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The situation of the non-profit sector in the context of the health crisis in France

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The exceptional circumstances of the global health crisis are shedding an entirely new light on the role of non-profit organisations in our society. Being as they are at the front line of national solidarity, non-profit organisations have never received as much recognition for their contributions to the general wellbeing as they do now. Meanwhile, their economic models are being rendered fragile by the effects of the pandemic, thus imposing new material constraints on their ability to operate. As much as it exacerbates them, this period in time equally reveals deep permutations in the forms of commitment that associations and non-profit organisations see.¹

1. The front line work of non-profit organisations in the face of unprecedented needs

The French voluntary sector consists of 1.5

million organisations. Together, they employ 1.85 million persons and have an overall budget of €113 billion. In total, 22 million persons volunteer their resources in France each year.²

The voluntary sector in France, which is composed of registered associations (known as “loi de 1901”) and of informal groups, makes a major contribution to defining and managing the general interest, along with the public authorities, thus acting in a way that is complimentary to the public sector. It does so in numerous sectors: social work, health, humanitarian aid, the defence of rights, education and job training, integration, sports, culture and leisure.

Most of the non-profit organisations, as well as the companies and businesses defined as non-essential by the public authorities³, were forced to close during the three periods of confinement that took place between 17 March 2020 and 3 May 2021. These successive closures, along with added regulation and heavy material and organisational constraints (the closure of premises, generalised teleworking, a prohibition to welcome visitors

¹ This article was written on the basis of the current level of knowledge at the end of August 2021.

² Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire. (2019). *Les chiffres clés de la vie associative*. <https://injep.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Chiffres-cles-Vie-associative-2019.pdf>

³ The Government has drawn up a list of non-essential establishments that are to remain closed during lockdown periods.

or to meet in groups, etc.), have strongly affected the non-profit sector.

However, the closure and slowing down of the non-profit organisations' activities did not necessarily lead to the end of their activities and of volunteer involvement. The sector contributed greatly to the management of the crisis and many organisations were on the front line in the face of unprecedented needs. From the beginning of the health crisis, non-profit organisations and informal groups were involved in responding to the urgency of the situation alongside and in addition to the public authorities. In the weeks following the announcement of the first lockdown, half of all non-profit organisations were already supporting the public authorities in relaying the official messages and declared their readiness to mobilise in a public approach, beyond their usual area of engagement: manufacture of fabric masks and hydro-alcoholic gel, distribution of foodstuffs, local solidarity groups, loans of computer equipment, etc.⁴

Confronted with heightened levels of precariousness and vulnerability of parts of the population, these organisations mobilised rapidly. They organised shelter for homeless persons, notably immigrants, support for students in precarious circumstances, assistance to victims of domestic violence – on the rise during the periods of lockdown –, showed solidarity with elderly persons in need of assistance, and even offered psychological support to care workers and vulnerable persons. All these activities were carried out on the ground where possible, or else supervised remotely, with the backing of the

launch or enhancement of already existing phone or web-based platforms.

In response to the sudden isolation of a large part of society, non-profit organisations also attempted, albeit often hampered by the constraints of social distancing, to maintain their function as enablers of social cohesion. Maintaining the links of solidarity with their volunteers was a priority for 60% of organisations during the lockdowns⁵. Some organisations entrusted their volunteers with the task of keeping in contact with their members and with the people benefiting from the organisation's work by regularly calling them and thus checking in. Both informal groups and organisations played a role in facilitating contact between individuals in isolation during the periods of lockdown by organising outreach activities, online activities, but also by reinforcing mutual aid activities and informal acts of solidarity, as observed among diasporic groups and student networks.

The traditional food systems have likewise had their flaws exposed, as born witness to by the massive uptick in demand of food aid, by the disruptions of supply chains and by the unequal distribution of foodstuffs – particularly during lockdown periods – for an important part of the population. By favouring more direct ways of communicating and access to local produce, as well as by organising the redistribution of foodstuffs towards people living precariously (collection, redistribution, soup kitchens), non-profit organisations yet again played a major role in managing the food crisis that emerged alongside the health crisis.⁶

Non-profit organisations have also mobilised to accelerate research on the pandemic,

⁴ Recherches & Solidarités. (May 2020). *#Covid-19 : quels impacts sur votre association ?* <https://recherches-solidarites.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Complements.pdf>

⁵ Plaisance, G. (2021). French nonprofit organizations facing Covid-19 and lockdown: maintaining a socio-political role in spite of the crisis of resource dependency, *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, in press

⁶ Filippi, M. (11 October 2021). *La connaissance du monde associatif à la lumière de la crise Covid-19 – 8 nouvelles recherches soutenues par l'Institut*. French Institute for Non-Profit Organisations. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvyDGcUv7ug>

following the example of the collective intelligence platform OpenCovid19, an initiative which gathers more than 4,000 volunteers around the world.

