



# Volunteering Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study Perspective

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## Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes in all aspects of society, including the work of non-profit organisations. Many restrictions reshaped the economy and everyday life, causing serious threats to the work of both for-profit and non-profit sectors. However, the crisis also created an opportunity for innovation. As an important part of civil society, associations had to find new ways to support their beneficiaries and maintain volunteer activities. **Methods/Approach:** This paper used a quantitative survey of volunteers from the Krijesnica Association. Data analysis was conducted to assess changes in volunteer activities and to identify the main challenges volunteers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Results:** The research results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to the proposal and implementation of new forms of volunteering, such as digital volunteering. Significant restrictions on physical contact encouraged the modification of existing forms of volunteering, which enabled the continued provision of assistance to beneficiaries. **Conclusions:** Understanding the changes in volunteer activities and the challenges volunteers face is crucial for developing strategies to support civil society organisations and ensure their sustainability in the future. The Krijesnica Association successfully adapted to the pandemic's challenges and continued to support its beneficiaries. The development of new forms of volunteering and the challenges volunteers face are important lessons for the future and an incentive for further research.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; non-profit organisations; volunteering; challenges; adaptation; new forms of volunteer activities

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic came on very suddenly and dramatically, significantly changing every aspect of people's lives and social structures worldwide. The most visible changes were related to the strict restriction on physical contact, which consequently spilled over into various areas of organisations, society, and individuals' activities. When the functioning of the entire world economy is highly uncertain due to disruptions to global supply chains, the survival of the non-profit sector is in question.

Considering the scope and intensity of the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis's implications for the non-profit sector (Baturina, 2022), i.e., civil society organisations, are relevant. In essence, the COVID-19 pandemic can be analysed as a crisis from two perspectives. Firstly, it poses an objective threat to a non-profit organisation's activities. Secondly, it is an opportunity to transform and enrich user content and activities (De Sandes-Guimarães et al., 2023) and an innovative approach to the new situation. Non-profit organisations inclined to the first understanding of the crisis significantly reduced their activities, sometimes permanently shutting down their work. On the other hand, non-profit organisations that have accepted the COVID-19 pandemic as a challenge (Almeida, 2021; Azevedo et al., 2022), i.e., a catalyst for change, have further affirmed the importance of the organisation's purpose and operations.

The importance of volunteer activities as a driver of civil society organisations (Šimunković, 2022), which have been most affected by the crisis due to various restrictive measures, should be emphasised. The previously mentioned positive perspective has helped some organisations to maintain a high level of interest in engaging in volunteer activities during the crisis (Mao et al., 2021; Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022) and thus ensure the implementation of all planned activities of individual non-profit organisations with slight modifications. Furthermore, the challenging COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of volunteer work, volunteer program design, and the systematic management of volunteers.

Therefore, two research questions arise when designing this paper: (i) RQ1. To what extent and in what way has the recent COVID-19 pandemic affected the work and activities of civil society organisations, with a special focus on associations, as one of the forms of non-profit civil society organisations, and (ii) RQ2. What are the main challenges that non-profit organisations have encountered when operating during the COVID-19 pandemic?

These research questions will be addressed in the context of the Krijesnica Association's activities as an example of good practice. Namely, it is an association focused on helping children and families facing various forms of malignant disease. As the association's name suggests, it is an example of good practice that shines a light on others, like a firefly, highlighting specific practices and approaches for volunteers during the crisis to ensure planned activities are maintained.

## Literature review

### *Volunteering as a social phenomenon*

Volunteering is a well-known activity involving individuals who are supposed to approach the idea that an organisation promotes altruistically. This perception is especially relevant for individuals facing transitions, such as retirement, who may experience a loss of work-related identity and turn to volunteering to reclaim purpose and social roles (Bartol & Grah, 2024). However, this term also carries a common negative connotation. When the ratio of remuneration to work performed is perceived as insufficient, individuals may characterise their work as volunteering. This way, a

wrong image of volunteering and everyone involved in its implementation is created to express dissatisfaction. Consequently, it can be an obstacle to a deeper understanding of the implications of volunteering for society and on society.

Defining terms avoids misunderstandings and indicates their proper use. Therefore, it is necessary to define volunteering first. Ellis et al. (2003) define volunteering as the voluntary provision of time and talent to something for which no monetary compensation is expected. A constant problem in the research on volunteering is the term's multidimensionality, which encompasses aspects of choice, compensation, structure, and the activity's impact. Anheier (2022) defines volunteering as work that does not involve monetary compensation or a legal obligation to act on behalf of organisations or individuals. Begović (2006) describes it as a way of life closely related to the individual's value system. The legislative framework of the Republic of Croatia defines volunteering as the voluntary investment of personal time, effort, knowledge, and skills to perform services or activities for the general benefit or the benefit of another person. The above definitions highlight the multidimensionality of the concept of volunteering and its connections to various social spheres. The importance of understanding volunteering has been highlighted by the European Union's recognition of this activity through the European Solidarity Corps program since 2018. This program aims to enable young people aged 18 to 30 to volunteer on projects that improve the lives of individuals and communities in their home countries or abroad (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2023).

