

Global Civil Society Response to the COVID-19 Crisis^a

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Abstract

How did Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) globally address the needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? In this study, we examine the roles CSOs played during the first eighteen months of the pandemic, their main challenges, and how the pandemic changed CSOs' roles in society across 39 countries and economies. Using inductive thematic analysis analyzing responses from global philanthropy experts in two consecutive studies (2020 & 2021), we find that CSOs played fourteen roles, of which we discuss the six most mentioned: providing social assistance; responding to health care needs; coordinating and collaborating with government and business; mobilizing funds to address societal needs; raising awareness and combating misinformation; and advocating. Challenges for CSOs included reduced revenue and difficulty reaching beneficiaries. We found these challenges led to innovative ways of operating and new arrangements between civil societies and governments, which may have opened opportunities for a more active role of CSOs.

Keywords: philanthropy; civil society organizations; CSO; COVID-19; government; cross-sectoral collaborations

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a cascading crisis that did not follow previously observed patterns of natural disasters with a clear endpoint and a clear phase for civil society response. Since 2020, research about civil society responses to COVID-19 has shed light on the social, economic, and political factors that influenced the effectiveness of the response of multiple social actors during the early peaks of the pandemic (Andion, 2020; Cai et al., 2021; Saghin et al., 2022; Woo, 2020). A substantial body of research has also addressed the importance of government-civil society interactions during the crisis and the long-term impact on CSOs' roles and sustainability (Doğan & Genç, 2021; Kövér et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2021; National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2021; Sidel & Hu, 2021; Tandon & Aravind, 2021; Schmid, 2021; Simsa, 2022; Wong & Wu, 2021).

Most publications between 2020 and 2022 focus on one country, groups of countries in one region, or one or two regions, with very few global or multiregional studies. Studies at the country level in Australia (Seibert et al., 2021), Brazil (Hopstein & Peres, 2021), China (Woo, 2020), France (Plaisance, 2021), India (Tandon & Aravind, 2021), Indonesia (Meiji et al., 2021), Thailand (Pongutta et al., 2021), and United Kingdom (Thiery et al., 2021) concluded that voluntary action, civil society groups, and organizations acted quickly to resolve emerging needs by engaging in advocacy, coordination of efforts, donation and distribution of goods and resources, civil activism, awareness building, livelihood support, mental health support, and connection to information and resources.

However, few studies offer a comprehensive vision of CSOs' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic at a global level. This study further examines how CSOs in 39 countries and economies in different world regions acted to address the needs caused by the COVID-19

pandemic, and how this may have re-defined their roles in times of crisis. Despite significant differences in each country, we seek to identify the main trends that apply to all countries in our population during the first eighteen months.

Literature Review

In times of crisis, the increased demand for social services activates civil society to respond to community needs. Civil society organizations (CSOs) mobilize resources, volunteers, and expertise to support relief efforts and provide aid to those affected (Durán et al., 2020). They also advocate for policy changes and reforms that address the root causes and consequences of the crisis and promote long-term solutions (CIVICUS, 2020). Crises open opportunities for civil society to transform (Duliba et al., 2022) and may alter the balance of CSO-government relationships (Kövér, 2021). In a crisis, these already complex relationships can become even more complex. Civil society actions may challenge or contradict government responses, leading to tensions and disagreements, particularly if the government is slow to respond or if the response is seen as inadequate or inequitable (Curty et al., 2023). At the same time, governments may seek to limit civil society initiatives during crises, citing concerns about security or public order (Haavisto, 2020).

Regional studies in East Asia (Cai et al., 2021; Wong & Wu, 2021; Yuen et al., 2021), Southeast Asia (Lorch & Sombatpoonsiri, 2022), Middle East and North Africa (Cherif et al., 2020), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Vavolda, 2020), Europe and the Western Balkan countries (Neshikj & Spasovska, 2021; Tageo et al., 2021), Latin America (von Bülow & Rossi, 2020), and the study of 5 countries in five different regions by Adhikari and colleagues (2022), highlight the role of the state in shaping the civil society responses, either through restrictive regulatory practices or lack of engagement with CSOs. Key findings include that in the context

of COVID-19, government-CSO relationships played a significant role in shaping civil society response and that the types of CSOs' engagement "with the state during the pandemic depended largely on pre-existing dynamics and personal connections between organizations and government officials" (Adhikari et al., 2022, p. 3). Regardless, CSOs operating under different institutional environments were mostly efficient in providing emergency relief and goods and services and had a consistent role in enhancing social resilience, either by reinforcing government-led efforts or filling the institutional voids left by the government (Cai et al., 2021).

In this study, we seek to understand the roles of and challenges for civil societies as well as the balance between cooperative and conflictual interactions between government and CSOs (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Young & Casey, 2017) and how these dynamics may have shaped CSOs' roles in society. We use Young and Casey's work (2017) to understand the dynamics of the government-nonprofit relationships when nonprofits supplement or complement government services or enter into adversarial relationships. Additionally, we analyze cases of co-optation (Brinkerhoff, 2002), a type of adversarial relationship in which power asymmetries make the interests of one side dominate the others. Finally, we analyze policy neglect, characterized by the government's lack of policy attention to CSOs, which can weaken civil society (Anheier & Toepler, 2019).

