



## Corporate Donations in the Context of Covid-19: Insights on Trust and Policy Innovation Opportunities

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the determinants of corporate donations during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the Portuguese context. It explores the interplay between pandemic-related factors, corporate structures, recipient profiles, and media coverage on the levels of corporate donations. In the absence of publicly available data, a comprehensive database of corporate donations was constructed by analyzing over six thousand news pieces from various media sources between March and May 2020. The database comprises 1171 donations from 709 different institutions. The relationship between corporate donations and multiple variables was examined, including the epidemiological progression of the pandemic, corporate ownership structures, recipient characteristics, and media coverage. Our analysis reveals that during the initial wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Portugal, corporate donations were predominantly made by large companies, primarily directed toward their local regions. Notably, nearly 93% of all donations were allocated to the National Health System. PPEs and hospital equipment were the preferred donation items among the contributing companies. These findings shed light on the factors influencing corporate donation behavior during emergency situations and provide valuable insights into trust levels within the healthcare system. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a unique exploration of corporate donation behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in Portugal. The comprehensive dataset and findings provide novel insights into the factors shaping corporate donation decisions during crises.

### Keywords:

Corporate Social Responsibility;  
Covid-19;  
Corporate Donations;  
Public Health Innovation.

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## 1- Introduction

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, corporate donations have played a crucial role in addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals and groups [1]. These donations have helped provide essential services and support to those most affected by the crisis [2]. While corporate donations have helped to mitigate the effects of Covid-19, there is a need to maintain transparency and trust in these initiatives. This can be accomplished by establishing clear norms and criteria for corporate donations, ensuring that funds are utilized properly and efficiently [3]. Corporate donations may also provide chances for policy innovation in the context of Covid-19 [4]. Companies, for example, might form new collaborations with governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to maximize the impact of their donations. With the effort to rapidly respond to an overwhelmed health system, society gathered in multiple grassroots initiatives to give what they could, applying personal and corporate resources to help the system and the healthcare workers. Altruistic behaviors had their roots in individual and collective actions, in a very authentic and spontaneous way, with multiple enablers from social media, crowdsourcing platforms, corporate and institutional channels, and random groups approaching health authorities or hospitals directly [5]. These grassroots initiatives emphasize the

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strength of spontaneous solidarity and the possibility for governmental innovation in harnessing these collective efforts [6]. Even under unprecedented economic and social strains, the Covid-19 crisis has ultimately placed businesses under pressure to adhere to responsible business practices and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) [7].

In a domain where publicly available data on corporate donations during crises is limited or non-existent in many countries, the creation and analysis of a comprehensive database of donations is an important instrument for increasing transparency and informing future decision-making processes. Through comprehensive data collection and analysis, this study not only sheds light on the complex dynamics of corporate giving during the Covid-19 outbreak but also lays a foundation for more informed and evidence-based policymaking. Our research aims to bridge current knowledge gaps, present stakeholders with practical insights, and eventually create improved accountability and efficacy in crisis response efforts by conducting a comprehensive exploration of corporate contribution behavior and its determinants.

