

## Civil Society Shifts, Challenges and Responses to COVID-19: Ireland, Scotland and Wales

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### Abstract

This paper discusses to what degree did civil society organisations (CSOs) felt threatened during COVID-19 in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The authors explore how civil society organisations handled lockdowns. The authors invited three CSOs from Scotland, Wales and Ireland to describe the variations between cultural and political contexts and the influence of social and environmental dynamics on their work during COVID-19. These three countries have been challenged to a great extent by a high level of uncertainty owing to the full lockdowns during COVID-19. Hitherto, the people of Scotland, Wales and Ireland have been living relaxed and operating smoothly. Lockdowns have created challenges for successful CSOs. This paper focuses on the political reactions and social dynamics of CSOs focused on active grassroots participatory democracy and the philosophy that comes with it as a democratic decision-making mechanism where people have the power to vote on progress in the area of public participation and social change. The central finding in our investigation is that CSOs power to influence their politicians or society and become engaged in changes within their society is minimised during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** CSOs in COVID-19; Lockdown Shifts in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; United Kingdom

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unexpected and challenging barrier to the effective third-sector and civil society developments. The already shifting social, political and financial influences have been further compounded by the crisis, creating additional movements of power for civil society in general and related organisations (Natil et al., 2020; Pulla et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the day-to-day lives of people around the world with school closures, millions left unemployed or forced to work from home offices, and many facing food insecurity; with lockdowns and social distancing well and truly the norm (Hulme & Horner, 2020). The crisis is affecting all human developments while increasing unresolved tensions between people and technology and between people and the planet (UNDP, 2020).

The Chinese government locked down Hubei Province in the third week of January 2020 by halting transportation and imposing full restrictions on people's movement. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a pandemic at the beginning of March 2020 (WHO, 2020). The virus quickly spread across the world, reaching Scotland, Wales and Ireland between 28 February and 01 March 2020, with the countries in the South, such as Lebanon, confirming cases even before this.

The third sector comprises non-government and not-for-profit organisations, volunteer organisations, charities and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), undertaking a diverse mix of support and representation with a dedication to a particular societal issue or group. Many of these are brought together voluntarily to work towards collective interests, with long histories challenging political adversaries such as CSOs (Pulla et al., 2019). The third sectors in the Western democracies of Ireland, Wales and Scotland are part of active democracy that also engages a range of social and political groups in the government decision making process. However, the pandemic unleashes a human development crisis affecting social groups and

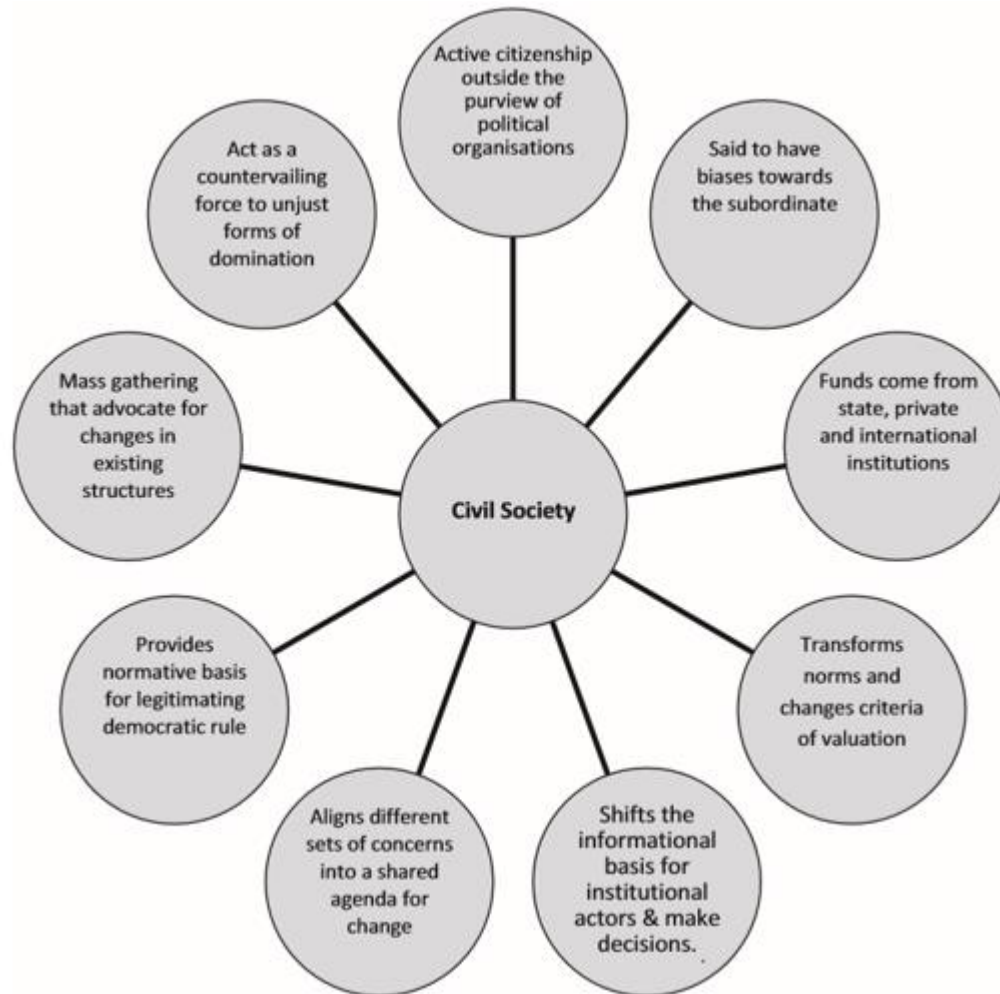
marginalised communities worldwide (UNDP, 2020). The third sector, therefore, has the opportunity to exercise such democratic rights to push governments towards collective interests and responsibilities.