We aim to answer the following research questions:

- What main roles did CSOs worldwide play during the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What were the main challenges for CSOs in addressing the needs caused by the pandemic?

- What changes were observed in the roles CSOs played during the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

To answer our research questions, the study uses reflexive thematic analysis grounded within the qualitative paradigm, emphasizing the role of the researcher’s interpretations and reflexivity in the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We analyze the results of two consecutive studies conducted in 2020 and 2021 with experts from the Global Philanthropy Environment Index (GPEI) and other international experts using open-ended questions.^e We asked the experts to describe the role CSOs played during the COVID-19 pandemic in their country or economy of expertise.^f

The respondents were all either legal experts, scholars of the nonprofit sectors, or working in CSOs in their country or economy of expertise. In seven countries, the 2020 questionnaire was completed by more than one expert. The second phase was limited to one contributing expert per country.

The study instruments and implementation differed slightly between the first and second phases. The first phase, which included seven open-ended questions, was launched online using Qualtrics in April 2020. Through our network, in part based on established collaborations through the Global Philanthropy Indices (Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2022), we approached 280 experts active in diverse types of organizations (including CSOs, nonprofits,

^e See online Appendix A for the questions.

^f In the questionnaire we used the terms “nonprofit sector and philanthropy.” In their responses, many experts used the terms *philanthropic organizations*, *civil society organizations*, and *nonprofit organizations* interchangeably. In reporting of the results, we use Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as an umbrella term inclusive of CSOs (including nonprofits and philanthropic organizations when used interchangeably by the expert), grassroots movements, volunteer groups, and collective initiatives.

foundations, and academic institutions) around the world. We invited them to share their observations of publicly available information on current opportunities and challenges faced by the nonprofit sector in different countries and economies. We encouraged them to forward the questions to other experts in their networks to provide additional perspectives. The questionnaire remained open throughout 2020 with the understanding that each country would experience the progression of the health and economic crisis according to its own timeline. Between late April and October 2020, we received 55 responses representing 44 countries. Thirty-six were received between April and May, 16 in June, and 3 in September and October 2020.

The second phase, which included only four questions, was included as a section of the 2022 Global Philanthropy Environment Index (GPEI) questionnaire, which experts completed between January and September 2021. Only contributing GPEI experts were asked to complete the questions during the study's second phase. Respondents to the second phase received a modest honorarium for completing the full GPEI questionnaire, of which the four COVID-19-related questions were a small part. Space for responses was unlimited in the 2020 phase, so some responses were quite long and nuanced, but space was limited to 2,000 characters in the 2021 phase.

Of the 44 countries with responses in the 2020 phase, 39 also completed the 2021 phase (Table 1).

{Insert Table 1 here}

Data Analysis

We concurrently analyzed the 2020 responses and answers to the four questions in the 2021 GPEI study using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with N-Vivo 12. Each

country was treated as a separate case, including all responses across phases related to each case. In total, 39 countries included in the first and second samples were analyzed. Responses were coded “[Country name], [year]” to identify when data were collected. The responses were first coded and re-coded in a reflective process to identify patterns in the data. To address reliability issues, the codes were discussed among the researchers and re-codified when necessary. A second round collated codes into potential themes that captured “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by [the] core concept...” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). At the final stage, we reviewed and named the themes to reflect the codes under each theme. During the analysis, we compared conflicting cases to deeply understand the challenges and government-CSOs relationship patterns during the pandemic as factors affecting these roles.

Results

What Roles Did CSOs Across the World Play During the First Eighteen Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The responding experts reported fourteen roles in which CSOs across countries were active in addressing social needs during the pandemic. Table 2 shows an overview of the fourteen identified roles and the frequency with which experts mentioned them. Due to space limitations, we describe only the six most frequently mentioned roles: Providing social assistance; responding to health care needs; coordinating and collaborating; mobilizing funding to address societal needs; raising awareness of and fighting misinformation; and advocating.

{Insert Table 2 here}

Providing Social Assistance. CSOs provided critical social assistance to affected populations, including food and financial assistance, humanitarian aid, livelihood recovery, childcare, and support to at-risk or vulnerable populations. During the pandemic’s earlier phases, CSOs demonstrated an ability to make rapid adjustments in providing services to avoid health risks, identify the most vulnerable groups, and reach out to them.

Vulnerable populations under lockdown in urban and rural communities received food assistance. Beneficiaries included the unemployed, youth, women, people with disabilities, people who are houseless, the elderly, and migrant populations, comprising refugees and asylum seekers, in countries such as Greece, India, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates [Greece, 2020, 2021; India, 2020; Israel, 2020, 2021; United Arab Emirates, 2020, 2021]. In Nigeria, many CSOs prioritized the economic empowerment of women and girls who are caregivers “to enable those most affected to become self-reliant” [Nigeria, 2021]. Volunteers, faith-based groups, food banks, and other organizations provided food and other types of assistance to vulnerable communities that did not have the monetary resources to cope with the crisis.

Financial assistance and support were provided mainly in cash. In Colombia, social services provided by the government during lockdowns did not always reach populations who did not have access to bank services, so CSOs made direct cash transfers [Colombia, 2021].