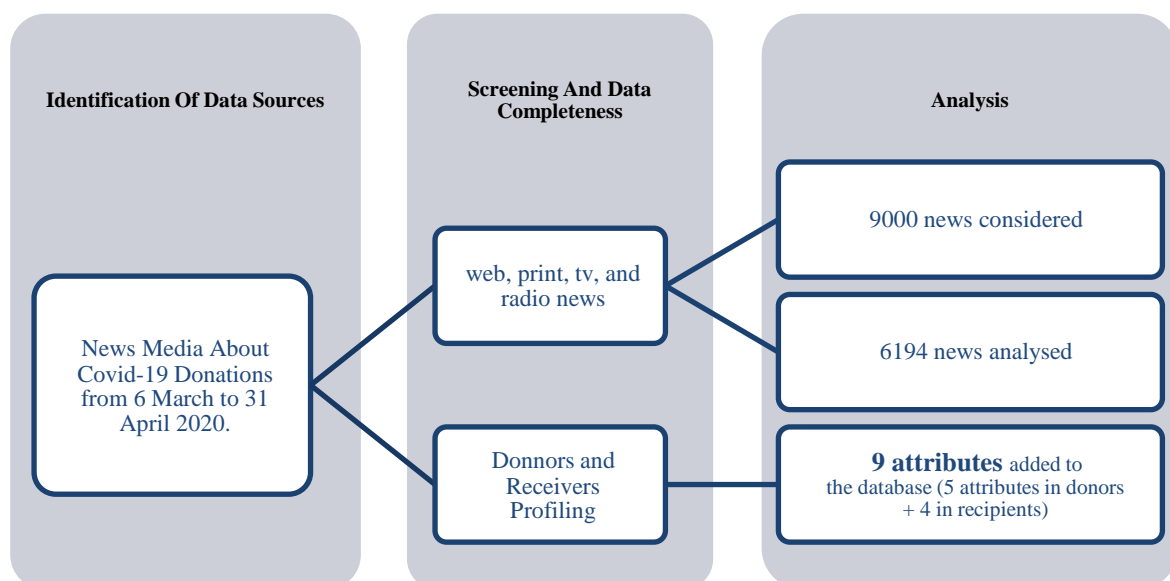
In terms of structure, the paper is organized in the following: the present introduction explaining the study's focus on the factors of corporate donations during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in the Portuguese context. Following the introduction, a literature review investigates existing research on corporate donations, CSR practices, and their role in crisis response, with a focus on the Covid-19 epidemic. The methodology section describes the creation of a comprehensive database of corporate donations based on publicly available news about corporate donations. The findings section shows and examines the relationship between corporate donations and a variety of parameters, including pandemic progression, corporate structures, recipient profiles, and media attention. This leads to a discussion of the findings' implications for theory, practice, and future research paths, with a focus on social resilience and crisis governance. Finally, the paper provides an overview of major findings and contributions, emphasizing practical implications for companies, policymakers, and stakeholders.

### *1-1-Risk Perception in Extreme and Rare Events: Covid-19 and the Media*

For any rare occurrence to be viewed as a threat, it must primarily attract our attention [8]. Covid-19 has attracted global media coverage since the first reported cases and mainly after WHO published the first Disease Outbreak News on the new virus on 5 January [9]. Media is a social agent that can generate certain biases in social information by communicating and drawing attention to particular knowledge, concepts, beliefs, norms, and behaviors [10]. Salience to factors such as death and death rates and many connoted anxieties surrounding the outbreak are the most common issues reported by the news in the epidemic coverage, compared to critically important information on the prevention of Covid-19 spread that receives little attention [11].

Based on a media news database related to Covid-19 donations, text analytics was applied to isolate more than 1000 contributions from 700 donors within the first three months of the pandemic. Within this general framework, our study aimed to contribute to the design of new strategies to appeal to donations in response to disasters and pandemic crises from the perspective of the central government and policymakers and to help companies identify causes and needs that better fit their corporate culture, values, and communication strategy.

Figure 1 shows the flowchart of the research methodology through which the objectives of this study were achieved.



**Figure 1. Flow chart of the methodological approach**

## 2- Material and Methods

The research regarding donations and trust in health systems generally relies on self-reported instruments and the willingness to donate rather than actual donations. The choice was to invest in constructing a database and study donations, even after realizing that only a small subset of the social psychology literature uses archival research, believing this could be a promising complementary approach to conventional laboratory experiments.

### 2-1-Data

In the absence of official public data about donations, a brainstorm around possible alternatives was conducted, followed by a collection of secondary data to describe CSR strategies and donation behaviors in the first months of the pandemic. The benefit of looking at real-world data was also faced by the difficulty of aggregating all the different data sources needed to carry out the analysis. Table 1, the steps taken to create the dataset are presented, and how relevant insights were addressed using descriptive and predictive analysis:

**Table 1. Chronological steps for the database creation**

Step	Description	Goal / Comments	Numbers
Step 1	Initial dataset request	Dataset provided by Cision with a query to Covid-19 donations in web, print, tv, and radio news from 6 March to 31 April 2020.	+9000 news (initial dataset)
Step 2	Data Cleaning	Remove unwanted observations from the dataset, including duplicate or irrelevant observations.	6194 news Dataset considered for the analysis
Step 3	Data Completeness	The goal was to integrate data about donors and receivers further and understand how all required data was known.	9 attributes added to the database (5 attributes in donors + 4 in recipients)
Step 4	Data Consistency and Uniformity	Ensure that data collected was consistent within the initial dataset and across the multiple data sets (covid-19 cases, GDP per region, etc.) that we integrated, namely, the degree to which the data was using the same unit of measure.	1172 Donations 709 Donors 612 Recipients

Note. Adapted from "The Ultimate Guide to Data Cleaning": Available online: from <https://towardsdatascience.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-data-cleaning-3969843991d4>.

