

ERASMUS



VOLUNTEER EFFORT DURING A (CORONA) CRISIS: INSIGHT & LESSONS LEARNED

A study by the *NLvoorelkaar* volunteer platform & Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM)

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PREFACE

The COVID-19 virus struck in the Netherlands in March 2020. Corona-assistance initiatives soon followed, ranging from special corona-assistance platforms and volunteer services to self-organised neighbourliness. In the Netherlands, people turned out in droves to help each other. For example, the volunteer platform *NLvoorelkaar.nl* received nine times the usual number of new-volunteer registrations.

It was not always easy, however, to match this massive supply to existing demand. As noted by Prof. Lucas Meijs, 'Practical issues get in the way of helping. For example, volunteers want to get started right away, whereas people might not ask for help until later. Moreover, asking for or receiving help from a stranger can be unnerving. Such situations call for a trustworthy intermediary, with a feel for converting the current willingness to help into sustainable volunteer effort'.

In this study, 1,859 participants in the largest platform for volunteering and corona-related assistance provided insight into volunteer efforts during the corona crisis. What did this mean for the people who received volunteer help? Did the help that was offered ultimately meet the needs of those asking for help? What were the obstacles, and what lessons can be drawn about the organisation of help during a crisis? How sustainable is the volunteer energy that has been released, and how can it be retained?

This study was conducted in June 2020, in collaboration with Prof. Lucas Meijs, of the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM). It provides a special follow-up to our annual joint studies on volunteer effort in the Netherlands (October 2018, November 2019). We are grateful to Lucas and everyone who has made this study possible. You have helped to make the Netherlands a little bit nicer.



Anne van Roosmalen

IMPACT NLvoorelkaar Advisor
06 11 29 97 06 | anne@nlvoorelkaar.nl

P.S.: Please (feel free to) share. A link to [NLvoorelkaar.nl](https://nlvoorelkaar.nl) in exchange for our efforts would be very much appreciated. Reactions and feedback are always welcome. You can connect with [NLvoorelkaar](https://nlvoorelkaar.nl) and me on LinkedIn and other platforms

VOLUNTEER HELP DURING THE CORONA CRISIS

The lock-down had a major impact on volunteer activities: sports, cultural and recreational activities were put on hold. Informal help has become tricky as well. We cannot simply drop in on each other like we used to do, and well-meaning help might even place a neighbour in danger. In addition, there are the hard-working people in the care sector, who could really use a hand to help them keep going. **What has the corona crisis meant to the people who have offered and received all of these types of volunteer help?**

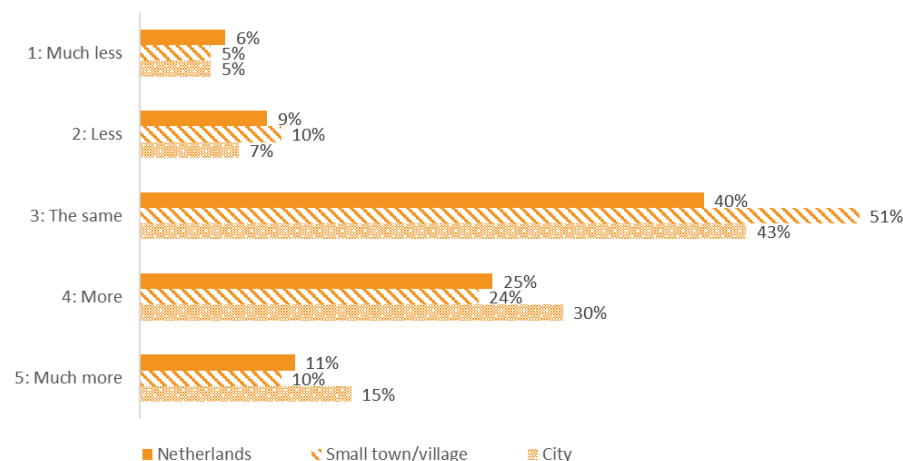
Practical issues have been at play as well. For example, volunteers are eager to get started right away, whereas people might not ask for help until later. Moreover, asking for or receiving help from a stranger can be unnerving. Did the supply of volunteers match the demand for help? **Did supply and demand come together safely and effectively amidst all the fragmented corona-related initiatives?**



GREATER NEED FOR HELP + HIGHER THRESHOLD

Was more or less help needed during the corona crisis? Although the gut reaction is likely to be 'more', many initiatives (including those inspired by the corona crisis) and volunteer organisations noted that the supply of people offering help exceeded the demand for help. Perhaps even more importantly, demand was lower than expected.

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU NEEDED MORE VOLUNTEER HELP SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE CORONA VIRUS?



In this study, we asked everyone who had requested help on the various platforms of *NLvoorelkaar* to tell us the extent to which they have needed help since the outbreak of the coronavirus, based on a scale ranging from 1 (much less need) to 5 (much more need). The outcomes suggest that the need for help was slightly greater than it had been before the outbreak of the coronavirus. It is interesting to note that people in the northern regions of the Netherlands perceived a slightly greater need for help than did those in the middle or southern regions.

Of the respondents, 40% said that it was more difficult to ask for help during the corona crisis. For 46%, it was neither more difficult nor easier, and 14% noted that asking for help was easier. **Those living in cities had somewhat more difficulty**

asking for help than did those living in small towns/villages (45% of respondents living in cities noted that it was more difficult to ask for help during the corona crisis, as compared to 34% of respondents living in small towns/villages). People in the northern regions of the Netherlands reported that it was somewhat more difficult to ask for help (44% replied that it was more difficult).

The following were the most important reasons for such 'reluctance to ask':

1. The **fear** of becoming infected (37%)
2. A sense that the help they needed would not be allowed by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) (35%)
3. The assumption that others would be too busy (34%)
4. Personal health complaints (28%)
5. Lack of visitors/social contacts to ask (26%)

It is interesting to note that the two most commonly mentioned reasons were specific to the coronavirus situation. It is therefore **important to understand the context when seeking to reduce reluctance to ask** for help during (or outside of) a crisis.

