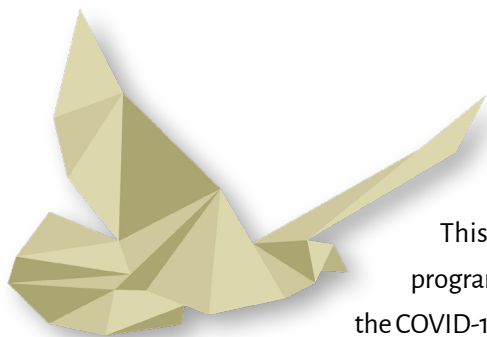


Support of CSOs in times of COVID-19

How joint efforts in Europe build resilience



Network^{of}
European
Foundations



Editorial

This publication aims to showcase how the Network of European Foundations' programmes and their grantee organisations have been able to adapt and respond to the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences. As with all crises, this one came as both a shock and an opportunity for adaptation and resilience. In the spirit of solidarity, we would like to share how grantee organisations have placed the common good at the centre of their work and found creative solutions during this challenging period. We seek to capture the richness and diversity of the work of the grantee organisations across European countries and how the crisis has had ramifications in nearly all aspects of the programmes supported by NEF. We have selected case studies that illustrate civil society's mobilisation: if the response has been local, we -as Europeans- can learn collectively from those common challenges.

For instance, questions of long-term care facilities have become central for our European societies, as the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated these and the need to improve the preparedness and resilience of our European health and care system. Against this background, the facets of integrated community care are being explored through our TransForm initiative, in which several projects have served as a proof of concept. COVID-19 has heightened the need to develop a conceptual framework that can guide healthcare reform, with particular attention to the connections among the different levels of care (primary, specialist, hospital care and social care).

This crisis has hit hardest the most vulnerable groups of our societies in the health and social domains: elderly and people living with dementia, children and women, and migrants. These groups are targeted through other NEF programmes (such as EFID, focusing on people living with dementia and EPIM, focusing on migrants). Across our social inclusion programmes, we have noticed an increased need of best practices in support and care of marginalised groups and/or in provision of mental health and psychosocial support.

In these times, civil society is under pressure with limited capacity to react. Yet civil society can facilitate the engagement towards the communities affected by the crisis, an essential element to guarantee responses are adapted to the context. Governments should rely on civil society to help them understand the impact of their decisions on their citizens, thanks to open and active feedback processes.

In this extended emergency context, democracy faces greater risks. One of the issues that the COVID-19 crisis has surfaced is how institutions in charge of the common good are operating in a political way, disseminating science according to an agenda, which also contributes to the crisis of legitimacy our societies are currently grappling with. Our Civitates programme is now engaged in supporting independent, public-interest journalism organisations across Europe, as they have an important role to play in the framing of public opinion. Along the same line, you will read about Civitates' work on disinformation in the digital public sphere.

We are privileged to be part of the philanthropic efforts that seek to address emerging needs and gaps, especially in those times that are fast evolving. With the launch of the European AI Fund under the NEF auspices last September, it is time to collectively engage on the impacts of high tech that have also been accelerated with the COVID-19 crisis. This publication will be complemented with case studies from this strand of work when the preliminary outcomes of its calls will be available.



Peggy Saïller,
Executive Director of NEF



TransForm and EFID are two programmes of NEF, focusing on health care within the field of social inclusion in Europe.

“Community care is as important as intensive care”

The international TransForm coalition seeks to map and analyse promising practices of Integrated Community Care (ICC) and draw learnings from their experiences and impact. ICC sees communities as crucial partners in healthcare that contribute invaluable assets such as relationships, expertise, contextual knowledge and locally supportive ecosystems. The European Foundations’ Initiative on Dementia, EFID, is more focused on the life goals of persons as the centre of the health and care interventions. Both ICC and EFID believe in the assets of a person as an individual and in the assets of the community.

Tinne Vandensande is Chair of Transform, Senior Programme Coordinator at the King Baudouin Foundation.