Based on text analytics methods applied to the initial dataset, from the 6194-news analyzed, it was possible to isolate 1171 unique donations within the first three months of the pandemic, with 12 donations per day in March, 21 donations in April, and 13 donations in May. Regarding the donors, it was possible to identify 709 unique donors distributed amongst 16 different sectors. Regarding the size of the donor institutions, as mentioned before, it was possible to categorize all the donors into three segments that represent the institution's size (large, medium, and small) according to the Portuguese Official Statistics Entity [5]. From our dataset, it was possible to infer 612 entities that were recipients of the donations. The primary recipients of all donations were Hospitals, followed by social institutions, fire brigades, and counties or local Government.

## 3- Results

At this point, the objective was to identify and explain the characteristics of donations, donors, and recipients of donations, as well as the Covid-19 case evolution reported by official healthcare entities in Portugal. Descriptive statistics was used to include summaries of the sample and data measurements to explore quantitative insights that are often difficult to understand over a broad dataset by identifying measures of central tendency and measures of variability or spread. Aristotle's [12] rhetorical device, commonly known as the "seven circumstances", has long helped journalists and researchers address the five whys [13], seeking to ensure the process of collecting information and enhancing the resolution of problems.

The following questions were used to present our main insights:

- Who are the Key Stakeholders in the Covid-19 Donations?
- What is being donated?
- When is it being donated?
- Where are the main donations given and received?
- Why are people donating?

### 3-1- Who Are the Key Stakeholders in The Covid-19 Donations?

The number of donations was correlated mainly with the size of companies, defined according to the Statistics Portugal (INE) classification, with the majority being made by large organizations (421), followed by medium-sized companies (116), and finally small companies (57).

In Portugal, according to PORDATA [14], there were, in 2018, 1.295.299 companies, with 1262 of those being large companies, which might indicate that around 33% of the large companies in Portugal made a public donation during the first three months of the pandemic. Also, it is interesting to see in Table 2 the comparison between the size of the donor and the sector they represent. As a highlight, we observe that the commerce sector was very engaged in donating independently of the size of the companies. Cultural & Sport's institutions were ahead of Manufacturing & Construction sector's donations, and Banking & Insurance donated more than the Technology sector.

**Table 2. Number of Donating Companies by Size of the Company**

Size of the Companies	# Companies
Large	255
Medium	85
Small	44
Multiple	8
Not Defined	317
Total	709

Note. The size of the company followed the Official Statistics definitions. Multiple sectors represent donations by a group of companies of different sizes. Not defined means individual and other donations where it was not possible to track the company's size.

Even though Portugal is an SME country, only a tiny number of companies (Table 2) had the opportunity to donate in the first months of the pandemic, probably because, according to the OECD [15], the economic ripple effect of the pandemic causes “a dramatic and sudden loss of demand and revenue for SMEs severely affects their ability to function and/or causes severe liquidity shortages”.

### **3-2- What is Being Donated?**

The unprecedented solidarity during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic was expressed mainly in tangible items due to the lack of available Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) during the first months of the pandemic, followed by financial support or fundraising campaigns. Finally, some companies decided to make their assets available, like transport or machinery. The news often mentioned very authentic ways of giving, like people spontaneously showing up in the hospital to donate a cake or a meal to health professionals.

### **3-3- When is it Being Donated?**

21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 was the peak of the first wave in Italy with 6557 positive patients and in Spain with 9159 positive patients, respectively. We were all impacted by the impressive images of the health systems collapsing or with severe shortages in answer to the critical ill patients. In Portugal, it was possible to “flatten the curve” (4) with the peak on 10 April with 1516 cases, with April being also the month with more observed donations.

According to Rooney [16], after a disaster, people typically make donations within “six weeks of a big disaster, when media coverage is the most intense”, adding that their contributions usually “slow to a crawl within two or three months and typically dry up by the six-month mark, once the cameras stop rolling and news cycle moves on”.

