

COVID-impact on civil society work

Results of consultation with FRA’s Fundamental Rights Platform

24/02/2021

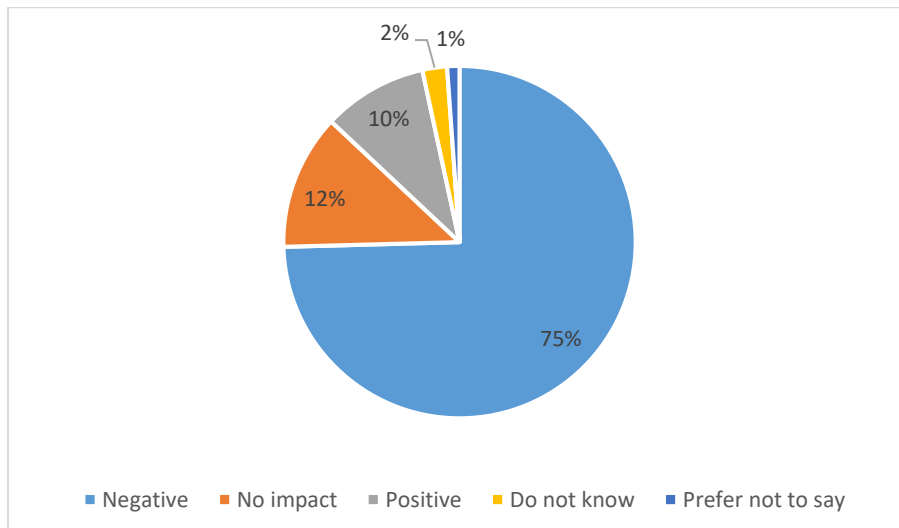
In November 2020, FRA consulted its Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP) on how measures taken since March 2020 to address the COVID-19 pandemic affected civil society work, and how organisations could mitigate adverse impacts. In total, 177 civil society organisations (CSOs), including 155 non-governmental organisations, completed the online survey; 35 of these CSOs are umbrella organisations active at EU level.

Most CSOs (75 %) consider that the impact of measures on their operations and activities since March 2020 was negative. Of those, 41 % are very worried and 52% somewhat worried that the negative impact will persist in the next six months. The majority (75 %) of the responding CSOs finds that measures to contain the pandemic, despite their impact on their work, are overall justified. However, the proportion of those who consider them proportionate, while still the majority, is smaller (56 %).

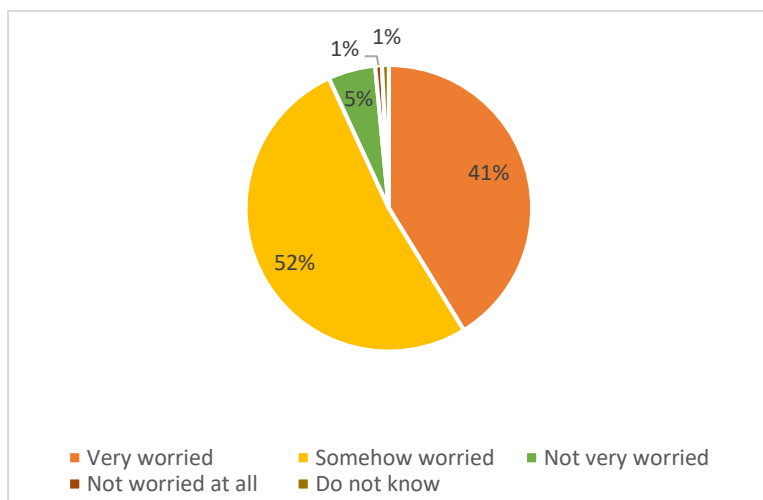
Restrictions introduced in the COVID-19 pandemic affecting physical access to their beneficiaries *significantly* affected 44 % of CSOs. While CSOs reported increasing demand on their services (59 % *often* or *every time*), a majority faced difficulties in ensuring continuity of their services (57 % *often* or *every time*). Cancellation of activities, psychological impact on staff and reduced work contribution by volunteers were the most frequently mentioned practical challenges.

