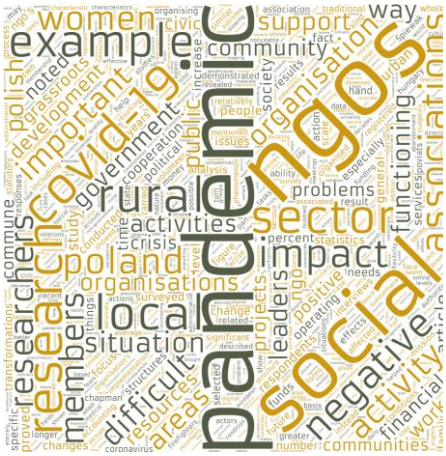
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POLISH RURAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This article describes the extent and nature of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of community-based organisations in rural Poland. The analytical foundation of the study is the research carried out in 2021 on a sample of three hundred and thirty-three rural NGOs. The negative and positive impact of the pandemic on the activities of these organisations were noted. Negative phenomena include a significant slowing down of existing tasks, abandonment of the completion of projects, an exodus of volunteers and active members. The bottom-up organised activity of the rural third sector during the pandemic also brought about noticeable positive phenomena: a widening of the activity field of organisations by new dimensions, an expansion of the cooperation network of rural organisations, and a significant increase in the appreciation of civic activity as a result of the speed and flexibility of self-help activities.

Keywords: rural organisations, grassroots activities, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become one of the most dramatic social experiences of recent decades for the whole world. The scale of the measures taken to contain and suppress it has resulted in major changes (including disruption) to structures and processes in many areas of life that for years had been considered part of the established *status quo*. The social dimension was particularly hard affected, within which major transformations were observed in the lifestyles of all categories and social circles, by the way perpetuated as updated norms of behaviour (for example, raising the level of hygiene in administrative and personal

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procedures). The aim of this article is to describe the extent and nature of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities and selected structural features of the third sector in rural Poland. The analytical basis for the text is research carried out in 2021 on a sample of three hundred and thirty-three rural NGOs and an analysis based on four focus interviews (with a total of 37 people), by a team of rural sociologists from the Institute of Sociology at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the Torun School of Banking.[4]

2. Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities and structure of the non-governmental sector

Some of the world's first analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and activities of NGOs is contained in a research report from as early as the end of March 2020 (!), conducted by the University of San Diego (USA). One of its most important findings was that, although the pandemic-affected society was 'pausing' in a specific way, in parallel the demand for third-sector activities was dramatically increasing (Deitrick et al. 2020). It may not come as a surprise that relatively the earliest and also the most numerous studies on the social impact of the coronavirus pandemic were conducted by health and medical sociologists. In late 2020, a team from Iran led by Mahasti Alizadeh conducted a study in the Tabriz region of Iran on the importance of NGO networking as a key factor in efficient and mass education of the society on COVID-19 prevention as well as the elimination of the social impact of the pandemic in small urban centres and rural areas (Alizadeh et al. 2020). Earlier, another team of physicians and medical sociologists from the University of San Diego examined the opportunities and obstacles to implementing telemedicine and ICT innovations to combat problems in accessing health services in the pandemic era. The importance of the third sector as the most efficient distributor of reliable information has been recognised here (Said et al. 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on relations between the third sector and public administration has been the subject of research in many European countries. Italian researchers revealed, for example, that the fight against the pandemic, while it did not increase the field of cooperation between the third sector and the public sector, it did strengthen mutual partnership in many areas, especially at the local level. An example is the services provided by NGOs, which, thanks to financial support, could be provided digitally, i.e., via the Internet. However, not all organisations have been able to cope with the financial problems and even moving some services online has not saved them from reducing their activities. The conclusions drawn by the Italian researchers refer to the call for an increase in the scope of partnerships between NGOs and the public sector and, the need to reinvest in NGOs that have passed the test of their mission with distinction and which, in many situations, have initiated activities beyond the budgetary capacity of their organisations. Italian researchers asked themselves to what extent a crisis situation such as a pandemic triggered an 'instinct for cooperation' in the public sector on a scale that did not exist in a 'normal' situation. The research shows that the closer to the local community, the more frequently this cooperation was initiated and the more effective it was, but the question that remains open is whether it will continue also in the future and not only in a crisis situation (Corvo et al. 2022). According to Italian researchers, the third sector, although it has demonstrated a relatively good resilience to the crisis situation and, at the same time, the ability to adapt its services to dynamically emerging needs, as well as the ability to raise funds, may paradoxically not receive much support from the public sector for future activities, as it has proven that it can, colloquially speaking, 'deal with it' anyway, even in the greatest crisis (Corvo et al. 2022). The overall message is that the state (local government) is willing to ask for help and knows that NGOs will not fail. These in turn, despite the lack of sufficient resources, are able to obtain them anyway and fulfil not only their mission, but also to expand (modify and adapt) their action to the needs in a crisis situation.

[4] Research project carried out for the Polish Rural Forum with funds raised from the National Freedom Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development as part of the 2018 – 2030 Civil Society Organisations Development Programme. The research covered a broad spectrum of issues in the functioning of rural NGOs in Poland, and the topic of the impact of the pandemic was one element of it. Those interested in the details of our other studies are encouraged to contact the corresponding author.

