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Reference:

Raeymaeckers Peter, Van Puyvelde Stijn.- Nonprofit advocacy coalitions in times of COVID-19 : brokerage, crowdfunding, and advocacy roles
Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly - ISSN 0899-7640 - 50:6(2021), 0899764021991675
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764021991675>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1759760151162165141>

Title

Nonprofit advocacy coalitions in times of COVID-19: brokerage, crowdfunding and advocacy roles

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Compliance with Ethical Standards:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

This paper analyzes the roles an advocacy coalition undertakes to support nonprofit organizations to cope with the challenges caused by lockdown and physical distance measures to stop COVID 19. We find that social workers and nonprofit members of the coalition created different kinds of solutions and innovative practices to support vulnerable target groups when confronted with the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting lockdown regulations. In particular, we show that the coalition was pushed to diversify its activities, leading to the development of three roles: a direct and indirect advocacy role, a brokerage role to provide information on new practices, and a crowdfunding role to provide finances for material aid. We conclude by emphasizing the implications of our analysis for both theory and practice.

Introduction

Countries around the world impose very strict lockdown policies to stop the spread of COVID-19. We analyze the roles an advocacy coalition undertakes to support nonprofit organizations to cope with the challenges caused by lockdown and physical distance measures enforced by the government. Advocacy coalitions combine a diversity of like-minded nonprofit organizations that share the goal of developing advocacy strategies to influence policymakers to take the interests of their target groups into account (Mosley, 2010, 2012). These coalitions and their member organizations are not directly involved in the detection and treatment of COVID patients but are nonetheless critical because they provide health information, essential services and emotional support to vulnerable target groups as well as their expertise and ideas to (local) policymakers (Gazley, 2013). They are however challenged to continue these critical roles in the context of the physical distancing and lock down measures enforced by the government to stop the spread of COVID-19. Recent work already confirmed the significant impact of the COVID-19 crisis and state enforced lockdown

measures on the management and work environment of nonprofit organizations (Kim & Mason, 2020; McMullin & Raggo, 2020; Young et al., 2020). As social workers and professionals from these organizations often engage in direct face-to-face contact with their clients, they are forced to rapidly adapt their daily practices in accordance with state regulations enforcing social distancing.

As Rao and Greve (2018) demonstrate, epidemics lead to distrust and “fear of the other” because contagious diseases often spread through contact with other people. Previous studies have shown that as a result of state regulations to enforce social distancing between citizens and intensive media coverage on the dangers of physical contact, feelings of “disgust avoidance” lead to fear of contact, especially with target groups that are labelled as “unhygienic” or as “the other” (Knowles et al., 2014; Rao & Greve, 2018). This leads to a weakening of community cohesion and a high risk of the exclusion of people in vulnerable target groups from access to necessary and vital resources such as for example food and material resources (Rao & Greve, 2018).

We analyze how an advocacy coalition of nonprofit organizations in Antwerp (Belgium) responded to these challenges during the COVID crisis and a government enforced lockdown (March-June 2020). From the moment the number of infected patients began to rise, the Belgian government enforced a lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19. People were thus forced to maintain physical distance in their daily contacts and interactions. This paper fills a gap in the scientific literature by describing the role of a nonprofit advocacy coalition confronted with a contagious pandemic and the resulting lockdown and physical distancing measures. The few studies that do focus on this topic, such as Rao and Greve’s (2018) study of the Spanish flu, have confirmed that a dense network of a diverse set of nonprofit organizations is able to mitigate the severe societal consequences of these types of extreme events and resulting regulations. However, there is currently no scientific evidence on the

roles coalitions of nonprofit organizations take on when they are confronted by the highly contagious COVID-19 pandemic. We extend the findings of Rao and Greve (2018) by identifying the different roles an already existing nonprofit advocacy coalition adopted during the COVID-19 crisis and an enforced lockdown. Our descriptive case study shows that in addition to the traditional advocacy role, two other important roles emerged: a brokerage role and a crowdfunding role. As COVID-19 is highly contagious and pharmaceutical treatments are yet to be found, lockdown policies and physical distancing regulations are considered as the only way to stop the spread of the COVID disease (Fadaka, et al., 2020). Our analysis provides evidence on how nonprofit organizations and their advocacy coalition are able to mitigate the detrimental consequences of physical distancing policies for vulnerable target groups. We first point to the critical importance of nonprofit coalitions. Subsequently, we discuss their roles and functioning in the context of disaster management and the spread of a contagious disease. We then focus on how the Antwerp advocacy coalition responded during the COVID crisis and an associated government enforced lockdown. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of three roles (advocacy, brokerage, and fundraising roles) and their implications for both theory and practice.