The fact that none of the respondents mentioned the role of the government (whether actual or desired) is also interesting to note. Prof. Lucas Meijs observes, 'Another factor that often makes people reluctant to ask for help or care is that they tend to regard this as a **responsibility of the government**. They are therefore likely to feel guilty for having to ask others to help. In our study, this reason was remarkably absent. What this tells me is that the corona crisis is being regarded as a challenge not only to the government, but to all of us. This finding also has consequences for the reluctance to ask: there is a general sense that we are going to work together to solve this problem. It says less about the experience of reluctance than it does about who will be asked to help and how'.

Finally, the results indicated a number of subtle differences between groups of respondents regarding the reluctance to ask. In cities, beneficiaries were more likely to fear becoming infected than were those living in small towns/villages (40% as compared to 32%). This was also the case for the sense that the help that was needed would not be allowed under the RIVM guidelines (34% as compared

to 42%). Older respondents were less bothered by this possibility (14%), but they were more likely to express that the people around them were too busy to help (41%).

Respondents who found it easier to ask for help felt that more people wanted to help (40%), that more help was being offered (29%), that the necessity was

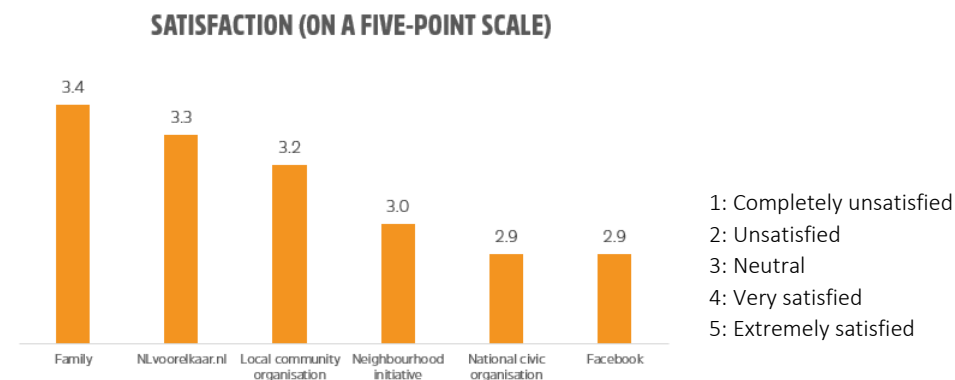
'ASKING FOR HELP IS MORE DIFFICULT, BECAUSE NOT EVERYONE FEELS COMFORTABLE HELPING RIGHT NOW. IT'S NICE THAT A PLATFORM IS AVAILABLE WHERE PEOPLE CAN COMMUNICATE SINCERELY AND HONESTLY WITH EACH OTHER ABOUT WHAT THEY COULD DO FOR EACH OTHER.'



greater, because other forms of help had been discontinued (27%) and that the crisis situation had made it easier (17%).

FAMILY AND THE VOORELKAAR PLATFORMS WERE THE MOST POPULAR

There are many ways to ask for and receive help. We asked respondents to indicate their relative satisfaction with the avenues that they had used.



Family was identified as the most commonly used and most comfortable way to ask for help, followed by the platforms of *NLvoorelkaar*,¹ and then by local volunteer organisations. Although neighbourhood initiatives received average scores on satisfaction, they were not called upon as much as other resources were. National organisations and Facebook groups received the lowest scores.

'AS A FORMER CORONA PATIENT, I HAD TROUBLE FINDING/GETTING THE TRANSPORTATION THAT I NEEDED FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT. THEN I FOUND NADINA THROUGH *NLVOORELKAAR*. WHAT A SUPER-FRIENDLY WOMAN. THAT MAKES THE TRIPS VERY COMFORTABLE AND RELAXED!'



These results correspond to the expectations of Prof. Lucas Meijs, that **local matching would be the most effective with regard to requests for help**. 'It can be unnerving to ask for help. People are likely to be more confident if such help is being provided or organised in their own neighbourhoods. We have found that smaller initiatives, websites, WhatsApp groups or platforms like *NLvoorelkaar*, which involve neighbourhood-level matching assisted by local intermediaries, work better than national networks'.

MISMATCH BETWEEN CORONA-RELATED SUPPLY AND DEMAND

According to the subjective comments of respondents and a big-data analysis, the help provided through the *NLvoorelkaar* platform was primarily of the type extending 'to the front door'. It thus consisted largely of low-risk activities (e.g. running errands, doing household chores and gardening). This makes sense, as these types of activities fit most easily within the RIVM guidelines, because they require little or no personal contact. In addition, many of the activities that were

'ALL CORONA-RELATED ASSISTANCE SHOULD BE CONCENTRATED ON A SINGLE WEBSITE. I HAD TO DO A LOT OF SEARCHING.'

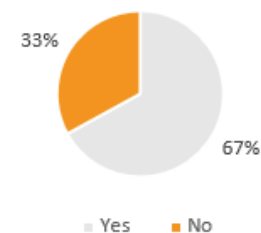


¹ This result reflects a slight bias, as the respondents were drawn from amongst the participants in the various platforms of *NLvoorelkaar*. Additional information on the methods used in this study is provided in the Appendix.

matched had been organised remotely or as one-off activities aimed at brightening someone's day. **Approximately 28,000 corona-assistance matches have been made through the *NLvoorelkaar* platform.**

This is an impressive number, but did it cover the full demand? For **67%** of the beneficiaries, the help that they had found also **satisfied the greatest need**. The remaining 33% of those asking for help had other needs that were not met. Analysis of open-ended answers revealed that 38% of these respondents were in need of social contact, while 29% needed help with household chores and 12% needed help with gardening.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED HELP DURING THE CORONA CRISIS. WAS THIS HELP ALSO YOUR GREATEST NEED?



It is unclear whether such help was simply not possible under the RIVM guidelines or whether other factors were at play. The results were probably due to a combination of the following factors:

- **Not possible:** It was difficult to fulfil the desire for true, fundamental social contact within the RIVM guidelines during the lock-down. Particularly in vulnerable situations and for vulnerable groups (e.g. nursing-home residents), it was quite a challenge to find possibilities while navigating an ever-changing situation. Activities and social structures have since begun to resume cautiously, and technological resources (e.g. video calls) have been made available to many older people.