Responding to Health Care Needs. CSOs provided health care services, supported health personnel and health organizations, produced and distributed health supplies, and contributed to developing innovative solutions. Responses highlighted CSOs’ acquisition and production of personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies distributed to vulnerable populations, communities, and healthcare establishments and personnel. Experts mentioned masks, protective visors, sanitizers, and ventilators among the supplies produced,

sometimes with the help of volunteers mobilized by funders and CSOs like in the documented cases of China and Romania [China, 2021; Romania, 2020, 2021]. Universities and research centers produced ventilators and used 3D printers to produce visors and face shields to address the increasing demands for inventory [Czech Republic, 2020; Pakistan, 2020].

Testing, implementing mobile testing labs, tracking, and distributing medical supplies were substantial initiatives promoted by CSOs to support healthcare systems. CSOs “provided hospitals with rapid testing systems, installed new testing labs, provided training to medical staff...provided hospitals with artificial lung ventilation apparatus, face masks, personal protection systems, disinfectants, etc.” [Kazakhstan, 2021]. In countries with inconsistent electricity, CSOs provided alternative energy solutions to the health sector, ensuring their operation during the pandemic [Nigeria, 2020].

Supporting health workers and front-line responders was also crucial. Groups of volunteers, activists, CSOs, and businesses mobilized resources to provide protective equipment, monetary donations, training, meals, and free childcare for medical workers. Experts from nine countries and economies (Belarus, the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) mentioned this direct help to health workers at the forefront of combatting COVID-19.

Experts from 8 countries (China, Czech Republic, Greece, India, Kenya, Montenegro, Nepal, and United Kingdom) noted rising psychological support needs, especially during the lockdown period, and reported CSOs offering psychological counseling to people experiencing distress from the crisis, which imposed new pressures on CSOs to find ways to provide services online.

Coordinating and Collaborating. Experts reported that CSOs coordinated and participated in intra and inter-sectoral collaborations. CSOs coordinated relief efforts, identified

ways to mobilize volunteers and resources, collaborated in linking medical centers' needs with donors, and coordinated with other organizations and governments to provide resources, assistance, information, and support.

Intra-Sectoral Coordination. In total, 24 of the 39 countries and economies reported self-mobilized groups of volunteers acting to reduce the impact of the pandemic. Volunteers coordinated by CSOs were crucial in using and implementing technology for data tracking, contact tracing, data collection, and data sharing and dissemination used by governments [India, 2021; China, 2020]. CSOs developed apps to help track people with recent travel history and supported the government in monitoring quarantine and service delivery, including the vaccination program [Nepal, 2021]. *Philanthropy New Zealand* created a website to provide updates to the public about the pandemic, and funders collaborated to map philanthropic initiatives [New Zealand, 2020]. Informal groups formalized their work by registering as associations [Serbia, 2020], and informal networks organized social services for underprivileged families [Turkey, 2021].

While some experts described a lack of coordination at the beginning, leading to redundancies, intra-sectoral collaborations became more prominent and effective during the pandemic's later phases and were more frequently reported on in the second study in 2021 in China, Germany, India, Israel, Portugal, and Switzerland, where grantmaking foundations entered in cooperation agreements with CSOs [China, 2021; Germany, 2021; India, 2021; Israel, 2020; Portugal, 2021; Switzerland, 2021].

State-CSO Collaboration. Collaborations with the government sector were different in each country. In the United States, the government boosted its efforts to encourage vaccinations by enlisting over 200 civic associations into a "community corps," marking a return to historical

ways of responding to national crises, with “intentional partnerships between government officials and civic associations” [United States, 2021]. In Switzerland, on a cantonal level, government institutions collaborated with nonprofits by providing funding while benefiting from the expertise and networks of CSOs, especially in the health sector and social services. In Kenya, the measures taken by the government provided a one-point coordinated approach, reducing “...overcrowding by many un-equipped players which may lead to exacerbating the infection.” [Kenya, 2020]. In Nepal, the government exerted a centralized management of the crisis but also invited CSOs to collaborate. In Nigeria, “The government issued a blanket call for the non-profit and philanthropic sector to join the government to mitigate the impact of the pandemic” [Nigeria, 2020], the same as in Portugal and the Republic of Korea. In Turkey, experts reported tight control by the government and restrictive policies toward CSO operations. In China, all voluntary activities were under government control [China, 2021]. In Greece, “the fact that the central government [took] over all the efforts of responding to the COVID-19 crisis, [left] limited space for activation of the philanthropic sector” [Greece, 2021].

In countries like Belarus, the Czech Republic, and Romania, civil society stepped up to fill gaps in services and support left by the governments, especially during the first months of the pandemic. The healthcare system in Belarus was “propped up by volunteers and crowdfunding campaigns” because the president was “hesitant to admit” the pandemic existed [Belarus, 2020]. In Romania, “the context of political instability, the chronically underfunded healthcare system and endemic corruption in the public services and hospitals” prompted CSOs to be the first to respond to the pandemic [Romania, 2020].