Nonprofit advocacy coalitions

The scientific literature increasingly confirms the importance of nonprofit advocacy coalitions. First, collaboration increases the mobilization and involvement of important stakeholders, such as professionals and clients, in several advocacy strategies (Leroux & Goerdel, 2009; Mosley, 2010). Second, coalitions allow nonprofit organizations to pool resources and expertise (Schmid et al., 2008). A dense network of nonprofit organizations increases the exchange of resources and expertise in the coalition and helps to provide responsive answers to the complex needs of target groups. Third, advocacy strategies of

nonprofit coalitions are more successful in influencing policy than those of individual organizations. Nonprofit coalitions often have intensive and frequent contact with and access to government officials and staff, and they may be perceived as more influential than an individual organization (Fyall & McGuire, 2015), as well as motivated by societal benefit rather than organizational survival (Buffardi et al., 2018).

Nonprofit coalitions and contagious epidemic disease

The literature agrees that nonprofit organizations fulfill critical roles during disasters, as they often fill service gaps left by public agencies. The current literature mainly focuses on natural disasters, such as hurricanes and tornadoes, showing that nonprofit organizations fulfill roles such as preparing communities for disasters, mitigating the severe impact of disasters and advocating for better policies and emergency management procedures (Brudney & Gazley, 2009; Eikenberry, Arroyave & Cooper, 2007). Some studies even have shown that nonprofits are more active during the preparation and mitigation phases of disaster management than their for-profit and public counterparts (Chikoto, Sadiq & Fordice, 2012). Studies that focus on the work of nonprofit advocacy coalitions emphasize that these types of collaborations play a key role after the event, when advocating for more effective policy and emergency relief measures to prevent or to mitigate the detrimental consequences of the disaster (Szczepanska, 2020). These coalitions often take a critical stance toward the government (Szczepanska, 2020) and advocate for emergency relief measures that will reduce the impact of disasters that are expected to occur in the near future or longer term.

The control of infectious diseases often involves activities in several phases including detection, prevention, response, recovery, and management of index cases (Lai, 2012).

Nonprofit organizations are found to play vital roles during every step in the strategy to stop epidemics. Literature on the role of nonprofits in the context of the spread of acquired

immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), for example, shows that nonprofits provide social support services, create public awareness and provide health information to those affected (Arno, 1986; Snyder & Amoto, 1992). Additionally, Tully (2018) showed that nonprofit organizations played an essential role in providing medical supplies, educating local residents, raising public awareness and creating a sense of urgency regarding the Ebola epidemic, which resulted in the mobilization of several powerful donors to provide the necessary funding.

Furthermore, there is evidence that nonprofits go beyond the abovementioned roles.

The analysis of Rao & Greve (2018) of the Spanish flu pandemic after WWI shows that extreme events such as a pandemic also have a detrimental impact on the broader community that goes beyond health related problems and needs. A pandemic and especially the spread of highly contagious diseases will most likely result in a lack of capacity to meet vital needs such as food and water, especially when physical proximity is impossible and prohibited by lockdown measures. The resilience of communities to deal with the impact of an epidemic is largely dependent on the presence of organizational diversity and the networks among these organizations within the community (Rao & Greve, 2018). Paarlberg et al. (2020) provide some insights into community philanthropic organizations' capacity to activate community resilience during the COVID-19 crisis. However, evidence on how nonprofit advocacy coalitions tackle the detrimental effects of lockdown policies on vulnerable target groups during highly contagious diseases such as COVID-19 is still lacking. To meet this gap we explore the roles that the Antwerp nonprofit advocacy coalition undertook during the first months of the COVID crisis and the associated lockdown (March-June 2020).