Miriam Bodenheimer and Jacob Leidenberger pointed out that the coronavirus pandemic opened a 'window of opportunity' for societies to transform more rapidly economically and socially towards more sustainable development, largely as a result of the clash between the unsustainable lifestyle of modern societies and, the rapid lifestyle transformations associated with the pandemic. This transformation, as the article argues, is only possible in a situation of widespread public debate on the social engineering of redirecting social attention towards, among other things, the reconstruction of social relations in local communities. As stated, the coronavirus pandemic demonstrated the fundamental role of NGOs as agents of this change. (Bodenheimer & Leidenberger 2020).

A study of NGO leaders in the UK (while the pandemic was still ongoing) found that, despite serious concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the organisation's finances and therefore the organisation's ability to meet the needs of its beneficiaries, leaders nevertheless remained downright stoic. And while these fears were not groundless, UK researchers saw the reason for such an optimistic and measured attitude among leaders as being due to their resilience developed over the years in the face of ongoing challenges, not just of a financial nature. It can be claimed that this is the strength of the third sector, which is paradoxically reinforced by periodic financial turbulence and crisis management of the organisation. A characteristic trait of the (surveyed) leaders was being constantly on the lookout for new opportunities despite the uncertainty resulting from the prolonged restrictions of isolation and distance. According to British NGO leaders, the test in this situation was passed mainly by the many donors spontaneously responding to the NGO's needs. However, the question they constantly asked themselves was how long such relationships could be maintained, as the crisis might soon affect philanthropists too (Chapman 2020). There is another interesting finding from the UK research. It is a characteristic of NGO leaders to think about the future with the conviction that not all plans can be realised, and this situation should simply be accepted. This does not mean that there are only optimists among leaders. There is also no shortage of those who look to the future primarily with apprehension or, at the very least, with a wait-and-see or even ambivalent attitude (Chapman 2020). Similar results were obtained when analysing the situation of the third sector in Scotland, about which it was written that "Scotland's Third Sector didn't wait around and nurse its wounds. Instead, it diversified – and fast" while emphasising that NGOs adapted to the new situation almost instantly by customising their service profile to current needs. An example is given of organisations that have taken on the task of preparing and distributing food parcels to the most deprived, while on a daily basis providing counselling and therapy services (Research commissioned by the STV Children's appeal 2020).

Meantime, another survey of NGO leaders on the impact of the pandemic, planned after two years, coincided with the new crisis brought about by the war in Ukraine. Thus, while the problem of the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of the third sector has so far been considered in terms of short-term periods, today there is talk not only of the long-term, but also of a combination of the negative effects of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflation, where the increase in production costs is largely passed on to consumers. It is recognised, therefore, that building the long-term resilience of the third sector has never faced such a difficult challenge before (Pierce 2022). Especially if public opinion is shaped by statements such as those published in Forbes magazine: 'If the Pandemic crippled the global supply chain, the war in Ukraine knocked it to its knees'. However, Tony Chapman believes that the third sector can cope with such a crisis as well, because the basis of its activities, apart from finance, is after all voluntary work and the unpaid commitment of people who have something more valuable to offer than money, namely their time. Furthermore, Chapman emphasises that well-managed NGOs will do fine. Of the organisations he has observed over the past 14 years, none have shut down, and the key to their success has been their ability to anticipate and prepare for change (Chapman 2022). However, many organisations have neither the competences nor the skills or resources to anticipate the future and, in addition, to respond effectively to change, and after all, the point is not for the third sector to compete with itself, but not to leave these weaker organisations behind, sentencing them to the end of their mission (Tageo et al. 2021).

Exploring the theme of bottom-up efforts to minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural India, Anwesha Dutta and Harry Fischer showed how the pandemic had the effect of crystallising and consolidating entirely new and quite effective ways and techniques of collaboration between government

(or local government) agencies and small, rural residential associations. This would not have been possible, as has been demonstrated, if these organisations had not previously been supported financially and administratively. Instead, their presence in the local environment has influenced public confidence in partnership activities related to, for example, COVID-19 vaccination or adherence to preventive care among Indian villagers (Dutta & Fischer 2021).

The pandemic also revealed many weaknesses of NGOs, such as a lack of stable sources of funding, insufficient resources and skills, which are crucial in the face of the demands made by digital transformation. For this reason, many of them either suspended their activities or simply fell behind those organisations that not only sustained themselves after the pandemic, but also strengthened themselves during the crisis situation. According to Valentin Tageo, among others, rebuilding the third sector after a pandemic will require not only theoretical reflection but, above all, bold political decisions (Tageo et al. 2021).

Research conducted for the European Economic and Social Committee suggests that the condition of the third sector after the pandemic may give cause for moderate optimism. For example, the fact that civil society organisations proved to be extremely resilient during the pandemic was seen as a positive sign. Many of them were the first to be able to reorganise their activities in such a way that they could respond to the needs of the local community as soon as possible. What distinguishes NGOs from the public and private sectors is first and foremost their rapid response time to a situation. In addition, the pandemic has changed the way many organisations operate, which is particularly evident in the area of activities moving online, which has definitely accelerated the process of digitalisation of the third sector. As a result, organisations have been able to reach the recipients of their services more quickly and to carry out their work more proficiently and effectively, not infrequently expanding their area of influence. According to analysts, it was also easier to build coalitions between organisations of organisations, and there were more frequent (than in the run-up to the pandemic) exchanges of experiences and the development of common positions on actions within the competences of public administration. According to the researchers, all this has helped to improve the visibility of NGOs in society and has had a positive impact on raising awareness of the momentous role that NGOs play in society on a daily basis (Pazderski et al. 2022). On the other hand – as it has been described many times (Pollard & Court 2008) – representing the afore-mentioned characteristics, grassroots organisations are not always well perceived by local authorities (political competition, showing the inadequacies of the functioning of the local government bureaucracy, etc., Wojciechowska 2022).