In our case, with just three months of data, we observe that it follows the same path with the peak donations in the same month having peak infection with a subsequent decrease in May 2020.

### **3-4- Where Are the Main Donations Given and Received?**

The main region where donors are based is the north of Portugal (296 donors), a more industrialized region of the country and where the pandemic crisis initially emerged. This is followed by the Lisbon region (229 donors), central Portugal (151 donors), and the southern regions of Alentejo (58 donors) and Algarve (29 donors). We can also observe 12 and 16 donors in the Madeira and Azores islands, respectively. Finally, we have 20 donors from multiple regions in Portugal and 121 international donors.

Regarding the value donated by each region, the value of the donations also follows the number of donations ranking, with the Lisbon Region being by far the most generous region with more than twenty-nine million euros donated from a total of almost one hundred and five million euros donated in the first three months of the pandemic.

### **3-5- Why Are People Donating?**

The motives to donate in emergencies might be related to the perceived need for help and the perceived impact of a potential donation [17]. In that sense, the preferences for the type of donation and the recipients of the donations were analyzed to see how donors perceived more in need and which type of donations would have more impact.

It is possible to see that tangible items were the primary preference for corporate donations in all types of companies (small, medium, or large), with emphasis on medium companies who are the most active in this type of donation. Large companies, however, have a higher number of financial support initiatives, while small companies tend to engage more in fundraising campaigns. We could also observe that the majority of the donations prefer to benefit a specific institution rather than the whole NHS and leave to the authorities the allocation of the donations. In its official webpage, the Ministry of Healthcare created a centralized form where individuals and companies could manifest the will to donate in one of 16 different categories like PPEs, lodging, food, tests, medical equipment, ventilators, etc.

At this stage, comparing the donor region with the recipient's region, it is possible to observe that there is not much mobility in the donations. Mostly all regions donate more for their geographic area, with only the Lisbon Region contributing more nationally than its region. Epidemiological data is relevant for our analysis because, in the event of a

disaster, institutional and corporate assistance is generally provided on the premise of both the number of people who have died, and the number of people affected [18].

Finally, it is also essential to plot the chronological evolution of the donations, where it is possible to observe a very diffuse pattern of giving.

## **4- Discussion**

In this work, it was possible to map the response of companies in terms of donations, taking into consideration the media coverage of the donations and the epidemiological evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first three months. As a first step, an analysis on the impact of demographic variables on corporate donations was performed, characterization of regional donations, and solidarity between regions was analyzed. Then the focus was on specific corporate structure dimensions of both donors and recipients of the donations, trying to learn how these dimensions relate to the willingness to give. Finally, we tried to analyze the relationship between the number of Covid-19 Cases and Deaths and the amount of news about corporate donations.

Based on the present exploratory work, it is now possible to identify very concrete opportunity spaces that collectively we need to address if we want to maximize the utility of donations in the future. Several questions are raised by looking at the results that might guide us for future research and data exploration:

### ***4-1- Are the Recipients of the Main Donations the Most Trusted Institutions?***

The primary recipients of donations are hospitals, representing 57% of the institutions that received donations, with the NHS receiving almost 30% of donations. The Health System accounts for 93% of donations in the first wave of Covid-19. Portugal has a public health system, free at the point of care, with universal coverage and financed by taxes. Despite recent criticism, society and in this case, corporations trusted the system to respond to this massive public health threat. The unprecedented amount donated was also a sign of trust in the health system to use those resources in a productive way. The challenges presented by the pandemic, with severe impacts beyond healthcare, raise the question about who should, beyond hospitals, earn the trust of society to also receive relevant help in the future.

### ***4-2- Do Donations Mirror Cohesion Policies and the Challenge of Inter-Regional Solidarity?***

For us, one of the biggest reveals of the study was to realize that all regions (except Lisbon) have mainly donated for their own regional institutions. While same region preference is expected, it is obvious the lack of inter-regional solidarity. From the national map of donations, it is possible to observe that most of the recipients are in the littoral of the country in the main cities. The interior of the country has little to no attention in terms of donations.