The Antwerp nonprofit coalition

The Antwerp nonprofit coalition was initiated almost ten years ago and is conceived by its members as a platform that unites large and small Antwerp organizations. The aim of the

platform is to enter into a dialogue with local policymakers to realize rights and fight poverty and exclusion. The platform strongly believes that: *“The European Convention on Human Rights and the Belgian Constitution (Articles 23 and 24) help us to realize human dignity for all. Social rights are central in the fight against poverty and exclusion.”*

The Antwerp advocacy coalition has acquired the status of a well-known and very active platform, with a very high level of involvement in local social policy in Antwerp. It provides a platform for discussion and debate among nonprofit organizations and is governed as a typical vertical complex network, consisting of a core group, steering committee and a broader network of members (Vermeiren, Raeymaeckers & Beagles, 2019). The core group consists of four different organizational representatives, with a dual function: to prepare and follow-up meetings of the steering committee and to engage in regular discussions and dialogue with local government officials on the steering committee’s behalf.

Method

This paper analyzes the roles of a nonprofit advocacy coalition during the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyzed minutes of all the meetings of the coalition during the lockdown in Belgium from March 12 until the end of June 2020. More specifically, we analyzed four meetings of the steering committee and three meetings of the core group. We also used a report written by the core group on the results of a survey that the coalition distributed to its members. Additionally, this paper is also based on notes and observations of the first author, who was member of the core group of the coalition and was thus closely involved in all meetings, had access to reports and minutes and also had the opportunity to talk with all core group members, steering committee members and government officials. The data were analyzed in an exploratory manner. We used a thematic content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to reduce the qualitative data by identifying core consistencies and meanings (Patton,

2002). Based on this analysis we identified the roles the coalition adopted during the lockdown. We documented these roles and used feedback loops while moving back and forth between the content of the reports, minutes of the first author and findings from nonprofit literature.

The authors are, nevertheless, aware of the limitations of the insider's perspective, from which we gathered the data. Personal closeness with participants and settings may lead researchers to ignore important details (Karabanow, 1999). However, we agree with Dwyer and Buckle (2009) that an insider's perspective is most useful when the purpose is to quickly gather data in difficult and complex settings and to provide a descriptive analysis. As the COVID-19 crisis is a difficult and very complex context for the Antwerp nonprofit coalition, the insider perspective provided the most extensive view of the roles the coalition adopted during the lockdown.

We first focus on the results of the survey the coalition used to gather information on how coalition members were coping with the crisis. These are important to understand the considerations of the coalition in deciding which roles it needed to adopt to support its members during the lockdown. After discussing the survey results, we distinguish three roles the coalition took on at the beginning of lockdown.

The first weekend after the Belgian lockdown: setting up a quick online survey

On Thursday, March 12, 2020, the Belgian government announced very strict measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. Citizens were obliged to avoid all unnecessary movements outside their homes in order to maintain social distance. During the weekend following March 13, many nonprofit and public service organizations started to adapt their daily work routines and practices to the new regulations and the COVID-19 crisis.

In order to obtain information on how nonprofit organizations were adapting to state regulations, the Antwerp platform quickly decided to draw up and distribute a short online questionnaire to their network organizations. The questionnaire consisted of five open questions, with representatives of member organizations asked to provide information on: how the delivery of services and support had been adapted; which new and creative practices had been developed; which challenges the organizations encountered; and which needs their target groups were experiencing. Member organizations of the coalition were also asked to formulate expectations concerning the role of the coalition.

The survey was completed by 27 Antwerp organizations in various fields, such as welfare, community work, social groceries and shelters for homeless people, in the period from March 16 to March 20, 2020. The results showed that: (1) the members of the steering committee had adapted to the new situation at “lightning speed” and (2) many respondents were confronted with additional urgent needs of their target groups.

