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# PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC ATTITUDES TOWARD PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES: THE CASE OF POZNAŃ

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## Abstract

This study describes and analyzes the pre- and post-pandemic approaches toward participation in community-based initiatives by the residents of Poznań, Poland. Data for this study were collected through surveys with city dwellers (2018 and 2023) and interviews with local community leaders (2020). These results reveal a notable increase in the willingness to engage in community-based initiatives between 2018 and 2023, with the shared experience of the pandemic threat contributing to this shift. There is also a visible increase in the readiness to involve digitally mediated forms of participation among residents. In conclusion, this study underscores the need to sustain pandemic-driven social mobilization to build long-term community resilience.

## Key words

COVID-19 • community-based initiatives • mobilization • community resilience

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a new pivotal moment, with the potential to reshape local communities' social relationships and grassroots activities. Contemporary literature provides a broad list of examples illustrating the pandemic's influence on urban neighborhoods. This impact includes the emergence of neighborhood cooperation initiatives (Jo et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2023), development of online organized local communities (Sowada, 2020), an increase

in community resilience (Jewett et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2022), the development of innovative bottom-up support for a local economy (Antonescu, 2020), and broadly understood solidarity (Huijjer, 2021; Yemane et al., 2023). Public from around the world joined forces and established grassroots support networks with various objectives such as delivering necessities to vulnerable people, providing material and spiritual support to doctors and other healthcare workers, supporting local businesses, tending to the needs of sick or isolated individuals' pets,

manufacturing protective masks, organizing remote learning equipment for children, and offering numerous other methods of support for those in need (Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Carstensen et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2022). Numerous publications on community resilience, mutual aid initiatives, and solidarity provide evidence of the massive social mobilization during the recent pandemic in response to the multidimensional social and economic crisis (Gray et al., 2023).

For some scholars, the COVID-19 pandemic renewed and transformed the significance of the community. Communities worldwide have consistently demonstrated increased social cohesion and solidarity in response to prior crises and disasters. However, COVID-19 presented a unique challenge compared with floods or earthquakes because of its global reach and long-term character. Individuals had to confront health crises, economic difficulties, and various tangible results of the pandemic while coping with restrictions and lockdowns. Measures like social distancing, immobility, and isolation were necessary to contain the disease but simultaneously disrupted social identities and relationships (Vezzali et al., 2022). In this context, people needed to discover new, secure methods of organizing mutual aid and displaying solidarity.

In this article, my focus centers on community-based initiatives in urban neighborhoods of Poznań, Poland. Inspired by the numerous reports of large-scale, widespread, and grassroots social mobilization during the pandemic, I became interested in the sustainability of these endeavors, understood as a capacity of building a long-lasting everyday civic engagement based upon this pandemic-driven mobilization. Consequently, I decided to replicate in 2023 the research I conducted in 2018, which examined the willingness of Poznań residents to engage in neighborhood community activities and supplement its results with data collected through interviews with local community leaders in 2020. The primary objective of this study was to identify the variation in residents' attitudes toward involvement in grassroots neighborhood activities

between 2018 and 2023, driven by their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The realization of this objective is achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the difference in the declared willingness of Poznań residents to engage in grassroots neighborhood activities in 2018 and 2023?
2. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic experience on changes in the declared willingness of Poznań residents to engage in grassroots neighborhood activities in 2018 and 2023?

Answering these questions based upon quantitative and qualitative data collected through my research I plan to fill the research gap and supplement the current knowledge about the influence of disease outbreaks on community-based initiatives. It will be achieved by delivering insight on the pandemic-specific features of social mobilization and impact made by the lockdown on the integration of neighborhood communities.

## Literature review

### Community-based initiatives in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

Considering the available literature, individual involvement in grassroots collective actions often appears to contradict the principles of traditional economics. People sometimes engage in activities where personal costs outweigh the benefits, a choice that might seem irrational. However, they do so with the belief that if a sufficiently large number of individuals participate, the resulting collective benefits will far outweigh their sacrifices (Rogers et al., 2018). Regardless of their form, such actions have left a profound impact on past social, political, and economic life. Some have influenced the global balance of political power, as seen in the case of Solidarity in Poland, challenged widely held social norms as with the movement against apartheid in South Africa or the suffragettes, and influenced decisions made by the boards of directors of major corporations, exemplified by the fair trade movement (Lott, Jr.

& Kenny, 1999; Thörn, 2009; Ash, 2002; Jaffee, 2010). Furthermore, in recent years, large-scale collective actions of this nature have been observed both globally (e.g., Black Live Matters, #MeToo, QAnon) and within Poland (Women's Strike, numerous urban movements, spontaneous help for refugees from Ukraine) (Kotus & Sowada, 2017; Kowalewski, 2018; Murphy, 2019; Sowada, 2019; Enders et al., 2022; Lebron, 2023).

On a local scale, grassroots endeavors undertaken by residents are commonly referred to as community-based initiatives. Igalla et al. (2020) provide a definition, characterizing them as a manifestation of self-organization, wherein citizens pool their resources to collectively conceive and execute projects with the aim of delivering public goods or services to their community. These initiatives arise in response to the perceived ineffectiveness of local, regional, or national authorities in addressing local issues and organizing public services. Their defining feature is that the citizens take the lead in setting goals, planning, and implementing the means to achieve them, thus exercising complete control over all activities. When conceived in this manner, community-based initiatives embody the principles of direct democracy and encourage the highest levels of civic engagement.

