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DIFFICULT EVERYDAY LIFE OF PANDEMIC VOLUNTARY SERVICE (RESEARCH REPORT)

Abstract. In 2020, as part of the municipal “mikroDOTACJE”, we conducted a study of the #SzczecinPomaga campaign on how local government and non-governmental institutions dealt with helping the inhabitants of this city during the lockdown forced by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the elements of this research were interviews with coordinators of institutions involved in aid activities undertaken as part of this campaign. Most of the questions that we’ve asked our respondents concerned broadly understood volunteering. We asked about the methods of searching and recruiting volunteers and the methods of organizing their activities in the difficult coronavirus reality. In May 2021 (exactly one year later), we repeated these interviews and found out how the coordinators assess the situation of Szczecin’s voluntary service after two consecutive waves of the pandemic and holiday “lockdowns”. We look at the problem from the point of view of the practice of coordinating aid activities, relations with volunteers, as well as opinions on their commitment and willingness to help.

Keywords: COVID-19, local government organizations, NGOs, aid activities, volunteering.

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1. Introduction

From May to July 2020, we participated in the project “How does #SzczecinPomaga help? Researching the needs caused by the coronavirus epidemic”. The project was implemented under the municipal program “mikroDOTACJE”.¹ The research we are discussing looked at how local government and non-governmental institutions dealt with helping the city’s inhabitants during the first “lockdown” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, we repeated the interviews to find out about the post-pandemic relief situation.

#SzczecinPomaga is a municipal aid campaign organized during the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020² by the City of Szczecin and Szczecin aid organizations (including the Senior Center, the Municipal Family Assistance Center and the POLITES Association). The Regional Volunteer Center (lead by POLITES) was involved in the campaign, responsible for cooperation with over three hundred people who volunteered under the #SzczecinPomaga program. Recruitment for volunteer work took place via the form available on the website of POLITES and the City Hall, and then the information contained therein was verified in an interview with one of the project coordinators. The main task of the volunteers was to provide direct, remote and specialized help to those residents of Szczecin who, as a result of the pandemic, were unable to meet their basic life needs on their own.

The need to investigate the method of providing aid appeared after only a few weeks of operation of #SzczecinPomaga. It turned out that although some of the reported needs actually resulted directly from the presence of the coronavirus, others had already occurred before, and during the pandemic they were additionally exacerbated (e.g. those resulting from disability, old age, lack of contact with others, loneliness and isolation or lack of sufficient material means). Relevant activities were coordinated on an ongoing basis, institutions shared tasks (volunteering, cash benefits, food packages, care services or psychological support). However, in the longer term, providing effective and adequate help to all those in need, on the one hand, required the systematization of information on reported needs, and on the other, a well-planned process of verification of the information received, as well as coordination of activities and management of available resources. Moreover, it turned out to be important and interesting from the point of view of the cooperation of all organizations involved in helping the inhabitants of Szczecin to get to know and better understand the volunteers of #SzczecinPomaga (identifying their motivation, level of commitment, examining the level of satisfaction related to working as a volunteer during the pandemic and – possibly – in the future). An important aspect with a practical dimension was getting

¹ Program #mikroDOTACJE2020 [microSUBSIDIES] “Ad hoc support”. The campaign is co-financed by the City of Szczecin. Type of project: “Activities in the field of health protection and promotion; promotion and organization of volunteering”. The mikroDOTACJE operator is Fundacja Sektor3. Applicant organization: POLITES Association, contract number: 79/MD/2020.

² Since autumn 2020, the #SzczecinPomaga campaign has been launched again.

to know and describe all mechanisms of cooperation of organizations involved in the campaign to help the inhabitants of Szczecin (functioning correctly and incorrectly). We conducted in-depth interviews with employees of organizations cooperating under the hashtag #SzczecinPomaga (Senior Center, Municipal Family Support Center, POLITES Association, Municipal Police, City Hall).

2. Methods and approach

The program as a whole #SzczecinPomaga was an enormous team effort consolidating over 256 voluntary workers traveling across the city to provide help and support; 42 coordinators spread across the voivodeship gathering submissions and managing all efforts; and over 116 families with a need for a daily contact.