- Fragmentation:** On average, 25% fewer corona-assistance matches were made in regions where there were fewer local intermediaries or where supply and demand were more dispersed. According to the results of the most recent volunteer study (November 2019), people are willing to travel a maximum of 23 minutes or 12 km in order to volunteer. Geographic distribution is thus an important factor in effective matching. Connecting supply and demand becomes even more difficult when supply and demand are also channelled through different platforms/databases. In general, the likelihood of a match increases when supply and demand are brought together in one central location. A central matching point can also facilitate access to assistance, improve communication and enhance safety (due to better supervision). At the same time, however, centralised matching cannot resolve the excess supply of help, as was observed during the recent corona crisis. Throughout most of the Netherlands, the number of people offering help exceeded the number requesting help by a net factor of 10. Later in this report, we offer suggestions for identifying the need for assistance more quickly and more completely.
- Too little offered:** Help with household chores and gardening were the most commonly requested forms of help requested on the platforms of *NLvoorelkaar* (accounting for 22% and 12% of all requests for help, respectively). Such help was offered at a much lower rate (9% and 14% of the help offered, respectively). These results are supported by the big-data analysis, which revealed that many respondents noted that some types of help were not offered enough. This points to a strong and feasible point for improvement for the next crisis that we might face: the recruitment of people who are capable of performing household chores and gardening. Prof. Lucas Meijs notes, 'People become excited about volunteer activities at least partly according to their own perceived competence. **The results of this study tell us that many activities do not require any specific skill sets:** anybody can run errands. In contrast, household chores and gardening are apparently so specific that they do not fall within the set of general skills that most people possess. There is thus also a structural shortage of such

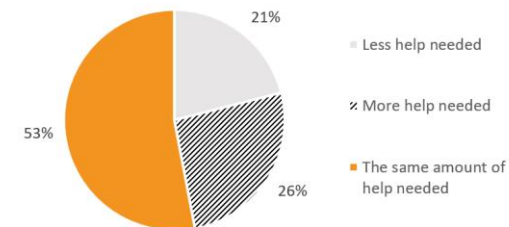
help (even outside the context of the crisis). This situation nevertheless harbours a major opportunity: we should invest effort in recruiting people who are **competent** in these tasks (e.g. do-it-yourself fanatics, hobby gardeners). This is not done much at all, even though there is a major need in this area that is currently going unfulfilled'.

Finally, it is important not to lose sight of the **local aspect**, given that it contributes to a sense of safety and reliability, thus making it easier to ask for help. As noted by Prof. Lucas Meijs, 'It also contributes to the perceived feasibility of volunteer activities in the neighbourhood or with a trusted contact—this lowers the threshold for contributing, in addition to enhancing the sustainability of assistance'.

POST-CORONA HELP

How much help will be needed after the corona crisis? The majority of beneficiary respondents (53%) expected to need the same amount of help in the coming months. Another 26% expected to need more help than at the time of the survey (June 2020), and 21% expected to need less help. It is interesting to note that respondents in the northern regions of the Netherlands were more likely than average to report an expectation to need more help (44% as compared to the nationwide average of 26%).

**EXPECTED AMOUNT OF VOLUNTEER HELP NEEDED
(JULY-OCTOBER 2020)**



VOLUNTEER EFFORT DURING THE CORONA CRISIS

45% OFFERED HELP, 34% WENT UNUSED

Of the volunteers participating in this study, 45% reported having done something for someone else during the corona crisis. This also means that 55% of people who are usually active as volunteers were either unable or unwilling to do so during this period.

'I WOULD ACTUALLY JUST LIKE TO HELP WITH GARDENING OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT, BECAUSE I'M REALLY AFRAID OF BECOMING INFECTED, AND I'VE HEARD THAT THE RISK OF INFECTION IS MUCH LESS OUTDOORS'.

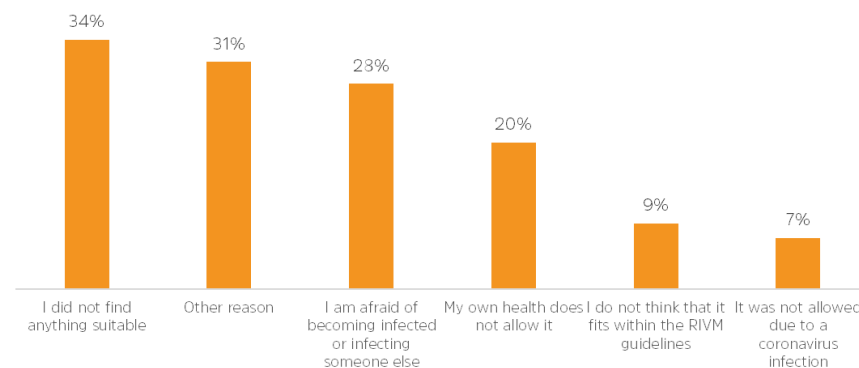


This percentage was **higher for young people and lower for older people**. On average, 53% of volunteers younger than 20 years and 54% of respondents identifying as 'students' were active as volunteers during the corona crisis, as compared to 30% of volunteers older than 70 years. Another interesting finding is that respondents listing 'occupationally disabled' or 'homemaker' as their occupation were also less likely to have been active as volunteers during the corona crisis (40% and 25%, respectively).

Interesting fact: there was little to no difference between respondents living in cities and those in small towns/villages, or between respondents in the northern and the southern regions of the Netherlands. We were all equally likely to be there for each other.



WHAT IS THE REASON FOR VOLUNTEERING LESS OR NOT AT ALL SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF CORONAVIRUS?