Community-based initiatives also play a crucial role in enhancing community resilience, defined as the capacity of community members to utilize and develop community resources in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise (Magis, 2010). This aspect of local communities gains particular significance in the face of an increasing number of threats, including natural disasters (Paton et al., 2001; Colten et al., 2008; Summers et al., 2018), climate change (Joerin et al., 2012; Fazey et al., 2018), economic crises (Borger, 2013; Apostolopoulos et al., 2019), or disease outbreaks (South et al., 2020; Fransen et al., 2022; Suleimany et al., 2022). Berkes and Seixas (2005) underscore that fostering opportunities for self-organization is critical in building community. Additionally, grassroots initiatives

by residents are notably visible in response to natural disasters and other emergencies. This involvement includes preparing for imminent threats, recovering from their impacts, and providing assistance and shelter to those most affected (AIDMI, 2009; Calo-Blanco et al., 2017; Goulding et al., 2018).

In the event of various hazards and disasters affecting the local communities, providing immediate assistance to those in need is of paramount importance. Traditional state services can respond rapidly to individual incidents, but their effectiveness decreases when confronted with a large-scale emergency. The literature offers numerous instances where grassroots initiatives undertaken by the public have exhibited faster and more effective responses compared with the state. Recently, this scenario unfolded during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when numerous grassroots organizations, each typically focused on different daily issues, rallied to engage in activities aimed at curbing the spread of the disease and reducing its negative social and economic impact (Radice, 2021). Local communities organized mutual aid networks, delivering exceptional care to those most in need. These individuals, often beyond the reach of effective support of national and local government, aid valuable assistance from these community-driven initiatives (Carstensen et al., 2021; X. Wang & Cheng, 2021). The local and flexible nature of these grassroots initiatives allowed them to assume the role of the "first contact infrastructure" during an emergency.

In certain circumstances, as proven by researchers, community resilience was supported by digital activities. The digitally mediated social response to the crisis proved particularly relevant when facing a pandemic threat, where one of the safety measures was to remain isolated. In this situation, the organization of activities and interactions within local communities could seamlessly transition to online platforms. Notably, numerous neighborhood groups on social networks served as local hubs of activity during lockdowns (Sowada, 2020). Additionally, crowdfunding,

which facilitates secure and fully anonymous donations to support a wide range of social causes, has proven to be a valuable resource for local communities engaged in grassroots efforts to combat the pandemic and its repercussions (De La Torre Parra et al., 2023).

### **Mobilization factors**

In many instances, the crux of a community-based initiative's success hinges on the mobilization of potential participants, which can be understood as the effort to rally numerous individuals to engage in actions that entail a net cost for each complying individual and provide negligible collective benefits unless carried out by a large number of individuals (Rogers et al., 2018). The effectiveness of such mobilization is influenced by several factors, including the fundamental human need for belonging and social connection, charismatic leadership, a personalized approach to participants, alignment with participants' shared values and group identity, instances of frustration, the appropriate utilization of new technologies, especially social media, as well as leveraging existing social networks and shared experiences related to the challenge or disaster (Greenberg, 2000; Irazábal & Neville, 2007; Castells, 2015; J. Wang et al., 2015; Cardoso, 2016; Bjork-James, 2018; Rogers et al., 2018; Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a factor of social mobilization itself. As an example of crisis or disaster it triggered a significant grassroots response on a global scale (Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Marvi et al., 2021). Some researchers even characterize the pandemic period as the greatest social mobilization of this generation (Gray et al., 2023). However, because of its specific features like a long-term infection threat, COVID-19 pandemic also influenced and transformed traditional mobilization factors, which was revealed by a growing body of research on that matter (Vezzali et al., 2022). Notably, interesting findings have emerged regarding the interplay of "pulling" factors (such as moral identity)

and "pushing" factors (like threat perception) in predicting prosocial actions and hoarding during the COVID-19 pandemic. This fact is important because in the face of an epidemiological threat, natural reflexes to help at times inhibited by concerns for one's health and life, distinguishing this type of threat from natural disasters where assistance is typically rendered once the immediate danger has subsided (Tse et al., 2022).

Investigating recent events, it would be fault to omit the role of new technologies. One of the indispensable tools for social mobilization is the Internet, with social media platforms playing a central role. The ability to establish immediate connections with many people and across long distances has profoundly transformed the information potential of grassroots activities, multiplying the reach of published messages (J. Wang et al., 2015; Cardoso, 2016; Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2022). This shift has also altered the power dynamics in the relationship between authorities and grassroots movements concerning the control of information flow. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the local social media groups played a tremendous role in mobilizing citizens to organize mutual-aid networks and resist the disease outbreak's influence on their lives and local economy (Sowada, 2020).