The largest number of submissions came from neighbourhoods located in the downtown area, where old tenement houses and pre-war residential buildings are located. That district is inhabited widely by elderly, senior citizens, and have had the largest submission ratio reaching over 60%. No wonder over 75% of all requests for support came from seniors of 66 years of age and more (where 48% were submitted by 76 years old and older). All requests were reported during a phone conversation when needy people were describing their needs while volunteers were taking detailed notes.

Voluntary workers joined #SzczecinPomaga answering broad recruitment call (Centrum Wolontariatu 2008: 33) made by NGO's. The promotion of the program was published online on social medias, POLITES's web page, billboards, radio announcements, tv commercials, and with word of mouth or snowball effect being the most valuable source. All were dedicated to their duties, declaring need for help and support, empathy are crucial motivation and values among all in their work attitude. They were providing not only help with hot meal preparation, prescription fulfilment, grocery shopping but also, supporting with warm conversations, understanding and devoting their own time for those in need. Profiling volunteers we've spotted 18–45 was their age range, all being active (working or studying) and 95% originating from town of 500k of citizens, and others from outside town.

Talking to coordinators we've used In-depth Interviews as a method to provide valuable insights that were later put through content analysis techniques. Controlled usage of scientific methods allows to gather information that were further analysed by evaluation techniques (Szarfenberg 2010: 32). To our research we've invited coordinators who had the greatest number of volunteers to work with, and not all of them were available due to work duties, and not balanced work-life equilibrium (just twelve of them were able to find time for meeting). While trying to find suitable time for them we've realized the pandemic period resulting in changing key work habits (namely remote work or splitting time between remote and office) is still a consequence our interlocutors face. The next consequence is that work-life balance idea became more and more blurred, fading.

3. Coordinators of the #SzczecinPomaga campaign

As part of the study, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of organizations involved in helping the inhabitants of Szczecin during the first “lockdown” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents were asked primarily about (1) the scope of duties and activities during the “lockdown”; (2) cooperation with volunteers; (3) cooperation with coordinators from other institutions; (4) needs most frequently reported by residents; (5) preparing the city and aid institutions for the second wave of the virus; and the further organization of the functioning and cooperation of aid institutions beyond the epidemic.

Local government and non-governmental organizations in Szczecin undertook unofficial preparations for the “lockdown” a few weeks before its announcement.

We were preparing for it because we were watching what was happening abroad, especially in Italy, and it seemed inevitable. Anyway, Szczecin made some decisions ahead of the government decisions [Interview 5].

Despite these actions taken earlier, at the time of the official announcement of the lockdown, there was organizational chaos, panic, “nervousness”, and “improvisation”.

[...] it really was as if someone had thrown us into a new reality [Interview 8].

My work? How my life was? My life used to be all about work. [...] I am an advocate of being prepared for the worst rather than later finding yourself in a helpless situation. [...] And these were incessant thoughts, incessant phone calls. And I must admit that it was very stressful. Very stressful [Interview 4].

The work of aid institutions has been moved online as much as possible. If possible, the employees stayed at home. On the other hand, in offices, employees were divided into teams that worked shifts (if in one of them someone becomes ill and the entire team has to go into quarantine, the other may continue to work).

Everyone worked very hard in the scope they could and in the area they dealt with and were responsible for. And I don't think anyone of us has the impression that something went wrong along the way [Interview 3].

The daily work of the organization consisted primarily in accepting applications from residents, entering them into the database, coordinating work by telephone contact, sending a volunteer to those in need (who is closer to the reporting person), analyzing the situation and preparing reports (also from other organizations), monitoring if residents follow sanitary recommendations. The respondents pointed to the extended, irregular working hours, from morning to night, also on weekends. So this is when the work-life equilibrium fails, and people start to move their energy towards work, help mostly forgetting or putting aside their own life, wellbeing, health and relations to those close to them.

On the other hand – volunteers were positively surprised by the reactions of the residents: empathizing with them, complying with the announced restrictions, and mutual support. They also emphasized concern for people in quarantine, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless, including those under the influence of alcohol.

