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Innovations in Citizen Response to Crises: Volunteerism & Social Mobilization During COVID-19

**Roger Spear, Gulcin Erdi, Marla A. Parker, Maria Anastasiadis
(April 30th)**

Introduction

The global pandemic of Covid19 is having severe social and economic impact on people and communities in nearly every country on the planet and we have seen differential impacts exacerbating pre-existing social and health inequalities particularly in poor and minority ethnic communities. Inevitably the responses of governments and institutions have been found wanting, partly because of the scale and rapidity of the infections, but also due to failures in preparedness, as well as mistakes and delays in responses. Subsequently there have also been clear market failures in the way government procurement and business supply chains have functioned.

Civil society particularly through different forms of social-economic-political action has played an important role in helping to address these response weaknesses, and implicitly or explicitly revealed a critical dimension to established governments and institutions. The characteristics of typical government responses (lockdown, tracking, tracing, modelling) has pushed digital technologies to prominence for citizen digital/virtual responses. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework (with associated examples from the U.S and Europe) for understanding and subsequently empirically examining and evaluating COVID19 responses that can be used for further improvements both in application and theory. The framework has four key dimensions: *digital continuum*, *institutional-constituent continuum*, *tool innovation*, *response targets*. To conclude the paper, several lessons are offered, which may initiate and inform discourses and empirical observations about evolutions in social innovations related to crisis responses.

Framework: digitization, institutions and constituents, tool innovation, response targets

The following framework reflects extant literature on factors related to crisis responses; but coupled with the COVID19 examples presented, new insights may emerge. In addition to providing descriptions of each framework element, political and policy dimensions inherent in each of them are highlighted.

Digital continuum

The role of information communication technologies (ICTs) and other tech based innovations have changed the boundaries, roles, resources and dynamics of political and policy stakeholders in the context of responsiveness during

crises. More specifically, these innovations have in many cases increased response capabilities, enhanced collaboration, provided agency to communities, increased demands for accountability, altered institutional arrangements, enlarged the scale of responses and contributed to the various narratives present during responses (Benet, 2019; Pipek et al., 2014; Gonzalez, 2010; Palen & Liu, 2007). At one end of the continuum, innovations have not completely eroded the value and need of low-tech or no-tech approaches. While at the other, Jarvis (2005) identified “hashtag revolts” as key ways social media networks support internet activism, like occupy-type movements; although in successful global campaigns and mobilisations combine both the [internet and public space](#). For this particular framework, the digital continuum considers how COVID19 responses exist as purely digital, purely non-digital or some combination of both.

The novelty of COVID19 is that it requires social distancing in the face of meeting physical and non-physical human needs, thus highlighting the simultaneous necessity of effective tech and non-tech solutions. Moreover, these varied responses play multiple roles by providing needed community information, soliciting for and providing help, and providing socio-emotional support. For example, in Austria there are numerous self-organized purchasing initiatives for risk groups initiated by young people. Users on Twitter and Co. are calling for help for these people in their neighbourhoods. With the [#NeighbourhoodChallenge](#)¹, people want to help those quarantined with their daily errands. To this end, users posted photos of notes that they hang up in the neighborhood, leading to young people offering their neighbours support - a movement which inspired imitators in Germany. Another example is the use of Instagram by actors and influencers in various parts of the world who read to children at home due to quarantining or create public service announcements encouraging social distancing². A network of women in France named “Over the Blues”³ who sew masks and hospital gowns for hospital staff established a Facebook and internet page to organise their distribution, allow entry into the network and provide a map showing similar activities throughout the country. In the French banlieue of Sartrouville, at the Cité des Indes, known as a marginal and problematic area, a group of young people use Facebook⁴ to organise and solicit participation to bring food and meals to both hospital staff and to elderly people in their neighbourhood. Even in the absence of ICT tools, essential needs such as direct health care, health support, food, clothing and shelter have increased demands for in-person volunteerism that may require

¹ See e.g. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000115636108/nachbarschaftschallenge-wiener-rufen-dazu-auf-aelteren-mit-besorgungen-zu-helfen>

