

SIGWATCH: How NGOs will respond to the Covid-19 crisis

The impact of Covid-19/coronavirus on business, government, and our daily lives has already been enormous. But it will also affect NGOs and activists, by forcing them to change strategies and tactics. You need to be prepared.

Just a month ago (through it seems like a year), activists were readying expanded campaigns on climate change, oil and gas financing, plastics, and deforestation, in addition to maintaining pressure on palm oil, animal welfare, pesticides, and corporate responsibility. Major protests were planned from late March onwards in anticipation of the next round of UNFCCC COP26 climate talks in Glasgow, Scotland in December.

These protests are clearly not now going to happen (nor for that matter will COP26). Without high profile events and industry gatherings to protest against, and no possibility of confronting, let alone demonstrating against, corporate targets, how will NGOs prosecute campaigns that rely on physical protests to get attention? When people cannot stand closer than two metres, and not be in groups larger than five or ten people, even small-scale direct actions become almost impossible to organise, let alone conducted in a way that makes an impact. Greta Thunberg may have drawn attention to her cause by sitting alone outside the Swedish parliament, but she was surely the exception that proves the rule.

Stripped of the possibility of mass mobilisation, New Climate Movement groups like XR, the Fridays for Future school children's climate strike campaign, and Sunrise campus group in the U.S. have been in effect neutered, even if the economic shock of Covid-19 is delivering the very reduction in fossil fuel use and flying that they had been demanding. But NGOs are hardly ones for sitting on their hands. What will they do instead?

The easy move for activists is to convert physical protests into digital ones. This is already happening with this month's climate actions. What it means in practice is unclear. A social media 'thunderclap' sounds dramatic but few companies are likely to panic in the face of a larger than usual rush of hostile tweets from their known critics. Certainly there is no comparison here with getting several hundred people to sit in the middle of a major central London river crossing for several weeks, but as digital protesting becomes the only way to make some noise, it will surely grow in size and impact.

Getting attention remains a problem for activists, with Covid-19 news utterly overwhelming both mainstream and social media. This will deter NGOs from starting new campaigns until the current emergency becomes the new normal and the media has room for other news. Meanwhile some groups are trying to influence their governments' response to the crisis, for example, by lobbying against no-strings bailouts for industries they traditionally oppose, such as oil, gas, and aviation.

Once campaigners get going again seriously, they will likely make much more use of social media. The problem here is attracting attention beyond ones' existing pool of supporters. Expect to see NGOs sharing lists and forming digital alliances to try to reach far more people than usual.

Another possibility, though likely only for the more aggressive groups, is digital sabotage, from hijacking and defacing corporate web and Facebook sites, to obstructing communications through server blockades and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. Large corporations and other likely targets need to review their network security to make sure such attempts are not successful.

We can also expect more use of litigation and petitions. Just the initiation of lawsuits against prominent targets is good for a few headlines (once wall-to-wall Covid-19 coverage has died down) even if the suspension of the courts delays actual hearings. Petitions run online meanwhile are a good way to encourage participation and demonstrate public support for a cause. The EU and some other countries officially recognise petitions, if signed by enough people, as justification for new laws and regulations. It would make sense for locked-down NGOs to put a lot of effort into this tactic to keep their campaigns moving.

All said, one thing we know is that activists are never short of creativity. They will find ways to get under the skins of CEOs and politicians. Whether this means using organised social media-driven outrage and embarrassment, or some other tactic yet to be invented, remains to be seen. At least they will be able to take advantage of the millions of bored people stuck at home, looking for a little bit of excitement and some interaction with fellow humans.

Looking into 2021, the Covid-19 lock-down may ironically re-establish the pre-eminence of the established NGOs. With the new radical groups like XR no longer able to steal their thunder, the likes of Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, WWF and Sierra Club, armed with well-funded digital campaigning arms that the upstarts can't afford, could reclaim their dominance after a year of being out-shouted and out-PR'd.

Good luck, and stay safe!

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