

The 5th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences
Fostering recovery through metaverse business modelling
June 16-17, 2022
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

**Sustainable and Blended Solutions for NGOs to Face
COVID's Challenges and Interconnected Crisis**

Marta-Christina SUCIU¹, Ana-Maria BOCĂNEALĂ²,
Gheorghe-Alexandru STATIVĂ³, Mircea Ovidiu MITUCĂ^{4*}

DOI: 10.2478/9788367405072-074

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an existential set of complex interconnected crises that affect companies, communities, organizations, and institutions all over the world. This crisis highlighted the importance of innovation, collaboration, and partnerships. Collective wisdom and knowledge are key factors for communities that are expressing their high willingness to collaborate in order to find the best solutions together. The main goal of this paper is to analyse the NGOs' possible solutions to face the COVID-19 crisis challenges in the context of a turbulent international environment. The research methodology follows a step-by-step approach including: Literature review (step 1); a brief analysis of case studies illustrating the COVID's influence on NGOs on the international level (step 2); Qualitative research based on telephone interviews with NGO leaders that shared the problems they had to face during COVID (step 3); Mapping the solutions adopted during the COVID crisis (step 4). As a main result, our research offers a map of possible solutions that might be used by NGOs to face crisis, but also other similar situations. One of the most interesting results is the importance of mobilizing NGOs to work together, to collaborate, and to realize that together they can better overcome certain obstacles. Our paper has a potential original value providing a relatively new and fresh perspective on solutions that might be applied by NGOs in order to face COVID challenges and complex set of interconnected crises. As a main conclusion, our paper illustrates that a valid solution to manage to face crises is to join hands for collaborations and sustainable partnerships.

Keywords: NGOs, collaboration, collective wisdom and solidarity, COVID crisis.

JEL Classification: A12, L31.

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies; Romanian Academy; Academy of Romanian Scientists, Bucharest, Romania, christina.suciu@economie.ase.ro.

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, anamaria.bocaneala@gmail.com.

³ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, alexstativa95@gmail.com.

⁴ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, mircea.mituca@gmail.com.

* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis pandemic and the measures taken to stop it generated one of the largest and deepest downturns in economic activity in the European Union. This paper analyses the NGO's response to COVID-19 in the context of a dramatically changing international environment, which is characterized as a VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity). The main research questions (RQ) refer to how the crisis has affected the Romanian NGOs (RQ1) and, correspondingly, to what would be the future possible solutions (RQ2). The impact of the pandemic has varied dramatically across different sectors. It has at the same time a complex social, economic and multidimensional impact as it refers not only to a health crisis but also to a complex human values crisis. During the COVID-19 crisis, the NGOs have to change their strategies and re-establishing their priorities. Our paper analyses the main aspects that influenced the activities of NGOs.

The research methodology involved a step-by-step approach. *The first step* is to analyse the global aspects of the influence of the COVID-19 crisis within NGOs. *The second step* is about a comparative analysis between some word surveys regarding the impact of pandemic for the NGOs. *The third step* consists of identifying the impact within the Romanian NGOs based on a qualitative analysis applying interviews and discussions with leaders from various NGOs, who expressed their points of view on issues that have positively or negatively influenced the environment during the COVID crisis. Finally, *in the fourth step*, we provide an outline including a possible set of sustainable solutions that might be applied by NGOs in the future. Our research highlighted that solidarity, transparency, trust, and cooperation are crucial in order to better face complex crisis and challenges.

2. Problem Statement

The COVID crisis has pushed the world economy into a depression with potentially profound consequences and historic levels of unemployment and inequalities. At the same time, *the United Nations Strategic Development Goal 8* indicated that every country has to apply multiple ways to support public, private, and civic sectors collaborations (United Nations, 2020). More than ever before, we need solidarity, hope, and cooperation to see this crisis through together. This ability to find quick, effective, and efficient answers to face the complex problems can be seen as their common denominator. (Le Got, 2022) The COVID-19 crisis risks overturning decades of progress in the fight against poverty and further increasing already high levels of inequality within and between countries.