² See e.g. <https://www.instagram.com/carolinepetersliet/>

³ See <https://over-the-blues.com/>, they have now 2500 voluntary with 156 local solidarity branch

⁴ See “les Grands Frères et Soeurs de Sartrouville”, <https://www.facebook.com/LesGrandsFreresEtSoeursDeSartouville/>; for a media coverage of this network, see : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A6w3wVXuUc>

physical, non-digital actions such as packaging and distributing goods. As an example, the gifts fences (previously used in the freezing winter of 2017) in Austria are dedicated fences where the citizens hang bags of food, hygiene products and anything else that helps, and where homeless people can help themselves freely⁵. Overall, these examples demonstrate the value of technology to scale responses and minimize risk of illness, but also reveal their limitations that still need to be filled with non-tech approaches. In other words, these online organisation tools are used for needs in offline life. Finally we can advance the idea that social media and the internet by shaping coalitions, creates space for online social networks to facilitate activists to strengthen connections and build social capital (Mundt et.al, 2018).

Institutional-constituent continuum

Public, nonprofit and private institutions have varying capacities and motivations for addressing crises centered on the public values, institutional structures and formal policies (Wetter & Torn, 2020; Brugh et al., 2019; Culebro et al., 2019). Yet, insufficiencies and even unfairness of institutions have largely driven more community, grassroots based approaches (Anderson, 2008; Palen et al., 2007). Literature about the role of emotions in social movements in community-solidarity responses also informs constituent driven crisis responses where emotions trigger, shape strategies, and target objects of movements (Goodwin et.al 2009; Jasper 2011; Traïni 2009). However, collaborative governance has led to more hybrid approaches (Moynihan 2008, 2009). The literature on volunteer responses in crises (Whittaker et al, 2015) indicates two types: 1) emergent, where volunteers respond in the immediate aftermath, often innovatively as they are closely connected to the crisis impact; and 2) extending, where those who are already part of existing groups and NPOs and draw on those networks and resources. In this paper, our cases reveal the full range, but various forms of hybridity are most typical. In the platform "Covid-19 Civil Society Initiatives"⁶ established by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs (an extension of the already existing platform "Freiwilligenweb" - a volunteer recruiting platform), self-organised groups as well as NPOs and social entrepreneurs but also commercial businesses can publicise their support offers. This list of helpers refers to a multitude of different initiatives that offer support to citizens of all ages and in different problem and life situations (elderly people, children, families, people with health and psychological problems etc.) but also to small entrepreneurs, self-employed and artists affected by the crisis. They range from neighbourhood initiatives, delivery services, fundraising platforms, appeals for donations, lists of regional online shops to support the regional economy to online courses and consultations of all kinds (e.g. how small

⁵ See e.g. <https://www.1000things.at/blog/wie-du-obdachlose-menschen-momentan-unterstuetzen-kannst/>

⁶ See <http://www.freiwilligenweb.at/de/freiwilliges-engagement/österreich/covid-19-zivilgesellschaftliche-initiativen>

businesses can apply for the announced state financial support or telephone discussion groups for caring relatives of people suffering from dementia).

From a policy, political and even administrative perspective, the extent to which responses reside in the domain of institutions or constituents has implications for efficiency, effectiveness, support, usage, and raises issues of civil rights and liberties violations.

The scale of the crisis has demanded huge levels of resources for institutional based responses by national, state and local governments to provide direct financial support to residents and the economy. In addition to the huge sums of money for the economy damaged by the lockdown similar support structures can be found in Austria and in France (e.g. support for short-time work to keep unemployment low, funds for small businesses and artists, discussions on additional welfare support for marginalized groups). Corporations have also been drawn into lend support, but the extreme needs has also required hybrid approaches such as the UK's Enabling Social Action programme which supports local authorities to collaborate on services with local people, service users, and civil society organisations in routine work; these have been extended to link with different volunteer recruitment platforms.