However, it should be remembered that in many areas, the pandemic has negatively affected the functioning of NGOs. Many of them, especially the smallest and those located in rural areas, simply suspended their activities. The negative consequences of the pandemic were also not dealt with by organisations that brought together specific social groups, such as seniors or the disabled, social categories that were particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion and for whom moving the NGO's activities online did not change much. It is clear from research conducted in various European centres that a significant percentage of such organisations that suspended their activities during the pandemic have not resumed their activities to date. And this is not just about the general conditions of the organisation, but also about factors such as: exhaustion from work that combines volunteering with professional activity as well as deterioration of mental condition, which was influenced by factors associated with long-term isolation combined with increasing uncertainty about the future. It was therefore difficult for volunteers to maintain an adequate mental and physical state in a situation of constant balancing between work, volunteering and private life (Pazderski et al. 2022).

According to the authors of the report, *The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space*, some EU member state governments used the pandemic to reduce the transparency of their actions making it difficult for citizens to control them. Under the pretext of countering the effects of the pandemic, governments introduced measures that limited fundamental rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, while silencing any critical opinions of independent journalists and community activists (Pazderski et al. 2022). Recent research in Hungary, too, has revealed the worrying phenomenon of the threat to the idea of civil society in general: in a situation where state structures have

skilfully managed the fear of a pandemic, 'by the way', so to speak, diminished, devalued or even blocked the activities of the third sector. Since 2010, with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party coming to power, a shift away from social dialogue and democratic forms of political decision-making on social issues has been observed in Hungary (Kornai 2017). Agnes Kövér, Attila Antal and Izabella Deák wrote about the "complete annexation of civic space" – typical of Hungary in the pandemic era – by central agencies, subordinating civic initiatives through the creation of quasi-partnership structures (Kövé, Antal & Deák 2021). The Hungarian third sector can undertake anti-covid prevention and aid actions on the condition that it does so under the auspices of partnerships controlled entirely by the government. This restriction even extended to church organisations. This is an example of a kind of governmentalism, where the public sector imposes on NGOs forms and ways of working typical for governmental structures, in the name of expanding the level and reach of its power. As a result, NGOs lose the advantages typical of their sector (flexibility, grassroots activation) in favour of acquiring the disadvantages typical of the public sector (fossilisation, bureaucratisation, delayed reaction to unusual problems). From yet another angle, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the light and dark side of the phenomenon of 'outsourcing' public tasks to the third sector by triggering the phenomenon of so-called 'grantosis' (Śpiewak 2016). In many countries, as a consequence of lockdown, fears were raised about the loss of opportunities for local government institutions to support marginalised groups (the disabled, the elderly, the lonely, etc.). Counting on the (many times confirmed in emergency situations) effectiveness of NGO's at the local level, the government and local authorities at the beginning of the pandemic widely opened the tap of financial support for them in order to de facto cover up the level of their own ineffectiveness and inefficiency through their actions. This resulted in an unhealthy competition for resources, which Ruta Śpiewak described as a 'race for grants'. In the case of Poland – according to Śpiewak – this race was highly politicised. Preference was given to organisations that the current government in Poland considered to be "providers of the electorate", such as Rural Women Associations or Rifle Associations.

Maria Ochab believes that the greater the scale of the negative consequences of a pandemic, the greater the problems NGOs have to face from organising ad hoc grassroots activities, mobilising civil society in emergencies, to competing with each other for survival (Ochab 2021). Such situations have, for example, been experienced by organisations in societies where citizens have always had to rely heavily on their own efforts to provide security for themselves and their families because they cannot rely on much help from a corrupt or incompetent political class, such as in Brazil (Ochab 2021).

In Poland, as early as June 2020, a team of researchers from the Poznań University of Economics published the results of a study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of NGOs in Poland (Schmidt 2020). This was a non-representative, relatively small-scale (115 respondents) study, which produced conclusions that were confirmed many times later. At this, after all, early stage of the pandemic, a significant decrease in the activity of many NGOs in Poland was noted, including discontinuation (20% of cases). There were reported problems with continuity of functioning, with the implementation of projects, with financing the activities of associations, and finally with the lack of support at this difficult moment from the authorities.

Among the most important, representative studies on the impact of the pandemic on the third sector in Poland were those carried out in mid-2020 on behalf of the Klon/Jawor Association. From the perspective of the topic of this article, it is necessary to point out that these were the first data in which organisations operating in rural areas of our country were included and highlighted in the analyses.

Karwacki (2022), in a study based on the analysis of more than four hundred and fifty diaries of the pandemic era, showed, among other things, completely new, post-pandemic ways of realising traditional habits of Poles. The same diaries were analysed by researchers from the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The findings revealed profound changes in social relations, including the emergence of new tensions, an increase in prejudice against strangers or a re-evaluation of relations in local communities (Posłuszny et al. 2020). Most interestingly from the perspective of this discussion, however, the pandemic triggered widespread transformations of the institutional system of society. Firstly (and most obviously), it affected organisations forming the administrative system of the state, i.e., health services, offices or schools (Helak & Żakowiecki 2020).

Secondly, the pandemic caused (sometimes painful) transformations in the structure, methods of operation and development directions of enterprises. Thirdly, significant changes associated with the pandemic also occurred in the third sector, and these are, as the published research results show, very serious (Jones 2021; Chapman 2020; Statistics Poland 2020, Klon/Jawor 2021).