In the first period, our friends brought us more things, from hygiene products to some mattresses, which were possibly needed, but certainly masks and disinfectants, more than the voivode gave us in the first period. Because in the beginning, you couldn't buy anything, it was not that easy [Interview 4].

The most important issues mentioned by the respondents were: masks (sewing campaign, distribution among residents, free masks from the city for seniors – over 8,000 masks were issued, which were delivered to 300–400 addresses daily); food packages for people in quarantine; providing hot meals, daily shopping for people staying at home; medicaments; assistance in walking dogs; psychological help and support (conversation, contact with other people); gestures of solidarity with health workers, people working at the border (delivering meals).

There were a lot of reports... “I'm in quarantine, I can't go to the store”, we went there... we shopped, we carried it to people's houses, we helped the elderly, but also younger people who were in quarantine [Interview 3].

In the opinion of the coordinators, the volunteers did not have access to the database describing those in need and the types of needs. The most common volunteers were people who had downtime at work, or students. The most important questions for them were: what to do and what not to do as a volunteer; where is the limit of commitment to help. A volunteer is not and should not be someone who will do everything, e.g. renovate the house, bring new furniture from distant places. Sometimes it was necessary to refuse to process the request (e.g. window cleaning is not the most urgent action for such time). New volunteers were trained remotely over the phone (for safety reasons). Among the advantages of the #SzczecinPomaga volunteering program, the respondents noticed, first of all, the fact that many people volunteered with a clear and strong intention to provide help to others.

[...] We are very grateful that they were there, that they were willing, [...] because there was a lot of interest in volunteering, a lot of people wanted to help. [...] Overall, they did a great job [Interview 6].

[...] both the young, the adults and the seniors wanted to help very much [Interview 7].

The disadvantages indicated by our interlocutors are: poor or lack of method to verify people who were requesting for support (contact information was added to the request, name and last name as well but there were many situations where others were calling on behalf of someone in need and in this case they were not leaving their own contact info); too high expectations for volunteers from people who required assistance; problems with coordinating the work of volunteers. Furthermore

all interviewees, in their responses, emphasize extremely intense, everyday contact (e-mails, phone calls, online meetings) with people being in different conditions, approaches to problem solving. It seemed it required huge openness, empathy, patience, and willingness to cooperate no matter the case.

We were in contact all the time. All the time on phones, e-mails. We were in contact and cooperation was very good. There are no problems here [Interview 3].

We made the assumption right away that we are shortening the paths and that if we want to survive and cope, the most important thing is that we must be able to communicate. Communicate, that is, we must take into account that we will all have different moods, emotions, so that we can talk about it and I think we managed to do it [Interview 4].

The positive sides of the cooperation, according to the interviewees, were: the fact that the activities ran smoothly, there were no major problems, if they arose, they were resolved on an ongoing basis, and the inter-institutional cooperation proved successful. The problems we heard about in the interviews were: (1) lack of experience in coordinating the activities of volunteers from different organizations; (2) lack of prior cooperation between aid institutions; (3) misunderstandings resulting from the lack of a clearly defined area of activities of individual institutions; (4) lack of communication.

[...] an interesting experience, because we didn't know each other before, we didn't see ourselves physically, we didn't know our way of speaking, we didn't know the tone of our voice, we didn't know our jokes. Well, we were just strangers and suddenly we had to work together. [...] It was certainly instructive, in the sense that each organization certainly wanted to be the best in a positive sense that everyone wanted to prove to themselves and to others that we could cope with this task. Only that none of them spoke about it directly, I think there was a little lack of humility in all of us that we thought we were the most important, they thought they were the most important, but in general everything is fine. [...] There was no such meeting [Interview 2].

So, there were such different clashes. We've never talked about it outright either. There was no such conversation between us as to clarify something. But I think there were some flips out there, but it was emotional, stressful, it was a new situation for everyone [Interview 2].

According to the respondents, "if the next c19 wave occurs": we will enter it naturally, we are prepared, we need to act calmly, cool down our emotions and manage our resources. Besides, there are hygienic materials for masks and gloves, disinfectants for future use.