The percentage of volunteers who were actively involved during the corona crisis could have been even higher. **Of the volunteers reporting that they had not done any volunteering during the corona crisis, 34% said that this was because no suitable volunteer work was available.** Institutions, clubs and associations were closed, and recreational activities were cancelled. Respondents citing 'other reasons' (31%) further revealed that existing volunteer work was no longer possible or permitted. Fear of infection was also an important reason for not volunteering during the corona crisis (27%). This included both the fear of

'AS A MUSICIAN, I LOST MY PLATFORM/PODIUM FOR BRINGING MUSIC TO PEOPLE. MUSIC IS HEALING, IT PROMOTES BONDING AND IT CAN BRING RELIEF AND JOY IN TIMES LIKE THE CORONA CRISIS. SO, I STARTED MAKING MUSIC OUTSIDE AND GIVING OLDER PEOPLE A FINE AFTERNOON ON THEIR BALCONIES'.



becoming infected and the fear of passing an infection along to others (e.g. vulnerable clients).

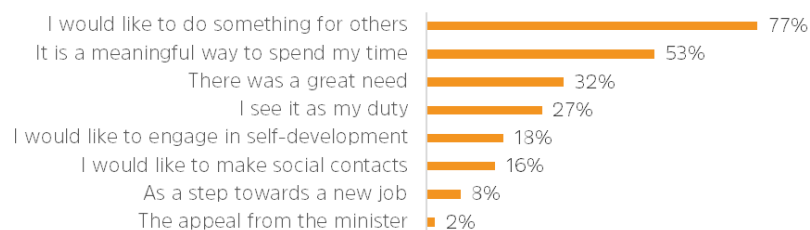
The potential volunteering capacity during a crisis could be much higher than what we have seen in the Netherlands to date. In this regard, it is crucial to ascertain

the need for assistance and the concrete offers of help. Additional practical tips and details in this regard are provided in the 'Lessons Learned' section.

EQUALLY ALTRUISTIC, THOUGH LESS INSTRUMENTAL (INDIVIDUALISTIC)

There are many reasons for doing good deeds. Such motives range from the purely altruistic to the instrumental, with volunteers experiencing considerable personal benefit as well. This is fine, because volunteering that also makes the volunteer happy is far more sustainable.

WHAT IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR VOLUNTEERING DURING THE CORONA CRISIS?



It is interesting to note that **instrumental motives were less prevalent** during the corona crisis. While altruistic motives (e.g. 'I would like to do something for others') were just as prevalent as indicated in a study conducted in November 2019 (77% of the respondents in the current study provided this response, compared to 76% of the respondents in the volunteer study conducted in November 2019), motives like 'I would like to engage in self-development' and 'I would like to make social contacts' were much less prevalent. While the latter two motives were listed by 35% and 43% (respectively) of the respondents in November 2019, they were listed by only 18% and 16% (respectively) of the respondents in the current study.

Moreover, a **sense of duty** emerged as a far more important **motivator** for volunteering in response to the crisis. In the 2018 volunteer study (this question was not asked in 2019), only 6% of the respondents listed this as a motivator, compared to 32% of the respondents in the current study. Interestingly, the sense of duty seemed to be felt somewhat more strongly in the southern region of the

Netherlands than it was in the middle or northern regions. Respondents in the southern region were also more likely to list the appeal from the minister as a motivation. The relative intensity of the coronavirus in different regions is also likely to have played a role in this regard, given that the southern regions experienced the earliest and most severe effects.

It is interesting to note that the appeal from the government/minister was hardly ever selected as a reason for helping each other. Prof. Lucas Meijis: 'As we saw with respondents asking for help, these results indicate that people in our country generally regard offering help during a crisis as a matter of common decency. The decision to do something for someone else is made by the citizens themselves. An appeal from a minister or, at the local level, from a municipal councillor, does not induce a substantial flow of volunteer energy. Put bluntly, Dutch people are not inclined to dance to the government's tune. At the same time, however, ministers and municipal councillors can help to direct this energy by facilitating it'.

Differences in motivation were also observed **between age groups**. Respondents between the ages of 21 and 40 years were more likely than average to identify making social contacts and engaging in self-development as important motivators for volunteering. Respondents older than 60 years were less likely than average to identify these motivators as important. Respondents between the ages of 50 and 60 years were more likely to list finding a job as an important motivator for volunteering. The same was true for respondents who reported being unemployed.

NEW FACES: 12.5% 'FIRST-TIME' VOLUNTEERS

Half of the people in the Netherlands are regularly active as volunteers. The corona crisis appears to have had a side effect of raising awareness amongst people who had not yet been active as volunteers: **12.5% of the 'corona helpers' (i.e. those offering help during the crisis) reported that they had not previously volunteered.**

The **net volunteer potential during the corona crisis appeared to have been the same as before the crisis**. What could explain this? As a simple estimate, in addition to the 12.5% new faces, 24% of the existing volunteers reported that they

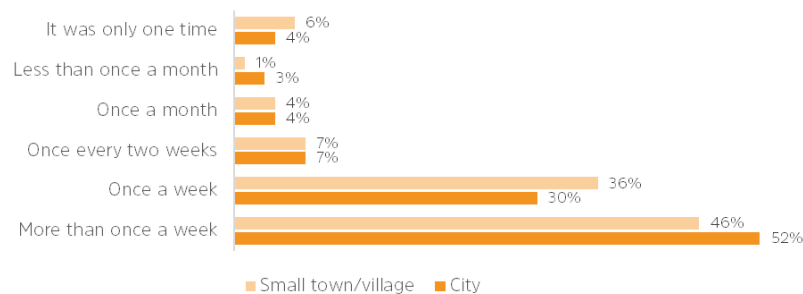
had done more than before the crisis. At the same time, however, 40% of the volunteers indicated that they had done less. Finally, 24% of the volunteers reported that they had volunteered just as much during the corona crisis as they had before that time.

Groups of respondents who reported having volunteered more during the corona crisis than before the crisis included entrepreneurs, homemakers and respondents between the ages of 20 and 50 years. Students and entrepreneurs were over-represented amongst the new volunteers.

CORONA CRISIS: MORE CAPACITY AND EFFORT, OR LESS?

Does the fact that volunteer potential remained relatively consistent before and during the corona crisis mean that the same capacity for volunteer effort was available? This is difficult to calculate, as it goes beyond the question of whether the amount of effort increased, remained the same or decreased.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU VOLUNTEERED FOR SOMEONE ELSE SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE CORONA VIRUS?