### **Methods**

The research was conducted among city dwellers of Poznań, a city located in western Poland, serving as the administrative capital of Wielkopolskie Voivodeship. It has a population of more than 540,000 (status as of December 31, 2022). I chose Poznań as my case study because of its long history of civic engagement and resistance, starting from 18th century, when it was aimed against the Prussian authority's repression over Polish city dwellers. Currently it is one of the biggest nodes of urban social movements' activity and the home of the first Urban Movements Congress held in 2011. The presence of ongoing community-based initiatives before, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic makes it possible

**Table 1.** Characteristics of PAPI respondents in 2018 (T<sup>1</sup>, N = 504)

				Type of housing in the place of residence			
				single-family houses persons	city center (townhouses) persons	block of flats built before 2000 persons	new housing complexes built after 2000 persons
Gender	female	age	up to 25	10	10	15	10
			26-35	10	11	15	12
			36-45	10	11	11	11
			46-55	10	10	10	10
			56-65	10	10	10	10
			Over 65	10	10	10	10
			male	age	up to 25	10	10
	26-35	10			10	12	12
	36-45	10			11	11	11
	46-55	10			10	10	10
	56-65	10			10	10	10
	Over 65	10			10	10	10

Source: Own compilation

to investigate the influence of pandemic experiences on this kind of social activity.

The quantitative data used in this article were collected using the questionnaire survey, conducted among the residents of Poznań in 2018 (before the COVID-19 pandemic,  $N = 504$ , PAPI method) and 2023 (after the COVID-19 pandemic,  $N = 500$ , CAWI method). Participants were selected for the study using a quota-selection approach. The assumption behind the quota setting was to recruit groups that were comparable in size regarding selected sociodemographic characteristics. The characteristics considered in the recruitment process included the city of residence, gender, age, and the type of housing in the place of residence (Tab. 1). The decision to repeat the survey in 2023, using a group of participants with similar socio-demographic characteristics (Tab. 2), was made due to the potentially significant cognitive value of the results. Given the unexpected nature of the pandemic and the inability to plan a repeated survey with the same group of respondents, this approach was adopted to allow for a meaningful comparison of attitudes before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research participants were asked about their will to participate in a wide range of community-based initiatives using 5-grade Likert scale. Initiatives considered in the study were divided by subject and form of engagement, and consist both bottom-up initiatives oriented on achieving common goals and resistance against hypothetical decisions of local authorities. This papers data corpus consist of respondent's answers on following questions: Are you willing to get involved in the following activities of residents for the benefit of the neighbourhood? (12 categories to assess); What form of involvement in neighbourhood matters suits you best? (5 categories); How are you willing to get involved in neighbourhood issues in the event of unfavourable decisions made by local authorities? (6 categories). The last question, exclusive for 2023 survey, was: Please specify whether your willingness to get involved in neighbourhood affairs has changed compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic? The data generated using this method underwent statistical analysis, which encompassed descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) and non-parametric tests

**Table 2.** Characteristics of CAWI respondents in 2023 (T<sup>2</sup>, N = 500)

				Type of housing in the place of residence			
				single-family houses persons	city center (townhouses) persons	block of flats built before 2000 persons	new housing complexes built after 2000 persons
Gender	Female	Age	Up to 25	10	11	10	10
			26-35	11	11	11	11
			36-45	10	10	10	11
			46-55	11	10	11	10
			56-65	10	10	10	10
			Over 65	11	10	11	10
	Male	Age	Up to 25	10	11	10	10
			26-35	10	10	10	10
			36-45	11	11	10	11
			46-55	11	10	11	11
			56-65	10	11	11	11
			Over 65	10	10	10	10

Source: Own compilation

to examine the statistical significance of the results (Mann-Whitney U test).

**Table 3.** Characteristics of the participants selected for individual in-depth interviews

Respondent code	Gender	Age
P01	Male	29
P02	Female	41
P03	Female	44
P04	Female	34
P05	Female	42
P06	Male	34

Source: Own compilation.

Semistructured and open-ended individual in-depth interviews were conducted online among 6 neighborhood community leaders (Tab. 3). The interlocutors spoke on topics such as the general functioning of neighborhoods, the organization of neighborhood collective actions, and the impact the pandemic had on these two aspects of neighborhood life. The aim of this research was to identify

the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday life of the neighborhood and the trajectory of community-based initiatives. The conversations were registered with participants' consent and transcribed. The collected materials were coded based on data, in an inductive procedure (without creating codes prior to the analysis of the material), using CAQDAS software (Nvivo package). Conclusions were drawn based on the applied mathematical analysis of the obtained results.

## Results

### Respondents will to participate in community-based initiatives in light of questionnaire survey results

I will commence my analysis by examining the respondents' willingness to participate in specific community-based initiatives within their neighborhood, expressed in the questionnaire survey. Respondents assessed twelve categories of activities using a five-point scale, where a rating of one indicated "I am not interested at all" and five signified "I will definitely take part." In 2018, only five activity categories

received an average rating of at least 3.00, whereas in 2023, only one category had an average below this value. The activities that garnered the most frequent expressions of interest were cleaning the common areas of the building, planting and maintaining greenery together, and engaging in community meetings. These categories had the highest average score in both 2018 and 2023. In 2018, respondents expressed a considerably lower level of enthusiasm for participating in a social media neighborhood group, contributing to a neighborhood online forum, and becoming a member of a neighborhood association. However, the situation changed in 2023, where the lowest average ratings were attributed to activities like providing financial

support for purchasing common equipment, engaging in group wall painting, or participating in a social media neighborhood group.