2. A non-profit sector affected by the crisis

Economic consequences

The crisis has put a sudden halt to numerous activities of non-profit organisations and has disrupted their economic models and organisational arrangements: A decrease in membership fees and lower revenues from activities for more than half of the organisations, losses incurred by activities that had to be cancelled, and difficulties in maintaining and mobilising funds, often earmarked for certain projects – put on hold during the crisis – rather than affecting the functioning of the organisational structures. 90% of non-profit organisations have thus suffered from the effects of the crisis and the lockdowns. In parallel with the decline in revenues affecting more than 60% of organisations in the spring of 2021, close to one in five organisations reports a rise in expenses linked to the crisis⁷. These factors should also be seen in the context of uncertainty about the future and against the backdrop of an anticipated economic and financial crisis linked to public debt, which raises questions among non-profit organisations about the sustainability of their partnerships.⁸

However, these figures must be interpreted with caution depending on the type of non-profit organisation. Organisations with staff

on payroll for instance were better able to maintain their activities during the first lockdown than those reliant upon volunteer work. This can in part be explained by the presence of paid staff members who were able to carry out activities, but the fact that organisations with paid members of staff are predominantly found in those sectors that were not forced to halt their activities (community work, health, economic sector and local development) equally plays a role here.⁹ Those organisations whose activities were either continued or even expanded went relatively unscathed from a financial point of view. Inversely, organisations in the leisure, cultural and sports sectors, which represent 69% of all French non-profit organisations but employ few members of staff were hit very hard by the crisis and still feel its effects acutely.

It should be noted, however, that employing non-profits, which represent 12% of the total,¹⁰ experience more cash flow difficulties than volunteer-based non-profits. The use of furlough was still widespread in the spring of 2021, with a third of associations availing themselves of it for all of their employees, especially among the smallest organisations.¹¹ These voluntary organisations have significant financial and technological needs, as many of their activities and work processes have moved online.

Impact on the working environment and constraints on engagement and volunteering

French volunteers as a demographic group are relatively old, with a large proportion of volunteers being over 65 years of age, and the

⁷ LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

⁸ Plaisance, G. (2021). French nonprofit organizations facing Covid-19 and lockdown: maintaining a socio-political role in spite of the crisis of resource dependency, *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, in press

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tchernonog, V. & Prouteau, L. (2019). *Le paysage associatif français (3e éd.)*. Dalloz Juris Associations.

¹¹ LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

governance bodies of non-profit organisations are largely made up of volunteers in this age group, too.¹² This group being the most vulnerable to Covid-19, the organisations have had to operate without some of their volunteers, but above all with governance bodies that are sometimes incomplete and unable to convene under favourable conditions. Running a community of volunteers at a distance, with activities sometimes halted or transformed to meet the changed needs arising from the health crisis, has posed many difficulties. In the spring of 2021, 61% of non-profits reported that they had lost contact with some of their volunteers, and remobilising them, particularly volunteer leaders, was one of the main concerns of the organisations.¹³

In addition, difficulties in accessing material resources, including office-space, have severely limited volunteer involvement since the beginning of the health crisis. At the end of the first lockdown (June 2020), more than 60% of non-profits were most immediately concerned with the task of implementing protective measures and reopening reception facilities or venues.¹⁴ The difficulty of getting together, the loss of social ties associated with volunteering (especially among the elderly), and the fact that some organisations had stopped their activities altogether have resulted in a weakening of the motivation of some volunteers and, consequently, of their commitment.