Hulme & Horner (2020) discuss the structural levels affected by the pandemic that has not only transformed social groups but also changed the social, economic and political institutions and norms — essentially positively or negatively changing the “rules of the game”. These tensions have already shaped a new generation of inequalities and severity of the unfolding human development crisis (UNDP, 2020). The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (The Alliance) reports that “COVID-19 will not have the same impact on everyone and that it is already disproportionately affecting some individuals and groups within society” (Alliance, 2020a). The pandemic has exposed harmful effects on marginalised and vulnerable groups. Pulla et al., (2019), however, discuss that there have been a number of human rights groups calling for the engagement of such marginalised groups in decision-making processes to provide adequate representation and expression of concern around economic and environmental rights worldwide. This brings to question the civil society's involvement in policy-making throughout the current crisis.

The third sectors, including CSOs, have valuable experience and expertise in the analysis of structural inequalities that could help build an understanding of the issues citizens face and to critique the presented solutions (Donnelly, 2020). This brings to question the power of people to decide if those solutions serve collective interests and the need to propose alternatives. The role of CSOs in the current crisis across the mentioned countries are queried, protesting government policy-making institutions and gaining motion. The influences on civil societies are presented below in Figure 1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, typical influences and strategies of using mass gatherings to bring attention to and advocate for structural changes, along with potential funding

cuts from government, private and international sources due to COVID-19 complications. Despite obstacles of shifting state powers are responding to the virus and the control of resources, CSOs and third sectors across the globe are still gathering with collective interests in mind, but

not constantly gathering in person as previously done. CSOs in the South, such as Lebanon, has been active during the pandemic to show their active citizens' power in deciding their future changes as Aragonés & Sánchez-Pagés (2009) discuss.



**Figure 1: The Realm of Civil Society Influences (Reproduced with permission from Pulla et al., 2019)**

**Methodology**

The authors reviewed the existing literature and interviewed a number of CSO activists who engaged in activities during the periods of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine in these countries. The authors also analyse some CSOs' activities; work delivered, statements and literature produced by their representatives and activists from each country. Therefore, the authors use the case study approach to examine the challenges and shifts facing CSOs in different cultural contexts, political environments and social dynamics in these countries. Gerring's (2011) case study approach is used to

understand these differences within the subfield of comparative politics. This approach assists us in understanding these selected countries, which have been enduring very severe circumstances due to health and economic deterioration. These circumstances have already created barriers to CSOs' operations and deliveries. These countries, including their CSOs, face unstable environments and harsh economies. In other words, Gerring's (2011) case study approach also assists the readers in understanding different social, health and economic challenges facing CSOs in each country as Ireland, Scotland and Wales, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Ireland