Of the volunteers participating in the current study, 49% reported having volunteered more than once a week during the corona crisis, compared to just 23% in the volunteer study of November 2019. In addition, 31% of the volunteers in this study reported having volunteered once a week during the corona crisis

(compared to 41% in the study of November 2019). It thus seems that people were more frequently active in helping each other during the corona crisis.

It is interesting to note that there was a **slight difference between respondents in cities and those in small towns/villages** with regard to frequency. City dwellers were more likely than residents of small towns/villages were to volunteer 'more than once a week'. Students, people who were unemployed or who had occupational disabilities, and retirees volunteered somewhat more frequently during the corona crisis.

We simply do not know enough about the actual hours that have been invested in volunteering or about the impact that these efforts have achieved in order to draw any conclusions about the true volunteering capacity during the corona crisis. One clear indication from our results is that the maximum capacity was not reached, given the substantial share of the volunteer supply that was not

THE RIVM MEASURES HAVE BROUGHT ALL OF MY VOLUNTEER JOBS TO A SCREECHING HALT. FOR THE TIME BEING, I'M NOT WELCOME. I HATE THAT!

I'VE SIGNED UP AT VARIOUS PLACES, BUT I'VE EITHER GOTTEN NO REACTION OR THERE WEREN'T ANY SUITABLE JOBS IN THE AREA'.



deployed.

ERRANDS, SOCIAL CONTACT & ACTIONS WERE POPULAR

According to both the big-data analysis and the responses to the corona-assistance study, the following services were particularly popular: practical household and gardening chores (32% of the total demand, 24% of the total supply), social contact (31% of demand, 57% of supply), light-hearted actions like balcony concerts (29% of demand; no information on supply) and help with errands (9% of demand, 52% of supply).



'AS A PHONE BUDDY, I CALL SEVERAL PEOPLE ONCE A WEEK, EVERY WEEK'.

'I'VE HANDED OUT FLYERS AND WALKED THE DOG'.

'I'VE MAINLY BEEN INVOLVED WITH COORDINATING ACTIVITIES AIMED AT HELPING VULNERABLE PEOPLE BY RUNNING ERRANDS OR BRINGING FLOWERS'.

'ERRANDS AND VISITS'.

'I WEEDED THE GARDEN FOR AN OLDER COUPLE'.

'I RAN ERRANDS FOR OLDER PEOPLE WHO WERE NOT COMFORTABLE LEAVING THEIR HOMES'.

'I WROTE 165 CARDS TO OLDER PEOPLE AND HELPED AT THE FOOD PANTRY'.

'I HELPED A SINGLE MOTHER CLEAN UP HER GARDEN SO THAT HER CHILDREN WOULD HAVE A SAFE PLACE TO PLAY AGAIN'.

'I HELPED BY INTERPRETING FOR REFUGEES/ASYLUM-SEEKERS'.

MORE VOLUNTEERING DUE TO LONELINESS

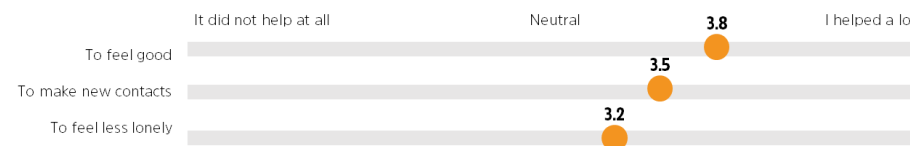
The intelligent lock-down had implications for the possibility of social contact. Because social contact (or the lack thereof) has been the most popular category for both 'help wanted' and 'help offered' on the platforms of *NLvoorelkaar* for years, we always include it as a specific question in our studies.

In the current study, 37% of the respondents identified loneliness as a 'very important' factor in the choice to volunteer during the corona crisis. This is a

remarkable increase from the 21% of respondents selecting this response in November 2019. There did not appear to be any major differences between cities and small towns/villages. Contrary to expectations, people 60 years of age and older were clearly less likely than other age groups to identify the loneliness motive as a 'very important' factor in the choice to volunteer during the lock-down.

Did volunteering during the corona crisis actually help to combat loneliness? First and foremost, it did give people a good feeling (average score of 3.8 on a five-point scale ranging from 1: 'did not help at all' to 5: 'helped a great deal'). In addition, volunteering was helpful in establishing new contacts (3.5) and in making respondents feel less lonely (3.2).

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS VOLUNTEERING HELPED YOU:



Volunteering during the corona crisis thus reduced the negative feelings associated with loneliness and had had a slight positive effect on establishing new contacts. In this respect, volunteering apparently had a positive effect on preventing or reducing loneliness.

TO RETAIN ENERGY: ENSURE USEFULNESS, SAFETY AND FLEXIBILITY

There is good news: 30% of the volunteers responding indicated that they would like to volunteer more after the corona crisis. Another 61% would like to continue volunteering the same amount of time, and 6% would like to do less. Although these results obviously reflect an element of social desirability, they do reveal a slight shift from November 2019, when 13% of the volunteers expressed a desire to volunteer less in the future and 54% expressed a desire to continue the same amount of volunteering. Given that both the target group and the question were

essentially the same,² it appears that the corona crisis has persuaded people to invest more of their efforts in helping other people.

This increase in the intention to volunteer more particularly strong for young people (16–30 years), students and respondents in the northern regions of the Netherlands.

What is needed in order to volunteer, continue to volunteer or volunteer more after the corona period? The top 5 responses are as follows:

1. Useful work
2. Safety
3. Flexibility (volunteers can set their own schedule)
4. Availability of sufficient opportunities
5. Flexibility (one-off or flexible frequency)

It is interesting to note that flexibility, which has always emerged as the most important motivator in the studies by *NLvoorelkaar*, came in at third (timing) and fifth (frequency) place in the current study. **The usefulness and safety of volunteering surprisingly emerged in first and second place.** This result makes sense, given the circumstances. Given the important role that the risk of infection has come to play in our lives, safety is obviously a prerequisite for doing something nice for someone else. In addition, as a result of the lock-down, many regular volunteer activities were discontinued and, in some cases, they were replaced by less intense, more light-hearted actions aimed at brightening someone's day instead of directly helping others. This could also explain the need for the 'availability of sufficient opportunities' (fourth place).