Mobilizing Funding to Address Societal Needs. CSOs also played a significant role in collecting and mobilizing funds during the pandemic. In many cases, the public was quick to

make donations that had to be allocated rapidly to address the needs of individuals. Volunteer groups, individual donors, and CSOs used crowdfunding platforms, especially during the most critical early months of the pandemic. Experts from nine countries and economies (Belarus, the Czech Republic, Ghana, Germany, India, Montenegro, Serbia, Taiwan, and Ukraine) reported that CSOs and organizations used crowdfunding to collect donations to support the healthcare system and workers and provided direct support to vulnerable communities. In Serbia, between March 16 and April 16, 2020, “local or regional sources (companies, individuals, diaspora, and nonprofits from Serbia and the Western Balkans region) donated more than \$9.7 million of the recorded amount in 519 donations...while foreign sources (bilateral and multilateral donors, foreign organizations and companies) provided, \$109.0 million in donations, aid, and transport in the same period” [Serbia, 2020]. In Korea, “in mid-March [2020], the total funds raised for COVID-19 response recorded the largest amount gathered for disaster relief in the shortest period by the Korean people as a whole (individuals and corporations combined)” [South Korea, 2020].

CSOs also organized successful fundraising campaigns, often through collaborations with other CSOs or sometimes governments. Corporate donors also stepped in. The *Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy* (PCP) collaborated with *Give2Asia*, the *PepsiCo Foundation*, and *S&P Global Foundation* [Pakistan, 2020] to raise funds and distribute relief to more than 50 districts in six regions [Pakistan, 2020]. Likewise, in India, the challenge provoked an unprecedented response from “all stakeholders, [including] private Corporates, [and] High Net Worth Individuals (HNIs),” who contributed generously in cash and in-kind. [India, 2021].

Grantmaking foundations also significantly supported CSOs experiencing financial shortfalls during the pandemic, typically through grants as additional emergency support. Foundations

made the funding process more flexible, easing the bureaucratic requirements while also putting effort into understanding the needs of their beneficiaries [Turkey, 2021]. Funders allowed CSOs to redirect existing funding toward COVID-related support, provided more direct and rapid financial support and unrestricted funding, and created more straightforward application and reporting processes.

Raising Awareness of and Fighting Misinformation. Awareness raising and fighting misinformation became two critical activities to prevent health risks during the pandemic. In March 2020, “the Council of State Support to Non-Governmental Organisations, under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, cooperated with Real T.V. and hundreds of NGOs to launch a public monitoring and awareness campaign called ‘Stay at home, protect society,’ to inform the public and raise awareness about the importance of adherence to the quarantine” [Azerbaijan, 2020]. In Colombia, “non-profit organizations and basically civil society through WhatsApp networks...made visible extreme situations caused by quarantines and confinement” [Colombia, 2021]. In Ghana, nonprofits provided education on the causes and prevention of COVID-19 and the need to follow protocols [Ghana, 2020]. In China, a “group called A2N was set up by veteran internet users in their 20s to curb the spread of disinformation and rumors in tandem with the outbreak of COVID-19” [China, 2020]. Experts in eleven other countries (Greece, India, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe) reported that CSOs took on the important task of fighting misinformation through public education about governments’ prevention protocols; using helplines, social media, or TV; and awareness campaigns run in collaboration with local and national governments to share reliable health information and prevention practices.

Advocating. The pandemic surfaced the significant role CSOs play in protecting civil rights, primarily because of government restrictions to freedoms of movement, uses of personal data, and vaccination requirements. CSOs in Belarus, Germany, Israel, Serbia, South Korea, and the United States advocated against government policies and measures that restricted their operations and civic freedoms [Belarus, 2020; Germany, 2020; Israel, 2021; Serbia, 2020; South Korea, 2021; United States, 2021].

CSOs also played a significant role in advocating for vulnerable populations. In China, CSOs “promoted public awareness of marginalized and high-risk groups” [China, 2021]. Colombian CSOs and civil society utilized social media, “making visible extreme situations caused by quarantine and confinement” [Colombia, 2021]. In India, CSOs advocated for providing support to affected “underserved groups including women, children, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, sex workers, migrant workers, [and] refugees” [India, 2020]. In Pakistan, religious authorities “called for the early distribution of Zakat—an obligatory annual charity in Islam—to support...the most vulnerable” [Pakistan, 2021].

What Were the Main Challenges for CSOs in Addressing the Needs Caused by the Pandemic?

Experts from 31 of the 39 countries reported loss of revenue and diversion of resources away from CSOs’ missions to cover COVID-19 emergencies as issues affecting the continuity of the organizations’ work and existence, even in mid-2021. The pandemic also affected timelines for the delivery of donations and requests for proposals amid increased demand for services. Many organizations had to rely on their financial reserves to respond to the immediate needs arising from the pandemic, resulting in reduced operating funds. Canceling in-person fundraising events and activities also caused delays until CSOs could effectively switch to online funding strategies.

Although CSOs collected unprecedented funding worldwide to fight the effects of the pandemic, experts indicated most of this money was immediately distributed to populations in need.

Additionally, organizations working in other areas not connected with vulnerable groups or health, such as arts organizations, saw a decline in fundraising revenue. Projects unrelated to the emergency were canceled or put on hold, creating new challenges for continuity of work.

CSOs already disadvantaged before COVID-19 were most affected by these stressors. According to the UK expert, “many charities entered the pandemic financially vulnerable, with little or no reserves...[causing] the voluntary sector [to be] inevitably smaller in the immediate future” [United Kingdom, 2021]. Some CSOs struggled to survive, whereas others found new income streams and were able to expand services and “transition to new models of operating and using pandemic as an opportunity for raising record-high funds” [Poland, 2021].