Prior to the pandemic, the Irish charities regulator authority described 2019 as the “busiest year to date” in the third sector, with 10,514 charities registered (Charities Regulator, 2020). O’Connor et al., (2020) discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the third sector's fundraising activities, income and loss as Ireland faced a 15% decline in funding in 2020, costing the sector €179m. Not only has the third sector been affected by the pandemic and the lockdown, but all sectors are hit from the Irish government-imposed lockdown. This lockdown was enacted through an emergency law supported by the parliament to assist the health sector in managing the crisis. However, Sheehan (2020) argues that the state mobilised an extraordinary amount of physical, economic, political and social resources to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been a number of Irish CSOs, such as Saint Vincent De Paul, running health centres and hospitals engaging in the fight against the pandemic. Dundon (2012), however, discusses how to protect the most vulnerable' in an economic crisis in Ireland. These frontline workers in the health sectors of civil society organisations have been heroes in the pandemic, delivering services for an increasing number of people who contracted the virus (The Journal, 2020). Ireland has already recorded the highest COVID-19 infection rates for health workers in the world (The Journal, 2020). Vadlamannati et al., (2020) argue that the relationship between death rates and health access is influenced by the government's policies, with closure and lockdowns impacting the delivery of welfare services and equitable healthcare access. Nevertheless, the dual strategy implemented of community-based action and education, and medical response have been said to be effective in limiting the spread of the virus (Sheehan, 2020).

On 14 July 2020, the charities regulator authority issued its annual report to deliver accessibility to the most up-to-date data on the third sector during the pandemic. The authority is continuously monitoring the impact of COVID-19

on charities and providing guidance and information to charities navigating this very difficult period (The Journal, 2020). The state's support for the third sector has been decreasing over the years, so the interrupted fundraising campaigns because of the pandemic are devastating to the sector (O’Connor et al., 2020).

Áine Ferris (2020) discusses that the adaption of the third sector in the current crisis is vital to continue their work as normally as possible while continuing to reach out to support local groups. The local groups must adopt new approaches to engagement through social media networks with their target groups and beneficiaries to follow the rules of lockdown and social distancing. Ferris provides the following example of the way a charity in Dublin is responding:

As an environmental education charity, our GLAS Community Garden in Ballymun serves as an outdoor learning centre and safe social space in which to learn. We serve groups with varying abilities, skills, ages and backgrounds who are eager to continue their work in the garden. While the garden closed, it has not stopped GAP from making an impact. We are in the process of delivering gardening packs to nearly 200 homes in North Dublin. Support to these homes will be provided either via video calls or YouTube tutorials. Our focus is on supporting elderly members of the community and families with young children for whom these packs will bring the joys of growing to their door with the support they need to get the most out of it. These live tutorials demonstrated to community members that no matter what space or resources you have, you can still grow your own from your home. We are thankful for our funders who enabled us to send out gardening packs to these participants to continue providing continuity, education and activity that supports positive mental health.

In other words, Covid-19 has already affected the CSOs' operations and their responses to societal demands as similar CSOs have done in neighbouring countries such as Scotland.

## Scotland

The Scottish third sector is struggling with the impact of COVID-19, with organisations all being affected in different ways by the pandemic and its accompanying lockdown (Finnie, 2020). The sector has shifted its scope of work and deliverables in response to the harmful effects of COVID-19 (Hosie, 2020). The Alliance is a Health and Social Care group of CSOs in Scotland that includes over 2,900 national and local organisations from various ranges of health and social care civil society organisations (Alliance, 2020a). The Scottish Government's release of the document titled *COVID- 19: A Framework for Decision Making* has been welcomed by the Alliance. However, Alliance has provided the recommendation to government to give priority:

to contain a broader acknowledgement of the role of the third sector and unpaid carers in providing social care – and further detail on how they are to be supported during a time of unprecedented strain (Alliance, 2020b).