One of the most affected economic sectors is the NGOs sector. This sector is particularly subject to a lack of financial reserves to pay for fixed costs (especially wages, salaries, etc.) and office rents, but, at the same time, faces a number of difficulties in terms of the nature of the activities/services they produce. The COVID pandemic has forced NGOs to develop more flexible workplace models and to accelerate digital transformation. The NGOs are the links between civil society and institutions.

They are one of the most important actors in our society. The NGOs provide numerous examples of positive actions providing concrete solutions for the most disadvantaged ones. The COVID-19 crisis has also affected the young people mostly in terms of online education that has disrupted learning methods. Education is not only a fundamental human right; it is a right that directly affects all other rights. When education systems do not work properly, peace, prosperity, and the whole society is no longer functioning well. (Le Got, 2022). Recent innovations have shown promising prospects, but these changes can only be sustainable if no one is left behind. The crisis pushed NGOs to innovate, adapt, and modernize in order to implement tools and methods to scale the COVID-19 effects.

The diversity of NGOs activities is a great advantage, especially for their leaders who have to adapt and find better solutions for each problem. We believe that NGO leaders can find more innovative solutions to the problems they face, and these solutions can become practical guides for corporate leaders.

3. Research Questions and Main Goal of the Paper

The research questions (RQ) of this study are: how NGOs' activities have been affected by the COVID crisis (RQ1) and what solutions they have found to overcome this crisis (RQ2). This paper analyses the NGO's response to the COVID-19 crisis against the backdrop of a dramatically changing international environment. We focus on the identification of a viable set of possible solutions and drawing a map, which will help the NGO leaders to act in difficult/complex situations. The research's main goal is to identify the solutions that NGOs have found in response to the crisis in COVID. The specific objectives are designed on the basis of a step-by-step approach. *On the first step*, we had analysed some case studies of international NGOs influenced by COVID crisis. *On the second step*, we focus on the identification of the problems faced by NGOs during the COVID-19 crisis. *The third step* concerns the process of finding solutions that might be adopted by NGOs in order to overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

4. Research Methods

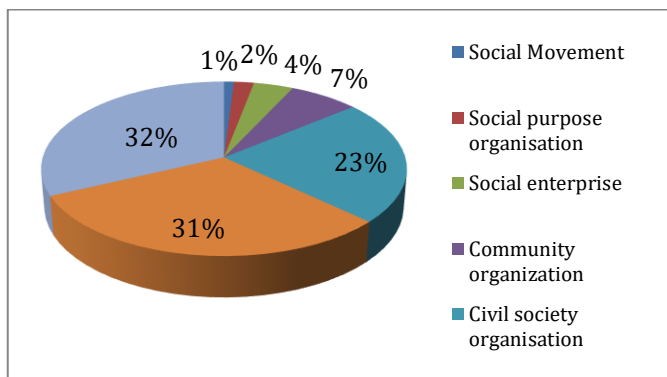
The research methodology is based on a *step by step* approach including four steps. *Step 1*: Literature review; *Step 2*. Case studies analysis of COVID-19's impact on international NGOs; *Step 3*: Romanian NGO research based on a qualitative analysis consisting of telephone interviews (made in the first part of 2022, the end of month January) with several NGO leaders from Romania who shared the problems they faced during the COVID-19 crisis and what solutions they found to manage; *Step 4*: Mapping the solutions found by NGOs in managing problems during the COVID-19 crisis.

5. Case Studies

5.1 Impact of COVID-19 on African Civil Society Organizations, 2020

This research report is the first of its kind to look exclusively at the impact of the COVID-19 on Africa. It is based on a survey conducted by the African NGOs and EPIC-Africa between 29 April and 15 May 2020. These results are based on feedback received from 1.015 CSOs in 44 African countries that participated in the survey. Despite the enormous impact of COVID-19 on their operations, African CSOs are actively contributing to the fight against the pandemic at national and continental levels. The type of organization that was included in this research is illustrated in the figure below, Figure 1.

