

7

CHAPTER 7

Volunteerism and disasters

When facing the massive disasters which occurred in Tohoku, everyone must have felt the vulnerability of human beings to natural threats. Yet I believe the biggest power of recovery comes from human beings. What one volunteer can do is small, but what all of us can do is huge for recovery, it creates a stronger power... After the initial media boom people gradually forgot about the disaster, but the real challenge for survivors has just begun. Their need may have changed but there is still need for help. The true recovery can come only after a long-term effort of everybody.

Khaliunaa, Japan tsunami volunteer from Mongolia¹

The most effective resources for reducing vulnerability are community self-help organizations and local networks

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer action in response to disasters is perhaps one of the clearest expressions of the human values that underpin the drive to attend to the needs of others. It is also among the most visible of the faces of volunteerism. People's immediate reaction to a disaster is often to assist those directly affected. In many instances, this takes place spontaneously, outside any organized setting. However, the contribution of volunteerism extends far beyond immediate response. This chapter looks at the range of volunteer actions across the spectrum of disaster management, from prevention through to preparedness and mitigation, as well as response and recovery.

DISASTERS AND DEVELOPMENT

The nature and frequency of disasters is changing with climate change, rapid urbanization, food insecurity and increasing numbers of conflicts. Valuable progress in development over many years can be dramatically wiped out by disasters. Growing awareness of this connection has led to a move away from dealing with disasters simply as humanitarian emergencies and towards treating them as development issues. How to reduce vulnerability to disasters, especially for people living in poverty, is now a major policy consideration in many countries. The 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction gave considerable impetus to this shift in thinking. The overar-

ching goal of the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015* is to build the resilience of nations and communities to disasters. It recognized that the most effective resources for reducing vulnerability were community self-help organizations and local networks.

MULTIPLE ROLES OF VOLUNTEERISM IN DISASTERS

Managing disasters efficiently and effectively begins and ends with communities. A key term, widely used today, is "resilience" which encompasses the ability of communities to prevent, prepare for, cope with, and recover from disasters. Those located in hazardous environments are not helpless prospective victims of events outside their control. They may have limited livelihood options but, given opportunities, they can engage in initiatives that reduce their vulnerability.

Before a disaster

Increasingly, the aim of disaster programmes is to enhance prevention, mitigation and preparedness, limiting the need for response and recovery, and thus reducing loss of lives and livelihoods. These steps are known collectively as Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and are today the focus of national and international efforts. Prevention involves eliminating the hazard or erecting a barrier between the hazard and the community. Mitigation is protecting the elements at risk prior to a disaster in order to minimize its damaging effects. Preparedness concerns measures taken in anticipation of a disaster including building readiness for the emergency response and laying the basis for recovery.

Prevention and mitigation of disasters

Prevention and mitigation actions include reforestation, watershed management, urban planning and zoning, improved infrastructure such as communications and transportation, utilization of drought-resistant seed, and improved construction practices such as earthquake-resistant housing.

BOX 7.1 : Good practices for community resilience

Particularly impressive is the level of volunteerism encountered and the strength and commitment of the community-based organizations (CBOs) formed in the target communities. Their role in guiding the development and implementation of community-based development plans ...encourages cohesion and contributes to the sustainability of community-based disaster management (CBDM).

Source: Ullah, Shahnaz & Van Den Ende. (2009), p.6.

Changes in climate patterns are increasing vulnerability of communities, especially among the most vulnerable.² Volunteers have a critical role to play in creating awareness about the sustainable management of natural resources that can prevent and mitigate the impact of disasters.

