

Campaigning in the time of coronavirus

How NGOs have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic

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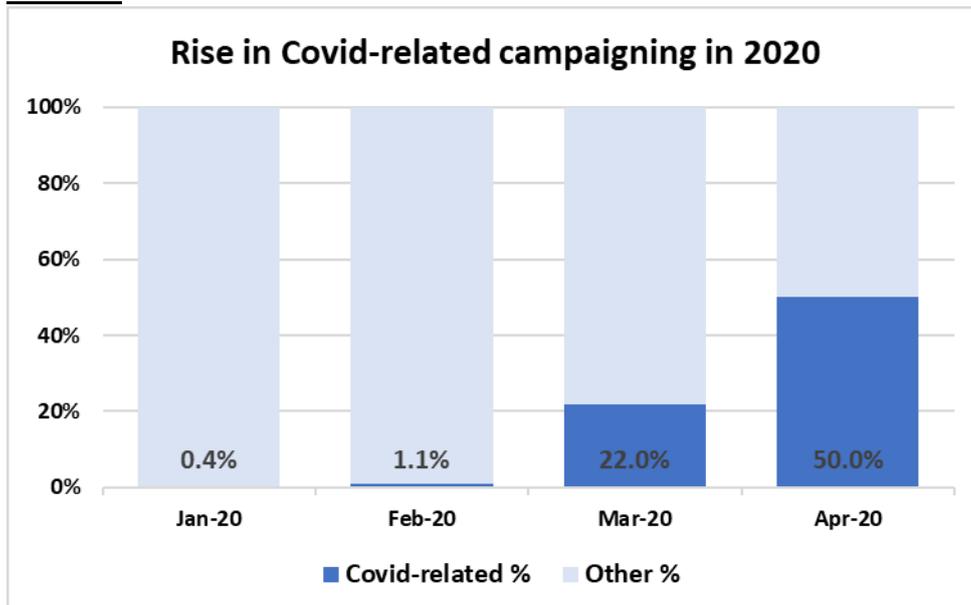
Overview

After the activists, like everyone else, got their heads around the implications of the Covid-19 crisis and lockdown, they quickly adapted to the new realities – for them, campaigning without physical protest or easy media publicity. They tried converting planned protest events to digital actions, but this sacrificed much of their impact. Some are now trying dedicated social media campaigns which aim to build a rising drip-feed of protest. In the US, in just ten weeks, climate activists used this tactic to get JP Morgan to demote one of its directors, ExxonMobil’s former CEO Lee Raymond. Litigation is another available option as long as the courts are working. In France, Friends of the Earth shut down Amazon with a lawsuit challenging the retailer on worker safety and questioning whether it was truly an essential service under the law.

Strategically, NGOs are realizing that the economic crisis of Covid-19 will leave an even deeper scar on the public consciousness than the health emergency. To this end, they are mobilizing to influence not only political decisions during the crisis, for example, how government bailout funds are spent, but also how economies are rebuilt once coronavirus is defeated. Just a few weeks into the crisis, leading European environmental NGOs, in partnership with European Parliament politicians and the CEOs of several major companies, are already setting out their terms for reconstruction. Their calls for a greener and more sustainable economy go further even than the European Green Deal that was on the table before the crisis struck, and comprise a determined effort to knock down the counter argument that regulation should be reduced to speed recovery.

Insights

Timeline



Main themes of Covid-19-related campaigning to date**Health and safety in the workplace**

- Safeguarding employee health, access to personal protective equipment in non-healthcare settings, ensuring social distancing accessing sickness benefits for gig/low pay workers, making workers continue non-essential work. Friends of the Earth France successfully sued Amazon on the last point.

Supply chain ethics

- Ensuring suppliers are paid for work done or in progress (particularly in garment sector).

Access to affordable medicine

- Ensuring medicines for treating Covid-19 and vaccinations are affordable, international sharing of therapeutic technology and knowledge, enabling health facilities to repair equipment on site without company engineers.

Climate change and fossil fuels

- Accelerating decarbonization of economies in light of a sharp fall in fossil fuel consumption.

Companies most praised and criticized over Covid-19**Most praised**

- H&M, for committing to pay for outstanding orders from overseas garment suppliers despite closure of all its stores, and for backing a 'green recovery' in Europe.
- Nestle and Unilever, along with L'Oreal, Lego, ENEL, Danone, IKEA, H&M, E.ON, PepsiCo, Volvo, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Engie, Iberdrola, and SNCF, for backing an NGO call for a 'Green recovery' in Europe after Covid-19.

Most criticized

- Air France-KLM, as a beneficiary of French bailout money and for allegedly refusing full refunds to customers.
- TC Energy/Trans Canada, for continuing work on the Keystone XL pipeline, getting Canadian government money, and lobbying against environmental conditions on firms receiving public funds.
- Amazon, for treatment of warehouse workers, 'illegally' selling non-essential goods (in France), and 'enabling' price gouging by marketplace sellers.

Impact of lockdown on NGO campaigning strategies and tactics

NGOs have for the most part persisted with their usual media activities such as issuing press statements, publishing reports, and initiating online petition campaigns. However, with the media dominated by coronavirus, little of this activity is producing tangible mainstream media coverage.

Traditional demonstrations and direct actions have been replaced by digital actions (for example, supporters joining online instead of in person) or occasionally, by 'socially distanced' protests (a handful of activists standing 2m apart), social media hashtag 'blitzes', window banners and slogan chanting. Greenpeace has tried drive-by hologram and shadow projections on EU and government buildings and company headquarters. Building dripfeed campaigns appear to be more effective (e.g. the campaign to get JPMorgan to demote director Lee Raymond).

Notable hashtags from online protests included #DigitalStrike, #ClimateStrike, and #WebAgainstSyngenta.

Geographical distribution of Covid-19 related campaigning

Most active country for Covid-19 campaigning to date has been the US (dominant issue is worker protection), followed by France (Amazon) and the UK (customer safety in shops).

