

# ERNOP Research Note



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## Do we help our neighbours just because they will return the favour in the future?

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Understanding how the willingness to help a neighbour is influenced by reciprocity, their need for help, and the perceived helpfulness of the neighbour is essential for fostering community support, especially for those unable to reciprocate.

To what extent does expecting a return influence helping neighbours? Does the neighbour's need and perception of helpfulness balance this out?

Through an experiment, the study shows that while expecting to get something in return influences the intention to offer informal help, its influence is relatively small compared to the level of need for help and the reputation for having previously provided help, therefore if the government helps to give visibility to the needs of the neighbour who cannot return the favour, they may also end up receiving neighbourhood help.

[#InformalHelp](#) [#Experiment](#) [#Reciprocity](#) [#NeighbourhoodHelp](#)

## Background & Context



- **Informal helping refers to the actions we take to help others without the coordination** of formal organisations, for example mowing a neighbour's lawn or providing emotional support to a friend. **This study focuses on informal help among neighbours** since among friends and relatives the reasons for offering help are more about emotional closeness or kinship than reciprocity.
- A key element of informal help, is **reciprocity**, which means the **expectation that if you help someone, the favour will be returned in the future**, but this means that those who are unable to return the help (due to illness or material incapacity) may not receive help, when they are often the ones most in need.
- Apart from reciprocity, other factors such as the **perception that the neighbour has offered help in the past and the level of need for help also influence our willingness to help**. With these 3 factors in mind, the study analyses if people are more likely to help neighbors:
  - if they favor will be returned
  - if the neighbor has a reputation for helpfulness
  - if the neighbor genuinely needs help (with the expectation of reciprocity being less influential when the neighbor is known to be helpful).



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### Take aways & Learnings



- To analyse the influence of the 3 factors, 1104 participants in the Netherlands were surveyed and presented with three vignettes with three different situations in which they were asked to answer how they would act.
- The results showed that the analysed **factors** (reciprocity, their need for help, and the perceived helpfulness) **have a positive effect on helping neighbours, except** for the fact that neighbours still found obtaining a benefit after helping important, even if the neighbor had a good reputation.
- An unexpected finding was that in case your neighbour needs a lot of help, **the fact that they have a reputation of being helpful is crucial**, and having a good reputation was more important when neighbours were described as being in need of help.
- People who cannot return the favour are less likely to receive help from neighbours and therefore rely more on other groups (friends/family or formal aid organisations). **However, if he/she needs a lot of help and has a reputation for being helpful, this may compensate for the lack of reciprocity** and will increase the likelihood of receiving informal help. Policy interventions should therefore focus on highlighting these characteristics of those who are less likely to receive help.
- **This study is novel** in that it examines for the first time the characteristics of the neighbour in need and the balance between the 3 factors analysed. Its methodology, **although** accurate, **has limitations** as it only takes into account intentions, not actual behaviour, it is only between neighbours with respect to a single type of assistance (gardening) with a single interaction and without considering the social context.

Research question **RECIPROCITY > NEED OF HELP + PERCEPTION OF HELPFULNESS?**

Methodology

EXPERIMENT

Results



ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2024/26 is published in September 2024 and has been written by Ines Sevilla from Centre for European Volunteering. More information can be found at [www.ernop.eu](http://www.ernop.eu).



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