If there is a second wave, we are prepared for it. First of all, it will be easier for us emotionally [...]. Because this time it was a new surprise for everyone, and everyone had to find their way in it [Interview 1].

I think first of all, you have to talk about it and not say "it won't" [...] not to give people illusory hope and not to say: no, everything will be fine, no no... just to say it outright, that there may be such a risk, to prepare them so that they can hear about the fact that it may happen... No scaring, because this is obviously not what it is about [...]. Only to show various possible scenarios [Interview 2].

Well, unfortunately we are waiting for the next wave. We'll see what it will be like [Interview 7].

According to the answers provided, there is no need to create a single superior unit in Szczecin to coordinate aid and voluntary activities. However, there was an idea to create one database for all organizations (although opinions were divided there).

If someone wants to help another person, he will always find a way to do it [Interview 7].

It's important for this help simply to work and where there are gaps, really, for these people to know where to turn. So there has to be one place everyone can turn to: both a volunteer that wants to help and a person in need that needs that help, or someone who sees that someone else needs this help can simply report the situation [Interview 5].

The respondents indicated, first, the need to (1) open the conversation between aid institutions on the creation of a cooperation network or superior coordination of their activities (also beyond the time of the epidemic); (2) creating a single, inter-institutional database of notifications of residents' needs; (3) and to try to formally establish who the volunteer is and what his or her functioning in Szczecin should look like. More frequent meetings between coordinators of cooperating institutions was the second important topic that appeared in the interviews. The need for a real meeting of coordinators in a time when there is no epidemic, discussing the issue of cooperation between organizations also outside the time of "closure" is another real need of the organizers and coordinators of the campaign. It is they who notice that each city development, e.g. through its seniors club, could create a network thanks to which seniors could turn to their local club for help. E-prescriptions have worked very well (though it's a pity that you have to continue shopping at the same pharmacy where you started). An important aspect, emphasized by many interlocutors, was the aspect of information chaos in the media, which gave misleading information: that everyone deserves a food package, a mask, that everyone will receive funds (a lot of time was spent explaining to the callers what the situation is in reality).

The media crossed us a lot, it was also a big problem, unfortunately we couldn't deal with it, I don't think anyone could. As you can see, there was one thing in the media, and another in life, and later, we had to explain that this is not the case at all [Interview 1].

And that was the worst that was possible, because there is no way to explain to these people that it is not so, that it is not because it does not work that way [Interview 2].

Organizations that do not use voluntary support in their daily activities could start using their potential. For example, the Municipal Family Support Center (MOPR) could use the help of volunteers to do shopping, and a sitter could take care of the child during this time. Promotion of the campaign could be more "bottom-up": small shops, mailboxes, pharmacies could inform about the existence of the campaign and the possibilities of joining it, both as a person in need and as a volunteer.

This is the time that should give us Poles a lot of food for thought, to focus on what is most important in life, that is, ask yourself what gives me happiness, appreciate it and take care of it [Interview 8].

There are definitely a few things we would like to improve, but overall I think we did a great job. Really [Interview 6].

4. A year since the pandemic's beginning

Respondents noticed that in 2021, the coordination of assistance activities is much calmer: the telephone rings much less frequently and these are most often reports of people residing who cannot cope without outside help. There are also fewer reports of seniors requiring help, but there are questions about what a given organization can offer them.

Fewer pandemic-related, rather something like I'm a senior, I heard about you, someone told me, I called to ask [Interview 9].

Distribution of help (that is, directing the person in need to a specific institution that can and should provide this help) is centralized. There is one telephone number (in Warsaw), from which reports are sent to the Szczecin MOPR, and then further. Unfortunately, this procedure is not fully known. The inhabitants of Szczecin are used to functioning in a pandemic.

People are slowly getting used to certain things, there are no reports like: I'm afraid to leave the house because there is a pandemic. However, the practice of calling all available numbers with the same problem remained [Interview 9].

