Does the COVID-19 pandemic increase or decrease pro-sociality and does it shift donations towards more local causes?

Authors and affiliations and contact emails
Maja Adena (WZB, maja.adena@wzb.eu)
Julian Harke (WZB, julian.harke@wzb.eu)

Abstract
Locally occurring natural catastrophes typically seem to increase international solidarity (Scharf, Smith, and Ottoni-Wilhelm 2017). The global spread of the COVID-19 is unprecedented such that it is not clear what types of behavioral responses it is going to generate. While newspapers provide examples of help among neighbors who go shopping for the vulnerable, donate food, or produce home-made face covers for nursing homes, there are also examples of engagement in racist acts involving attacks on members of ethnic groups blamed for spreading the disease, or excessive gun purchases. Moreover, news attention has clearly shifted away from distant problems, including the refugee situation on the Turkish-Greek border, the plague of locusts in Africa, and famine in third-world countries.

In this project, we want to understand how pro-sociality is transforming under the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to study this question, we take a threefold approach: (i) In an online experiment, we vary the framing of the donation ask for Save the Children to either include or exclude the reference to COVID-19. We expect that the COVID-19 frame will increase donations. The second dimension of the experimental design relates to the location of the charitable project: national versus international. We expect that the national project will benefit more from the COVID-19 frame than the international project. (ii) In a natural experiment-like approach, we explore local differences in the severity of the pandemic depending on the place of residence of our participants and observe differences in giving behavior. Of course, the spread of COVID-19 might be related to other local characteristics, for example, density. Therefore, we plan to control for a number of available characteristics of the places. It is not clear what we can expect as a result as there are probably different mechanisms at work: while witnessing more severe local pandemic should increase solidarity, subjects might be more affected economically or fear being affected in the future themselves and reduce giving. The same might hold for health. The sign of the effect might change depending on the inclusion (availability) of control variables. (iii) In order to understand the mechanism behind the effects observed in (i) and (ii), we will explore an array of self-reported answers. This will help us to distinguish between economic, health-related, and empathy-related causes.

Data description
Experiment with at least 1000 participants located in UK, recruited via Prolific

JEL codes for the project: C91, D64, D12, D91

Key-words
Charitable giving, pro-sociality, experiments, COVID-19