The need for a broader understanding of volunteering inevitably raises questions about the incentives for involvement in volunteering activities. While answers to these questions about altruistic motives are intuitive, researchers on volunteer activities (Cnaan et al., 1996; Wilson, 2000; Grönlund et al., 2011; Anheier, 2022) have concluded that there are other reasons individuals volunteer. Furthermore, the importance of volunteering has consistently been recognised and highly valued in non-profit organisations, whose activities are primarily driven by volunteers and their contributions. Traditionally present in civil society organisations, volunteering has successfully found its place in for-profit organisations in the last decade. In fact, volunteering has become increasingly relevant to employability models, where engagement in meaningful unpaid work helps individuals—especially recent graduates—develop competencies valued in the labour market (Tecilazić, 2024).

Figure 1 shows the characteristics of volunteering that include: a) the area of volunteering, b) the age of the volunteer, c) the geographical scope of volunteering, d) the duration of volunteering, e) the method of organisation of volunteering, and f) the motivation for volunteering. At the same time, these characteristics can be explained as one tile in a mosaic. Therefore, organisations will differ in the specific combinations of volunteering characteristics among their volunteers. This approach allows non-profit organisations to recognise the profiles of volunteers most attracted by their activities. Accordingly, they can decide whether these individuals are best suited to help achieve the non-profit organisation's purpose. On the other hand, they help non-profit organisations form teams and develop volunteer work programs.

Each volunteering characteristic listed in Figure 1 also has specific social implications that make it interesting for research. Although all the characteristics of volunteering are important, the author's special attention is drawn to the motivation for volunteering studied alone or in combination with other characteristics. It is also the most complex characteristic of volunteering (Clary & Miller, 1986; Houle et al., 2005). A volunteer has specific preferences, experiences, knowledge, and skills. They are driven by unique motives when it comes to volunteering. In their research, various authors (Clary & Orenstein, 1991; Clary et al., 1996; Farmer & Fedor, 2001; Bussel &

Forbes, 2002) recognise a gap in the theory of volunteering and the need to conduct research that describes the specifics of volunteering.

Figure 1  
Overview of the Characteristics of Volunteering



Source: Authors, according to Begović (2006) and Clary et al. (1996)

As a significant contribution to long-term research efforts in this area, Clary et al. (1996) advance the functional perspective on volunteering. This aspect of the analysis of volunteering characteristics provides deeper insight into the motives of volunteering, as described through six specific volunteering functions. Table 1 presents the six volunteering functions and their corresponding descriptions, as defined by Clary et al. (1996). Each function, i.e., is related to a specific group of motives that encourage volunteers to engage in volunteering activities. This approach to analysing the motives for volunteering helps non-profit organisations, for example, predict perseverance in volunteering and the duration of volunteering within a single organisation (Clary & Miller, 1986; Clary & Orenstein, 1991).

Table 1  
Functional Overview of Motives for Volunteering

Volunteering functions	Description
<b>Values</b>	The subject's personal belief is that it is necessary to help those who are less fortunate.
<b>Better understanding</b>	Learning about the purpose and role of volunteering in society, the reasons of others for volunteering, the organisation's needs for volunteers, and the like.
<b>Personal development</b>	An opportunity for personal growth and development.
<b>Career</b>	The belief is that volunteer engagement and the experience gained can contribute to an individual's career development.
<b>Social relations</b>	It is an opportunity to meet new people and build a network of relationships.
<b>Self-protection</b>	Volunteering to escape from one's problems and reduce internal conflicts due to feelings of guilt that others are less fortunate in life.

Source: Adapted from Clary et al. (1996)

It is noteworthy to see how, given their fields of activity, civil society organisations attract members with specific motives for volunteering. For example, among professional and student association volunteers, the dominant motives for volunteering include altruism, social connection, personal development, and intrinsic satisfaction (Golensky & Hager, 2020; Kearns & Wang, 2023). In contrast, in humanitarian organisations, groups of motives focus more on the organisation's beneficiaries, ranging from specific organisational values to understanding the organisation's purpose (Li & Liu, 2021; Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). In the case of the first-mentioned group, the persistence of involvement in volunteering is understandable due to the indirect consequences of volunteering. That is, the effects of such volunteering are mainly related to one's progress. This focus on personal growth can enhance skills and networking opportunities, reinforcing volunteers' commitment (Chow et al., 2021). The second group, humanitarian organisations, is interesting because of the complexity of the motives for volunteering, given that they are not primarily focused on the individual's benefit but on the organisation itself and its users (Zainuddin et al., 2020).

