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The associative sector during COVID-19: An overview of the issues and challenges of lockdown

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The associative sector in France constitutes a network of mutual acquaintance and aid that is essential in times of crisis. Lockdown, however, has posed an enormous and unprecedented problem for these organizations—whose physical premises tend to be small at best—when it comes to carrying out their missions. Beyond the difficulties they have been facing on a daily basis for several years—such as decreases in and changes to the form of public financing, the loss of subsidized jobs, modifications to their relationship with the public authorities due to the NOTRe law, and changes to governance—lockdown has brought additional challenges, both at the national and regional levels, and for large and small organizations alike.

The thoughts that follow will likely need to be qualified depending on the regional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, we felt it important to draw up an overview of associations' situation in the early days of lockdown as soon as possible,¹ because the questions raised here foreshadow certain developments that are to come in the months and years ahead. The conclusions drawn here are thus incomplete, biased, and dated, and later approaches that rely on a more scientific methodology will no doubt follow. However, this article lays the groundwork and highlights the experience of associations during lockdown.

This overview was developed as part of a study of French associations and foundations on behalf of the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum,² a network of European nongovernmental organizations that publishes a yearly report on several European Union countries, plus a chapter on emerging nonprofit organizations in Russia. Beyond legal, political, and statistical data, the report's bottom-up methodology relies on fifteen interviews with new and old organizations of varying legal forms, sizes, and sectors of activity. They shed light on the problems encountered by associations and foundations over the last three years, as well as the potentially innovative solutions that have been implemented in response. During lockdown, fifteen people working in associations and

¹The study and the writing of the article were completed May 1, 2020.

²Our thanks to EU–Russia Civil Society Forum for allowing this data to be pre-published.

foundations (founders, managers, or board members) were contacted by telephone. This sample is obviously not representative of the associative sector as a whole, but overall the interviews were very valuable.³

We begin by looking at how associations have experienced lockdown very differently depending on their missions and whether or not they have salaried staff. We then discuss the consequences of this situation for the salaried staff and volunteers working in these organizations, as well as for the associations themselves, which have been forced to reinvent their tools of governance and to begin reaching out to a different profile of volunteers.

Lockdown: A wide range of situations depending on associations' missions and size

Associations in the educational, sports, cultural, and humanitarian sector

Associations that manage school or university educational establishments, as well as those that offer activities linked to the academic calendar—sports or leisure clubs, outdoor centers, summer camps, etc.—or preschool facilities, such as daycares or kindergartens, were forced to close from March 13, 2020, at the same time as all public and private schools.

From March 17, the day that lockdown officially began in France, most other associations with employees were closed, as were small “non-essential” stores and many other businesses. If these associations had websites, most of them announced the indefinite interruption of all scheduled activities and occasionally noted that certain programs were to be pursued online. This cessation of activity applied to sports, cultural, and recreational associations (which form the majority), as well as professional training associations, professional integration programs, and other organizations supporting people out of work. Most organizations dealing with health and social action but that do not provide accommodation were also forced to close, since their salaried employees and volunteers were required to stay at home.

Day care for people with disabilities, those in social or psychological distress, the homeless, and people with Alzheimer's, as well as women and children victims of domestic abuse—which are essential activities—disappeared overnight. Another activity primarily performed by associations, homecare for the elderly and people with disabilities, has been maintained only for care and housekeeping for highly dependent persons, and caregivers were required to carry a medical certificate to justify their movements.

³I would like to thank everyone who answered my questions objectively and precisely: Anne-Christine, Anne, Béatrice, Caroline, Nathalie, Charles, Frédéric, Henry, Hugues, Patrick, Paul, Pierre, and Rémi. All errors and biases are of course mine alone.

What has happened to local associations that rely entirely on volunteers, which likely number over 1.3 million in France?⁴ Little is known, because little is published about them outside of the local news. These volunteer-based associations, some of which are part of a federation, are present throughout France and constitute a network of mutual acquaintance and trust. It is therefore likely that they are partly to thank for the neighborhood support groups that have arisen during lockdown.