The differences in results between the pre- and post-pandemic surveys were found to be statistically insignificant for the three categories. However, significant differences in scores at  $t^1$  and  $t^2$  (Tab. 4) were observed for the remaining nine categories. When considering only the statistically significant scores, the averages calculated from the score values provided by the respondents in 2018 were lower than those in 2023 in eight of the nine cases. The exception to this trend was the willingness to engage in cleaning the common areas of the building, where the average score decreased from 3.49 to 3.40

**Table 4.** Respondent's approach toward different kinds of community-based initiatives

Lp.	Kind of grassroots activity	Statistical significance for the clustering variable: year of the survey	$\bar{x} t^1$	$\bar{x} t^2$	$\bar{x} t^2 - \bar{x} t^1$
1.	Cleaning of common parts of the building	0.015	3.49	3.40	-0.09
2.	Cleaning the courtyard/space between blocks, etc.	0.192	3.13	3.31	0.18
3.	Painting walls together	0.005	2.77	3.04	0.27
4.	Joint planting of flowers and taking care of greenery	0.654	3.37	3.48	0.11
5.	Organizing social events (festivals, barbecues, etc.)	<0.001	3.00	3.35	0.35
6.	Participation in integration meetings (festivals, barbecues, etc.)	0.783	3.35	3.40	0.05
7.	Membership in neighborhood association	<0.001	2.59	3.11	0.52
8.	Activities of local community centers	<0.001	2.63	3.09	0.46
9.	Physical work to develop common space	0.002	2.89	3.19	0.30
10.	Financial support for purchasing common equipment (children's toys, sports equipment, barbecues, benches, tables, etc.)	0.005	2.69	2.95	0.26
11.	Activity in a neighborhood Internet forum	<0.001	2.47	3.11	0.64
12.	Activity in a social media neighborhood group	<0.001	2.46	3.06	0.60

Source: Own compilation based on the survey results

over the analyzed period. Between 2018 and 2023, the most significant increase in the average score was observed for activities involving participation in a neighborhood online forum, engagement in a neighborhood group on an online social network, and membership in a neighborhood association. For these community-based initiatives, the mean value increased by more than 0.5 points between the two periods  $t^1$  and  $t^2$ ; however, these were the three categories with the lowest mean scores in the 2018 survey. In contrast, the smallest increases were observed in the categories related to planting flowers and tending to greenery together, participation in community meetings, and the willingness to clean the common areas of the buildings (the only case where the value is negative). Notably, these activities represented the types for which the average values in both periods were the highest. These results showed general tendency of a growing willingness to participate in a community-based initiatives. It is especially visible in case of online activities, which might be supported by forced rise of digital skills during the lockdown.

Another aspect under consideration is the respondents' willingness to engage in grassroots neighborhood activities, contingent on whether these activities are of an individual or group nature and the type of potential

collaborators involved. Respondents were provided with the opportunity to rate five ways of neighborhood-level engagement on a scale analogous to that outlined in the previous paragraph. In 2018, the score obtained from respondents' responses exceeded 3 for just one category, which pertained to collaborating with a small group of immediate neighbors and had an average score of 3.62 (see Tab. 5). However, in 2023, the average score surpassed 3 for individual activities and also for working with a larger group of neighborhood residents.

Statistically significant differences were observed between the results for 2018 and 2023 in four variables: individual activities, collaborating with a small group of immediate neighbors, membership in a formal residents' association, and membership in a political party. However, in the case of working with a larger group of neighborhood residents, the differences between the results obtained at  $t^1$  and  $t^2$  were found to be statistically insignificant (Tab. 5). The largest increase in the mean value was noted for membership in a residents' association (+0.54) and membership in a political party (+0.99). Both categories had received the lowest mean scores in the 2018 survey (2.41 and 1.43, respectively), and despite significantly higher scores in 2023, they still had the lowest averages of all categories assessed.

**Table 5.** Respondent's approach toward different kinds of individual or group engagement

Lp.	Type of engagement	Statistical significance for the clustering variable: year of the survey	$\bar{x} t^1$	$\bar{x} t^2$	$\bar{x} t^2 - \bar{x} t^1$
1.	Individual activities	0.002	2.98	3.26	0.28
2.	Working with a small group of immediate neighbors	0.013	3.62	3.51	-0.11
3.	Working in a larger group of district dwellers	0.173	2.94	3.07	0.13
4.	Membership of a formal residents' association	<0.001	2.41	2.95	0.54
5.	Activity as part of political party membership	<0.001	1.43	2.42	0.99

Source: Own compilation based on the survey results.



A decrease in the respondents' average score was noted for collaborating with a small group of immediate neighbors, which, however, had the highest average value in both 2018 and 2023 among all assessed categories. According to the results, the highest willingness to engage was for activities carried out in smaller groups with a low degree of formalisation. At the same time, the largest increases in potential involvement concerned large and highly formalised groups. Such an observation may be indicative of ongoing changes in civic attitudes and points to the need to continue the research in the future.

In the following sections, I will present the results concerning how and to what extent the residents are willing to respond to unfavorable decisions made by the local authorities affecting the local community. Respondents were given the opportunity to rate six potential responses on a scale from 1-5, where one meant "I am not interested at all" and five meant "I would definitely take part." In both 2018 and 2023, the average ratings for each category were above 3 (Tab. 6).