With lockdowns and social distancing, organizations allowed staff to work from home, requiring digital competencies and access to adequate equipment, software, and Internet. In many cases, services that could not be replicated at a distance—e.g., childcare—had to be curtailed or abandoned. Many professionals who could not offer services online, such as social workers and professional caretakers, experienced emotional distress and risk of infection, which increased the risk of staff turnover. Along with the complications of moving operations online, layoffs and furloughs due to financial losses also posed challenges for CSOs.

The switch to virtual environments required organizations to conduct internal meetings online, adopt online fundraising platforms, and conduct home/client visits online. This benefited some organizations as they increased their reach and reduced inefficiencies. However, the paths to adapt to online environments differed depending on internal capacities, increasing existing disparities among CSOs. Experts from Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia

reported technology limitations. Even months after the pandemic started, these limitations remained a significant hurdle in several countries and economies (Ghana, India, Montenegro, Peru, Romania, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan).

What Changes Were Observed in the Roles CSOs Played During the First Eighteen Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Operational changes mentioned by experts ranged from using technology to coordinate volunteers on unprecedented scales to mobilizing funding through online events and crowdfunding, and forging new collaborations with CSOs, governments, corporations, and groups of self-organized volunteers. New activities, including increased focus on mental health and provision of online psychological services, greater ability to support underserved and vulnerable groups, agility in adapting programs/funding/staff and communication to pivot to relief/response, and more efficiency in presenting their results to donors and the public were pointed out by experts as focus of transformation in the future. Experts also predicted that the increased focus on research and planning will help CSOs be more proactive in preparing for future challenges and garner increased public recognition for their work.

The crisis also increased public awareness about the importance of philanthropy. The critical role of CSOs in reducing the impact of the crisis became visible and recognized by the media, along with increased support from society.

The amplification of activism and advocacy was also mentioned [Azerbaijan, 2021; Ghana, 2021]. For the Poland expert, the impact of the pandemic and need to work online transformed organizations' working practices and service delivery models [Poland, 2021]. On the funding

side, an expert mentioned that “As a result of the emphasis on economic empowerment...some donor organizations have since become more open to projects they initially would not fund” addressing the needs of the poor [Nigeria, 2021]. Because the internal factors that drove those changes may differ for every nation, the experts’ visions of long-term changes also differ. The changes observed in functioning and role shifts could become permanent in some cases.⁸

Discussion

Changing Roles for Civil Society

In 2020, the experts responded as their communities were experiencing the pandemic in diverse ways and at various times and confirmed what research in individual countries has shown about the roles of civil society organizations during the first eighteen months of the pandemic. Our results show that the magnitude of the 2020-2021 crisis brought social actors to understand that cooperation among people, institutions, agencies, and countries was needed to overcome the pandemic’s disproportionate impact, especially on minorities. This coordination role has also been documented in the recent literature on the role of CSOs during COVID-19 (see, for example, Adhikari et al., 2022; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2021; Santos & Laureano, 2021).

Throughout, but especially during the earlier phase of the pandemic, mobilizing volunteers was crucial in addressing societal needs (Lai & Wang, 2022). Networks of volunteers and community organizations provided on-the-ground community response. Building on the trust and the

⁸ Online Appendix B shows the changes noted by experts in their countries and economies of expertise that could be considered long-lasting and maybe even permanent.

commitment they had to the community (Thiery et al., 2021), volunteers were moved by sentiments of solidarity (Kuhnt, 2021), acted in response to government requests for action (Alalouf-Hall & Grant-Poitras, 2021), or worked in coordination with the government to produce a more effective response within a very restrictive framework (Sidel & Hu, 2021; Woo, 2020).

Financial and Operational Challenges as a Driver of Change

CSOs changed the way they operated during the pandemic. Experts reported that the lockdowns prevented CSOs from fundraising and reaching beneficiaries. Organizations with limited reserves were sometimes forced to scale back or even close. Others found themselves putting their original missions aside to respond to the crisis or overhauling their operations to move to work remotely when possible. Insufficient digital competence and capacities complicated the shift to online work, on top of layoffs and furloughs due to financial losses.

However, although the challenges surfaced the vulnerabilities of small and medium-sized organizations that were already under-resourced before the pandemic (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021), these same circumstances provoked unprecedented reactions from governments, civil societies, and corporations (Freedom House, 2020; Newby & Branyon, 2021; Schächtele et al., 2021) as well as operational improvements for several CSOs. Experts reported changes, including switching to online operations, developing flexible funding schemes, and significantly increasing collective actions through volunteers and grassroots groups to amplify support and fundraising efforts.

Having more financial resources proved particularly important during the pandemic. The pandemic accelerated social and technological innovation in countries like Poland, benefiting CSOs' operations and services. The health and social crisis moved funders to shift funding priorities and practice more flexible funding schemes to address emerging needs (Azevedo et al.,

2021). These initial changes raised hopes for long-term transformations in the way grantmakers operate by “shifting the philanthropy sector’s focus from attempting to solve discrete problems to resourcing long-term change [and] systemic transformation” (Mattingly, 2021, para 2).