Associations in the medico-social sector

Unlike social associations that do not provide accommodation, social and medico-social establishments and nonprofit hospitals—whether associative, mutualist, or run by foundations—operate 24/7, 365 days a year. They have continued to care for their residents while respecting social distancing guidelines as much as possible. They are, in effect, quasi-public services, and their conditions of authorization and contractual financing by the state, local government, and Social Security assume uninterrupted provision of service. However, the staff working in these residential establishments have been very poorly protected from the virus, both inside and outside the workplace, because masks, gowns, hygiene caps, screening tests, and hand sanitizer were allocated first and foremost to public hospitals, the front line against the pandemic. As a result, the virus spread rapidly between staff and residents in elderly care homes (known as EHPADs) in the Grand Est and Île-de-France regions, which suffered a considerable number of deaths.⁵

Because they cater to a younger population, assisted living facilities for children and adults with physical or mental disabilities, homeless shelters, and other associative social and medico-social establishments have seen a much lower mortality rate than EHPADs, despite a lack of sufficient protection at the start of the epidemic. The few residents who were infected were able to quickly be isolated and treated, either onsite or at a hospital. Isolation was also the rule in the various elderly care homes in regions less affected by the epidemic. Drug and alcohol addiction rehabilitation centers were also forced to close if they operated only during the day, whereas establishments with onsite accommodation (which often have very few residents), such as the Red Cross, were able to continue operating.

Varied consequences for salaried staff

The salaried staff of associations forced to close were quickly moved to *chômage partiel*, or partial unemployment, and paid by the state. Partial unemployment applies to people who cannot work from home, such as activity organizers at sports or leisure clubs and care workers at the many health and social associations without accommodation, as well as salaried staff at professional

⁴Viviane Tchernonog and Lionel Prouteau, *Le paysage associatif français* (Paris: Dalloz, Juris Éditions, 2019).

⁵The situation is probably less dramatic in other regions (just one death for three EHPADs in Orléans). But at the national level, between one-third and half of all COVID-19-related deaths came from EHPADs, whether they were treated onsite or at a hospital.

integration programs—the example of the association Approche is representative in this regard (see insert).

A dynamic association brought to a halt

Founded in 1992 in Saint-Maur (in the southeastern suburbs of Paris) by a handful of volunteers with the goal of reusing and recycling textile waste, Approche has seen continuous growth. It developed into a professional integration and training program for people facing hardship, without entry criteria. 60% leave with a positive experience, and 25% end up finding long-term employment. The association collects 365 metric tons of merchandise a year, most of it textiles, which is then sorted and repaired before being sold, either directly to the public or to various partners. Anything unusable is sent to a recycling center. Approche has 6 permanent salaried employees and 43 people participating in the professional integration program (15 FTE), as well as 78 volunteers (8 FTE), mostly women, who sort, repair, and manage the secondhand goods. The association has a total budget of 920,000 euros; 50% of its resources come from contractual public funds as a professional integration program, another 40% from sales, and the rest from membership dues (360 members) and donations. As part of the Île-de-France reemployment network, Approche opened a branch in Orly (in the southern suburbs of Paris) on March 9, 2020, but it had to close a few days later. At the time of our interview, the president of Approche was filling out partial unemployment forms for all of the association's staff...

In cultural associations, salaried employees who had worked a sufficient number of hours were able to benefit from the status of *intermittent du spectacle*, which recognizes the intermittent nature of the events sector. This was the case for artists and other association staff that organized events that had to be cancelled, such as summer festivals. However, it is in small cultural associations where employment is least stable and artists most precarious, as they had often not worked enough hours to qualify for this status or for partial unemployment.

Emerging challenges for associations that have continued to operate during lockdown

The rise of remote work and digital governance

The situation of associations that have continued to operate, either fully or partially, is complex and varies according to the sector of activity. Teachers at associative school or university educational establishments moved to teaching remotely and, after a period of adjustment, have done so with some success. Because private schools cater to a wealthier demographic, they have probably lost a smaller proportion of students—those who lack access to the necessary equipment—than public schools and universities; this will certainly exacerbate academic inequalities. Certain associations and foundations facilitated the conversion to remote learning

by providing teachers very early on with documents and exercises suited to the new medium. For example, the association Synlab, which works with teachers in educational priority areas, has put in place a continuity of learning program designed to prevent children from falling behind: 80,000 teachers signed on. The foundation La Main à la pâte, which promotes scientific learning through experiments from a young age, has offered elementary- and middle-school teachers a series of scientific experiments that are easy to do at home and simple to explain. They have received 40,000 connections per day.

The managers of many associations—and certainly those of federations and large charities—have also turned to remote work. Many associations have kept their websites updated, indicating their actions during COVID-19 and increasing their appeals for donations. General meetings, which tend to be scheduled for spring, were often held remotely, while votes were taken electronically or by mail. Similarly, many distributive foundations held board meetings remotely, which allowed them to rapidly disburse voter-approved grants to the relevant associations, including those in third-world countries. Maintaining these statutory authorities remotely certainly allows for day-to-day activities to go on uninterrupted, but not for strategic decision-making to take place. Remote work has been particularly important for the Mouvement associatif, which surveyed its members regarding their reactions to lockdown. Umbrella organizations, first and foremost the Fondation de France, have been able to bring together organizations under their aegises to act in concert on behalf of the most vulnerable populations. National associative federations have compiled information of interest to their members (see insert).