Tinne: “COVID-19 has clearly exposed the fragility of communities and the growing economic inequalities. Already vulnerable and marginalised people are hit hardest. The pandemic also highlighted structural deficiencies of existing health-care and public service systems. However, the crisis brought opportunities along as well, particularly for ICC. Integrated community care is on the agenda more than ever. Citizens, neighbourhood networks, community-based organisations and informal carers are being recognised as key players in tackling the COVID-19 crisis as they address the huge needs for psychosocial, practical and food support. They are inspiring us to act differently, cooperate better and innovate faster.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic triggered a range of short-term windows of opportunity: operational changes, suspension of certain rules and protocols, pay rises for health and care workers, new ways of gathering and reporting data, and the building of new alliances. More fundamentally the disruption demonstrated perhaps unsuspected resilience in civil society and public services. The response to COVID-19 has also created a level of social capital and trust between governments, civil society, and local communities that might be leveraged for positive change.

In order to take the challenges and opportunities associated with the global pandemic seriously, TransForm is working to develop a pandemic-robust strategy to bring the cause of integrated community care further. We will expand on the learnings and come up with sustainable solutions, whereby sustainable ICC requires a paradigm shift at the citizen, community and system level. Local experimentation is not enough. ICC comes down to a continuous process of ‘whole system innovation.’”





Foundation Compassion Alzheimer – Bulgaria

Foundation Compassion Alzheimer Bulgaria is a non-governmental organisation, established by people living with alzheimer and their families. The foundation aims to improve the quality of life for people living with alzheimer and dementia in Bulgaria, by changing the current attitudes and practices towards them and providing access to treatment and social support.

Tania Tisheva is project coordinator at Compassion Alzheimer Bulgaria.

Tania: "Because of the lockdown in Bulgaria we could not organise any self-help groups or Alzheimer Cafes for people living with alzheimer and dementia and their families. We could not maintain the direct, face to face contact we used to have, for giving psychological support to them. Life during lockdown became very hard for people in the nursing homes, not being able to even have contact with their relatives. Many of them felt isolated.

At Compassion Alzheimer Bulgaria and by state regulations, we were also prohibited to visit these elderly and therefore vulnerable people. We were forced to do everything virtually. Luckily that didn't change our lobbying work so much, as we could meet with the Ministry of Social Policy and with other institutions online. However, to remain connected with the people directly involved in the care of persons with alzheimer and dementia, we had to develop new practices. We became inspired by good practices from other organisations around Europe.

We spoke to a nursing home in Bulgaria and found out that they were in need of several items, such as cleaning detergents, and started a fundraising campaign for them. Through an online platform we gathered what they needed in a few months time. After that campaign we have been working on more fundraisers for other nursing homes as well. One of our most successful activities during the crisis, is the publishing of a podcast to our website. This podcast provides information for caregivers and a broader public related to the challenges of dealing with and providing care for somebody with dementia. The number of visitors to our website increased substantially. We think that this is something that could be interesting for other organisations too.

We also introduced music therapy, provided to two nursing homes by a young music therapist playing harp. A very successful project as the directors of the nursing homes reported that it helped people to come out of their isolation and it positively effects their cognitive abilities. In addition to the joy it brings them, the music therapy allows them to be who they are; elderly people enjoying their age with dignity. With these several actions, we provided really something innovative in Bulgaria during COVID-19. However, we also continue our work for a national strategy regarding alzheimer and dementia and for daycare centres to provide the best standards ever. For that purpose we engage as much as possible with other NGOs, both in Bulgaria and abroad. Together we are stronger."





Foton – Belgium

Foton is an expertise centre in the field of dementia as well as a home counselling service. The main goal of the organisation is to change the dominant perception society has of people with dementia. The centre wants to ensure that people suffering from dementia and their informal caregivers receive the tailored, person-centred care they need.

Hilde Delameillieure is Coordinator of the FotonTeam in Bruges, Belgium.

Hilde: *"The activities we carry out can be divided in three. From our position as an expertise centre, we organise courses, workshops and training for professionals and volunteers. For example, we trained library staff to help people with dementia who come to the library. Secondly, Foton is a home where people with dementia and their caregivers are always welcome. Here, we organise music and a choir. The activities with regard to our third area of work, home counselling, form a large part. It mainly consists of psycho-social support for people with dementia and their informal caregivers. This can range from just before diagnosis to after death. Everything related to dementia can be discussed, and together with the people involved, we always try to shine a light on each individual's strength."*

Due to the lockdown our home counselling had come to a standstill. We replaced all of our personal guidance with phone calls. We have also conducted online meetings with some people, but not every informal caregiver has the IT skills to organise this. As the choir could not continue either, we provided an online alternative through a very user-friendly tool, where people could log in once a month, and after singing a number of songs, had a conversation together. For this we worked together with volunteers who called the clients in advance and helped them log in. One of the things that I am really proud of though, is the inspiration booklet, full of connecting and hopeful texts which we sent to all the families. We have received many positive reactions to it, and now have a second booklet ready to distribute before Christmas. We think it is very important to occasionally let the caregivers know that we have not forgotten about them."