In conclusion, it is important to note a number of similarities emerging from the analyses of studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the NGO sector worldwide. Firstly – the negative impact was mainly manifested in the slowing down and, in many cases, freezing of the organisations' operations. This was compounded by financial problems resulting from the stoppage of externally funded projects. On the other hand, many of the organisations proved to be exceptionally resilient to the conditions of lockdown, often constituting in this particular situation the first and, for many of the first weeks – as it later turned out, the most difficult for society as a whole – the only organised social structure providing support to local communities. Most of the studies cited above have shown that social organisations operating in small local communities have demonstrated a widespread capacity to rapidly shift their activities into fields and forms not previously explored. A third type of similarity can be collectively described through the prism of reinforcement in times of global pandemic, especially during successive lockdowns and pressures of the governmentalisation of the NGO sector.

3. Third sector in rural Poland

The structure and dynamics of the rural third sector in Poland have been the subject of much research and analysis for years. This is due to at least several reasons.

Firstly, rural NGOs have been a very important part of local communities for almost a century, thanks in part to the interpenetration of the local government and NGO sectors. Representatives of the local political elite function in parallel in community organisations as their leaders, which, by the way, has its good and bad sides. Good, because it is local community activists who take up important political positions, which is reflected (at least in theory) in an increase in the quality of governance, and is in practice a sign of the realisation of democratic ideas at their roots. It is bad because it results in blocking the channels of social advancement for young social activists, actually discouraging them from getting involved in social issues, and consolidates local arrangements into dysfunctional clientelistic structures or social and family closed clans (Goszczyński, Kamiński & Knieć 2013).

Secondly, the interest of researchers in the issue of rural inhabitants organising themselves into civic associations stems from the focus of social sciences on the phenomenon of organised society in general, one of the earliest studied manifestations of which were nineteenth- and twentieth-century agricultural cooperatives and rural benefit funds. Polish sociology also took a very early interest in other forms of organisation of rural society, including interwar associations of rural youth (Chałasiński 1938).

Thirdly, the rural third sector has for decades been formed and dominated by two types of organisations: rural women associations and volunteer firefighters[5]. For years they have been – and still are – the most important and at the same time, extremely specific element organising the social life of the Polish countryside. However, what has been noticeable in recent years is, on the one hand, an increase in the activity of rural women associations, mainly due to the possibility of applying for government subsidies for statutory activities, and, on the other hand, increasing problems in recruiting new members into the ranks of volunteer firefighters, resulting, among other things, from a change in the priorities of rural youth, from educational aspirations or the choice of other forms of leisure activities (Marcysiak 2021).

The third sector in rural areas has been clearly growing for more than two decades. Data from Statistics Poland shows that in 2020, there were 95.2 thousand registered non-profit organisations in Poland (Statistics Poland 2021), and one in four NGOs in Poland were based in a rural area (Arczewska et al. 2020). However, if one takes into account that many organisations operated in an informal way, the total could turn out to be much higher. For example, data from the National Court Register shows that a further

[5] Both types of organisations are present in rural areas in Poland for more than 150 years.

53 brigades of volunteer firefighters were registered between March 2021 and June 2022 and now totalling 16,443, compared to 16,390 the year before. This is also the case for sports clubs and rural women associations located in the countryside (Arczewska et al. 2020), as well as hunting clubs and church (parish) organisations, which, according to estimates by Statistics Poland, number on average four to five in each of the approximately 6000 rural parishes, and whose activities almost in every case go beyond support for religious worship (Sadłoń 2019; Statistics Poland 2014). In the past, surveys by Statistics Poland also revealed the scale of inactive organisations, i.e., those that did not carry out statutory activities. For example, in 2008, this was the case for as many as a quarter of all registered organisations, which amounted to 71,000 actively operating foundations, associations and social organisations out of over 90,000 registered entities (Statistics Poland 2010). According to a recent report published by the Klon/Jawor Association, approximately 26 percent of the 138,000 total organisations in Poland are registered in rural municipalities (Charycka, Gumkowska & Bednarek 2022). This indicator did not change significantly until around 2012. The dynamic development of the third sector can also be seen from the fact that the number of registered associations and similar social organisations has increased by as much as 10 per cent over the next decade (Statistics Poland 2019), although it should be noted that there are still fewer rural organisations and associations than entities in larger urban centres, but significantly more than in small towns. This demographic has obviously caught the attention of and continues to trouble researchers, who explain its intensity among other things by the formalisation of many long-established informal groups. In conclusion, it should be added that rural organisations, in relation to urban ones, are characterised by a smaller number of members, much smaller budgets, and a higher level of dependence on funding offered by local governments (Charycka & Gumkowska 2021a). On the other hand, rural organisations are more likely than urban ones to declare a good quality of cooperation with the local government, and the intensity of these relationships is also higher.

Fourthly, the third sector has for decades been a platform for the emancipation of rural women towards their fuller participation in rural political and cultural life. Monika Kwiecińska-Zdrenka (2010), in her study *Prawa podstawowe kobiet wiejskich w Polsce: odcienie marginalizacji* [Basic Rights of Rural Women in Poland: Shades of Marginalisation], showed how rural women's involvement in civic activities builds their position within traditionally patriarchal structures of family and community and is the starting point for shedding the corset of cultural subordination. In turn, Katarzyna Zajda (2015) noted that in newly formed rural local partnerships (for example, Local Action Groups[6]), rural women were characterised by higher levels of political participation and, were more likely to be involved in the governance process at the local level.