However, it raises the question of whether there are limits – specifically, situations or conditions in which initially altruistic motives weaken or shift toward self-serving aims. Hence, we conducted empirical research on the motives for volunteering within the Krijesnica Association. This study will uncover how the pandemic influenced volunteer motivations, revealing potential shifts from genuine altruism to personal gain. Understanding these dynamics can help shape future volunteer programs, ensuring they remain effective and ethically grounded, in line with the organisation's mission and the needs of its beneficiaries. The research analyses motives for volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, using this context, and compares pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic differences in motives.

### *Impact of COVID-19 on volunteering globally*

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed volunteering worldwide, leading to notable changes in volunteering practices (Biddle & Grey, 2020; Kearns & Wang, 2023; Mao et al., 2021). It brought together non-profit organisations from around the world to share their best practices from the pandemic. This interconnectedness enhanced the overall effectiveness of volunteer efforts and addressed diverse community needs.

Among the different adjustments and innovative adaptations of volunteering arrangements, technology-involved volunteering attracted the most interest (Kearns & Wang, 2023) because it was already incorporated into the volunteer work of some non-profit organisations.

The United Nations defines online volunteering as tasks that “a person performs, in whole or in part, over the Internet from a computer at home, at work, at university, from a cybercafé or telecentre” (United Nations Volunteers, 2004). Liu et al. (2016) define online volunteering as volunteering through innovative technologies and social media applications. Furthermore, Lachance (2021) explains that this type of volunteering allows individuals to engage in volunteer activities remotely, using technology to perform their duties without being physically present. The definitions explained above reveal differences in understanding of online volunteering, particularly regarding scope and name. Hence, it took the non-profit organisations some time to precisely determine what virtual volunteering means in the context of their activities and everyday work.

In addition to the mentioned adjustments, volunteers developed creative approaches and used available resources to cope with challenges during the COVID-

19 pandemic (Biddle & Grey, 2020; Mao et al., 2021). According to the recommendations for volunteering in crises, the Croatian Center for the Development of Volunteering (2024) points out that volunteers immediately accepted and adapted to new forms of volunteering, such as the use of resources for virtual communication, telephone support, food delivery, protective masks, psychological support, and the organization of webinars. The following can be highlighted as significant forms of volunteering and innovation in practice during and after the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Virtual communication: In conditions of physical distance, volunteers quickly recognised the value of virtual communication by using video calling platforms like Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams.
- Use of phones and mobile apps: Mobile phones and messaging apps have become indispensable tools for volunteers.
- Online volunteering platforms: Volunteers use online platforms that specialise in volunteering to find volunteer opportunities online or remotely.
- Online training and education: Volunteers were educated through online training and webinars to gain the necessary skills for virtual volunteering.
- Digital coordination tools: Organisations and volunteers relied on digital tools such as task management apps and calendars to coordinate their activities and volunteer actions better.
- Social media and online campaigns: Volunteers used social media to share information about volunteering, organise virtual events, and participate in online campaigns to raise awareness of important issues.
- Virtual tools for education: To educate users or inform them about relevant topics, volunteers used virtual tools such as e-books, online courses, and video materials.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread rapidly in early 2020, has left a profound and lasting impact on global social dynamics. In addition to causing health, economic, and social challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped society's perception of volunteering. According to the Official Journal of the European Union (European Parliament, 2022), trends and the role of volunteers in the community are discussed, highlighting volunteering as the most visible expression of solidarity, the progress of online capacity, and the importance of volunteering itself during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusions drawn from the Official Journal of the Union (European Parliament, 2022) highlight changes in the perception of volunteering, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
Changes in the perception of volunteering in the EU

Name of the change	Description
<b>Increased awareness of the importance of volunteering in crises</b>	The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to volunteer in difficult times. People have become more aware that volunteering can be key to preserving social cohesion.
<b>The rise in popularity of online volunteering</b>	With physical distancing, restrictions on movement, and advances in online capacity, online volunteering has gained popularity.
<b>The growing importance of volunteering in the health sector</b>	The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crucial role of volunteers in the healthcare sector. They provided invaluable support to medical staff and played a key role in testing and distributing vaccines.

<b>Changing volunteer priorities</b>	Many volunteers have shifted their priorities, focusing more on delivering food, medicine, and other necessities to older people.
<b>Increased demand for volunteer organisations</b>	The COVID-19 pandemic has fuelled an increased demand for volunteer organisations.
<b>Greater solidarity among volunteers</b>	The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered a sense of community and solidarity among volunteers.

Source: author's creation according to the European Parliament (2022)

Given the rapid spread and large scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequences have affected non-profits worldwide. Restrictions on movement and physical contact were applied to varying degrees across all areas of work and life. Accordingly, adjustments in volunteering have spilled over, both to all countries and to non-profit organisations. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation and modification of volunteer practices in Croatia, providing a framework for understanding changes in practices and volunteering activities at the Krijesnica Association, the focus of this paper's research.