Finally, the lockdowns, the imposed

distancing from the public, remote volunteering, board meetings taking place online and, more recently, the introduction of the health pass have increased the administrative burden on the organisations.¹⁵ Although the health and protective measures required by the pandemic have imposed increasingly formal modes of communication and decision-making and working frameworks on the non-profit organisations, they were already aware of a basic trend towards greater formalism before the crisis. In particular, they were observing a working environment that placed increasing legal responsibilities on the management and required more and more technical skills from the non-profit organisations. This trend seems to explain in part the growing difficulty of organisations to renew their governing bodies, a phenomenon that will remain to be observed in the coming period in the context of the health crisis.¹⁶

3. The strengths of the voluntary sector in the face of the health crisis

Initial financial responses

Public authorities have offered various exceptional forms of financial support to non-profits: solidarity funds for employing organisations, sectoral aid from the state, aid from the regions, departments, municipalities and intercommunal bodies, and deferral of social and tax deadlines. Philanthropy has also been widely mobilised to respond to the financial difficulties of the voluntary sector. For example, the philanthropic alliance "Tous unis contre le virus" ("All united against the virus")

¹² Prouteau, L. (2017). *Le bénévolat en France en 2017 - état des lieux et tendances*. https://fonda.asso.fr/system/files/fichiers/LeBene-volatEnFranceEn2017_SyntheseEnqueteCRA-CSA_17102018_VF.pdf

¹³ LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

¹⁴ LMA, RNMA, R&S, & Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2020). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations après le confinement ?* <https://recherches-solidarites.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-2-diaporama-17-06-2020-RS.pdf>

¹⁵ French Institute for Non-Profit Organisations. (1-10 June 2021). *Fait associatif et crise sanitaire : le fait associatif en situation de confinement ?* [Séminaire]. <https://youtu.be/Ay9JGavIfYg>

¹⁶ Dansac, C., Bordes, V., Gontier, P., & Vachée, C. (2013). *Renouvellement et Rajeunissement des Instances Bénévoles Dirigeantes. Rapport terminal sur les travaux de recherche menés dans le cadre du projet REBDA*.

supported by the Fondation de France, AP-HP (the university hospital trust of Paris) and the Pasteur Institute, raised €34 million to help caregivers, support research and vulnerable people, of which €11.3 million were donated to local non-profit organisations that work with vulnerable people. Other activities were implemented jointly by the philanthropic sector and the state, such as the rescue package for the social and solidarity economy (€4 million), or the Solidarity Relief Loan (€30 million). However, during this period, the vast majority of non-profits turned to state aid, and to a lesser extent to aid set up by philanthropy.¹⁷

Although the surge of solidarity inspired by the health crisis is undeniable, many organisations have nevertheless expressed difficulties in accessing the various forms of aid offered. In the spring of 2020, only 14% of non-profits had received aid from the public authorities, while the majority reported difficulties in accessing it. One year later, one fifth of non-profits are beneficiaries of this aid, the majority of which are employing organisations. Nevertheless, exceptional financial aid is one of the priority needs expressed by the voluntary sector in order to continue to carry out activities in the short term.¹⁸

Non-profit organisations have also sought to absorb the shock of the crisis by raising funds from donors. This task has sometimes been made difficult by the redefinition of donors' thematic priorities caused by the crisis (increase in the health and solidarity sectors and drastic decrease in sports and culture).

The fundraising strategies deployed by non-profits have also been redefined in this new context. The French Association of Fundraisers has observed a sharp decline in funds raised through fundraising events and, to a lesser extent, through canvassing, while at the same time there has been a strong increase in donor loyalty and fundraising via digital tools (social networks, email campaigns, newsletters).¹⁹ It remains to be seen whether these developments will take hold, changing fundraising practices in the long term, or whether the return to normalcy will be accompanied by a return to those fundraising practices prevalent prior to the health crisis.

The voluntary sector's specific internal resources

The organisational agility of non-profit organisations is a first resource of resilience. The voluntary sector, through its methods of operation and its territorial roots, has resources that have enabled a large proportion of organisations to adapt to the situation. Thus, 73% of non-profit organisations stated that they had redesigned the general functioning of their structure in 2021: introduction of remote working and new practices, changes in relations with members, beneficiaries and volunteers, but also increased cooperation with other players, particularly with the organisations in their area, which 52% of the organisations stated to be in favour of.²⁰

The non-profit organisations' capacity for social innovation and their ability to adapt their internal operating methods seem to stem from common mechanisms. However, their degree of organisational agility varies and depends