Different Types of Government-CSO Relationships as a Driver of Change

Increased development of cross-sectoral collaborations was found in Poland, Romania, and Latin America during COVID-19 (Buzaşu & Marczewski, 2020; von Bulow & Rossi, 2020). In Serbia, Switzerland, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, community-based organizations worked with local governments to produce effective responses at the local level, aligning with Cheng and colleagues’ (2020) findings in Zhejiang Province in China. However, government-civil society relationships proved to be complex. Factors such as political and institutional arrangements influenced the state-society collaborations and the effectiveness of responses of each sector (Wong & Wu, 2021; Yuen et al., 2021).

We identified four ways in which governments interacted with CSOs during the pandemic: governments enacted restrictive policies and practices (*adversarial*), took central control of the COVID crisis, and forced CSOs to adapt (*co-optation*), collaborated fully with civil societies (*complementary*), or demonstrated a lack of response and coordination at least during the first months of the crisis (*policy neglect*) (Anheier & Toepler, 2019; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Young & Casey, 2017). These four types of relationships or interactions were predominant in some countries and shaped, to a certain extent, civil society responses, as explained below.

The power dynamics that characterized the relations between CSOs and governments during the pandemic tended to reflect the pre-existing relations of collaboration or conflict between CSOs and governments but also opened the gate for a more active engagement of CSOs in public spaces. In countries with fragile democracies and restrictive regulatory and political

environments, increasing restrictions on civic space during COVID-19 shaped CSOs' operations (Harrison & Kristensen, 2021; Sidel & Hu, 2021; Soeung & Sunyong, 2021). Experts in countries and economies with restrictive political and regulatory environments and where the government had central management of the crisis (i.e., Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, and China) tended to report that the government had created a national fund that the nonprofit sector would be expected to support (*co-optation*). In countries where the government did not rely on civil society as a partner or limited their operations (*adversarial*), CSOs tended to provide a covert or minimal response due to the lack of government support. Collaborations were guided and controlled by government, reproducing a restrictive policy environment in China (Sidel & Hu, 2021) and Turkey (Doğan & Genç, 2021), limiting civil response, especially during the first months of the crisis.”

In Turkey, Doğan and Genç (2021) found that in addition to the tense relationships with central government, CSOs endured neglect by local governments, not receiving support from local authorities (*policy neglect*), demonstrating the co-existence of restrictive policies with stagnation of the relationships of CSOs with the government sector within one country. In a recent study, members from Nigeria CSOs, described “government coordination with civil society as “limited,” “slim,” “hardly existing” and tantamount to “neglect”” (Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding [CSPPS], 2021, p. 10). We found similar situations in Ghana where CSOs lacked government recognition and “were excluded from the list of essential service providers” during the first months of the crisis [Ghana, 2020]. Similarly, in 2020, the expert from Serbia mentioned “the intermittent recognition” the sector received as an important stakeholder in helping government respond to the crisis [Serbia, 2020], same as in Nepal, where CSOs felt the “lack of trust and encouragement from government to work shoulder to shoulder” [Nepal,

2020]. Even under restrictive policies and strict government control, the magnitude of the crisis seems to have prompted governments to rely on civil society, as in the cases of China and India and Ghana later in the process [China, 2021; India, 2021; Ghana, 2021].

In contrast, in countries where governments actively promoted the involvement of CSOs (*complementary*), like the United States, Kenya, South Korea, and Switzerland, governments maximized opportunities and opened channels for civil society to contribute its resources, allowing CSOs and self-organized citizens to play a prominent role in complementing government efforts. Experts in such countries tended to report more proactive support from governments, which also facilitated the nonprofit sector's ability to respond promptly to the crisis.

The fact that civil society organizations rose to the occasion to respond to the emergent needs of the population boosted their profile in states where governments efforts proved slow and insufficient, like in Belarus, the Czech Republic, and Romania (Valvoda, 2020), and has shown the strength and possibilities of mobilizing civil society (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting [CABAR.Asia], 2021). As one expert mentioned, "Society got a strong signal that the state is not able to satisfy all their needs in the crises" [Czech Republic, 2021]. While civil society roles were partly shaped by government-civil society relationships (Cai et al., 2021; Tageo et al., 2021), these interactions also created new opportunities for civil society activism (Lorch & Sombatpoonsiri, 2022; Meiji et al., 2021). In the context of COVID-19, "need-induced spaces" emerged when government responses (or absence thereof) impacted the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, provoking more activism to sustain civic spaces (Lorch & Sombatpoonsiri, 2022; Meiji, 2021).

This study evidenced what other studies found about the importance of a long tradition of presence in the civil space that became even more notorious during the crisis due sometimes to the tardiness of government response (Hopstein & Peres, 2021; Saghin et al., 2022) and reaffirmed that characteristics of the relationships between government and civil society are not the only factors explaining the significant role of CSOs during the crisis in building social resilience (Cai et al., 2021). Studies in Indonesia (Meiji et al., 2021), the Western Balkans (Cela & Nechev, 2021), and worldwide (Schächtele et al., 2021), and the 2022 protests in China against the government “zero Covid policy” (Wolfe, 2022) show the resilience of civil societies and the emergence of opportunities for new strategic alliances and activism during and post-COVID.