### *Impact of COVID-19 on volunteering in Croatia*

Given the specifics of how individual countries have approached the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be emphasised that the same principle has been applied to volunteering. Therefore, this paper discusses the practices and challenges of volunteering in Croatia. The central organisation responsible for communication with local and regional volunteer centres to increase the visibility and availability of information on the importance and value of volunteering in the national and international environment is the Croatian Centre for Volunteer Development. The Centre brings together four regional and 32 local volunteer centres. In doing so, the Croatian Centre for the Development of Volunteering (2024) defines volunteer centres as organisations or organisational units that affirm the values and practices of volunteering and enable potential volunteers to connect with volunteering opportunities.

As such, volunteer centres have a specific role in society, and as their main features, Croatian Centre for the Development of Volunteering (2024) points out: a) providing information about volunteering, b) connecting volunteers and volunteer organisers, c) counselling and educating children, young people and other citizens about volunteering, d) creating quality volunteer programs through education and empowerment of volunteer organisers, e) initiating and implementing projects aimed at involving all citizens and organisations in building society through volunteering, f) creating a stimulating environment for volunteering in the community through promotion and advocacy.

As the oldest member of the network of volunteer centres, the Volunteer Center Zagreb (VCZ) stands out as a key organisation in Croatia's capital (Volunteer Center Zagreb, 2021), dedicated to promoting and supporting volunteer activities. As volunteers give their time freely (Volunteering Law 2007), VCZ makes every effort to match them with the appropriate non-profit organisation. Since 1997, VCZ has been key in connecting volunteers with volunteer organisers and facilitating cooperation between the community and civil society organisations (Čekolj & Čulum Ilić, 2024). In times of crisis and the subsequent recovery process, VCZ (2021) performed several key roles: a) acted as a central place to provide information and advice to citizens and organisations, and b) promoted inspiring stories from the community to boost morale and optimism. The same practice continued during the COVID-19 pandemic and was followed by a strong earthquake in Zagreb. The role of mediators and coordinators

has been instrumental in making life easier for vulnerable citizens. During the crisis, VCZ organised volunteer actions called "Volunteers to support vulnerable citizens". In cooperation with other organisations and volunteers, they provided donations and support to members of the society who needed it.

Furthermore, in contrast to the cumulative number of submitted reports on organised volunteering in Table 4, the annual reports on the work of the Volunteer Center Zagreb indicate a decrease in the number of volunteer organisers and volunteer actions. VCZ also recorded decreased involvement in ongoing activities, such as the Volunteer Oscar and Volunteer Festival, due to compliance with epidemiological measures. Volunteering practices in Croatia and around the world have faced significant challenges due to restrictions on movement to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Volunteer Centre Zagreb particularly emphasised the two main challenges its members faced. The first challenge was implementing activities for printing publications on primary and secondary school volunteering. The second challenge was the inability to implement the Conference on Corporate Volunteering and the Volunteering Fair for 2020 due to measures issued by the Civil Protection Headquarters (VCZ, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous challenges to organisations across social and economic life, and therefore to those involved in volunteer programs worldwide. Traditional working methods were no longer sustainable or safe, and the voluntary sector was forced to adapt its strategies quickly to remain operational. In this part of the paper, key aspects of the adaptation of volunteer program organisations during and after the pandemic are highlighted, based on stories published by organisations on the ZADobroBIT platform (2020), with a focus on the best practices of associations that have successfully adapted to the challenges. One of the most significant changes introduced by volunteer program organisations in Croatia during the pandemic was the transition to virtual volunteer activities.

Just like in the rest of the world, the virtual volunteer's work description considers volunteer tasks performed in whole or in part via the internet and computers at home or work (Liu et al., 2016). The understanding of virtual volunteering varies across non-profit organisations, depending on their needs and activities. Adopting technology in the virtual volunteering process enabled non-profits to remain active and connect with their volunteers, even when a physical presence was not possible. They had to develop and implement strict safety protocols to minimise the risk of virus spread (Vočanec et al., 2022), including new hygiene standards, the use of personal protective equipment, and promoting physical distancing during volunteering. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the voluntary sector's digital transformation. Thus, organisations began using digital tools to manage volunteer databases, communicate with volunteers, and monitor the performance of volunteer programs. Although the pandemic situation changed over time, many modifications in volunteer work persisted even after COVID-19 had passed. A form of volunteering that involves the use of innovative technology and social media applications will remain an important resource for non-profit organisations (Lachance, 2021; Mao et al., 2021).

Table 3 presents data on organised volunteering since 2014, available on the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy website. A review of Table 4 shows that two points are fascinating: a) the transition from 2015 to 2016 and b) the transition from 2019 to 2020.