When the crisis had just hit Europe, EFID published a call for proposals for solutions to the challenges created by the pandemic in which we participated. Foton was selected and rewarded with a grant which helped us a lot. We have not only been able to print the booklets but we've also been able to invest in some laptops and mobile phones for the organisation to use for online counselling. Through the crisis we have found out that for some people online conversations are a genuine alternative. One of our colleagues has been undertaking walks with clients since COVID-19. For some people it turns out to be easier to tell their story while walking, so we'll continue that activity for sure!"





Migration



The European Programme on Integration and Migration (EPIM) is one of the programmes of NEF, focusing on social inclusion in Europe.

“COVID-19 heavily impacted people that already were vulnerable”

EPIM is a collaboratively funded programme, established in 2005 as a reaction to more competences on migration moving to the EU level. The goal of the programme is to strengthen the role of civil society in building inclusive communities and in developing humane and sustainable responses to migration, based on Europe's commitment to universal human rights and social justice. As there are a lot of common issues amongst different member states, the learning from other contexts, and making the connection from practice to policy, is a huge dimension of the work of EPIM.

Sarah Sommer is Programme Director of EPIM.

Sarah: “COVID-19 heavily impacted in particular people that already were vulnerable. As some groups were suffering disproportionately, grantees of EPIM had to address their programme and change their services, while following the restrictions of their governments. At a certain point some could not even go out to see their clients because of these regulations. They found creative ways to provide their support anyway, for example virtually.

When we talked to grantee organisations, they flagged that they needed additional resources because they had to reinvent their work. At the same time, as a lot of the resources were suddenly prioritised to be spent on protection against the virus, some of the funding that our grantees had expected and planned for was no longer available. We stepped in with a specific COVID-19 budget to be able to respond to this need. Internally, just before the crisis overran us all, we had already discussed freeing up some extra funds for grantees working with migrants in Greece, as the situation there is under high pressure, both in a political and humanitarian context. The situation there can be seen as kind of symbolic of how Europe is dealing with migration and we wanted to take a stand for civil society organisations dedicated to providing support in this difficult context. So when the health crisis hit Europe, we quickly started spending the COVID-19 budget and immediately released the Greece Emergency Funds.

The crisis, in some cases, also offered new opportunities for our grantee organisations to engage at a policy level. There were more discussions related to the situation of migrants in the context of COVID-19 amongst politicians in some European countries, for example on access to health care. On another positive note, we saw that a mechanism like the EPIM programme is very helpful in carrying out the response, in a coordinated and rapid way. A number of funders reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic immediately, channeling their funds through the new mechanisms established in EPIM. This reinforces the use of EPIM in the context of a crisis like this.”





METAdrasi – Greece

METAdrasi is a Greek non-governmental organisation that covers crucial gaps in the reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Europe. Most of METAdrasi's activities are innovative and are implemented for the first time in Greece. The organisation works mainly in two areas, offering interpretation services in more than 40 languages and dialects, and protecting unaccompanied children.

Lora Pappa is President of METAdrasi, Greece.

Lora: "10 years ago one of our first projects was to cover the crucial gap in the interpretation services provided to refugees. The language barrier was one of the main reasons refugees did not have access to basic services. So, we created an integrated system for the provision of quality interpretation that included training and certification of interpreters through intensive courses, exams, evaluation and constant reassessment, as well as supervision in the field. Quality interpretation was a major innovation, just like the comprehensive safety net of activities for the protection of unaccompanied minors. These include, amongst others, accommodation facilities, escorting from precarious conditions to safe spaces, guardianship and foster families. A major innovation and breakthrough not only for Greece but also for Europe.

The stories and traumatic experiences of unaccompanied minors have given us the incentive to think out of the box in order to find solutions. It is always difficult to secure funding from governmental institutions for innovative ideas. That is why it is really crucial to have the support from foundations, like EPIM. That was again prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we received funding for our guardianship program. For METAdrasi the relationship with our supporters is important not only in terms of money, but also in paying attention to what we do and in asking us how we are coping.