Nampoothiri and Artuso (2021) suggest that the critical role of communities and informal networks in COVID-19 response and the tensions between the state and civil societies—individuals, communities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and grassroots organizations—may have reconfigured the social contract between citizens and the state in several countries. Experts in Ghana predicted a reignited interest in advocacy efforts, while others, like the expert from Romania, were less optimistic, predicting limits on the freedom of movement and action. Regardless of type, transformations in the roles civil societies play seem to have resulted from the interplay of restrictive/enabling regulations and collaborations with needs-induced spaces for CSOs to provide services and expand (Lorch & Sombatpoosiri, 2022); this interplay will determine how state and civil societies will interact in future crises.

Conclusion

We described the main roles CSOs worldwide played during the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic, their challenges, and observed changes. We found similarities not only

among countries but also with studies published between 2020 and 2022. Across the 39 countries and economies included in our study, CSOs responded to the COVID-19 crisis by playing fourteen roles (see Table 1), of which we described six in detail: provide social assistance, respond to health care needs, coordinate and collaborate, mobilize funding to address societal needs, raise awareness of and fight misinformation, and advocate.

The study presented narratives of coalition practices and citizens' commitment and solidarity and analyzed the balance between cooperative and conflictual dynamics where state-CSO collaborations were observed. In addition to the necessary rapid adjustments in the relationship dynamics with the government sector and increased intra-sectoral and cross-border collaborations to respond to the crisis efficiently, CSOs also faced increased demands for services while experiencing limitations in engaging donors in an unpredictable economic and social environment.

Both the unprecedented challenges and the collaborations (or lack thereof) between civil societies and governments at a local and national level seem to have played a substantial role in shaping and changing, at least temporarily, the operation and role of civil society organizations, opening the door for a more active role for and recognition of CSOs in societal development. Future research could include a third phase with the same participants to examine how CSOs' operations have changed over time as the pandemic moves toward becoming endemic, particularly to assess whether increased collaborations continued to evolve or were only temporary.

COVID-19 has created opportunities for CSOs to innovate, collaborate, and advocate for a more resilient and inclusive society. The adaptation to online platforms has enabled CSOs to reach new audiences, expand their networks, and diversify their income streams, but it has also

exposed them to digital exclusion. The crisis highlighted the interdependence and complementarity of different actors and sectors in addressing complex social problems and the risks that power imbalances represent to the survival and strengthening of civil society.

In general, the COVID-19 crisis has significantly reshaped the landscape of civil society. CSOs have undergone a process of adaptation, innovation, and transformation that will shape their future direction and role. To thrive in the post-pandemic world, CSOs need to embrace the changes brought by the crisis while staying true to their mission and values.

This research provides new empirical evidence about civil society and CSOs' responses in times of crisis and factors that affect these responses. The study also increases understanding of how government-CSOs relationships shape civil society response in difficult times while providing a methodological framework for future analysis.

The study is not without the limitations that typically characterize qualitative research in terms of generalization of results, limiting the findings to the situation and cases under analysis, and the limited contextual information available for each case. Future directions for research include comparisons of CSOs' roles across countries and economies using institutional frameworks and the phase of the crisis (for example, at the prevention vs. mitigation phase) as points of reference analyzing the direction and evolution of the changes induced by the COVID-19 crisis.

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Table 1 List of countries and economies included in the first (2020) and second (2021) phases

Region	Countries and Economies
Balkan Countries	Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia
Central Asia & South Caucasus	Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia
Eastern and Southern Europe	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Ukraine
Eastern Asia	China, South Korea, Taiwan
Latin America	Colombia, Peru
Middle East & Northern Africa	Israel, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates
Northern & Western Europe	Germany, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom
Oceania	New Zealand
Southern & Southeastern Asia	India, Nepal, Pakistan
Sub-Saharan Africa	Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Canada & United States	United States

Table 2. Fourteen roles / areas in which CSOs were active during the COVID-19 pandemic

<i>Most prominent roles mentioned:</i>	<i># Of Countries</i>	<i># Of References</i>
1. Providing social assistance	35	104
2. Responding to health care needs	30	98
3. Coordinating and collaborating with government, businesses, other organizations, and volunteers	27	114
4. Mobilizing funding to address societal needs	21	40
5. Raising awareness of and fighting misinformation	16	40
6. Advocating	10	15
<i>Other roles:</i>		
7. Supporting home-based/online learning	10	10
8. Supporting local services (e.g., garbage disposal, transportation, visitor services, water sanitation)	9	13
9. Support other non-profits (i.e., crowdfunding initiatives to	8	12

support local and arts/cultural organizations)		
10. Data organization and sharing/data tracking (i.e., using data and information technology to collect data on needs and facilitate reaching out to vulnerable populations)	7	14
11. Supporting small business operations	4	4
12. Preventing/addressing domestic violence	3	5
13. Supporting contact tracing	1	1
14. Supporting first responders (e.g., health workers, police)	1	1

Online Appendix A: Questionnaires

Phase 1, 2020

Thinking about the country or economy of expertise you identified above for each of the questions below, please share your assessment at the national level. In this survey, philanthropy refers to voluntary action for the public good, including actions done formally through organizations and grassroots actions through informal networks.