These prerequisites could be used to help structure volunteer efforts after the crisis. In the following part of this report, we provide additional tips from volunteers, beneficiaries and volunteer (or other) organisations.

² In the current study, the question was posed as follows: 'The coronavirus measures will soon be relaxed further, and we will see the start of the '1.5-metre society'. To what extent



would you like to continue your efforts to help other people, your neighbourhood or the world?'

LESSONS LEARNED

The corona crisis offers an opportunity to learn how to improve the organisation of volunteer help and volunteering during—and possibly after—a crisis situation. In this study, volunteer organisations, volunteers/helpers and private beneficiaries were asked to share their ‘tops and tips’ for organising assistance in crisis situations, based on their experiences with corona-related assistance.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF VOLUNTEERS

Tops

Fortunately, many things went well with regard to the organisation of corona-related assistance, according to the 577 volunteers responding to this question. Many expressed appreciation for the **agreements and adherence to the corona-virus measures**. These aspects were interpreted in two ways. Some volunteers stated that the rules, guidelines or protocols were explained to them very clearly and precisely, and that they had followed them in a similar manner. Others noted that the rules were interpreted in a flexible manner and that their application was customised to specific situations, thereby allowing for even more opportunities to help others within the guidelines.

Volunteers were also highly satisfied with the **communication** from volunteer organisations, which they described as personalised, fluent, positive, largely online (e.g. WhatsApp, online meetings), comprehensible, sufficiently informative and, in many cases, clear with regard to what was expected.

Finally, many respondents expressed that their experiences with volunteer effort during the corona crisis had been **positive**. The speed of action and the direct contact with the beneficiary (or organisation) were well received, as was the experience of finding activities through platforms like *NLvoorelkaar* or within their own networks/environments.

Tips

Many things could also have gone better. Along with the 577 volunteers mentioning positive aspects of their experiences, almost twice as many (N=1,032) provided feedback on how their experiences could have been improved. Much of

the feedback expressed a common theme: ‘**Make it easier for volunteers to help**’. Several additional key points:

‘THE STRUCTURE COULD BE CLEARER, WITH A SINGLE CENTRAL LOCATION WHERE ALL CORONA INITIATIVES ARE LISTED. IT WAS SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO FIND OR CHOOSE VOLUNTEER JOBS, BECAUSE SO MANY WERE OFFERED THAT IT BECAME UNMANAGEABLE.’

‘POINT FOR IMPROVEMENT: ORGANISATION. OFTEN VERY AMATEURISH. REGISTRATION, FOLLOW-UP, INTRODUCTION... EVEN THE SIMPLEST MATTERS WERE OFTEN NOT ARRANGED. PROVIDE SUPPORT. BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, EVERYONE WILL BE WALKING AWAY FRUSTRATED.’



- Provide a better **overview** of what type of help is needed and where, thus reducing fragmentation and making the search process easier. Individual respondents differed with regard to how such an overview should operate: from geographic region (municipality, region, province or the Netherlands as a whole) to content (only corona-related assistance or volunteering that could be done in a corona-proof manner with a bit of creativity).
- Allow for more **flexibility and creativity** in the performance of regular volunteering, so that it could also be corona-proof (e.g. taking advantage of online capabilities or arranging space to allow a corona-proof working environment).
- Improve **communication**. For example, some volunteers mentioned that the national government/municipality/organisation was not always clear in stating what the safety guidelines did and did not allow with regard to volunteering. For example, communication concerning personal protection (e.g. face masks) led to considerable anxiety: why should they be used in the care sector, but not by volunteers? Practical communication was appreciated, as with the email communication by *NLvoorelkaar* concerning the availability of corona-proof volunteering.

‘A GREAT IDEA OF *NLVOORELKAAR* TO INCLUDE INSTRUCTIONS IN THE VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR HOW THE JOBS COULD BE DONE IN A CORONA-PROOF MANNER.’



- Clearer **impact and appreciation**. It was not always clear whether the help that volunteers provided was actually needed. Reactions to offers of help were often late or absent. 'On the job' as well, there was less time or opportunity for expressions of gratitude or feedback.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF BENEFICIARIES

Tops

Private beneficiaries resembled volunteers with regard to their positive experiences during the corona crisis (N=235). The greatest appreciation was expressed for **communication** (e.g. quick, easy/accessible, short lines, clear and online). This applied to communication with both the volunteers who assisted them and the volunteer (or other) organisations that were able to act on their requests. This group was highly appreciative of the **agreements and the extent of adherence to the corona-virus measures**. Finally, many beneficiaries during the corona crisis reported **positive experiences** requesting, finding and receiving help. This is not surprising, given the amount of help offered.

'COMING INTO CONTACT WITH A VOLUNTEER WAS QUITE EASY AND QUICK'.

'IT TOOK A FEW REFERRAL CALLS BEFORE I ARRIVED AT ZAANKANTERSVOORELKAAR. THEN MY REQUEST FOR HELP WAS ARRANGED WITHIN A DAY'.



Tips

Our results also indicate several areas for improvement. Based on this feedback, and in light of the surplus offers of help and the unfulfilled need for assistance, we recommend that, in a future crisis, the focus should be shifted towards those who need (or would be likely to need) assistance in conjunction with the measures, as well as towards **ascertaining the need for assistance**. Prof. Lucas Meijs adds, 'This is particularly well suited as a task for paid staff, given that they are already in direct contact with the vulnerable groups who are likely to need support in such situations'.

What could help to reduce the reluctance to ask? The prompt availability of **coronavirus-protective equipment** was particularly important to this group of stakeholders. The risk of infection was even more important for this often-

vulnerable group than it was for the volunteers, who mentioned this point of improvement several times.

Private beneficiaries also noted that they had encountered more **obstacles** than they had before the corona crisis. These respondents provided the following suggestions for improvement:

- A more active approach and effective matching to truly *suitable* offers of help. Local intermediaries (e.g. volunteer coordinators, care providers, community teams or volunteer centres) play a key role in this regard.
- Greater awareness of and more information about additional possibilities for assistance.
- Additional attention to specific groups, including those living alone, older people, low-income households, people with disabilities and people with language deficiencies.