Though our way of work has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not stopped any of our activities. Even our educational program on the islands, where e-learning was not an option due to the lack of internet, did not stop. Our teachers set up a system with exercises. It was a challenge to think in simple and practical solutions but the children were standing in lines for this, so I think I can say we managed!

In order to respond to the new circumstances of the pandemic, we also established a 24/7 telephone line to cover the needs for interpretation. The pandemic made many people panic; police weren't able to make clear to migrants that they needed to keep a safe distance, and medical staff in hospitals could not discuss symptoms with patients. Our emergency line received hundreds of calls for interpretation and that didn't stop, even when we had to stop the line. We strongly believe that the 24/7 telephone line would offer significant help in many critical situations and that it should continue even after the end of this pandemic."



Picture: courtesy of Conrad N. Hilton Foundation



New Women Connectors – The Netherlands

New Women Connectors is a movement striving for mainstreaming the unheard voices of migrant and refugee women living across Europe. It is led by women, for women, who are working to ensure that all voices are heard and answered so that they collectively can feel empowered. The movement supports women to reach out to decision makers for an inclusive and social justice approach giving a new perspective, new knowledge and new insights to the debate about integration and inclusion.

Anila Noor is the initiator of New Women Connectors, The Netherlands.

Anila: *“When the virus hit Europe, a lot of restrictions followed. In many cases it was actually a privilege to be able to follow these restrictions. Social distancing, for instance, was really not possible to pursue in many of the refugee communities. COVID-19 meant a full stop for the collective meetings and gatherings that we were organising with migrant and refugee women. By going online, we know we miss out on a lot of women who do not have access to a laptop or a mobile phone.*

Still, as an alternative, we have set up large WhatsApp groups in different languages, including Arabic, Spanish, Urdu, Pashto, English and Dari. Women feel free to speak out in these groups, they really provide a safe space. Through these groups we encourage women to participate in decision-making processes that affect their everyday lives and impacts them and their families daily. We are not a service provider but we are trying to engage people with the political debate and as women use our resilience to get a seat at the discussion table. During COVID-19 it became clearer that as we were not able to meet in person, solidarity, more than ever, is key. It is extremely important to show these often unheard women, that they actually can speak and stand for themselves, to give them confidence so that they feel motivated and feel that a different perspective is possible.

Many of the migrant and refugee women we are connected with, have now developed a real appetite for participation in debates. They want to join the discussions and people want to hear them. I am worried though how we will create a follow up when funding comes to an end. If we leave that space empty, now that these women are hoping for more action, we could easily ruin what we have built. I think however that COVID-19 also provides an opportunity. A chance to look at structural barriers that prevent women participating in a meaningful way. The crisis offers the possibility to evaluate ourselves and rethink how everything is interconnected and overlapping. We can't ignore anyone, especially not women.”





Civitates is one of the programmes of NEF working in the field of democracy in Europe.

“Especially in a crisis, we have to make sure that democracy is upheld”

Civitates provides funding for civil society actors to come together, revitalise public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard. In order to increase their impact for a strong civil society to shape vibrant and open European democracies that work for all, multiple donors have pooled their financial resources. Through Civitates they support cross-sectoral coalitions that strengthen the resilience of the civil society sector, initiatives that push for a healthy digital public sphere, as well as independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

Roy Virah-Sawmy is Programme Officer at Civitates.

Roy: *“When the COVID-19 crisis hit us, the first thing that came to our mind was how it would affect our grantee partners and how we could support them best. We immediately extended deadlines, opened up the possibility of faster instalments and communicated that we wanted to stay as flexible as possible with regard to the funding.*

The biggest challenge for us at Civitates was how to keep the network of coalitions all over Europe alive online? How to keep the conversations going? We didn't think it would work out to just translate the meetings that we used to have in person, into online meetings. Therefore, we reviewed the timings, objectives and expectation of our convenings and together with a professional facilitator created the right online environment. We felt that we also had to support our partners with the tools to continue their work, so we organised an online facilitation training for them.

I think it is safe to say that we have seen that the restrictions around Europe impacted civic space greatly and that is why during a crisis, the coalitions supported through us, need to play an even greater watchdog role. Especially in such an usual situation as this, we have to make sure that democracy is upheld. If nobody monitors what the consequences of restrictions are, these can easily lead to the abusing of rights, by all kinds of actors. At the same time, since everyone is working from home, lots of communication moved to the online space. There are many positive sides to this, but also plenty of abuse, for instance disinformation around COVID-19. It makes clear that now, more than ever, there is an even greater need for a healthy digital public sphere and independent journalists for reliable information.”