The First International Conference on Volunteerism and Millennium Development Goals held in 2004 in Islamabad, Pakistan, highlighted the role of volunteers in disaster risk management. The conference emphasized the link between volunteerism and environmental sustainability in water sanitation projects, forestry and natural resource management. Grassroots initiatives made an impact not only on ensuring environmental sustainability but also on improving local living conditions. This was especially true for women and girls who benefited from improved water supplies. The conference called on governments to recognize the important contributions of volunteers and volunteer involving organizations in these areas.³

In prevention and mitigation, as in other aspects of disasters, young people are very active. In Nepal, volunteerism draws on strong cultural and historical traditions. The Development Volunteer Service was launched there in 2000. This built on the National Development Service, a successful model of volunteerism in rural areas which began in the 1970s.⁴ The scheme mainly involves students in projects in the mountain districts of Nepal and includes infrastructure development, agriculture, and health and sanitation activities. Since 2000, over 7,000 volunteers⁵ have been deployed in 72 districts working on disaster mitigation projects such as the building of seeds banks, toilet construction and water sanitation.⁶

Through volunteer action, NGOs and local organizations can mobilize communities and create community-based systems for disaster

risk management.⁷ For example, the Women's Tree Planting and Caring Movement 2009 for Water Conservation in Indonesia has involved several women's organizations in planting over 30 million trees since 2007.⁸ In Sri Lanka, 26 youth leaders from the voluntary Peace Brigade of Sarvodaya took their knowledge and training to 32 coastal villages, which had all been battered by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and mobilized local Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities.⁹

During the 2008-2009 droughts in Syria, volunteers from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies played a key role in supporting local communities in assessing vulnerability and capacity to counter desertification.¹⁰ Here, as in other drought-prone areas, communities have knowledge about hazards, vulnerabilities and resources available which can help disaster managers to take appropriate measures.¹¹ Droughts in Africa are also being countered by building on local knowledge mainstreamed into new technologies. For example, the Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE) and the Southern African Drought Technology Network (SADNET) have facilitated voluntary peer-to-peer information exchanges between small-scale farmers and community-based organizations to ease the effects of droughts in Southern Africa. SADNET has worked as a network, bringing together development practitioners involved in agricultural development. It promotes indigenous knowledge systems and addresses livelihood and food security issues for communities in drought-prone areas through information-sharing.¹²

Volunteers contribute in other, significant, ways to adaptation to new environments resulting from climate change¹³ through initiatives that are culturally sensitive and locally accepted. In Australia, traditional practices of indigenous people, such as controlled burning of vegetation, have been adopted by rural fire services in Wollondilly, southwest Sydney, as part of fire-risk reduction measures.

Volunteers have a critical role to play in creating awareness about the sustainable management of natural resources that can prevent and mitigate the impact of disasters

Volunteers from within communities are the first line of response

One ethnic group, the D'harawal, have knowledge of plants that warn of major bushfires well in advance. Frances Bodkin, a D'harawal who predicted the New South Wales bushfires in early 2002, spoke of how her people "followed the patterns of the native flora and fauna to indicate how the seasons would behave".¹⁴ The rural fire service consults with the D'harawal and uses this knowledge to plan controlled burning activities.¹⁵ Volunteer contributions that build on local knowledge are important to counteract the trend identified by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) whereby "indigenous knowledge has been either eroded or ignored in the development of these [early warning] systems. It needs to be revived, harnessed, documented and brought to the service of communities."¹⁶

Preparing for disasters

The preparedness stage is reached when, despite prevention and mitigation efforts, a disaster is about to occur. The knowledge and capacities developed by governments, professional response and recovery organi-

zations, communities and individuals to anticipate, respond to, and recover effectively from the impacts of likely, imminent or current hazards are now put to use.¹⁷ Actions may include risk analysis, development of early warning systems, public information, contingency planning, stockpiling of supplies, and training and field exercises. Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) were set up following Hurricane Katrina in the United States. These involved local volunteers trained in disaster preparedness and response. They included neighbourhood watch, community organizations, communities of faith, school staff, workplace employees, scouting organizations and other groups.¹⁸

Recognizing that volunteers from within communities are the first line of response, the Government of India stresses the importance of preparing local people. This includes periodic drills that communities practise in advance of a disaster.¹⁹ To be effective, these actions require volunteers to come forward for training. The Hyogo Framework for Action

BOX 7.2 : Volunteer early warning to save lives

Natural disasters are common in Bangladesh. After a devastating cyclone in 1970 that took half a million lives, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and the Bangladesh Government established the Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) to strengthen disaster-management capacity in coastal communities. CPP relies on the technical skills and the commitment of volunteers to ensure that there is cyclone advance-warning.