Survey results from COVID consultation with FRP (November 2020)

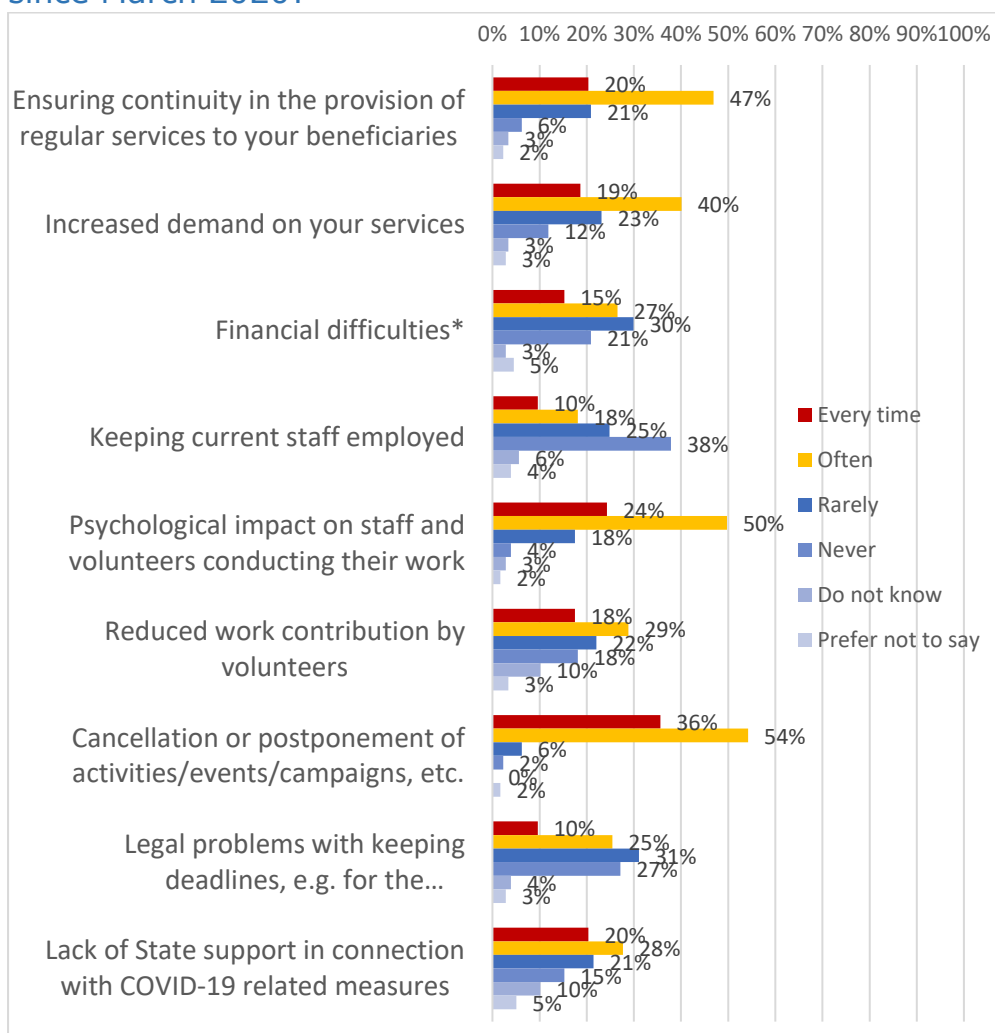
Looking back over the past year – would you say that the impact of measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on your operations and activities since March 2020 was:



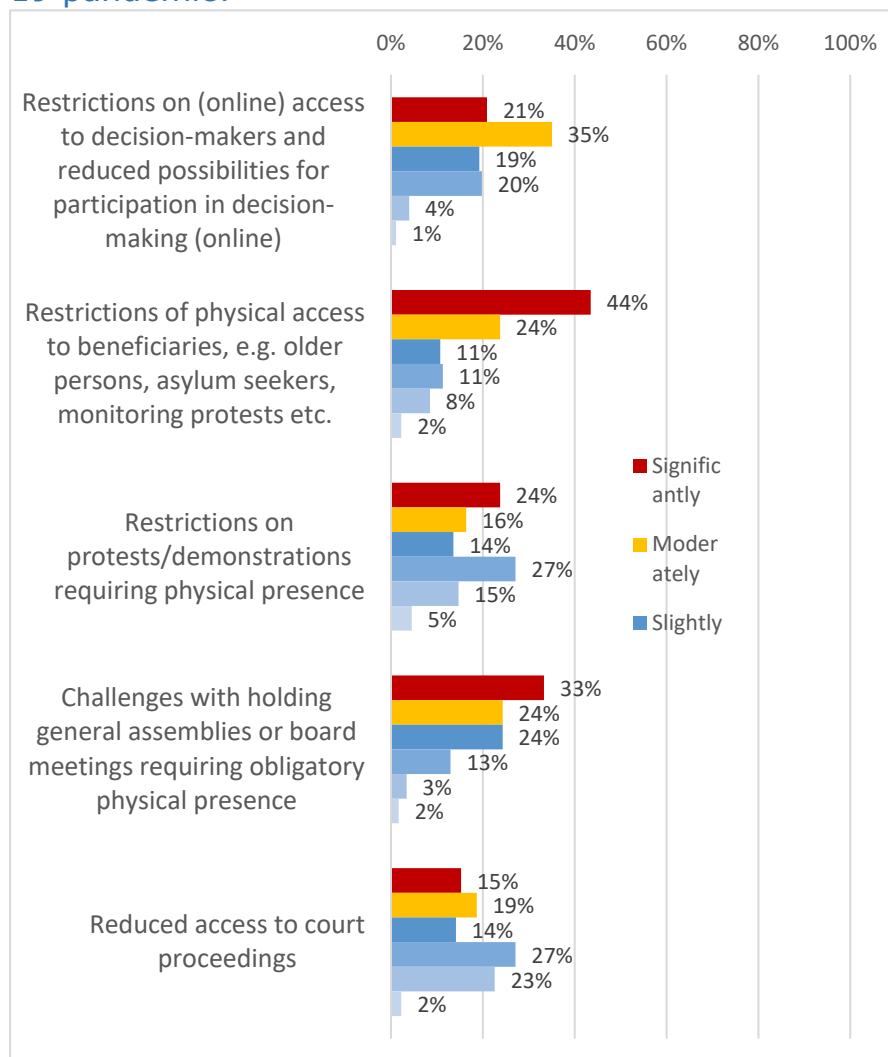
Looking ahead - how worried are you that the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impact negatively on your operations and activities in the coming 6 months?



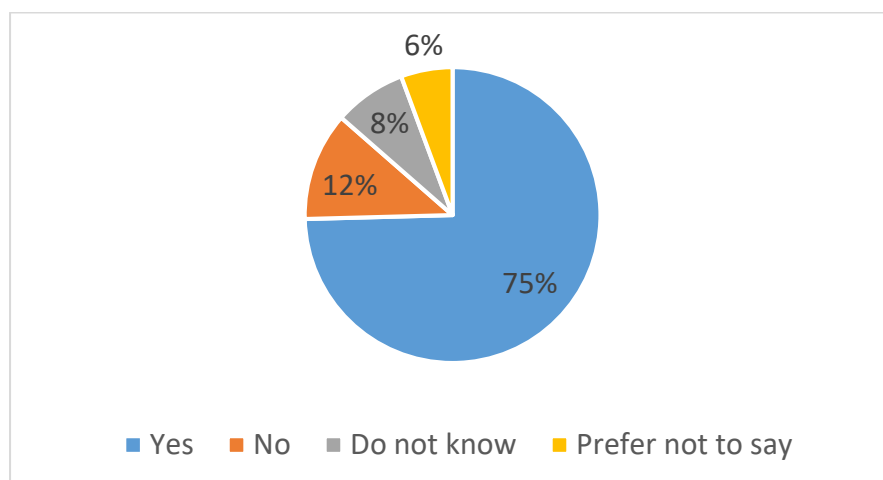
How often has your organisation experienced any of the following practical challenges as a direct result of measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020?