Resource Center for Public Participation – Romania

CeRe is the Resource Center for Public Participation in Romania. It was set up in 2006 on the belief that public decisions must be made in a participatory way. The organisation supports citizens and NGOs in their advocacy efforts for a decision making process with public participation. CeRe facilitates a coalition that defends the civic space for participation.

Oana Preda is the Director of CeRe, Romania.

Oana: “Many challenges arose from the COVID-19 crisis. At the very beginning of the crisis in Romania, our president signed a decree which established a state of emergency throughout the country’s territory. This emergency situation came with a lot of restrictions and we immediately noticed, that there was – generally speaking – no attention for civil rights and democracy but also that no questions were asked by politicians or media about any of these restrictions. There was of course, a state of panic, yet we were surprised that nobody raised their voice. In this emergency situation, legislation restricting access to information and to decision making participation was introduced, without any debate. We even found out through international media that the Romanian president announced to minimise the country’s role in the European Convention on Human Rights, invoking the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

At CeRe and in our coalition we realised the delicacy of the situation as it was important for people to be able to trust the government and follow the measures, yet somebody needed to say something. We tried to find a balance, as we did not want to create more tension and decided to organise an online system to report about the state of democracy and civil rights in the country. We turned to Civitates to ask for a subsidy to build a website. Finding funds during COVID-19 was an extra challenge as most donors had other priorities: they wanted their money to be spent on masks and food. If we had been a service provider, we would have shifted services to the direct needs of people, but being a watchdog we shifted our advocacy work to COVID-19. Civitates’ reaction was very valuable to us as we were allowed to use some of their funds, allocated for learning purposes, for the website.

With our online database, we tried to build awareness amongst people about civil rights in COVID-19 times, but we also used it as a basis to ask the state for specific actions. Some of our requests or public statements had a real impact, but most of them were ignored by the government. Nevertheless we are excited to show that, no matter what happens, we are here to monitor the data about civic liberty in our country. We feel that is an important statement.”





Computational Propaganda Research Project – U.K.

The Computational Propaganda Research Project (COMPROP), based in the Oxford Internet Institute and the University of Oxford, investigates the interaction of algorithms, automation and politics. This work includes analysis of how tools like social media bots and algorithms are used to manipulate public opinion, by amplifying or repressing political content, disinformation, hate speech, and junk news.

Lisa-Maria Neudert is a doctoral candidate at the Oxford Internet Institute and a core researcher at the Computational Propaganda Research Project.

Lisa-Maria: *“As a result of COVID-19 we have definitely shifted our focus. We are now focusing on misinformation related to the virus, such as conspiracy theories around the origin and anti-vaccine messages. While all staff started working from home from one day to another, the nature of our work did not change that much. One of the things we did was publish a memo about how the online advertising ecosystem funds COVID-19 junk news and disinformation. Comparing professional versus junk news and disinformation sources, our analysis draws from a sample of 830 sources that were reporting on COVID-19. What we found -amongst others- was that major high-prestige websites inadvertently boost junk news and disinformation. This happens for instance, when high-prestige websites mention a certain site as an example of controversial opinions, which will give them a boost on google and promote the online reputation and visibility of the controversial messages.*

Another research we did on YouTube and COVID-19 showed that on average YouTube took 41 days to remove videos that were flagged by users as maintaining false information. Several social media companies had to send home their content mediators, whom are usually third party contractors without own devices and cannot switch to working remotely. Especially in spring we could see moderation was taken over by automation. While this is often referred to as a sophisticated future means, automatic moderation is only able to match patterns while nuances such as irony and satire, but also freedom of speech are difficult to recognise.

One of the practices that we would like to share for others to benefit, is that we found it is important to work as much on multi-platforms as possible. For instance, when we can see that certain actors are active on multiple channels, or whether visuals that pop up on one channel also pop up on other channels, we can develop a more holistic overview. It is complicated though and it depends on your bandwidth and focus whether this is possible. As COMPROP is a larger project, we have the possibility to look into more platforms and try to get a more comprehensive view on false news.”





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‘NEF is an association of leading European foundations dedicated to strengthening philanthropic cooperation. We fund and support the civil society in its work on social inclusion, international development and democracy.’

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