The programme comprises 2845 units in 32 sub-districts, each unit serving one or two villages of between 2000 and 3000 people. Ten men and five women volunteers from each unit are appointed by the villagers and divided into groups to address warning, shelter, rescue, first aid, and food and clothing needs. The volunteers receive training on cyclone behaviour, warning, evacuation, shelter, rescue, first aid and relief operations. Around 160 volunteers have been trained as trainers and now equip their communities with these skills.

On 15 November 2007, category-4 Cyclone Sidr hit the south-west coast of Bangladesh, claiming the lives of around 30,000 people. A cyclone of similar magnitude had killed 140,000 in 1991. The lower death toll in 2007 was partly due to the work of over 40,000 trained volunteers who received advance warning and alerted communities through flags, megaphones, hand sirens and the beating of drums. Data from the World Meteorological Organization on the approaching cyclone were received by the volunteers through government services and local Red Crescent offices. Volunteers also helped people to evacuate and find cyclone-safe shelters, advised on safety and helped maintain order, showing high commitment to the programme and the people.

Source: The Government of Bangladesh. (2008); Rashid. (n.d.).

highlighted the need to: “Promote community-based training initiatives, considering the role of volunteers, as appropriate, to enhance local capacities to mitigate and cope with disasters.”²⁰

Beyond communities, there are many other ways in which volunteerism is manifested in disaster preparation. In Mexico, a university network (UNIRED) was established in 1997 to mobilize volunteers from universities to collect and share information on hazard scenarios throughout the country and abroad. The network taps into more than 60 Mexican universities and has links with governments, the private sector and international organizations outside the country. Volunteers are in charge of all initiatives, recruiting other volunteers, training them, designing and implementing risk assessment, and coordinating humanitarian aid collection. In 2010, UNIRED helped to address the effects of, and subsequent response to, Hurricane Alex and flooding in Chiapas State in Mexico. The network was also involved in the response phase. In addition, it sent volunteers to help in the response to the earthquake in Haiti in 2010.

Another manifestation of volunteerism in disasters involves the private sector. Ready When the Time Comes is a workplace volunteer programme launched by the American Red Cross Society in 2006. Over 10,000 employees of 300 United States companies have been trained as a community-based volunteer response force. As a result, the capacity to respond to local disasters increased by more than 40 per cent between 2006 and 2010.²¹

Awareness and education should start from early childhood. In Nigeria, Volunteer School Clubs for DRR are being established in the Federal Capital Territory. This initiative, launched in 2010, recognizes the potential of children to play their part in DRR through volunteering in their schools and communi-

ties. It involves educating school children so that they can become agents of prevention and management in basic emergencies such as fire, flooding and air pollution in schools, homes and communities. The children are expected to propagate the importance of building disaster-resilient communities.²² In the Giang province of Vietnam, in the lower Mekong basin, school projects on disaster preparedness were implemented in 2006 by the Department of Education and Training. These raised awareness among children about school flood safety, provided swimming lessons for safety, and established “child-to-child” clubs in which children can volunteer under the supervision of teachers.

Responding to disasters

The image of volunteerism in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, often perpetuated by the media, is first the spontaneous reaction from people living in, or close by, the affected area. This is usually framed in a positive light, reflecting altruism and concern for one’s neighbour. It is frequently followed by an influx of foreign personnel including many volunteers. In this scenario, local and national expressions of volunteerism are usually overlooked.²³ In one sense, this is positive as it draws attention to the power of volunteerism. For example, “the unprecedented humanitarian response to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake involving hundreds and thousands of volunteers has led to the recognition of the important role of trained volunteers in emergency response, better coordination mechanism and an increase of grassroots organizations which has continued to support the reconstruction and longer term development efforts.”²⁴

Conversely, from this perspective local communities are seen as experiencing disasters as victims only and not as proactive volunteers.²⁵ The evidence points to a different reality. The first respondents are not trained emergency personnel but rather local residents and neighbours.²⁶ Many actions are spontaneous. When