Given the greater intensity of the latter transition, the context of this period, marked by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, is chosen for analysis in this paper. In the observed transition from 2019 to 2020, 72 more reports on organised volunteering were collected. This finding can be explained by the fact that, in addition to the COVID-19

pandemic, Croatia was also affected by two strong earthquakes, which prompted many civil society organisations to organise volunteer activities. Furthermore, due to restrictive isolation measures and restrictions on movement to minimise physical contact and transmission of the COVID-19 virus, it is understandable that the number of volunteers should be reduced by up to 25%. Consequently, the decrease in the number of volunteers led to a 7% reduction in volunteer hours and a 30% reduction in volunteer costs. However, it is relevant to note that the number of volunteer hours decreased by a smaller amount than the number of volunteers. Hence, the average number of volunteer hours per volunteer was 47.35 hours in 2019 and 58.27 hours in 2020. Despite some volunteers leaving due to physical contact restrictions, the number of volunteer hours did not decline at the same rate. As is usually the case, the illogical and isolated findings warrant further exploration. True, one should be aware that it may be just an anomaly or outlier. However, a more detailed analysis can sometimes bring valuable findings and further explain what has been studied.

Table 3  
Data on Organised Volunteering in the Period from 2014 to 2023

Year	Dimension	Number of reports on organised volunteering	Number of volunteers	Number of volunteers hours	Costs of volunteering
2014.		1.032	45.955	2.597.121	5.829.520,62
2015.		1.367	52.208	2.943.902	12.289.283,76
2016.		1.217	48.731	3.332.984	12.748.895,88
2017.		1.168	47.372	2.603.676	11.299.314,08
2018.		1.497	62.699	3.253.667	15.968.910,16
2019.		1.502	64.280	3.043.954	16.121.311,91
2020.		1.574	48.386	2.819.655	11.324.342,78
2021.		1.607	59.161	3.181.557	16.278.830,37
2022.		1.720	63.275	3.236.883	20.712.233,99
2023.		1.660	67.909	3.012.837	28.709.742,22

Source: Authors, according to statistical data from the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy

Table 4 explores how these associations have adapted their approaches to organising volunteer activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project Our Stories, organised by the ZADobroBit platform, provides a deeper insight into their specific approaches and adaptation strategies in these challenging times (ZADobroBIT, 2020).

Organisations such as the Vestigium Association, the Ogulin Association of the Blind, the Association of Multiple Sclerosis Societies of Croatia, the Brave Phone, the Association of Disabled Workers of Zagreb, the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Osijek-Baranja County, and the Zaprešić Youth Center have successfully adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic through various innovative approaches.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent. Therefore, it was almost certain that the consequences would be felt worldwide, including in Croatia (Baturina, 2022). However, non-profit organisations have not backed down despite many challenges posed by the pandemic. A strong purpose and users who depend on the availability of their services have encouraged them to adapt their activities and use all available resources innovatively.

Table 4

Experiences of associations in adapting volunteer activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Name of the association	Volunteer experience
<b>Association Vestigium</b>	"We have organised food delivery from family farms to home addresses and created a list of channels through which healthy food can be procured. According to citizens' needs, support for group conversations, meditation, and stress-reduction techniques was the most offered and sought in the virtual workshops."
<b>Association of the Blind Ogulin</b>	"For members who need help delivering medicines, food, and other necessities necessary for their lives, our sighted companions are at their service 24 hours a day and on weekends as needed."
<b>Association of Multiple Sclerosis Societies of Croatia</b>	"Psychosocial assistance, solving issues related to the delivery of medicines, food, and other necessities of life, contact with neurologists, Social Welfare Centres, and the Red Cross, and volunteers are an integral part of every day, every minute since this situation befell us."
<b>Hrabri telefon</b>	"Brave Phone reacted immediately and offered the professional public six free webinars by the educational team on the topic of specific skills of telephone and electronic counselling, which we estimated could help experts at this time to better respond to the needs of citizens. The webinars were conducted from March 21 to 30, 2020."
<b>Association of Disabled Workers of Zagreb</b>	"In addition to the consequences on the mental state due to self-isolation, the recent earthquake in the City of Zagreb has left additional unpleasant consequences for many members. These consequences, even during self-isolation, the employees, and diligent volunteers of UIR Zagreb tried to mitigate through long telephone psychotherapeutic conversations. At the same time, the lawyer provided legal advice by phone and e-mail."
<b>Multiple Sclerosis Society of Osijek-Baranja County</b>	"Fortunately, we adapted to the situation and arranged for the physiotherapist to do individual exercises with users via Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, and Zoom. Furthermore, at least for a moment, they forget everything ugly and stressful in the environment."
<b>Youth Center Zaprešić</b>	"The coronavirus has motivated us to establish new forms of work with our users. In addition to launching a counselling hotline, sending worksheets and materials for children and young people, and recording educational videos, one of the new forms of work is video calls with families involved in our programs."

Source: Author's work according to ZADobroBIT (2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges to volunteering in Croatia, necessitating rapid adaptation and innovation. Volunteer organisations, such as the Croatian Centre for Volunteer Development and the Volunteer Centre Zagreb, played crucial roles in maintaining volunteer activities through virtual platforms and strict safety protocols. Despite declines in the number of volunteers and volunteer hours, volunteers' commitment remained high, with many adapting to new forms of virtual and remote volunteering.

