



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Cross-border solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Summary



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Cross-border solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Summary

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EU COVID-19 policy calls for solidarity in society, both within and across national borders

The global outbreak and spread of the coronavirus and the measures to combat it had a major impact on everyone's life. While the impact varied from one group, sector and country to another, the concerns about the pandemic – for instance those regarding the pressure on healthcare – were widely shared. The COVID-19 pandemic rendered the interconnectivity and mutual dependence between countries clearly visible. This is true both in relation to measures intended to halt the spread of the virus and those intended to mitigate the negative consequences to society. These measures often had a global aim, such as a worldwide reduction of the likelihood that new variants would emerge.

Solidarity is a collective phenomenon in which members of a group are prepared to share with one another. This applies equally to governments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both national and European policies were adopted to combat the spread of the virus and its negative effects on society. We explored scientific literature on the COVID-19 policies in Europe and conducted a document analysis of several communications from the European Commission (EC) concerning efforts to protect the health or social and economic security of citizens. In a subsequent study, we intend to explore how citizens themselves perceive the meaning of European solidarity and what their perspectives are on the government's role and their own roles. The present exploratory study shows that it is important to realise that international societal problems – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – give rise to issues of a political nature, including (re)distribution-related issues. For which problems should or should you not take steps to address them, and how? Which (policy-related) risks and burdens does one society share with others? Which risks and burdens do citizens of one society share with citizens in other societies? To whom do governments (and citizens) turn when solidarity-related issues arise and for what reasons?

Question 1: What risks and burdens do you share?

- Actions taken in response to cross-border situations, such as the pandemic, elicit questions for policymakers. Are national governments responsible for the deployment of resources such as financial support and the distribution of vaccines? Or should this distribution be managed at the European level? What risks and burdens do countries share with one another, and in what way, and who decides how this distribution is arranged and financed? Our literature study shows that, during the first months of the pandemic, there were concerns that EU Member States would adopt protectionist, primarily self-interested policies. These concerns were expressed by the scientific community and by international organisations such as the United Nations. In the months that followed, the EU urged its Member States to practice European solidarity in order to limit the social consequences of the pandemic.
- The analysis of the European Commission documents reveals that the EU shared medical, economic and social risks and burdens within its borders during the pandemic – and sometimes outside the EU via coordination and cooperation, insurance and the protection of social rights. Member States worked together to provide mutual support, such as by deploying medical personnel in another country. Member States also supported each other financially, for instance by allocating extra EU funding to Member States that were facing potentially unmanageable government expenditures due to pandemic-related unemployment. Or by coordinating joint purchasing in order to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines. Additionally, European policy was drafted for the benefit of EU citizens, such as to protect their right to a safe working environment during the pandemic.

Question 2: To whom do you turn when solidarity-related issues arise?

- It is important to know whom you are sharing medical, economic and social risks and burdens with during the pandemic. Which group will benefit from policy measures taken to combat the pandemic, and who is being excluded (either deliberately or inadvertently)?
- The literature study reveals that the EU's call for European solidarity in the summer of 2020 did serve to increase solidarity between EU Member States, but at the same time, criticism emerged regarding the lack of global solidarity with regions and countries. One example of this we identified from the document analysis is the central purchasing of COVID-19 vaccines. While the EU increased the EU Member States' chances of gaining access to these resources, the EU also impeded potential procurement processes by other (perhaps less wealthy) nations or regions.
- Solidarity, in other words, necessarily entails the inclusion of certain groups of people or countries and the exclusion of others.

Question 3: What are your reasons for doing so?