Adapting at “lightning speed”

As all organizations engaged in face-to-face contact with citizens or clients by providing direct services, counselling, and support or group activities to vulnerable target groups, the enforced physical distancing measures had a major impact on their core activities. As a result, they experimented with alternative ways of staying in touch with their target groups. Most of the respondents reported using email and different online tools, such as WhatsApp or Facebook. However, respondents also agreed that they had to do more than merely establish online contact. They were especially worried that such online forums were insufficient to reach the most vulnerable in their target groups, such as those without internet access. Other

respondents emphasized that they feared that, even when internet access was ensured, their clients did not have the necessary skills to communicate through online platforms. Not surprisingly, a pressing issue expressed by many respondents was, therefore, how to inform every citizen of Antwerp in a quick, accessible and multilingual way about the regulations and measures with regard to the health risks of COVID-19. A large number of organizations noted that some target groups were misinformed or – despite the intensive media coverage – had no access to any information. In addition, community workers provided information on the street, in various languages and in various ways. Not only did they work with flyers and posters, but they also used audio-recordings in order to reach people with poor reading skills. Another concern addressed by many organizations was the loneliness and isolation that was felt by certain groups or individuals, such as young people. It is interesting to note that to meet these needs, various practices focused on the principle of proactivity, such as calling people to have a chat and find out whether everything is okay. This “checking in” was very valuable, as the necessary physical distance was bridged in another way, needs could be explored and people reassured.

Need for material services and food packages

One of the most urgent problems experienced during disasters and extreme events is food insecurity among vulnerable and poor target groups (Rao & Greve, 2018; Singh-Peterson & Lawrence, 2015). This was confirmed by many respondents to the survey and all members of the steering committee. During the first weeks of the lockdown, food banks, social groceries and other organizations experienced a rapid rise in demand for all kinds of material aid, such as food, clothing and care equipment. The reasons reported by coalition members for this increase confirms earlier research on why people make use of food banks (Wainwright, 2018). More specifically, several respondents reported that cheaper products were sold out in regular

stores. In addition, the demand for food packages rose due to several “new” target groups turning to food banks and social groceries because they had lost their job or business as a direct result of the lockdown. This was especially the case for self-employed people with few financial reserves who had to close their business, as well as sex workers and people with a precarious job status. Finally, some organizations that worked with poor families also stated that existing food packages did not include specific care products that their target groups needed.

Advocacy role: adopting direct and indirect advocacy strategies

An important question was how the health crisis and the resulting lockdown measures affected the coalition’s advocacy role. As stated above, the coalition was involved in several advocacy activities before the crisis. We observed that it decided to maintain this advocacy role by developing and using direct and indirect advocacy strategies (Arvidson et al., 2018; Verschuere & De Corte, 2015). The direct strategy was developed by maintaining close contact and collaboration with policymakers during the pandemic. The coalition engaged in dialogue with the local government by sending it the results of the internal survey, combined with reported concerns from its steering committee members. Moreover, they organized meetings with several government officials, in which they discussed the precarious situation of vulnerable target groups that needed special assistance and more material and financial support. For example, during the meetings with government officials, the precarious situation of sex workers with children was discussed. The local government officials highly appreciated the efforts of the coalition, as they needed the information to improve their efforts to mitigate problems such as the lack of food packages and the specific problems of particular target groups such as sex workers and young people.

The coalition was also involved in different indirect strategies to create public awareness by informing the national news broadcaster, as well as contacting newspapers and using social media and blogs. One of the most urgent concerns of the coalition was to make visible and to communicate the value and resilience of social workers, such as community workers, outreach and youth workers, who were creatively adapting their practices and staying in touch with their vulnerable target groups. The coalition addressed the crucial role of social workers who could establish very low threshold practices, taking the basic principles of social work into account (Vandekinderen et al., 2019). More specifically, the coalition emphasized the importance of social workers working in proximity with target groups, while taking into account their problem domains (Vandekinderen et al., 2019), as well as the necessary measures to ensure social distancing. Members of the coalition published an article on a blog for social workers. Additionally, journalists were contacted and informed about the important work of these social workers, with this information published in several newspapers. We confirmed the findings of a growing body of literature that emphasizes the important role of social media in creating awareness and (indirect) advocacy strategies (Guo & Saxton, 2014). More specifically, in the context of the Ebola epidemic, Tully et al. (2018) showed that nonprofit organizations used social media to create awareness about the crisis by informing the public about the interventions and new measures that were necessary to tackle the detrimental impact of the epidemic on vulnerable groups.