Fifthly, in recent years, social researchers have also been focusing on the phenomenon of social activism within rural functional areas of large cities, where, among other things, they are interested in the incredible increase of involvement in community affairs of the so-called new rural inhabitants. One of the analytical procedures adopted is the perspective of the gentrification of suburbs by the urban middle class, which brings a new quality to the rural third sector, among others (Zwęglińska 2019). Community organisations in rural areas more often represent a leadership model, based on the position and charisma of an individual often coming from a background of generations being involved in local activities. A consequence of the dominance of this model is the problem of identifying successors to leaders – a result of the suppression of grassroots initiative.

The pandemic period exposed many NGOs to a severe test in terms of their ability not only to fulfil their statutory tasks and the resulting services, but above all to survive. The situation enforcing irregularly declared states of isolation resulted in a limited ability to raise funds from organised fundraising (also from membership fees), uncertainty in obtaining public funds for the implementation of planned activities, as well as fear of accounting for grants. One of the most important problems, however, was the sharp decline in volunteer activity or its complete departure, with one in three NGOs already suspending their activities in the first months of the pandemic (Charycka & Gumkowska 2020). Nevertheless, third sector actors showed great commitment to help during the pandemic, although

[6] More than 300 Local Action Groups are operational in Poland at the moment. Most of them were established in 2004-2007.

research shows that this help was less in comparison to the help offered by family, government, neighbours and local government (Kalinowski & Wyduba 2020).

On the other hand, this situation has helped to accelerate the digital transformation process, forcing a transition of activity focus to the web. However, this was not an easy endeavour, not only due to the limited digital competences of the members of the organisation in many cases or the lack of technological resources, but above all to a complete change in the quality of the provision of many services, including care, especially where the beneficiaries of the third sector were people also facing the same deficits. This was not a problem observed only in Poland, as it also occurred in other European countries affected by the pandemic (Jones 2021, Corvo et al. 2022). On the positive side, the increased competence of volunteers is of considerable importance in view of similar problems in the future, which cannot be excluded or underestimated. Therefore, what emerges from the research of the Klon/Jawor Association is a picture of perceived positive consequences of the pandemic for NGOs, as measured by new activities and cooperation undertaken with other actors (Charycka, Gumkowska 2021b). This does not change the fact that there is still a challenge for greater integration between public sector organisations and the third sector in crisis situations such as the pandemic.

4. Brief characteristics of the study and sample

The study, selected results of which we present in this article, took place in 2021 (survey questionnaire in July and August, focus group interviews in September). Due to the pandemic-related sanitary restrictions in force during the project, we had to make a number of important decisions regarding the execution of the study, modifying the initial plans and the assumed methodology. We decided to conduct the relatively extensive survey questionnaire (which also included many open-ended questions) and focus group interviews by telephone[7] and online meetings. In this paper, we present selected issues from the questionnaire part of the survey (related to the covid theme)[8], taking into account both statistical data and free-form responses, and supplement this with information gained from the group interviews.

During the quantitative survey, we interviewed 333 respondents – individuals who represented the drawn NGOs. They were acting as leaders of these entities (presidents, directors, chairpersons or board members). Respondents were selected using multistage sampling. Taking into account the administrative division of Poland into voivodeships and poviats, we focused on the so-called rural poviats (drawing in turn: voivodeships, rural poviats, NGOs). We encountered a serious problem related to the disregard of the obligation of land poviat authorities to publish a list of NGOs operating in theiforumr area. In addition, in the draw, we used the existing database at the disposal of Polish Rural Forum (FAOW), which contained several hundred rural NGOs. The examined leaders represented organisations from all over Poland. In addition, during four focus interviews, we spoke to a total of 37 people, selected in a deliberate manner, including 25 women and 12 men, representing different types of NGOs from different regions of Poland. It was not uncommon for one leader to be a representative of more than one organisation, for example, as a member of volunteer firefighters and, also an activist in a local association.

5. An analysis of research results

The study was conducted to show, among other things, if and how the pandemic had affected the activities of the rural third sector. The NGO leaders' statements show that, overall, the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of the organisations they represent was **definitely noticeable** – severe and moderate were indicated by 87 percent of respondents (Figure 1).

[7] These were not CAPI or CAWI type interviews - the interviewer conducted the interview over the phone by filling out a printed survey questionnaire, marking the indicated answers and entering information from the open questions.

[8] The questionnaire consisted of several sections on issues not covered in this article, such as relations with (supra)local authorities, the local environment, financial issues, logistics, project implementation problems, etc.