### ***4-3- Is the Amount Donated just a Momentary Trend, or will it be Consistent in the Future?***

The amount collected of more than one hundred million euros was unprecedented even when compared with other major donation initiatives like the fires in Central Portugal in 2017; as a reference point, the amount donated at that time was about thirteen million euros. The Ministry of Healthcare tried to implement a centralized donation management system, but our data indicates that people prefer to donate to specific units, mainly equipment that will be directly applied to fight the pandemic. The behavioral challenge will be to reinforce the feeling of belonging when a national donation is made, and the cognitive dissonance originated from many donations that have little or no use (like the 253 Chinese ventilators that have not been installed or used mentioned in a Portuguese reference newspaper).

### ***4-4- SME's vs. Big Firms Involvement: Are We Exploring All the Potential Donations?***

33% of the large companies in Portugal made a public donation during the first three months of the pandemic. Another relevant fact was that more than 2/3 of the donors are companies operating exclusively in the national territory. Also, that SME's donate mainly to the northern region of Portugal compared to large organizations that prefer to make national donations. Again, in terms of a national donation strategy, are there any sectors or regions that we could explore better all the donorship potential? Instead of just passively observing sector and regional differences in this study, reassuring who is intrinsically more prone to pro-social behaviors, we should actively engage donors in the responsibility to donate, taking into consideration factors like size, profitability, or social impact of the potential donors.

### ***4-5- Behavioral Insights from Donations Behaviour***

Helping donors plan accordingly and streamlining the donation process will eliminate certain behavioral obstacles that would otherwise discourage people from acting on their good intentions. Many people and corporations at this time feel inspired to donate and explore ways to support, creating a need for thoughtful design that lets them make a real, sustained difference. To help in that process, we have synthesized our learnings from the first impact of the pandemic on Table 3, trying to identify the instrumental needs of the different stakeholders, unmet material needs, and the emotional distress involved in the process. Then, based on actual behaviors identified, we try to formulate possible behavior insights that might be useful for future reference and to design relevant interventions that will benefit both the donors and the recipients of the donations.



**Table 3. Behavioral Insights from Donations Behavior**

	Large Companies			SME's			Donation Recipient's		
	Instrumental Need	Unmet Material Need	Emotional Distress	Instrumental Need	Unmet Material Need	Emotional Distress	Instrumental Need	Unmet Material Need	Emotional Distress
<b>Represent the Problem</b>	Company's values are put to the test, with stakeholders closely monitoring how they are behaving towards the crisis	Assess predisposition to give beyond the firm's interests, promoting Social Good in an authentic way	Whether their core corporate values are expressed in their actions to help communities	Find ways they can help that are aligned with their skills and resources.	SME's are also impacted by the pandemic so they face the dilemma between helping others and surviving in the short term.	Proportion of assets of the firm that is expected to give away.	Being able to cope with the emergency response needs and guarantee continuity of care.	Difficulty in getting enough PPE's, Ventilators, and Human Resources to fight the pandemic.	Maintain the levels of morale for the actors on the frontline of the crisis.
<b>Observed Behavior</b>	One third of large companies in Portugal donated in the first 3 months of the pandemic.			Only a small percentage of SME donated or communicated the donations in the media.			Donors tend to privilege tangible goods donations rather than financial aid; There is no inter-regional solidarity with each region donating to its own regional institutions.		
<b>Possible Behavioral Insights</b>	Companies are generally sensitive to the importance of the individual or entity asking for a donation, the personal interests of the top management, and the subjective opinion on how well the employees of the organization supported the cause.			Few SME's are working together today to accomplish pro-social goals.			By donating tangible goods to local institutions, donors feel that they could directly benefit from the donations (brand image, stakeholder engagement and personal benefit in case of need).		

	NHS			Government		
	Instrumental Need	Unmet Material Need	Emotional Distress	Instrumental Need	Unmet Material Need	Emotional Distress
<b>Represent the Problem</b>	Minimize the impact of the shortage of resources.	How are donations distributed and controlled.	Align the will of givers and the real needs of the system as a whole.	Guarantee that all citizens have the right to be taken care of in case of an emergency.	Avoid unequal access to resources.	Negative media exposure regarding insufficient response by official entities.
<b>Observed Behavior</b>	Although the NHS tried to implement a centralized process, donors prefer to donate directly to institutions rather than giving to a centralized entity.			Very reactive strategy, not maximizing the potential donations and with apparent lack of regional and national alignment. Most donations are in the North, Center and Lisbon Regions and mainly in the littoral areas.		
<b>Possible Behavioral Insights</b>	Donations might help to better understand the levels of trust in the health system and a participatory instrument in the discussion about the health system future.			Donations should be a way to promote inter-regional solidarity as a way to reinforce identity and values.		

