemțeanu and Tarcza, 2016). The lack of transparency in reporting may raise serious questions among stakeholders (Lai and Fu, 2020; Atouba and Shumate, 2020). Due to the particularities of the undertaken operations, humanitarian organisations often fight against the issue of managing requirements concerning reporting accountability (Kennedy, 2019). The collaboration of NGOs with interested parties is conditional on their trust with the implemented actions

(Atouba and Shumate, 2020), where transparent communication regarding resource use constitutes the basis of their relationship.

2. Research methodology

This research proposes to identify the best practices in the non-profit sector in Romania against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, the authors have analysed secondary data of NGO involvement in various humanitarian campaigns. They have employed both available online sources (the websites of various NGOs, public social media accounts, online mass-media publication, etc.) regarding the topic under scrutiny, and official data provided by public institutions, the NGO Database by the Romanian Ministry of Justice (MJR, 2020). Since the confirmation of the first case in Romania on 27 February 2020 (WHO, 2020), and until 13 April 2020, 60 such NGO initiatives have been identified.

2.1. Research context: COVID-19 and the non-governmental sector in Romania

In crisis situations, in emerging economies, the welfare of people from socially vulnerable categories depends on the resources made available to them through NGOs (Prasad et al., 2016). This research analyses the social initiative of NGOs in Romania as an emergent economy belonging to Central and Eastern Europe and which recorded a rapid economic growth in recent years (Dabija and Bejan, 2018).

Table no. 1 The COVID-19 impact on Central and Eastern European countries

Country	Population (millions)	Confirmed	Morbidity rate	Deaths	Fatality rate	Recovered	Recovery rate
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)=(3)/(2)	(5)	(6)= (5)/(2)	(7)	(8)= (7)/(2)
Albania	2,877,797	494	0.01716591	25	0.0008687	251	0.00872195
Bulgaria	6,948,445	783	0.01126871	36	0.0005181	105	0.00151113
Croatia	4,105,267	1,741	0.04240893	33	0.0008038	473	0.01152178
Czech R.	10,708,981	6,301	0.05883846	166	0.0015501	819	0.00764779
Estonia	1,326,535	1,400	0.10553811	35	0.0026385	117	0.00881997
Hungary	9,660,351	1,579	0.01634516	134	0.0013871	192	0.00198751
Latvia	1,886,198	666	0.03530912	5	0.0002651	44	0.00233273
Lithuania	2,722,289	1,091	0.04007657	30	0.001102	138	0.00506926
Poland	37,846,611	7,582	0.0200335	286	0.0007557	668	0.00176502
Romania	19,237,691	7,216	0.0375097	372	0.0019337	1,217	0.00632612
Slovakia	5,459,642	863	0.0158069	2	0.0000366	151	0.00276575
Moldova	4,033,963	2,049	0.05079372	44	0.0010907	171	0.00423901
Serbia	8,737,371	4,873	0.05577192	99	0.0011331	400	0.00457804
Ukraine	43,733,762	3,764	0.00860662	108	0.0002469	143	0.00032698

Source: Google COVID-19, 2020; Worldometer, 2020.

In 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Romania ranked first in terms of fatality rate and number of deaths per population. As for the number of infections, it ranks second with a relatively large number of cases compared with other Central and Eastern European countries (table no. 1), according to the OEDC (2020) definition, but also in relation to other neighbouring states (Serbia, Hungary, Ukraine, Moldova).

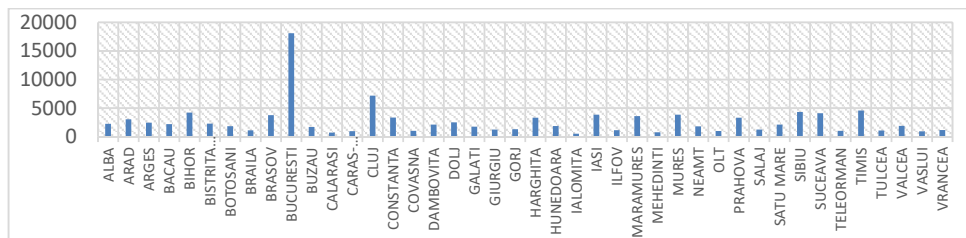


Fig. no. 1 Distribution of NGOs across counties in Romania (N=119.430)

Source: Analysis based on data from the NGO Database, MJR, 2020

The non-profit sector in Romania experienced a significant growth in the past 30 years, totalling 119,430 foundations, associations, unions, and federations (MJR, 2020). The previous report shows that București-Ilfov, the North Western and the Central region amass 55% of the non-profit organisations active in Romania, regions with the highest GDP in the country. The non-profit sector in Romania is preponderantly urban; 75% of non-profit organisations were located in the urban environment in 2015 (Andersen et al., 2017). The analysis of data due in the month of March 2020 (figure no. 1) show a conglomeration around large urban centres: București-Ilfov total over 18,093 NGOs, and Cluj 7,185 NGOs. In other regions, the number of NGOs is below 1,000 per county (Ialomița: 585; Călărași: 728, etc.).

2.2. Best practices of NGOs in Romania assisting in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic

The initiatives identified assisting the fight against COVID-19 were undertaken by organisations within various fields – organisations within philanthropy, social care, and healthcare (table no. 2). Organisations belonging to a wide range of domains, from organisations with nationwide to local coverage, from urban to rural areas, took part in the combatting of COVID-19.