The results exhibited significant differences between the 2018 and 2023 surveys for

five of the six potential responses assessed by respondents (except publicizing neighborhood issues in the local media, which was the only category with an increase in the respondents' expressed willingness to engage). In the case of all other reactions to adverse decisions by the authorities, a decrease was observed in the stated willingness to engage. This decline was most pronounced in the case of "signing paper petitions," which had the highest average in 2018 at 4.4, among all the activities included in the survey. Decreasing willingness to react to an unfavorable decision of local authorities could be another sign of changing civic attitudes. Combined with a growing willingness to participate in community-based initiatives it could mean that we observe a shift from activism 'against something' to activism 'for something'.

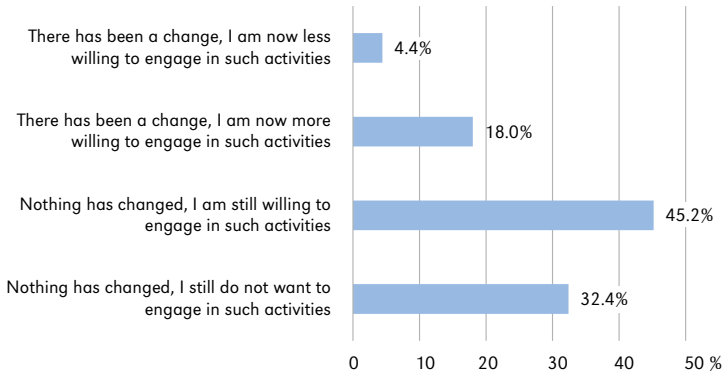
In the 2023 survey, participants were explicitly questioned about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their willingness to engage in community-based initiatives. The results show that 77.6% of the respondents perceive no change in their attitude regarding participation in neighborhood-collective activities due to the past pandemic

**Table 6.** Respondent's approach toward different kinds of reaction to an unfavorable decision by local authorities

Lp.	Type of reaction to an unfavorable decision by local authorities	Statistical significance for the clustering variable: year of the survey	$\bar{x} t^1$	$\bar{x} t^2$	$\bar{x} t^2 - \bar{x} t^1$
1.	Writing a letter to the councilor/mayor	<0.001	3.46	3.12	-0.34
2.	Taking part in a protest against decisions by the authorities that are unfavorable to the neighborhood	<0.001	3.44	3.22	-0.22
3.	Signing a paper petition	<0.001	4.40	3.74	-0.66
4.	Signing an online petition	<0.001	3.87	3.75	-0.12
5.	Participating in discussions with the authorities on issues important to the neighborhood	0.008	3.38	3.25	-0.13
6.	Publicizing neighborhood concerns in the local media	0.373	3.06	3.21	0.15

Source: Own compilation based on the survey results.

(see Fig. 1). This figure comprises 45.2% of the respondents willing to participate in neighborhood activities, whereas 32.4% are reluctant. However, nearly one in four respondents (22.4%) acknowledged that the pandemic had impacted their attitude toward involvement in neighborhood activities. This category includes 18% of the respondents whose willingness to engage in neighborhood activities increased after the pandemic, whereas 4.4% reported a decreased willingness. The increase in willingness to engage in neighborhood activities covered nearly one in five respondents, which may have a positive impact on attracting participants for such activities in the future.



**Figure 1.** Respondents' declarations regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their willingness to engage in community-based initiatives

Source: Own compilation based on the survey results.

### Local leaders' on the integration of neighborhood communities during the COVID-19 outbreak

Key to the interpretation of the results of the quantitative research presented above were the results of interviews conducted with community leaders from Poznań. As mentioned in the introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the functioning of societies around the world. One of the main themes identified during the interviews was the lockdown's influence on a neighborhood community integration. It gathers subthemes and codes dedicated to the issues connected

with making and sustaining social relations between neighbors during the COVID-19 outbreak (Tab. 7). In the following paragraphs, I will show the results of my research focusing on that matter. The presented material will later serve as a groundwork for the final findings presented in the paper's summary.

### COVID-19-driven limitations for the neighborhood integration

The implementation of some neighborhood activities was prevented due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. One of the respondents mentioned this situation in his response: *"This year because of COVID it didn't happen, but with the closest*

*neighbours who have children the age of my children, we go to the mountains to the shelter every year"* [P03].<sup>1</sup>

The government restrictions have also limited the possibility of using meeting places that are characteristic of a particular neighborhood. These places include both commercial and service facilities, open public spaces, and places dedicated to neighboring communities such as neighborhood clubs and local community centers. One of the interlocutors recalled that a local café, which

<sup>1</sup> Respondent codes are listed in Table 1.

**Table 7.** Theme, subthemes, and codes – data analysis structure

Main theme	Subthemes	Codes
Integration of neighborhood communities during the COVID-19 outbreak	COVID-19-driven limitations for the neighborhood integration	The break in regular activities The fear of being infected Exclusion of traditional meeting places
	COVID-19-driven advantages for the neighborhood integration	Spending more time at home Forced contacts Breaking the lines of social divisions/ Breaking the borders
	COVID-19 and neighborhood mobilization	Mutual aid Online mobilization

Source: Own compilation.

was a permanent meeting point, was closed due to the pandemic: *“There was one café. Unfortunately, due to COVID, it closed. The only place where you could go for coffee and talk was closed”* [P05].