While the Covid-19 pandemic undeniably witnessed an unprecedented surge of solidarity, this echoes patterns observed in past crises [19], where the national mobilization, particularly for the NHS, mirrored this global phenomenon and revealed a reservoir of creative and pro-social dynamism. The global response not only highlighted the need for unity in times of crisis but also provided a unique opportunity to learn valuable insights, both for Portugal and on a broader scale. The research aligns with previous studies in identifying there is evidence that disaster response benefits from corporate involvement [20], with emphasis on the vital role of having active local enterprises [21]. While the predominant focus on local institutions aligns with expectations of regional solidarity, the strong contrast in donation distribution across regions underscores broader societal challenges. The observed lack of inter-regional solidarity, particularly evident in the disparity between coastal and inland areas, raises critical questions about resource allocation and community cohesion. Further exploration into the underlying factors driving these regional preferences is needed, including socio-economic disparities, historical contexts, and perceptions of institutional efficacy. Understanding these nuances is essential for fostering a more equitable distribution of resources and strengthening collaborative efforts to address public health crises on a national scale.

There was this paradigm shift in CSR due to COVID-19, which can be related to the sustained focus on mental health resources for frontline workers throughout the crisis [22], contrasting with previous studies that reported a decline in such donations after the initial surge. This shift indicates a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of the long-term impacts of the pandemic, necessitating continuous support, with many arguing the sustainability of this generosity in the long term [23]. While the outpouring of support demonstrates a commendable commitment to social responsibility, questions remain about the continuity of such efforts beyond immediate crisis response. Corporate involvement in donation initiatives, particularly by SMEs and large firms operating exclusively within Portugal, presents opportunities for broader sectoral and regional engagement. Moving forward, strategies aimed at harnessing the inherent social impact potential of businesses while addressing logistical challenges and ensuring alignment with evolving societal needs will be crucial for sustaining momentum in donation efforts and maximizing their lasting impact.

## 5- Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic witnessed an unprecedented surge of solidarity, illustrating a collective effort across various sectors of society. This national mobilization, particularly in support of healthcare institutions like the NHS, revealed a reservoir of creative and pro-social dynamism globally. This global response not only highlighted the need for unity in times of crisis but also provided a unique opportunity to glean invaluable insights, both for Portugal and on a broader scale. Central to the present research is the exploration of how to enhance preparedness for future emergencies by better aligning donation intentions with the actual needs of frontline responders and affected communities. The originality of the study lies in the creation of a database derived from the analysis of public news sources, filling the gap left by the absence of an official database, and offers a comprehensive understanding of corporate donation behaviors that may inform proactive strategies for future emergencies, facilitating a more coordinated response.

This research aims to improve readiness for future emergencies by connecting donor intentions with the true requirements of frontline responders and affected communities. By collecting data from diverse sources, the aim was to create an accurate representation of corporate contribution behaviors, facilitating proactive strategies for future crises.

Clarity in areas of support is crucial for corporate donors to optimize collaboration with governmental and non-governmental entities. Encouraging businesses to leverage their expertise can amplify the impact of their contributions, fostering partnerships and collective action. Similarly, healthcare providers like the NHS face the challenge of rebuilding trust while addressing the backlog of non-Covid-19 medical needs. Understanding healthcare-seeking behavior during crises is vital for resource allocation optimization and mitigating negative outcomes. Moreover, exploring trust dynamics stemming from public donations during Covid-19 can inform strategies to encourage confidence in non-Covid-19 healthcare services. Governments must develop robust strategies for emergency donations, informed by an understanding of donation patterns and recipient selection criteria. Ensuring consistency in donations beyond the immediate crisis phase is crucial, particularly as needs evolve over time. Addressing challenges of inter-regional solidarity and cohesion policy will be central to navigating the long-term impacts of Covid-19. In conclusion, our research underscores the importance of leveraging pro-social behaviors to enhance societal resilience and inclusivity in the face of common threats. By encouraging stakeholders to reimagine resource allocation and decision-making processes, we can collectively build a more just and resilient society.

## 6- Declarations

### 6-1-Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

### 6-2-Funding

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### 6-4-Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

### 6-5-Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

### 6-6-Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the author.

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