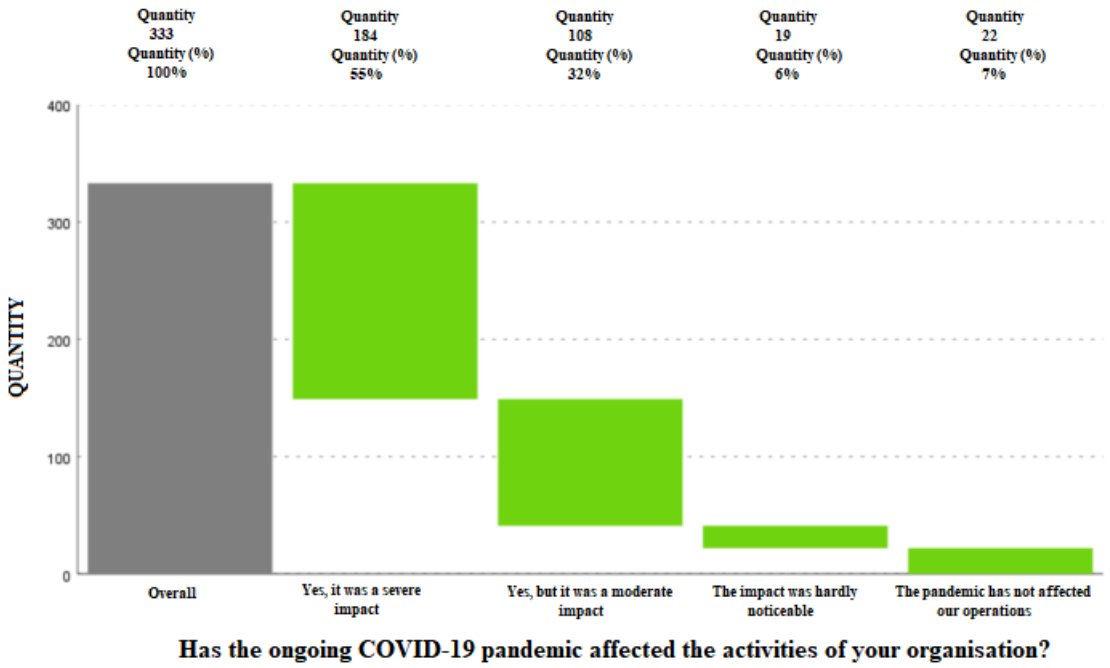


Fig 1. Opinions on the impact of the pandemic on the activities of the NGOs consulted. Source: own elaboration

Referring to the scale of NGO operations[9], it can also be noted that the most severe effects of the pandemic (serious) were more often indicated by organisations operating at the rural (61.4%) and national (70.8%) levels, thus, in some measure at the extremes of the 'localness continuum'. On the other hand, the least impact was felt by those operating at the voivodeship level.

Some surprise when analysing the responses was the rather low percentage of indications for negative feelings about the impact of the pandemic, but various issues were nevertheless reported. In the questionnaire, NGO leaders were given the opportunity to mark the extent of the negative impact of the pandemic, both the specific issues selected by the researchers and those listed independently in the open section. The rating that respondents could give ranged on a scale from 1 (the pandemic was not important) to 5 (the pandemic was very important). Referring to these indications, we performed a factor analysis[10] and identified three main issues regarding the negative impact of the pandemic, which can be described as:

- organisational-administrative (related, for example, to logistical problems, such as difficulties in organising the work of the office or board, lower attendance at meetings or general membership meetings),
- leading to a weakening of the organisation's condition (decrease in the number of members, lower activity of committed members, reduction of the organisation's budget),
- project-related (associated with the need to suspend or even abandon projects).

It is worth mentioning that although these issues were signalled as being the most perceptible, their negative impact was, as mentioned above, rated on a scale of 1 to 5 "only" at 3.5 on average. Looking at the ratings for the respective effects of the pandemic, it can be seen that it proved to be the most troublesome in terms of project implementation (both in the case of having to suspend projects and abandoning them completely), and the hindrance of activity related to the organisation of meetings or gatherings (Figure 2).

[9] We proposed a scale of operations, taking into account: village, commune, district, voivodeship and country.

[10] Analysis for KMO = 0.65, Bartlett's sphericity test p<0.001, Varimax rotation applied. Number of factors determined with consideration of the Kaiser method and scree plot.



Fig 2. Opinions on the negative effects of the pandemic [%]. Source: own elaboration

Compared to 2019, in which the surveyed NGOs carried out an average of 10 projects, the mean in 2020 – a year in which the pandemic (and sanitary restrictions) was already ongoing – dropped to 6 projects carried out. We found that the annual number of accomplished projects is only slightly correlated with the length of the NGO's existence. This means that NGOs with long tenure did not implement significantly more projects. It is also worth noting that while the correlation was at all visible in 2019, it disappears in 2020. The pandemic erased the differences, and longer tenure – at least in the studied initial phase of the pandemic (the 'getting used to the situation' phase), did not prove to be a significant advantage.[11] Very interestingly – in 2020, organisations up to one year old proved to be very active! According to the free-form statements, focus interviews – the pandemic has slowed down/stopped the projects of NGOs with longer tenure and thus the youngest organisations have "caught up" with those operating longer. Newly established organisations, not being burdened with the problems of accounting for and following up on projects, were able to settle more quickly into the pandemic reality, to define themselves more efficiently in action (without unnecessary 'ballast') during this unpredictable period of time. This 'ballast' was defined by the surveyed leaders as the necessity to modify projects or complications arising in the preparation of applications and accounting for projects, and ultimately also the return of money: "complicated procedure of delivering documents, of carrying out the call for proposals", "the mode of implementation of activities was hindered, a large number of formal corrections in projects/measures", "we had to return funds for a project that was not implemented, later we were afraid that the situation would repeat itself so we did not submit applications".

As already mentioned, the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of the third sector was sometimes surprisingly positive. However, we would not describe the positive effects of the pandemic as strong. We asked respondents to use a cafeteria of answers: "yes", "no", "no opinion" to address the issues we mentioned (Figure 3). Respondents declared that the pandemic first and foremost allowed their

[11] Kendall's tau b and Spearman's rho in 2019 were 0.15 and 0.2 respectively for $p<0.01$, in 2020 the correlations turned out to be statistically insignificant (analyses were performed on data not categorised into ranges).

organisations to "show that we are needed" (47 percent of affirmative responses), to fill the gap that appeared during the epidemic "for example, we sewed masks, provided assistance to a hospital, started volunteering for people who were sick, in quarantine, dependent" (44 percent of affirmative responses), and encouraged them to take a somewhat risky action in previously unexplored areas – "we started to act in other fields where we had not acted before" (40 percent of affirmative responses).