¹⁷ LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Association Française des Fundraisers. (June 2021). *Impact de la crise sanitaire sur le fundraising en France*. https://www.fundraisers.fr/system/files/uploaded_file/asset/etude_fundraisers_aff_tbs_macc_mars_2021.pdf

²⁰ LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

directly on certain conditions: the stability of volunteer teams involved in the organisation's project, the competence of employed teams, the benevolence of the working environment, experiences of cooperation and partnership on the ground, and the support of their institutional environment are all factors that vary from one organisation to another.²¹

Support structures have also played a significant role in the face of the crisis, with 44% of non-profits stating that they have found support either from a network, a federation or a non-profit organisation centre. 35% said they did not need to use these structures and only 18% of non-profits did not find support.²²

Cooperation and pooled resources are also important in this context: 52% of non-profit organisations are in favour of partnerships as opposed to only 16% who do not consider them necessary. In a no-profit sector where projects have long been developed in competition with each other, particularly due to funding allocated through calls for projects, it will be interesting to examine whether the practice of cooperation is spreading in a lasting way, to the benefit of new socio-economic models.²³

New forms of commitment come to the fore

The strong development of citizen initiatives and informal commitment, that is to say outside of organisations, is another striking feature of the health crisis. This commitment was manifested, for example, in solidarity actions within neighbourhoods, in residential care for senior citizens (EHPAD), or yet again in the production and distribution of masks.

Here, too, the crisis has revealed and amplified three basic trends.

First of all, we observe the new popularity of much more horizontal collective forms of action, where everyone can contribute equally. Part of the population is looking for greater freedom and spontaneity in their involvement, and is distancing itself from traditional forms of organisation that are sometimes considered too hierarchical and lacking in responsiveness.

A second trend can be described as "altruistic individualism". It is characterised by forms of commitment which, while being carried out in the spirit of solidarity, also include personal fulfilment and self-realisation as their objectives. This trend contrasts with the practices of past generations, who committed themselves to a cause throughout their lives, rather from a sense of duty, sometimes even from a sacrificial standpoint. This new form of commitment is reflected in more one-off instances of commitment.²⁴

A third, more recent trend is the development of joint work, or the embedding of state and civil society solidarity, in the multiple forms that we have seen during the crisis (multiplication of citizen platforms, manufacture of masks organised by local authorities, etc.). These are not just one-off bursts of generosity, but represent a profound desire for active citizenship.

In the background, digital technology, in particular the features offered by social networks, has emerged as a powerful accelerator of these new, more informal, more horizontal and more contributory forms of engagement.

²¹ Artis, A. (1 January 2021). *L'adaptabilité des associations en période de crise*. Juris Associations, 631.

²² LMA, RNMA, R&S, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. (June 2021). *#Covid-19 : où en sont les associations un an après ?*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pasquier, S. (2014). *Convivialisme et individualisme altruiste*. Revue du MAUSS, 43, 181-190. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdm.043.0181>

4. Conclusion

While non-profit organisations have proven to be essential in responding to societal needs and supporting vulnerable populations throughout the health crisis, they have never before been as vulnerable themselves as they are today. In order to preserve and encourage the vital contribution of these organisations to society, it seems essential to the French Institute for Non-Profit Organisations to try and better understand them and their contribution to society.

First of all, documenting the share of the collective interest taken on by the non-profit organisations and shedding light on their contribution to all aspects of society is a condition for their full recognition by their partners and by public policies.

It will also be useful to launch a structural diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the voluntary sector, but also of the societal trends that run through it. Enhancing our knowledge of their modes of operation and of their specific needs will enable us to better support them in becoming more resilient today and in the face of the major challenges of tomorrow.

Secondly, and at a time when a prevailing

model of research is interested in the impact of voluntary organisations, that is to say, in what they bring about, it will also be important to understand the mechanisms/resources of non-profit organisations, particularly in their socio-political function. Indeed, it is through their modes of governance, through their territorial anchorage, through their connections with the requirements of society, and through their capacity to innovate and propose deliberative spaces that non-profit organisations propose processes of transformation of society, or even new models of society.

Finally, the crisis will also have revealed strong tensions in the chain of trust between citizens and the state, thus feeding into an already existing crisis of representation. Confronted with this phenomenon, understanding the mechanisms by which voluntary organisations produce and restore trust in institutions will enable them to be recognised and supported as levers in the face of the democratic crisis.

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