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People at local level are best placed to identify their immediate emergency response needs

volunteers are untrained, or their actions uncoordinated, they may actually cause harm to themselves, for example by entering collapsing buildings. Similarly, they may impede the organized rescue work, for example by blocking access roads. Yet many people who are involved in local community-based or national non-governmental organizations combine local knowledge and experience with essential training. Response entails not only saving lives but also reducing health risks, ensuring public safety, and meeting subsistence needs of affected people. People at local level are best placed to identify their immediate emergency response needs and contribute to local decision-making for the future.²⁷ They can also provide valuable insights into community needs, bringing trust and a human touch to affected families as part of the healing process.²⁸ The combination of local people with those who have the necessary skills can be particularly effective when mobilized rapidly.

National volunteers from outside the affected communities also have a valuable role to play. They provide a direct, trustworthy connection between people directly hit and other stakeholders. They are also a "vital link between the informal resources of the community as a

whole and the more focused resources of established government agencies, such as police, fire and medical services".²⁹ This applies particularly to so-called "permanent volunteers"³⁰ who are highly trained and readily available for large-scale crises. In some countries, the use of such volunteers is increasing rapidly. In China, as of 2006, there were an estimated 100 million trained volunteers many of whom were registered with three major organizations: the Communist Youth League, the Red Cross and Civil Administration.³¹ Permanent volunteers are especially valuable in hazards resulting from less visible disasters such as health pandemics.

In some cases, governments have established national volunteer schemes. Following a major earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, a national agency to coordinate and support volunteerism-related activities, the National Volunteer Movement (NVM), was established to serve as a focal point for national volunteering activities. Its long-term objectives are to train a pool of first responders; to provide support in disaster situations; to promote volunteerism in government agencies; to facilitate cooperation in volunteerism between the public and private sectors and civil society; and to

BOX 7.3 : Christchurch earthquake: volunteers of all types

On 22 February 2011, an earthquake measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale wreaked havoc in Christchurch, New Zealand. The devastation led to an outpouring of solidarity expressed through volunteerism. Canterbury University Student Volunteer Army, a 10,000-strong, self-organized student workforce, assisted with clearing liquefaction sludge around homes and with disseminating information.

The students used a web-based platform to organize volunteers by updating job positions, taking notes in the field, and sending photos with iPhones donated by Apple, and data cards from Vodafone, 2Degree and Telecom. These communications companies also offered volunteers a no-cost SMS emergency short code and prepaid top-ups. Twitter, Flickr and Facebook offered channels for people to request and offer assistance and to gather data on information. A group of farmers, the Farmy Army, volunteered alongside students to clear hard-hit parts of the city and deliver meals to affected residents. Other volunteer contributions ranged from 1500 sandwiches prepared for rescue workers and volunteers by low-security prisoners to advice provided by professional architects and urban designers who volunteered to help rebuild the city. Beyond the affected area, students in Auckland raised funds for the victims while residents in Dunedin and Wellington offered accommodation.

Source: 3 News. (n.d.); MacManus. (2011, February 21).

enhance public recognition of volunteerism. It has a core group of around 17,000 volunteers and coordinates a further 80,000. During the flash floods in 2010, the NVM undertook massive volunteer mobilization. The floods were the worst in recorded history of Pakistan, killing over 1750 people and affecting some 20 million. The NVM acted as a link between the government and NGOs.³²

The connection between volunteerism and technology was explored in Chapter 3. A system called *Ushahidi* was developed in 2008 to map the post-election violence and peace efforts in Kenya. It has since been utilized in a variety of humanitarian, development and disaster relief efforts including in the earthquakes in Chile and Haiti in 2010. Volunteers monitor and map incoming reports from various media sources including information from Twitter feeds, Facebook accounts, blogs and traditional media such as radio, print and television. Crisis locations are identified and volunteers can reach them more quickly. The technology was initially developed to give cell-phone users the ability to send text messages about locations and events. The messages appear in a web-based map. During the Haiti earthquake, *Ushahidi* in Nairobi and a technology partner, Frontline SMS, developed a code (9636) for use by people in need anywhere in Haiti. People could send text messages to that number free of charge so the appropriate response group could be deployed to assist. This facility made it possible to identify injuries, lost family and friends, trapped individuals, dead bodies, orphaned children and water needs.³³ In the case of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China, the response was accelerated by the sharing of maps of areas in the province needing assistance. These were transmitted by thousands of volunteers online.³⁴