Brokerage role: distributing information about changes in service delivery and best practices

Another role the coalition adopted in response to the challenges experienced by the network members as a result of the COVID-19 crisis was to provide information on how nonprofit organizations were adapting their daily practices and routines. Interestingly, the way the

coalition mapped and distributed information about good practices to its members is closely related to the concept of brokerage developed by Burt (2004). As individual member organizations experienced many challenges in adapting their own practices to the new situation, they had no time to communicate with other organizations about how they were adapting and which new practices were being developed. None of the respondents had an overview of how the other organizations had changed their activities and provision of support because of the lockdown. In Burt's terms (2004), we found that the COVID-19 crisis and the enforced lockdown regulations created a structural hole in the nonprofit organizations' network. Respondents and steering committee representatives were unaware of changes in various organizations.

The platform, therefore, decided to adopt a brokerage role by bridging the structural holes between the nonprofit organizations that were unable to communicate or distribute information on how their daily practices had changed due to COVID-19. Building further on the very influential work of Burt (2004), we observed that the coalition adopted two levels of brokerage. According to Burt (2004), the simplest form of brokerage is to inform network actors about interesting issues and difficulties. The platform, more specifically, decided to share the information that was gathered in the survey on an open platform with coalition members and government officials. This shared information showed which organizations were experimenting with alternative ways of staying in touch with their target groups and continuing to provide services and support.

Another form of brokerage, according to Burt (2004), is to transfer information on best practices among network actors dealing with specific difficulties and challenges. The platform noticed that many steering committee representatives and respondents to the survey were

looking for information on best practices for inspiration to change their own practices and the delivery of services and support. The coalition addressed this issue by making several of the new initiatives visible through a Facebook page with approximately 1500 followers.

Crowdfunding role: creating a crowdfunding platform to provide complementary material aid

In response to the needs that were experienced by the clients and target groups of coalition members, the coalition also decided to launch a crowdfunding platform. The coalition explicitly decided that funds were needed by the organizations to provide complementary material services and aid that was not provided in the regular food packages distributed by food banks and social groceries. In the first five days after the launch of the crowdfunding platform, the coalition had collected 15.000 euros. To attract more donors, the platform organized a promotional strategy to convince citizens, various foundations and companies to make donations. However, as Zhou and Ye (2018) emphasize, the search for funding through crowdfunding demands strategies that do not make use of the pledger's own network, but relies on the ability to initiate viral network strategies using social media, where individuals pass on messages to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence (Zhou & Ye, 2018).

This was considered a real challenge for the coalition, which was very dense but mainly consisted of social workers and managers as representatives of their organizations. The coalition was thus forced to find new ways to expand its network and to convince the broader public to donate money. Earlier work on the relevance of social media to nonprofit organizations (Guo & Saxton, 2014, 2018) in creating awareness and obtaining funding (Tully et al., 2018) was found to be important here. In this respect, the coalition adopted two types of

social media strategies to find and convince donors (Zhou & Ye, 2018). The first involved strategies that use and expand social networks, with the coalition asking all of its members to share the crowdfunding initiative on their own social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Furthermore, the coalition asked several citizen associations that were not part of the coalition to spread the message. The second approach involved strategies that created a narrative about the worthiness of the initiative (Zhou & Ye, 2018), with the coalition posting short videos to build a narrative on the problems the crowdfunding wanted to address. In particular, famous social media influencers were filmed during a Skype chat with people dealing with lack of material needs due to the lockdown measures. We confirmed the findings of Zhou and Ye (2018), who indicated the importance of individual stories to increase the number of potential funders and to convince them to donate.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed how a nonprofit advocacy coalition continued to provide its services and support to the member organizations and vulnerable target groups during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis and the associated government enforced lockdown (March-June 2020). The nonprofit organizations of this coalition are not involved in the detection and treatment of COVID patients, but provide critical services and support to target groups that experience several needs as a result of the COVID crisis and the lockdown regulations.