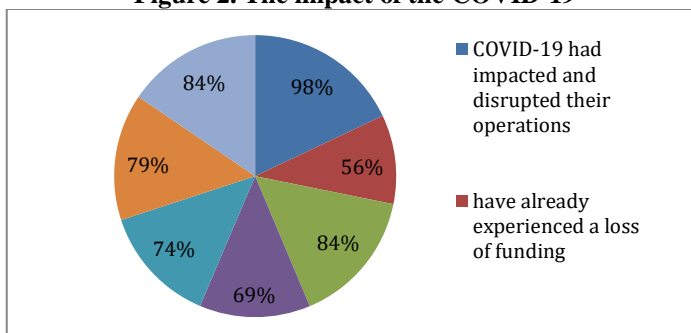
Figure 1. Type of organisations



Source: Designed by authors based on the information from the study “Impact of COVID-19 on African civil society organizations (CSOs)”.

In the figure above, we can see that the largest number of respondents is represented by NGOs. This study shows that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been felt in financing, operations, and activities. The general impact is reflected in Figure 2.

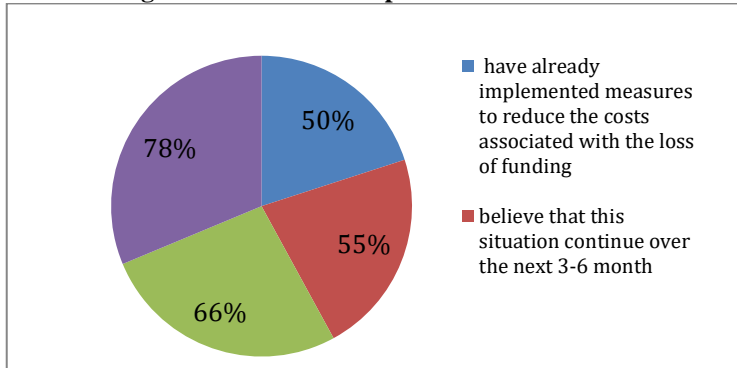
Figure 2. The impact of the COVID-19



Source: Designed by authors based on the information from the study “Impact of COVID-19 on African civil society organizations (CSOs)”.

The future impact is represented in the Figure 3.

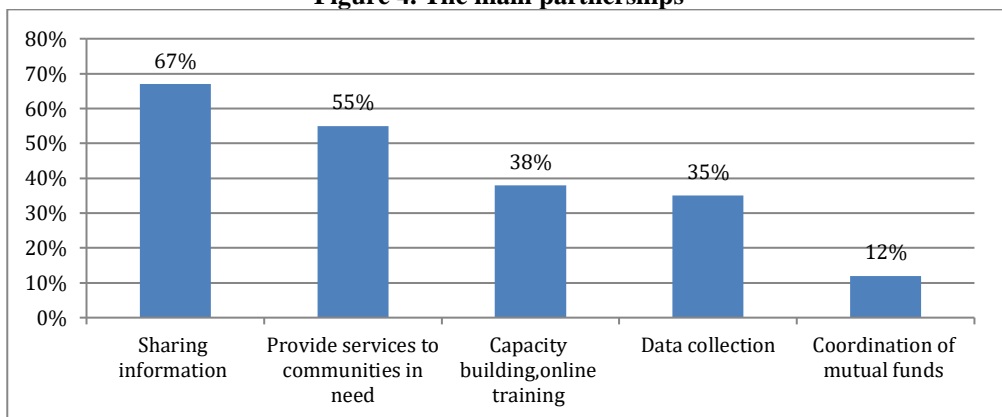
Figure 3. The future impact of the COVID-19



Source: Designed by authors based on the information from the study “Impact of COVID-19 on African civil society organizations (CSOs)”.

Other immediate effects noted by the participants include: the reduction of the staff numbers, increased workload, uncertainty about the future, and managing the consequences, such as increased domestic violence. Survey participants identified several specific challenges related to remote working: not everyone has a computer or an Internet connection, or the nature of our work does not lend itself to working from home. The results of the study suggest also some solutions on cost reduction, for example: cut or cancel of activities, reduced or cancelled travel, staff dismissal, employment freeze, reducing wages and working hours, increased use of volunteers, contract renegotiation (rent and insurance). Another important aspect is that partnerships were formed during the pandemic, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The main partnerships