1. Which measures has the government taken that affect the capacity and resources of the nonprofit sector and philanthropy to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In which areas are the nonprofit sector and philanthropy playing a role in responding to COVID-19?
3. What innovation or new trends in the nonprofit sector and philanthropy have you seen in responses to COVID-19?
4. What is the most significant initiative, project, or activity that you have seen achieved by individuals or organizations in responding to COVID-19?
5. What challenges do you think the nonprofit sector and philanthropy are facing in response to COVID-19?
6. What recommendations would you make to improve the ways that organizations across the public, private and nonprofit sectors can collaborate in responding to COVID-19 and addressing community needs, both within the economy and globally?
7. If you would like to share any additional information about COVID-19 responses, we would love to hear!

Phase 2, 2021

VIII. Philanthropic Response to COVID-19

The following questions ... will be used to provide a general picture of the philanthropic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in your country and recommendations for improving cross-sectoral collaboration.

Q54 In which areas are the nonprofit sector and philanthropy playing a role in responding to COVID-19?

(Max. 2,000 characters)

Q55 What innovation or new trends in the nonprofit sector and philanthropy have you seen in responses to COVID-19? (Max. 2,000 characters)

Q56 Thinking about the areas that this questionnaire asked previously, how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the environment for philanthropy in your country? (Max. 2,000 characters)

Q57 What impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the philanthropic environment do you anticipate in 2021? (Max. 2,000 characters)

Appendix B: Expected long-lasting or permanent changes in the role of CSOs in society

Countries	Expected long-lasting changes/effects
China	The political environment for philanthropy will not improve much in and after 2021.
Germany	Incentives to become more flexible, digital and entrepreneurial
Ghana	<p>Cross-sector innovative partnerships</p> <p>Enhanced response to crises</p> <p>Reignited interest in advocacy efforts</p> <p>Digital transformation</p> <p>Poverty and inequalities will impact how the philanthropic sector deals with these challenges in the coming years</p>
Greece	Emerging role of private foundations
India	<p>Massive surge in individual giving by the general public.</p> <p>Philanthropy by the wealthy</p> <p>Flexible funding</p>
Israel	Decrease in diaspora giving and corporation donations
Montenegro	<p>Many CSOs will close down; people working in the sector will lose their jobs.</p> <p>Some will emerge stronger</p>

Nepal	Struggle in fundraising and, with these, challenges in sustaining activities in the years to come
New Zealand	Philanthropy will be affected by a global recession, affecting their endowments and, therefore, the funds available to distribute. Aid from overseas negatively affected
Nigeria	Shift in philanthropic grant-making towards economic empowerment programs
Norway	To re-establish activities on the previous level may take a long time.
Portugal	All Third Sector organizations have had to readapt, but there is still no coherent resilience diagnosis. This year will still be marked by uncertainty and unstable responses.
Republic of Korea	Budget shortage during the last year, with a more pessimistic view of future prediction.
Romania	Limits on the freedom of movement and action. More focus on mental health issues Online operations
Russia	Number of citizens in need of direct social support and charity will be on the rise in the short-term perspective, increasing needs for services provided by CSOs.

<p>Serbia</p>	<p>Potential legal changes might include facilitating food donations and making them tax-free since this would help the state to reduce the risk of social unrest and augment the support provided by public kitchens.</p> <p>The high levels of giving are unlikely to remain as local donors have already given significant amounts, many businesses are struggling, and people are facing possible unemployment or reduction in income.</p> <p>Giving will undoubtedly be focused on fighting COVID-19 and urgent support for medical treatments and poverty reduction. The state will likely encourage giving to state institutions and discourage giving to the nonprofit sector.</p>
<p>South Africa</p>	<p>Increased focus on alleviating the negative impact of the pandemic.</p> <p>Innovative ways to enable organizations to continue to render their services within a different context through digital platforms.</p>
<p>Switzerland</p>	<p>High demands for financial support, especially in arts & culture, education, and social services.</p>
<p>Turkey</p>	<p>Flexible funding</p> <p>More comfortable supporting the civic space to upend the current restrictions the sector is facing.</p> <p>Dwindling foreign funds.</p>
<p>Ukraine</p>	<p>As unemployment grows, more involvement in volunteering and social enterprise is highly likely.</p>

UAE	<p>A small, fragmented universe of civil society has become even smaller during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected to further contract as corporate donations, and CSR office budgets dry up.</p> <p>Existing government-affiliated foundations will continue to attract and deploy funds.</p>
United Kingdom	<p>There have been significant and widespread losses across the sector, which will inevitably shrink in the immediate future, with job losses, reduction of services, and closure of some charities.</p> <p>Charities delivering public services relating to loneliness, mental health difficulties, educational inequality, homelessness, unemployment, and poverty will experience increasing demand.</p>
United States	<p>Organizations will be forced to collaborate more, merge with others, create new alliances, or close doors</p> <p>Foundations and other organizations with endowments benefitted, though increases in grants and spending will not be seen until 2021 or later.</p> <p>P.O.'s will face greater demand for the services they provide and significant amounts of remedial help.</p>

Note: This table provides information on countries where experts still find uncertainty about how the sector will be shaped in the future. By the time they completed the second phase (2021), experts were starting to appreciate that some of the positive changes implemented during the pandemic would remain in place long-term. Most of these responses were provided during the second phase of the study.