Governments in multiple countries had weaknesses in their preparation phase, due to poor planning, and years of austerity, plus difficulties with global supply chains, thus motivating communities to engage in social entrepreneurship to address failures such as lack of PPE (personal protective equipment). For example, the Hackney Wick Scrubs Hub was formed when four women talked to a doctor friend who was worried about scrub supplies. As a result, their friends from the fashion industry began designing and creating scrubs for healthcare workers out of their homes. They now coordinate a team of over 50 volunteers. Their Mutual Aid Group also established a fundraising online platform. Similarly in France, the government was not able to provide all necessary equipment, especially gowns. News on the TV showing hospital staff wearing trash bags⁷ instead of real hospital gowns and the loss of several hospital staff from Covid19 due to insufficient personal protective equipment pushed many citizens to take initiatives and constitute help and solidarity groups to support hospitals. In all these initiatives, indignation and compassion were major factors in the emergence of collective action. In the Covid19 pandemic, from our cases we can see the impact of two kind of emotions motivating people to mobilise: reflexive, and moral emotions motivate people to organise themselves and create solidarity networks in order to do something, to participate in the collective effort against Covid, but also against stereotypical stigmatisation (e.g. of marginal neighbourhoods). These two kinds of emotions transform into an emotional energy as it finds rapid recognition, compassion and gratitude from society and state institutions (hospitals, municipalities, etc.).

⁷ See about this : <https://fr.theepochtimes.com/des-sacs-poubelles-utilises-comme-blouses-par-le-personnel-hospitalier-pour-pallier-a-la-penurie-1323519.html>

Tool innovation

Examining innovation cycles reveals common outcomes when disruption and problems (i.e crises) arise: 1) adaptation of existing tools, 2) repurposing of existing tools, 3) removal of obsolete tools and 4) creation of new tools (Dekkers et al., 2014; Pumain et al, 2009; Schumpeter, 1991). This section of the paper provides examples illustrating some of these outcomes during the pandemic. One indicator is The Coronavirus Tech Handbook a crowd sourced continually evolving library of tools, services and resources relating to COVID19 responses, with an impressive range of over 20 categories of tools (from developers, to health workers, to consumers). For ordinary citizens and community groups its category of tools support Mutual Aid Groups, skills and time matching, fund-raising, and volunteering. And from the examples provided in this paper this involves extending the use of social media and communications platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp; Google Duo, Zoom, Facetime, Skype, Slack for communications; for e.g. WhatsApp Groups to connect volunteers). For supporting skill-time matching and volunteering, there's also more sophisticated local connectors and apps, like Nextdoor, a neighbourhood social networking app for connections and exchanging of information, goods, and services locally; established in California, 10 yrs ago, and now operating internationally in 11 countries, and volunteer platforms have also been extended for Covid initiatives, like: do-it.org with UK government support and the already mentioned Austrian "Covid-19 Civil Society Initiatives".

Extending the use of existing technologies has shifted *Digital Technologies Frontiers*: knocking on a neighbour's door is taking place, with more regularity, in fact some people say they've met their neighbours for the first time. But the digital technologies have moved substantially into more of our lives, our work, and our families. Almost every social innovation we've encountered was made possible through these new digital technologies, particularly the global companies founded in the last 20-25 years. As noted above, Nextdoor, the neighbourhood social networking app (which purchased the UK's Streetlife in 2017), gets its income from ads, and was valued at more than \$1bn two years ago. But at the next level citizen expertise has indicated considerable levels of innovation. Many Hackathons have been initiated to support social innovation - #HackForce virtual hackathon organized by TechChill Foundation is hosting a fully virtual hackathon for the online environment. Organized by volunteers from the startup community, HackForce gathered more than 650 hackers from 18 countries, working on many of the 71 originally submitted ideas. While some highly skilled citizen researchers have used open source data to inform the public, for example a Singaporean coder created a website using open data from the Singaporean government to map the daily status of every coronavirus patient, to provide detailed geographic and demographic detail. (Ref: <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovation-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>). John Hopkins University in the U.S. has created a similar tracking mechanism open to the public that illustrates the rate of virus (new cases, recovery and death) across the globe.