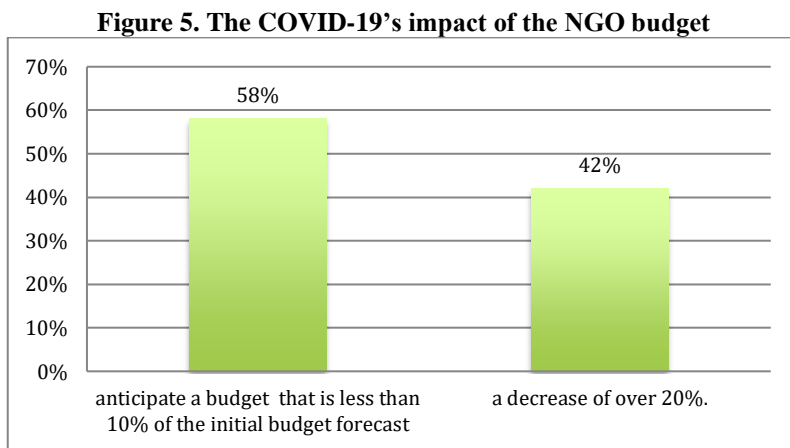


Source: Designed by authors based on the information from the study “Impact of COVID-19 on African civil society organizations (CSOs)”.

The local civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a key role in the fight against the COVID-19 at the national level (77.22% of the participants felt that). In terms of government involvement, 71.58% of participants felt that governments failed to recognize or use CSO skills, expertise, and networks in the fight against COVID-19. The 83.95% of participants collaborate with other CSOs at national level in several areas, sharing information and providing services to those most in need. In fact, 45.06% of the participants felt that the pandemic will strengthen the strength and agility of the sector. Only time will tell whether this optimism will lead to tangible change, but this trend demonstrates the resilience and adaptability found in many African CSOs.

5.2 The Impact of the Crisis COVID-19 on the 2020 Budgets of International Solidarity NGOs – Summary Survey

During December-February 2020, *Coordination SUD* by France implemented a summary survey among its member NGOs. The objective of which was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on NGO resources and budgets in 2020. The overall survey analysis was structured in four stages: generic information about NGOs, information on their resources since 2020, information on other types of difficulties they may have faced (cash flow, hiring suspension), and information on the use of public support (*Coordination SUD*, 2021). The overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis was variable depending on the respondent NGOs. Regarding the impact of the COVID-19's 2020 NGO budget, we can see the data in Figure 5.



Source: Designed by authors based on the information from the study “The impact of the crisis COVID-19 on the 2020 budgets of international solidarity NGOs”.

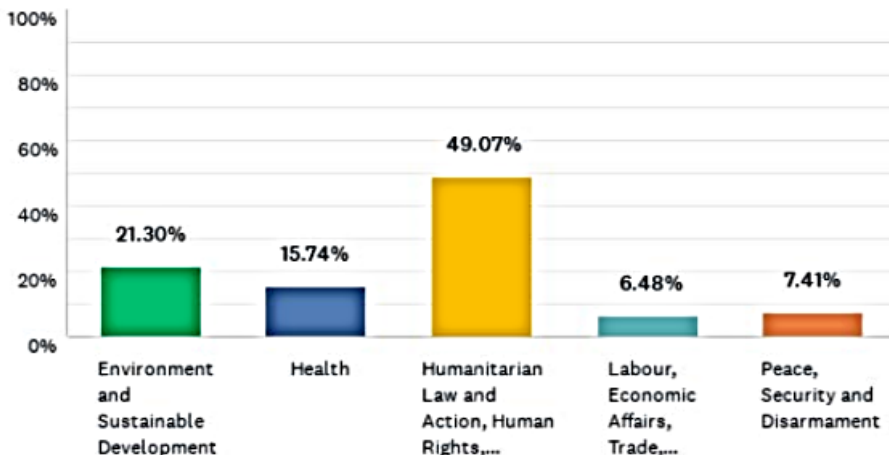
One of the important questions is whether the NGOs most affected by the COVID-19 crisis are those considered small, medium, and large NGOs. Indeed, between 40% and 45% of responding organizations in these categories anticipate a 10-40% decrease in overall resources. In comparison, none of the very large NGO respondents anticipate a decrease in overall resources.