Table no. 2 Fields of activity and geographic distribution of support initiatives of non-profit organisations against COVID-19 (N=60)

Field of activity	Organisations in total	Field of activity	Organisations in total	Operating level	Organisations in total
Healthcare	10	Civic involvement	4	National	6
Social care	14	Psychotherapy	2	County	15
Philanthropy	26	Other categories	4	Local	29

Source: Analysis done by authors.

The messages conveyed by the interested parties regarding the resource attraction through social media and own websites, or third-party websites, revolve around two main topics (Table 3): supporting public hospitals and supporting the community. The call to action regarding the involvement of interested parties took into consideration results that involve donations, volunteering, supply of free services, population information campaigns, and the development of technological infrastructure.

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, 61% of the analysed organisations proposed initiatives to support public hospitals, thus actively supplying the necessary resources for the smooth conduct of healthcare workers. Among the undertaken activities, the following are noteworthy: supporting public hospitals through the donation of protective medical gear and disinfectants (46.66%), supplying the medical equipment (35%) needed to manage the confirmed cases of COVID-19; setting up hospitals (8.33%) in such a manner as to expand their full capacity for treatment, should the number of patients increase. Community support comprises the assistance of categories which are socially vulnerable to COVID-19, such as the elderly over 65, but also people with other chronic conditions or who cannot travel (MSR, 2020). With the help of volunteers, NGOs support these people with food, hygiene products or medicine (28.33%); donations of food supplies (25%), psychological consultations (13.33%), and medical consultations (6.66%). Singular initiatives are noteworthy, such as app development for medical staff who can easily find accommodation during the pandemic, and technology development that facilitates access of other organisations to resources and potential beneficiaries.

Public information campaigns by NGOs analysed in relation to COVID-19 effects have not been used extensively (16.66%), neither reference material posted online warning individuals regarding the risk to which the expose themselves (table no. 3).

Table no. 3 Best practices in humanitarian initiatives of NGOs (N=60)

Ref. no.	Dimensions	Frequency (%)	Best practices (targeted results)	No.	Frequency (%)
1.	Message conveyed: supporting public hospitals	61.6	Donations: protective medical gear and disinfectants	28	46.66
			Donations: medical equipment	21	35.00
			Donations: construction of modular hospitals	5	8.33
			Donation: combatting COVID-19	2	3.33
			Donations: meals for medical staff	1	1.66
			Donations: medicine	1	1.66
			Donation: line for biological sample testing	1	1.66
2.	Message conveyed: supporting the community	60.0	Donations: food supplies for vulnerable groups	15	25.00
			Donations: hygiene products	4	6.66
			Volunteering: delivering food supplies, hygiene products or medicine	1	1.66
			Free psychological consultations	17	28.33
			Medical consultations	8	13.33
			Providing free shipping	4	6.66
			Searching for temporary shelter	2	3.33
			Educational services for children	1	1.66
			Elderly care services	1	1.66
			App for facilitating psychological counselling	1	1.66
			Infrastructure for facilitating the access organisations to resources and beneficiaries	1	1.66
3.	Message conveyed: COVID-19 public information	16.66	General information regarding COVID-19 on the website	9	15.00
			Electronic book on COVID-19	1	1.66
4.	RAM: donations	58.33	Bank transfer	26	43.33
			Website: card payment	22	36.60
			Phone: SMS	24	40.00
			Phone app: Revolut	2	3.33
			Paypal	6	10.00
			Facebook: card payment	1	1.66
			Other apps	2	3.33
5.	RAM: volunteering	28.33	Social media (Facebook)	13	21.66
			Own websites	10	16.66
			Third-party websites	4	6.66
6.	Organizational accountability through reporting	51.66	Transparent reporting	18	30.00
			Information regarding resource destination	13	21.66
			Lack of reporting	29	48.33

Note: RAM – Resource Attraction Means.

Source: Analysis done by authors.

The main resource attraction means consist of online payment methods, such as bank transfer (43%) and text messages (40%). 36% of the organisations analysed raise funds through card payments on the own websites. Organizational accountability towards stakeholders was evaluated through the amount of information given regarding resource destination and use. It is noteworthy (table no. 3) that only 30% of organisations provided full reports regarding the funds raised and voluntary participation. 21% specified the destination of donations or the voluntary participation while 48.33% did not report on the solicited contributions in assisting the fight against COVID-19.

Conclusions

The results of this research provide major input towards the development of Resource Dependence Theory, highlighting the manner in which NGOs, by resorting to volunteering

and fundraiser campaigns, obtain the resources necessary to assist socially vulnerable categories, such as the elderly and people with pre-existing medical conditions. The current backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic engendered a quick response of countless NGOs to support these groups through practical and targeted actions. These endeavours show the role of non-profit organisations as provider and resource facilitator for different organisations, especially for public hospitals. At the same time, the catalytic role of these NGOs is self-evident in the tempering of relations between the state and individuals.

From a managerial standpoint, this research extracts a series of best practices used by NGOs in Romania in the fight against COVID-19. The swift response of the NGO, together with their ability to generate and handle resources necessary to various stakeholders, is commendable. Nevertheless, this research contains a series of limitations, such as only having taken the case of NGOs in Romania into consideration. Future research will be able to analyse not only qualitatively but also quantitatively the dimensions and especially the effects of the actions of these NGOs in emergent and developed states, highlighting the most effective and swift solutions. In the future, as a consequence of some extreme situations – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – the reporting process of NGO actions ought to be transparentized, and the development of tools that analyse the processes undertaken by these NGOs for the legitimization of social and humanitarian initiatives, respectively.

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