- A government may have different reasons for deciding whether and which policy instruments can be deployed to contain a pandemic and mitigate its negative impacts on society. In our exploration of the literature and EC documents, we can distinguish three types of motives:
 - Taking action because you expect something in return
 - Example: the expectation that the centralised purchasing of vaccines in the EU and the subsequent redistribution worldwide (including in the EU) will contribute to the goal of containing and combating the COVID-19 virus in the long term.
 - Taking action because you cannot do it alone
 - Example: the worldwide mutual dependence in the transmission of the virus implies a similar worldwide mutual dependence with regard to the effectiveness of policy solutions. Based on this motive, cooperation (such as between Member States to improve the working conditions of seasonal workers) could be in the best interest of all Member States. For instance, because this also helps inhibit the spread of the virus or increases possibilities for finding enough personnel for production within the EU's internal market.
 - Taking action based on your values
 - Example: three values we identified in our exploration of the EC's COVID-19 policies are solidarity, justice and equality.
 - When we focused on solidarity during our exploration, we could see that the principle of solidarity can serve as a value – a kind of 'compass' – for decision-making with regard to European policy. The EC, for instance, claims it acts 'based on a spirit of solidarity between Member States' when providing support to Member States for the purpose of safeguarding the social security of citizens. With regard to the purchasing and redistribution policy for the COVID-19 vaccines, one of the EC's goals is to demonstrate global solidarity with people and nations outside the EU.

Cross-border solidarity in policy

This exploratory study of the literature and European policy shows that solidarity with a specifically defined (or implicitly assumed) group can be a value in itself, i.e. a compass for making decisions. In policy documents, we also find references to solidarity that focus more strongly on the *outcomes* of policy. The EC, for example, calls the financial support provided by the EU to Member States in the form of wage support a 'tangible expression of solidarity'.

In some instances, solidarity is explicitly mentioned by policymakers – like with the goal of European and global solidarity in connection with the European purchasing and worldwide redistribution of COVID-19 vaccines. At other times, solidarity is an implicit aspect of policy, though we do recognise it. For instance: we consider the European regulations that guarantee safe working and living conditions for seasonal workers during the pandemic to be an expression of solidarity. These regulations aim to reduce the risk of health problems among these workers, who – because of the kind of work they do – are able to employ few or no hygiene or preventative measures.

When motivated by solidarity, the time dimension is relevant as well: is it a matter of providing temporary assistance or is redistribution policy being used to address the structural causes of societal challenges? Joint purchasing of vaccines, for example, is something that can only happen during the COVID-19 pandemic – yet you can still opt to formally embed it in legislation. This makes it an option for purchasing medical supplies during other crisis situations.

What makes this even more complex is that European solidarity is a broad concept that can have different meanings, for instance in different policy areas. The support for European solidarity also depends on the nature of the need for assistance: is a crisis at hand or not? The exploration of the literature suggests that this support tends to be higher in crisis situations that could affect anyone. For the legitimacy of European policy, it is important to ask under which conditions citizens will support policy aimed at promoting EU solidarity. To what extent are the policy decisions that have been taken aligned to citizens' preferences and viewpoints on the same issues: what policy-related risks and burdens do citizens and societies share, with whom and why?

This study is exploratory in nature and does not constitute an evaluation of policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its exploratory character and focus on a few specific policy measures during the pandemic, this study yields insights that are also relevant in connection with other international events. Take international aid and economic redistribution within the EU in the event of an economic crisis, for instance, or outside the EU, such as more recently during the war in Ukraine. For policymakers, questions about what we as a society are willing to share, with whom and why – and the extent to which reasons of solidarity play a role in these decisions – are relevant questions to ask.

Here, we are talking about (re)distribution issues that may include or exclude specific groups. Regardless of whether solidarity is explicitly mentioned in policy or not, the decision to act based on the value of solidarity and to draft policy that promotes solidarity between groups of citizens and/or countries is a political decision. For this reason, it is important that policymakers at both the national and European level, when confronting societal challenges that transcend those borders, are clear about the motives underlying their policy decisions and the answers to the questions regarding which (policy-related) risks and burdens a society shares with others, which risks and burdens citizens of one society share with citizens in other societies, to whom governments (and citizens) turn when solidarity-related issues arise and for what reasons.

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