The Scottish civil society sector has a long-established reputation for being adaptable and responsive (Dale, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has imposed significant barriers to effective engagement and the sharing of information. It has, however, given many CSOs' staff, volunteers and activists experience in innovating new mechanisms and tools for overcoming communication barriers, as Janis McDonald, Chief Officer at deaf Scotland, says:

In many ways, we think it gives people who wouldn't normally have problems with communication an idea of what the barriers we experience every day would be it gives some insight to what some people have to deal with every day (Alliance, 2020c).

The health CSOs received increasing demands for their services while those belonging to arts and culture, such as museums, galleries and theatres, have lost their income due to the lockdown, as they needed to close their doors to the public (Finnie, 2020). This crisis provides an opportunity for National Health Service (NHS) to

engage new flexibilities and build a new local partnership with the third sector, as Gillian McAuley, Acute Nurse Director at NHS Lothian, says:

I have found real personal value engaging with the third sector, particularly our friends at the ALLIANCE. Sometimes we can become insular in our thinking, especially now as we move along this unknown path. Fresh ideas and thinking are really helpful. The check-in and chat service has provided additional support to our staff, patients and their families by allowing people time to have conversations that they need (Alliance, 2020).

Epilepsy Future provides a positive example of CSOs delivering a successful story of adaptation and resilience whilst providing services during a shifting landscape, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's lockdown.

Epilepsy Futures' success largely lies in the peer support offered to each group as they embark on a range of discussions and activities aimed at increasing self-management skills, improving well-being and resilience and building self-esteem and sense of connectedness. Luckily, we managed to get everyone comfortable with using Zoom, helping those who didn't have the ability to connect, and tutoring them all in the use of Zoom through weekly calls to our Project Coordinator. We managed to get the group started as planned on 26<sup>th</sup> May, and we have worked with other partners to try to adapt our programme to run virtually (Dale, 2020).

The pandemic has introduced a flexible revolution in adaptation of third sector work and working from home became a real, viable alternative to organisations that had never embraced this version of flexibility before (Auld, 2020). Staff working from home saved money on lunches and felt their productivity increased despite childcare issues. This flexible revolution poses a barrier to CSOs' effectiveness and deliverables owing to financial shifts and

constraints (Natil et al., 2020). The pandemic poses, however, an additional risk and a real existential threat for some charities because of the loss of income-generating activities. Children Hospices Across Scotland is one such organisation that moved its own services online.

Like many other charities, we've also had to cancel, pause or postpone many high-profile fundraising events which has had a direct effect on our income. As a result, our fundraising team has had to rapidly accelerate innovative and digital ways of working (Rami Okasha, CEO of Children Hospices Across Scotland in Okasha, 2020).

The pandemic lockdown has created unprecedented pressures of trying to save jobs and keep organisations alive, increased work stress in delivering services while changing the delivery service approach, managing staff remotely and applying for funding. For example, the Edinburgh Dog and Cat home charity lost at least £650,000 of income; if restrictions continue, it will surpass £1million (Fyffe-Jardine, 2020). This required CEOs to increase updates to their boards, engage their senior teams in decision making and organise regular online team meetings. Alternatively, the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations (ACOSVO) has moved all services online, now offering many of their services for free instead of previously charged face-to-face events (Armstrong, 2020). This has resulted in substantial financial losses due to limited to no income-generating activities. This has pushed the leaders of CSOs to learn how to mitigate new risks such as reduction of funding while trying to increase support for their community members and increase interactions with their members. However, CSOs may not survive if their leaders feel unable to find adaptation strategies or techniques to find a way forward (Armstrong, 2020). Susan Smith (2020) argues that the long and winding road to recovery as some CEOs re-budget every week trying to anticipate what's going around, ongoing costs and new unexpected costs, and emergency funding running out. It's exhausting and frightening for

everyone involved, from the chief executive to staff to the service user. SCOUTS Scotland is a charity with 40,000 young members and 12,000 adult volunteers, delivering skills, adventure, outdoor experiences, learning and friendship for youth and children (Docherty, 2020). SCOUTS Scotland, for example, has kept only 20% of its staff (13) working from home trying to save the foundation, while 80% of staff are furloughed (47) owing to a dramatic loss of income of £1.5 million by May 2020. Catriona Finnie (2020) discusses that the pandemic has been financially devastating for the sector; however, CSOs are taking a proactive approach by contacting existing donors to request additional financial support and launching emergency fundraising campaigns. A leading coalition, for example, put in an application requesting the UK government to claim via Gift Aid and the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme (GASDS). This proactive approach is stemmed from these CSOs values and missions of representing vulnerable communities and protecting people's equal rights, and engaging them in the decision-making process in a transparent mechanism by accessing and sharing information (The Alliance, 2020a).