These efforts ensured continued support for vulnerable communities and underscored the volunteer sector's resilience and adaptability in Croatia. The experience highlights the importance of digital transformation and flexible strategies in sustaining volunteer activities during crises (Lachance, 2021).

## Methodology

This paper takes the Krijesnica Association as a case study because of its specific and strong purpose: providing care and support to patients with malignant diseases for society. The Association is recognised as an organisation that successfully achieves its goals and makes a significant difference in the community in which it operates (Krijesnica Association, 2024). Furthermore, the values on which the work of this Association is based are support, courage, integrity, the richness of diversity, acceptance, security, and trust, which guide volunteers, employees, and management in their activities. However, given the non-probability sampling approach and the single-organization context, the results' generalizability is limited.

For this paper, quantitative empirical research was conducted, and a Google Forms survey questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument.

The questionnaire contains 26 items, divided into five groups, each following the characteristics of volunteering. The first part contains questions about the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and their period of volunteering with the Krijesnica association. The second part of the questionnaire covered items related to volunteering experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the average number of volunteering hours, types of volunteering activities, and key motivators for volunteering. The third part of the questionnaire examined volunteers' experiences of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. It included the same questions as the second part to maintain comparability of answers and address potential discrepancies. However, to these questions were added a question on the emergence of new forms of volunteering due to the COVID-19 pandemic and one that examined changes in volunteering practice after the pandemic. The fourth part of the questionnaire includes questions about the challenges volunteers encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and the methods and resources they used to overcome them. The fifth and final part of the questionnaire examined volunteers' attitudes toward the future of volunteering. After conducting the research, insights were gained into the work of Krijesnica volunteers and their experiences of volunteering before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to relevant conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

The research included 68 volunteers from the Krijesnica association, representing most of the 100 volunteers and thereby increasing the representativeness of the research conclusions. The respondents' structure indicates heterogeneity across age, gender, and educational level. Most of the surveyed volunteers are women (67.6%), and the age range is 18-45, indicating volunteers across different age groups. Furthermore, their educational structure shows that a larger proportion of highly educated people volunteer for the association (61.7%). In comparison, fewer volunteers have a high school diploma (38.2%), which again supports the diversity of knowledge and skills represented among volunteers.

## Results

### *Volunteering experience*

The research results on the duration of volunteer engagement with the Krijesnica Association are interesting. Most of the surveyed volunteers (51.5%) are long-term members of the Association, indicating a strong interest in volunteering.

Also, most respondents (68.7%) participated in volunteer activities before the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are significant to the Association in the context of continuous action, planning, and activity fulfilment.

Furthermore, the frequency of weekly volunteering varies among volunteers. The most significant number of volunteers participated in the work of the Association for 1 to 2 hours a week (34.5%), almost the same number of volunteers were active for 3 to 5 hours a week (31%), and a significant number of volunteers (16%) worked more than 5 hours a week. Furthermore, the findings related to the frequency of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic testify that the Krijesnica association managed to retain a significantly high number of active volunteers (66.2%) even in the difficult period with a very similar structure of average volunteering time, i.e. a third of volunteers were engaged for 1 to 2 hours a week, then 13.3% of volunteers were involved in the work of the association for 3 to 5 hours a week, while 5% of them were at the disposal of the Association for more than 5 hours a week even in an uncertain situation.

### *Volunteer activities*

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, society has encountered numerous challenges that have spilled over into associations' work and activities. Thus, many associations had to suspend their work and implement activities envisaged by their plans and programs during the pandemic. Isolation measures have primarily made it difficult or even entirely impossible for volunteers to act, calling into question the sustainability of specific activities carried out by associations. One of the biggest challenges was adapting key associations' activities.

Analysing the volunteer activities represented by the Krijesnica Association's volunteer programs, the share of participation in certain activities may have changed the most. Thus, the activities that were delegated to the surveyed volunteers in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic were mainly focused on social activities (53.3%), visits to hospital patients (33.3%), education and information (33.3%), volunteering in hospitals (31.7%), and providing emotional support to the beneficiaries of the Krijesnica Association (30%). However, with the introduction of highly restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus and protect the health of users and volunteers, some of the more popular activities were disabled or significantly limited. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a change and the introduction of some new activities. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, activities such as phone support and conversations (35%), online counselling and information (40%), mental health and support (20%), and organising virtual events and socialising (18%) stood out, as shown in Table 5.

The change in the representation of individual volunteer activities in the Krijesnica Association can be understood in two ways. The first way is explained because of the COVID-19 pandemic, stemming from severe restrictions on physical contact. The second interprets the creativity of the members of the Krijesnica Association, which reflects the Association's highly diverse and up-to-date adaptation. It ensures the almost uninterrupted development of key activities important to the Association's key beneficiaries.