Although the pandemic demonstrated the need for grassroots local initiatives (both reinforcing this belief for those involved in the third sector and, demonstrating it to those benefiting from these activities), it did not result in an influx of new members to the surveyed organisations. Only 6 percent of entities declared that the pandemic had made it possible to 'gain new members', and 10 percent declared that 'there was an increase in people who became active'. Our research confirms a great deal of fatigue among association leaders trying to balance work, family life and NGO activities, especially in such crisis situations. It is worth pointing out that Polish rural NGOs are often the domain of women, for whom reconciling these roles can be particularly difficult: *With us it looks like this. Formally there is a structure of a whole board, and in fact everything is done by one person, or as they say: 'a bricklayer, a plasterer, an acrobat'. So, a single person runs the events, raises funds and accounts for them, while activating the others. In the long run this is difficult to sustain, like such a locomotive that has no support. People do come, but as soon as you try to manage their time and allocate tasks, they withdraw, claiming they don't know how to do it, yet I also do a lot of things without a clue. This is difficult because I also have children, a farm, a rural women association and an organisation. All these requires dedicating many hours of my private time.*

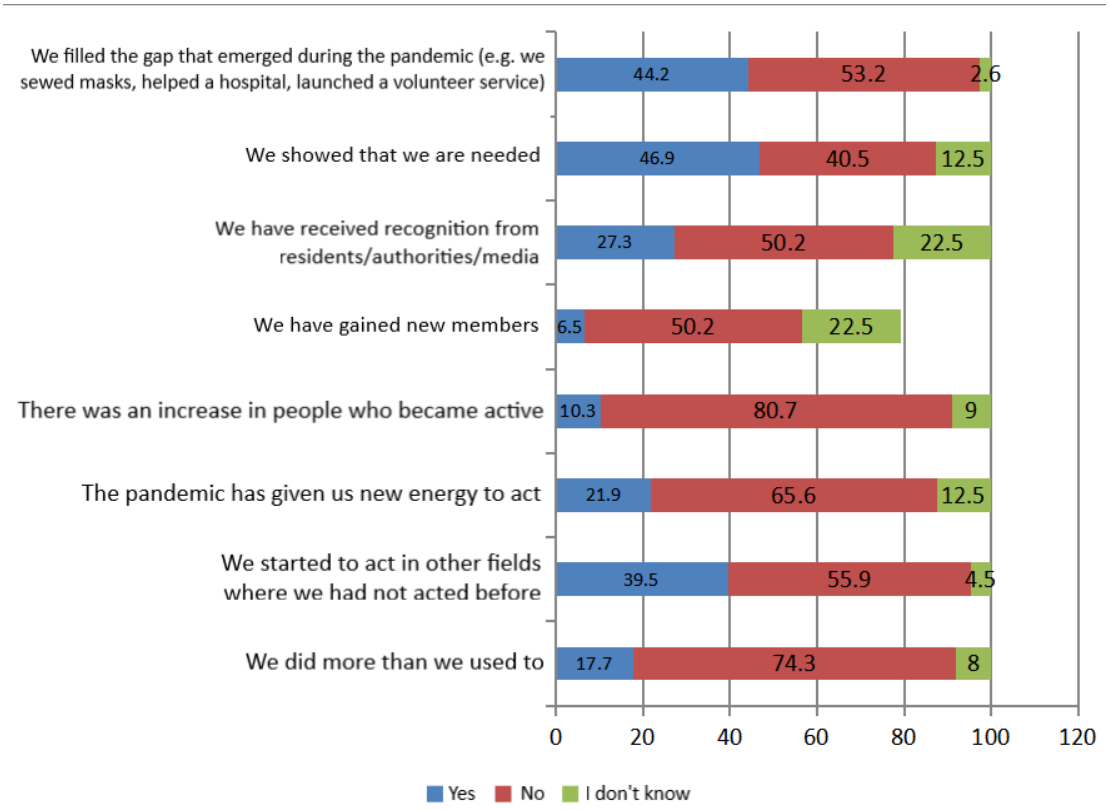


Fig 3. Opinions on the positive effects of the pandemic [%]. Source: own elaboration

It is also worth noting that the leaders surveyed, did not fully feel appreciated their efforts to deal with the pandemic – half of the respondents indicated that they did not "receive recognition from residents, authorities or the media". As can be seen from the data in Figure 3, the organisations that confirmed that they had received recognition for their actions during the pandemic also rated their existing cooperation slightly better in general, and at different levels (the higher the average, the better the assessment of the cooperation with the institution: from 1 – 'very negative' to 5 – 'very positive').