When social contact was still legally permissible, its restriction was also due to self-isolation motivated by fear of contagion. This problem mainly affected high-risk groups, i.e., immunocompromised, chronically ill, or seniors. Active representatives of neighborhood communities highlighted that this was particularly felt in relation to elderly people, less likely to use online communication channels staying the last safe way to stay in touch during the lockdown.

#### COVID-19-driven advantages for the neighborhood integration

Despite the limitations in meetings, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have also aided the development of neighborly relations. Due to challenges in everyday functioning, coping with routine matters required making more social contacts than usual. Because of mobility restrictions, these contacts were often limited to the immediate surroundings of the place of residence. The first pandemic-related reason for establishing and deepening neighborly relations was increasing amount of time spent in one’s home due to restrictions in mobility and remote work. The research revealed that

pandemic situation provided more opportunities for random neighborhood meetings. Additional factor supporting neighborhood contacts was the limited supply of various goods, including basic necessities. Because of a lockdown, some people decided to seek help from their neighbors, as mentioned by one of interviewees: *“And it is known that there is a pot to borrow, eggs, because there was none. I see it now in times of pandemic when I need to ask a neighbor ‘do you have some more yeast to share?’ or something else there”* [P04].

In view of the results of this research, it is particularly noteworthy that residents, faced with a new threat, integrated in configurations that were previously a dividing line between neighboring communities. The most commonly noticed split groups of neighboring communities are old inhabitants vs newcomers. Above mentioned statement indicates the rupture of generational barriers and distrust between long-term residents and new residents of a given area. For my interviewees, this ‘forced’ interactions with neighbors allowed people to meet each other, get to know about each other and start to (re)build social relations in the place of living.

#### COVID-19 and neighborhood mobilization

In the previous paragraphs, I showed how neighbors began to get to know one another in the face of a pandemic threat and ongoing

isolation. Another step in developing a neighborhood community that requires more commitment is mobilizing to undertake real action for the common good. During the pandemic crisis, one can find an opportunity for future development of collaborative actions. The neighbors demonstrated their ability to help each other, showed empathy and commitment, and built the mutual-aid networks as in case brought up by one of our respondents: *"There is help for families who lost their jobs through Covid, there is a food collection for them" [P\_05].*

It should be noted that in the current crisis, social mobilization on a local scale was strongly supported by social networks. Neighborhoods were organized in a hybrid mode, where tasks were frequently organized and distributed online, through specific neighborhood groups, and supplemented by real-world activities. One such group was described as follows: *"In my opinion, the most important thing is local integration and activities for our local community. Different things happen – help when something serious happens and someone can't cope with something. It happens in different ways. That, to me, is the mainstream of all this. Barter exchange is also important" [P\_03].* The respondents' statements indicated the privileged situation of neighborhood communities already organized via the Internet before the pandemic. They had already set up network channels, which became the only safe means of communication during the disease outbreak. The administrators of social media profiles and neighborhood groups also noticed that the number and activity of participants have increased due to the pandemic crisis.

According to my research results, social mobilization manifested in declarative and actual assistance to neighbors has had a positive impact on the sense of security and intimacy of neighborly relations. This section can be summed up in a statement that confirms the surprisingly positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic experience on neighborhood community integration: *"We are certainly more close to each other, we know each*

*other more, we know that we can count on each other. Especially when I was in the hospital, my husband was left alone with three children. There was a period of pandemic and you could count on help like 'I have to go to the hospital, will you come for a while, because the children are already asleep?' or 'Will you take my dog for a walk? Because I'm in quarantine, I can't go out.' Well, it's cool, that you can count on someone" [P04].*

## Study limitations

Before presenting and discussing final conclusions, I would like to acknowledge my study's limitations resulting from chosen methods and the way I used them in my research. I will start this section with quantitative methods, and then head to the qualitative research. Choosing the specific technique of a questionnaire survey can possibly alter its outcomes in two ways: by influencing response levels among different social groups or demographic cohorts and by affecting answers given by respondents (Tipping et al., 2010; Kagerbauer et al., 2013; Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014). Former research showed that computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) is preferred among retired and elderly people, while computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) enables reaching younger persons, and paper and pencil interview (PAPI) covers all parts of the population to the same extent and also achieves the same response levels as CATI and CAWI (Kagerbauer et al., 2013). In this study, I used PAPI in  $t^1$  and CAWI in  $t^2$ . I used the same quota-selection approach in  $t^1$  and  $t^2$ , and employed a CAWI panel that allowed me to keep the same quotes to avoid the technique's influence on respondents' final demographical structure.

When choosing the survey mode, the second question was its influence on respondent's answers. A stream of research suggests that the CAWI method is less accurate and its results are biased by technological factors (Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007; Chang & Krosnick, 2009). However, this bias was already reduced by the development of methods

of constructing, matching, and weighting Internet panels (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014). The study results could be also affected by the questionnaire design. In this study I reduced this risk by implementing almost exactly the same questionnaire in  $t^1$  and  $t^2$  (the only difference was an extra question about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic experience on respondent's approach toward community-based initiatives in  $t^2$ ). After considering all pros and cons of different data collection techniques, CAWI turned out to be the most cost- and time-effective method to implement questionnaire survey in  $t^2$  with limited resources (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014).