Table 5

Comparison of volunteer activities in the Krijesnica Association before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Volunteer activities	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
<b>Social activities</b>	53.3%	-
Visits to hospital patients	33.3%	-
<b>Education and information</b>	33.3%	10.0%
Volunteering in hospitals	31.7%	-
<b>Providing emotional support</b>	30.0%	40.0%
To users	14.0%	35.0%
Phone support and conversations	12.0%	40.0%
Online counselling and information	10.0%	20.0%
Mental health and support	7.0%	18.0%
<b>Organisation of virtual events and gatherings</b>		

Source: Authors' work, based on a survey conducted in the Krijesnica Association

However, it is important to note that in addition to the existing activities developed before the COVID-19 pandemic, during this challenging period, volunteers were offered some new forms of volunteering, such as online volunteering, virtual support and counselling, preparation of digital content for the *Krijesnica App*, creation of educational materials and fun activities, organisation of virtual workshops, and isolation support.

### Motivators for volunteering

Observing the findings and examining the motives of volunteering expressed by the Krijesnica Association volunteers contributed to understanding the previously described aspects of volunteering. The research used a functional approach to examine the motives of volunteers at the Krijesnica Association. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the functional approach to volunteer motives has six functions. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common functions were better understanding (70%), values (53.3%), and social relations (32%). These motives are remarkably consistent with the expectations of Generation Z, who tend to seek purposeful engagement and value alignment when choosing activities—including volunteering—that contribute to both personal growth and future employability (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). The situation did not change during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Comparison of the motives for volunteering in the Krijesnica Association before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Volunteer motives	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
<b>Values</b>	53.3%	55.7%
<b>Better understanding</b>	70.0%	72.4%
<b>Personal development</b>	26.0%	27.0%
Career	12.0%	10.70%
<b>Social relations</b>	32.0%	33.3%
<b>Self-protection</b>	13.0%	-

Source: Authors' work, based on a survey conducted in the Krijesnica Association

Therefore, the key motives of the surveyed volunteers correspond to the new conditions of volunteering. They can be explained by adapting existing volunteer

activities and creating and offering new ones. Potentially the greatest threat to modifying the volunteering motive was separation from the user, leading to a breakdown in communication and to fewer opportunities for empathetic action. By ensuring uninterrupted communication, a relevant level of motivation for volunteering has been maintained, which is appropriate and desirable given the Krijesnica Association's organisational purpose. Furthermore, these results indicate that primarily user- and organisation-oriented motives for volunteering can serve as the foundation for resilience in unforeseen crises. It is necessary to point out the limitations of this finding because it is a case study of only one non-profit organisation and examines only 68 volunteers.

However, the choice of the non-profit organisation Krijesnica is an example of good practice: it fulfils its mission well, serves society well, and has successfully overcome business challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic by finding new ways of acting. Indeed, this paper incentivises future research into the motives for volunteering and business practices in non-profit organisations.

### *Challenges of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Numerous problems and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, as observed during volunteering at the Krijesnica Association, can be divided into two main categories. First, it is necessary to point out those apparent challenges related to the specifics of the beneficiaries of the Association because these are patients with significantly impaired health due to various malignant diseases. Therefore, users' physical health was prioritised, especially in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Only subsequently were volunteer activities modified to enable volunteers as much as possible and to ensure the emotional and psychological health of the beneficiaries of the Krijesnica Association. This second category, related to modified volunteering activities, also encountered some challenges. Effective coordination and information systems, such as those used in operational emergency services, could be repurposed to support volunteer logistics in crisis settings (Stjepić & Pofuk, 2024).

Table 7 presents the main challenges that the Krijesnica Association's volunteers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 7

Challenges of volunteers in the Krijesnica Association during the COVID-19 pandemic

<b>Volunteer challenges</b>	<b>Structure in %</b>
<b>Lack of personal interaction</b>	50,9%
<b>Concern for one's health</b>	38,2%
<b>Use of technology</b>	27,3%
<b>Difficulty in collecting donations</b>	20%
<b>Problems in the organisation of volunteers</b>	19,8%
<b>Difficulty in providing emotional support</b>	7,3%
<b>Lack of information and communication</b>	12,7%
<b>Difficulty keeping track of documentation</b>	14,50%

Source: Authors' work, based on a survey conducted in the Krijesnica Association

At the same time, they most emphasised the lack of personal interaction due to the prescribed restrictions on physical contact (50.9%), the fragility of the users' health, and concern for their health (38.2%). This is followed by challenges related to the use of technology (27.3%) and the collection of donations (18.2%) required for the Association's functioning. This aligns with findings that among older adults, internet usage and digital engagement are more strongly influenced by self-efficacy and

perceived social influence than by direct social support (Pejić Bach et al., 2023). Consistent with earlier findings, 73.6% of respondents rated their volunteering experience during the COVID-19 pandemic positively, which is comparable to the 80.8% satisfaction rate reported for the pre-pandemic period.