The application of behavioural techniques and principles could also help to reduce reluctance to ask. For example, **offer concrete help instead of waiting to be asked**. This is probably familiar to anyone who has ever been to a funeral. When we offer to help by telling people that they can call us anytime, they hardly ever do. If we bring a home-cooked meal or drop by to help with household chores without being asked, however, the help is greatly appreciated. *NLvoorelkaar* applies this technique in various ways, including proactively arranging for care providers to help with errands, cooking or gardening. A preliminary inventory did not reveal any need for such services. Following the distribution of a sign-up schedule showing when helpers were available and how they could help, however, many people made use of these offers. The principle of equivalence ('trading' help) or **signing up someone else** for support worked well in relieving the burden on care providers during the corona crisis.



FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF VOLUNTEER (AND OTHER) ORGANISATIONS

In all, 219 respondents who indicated that they were working for volunteer (or other) organisations that organised corona-related assistance during the lockdown shared important lessons, tips, tops and insights in this study.

Most of the feedback concerned the **organisation/coordination** of volunteer help (47%) and **communication** (44%). Finally, they mentioned several prerequisite matters (7%), including close **cooperation with the municipality** and sufficient safety and reliability in the matching process.

'IT WAS NICE THAT THE NATIONAL PLATFORM RESPONDED TO THE CRISIS QUICKLY. IT WAS AND CONTINUES TO BE DIFFICULT FOR LOCAL (OR OTHER) ORGANISATIONS TO GAIN A GRASP OF THE FRAGMENTED OFFERS OF HELP AND TO RESPOND TO THEM.'

Organisation/coordination

The following was frequently mentioned under the topic of 'organisation/coordination of volunteer help':

- **Flexibility and creativity** (22% of all respondents). Taking a creative approach to opportunities that are allowed within the guidelines, transforming activities and always having a Plan B. This point was mentioned as both a top and a tip. While some organisations perceived considerable creative leeway during the crisis, others encountered rigid protocols. In general, organisations were enthusiastic about the online possibilities, and they expressed the intention to continue using them in the future.
- **Remaining pragmatic** (19%) and **cooperating** (19%) were mentioned frequently (often in combination with each other). Pragmatism was explained in terms of 'just doing it'—not being afraid, not talking about things for too long and just trying (while using common sense). Cooperation referred to such practices as sharing knowledge and experiences and drawing on each other's strengths. Both of these aspects were identified as positive experiences. The crisis apparently served to

'BECAUSE OF THE REGULATIONS, IT WAS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO OFFER HELP QUICKLY. THE DELIVERY OF SERVICE WAS LIMITED IN PART BY FEAR OF THE VIRUS, BUT ALSO BY FEAR OF THE EXTREMELY HIGH PENALTIES.'

'WITHIN MY ORGANISATION, WE WERE NOT ABLE TO USE ANY VOLUNTEERS, EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS A NEED FOR THEM, AND EVEN THOUGH IT WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO WORK SAFELY...'

bring parties together, while increasing speed and making it easier to work in a solution-oriented manner.

- The **centralisation** of requests for help, the recruitment of offers of help or information, and knowledge exchange concerning day-to-day practice (14%). A national or regional approach can easily be combined with local customisation. This could prevent **fragmentation** in both supply and demand, which participating organisations noted had occasionally posed serious obstacles to their tasks during the corona crisis.
- Finally, organisations mentioned providing structure for volunteers/employees (i.e. plans, policies, protocols, overviews: 9%), actively approaching vulnerable groups (e.g. nursing-home residents, foreign-language speakers: 8%) and quicker corona-proofing of spaces (e.g. offices, recreational spaces: 5%).

'MAKE SURE THAT IMPORTANT WEBSITES LIKE NLVOORELKAAR ARE WELL KNOWN AND EASY TO FIND.'

'IT'S NICE THAT SO MANY OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE, BUT IT WOULD BE MORE CONVENIENT FOR THERE TO BE ONE UMBRELLA ORGANISATION DISTRIBUTING THE REQUESTS FOR HELP. IN MANY CASES, HELPERS CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES, AND IT TAKES A LOT OF TIME TO SELECT THE RIGHT ORGANISATION.'

Communication

The struggles of professionals were clearly reflected under the topic of 'communication'. Even as an explosion of volunteer energy occurred, safety

concerns led organisations to discontinue all of their volunteer activities and intake procedures. In some cases, access was literally cut off as nursing homes and community centres shut their doors. On the sidelines, clients needed help but could not be reached by the available supply.

It is thus not surprising that this led to a struggle to direct the volunteer energy in an effective, steady and sustainable manner (for both the present and the future). A major **compliment** is due to everyone who has faced this struggle: in our study, many volunteers and beneficiaries rated communication as a ‘top’.

The following was the most commonly mentioned under the topic of ‘communication’:

- **Personal communication** (26%). This was mentioned as both a top and a tip, both for keeping volunteers involved and for reducing reluctance to ask. How this should be done is a question of taste, with a wide spectrum of options ranging from telephone and online calls to WhatsApps and greeting cards. What they all have in common, however, is a sensitivity to the personal situations and needs of others.
- **Clear communication** (21%). According to our respondents, communication was difficult, whether from the organisation to the volunteer or from the local (or other) government to the organisation. This was more often listed as a tip. For example, communication from the local (or other) government was seen as insufficient or unclear at times. Organisations would have appreciated greater clarity concerning the concrete application of coronavirus-preventive measures to what was

‘I’M POSITIVE ABOUT THE COORDINATION BETWEEN THE MUNICIPALITY, GOVERNMENT AND OUR OWN ORGANISATION. THERE WAS GOOD CONSULTATION ABOUT HOW TO USE THE RIGHT MEASURES TO START WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS AGAIN’.

‘THE MUNICIPALITY AND THE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WERE VERY DIFFICULT TO REACH (ESPECIALLY BY PHONE)’.



and was not allowed in their specific situations (19%). This includes a protocol for the proper interpretation and application of the rules. Interestingly, many community centres noted that this had remained unclear for far too long.