The resources of the UNIOPSS

The UNIOPSS website⁶ provides daily updates of the recommendations from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and other relevant ministries to establishments and services for the elderly, people with disabilities, and highly vulnerable populations. It provides member associations with lists of specialized links for help dealing with the various facets of the COVID-19 crisis: adapting safety and social distancing measures to their establishment and beneficiaries, facilitating personnel management, and listing the various types of public aid that health and social associations are entitled to depending on their sector of activity. Furthermore, regional information is sent to URIOPSS, and member associations can ask questions and get personalized responses.

Associations that defend the rights, interests, and causes of their members, as well as various associative think tanks, have long operated remotely and simply had to intensify this practice. The fact that their websites continued to operate normally during lockdown is proof of their digital savviness. The same goes for distributive foundations and charitable associations, which have intensified and targeted their calls for donations. More generally, most managers of associations

⁶The Union nationale interfédérale des œuvres et organismes privés non lucratifs sanitaires et sociaux (UNIOPSS) (National Interfederal Union of Health and Social Organizations), founded in 1947, comprises regional unions (URIOPSS) and a hundred or so specialized federations and national associations that together represent 25,000 nonprofit organizations.

work remotely to an equal or greater degree than managers of for-profit enterprises of comparable size.

A change in the profile of volunteers

Many volunteers,⁷ especially older ones, from which the presidents of associations tend to be recruited, quarantined even before March 17. Then, when those associations that work with highly vulnerable populations quickly began operating again, they called on the youngest volunteers for help with emergency activities.⁸ The most widespread of these activities, which has also received the most media coverage, has been the distribution of packed lunches to replace the hot meals formerly offered by the Restos du cœur, the Salvation Army, and the Secours Populaire Français, as well as public social restaurants. People living on the street—the homeless, documented and undocumented migrants (many of whom came via Italy), asylum-seeking refugees awaiting a decision on their case, etc.—were fairly quickly sheltered in appropriate associative centers (Aurore, Salvation Army, Secours Populaire, Secours Catholique) or hotels deserted by their usual clientele. Though sheltering these people so quickly had previously seemed impossible, it was necessary to prevent the homeless from wandering through cities and possibly spreading the coronavirus or catching it themselves.

Most of these people were destitute: few received social security or welfare, while the odd jobs they subsisted on, which often paid under the table, had disappeared with the closure of open-air markets, hotels, cafés, restaurants, and construction and repair sites. Begging, as a last resort, is impossible when there's no one on the streets. Along with these very poor “habitual” clients of charitable associations, which provide them with meals, showers, and a place to store baggage and do laundry,⁹ were the many people who had gone from precariousness to poverty in a matter of weeks—particularly but not exclusively in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. These included single mothers, temp workers who could no longer work but did not qualify for unemployment benefits, and French and foreign university students who were no longer provided with meals by their halls of residence. The lines outside solidarity grocery stores and food banks bring to mind the images of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Other associations and foundations, such as the International Federation of Little Brothers of the Poor and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, have called on young volunteers to do the shopping for now-isolated elderly people who had previously been receiving visits from older volunteers. These volunteers have kept in telephone contact with the people they used to visit in order to fight their sense of isolation, to understand their needs, and to encourage mutual aid among neighbors. The Little Brothers of the Poor already had an emergency plan in place from the 2003

⁷<https://fonda.asso.fr/system/files/fichiers/Voluntary%20work%20in%20France%20in%202017.pdf>

⁸The affidavit of movement by special dispensation required to be presented to police features two boxes for volunteers to check: “travel to assist vulnerable persons” or “participation in general interest activities by request of the administrative authority.”

⁹All these services have remained open, with protective measures in place and usually with reduced hours.

heatwave and the H1N1 flu, which shows, if proof were needed, that planning facilitates a quick response...

Local solidarity gradually began to develop, either spontaneously or facilitated by preexisting links formed by associations. More generally, a significant movement of solidarity and engagement has developed during lockdown that goes well beyond the health reserves and associations, although some of them have served as intermediaries. Medical and social work students from all across France have volunteered at hospitals in the regions hit hardest by the pandemic. Young people and families that went out to the countryside or less-affected areas for lockdown have offered their city dwellings to hospital workers in order to reduce their commute times. Restaurant owners have taken from their own reserves and freezers to give these workers good meals, and in doing so have kept some of their staff busy. Students and the unemployed have filled in for foreign seasonal workers at vegetable and fruit farms. Other university and high-school students have offered to tutor pupils struggling with remote learning and who could not get help from family members. Sports volunteers have offered in-home exercise classes or converted to social action while gyms are closed. Finally, women who still know how to sew have made masks for their loved ones and neighbors.