## Discussion

Based on the research findings, the Krijesnica Association has a powerful organisational purpose. Its area of activity, the care and support of patients with malignant diseases, encourages exceptional sensitivity in volunteers and maintains a high level of motivation for volunteering activities (Zainuddin et al., 2020).

This conclusion stems from the results that the number of volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic did not decrease; on the contrary, in one period, it was slightly higher than before the pandemic. Furthermore, the experience and satisfaction with volunteering were highly rated in both observed periods. The activities of the Krijesnica Association, which were disabled due to regulations related to physical contact, have been replaced by new forms of volunteering so that the users of the Krijesnica Association do not feel abandoned in the challenging period of the pandemic and at the same time point to the creativity and innovation of the members of the Association. Summarising the results, it is indicated that the Association's purpose is so strong and is affirmed through various activities that it even serves as the basis for the Association's resilience in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the common goal of all Association members further supports the Association's purpose and helps transfer its values to new members.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised and significantly changed the motives for volunteering among the surveyed volunteers. Namely, most volunteers had a notable level of empathy and compassion (70%), one of the leading motives for volunteering before the pandemic. At the same time, the situation on this issue has changed significantly during the pandemic, so empathy and compassion as motivators were represented much less (32.1%). This change does not mean that volunteers have ceased to care during the pandemic outbreak. On the contrary, it highlights the Krijesnica Association's specific purpose. Such a decline in empathy as one of the most important motivators may indicate its importance. Given this, it primarily relies on direct interaction, i.e., in-person meetings with the Association's key beneficiaries. When they are limited, empathy, an important motivator for volunteering, also decreases. The consistency of this result is also visible in Table 7, which shows the distribution of challenges that volunteers encountered during the pandemic.

Therefore, this leads to the conclusion that the lack of personal communication and meetings with the association's beneficiaries is significant for both beneficiaries and volunteers.

## Conclusion

The non-profit sector and related organisations are important for building a better society. Volunteers and activities are their driving force and have a strong potential (Azevedo et al., 2022) to transform time, talent, and commitment into new values, products, or services. The management and motivation of volunteers are crucial (Cox et al., 2018; Sablina et al., 2023) for the successful management of non-profit organisations and for realising their purpose in the current challenging times. Furthermore, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for

better preparation and coordination of volunteer resources. They have also shown the importance of volunteer organisations and volunteers as a key resource.

In many cases, non-profits and local communities have had to react quickly to mobilise volunteers and properly manage volunteer activities (Gómez-Durán et al., 2022). These experiences highlight the need to develop more effective systems for preparing volunteers for crises and to improve cooperation among organisations, authorities, and volunteers to ensure a quick and effective response to challenges. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the understanding of volunteer motivation (Luksyte et al., 2021). Although many volunteers faced risks and limitations, their desire to help others was stronger. This knowledge of volunteer motivation could be key to developing better strategies to attract and retain volunteers in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed volunteering practices (Mao et al., 2021; Sablina et al., 2023) and highlighted the importance of volunteering as a fundamental element of sustainable and resilient communities. Volunteers have proven to be an indispensable support in crises, and with their dedication, courage, and innovation, they have proven that volunteering remains a vital force that enriches society. Through the joint efforts of volunteers, organisations, and local communities, a better future can be built based on solidarity, cooperation, and care for others.

This paper addresses two key research questions arising from the analysis of volunteering at the Krijesnica Association during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the research identified changes in the type and representation of individual volunteer activities. Namely, the research results showed the development of new forms of volunteering during the pandemic. The emergence of new initiatives and forms of volunteering indicates that civil society organisations are able to adapt to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon can be explained in several ways. On the one hand, it can be explained by an important and substantial purpose (Worth, 2021) that members recognise as worth fulfilling even in times of crisis.

On the other hand, the high interest in volunteering reflects the excellence of volunteer management and the creativity of the Krijesnica Association's leadership. Such findings point to the need for further research and support to shape sustainable volunteering models that reflect the community's changed circumstances and needs. Answering the second research question identified volunteers' main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reasons include a lack of personal interaction due to prescribed restrictions on physical contact (50.9%), the beneficiaries' fragile health, and concern for their health (38.2%). Furthermore, other reasons are connected to challenges related to the use of technology (27.3%) and the collection of donations (18.2%) necessary for the functioning of the Krijesnica Association, which indicates a danger of the suspension of volunteer activities if the measures of modification and adjustment of volunteer activities are not taken. Understanding these reasons is key to adapting an organisation's volunteering and communication programs to motivate volunteers even in challenging circumstances (Almeida, 2021; Gómez-Durán et al., 2022; Sablina et al., 2023).

Finally, this paper provides a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic using a specific organisation as an example. It points out that the development of new forms of volunteering and the challenges of volunteering involvement are significant aspects that merit further research and attention by civil society organisations in future crises.

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