Communication from professionals to volunteers/beneficiaries/clients also proved difficult. Amidst the flurry of activity, it was a challenge to provide *adequate* communication (20%), and questions about rules were difficult to answer, due to vague policies. Many professionals noted that their own communication had been too slow at times (13%).

CONCLUDING WORDS BY PROF. LUCAS MEIJS

This study provides insight from three groups of stakeholders involved in volunteering during a crisis: people requesting help (beneficiaries), people offering help (volunteers) and paid staff members (professionals).

As during previous crises (e.g. the refugee crisis), a nearly unstoppable flow of volunteer energy quickly emerged during the corona crisis. Offers of help greatly exceeded requests, and they appeared more quickly than usual. If one thing is certain in this life, it is that there will always be another crisis. My advice is therefore to invest in **reducing reluctance to ask**, and not in recruiting offers of help or volunteers.

Based on the results of this study, there are at least three ways to address the problem of reluctance to ask:

1. Start thinking creatively about assistance that extends ‘beyond the front door’: How can you provide the fundamental contact that people are lacking, without posing a threat to the health of those involved?
2. Talk with vulnerable people in order to develop a sense of what they need. This will make it easier to act following a major event, as you will have already charted the likely ‘need for assistance’. The only thing left to do will be to fulfil it.

3. Start recruiting a pool of people with specific skills that you know to be in short supply (e.g. household chores and gardening). In a subsequent crisis, such help would be immediately available, thus drastically reducing reluctance to ask.

In particular, I would advise professionals to start thinking NOW about how they could deploy the volunteers they have now, as well as those who could be recruited through *NLvoorelkaar* (or other platforms) in the time to come and those who might sign up spontaneously should a second wave of the COVID-19 emerge. Consider which interventions would be best suited to your professional context. This exercise is particularly relevant to community centres, care and nursing wards, and hospitals, which it seems to me were hit hardest during the lock-down.

Finally, more support should be provided to the courageous professionals who, in recent months, have been so trapped between a flood of creative helpfulness and the restrictive safety measures of their organisations. They have persisted admirably amidst this immensely challenging situation. Take the time to prepare adequately for the next crisis period, as a clear plan will leave more room for creativity, flexibility and communication. This could increase the availability of help for those who sorely need it during a crisis situation.



Prof. Lucas Meijs

Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM)

APPENDIX

ABOUT *NLVOORELKAAR*

The *NLvoorelkaar* platform was built on an ambitious dream: to ensure that all people receive the help and attention that they deserve—both now and in the future, when this dream will be even more challenging due to the combination of an ageing population and continuing economisation measures.

We believe that everyone has something to offer that is needed by someone else—a quick chat, a strong arm, a skilful hand, wise counsel, a sporting attitude or organisational talent.

For this reason, we use technology and campaigns to inspire and facilitate people to use their talents to help other people. If we all help somebody, everyone will be helped. In addition to contributing to a nicer community that is ready for the future, good deeds simply make us feel good. It's like feeding two birds with one piece of bread. In other words, helping makes you happy.

With 65 affiliated partners, more than 170,000 participants, more than 11,000 community organisations, more than 12,000 open requests for assistance/volunteer jobs and more than 1.6 million website visits each year, *NLvoorelkaar.nl* has grown into the largest platform for volunteer effort in the Netherlands. Every six minutes, we make two people happy by facilitating a perfect match. To learn more about *NLvoorelkaar*, please visit [NLvoorelkaar.nl/zakelijk](https://nlvoorelkaar.nl/zakelijk).

RESEARCH METHOD AND JUSTIFICATION

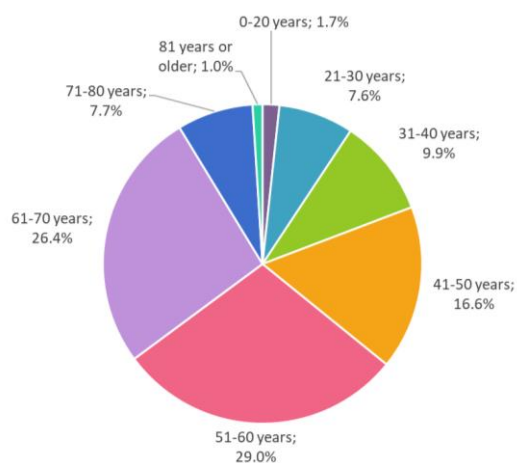
This study was conducted by *NLvoorelkaar.nl*, in collaboration with Prof. Lucas Meijs, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM). Invitations to participate in this study were sent to 15,070 participants in the national *NLvoorelkaar* platform and five local *voorelkaar* partners

(Rotterdamersvoorelkaar, Helmondvoorelkaar, Zaankantersvoorelkaar, Deurnevoorelkaar and Huizenvoorelkaar). The questionnaire was distributed by email on 28 May, and it remained open until 5 June.

The questionnaire was administered in blocks, such that not everyone had to answer all of the questions. In this way, we ensured that each respondent was presented with only those questions that were relevant to that respondent. For example, volunteers were asked only questions relating to volunteering.

In all, 1,859 respondents participated in this study (response rate: 12%). The reliability of the study is very good (reliability level 99%; margin of error 2%).

The age distribution was as follows:



The age range and average age of the respondents (49 years) was slightly older than average for all participants on *NLvoorelkaar* (45 years). This is an inherent effect of the questionnaire research method employed.

In the study, 67% of the respondents reported being volunteers. For *NLvoorelkaar* as a whole, this figure is 63%. The proportion of volunteers amongst respondents is thus slightly higher. In addition, 18% of the respondents indicated that they

were searching for volunteer help for themselves or someone else (e.g. private beneficiaries). Finally, 15% of the respondents indicated that they were searching on behalf of a community organisation, client or club (professionals).

**Because this study was conducted through the NLvoorelkaar network, it is not completely representative of the Netherlands as a whole. It is therefore important to remember that the educational level of the people surveyed was higher than average for the Netherlands and that the respondents already had experience with volunteer efforts (either as volunteers or as beneficiaries).*