In the case of small and very small NGOs, there is a significant decrease in private institutional resources or resources from income-generating activities. The impact on other resources of medium and large NGOs depends mainly on the types of activities they carry out. The analysis shows that very large NGOs are targeted in 2020 and most of them have seen a small decrease in resources. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the human resources of respondent organisations was different. Only 12% of the responding organisations had to fire staff. The study shows that of all the resources available to NGOs, public resources were the most affected by the decreases, especially among small and medium-sized NGOs. Overall, the measures implemented by the state have worked well, especially the working-time reduction programmes, which have been in high demand. The survey shows that the impact of the crisis is expected to be long-lasting and that some "compensation" effect is to be expected in the coming months and years.

5.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Geneva – Based NGOs

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a key component of Geneva International, alongside international organisations (IOs) and Member States' diplomatic representations. This study is interesting to analyse because it presents dates one year after the start of the pandemic. The survey was conducted in March 2021 and included 470 Geneva-based international NGOs. Most NGOs are small and medium-sized entities (SMEs), compared to very large United Nations (UN) agencies and related organizations. The activity of NGOs is varied. Half of the respondents are active in human rights and humanitarian affairs. The others are active in health, peace, labour, environment, and security.

Figure 6. Main sector of activities

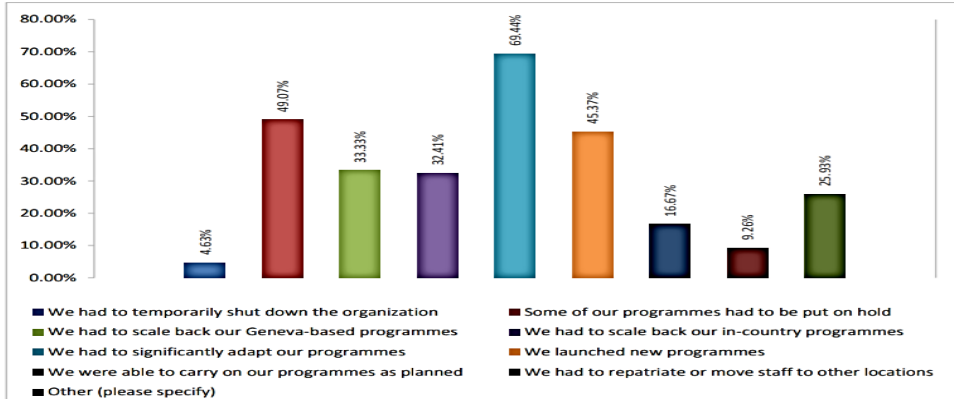


Source: Survey Impact of COVID-19 on Geneva –based NGOs.

One year after the start of the pandemic crisis, 97% of NGOs continue to be affected by the COVID-19 crisis. 38% of the respondents report that the impact of

COVID-19 on their operations has been severe. In response to the crisis, almost 70% of NGOs had to significantly adapt their programs, including the online environment, and 45% have implemented new programs, especially COVID-19. The figure below shows the impact of the pandemic on the organization's operations.

Figure. 7 The impact pandemic on the organization's operations



Source: Survey Impact of COVID-19 on Geneva – based NGOs.

In terms of the impact on the functioning of NGO activities, there has been a movement of activities online. Online meetings have been organized with limited possibilities for interaction. A number of respondents indicated that these aspects of working online made it difficult to build relationships and trust and were concerned that this could, in turn, affect their ability to make an impact.

5.4 Voice of the Romanian NGOs – React to the COVID-19 Crisis

In our research to see the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on NGOs, we did not apply a specific type of questionnaire but chose a free discussion in which the NGO manager explained the specific situation of his NGO. In Romania, the response of the NGOs to the COVID-19 crisis was very different, depending on the specifics of each NGO. We held discussions with NGO managers working in the fields of history, culture, theatre, education, and teaching. An important aspect of our research is the discussion with the manager who developed a support and collaboration platform that brings together over 100 NGOs (medical, social, educational, etc.), volunteers, companies, and individual donors. The telephone interviews took place in early 2022.

The first discussion was with the manager of a history NGO. In the field of historical research, the pandemic period was a difficult time. The nature of this work does not lend itself to remote work. The NGO's projects are more like educational projects, but occasionally implemented, depending on funding found. Their NGO's activities have decreased a lot in the last 3 years. As for future solutions, the manager told us that they see no realistic solution other than for the pandemic to pass.