While not exhaustive, the examples have revealed a few insights into outcomes related to tool innovation. First, there are winners and losers. Digital tech companies have been the big winners, together with online delivery companies, and essential goods and services; poor people, the precariat, unemployed, vulnerable people have been the losers, who have been the focus for community responders and social innovation. There's been a scandalous neglect of care homes which have been the biggest losers. Second, bricolage and use of social networks seems to have been most prominent in community responses, mainly using or extending existing tools. Some quite low tech have nonetheless been very inventive, as the mentioned gifts fences.

Responsiveness targets

Crises are rarely confined to one domain. They have equally devastating impacts beyond their direct targets. In case of COVID19, it has not just been healthcare systems experiencing a toll, but also economic, financial, political and educational systems. As such, the responses have focused not only on directly saving lives and treating the illness, but helping to mitigate the damaging indirect effects such job loss, business downturns, partial school shutdowns, and overwhelmed public resources.

Additionally, the pandemic has exposed existing disparities in socio-economic and health systems disproportionately impacting marginalized communities and thus compounding the negative impact of the virus. Thus some responses have specifically aimed to address unique needs of specific communities, fill gaps in institutionalized services and counter entrenched narratives of marginalized communities that can also prevent adequate care. The pandemic response becomes usurped or part of existing social movements aimed at eliminating marginalization. For example as noted above, the group of young people, “Les Grands Frères et Soeurs de Sartrouville”, in the French banlieue Cité des Indes, in Sartrouville, are highly stigmatized and known as “badlands of the republic” (Dikeç 2007). Despite negative media attention on the inhabitants of this kind of banlieue (especially the young ones) who are, according to the media, not able to respect the curfew or the law, solidarity networks have been organised in order to better organise the needs of health workers and elderly people in the neighbourhood. Another example comes from the U.S. where public sessions and media pieces have aimed to expose and explain the connection between inequitable systems and COVID19 death rates that are disproportionately high among communities of color and low income populations. They are accompanied by calls to action that galvanize targeted support for those communities (e.g. demand for more transparent data that provides more information about minority COVID19 cases). Anti-Asian sentiment and anti-African sentiment in China have also revealed the cultural norms and values associated with xenophobia where the virus has enabled negative narratives about belonging and “citizenship”, which has led to responses from institutions and individuals that either fan the flames of racism and “othering”, or seek to dismantle it.

Conclusions: Lessons learned for moving forward

This paper highlights how the unique COVID19 pandemic has motivated and even required a range of responses to alleviate its direct and indirect impact on individuals, communities, institutions, systems, culture and policies. While responses reflect the insights from extant literature on the intersection of technology, social innovation, volunteerism, the cases presented in the paper also provide an opportunity to consider possibilities for new frameworks. The presented cases reflect variation in responses based on a digital continuum; institutional versus constituent driven action; use, evolution and creation of new technology tools; and targeted responsiveness based on direct and indirect needs as well as marginalized status.

There are inevitable limitations to this study, being based on case studies from Western countries, it can only indicate emerging patterns and types of responses. And it has not been able to map global responses, nor able to touch on the secondary socio-economic impacts in exacerbating or restricting responses to the risks of famine to 130m people. However, although this presented framework remains to be applied in an empirical context that can yield more rigorous insights into the evolution of social innovation vis a vis responses during crises, lessons can still be gleaned that address a critical question posed on the webpage <https://covid-entraide.fr/>:

“The Covid-19 and its hideous face leave us the choice: do we want to find the world before or change course? The after covid is now: Act, reflect, organize, oppose, claim, think about tomorrow”.

- Technology combined with constituent action and emotions are powerful tools with the potential to erode, circumvent or even replace entrenched institutionalized approaches to crises that can be insufficient.
- Market and state failure in vulnerable economic based systems reveal the necessity and resourcefulness of civil society, thus motivating considerations for new systems centered on sustainability and inclusivity.
- Common experiences and needs at the global and local levels underscore interconnected dependency on goods, services and data that may inform new norms and values related to solidarity, community and globalism.

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