What will remain of this voluntary engagement when life returns to something resembling normality? The tasks substituting those jobs that have been put on hold will fade away on their own, but the experience of new volunteers, as modest as it may be, is sure to leave a mark. This is clearly demonstrated by the monitoring of young people who did their civic service at an association, many of whom continued to work as volunteers. More broadly, the increase in voluntary work seen since the 2008 financial crisis, particularly in health and social associations, will be reinforced. This will serve as an important resource for associations down the road.

Increased calls for generosity and donations

Charitable associations and foundations have redoubled their appeals for donations, preferably online, or by mail. Umbrella foundations (Fondation de France, Caritas, etc.) that had brought together organizations with similar goals have put out common calls. What has the result been? At this point, it is impossible to say. But we can note that the Fondation de France and charities approved by Don en confiance have seen a massive increase in donations, just like in the aftermath of the tsunami in Thailand and the earthquake in Haiti. However, competition, which was already fierce, has increased, as hospitals themselves have begun soliciting donations: fundraising for the Hôpitaux de Paris–Hôpitaux de France foundation, launched by Martin Hirsch, former director of Emmaüs Solidarité, has benefited from the expertise and fame of its president.

The economic model of associations that primarily survived on commercial activity has been upended by the pandemic. Even the Compagnons d'Emmaüs launched a subscription service, despite having made it a point of pride to survive as a sort of rag-and-bone organization: salvaging discarded items, repairing them, and selling them to the public is impossible during lockdown. Will the financial solidarity that these subscription models depend on prove to be a workable solution in the long run? Will households uncertain of their income levels, and even of whether

they will have a job after the health crisis, opt instead to save as a precaution? In-kind donations from businesses have been significant, corresponding to a need to get rid of stock and not let perishable food products go to waste, with specialized associations and ad hoc platforms acting as effective relays. But we have not had a repeat of the charitable one-upmanship seen among France's big businesses and wealthiest individuals in the wake of the Notre-Dame fire of 2019. Instead, there was a more muted competition between two luxury groups, which quickly converted their factories to produce hand sanitizer and cloth masks or made cash purchases in China of hospital masks.

What will the associative sector look like after the pandemic?

Whether it disappears more or less quickly after lockdown ends, or whether it resurges periodically, the COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt leave its mark on every generation that lived through it. The youngest generation may change its life goals as a result. By making death visible in developed countries that previously strove to hide it, by exacerbating visible social inequalities in France and throughout the world, and by drawing attention to the fact that the hierarchy of "essential services" does not correspond to the hierarchy of salaries, this crisis is changing the dominant system of values. The question is whether this change will last. We can therefore look ahead and imagine two scenarios for the future of associations and foundations.

The grim scenario assumes that the change in values will be a fleeting one. When lockdown ends, we will return to business as usual in a distinctly worse economic and social situation: a decline in GDP of at least 10% in 2020,¹⁰ not seen in France since 1945; a rapid uptick in unemployment and business bankruptcies, resulting in social and political tensions; and, finally, the sacrifice of the generation currently entering the labor market. In this case, associations will confront the same scissor effect they were faced with in previous crises: they will have to meet the needs of larger and more precarious vulnerable populations with shrinking sources of public and private financing. The low-overhead volunteer associations across France will survive, as will the largest solidarity associations that received significant media attention as a result of the crisis. But the future will be difficult for associations that were already in dire straits, those with fewer than five salaried employees, particularly in the cultural, sports, and leisure domains. Some will disappear, merge, or be absorbed by associative groups. Others will cut back their services or try to develop commercial activities designed for the general decrease in purchasing power. Still others will merge with organizations from the same sector or create regional economic cooperation clusters (*pôles territoriaux de coopération économique*; PTCEs) with SSE organizations, traditional enterprises, and research laboratories from the same region in order to pool their resources and develop their region.

In the more optimistic scenario, the change in societal and economic values will be an enduring one. Solidarity, nonprofitability or limited profitability, democratic management, concern for the common good and the environment, cooperation rather than competition, initiative and

¹⁰<http://variances.eu/?p=5015>

emancipation instead of assistance: all these values of the SSE—though sometimes more present in texts and speeches than in practice—will spread little by little throughout society. The economy, on a sustainable road to recovery, will be led toward a growth that is more qualitative and richer in employment, where health, education, culture, and the environment command more attention. Associations and foundations will play an increasingly important role, because they have innovative solutions to problems common to many countries: aging populations, work–life balance, the struggle against all kinds of inequalities, respect for human rights, and the reception and integration of migrants and refugees. Throughout the health crisis, associations have demonstrated how quickly they can react and how well they know vulnerable populations. Public authorities at every level can renew the partnerships that have withered away over time.

The future, of course, is what we make it.