### **Wales**

CSOs assumed new roles coordinating responses, identifying new groups' needs and exploring ways to respond to their needs owing to the lockdown. The pandemic has left significant and long-term implications as the loss of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is estimated to be between £200 million and £230 million in Wales alone (Rose, 2020a). Other studies presented the looming youth unemployment, the labour market and the role of CSOs in the current crisis. Some of these studies focused on CSOs' intervention to advocate, lobby and provide services for those not receiving state support during the crisis (Pearce, 2020). Pearce's analysis also looks at the characteristics of CSOs in this context; for example, 15.0% of all Welsh CSOs work on youth unemployment. However, many of these also focus on general problems and citizenship development in the context of community

development for improving life conditions, including raising self-esteem, social welfare and wellbeing during the current crisis.

The Welsh government has launched a number of emergency funds and schemes to support voluntary organisations struggling during the pandemic. The government's grant schemes and fund, for example, Wales Council for Voluntary Action's (WCVA) voluntary services emergency fund (VSEF) managed by Wales Council for Voluntary Action, has already awarded £7.5million to enable third sector organisations delivering vital and essential services during the pandemic to continue and to expand their work over coming months. VSEF has assisted various voluntary organisations delivering incredible and invaluable services for about 70,000 vulnerable people and 6000 volunteers across Wales in response to COVID-19 over coming months (WCVA, 2020).

The Welsh civil society's response to the crisis has brought a new understanding of the term 'community'. Community response is built on new partnerships, innovations, and voluntary initiatives that come from the grassroots and could assist in strengthening the community to challenge the pandemic (Bevan Foundation, 2020). Collaboration amongst funders has been vital in supporting community response to COVID-19 in Wales. Networking, a collective leadership and working together maximise the opportunities for community responses. John Rose, Director of The National Lottery Fund in Wales, says:

It is only by moving at pace, displaying collective leadership and listening to those on the ground, that funders of Civil Society in Wales can support the third sector to respond to the immediate and longer-term challenges of COVID-19 (Rose, 2020b).

## Conclusion

CSOs in the stable and democratic societies of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland had to adapt to the sudden and surprising changes that emerged due to COVID-19. These shifts will be lessons learned on how activists and leaders of CSOs in

these societies have worked differently, how we could predict a different future based on that learning — and how the significance and impact on the sector is tackled. The civil society sector of these countries had many similarities in the challenges while meeting the demands of their vulnerable communities. Some CSOs' Leaders, however, demonstrated exceptional and phenomenal skill and innovative approaches to keep their organisations alive and save the jobs of their staff while engaging with their volunteers, target groups, board members and funders online. The governments of these countries have already assisted the sector in challenging the existential threats by launching schemes and funds to support staff salaries and programmes.

However, the CSOs in conflict zones have been used to social, political and funding shifts and barriers from time to time. This pandemic, however, surprised not only CSOs but also governments, and they were unprepared. CSOs' staff and volunteers, however, learnt various lessons and experimented by engaging with other CSOs and exchanging information and expertise with them. CSOs' response to the pandemic was quick to get engaged with its grassroots and target groups. Additionally, CSOs have proven that they are capable of delivering a model of services managed by professional teams during the pandemic. However, there have been some CSOs seeking legitimacy, credibility and trust owing to operating in a conflict zone, economic collapse or political shifts as in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The question of funding, however, will remain a crucial issue for CSOs' operations and scope of work in the post-pandemic era as a result of various local health, social and economic conditions and shifts. The donors' community has already reallocated its available resources to their local and domestic needs as the global market and business has been shrinking and witnessing very hard times. Therefore, CSOs have to explore and raise funding from local resources and recruit volunteers to continue their engagement, deliveries and services to

their own people, target groups and beneficiaries.

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The first author has conceptualised and developed the draft. The second author has reworked the first draft. Both authors finalised and approved the draft.