A smaller, more personal, effort was apparent when Mount Merapi in Central Java, Indonesia, erupted in 2010. A nearby community used Twitter to help its response. The Twitter

account was part of a broader information network that began with a community radio called *Jalin Merapi* which was set up to track signs of volcanic eruptions. The news agency Reuters reported that: "*Jalin Merapi* has helped shelters that are unable to receive government aid by deploying about 700 volunteers who report by tweeting specific aid needs."³⁵ "The community announced they needed help to provide meals for 30,000 people and the food was ready in four hours."³⁶ While there is no way to verify the accuracy of information shared through such channels, in times of crisis people use the technology with which they are comfortable. In this case, it was Twitter.³⁷

In many countries, volunteer-based fire services are an example of how people engage in volunteerism to strengthen local capacities to respond to disasters. Volunteer fire brigades tend to be highly reliable and respected all over the world. Surveys conducted in Chile place firemen among the institutions most trusted by Chileans, ahead of the police and the Catholic Church.³⁸ Brazil's first volunteer fire brigade, the first in Latin America, dates back to 1892.³⁹

Recent years have seen increasing numbers of volunteers from outside affected countries willing to volunteer in disaster-related activities.⁴⁰ This can pose new challenges. For example, in the case of the Haiti earthquake, in 2010, difficulties were encountered in managing the hundreds of doctors and nurses who volunteered and whose skills were often under-utilized.⁴¹ Other challenges include unfamiliarity with the environment and surroundings⁴² and lack of cultural sensitivity and language skills. However, when well-organized, this contribution is effective and much appreciated. During the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and the subsequent earthquakes of 2005 and 2006, the Indonesian response to the emergency received a massive contribution from volunteers. This was both structured, from the government, international and national NGOs and community groups, and unstruc-

Communities with more trust, civic engagement and stronger networks have a better chance of recovering after a disaster

tured. Thousands of other spontaneous, non-affiliated volunteers provided their help in the spirit of *gotong royong*, or working together, as mentioned in Chapter 4. Volunteers play a vital role in disaster response. Yet their capacity should be further strengthened. Governments should rely on them as a resource in integrated disaster management and not treat them as a stand-alone component.⁴³

VOLUNTEERISM AND RECOVERY

The numbers of people from outside the affected communities who volunteer falls sharply after the immediate response phase is over. In one study of NGOs engaged in disaster recovery efforts, 64 per cent used volunteer services for 12 weeks or less in the aftermath of the crisis.⁴⁴ Yet, as the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction states: "The recovery task of rehabilitation and reconstruction begins soon after the emergency phase has ended and should be based on pre-existing strategies and policies that facilitate

clear institutional responsibilities for recovery action and enable public participation."⁴⁵

During the recovery phase of a disaster, the attention of national authorities and donors tends to be on rebuilding essential physical infrastructure: bridges, roads, power lines and buildings. These are vital for people to sustain their livelihoods, often in situations of extreme vulnerability. However, this focus ignores social infrastructure. Growing empirical research indicates that communities with more trust, civic engagement and stronger networks, which are largely volunteer-based, have a better chance of recovering after a disaster than fragmented, isolated ones.⁴⁶ Indeed, "social networks may be the most dependable resource in the aftermath of disaster," argues Zhao Yandong from the Chinese Academy of Science and Technology for Development.⁴⁷

A review of the post-tsunami disaster in Indonesia in 2004 noted that: "Relief and recovery efforts will be more effective if they

BOX 7.4 : Early response in Haiti

The Cascos Blancos (White Helmets) Initiative was launched by the Government of Argentina in 1993 and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994. It provides opportunities for volunteers from Latin America and other regions to assist in post-disaster relief and recovery efforts. The scheme engages in emergency-response missions globally. Within 72 hours of a disaster, it can call on over 4000 highly trained volunteers from other developing countries to serve with United Nations agencies and in partnership with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme.