The next discussion was with the manager of an NGO working in the field of theatres. The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on the sector. In particular, it has affected artists financially.

The manager told us that many of the freelance actors have left the profession. Regarding the shows, they were impossible to stage during the pandemic period. The NGO theatre manager told us that at the same time the COVID-19 crisis had psychological effects: sadness, depression intervened.

The most important discussion we had was with the manager who has developed a platform of support and collaboration that brings together over a hundred NGOs. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been different for each NGO. The results of the online collaboration platform were amazing; in times of crisis, each NGO posted what they needed, what they had extra, creating strong and useful links for all. Collaboration and solidarity have been the key to the survival of NGOs. During this period, therapy activities have stopped being face-to-face; some have moved online and others have stopped entirely.

The main conclusion is that only cooperation and collaboration are the keys to success in NGOs. Online is an opportunity for some NGOs, but there are activities that require face-to-face interaction, activities without which NGOs cannot exist. In terms of the benefits of online activities, during this period, online promotion has facilitated the identification of more potential beneficiaries of their NGOs.

5.5 Finding: “Sustainable and Blended Solution”

Our research has identified a list of possible solutions to overcome the effects of the crisis. These solutions can be the sharing of know-how from NGOs.

Table 1. Crisis solutions

Nr. crt.	Solutions
1.	integrate the lessons learned from this crisis into NGO project management;
2.	rebalancing operations – gives NGOs the opportunity to review and benchmark their cost structures and operational requirements, which could lead to significant savings, efficiencies, and stimulate innovation;
3.	digital transformation – adopting new technological solutions;
4.	staff have acquired new skills and gained experience with new tools and applications;
5.	office closures that are not absolutely necessary;
6.	work from home in situations where NGO activity allows it;
7.	social media/online presence – through the use of social media and participatory funding platforms, NGOs have exploited their online presence to increase their visibility, reach new audiences and garner new support;
8.	increase of income, correlated with cost optimization – NGOs must diversify their sources of income and developing income-generating activities;
9.	building relevance and credibility; NGOs have often responded to the needs of the most vulnerable communities through their own resources and without external support;
10.	cooperation – The NGOs demonstrated their capacity to respond and have strengthened legitimacy and relationships with local communities;
11.	solidarity – COVID-19 provides them with the opportunity to support each other and collaborate on the needs of the local community.

Source: Designed by authors.

6. Conclusion

The impact of COVID has been global and variable depending on the specific NGO. For example, in Romania, the field of art has suffered a lot because of the restrictions due to Covid. On the other hand, NGOs were identified that despite the context, quickly identified the risks and adapted, they found innovative and creative solutions. In this case, the success in finding solutions is attributed to the new model of the leader, the human-centred leader, who is both creative and innovative. As a result of this research, we observed that NGO leaders may have a broader view of crisis situations, as they have faced many difficult situations over time.

References

- [1] Coordination SUD. (2021, April). Enquête sommaire sur l'impact de la crise COVID-19 sur les budgets 2020 des ONG de solidarité internationale, retrieved from: <https://www.inter-reseaux.org/en/ressource/enquete-sommaire-sur-limpact-de-la-crise-covid19-sur-les-budgets-2020-des-ong-de-solidarite-internationale/>.
- [2] Impact of COVID-19 on international NGOs in Geneva: 2020-2021. (2021, april), retrieved on feb 08, 2022, from <https://www.cagi.ch/en/ngo/NGO-COVID19-SURVEY.php>.
- [3] Le Got, C.V. (2022). Council Of Europe, The impact of COVID: the opinion of NGOs, retrieved on february 05, 2022, from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/the-impact-of-covid-the-opinion-of-ngos#1>.
- [4] L'impact du COVID-19 sur les organisations de la société civile africaines. (2020, Juin), retrieved on feb 7, 2022, from <https://www.societecivilemedias.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/L%E2%80%99impactduCOVID-19surlesorganisationsdelasoci%C3%A9t%C3%A9civileafricaines.pdf>.
- [5] United Nations (2020, March). Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, retrieved from UN Sustainable Development Group: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>.