In case of qualitative research, the main issue is to decide how many people do we need to involve in our research. Using qualitative methods, we normally do not aim into knowing the general populations' opinion, but to discover some new phenomena or get deeper insight into matter of investigation. That is why the logic of small sample applies and a quantity of cases needed to obtain a meaningful results is up to researchers' decision (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006) research based on interviews often seeks to penetrate social life beyond appearance and manifest meanings. This requires the researcher to be immersed in the research field, to establish continuing, fruitful relationships with respondents and through theoretical contemplation to address the research problem in depth. Therefore a small number of cases (less than 20, say). In my case, the qualitative research was a part of a wider project involving 24 local leaders from two cities (Poznań and Wrocław). However, in Poznań only six interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and were useful for this study. As it was crucial to describe the role of disease outbreak in neighborhood integration and mobilization, and to support the interpretation of quantitative data, I decided to incorporate it into data corpus analyzed in this paper.

Results of my study are also limited to a comparison of people's attitudes measured in two particular moments: before and

after COVID-19 pandemics. It delivers only initial insights into the influence of pandemic experiences on the attitudes of city inhabitants toward participation in community-based initiatives. The research on this subject needs to be continued with the use of mixed method approach allowing to build a wider picture of investigated phenomena. It will be crucial to determine the way that a common experience of a large scale crisis influences the individual approach toward an everyday bottom-up activity during the ordinary time. The main questions are: how does pandemic experience changes people's motivation? Is the solidarity built during the crisis visible after it ends? Are social networks built/rebuilt during the crisis being used to sustain community-based initiatives in ordinary time?

## Conclusions and discussion

By analysing the results of the research results we can derive some final conclusions. These findings will be presented in the following paragraphs and supplemented by a discussion based on the author's interpretation and references to the literature.

### Neighborhood (re)integration during the pandemic

First, despite the lockdown constraints hindering face-to-face contacts, the study found that the shared experience of the COVID-19 pandemic period led to the re(integration) of neighborhood communities. Due to the necessity to remain in place of residence and the ability to make only essential travels, there were more frequent, casual encounters at the neighborhood level. Impediments to basic needs and daily activities created the conditions for social contacts to overcome these problems. These contacts, in addition to fulfilling their primary purpose, also influenced neighborly relations by making it possible not only to gain knowledge about neighbors, but also to establish completely new contacts and build an atmosphere of mutual trust. An additional factor reinforcing the discussed effect

may also have been the long-term nature of the pandemic threat, which forced a change in social behavior and affected our lives on an unprecedented time scale.

### **Growing activity and falling resistance**

Second, an increase in the willingness to engage in community-based activities has been observed. However, the extent of this increase varies depending on the specific activities and the type of group organizing them. At the same time, a decline in the willingness to take action in response to unfavorable authority decisions affecting the local community was revealed. This coincidence of these results may be due to a growing belief in the sense and effectiveness of bottom-up initiatives while at the same time lacking faith in the ability to reverse unfavorable decisions made in a top-down model.

When interpreting the results and discussing the literature, it is possible to identify potential factors contributing to the above-mentioned changes in citizens' attitudes. One of these factors may be the experience of government-imposed restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of pandemics, many of which involved limitations on mobility, directly impacting residents' spatial behavior. These restrictions on movement led to residents spending more time in their places of residence and operating within a confined spatial environment (Tully et al., 2021). Coupled with several difficulties related to, among other things, illness or economic crisis (inability to shop independently or limited availability of essential products), these circumstances impacted the reconstruction or strengthening of social relationships in the place of residence (Chevé, 2022). This, in turn, led to an increased interest in grassroots engagement with the local community.

Furthermore, grassroots activities and neighborhood self-help have proven to be effective in coping with crises. The widespread mobilization and mutual aid demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of action, often surpassing the capacity of state services

(Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Carstensen et al., 2021; Bringel & Pleyers, 2022; Chevée, 2022). Faith in a bottom-up activity may be reinforced by the citizens' perception that the actions taken by the authorities during the pandemic period were illogical, delayed, ineffective, and sometimes even illegal (Guasti, 2020; Lazarus et al., 2020; Rak, 2021; Winiarska-Brodowska, 2022). The harsh assessment given to those in power by the public led people to look for an alternative, which came in the form of grassroots activities.

The declining willingness to express opposition to adverse decisions by the authorities may result from a civic approach's shift from 'activism against something' to 'activism for something'. This shift may be supported by the above mentioned effectiveness of grassroots initiatives facing the coronavirus crisis. Growing belief in people agency could work as a factor moving citizens from interacting with the state toward building the bottom-up networks. Similar mechanisms are evident in communities that are organized through social media platforms. Research shows that grassroots groups or neighborhood pages on Facebook have much greater potential to bring residents together and actually build community than similar groups created by city or district institutions (Sowada, 2020).

### **Growing willingness for online participation**

Third, survey respondents were more interested in digitally mediated forms of engagement in community-based initiatives. Willingness to engage in grassroots activities through activity on a neighborhood online forum and membership of a neighborhood group on social media was higher in 2023, and the increases expressed in respondents' ratings were the highest among all categories compared. This trend also extended to potential responses to adverse decisions by authorities, including the option of signing a petition online. One of the lowest decreases in willingness to get involved was recorded concerning this response. In 2023, this form of reaction to an

adverse decision by the authorities received the highest average score in the assessment of the residents surveyed.