Following the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, Cascos Blancos deployed 37 volunteers from Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay to help in the immediate response as well as in long-term recovery, especially in the area of health. The team of volunteers mobilized by Cascos Blancos comprised doctors, nurses and paramedics as well as firefighters and experts in supply management and logistics.

They carried with them medical supplies, sanitation facilities, food, seeds, tents and mobile communications devices to help the immediate response to the earthquake. The volunteers worked mainly in Leogane, a city at the epicenter of the earthquake, 40 kilometres from Port-au-Prince. They worked in collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and were supported operationally by UNV.

Following the success and recognition of the volunteers' work by PAHO, MINUSTAH and the Haitian Government, more Cascos Blancos volunteers were later mobilized to provide further support in the Dominican Republic border town of Jimani and in the Haitian town of Fond Parisien.

Source: Carlos Eduardo Zaballa [Coordinator United Nations-White Helmets Commission, Argentina], Online Communication. (2011, July 25).

BOX 7.5: Disaster recovery and the *gotong royong* spirit

The major earthquakes that occurred off the coast of northern Sumatra in Indonesia, in 2004 and 2005, and the resulting tsunami, caused great loss of life and damage to property, especially in the provinces of Aceh and Nias. International donor support included a grant of 291 million US dollars to the Government of Indonesia by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) to help restore basic public services and infrastructure and to facilitate economic revival in the affected regions. The project placed strong emphasis on the involvement of local communities at all stages. The irrigation component, for example, was a vital part of restoring rural livelihoods. The rehabilitation and reconstruction of the lower-level canal systems was undertaken through community water-user organizations drawing on the well-established tradition of *gotong royong* volunteer labour. The success of the initiative demonstrated that, with appropriate external expert and financial support, local communities are able to undertake substantial infrastructure work effectively even when traumatized by a major natural disaster and decades-long internal conflict, as was the case in Aceh.

Source: Seyler, Personal Communication. (2011, July 14).

identify, use and strengthen existing social capital: community-based skills, programmes and networks. The community-driven approach to post-disaster recovery, which builds on this social capital, requires significant investments of time and human resources but results in greater client satisfaction, more rapid disbursement and local empowerment.⁴⁸

It is widely accepted that, after disasters, there is a need to address the damage not only to physical infrastructure but also to social infrastructure.⁴⁹ The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 highlighted the “spirit of volunteerism” as a basis for building mechanisms and appropriate interventions. This “spirit”, as has been seen, is a universal characteristic of human beings and lies at the core of the coming together of people to help one another in the recovery period as in other phases of the disaster cycle. It contributes greatly to bringing back hope and confidence to communities as livelihoods are rebuilt.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Communities have always faced disasters and volunteerism has always been present in preparing for and coping with them. With growing attention being given to the devel-

opment and implementation of strategic approaches to disasters in recent years, including building on the connections with development, volunteerism needs to be fully included in the discourse. This chapter has demonstrated the various ways in which people undertake volunteer action at the preparation, mitigation, response and recovery stages of disasters. It has shown how this action is manifested in various ways: spontaneous actions of people at community level, organized volunteering with associations and organizations at local and national level, and volunteers from abroad. It has also underlined that the involvement of volunteers helps to ensure that fundamental values of solidarity and a sense of common destiny, values that add immeasurably to the resilience of communities, are reflected in strategies and programmes to reduce disaster risk.

One of the most visible faces of volunteerism appears in disasters. It should not come as a surprise therefore that this is where actions to support volunteerism are most strongly articulated. The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 is subtitled “Building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters”.⁵⁰ This is a clear indication of the role of communities and, within them, volunteer action by

community members. There are various recommendations for providing disaster education and training for people at the local level contained in the Hyogo Framework.

They should go a long way to ensuring that the power of volunteerism to reduce vulnerabilities and increase resilience to disasters is fully realized.