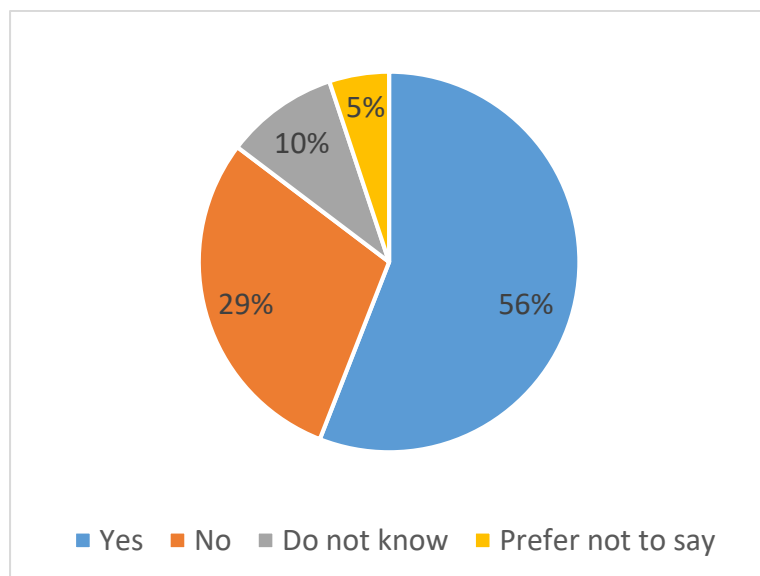
To what extent has the work of your organisation suffered from any of the following restrictions which were introduced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Do you think that measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, despite their impact on your work, are overall justified?



Do you think that measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, despite their impact on your work, are overall proportionate?



Selected, illustrative quotes from COVID consultation with FRP

In addition to the multiple-choice questions illustrated above, survey participants were asked a number of open-ended questions, which elaborated on the challenges CSOs are facing and the strategies they developed to meet them.

When asked to provide specific examples of how measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic impact on their work, many respondents highlighted an increased lack of transparency in policy and decision-making: *"The emergency measures added more opacity to the decision-making process, making the engagement with the authorities really problematic."*

Several respondents also pointed to the limits of digital solutions. While digital communication technologies are crucial for CSOs to keep operating during the pandemic, many stressed their exclusionary nature, especially for vulnerable beneficiaries: *"The restrictions were exacerbated by digital exclusion as digital technology platforms used by many to communicate during the pandemic lockdown periods, are largely inaccessible to [our beneficiaries]."*

Asked to give good practice examples of how CSOs are supported in their countries during the pandemic, many respondents mentioned additional government funding for civil society, for example through NGO-specific funds or by extending SME subsidy schemes to CSOs. Creative solutions at the local level were also highlighted: *"Some cities and municipalities did not charge the rent to CSOs which rent office spaces that are owned by those cities and municipalities."* Many respondents also experienced increased flexibility from private donors, which allowed them to redirect resources to the provision of emergency assistance to their beneficiaries.

CSOs have also developed own initiatives to mitigate the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures have posed to their work and their

beneficiaries. This ranges from delivering technological equipment to families taking part in online education to providing older persons with guidance on the use of online stores and bank services, as well as to prevent scams and abuse risks. Organisations also hold regular “online campfires” or online pub quizzes with their communities to combat isolation.

Internally, too, CSOs have adopted promising practices to combat stress and anxiety among staff. This includes flexible working arrangements, reducing the work pressure on staff members with children and providing staff with access to psychological support.

Several respondents reported that they intensified their cooperation with other CSOs to share knowledge and resources and collectively support those that are worst affected by the current crisis.