The transition of social relations to the Internet is associated with opportunities and risks. The opportunities include several positive aspects of this phenomenon, ranging from the possibility of socializing alienated people in their immediate environment to the increased mobilization potential of social movements (Mesch, 2001; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007; Castells, 2015). Risks are connected, among others, with the shallowing of social relations or erosion of social capital (Kraut et al., 1998; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004). However, the increasing interest in digitally mediated forms of participation is particularly interesting in the context of the past pandemic. Due to the fear of infection and lockdown restrictions, in many cases, social networks and instant messaging proved to be the only tool to sustain and expand interpersonal relationships (Spasiani et al., 2023). They also facilitated the organization and coordination of mutual aid and other forms of local community engagement. It has also been shown that, when used effectively, the Internet can contribute to increased levels of community resilience (De La Torre Parra et al., 2023).

### **COVID-19 pandemic experience and willingness to participate in community-based initiatives**

Fourth, most of the participants in the 2023 survey do not perceive the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their attitudes toward involvement in grassroots community activities. However, almost a quarter of those surveyed acknowledged the impact of this pandemic, with the vast majority reporting an increase in their willingness to engage in the activities discussed in this article. This fact, coupled with the increase in willingness to engage in particular activities between 2018 and 2023, highlights the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the potential for social mobilization, which was predominantly positive. It is known that the shared experience of disasters

mobilizes society and leads to the awakening of local communities. In response to adverse, often traumatic events, numerous solidarity-based networks emerge. This phenomenon is evident in studies related to natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods), economic crises, and disease outbreaks (Borger, 2013; Calo-Blanco et al., 2017; Fransen et al., 2022; Suleimany et al., 2022). Furthermore, participation in mutual aid networks or other forms of community-based initiatives during a crisis serves to strengthen the bonds within a community and reinforces the local identity of its members (X. Wang & Cheng, 2021).

Surveys conducted after the official lifting of the epidemic emergency clearly indicate that because of the COVID-19 experience almost one in five respondents is more willing to get involved in community-based initiatives than was the case five years earlier. However, the sustainability of the aforementioned awakening and the social networks built during particular mobilization is questionable. Researchers have also addressed this concern in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Boonstra et al., 2022; Lalot et al., 2022). There is a genuine risk that social mobilization and the associated activities may wane once the emergency factor diminishes. Activists, local leaders, NGOs, and other actors who care about an active and organized civil society should take advantage of this mobilization and consolidate grassroots structures before the "COVID-19 effect" loses its impact.

Capitalizing on ongoing mobilization and sustaining the conditions for residents' self-organization is crucial to building a vital and resilient community (Boonstra et al., 2022; Bowe et al., 2022; Lalot et al., 2022). This topic is addressed in one of their studies by Beitske Boonstra et al., focusing on whether the general factors known in the literature for the sustainability of community-based initiatives also apply to initiatives created in response to a crisis. They identified two pathways leading to the sustainability of solidarity initiatives established during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first pathway combines social capital,

transformational leadership, and organizational resources, and the second combines organizational resources and a lack of government support. In the first case, there is a somewhat 'traditional' set of factors where a local leader uses social capital to gather organizational resources and establish a durable initiative. Referring to my study's results, it is important that because of its specific features, the COVID-19 crisis aided building the social capital needed to keep the local-based initiatives going after the threat ends. The impact that the lockdown has had on the integration of urban neighbourhoods and social mobilization could be the key factor allowing local leaders to keep the social energy for a longer than it was seen in case of a different threats like floods or earthquakes. Surprisingly, the lack of governmental support is an initiative durability factor in the second path. It proves that the lack of external support in some cases could mobilize the local resources. The authors also suggest that under some conditions, any interference from public authorities could slow down grassroots initiatives (Boonstra et al., 2022).

Sustaining social mobilization is particularly relevant in the context of the declining propensity to react to adverse decisions by local authorities, as indicated by the research findings presented in this text. Over time, strong grassroots structures can help restore faith in the efficacy of protest and opposition to decisions made by authorities at different levels. This revival of confidence hinges on a sense of strength derived from the number of people participating in public life and the effectiveness of their actions (Rogers et al., 2018).

## Future perspectives

The results of the research presented in this article, along with their interpretation and discussion, shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the willingness of local residents to engage in community-based initiatives. These research conclusions on this issue offer valuable recommendations for authorities at various levels, local commu-

nities and their leaders, and other actors aiming to sustain the unprecedented community mobilization seen during the pandemic.

However, it is essential to highlight the existing research gap related to the identification of sustainability factors of community-based initiatives created around natural disasters or pandemics. Current efforts in this area have primarily consisted of single case studies, providing valuable yet incomplete knowledge. Addressing this gap requires further research, including additional case studies conducted in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. The global scope of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a particularly fertile ground for such research. The sustainability of mobilizations and social networks built from the bottom up significantly enhances community resilience, and therefore, sustaining their functioning becomes beneficial from a society-wide perspective.

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Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the author's, on the basis of their own research.



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