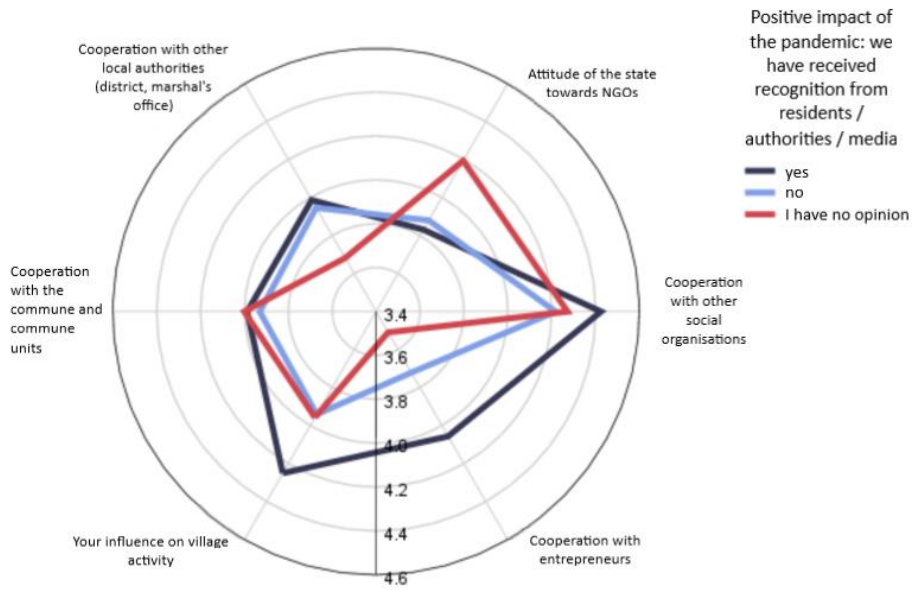


Fig 4. Average ratings of selected aspects of NGO performance in the face of responses to the question on recognition gained in the pandemic. Source: own elaboration

It can be noted, also taking into account the statements from the open questions and the focus interviews conducted, that the "climate of activities" is not described as favourable for third sector actors – both in terms of attracting new members or, actively involving people already associated with the organisation, and in terms of activities at state level (regulatory and legal, related to fundraising or creating a good atmosphere for the functioning of the third sector): *"Organisations are seen as claimants. Not as a partner. Financial assistance to organisations is treated as if we are 'begging' for this money, not on the basis that we are also entitled to small grant funds and alcohol funds in general. The money is divided apart from us. We are seen as obstructing the distribution of money", "Politics kills everything, there is fear of the ruling elite – we are afraid to say 'no' (I work in the local authority). They are clipping wings, hindering the development of any kind. People are afraid of losing their jobs because of Law and Justice. People are closed because they are afraid, they have lost faith that cooperation can achieve anything", "The local government treats NGOs like enterprises that have everything. We have never been invited to any interaction. When someone takes the initiative, it is us. The local government – especially the commune, which has the least reason to behave this way – treats organisations as if they were clients, not partners. I didn't even have time to react duly – they obliged the organisation to include the phrase 'public task carried out with the help of commune funding'. And we do not implement thanks to the commune, we implement instead of the commune. Thanks to the organisation. And, for example, the district and the voivodeship – [claim] an action 'co-financed by', indicate cooperation. These three levels of government; by opening calls, they don't give money for the development of organisations – the local government drains organisations. Both the district and the commune require proof of their own contribution. And they cut funding", "Officials are sometimes incompetent or reluctant to be socially active".*

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The results of the analyses of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Polish rural non-governmental sector presented in this article are broadly in line with the conclusions of other studies conducted around the world.

The impact of the pandemic on the functioning of organisations operating in the Polish countryside was definitely noticeable – as many as 87 percent of respondents considered it to be serious and moderate. Traditional rural organisations, especially rural women associations, were most affected by the changes resulting from the pandemic conditions. However, it should be clearly noted that the impact was not only negative.

Among the damage that the COVID-19 pandemic caused to the Polish rural third sector, the first to be mentioned was the suppression of activity, which in turn translated, among other things, into the abandonment of many projects, as well as the withdrawal of until then active members. Another negative effect was an exodus of volunteers, mainly in a wave of general concern about the risks of social contact. There were also problems of an administrative nature (problems in organising a general members' meeting, difficult contacts with the board of directors and the audit committee) and of a budgetary nature (decrease in the organisation's income, cancellation of funding in the face of the risk of no beneficiaries).

What is surprising is the relatively high percentage of surveyed organisations that declared that the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on their activities and themselves in general. Nearly half of rural NGOs (47 percent) demonstrated their social strength during this difficult time – these actors were often the first, even before commune institutions, to start organising and providing support in the local environment, they were effective in mobilising the hidden resources of rural communities, and they were also relatively flexible in changing existing courses of action (for example, volunteer firefighters distributed masks sewn by rural women associations to residents; sports clubs organised shopping deliveries for the elderly and sick). As a result, it is not surprising to see an often occurring – among the leaders of the surveyed NGOs – summary of the pandemic as a time when they 'felt needed'. A positive function of the surveyed actors' activity in the difficult times of the pandemic was also to (often for the first time in their history) go beyond their traditional, in many cases narrow (limited to one village) operating environment in search of partners for joint implementation of new tasks.

During the pandemic, once again rural and small-town **NGOs proved to be some kind of social machines**. Often dormant or inactive, these are local structures organised from the bottom up which, in a crisis situation, rapidly mobilise their resources (mainly personal, we should add) and, demonstrating flexibility, speed of reaction and knowledge of local needs, take extremely effective action, in a way replacing the more fossilised and schematic 'official' structures. As shown by Corvo and others (Corvo et al. 2022), and as confirmed by our analysis, this flexibility of the third sector often leads to a disregard of its needs by the public sector, according to the principle 'they can manage anyway'.

The pandemic made it possible to highlight these extremely important features, which – as the results of research by other teams mentioned in the initial part of the article show – seem to have a universal character, independent of the political, economic etc. peculiarities of a given country.

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