Recent work on the COVID crisis already showed important consequences for the functioning of nonprofit organizations (Kim & Mason, 2020; McMullin & Raggo, 2020; Young, et al., 2020). Our findings confirm that advocacy coalitions play a vital role in supporting nonprofit organizations to cope with the consequences of a global pandemic. We found that the expertise of social workers and nonprofit members of the coalition created different kinds of solutions

and developed innovative practices to support vulnerable target groups when confronted with the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting lockdown regulations. In particular, we observed that the coalition was pushed to diversify its activities, leading to the development of three roles in support of its member organizations: a direct and indirect advocacy role, a brokerage role to provide information on new practices, and a crowdfunding role to provide finances for material aid. On this basis, we formulate several paths for further research on nonprofit coalitions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, further scientific work is needed on how such crises impact the organizational capacity of nonprofit coalitions in the long term. Previous studies have already shown that disasters often have a significant impact on the routine activities of organizations and networks (Klüppel et al., 2018). One particularly important characteristic of a pandemic crisis such as the highly contagious COVID-19 is that it will weaken cooperation and may lead to a long-term reduction in organization building (Rao & Greve, 2018). The reason why the coalition in our study was able to build the necessary capacity to support its member organizations during the complex and stressful circumstances can be explained by the coalition's situation before the crisis. We focused on a very active coalition that was intensively involved in all kinds of advocacy strategies, while organizing a constructive dialogue with government officials. The coalition already had access to organizational resources, expertise and contacts before the crisis, which explains its capacity to show resilience during the crisis. Future studies should focus on a diversity of cases, such as investigating practices in less active or dense coalitions.

Second, we observed that social media and the use of the internet were critical for nonprofit organizations confronted with global health crises and lockdown measures (Guidry et al., 2017; Tully et al., 2018). In addition to the use of social media as an indirect advocacy strategy, the Antwerp coalition also used social media in response to the COVID-19 crisis to: (1) make

visible and disseminate information on good practices used by several nonprofit organizations and (2) promote crowdfunding initiatives. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the use of social media and the internet can weaken the relationship with vulnerable target groups. Advocacy coalitions and their organizations claim to represent the interests of such groups through a variety of activities and strategies that seek to influence policy decisions (LeRoux, 2014). Consequently, they need to possess the necessary organizational capacities to gain and maintain the commitment of these groups to their member organizations. We thus need more critical knowledge that will inform both policy and practice on the many challenges and virtues of the virtual turn of advocacy coalitions in times of crises.

Third, online forums and social media have many advantages when physical distancing is enforced through lockdown measures. Research, however, finds that despite the increase in internet access across the world, the most vulnerable groups, such as people living in poverty, the homeless and the elderly, still have poor access to the internet. Nonprofit organizations and social workers should also be aware that internet access needs more effort than providing the hardware and the internet connection. Research has distinguished several types of internet access, such as attitudinal access, skills access and physical access (Kim & Joshanloo, 2020). Nonprofit organizations need to look for innovative ways to remain in touch with vulnerable target groups with limited access to internet or computers. The survey of the Antwerp coalition identified several good practices, such as outreach social workers providing information on the streets. Further research should elaborate on how and which practices nonprofit organizations could best develop to maintain contact and to provide support to people in these most vulnerable target groups.

Finally, we based our analysis on an insider perspective. This means that further studies should preferably take an outsider perspective and adopt a more evaluative approach to the functioning of an advocacy coalition. However, in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the insider perspective may actually be a preferred option for the rapid generation and dissemination of knowledge (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In particular, we strongly believe that the roles observed in our exploratory analysis (advocacy role, brokerage role, and crowdfunding role) are of great value for scientists and practitioners alike. From a theoretical viewpoint, our results contribute to the development of a conceptual framework that can serve as foundation for further research. From a practical viewpoint, it assists nonprofit managers and coalition members in continuing their supportive services to vulnerable target groups during the COVID-19 crisis and associated government enforced lockdowns.

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