

CITIZENS FOR CITIZENS

Setting up your own relief action in times of corona? 5 questions to consider

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Laptops enabling home education for children in vulnerable families, banners supporting the caring, nursing and medical staff, a shopping service for risk groups: in recent weeks, thousands of citizens have taken action in order to support their fellow citizens during these times of the corona outbreak.

Maybe you were one of these front-runners. Or maybe you are considering setting up a relief action as well. How do you make sure that the time (and sometimes the money) you invest has the best possible effect. Based on 5 questions, we gladly share the lessons we learned from our research into small-scale, voluntary development organizations. Who knows, this may help you further...



Are people actually waiting for your help?

Only by engaging in dialogue with the (intended) beneficiaries will you get a good understanding of the situation: is help really needed and what kind of help would be appropriate? What you consider yourself a problem is not always experienced as such by the persons affected. In addition, not every solution you think of is actually a solution. Well-intentioned help that has not been set up in consultation with the beneficiaries can be disruptive and even stigmatizing. Hence, you should always include aid recipients in the design and implementation of your initiative. And also, keep up the dialogue with them: needs may change over time and problems may solve themselves. Due to social distancing measures, direct dialogue with aid recipients seems impossible these days. Yet, it does not mean by definition that contact is impossible.



Will you be teaming up with other organizations?

Initiatives are often set up separately, i.e. in isolation from one another. You tend to do so, because you do not know who else is active in this field, or because there is simply no time to align your actions with those of others. However, people sometimes act that way because they like to keep control and ownership over their initiative. Working with others is then seen as threatening or even delaying the action. Yet, teaming up with other (existing) organizations is an important precondition allowing you to provide targeted help. Indeed, organizations that have been active in a certain field for some time, already have experience with your target group and can provide you with valuable advice. In addition, they often have a good overview of who else is working and what is really needed. It's only by working together that you will manage to coordinate your help and to avoid any overlap.



Do you have an idea of the duration and the type of action you will be providing?

From the very moment you start offering help, you create expectations. People may assume that you will be offering the same help for a longer period of time. Hence, be explicit about how long you expect to be able to provide help, as well as about the type of help you have in mind. And if this is not yet clear, make sure to let them know. Be realistic as to the commitments you make. Where today, you still may have a lot of time and can rely on a large group of enthusiastic volunteers, your commitment might decrease over time. You want to give your aid recipients the opportunity to look – in time – for any alternative help.



Do you know when you are going to quit?

All too often, the initiators spend all their time and energy in sustaining their initiative, asking themselves: do we still have enough volunteers, does everyone know what is exactly expected from them, is everything going as planned? Therefore, thinking about quitting is not that obvious. In addition, your initiative has probably been enthusiastically received by family, friends and strangers. You don't want to disappoint people, especially those counting on your support. Hence, quitting is often easier said than done. Still, it is good to think about this in time and to ask yourself: when may the help provided no longer be relevant, if other parties might be more appropriate to proceed with the help and when do you expect that you will no longer be able to do the job all by yourself? This is the only way allowing you to work towards a good completion of your action, to organize any transfer and to properly and timely communicate on this with the beneficiaries, any other volunteers and anyone else who is involved in this.



Do you take your time?

Initiators are often strongly motivated to help as many needy people as possible and in the shortest possible time. That's exactly why there is often (very) little time between your confronting a problem, coming up with a solution and actually offering that solution. Moreover, when the initial results of your initiative are visible, the desire to continue and perhaps expand your action becomes stronger. Far too often, there is little time to sit and wonder about everything you have been doing. And reflection is just what it takes to stay sharp and focused on the help you are offering: is your help still needed, does your action require any adjustments, can you (still) meet expectations? So, occasionally, allow yourself to step out of the day-to-day issues, in the knowledge that, at any given moment, standing still may be necessary to move forward...

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