Help for residents in quarantine is still provided by volunteers reporting via the form. The database includes over 400 people, there are definitely fewer applications, but there are still weeks in which another 10 people willing to help are registered. You can also see that service companies or shops have also adapted to the new situation and now you can do more things yourself practically without leaving your home. Pharmacies remain a problem, but volunteers do their shopping there. There are also many help groups, support groups, neighborhood groups that organize help on their own, e.g. by walking the dogs of people in quarantine.

Our interlocutors also emphasize the greater awareness of the volunteers with whom they cooperate. There is still a willingness to help, but the thinking of people who help has changed. There are those who wanted to act only as an action, but stayed because it turned out that it was possible to combine professional and everyday life with volunteering. It is also about the way of providing help and its meaning. Volunteers contact the coordinators themselves: for example – asking where you can rent a wheelchair to go for a walk with someone who has mobility problems. They take the initiative themselves. The protective kits were left over from the previous wave, volunteers get them along with an ID (which sometimes allows them to make purchases without queuing). These are masks made by residents, because at the beginning of the pandemic, nothing could be bought and you had to deal with it yourself.

Mentally we are better prepared. Although sometimes people's expectations are surprising, they are too high if we rely on the voluntariness of people who can help in their free time, and not right now [Interview 10].

The statements of the coordinators also included reflections on the beneficiaries of the aid provided. Most of the activities are focused on the elderly, which led to neglect of children and adolescents. There is a clear need to come back to helping students, especially those who will fall behind after studying remotely. The respondents also lack direct contact with volunteers and charges. Coordinating is more difficult remotely, especially emotionally.

The problem remains the confusion related to the messages conveyed by the media (especially public) and the resulting information chaos. People who do not really need help, but want to get something that they deserve, according to media information, come to aid organizations more and more often. In addition, communication between coordinators from different organizations is still difficult, and so are the resulting competence disputes. But despite these inconveniences, we will be able to cope with the next wave of the pandemic more efficiently than in the previous ones, based on the *modus operandi* we have developed.

It is not known if there will be another wave. But if anything, we'll be fine. Pandemic is a school of life. It showed problems in the city that are worth solving, regardless of the situation in which we currently live [Interview 9].

5. NGO's in pandemic period

Polites similarly to other non-governmental organizations faces a lot of challenges in pandemic era. COVID-19 changed the way NGO works, posed new problems, required more flexibility and agile working habits. Especially implementation of new sanitary procedures, remote work, need to quickly upgrade IT skills (Gumkowska, Charycka 2021) were difficult to happen quickly and effectively. This happens where from one day to another part of the team works remotely, part is on call in bureau, and these teams needs to change the roles (remote workers would move to bureau and office workers change to remote – which is a standard procedure when you want to minimize the risks of people getting infected by reducing their face-to-face meetings).

Although our research focuses mostly on the way cooperation between coordinators and voluntary workers for obvious reasons it touches daily concerns and issues all research participants faced during pandemic times. That is how we know that lack of direct contact between all parties (coordinators – volunteers, volunteers – volunteers, coordinators from different organizations) but especially with recipients of the activities (volunteers) resulted in lower satisfaction with the tasks undertaken which was pointed out by all to whom we talked to. At the same

time the feedback provided by people in need of help – when that help arrived with volunteers – was a source of good energy, and additional motivation to all in Polites.

Like other NGOs (Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor 2021) Polites also sees that pandemic times worsened their overall situation, where they've faced the reduction in voluntary workers. But these obstacles forced them to act quickly and efficiently to find new people with willingness to help. So they've acted, they've posted a lot of news and invitations reaching to social media, local radio stations, tv commercials, billboards, targeting local communities as they seems to be checked before as strength in pandemic (Dąbrowska 2020). That is how many volunteers answered the call for help within four few weeks' time. Unlike others Polites did not face bureaucracy of public administration, competition (even though there were 7416 NGO in Zachodniopomorskie voivodeship according to Sejmik Województwa Zachodniopomorskiego 2021) or excessive control of state bodies (Interia.pl 2021).

6. Conclusion

Our research project was aiming to provide the feedback to NGO named Polites from coordinators who were engaged in the pandemic wave support to people who requested help in pandemic times. This study provided the basis for further evaluation process that is not included in this report.

The first interviews with the coordinators of the aid activities of #SzczecinPomaga (carried out in 2020) showed that all cooperating organizations (NGO, City Social Welfare Centre, City Hall of Szczecin) were prepared for the next wave of the epidemic. However, it was important to tone down the aid activities (“cooling down enthusiasm”) and adequately recognize what the actual need of a particular notifier is and how it can be best satisfied. Detailed analysis of what is needed against what the NGO showed the significant gaps. The volunteers' capabilities needed to be validated each time the support is provided (painting the flat, renovating furniture, psychological support – are the kinds of help that needed more professional engagement that volunteers could provide). That particular practice (validation) in a future will have the two positive effects. One on people requiring support (they will know what they can expect from NGO), two on volunteers (they will become better prepared to what is expected from them – and they will be able to estimate better the scope of their duties).

Coordination of all activities requires rational resource management and identification of barriers. However, the long-term organization of the functioning and cooperation of aid institutions during and outside the epidemic requires: a broader discussion on the creation of a cooperation network or superior coordination; preparation of a single, inter-institutional database of residents' needs; answer to the question of who the volunteer is and how their functioning in Szczecin should

look like. Interviews conducted a year later (2021) confirmed these observations. Aid organizations dealt with successive closures and the resulting problems.

Furthermore coordinators pointed to some “novelties” that appeared compared to the previous year (2020): becoming accustomed to the pandemic, changing the nature of reported needs (more seniors, fewer people in quarantine), increasing the base of people willing to help, taking the initiative by the volunteers themselves. They also pointed to the problems that, despite the passage of months, could not be avoided. These were: flexibility of grantors, reliable information from government (Gumkowska, Charycka 2020), and information chaos existing in media, plus unclear financing methods. They also emphasized the constant need for open conversations and consultations between coordinators from different organizations. Which leads us to dilemma: whether centralized or local coordination centers are needed for pandemic volunteer actioning?

With that in mind there has to be changes in the way NGO’s work. Namely: ways the processes are organized, scope of services provided, communication sources, key partnership and assurance on who is the one that anyone can lean on in specific areas (IT, logistics, financing, delivering sanitary equipment, etc.). That description makes Polites experience of pandemic times really similar to what other organizations were going through in this period (Waniak-Michalak 2021).

The overall conclusion is that each research findings needs to be carefully communicated and explained widely to local authorities. After Polites presented their findings, shared their ideas, and justified the conclusions – some of them were included in the cooperation program between Zachodniopomorskie Voivode and NDO’s – that is to say constant support for NGO’s during pandemic times (Wojewoda Zachodniopomorski 2021).

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TRUDNA CODZIENNOŚĆ WOŁONTARIATU PANDEMICZNEGO (RAPORT Z BADAŃ)

Abstrakt. W 2020 roku w ramach miejskich „mikroDOTACJI” przeprowadziliśmy badanie kampanii #SzczecinPomaga dotyczące tego, jak instytucje samorządowe i pozarządowe radziły sobie z pomocą mieszkańcom Szczecina podczas blokady wymuszonej przez pierwszą falę pandemii COVID-19. Jednym z elementów tego badania były wywiady z koordynatorami instytucji zaangażowanych w działania pomocowe podejmowane w ramach tej kampanii. Większość pytań, które zadaliśmy naszym respondentom, dotyczyła szeroko rozumianego wolontariatu. Pytaliśmy o metody poszukiwania i rekrutacji wolontariuszy oraz metody organizacji ich działań w trudnej koronawirusowej rzeczywistości. W maju 2021 roku (dokładnie rok później) powtórzyliśmy te wywiady i dowiedzieliśmy się, jak koordynatorzy oceniają sytuację szczecińskiego wolontariatu po dwóch kolejnych falach pandemii i wakacyjnych „blokadach”. Patrzymy na problem z punktu widzenia praktyki koordynowania działań pomocowych, relacji z wolontariuszami, a także opinii na temat ich zaangażowania i chęci niesienia pomocy.

Słowa kluczowe: COVID-19, organizacje samorządowe, organizacje pozarządowe, działania pomocowe, wolontariat.