



The process of distributing logistic supplies by the volunteers at Sumberwuluh.

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Ramadan inspires compassion and generosity

When a 7.5 magnitude earthquake tore through Palu in Central Sulawesi in September 2018, two memories surfaced for Moh. Tofan Saputra. He recalled seeing footage of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami on television, which killed close to 230,000 people, most in Indonesia. He also remembered how as a junior high-school student, flood waters had inundated his family home, gutting his parents' business, and placing his education on hold.

In Luwuk, about 12 hours drive away from Palu when the earthquake hit, Tofan, then 24, feared the worst from a disaster that eventually killed more than 4,300 people. "We were very panicked for our loved ones. We could not contact them because there was no phone connection and electricity," he says.

As a member of a local volunteer-involving organization, he traveled to the city to join emergency food distribution efforts, help locate children separated from their families, and arrange psychological support services for

survivors. Taufan's experience with disaster as a child, and his understanding of the local community proved crucial in an environment where many were in shock and looting contributed to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

"After a natural disaster, the community approach is very important, and it is the role of the volunteer to promote social inclusion between the victims," he says.

During Ramadan, which began in early April this year, Muslims around the world reflect on the values of compassion and generosity that the holy month esteems. In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, volunteers like Taufan and millions like him embody those values.

In fact, a 2018 Gallup survey suggested that Indonesians are among the world's most generous people when it comes to giving back to their communities. Some 53 percent of Indonesians Gallup polled said they had volunteered their time to an organization within the past month. So venerable is Indonesia's tradition of community self-help that it has its own terminology: *gotong royong*, meaning working together.

“ Indonesia's spirit of volunteerism finds echoes in many other countries. The UN Volunteers' (UNV) flagship 2022 *State of the World's Volunteerism report*, released on March 28 in Asia and the Pacific, draws on case studies across several continents to explore how cooperation between volunteers and governments can build a culture of collaborative decision-making that contributes to building more equal, inclusive societies.

The report estimates that 862 million people volunteer globally every month, which means about one in every seven people in the world is a volunteer. Their contribution is integral to the new social contract UN Secretary-General António Guterres says the world must build as it navigates the twin crises of COVID-19 and the climate emergency.

Volunteers “nurture solidarity and build social cohesion,” Guterres said at a December 2021 event to mark the 50th anniversary of UNV, “and the more people get involved in solving our common challenges, the more sustainable and feasible our solutions will be”.

Situated along the Pacific Rim of Fire, Indonesia is home to the world’s largest number of active volcanoes and is among the world’s most disaster-prone countries. In 2021, at least 3,034 disasters impacted 8.3 million people here, according to Indonesia’s National Disaster Mitigation Agency. Disasters, including COVID-19, set back the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and exacerbate pre-existing inequalities.

The UN supports all aspects of the Indonesian government’s disaster response efforts. In 2021, that included establishing two new provincial logistic clusters in Central Java and South Sulawesi to enhance cross-sector coordination between governments and local civil society organizations. The UN also supports existing coordination mechanisms on disaster risk management, including on COVID-19, where through a national logistics cluster the UN formed an oxygen task force to coordinate the response to oxygen scarcity-related issues.

But even with the best coordination, it is often volunteers who are at the forefront of disaster response. In an operating environment already complicated by the pandemic, the eruption of Mount Semeru on Dec. 4, 2021 killed more than 50 people and displaced a further 10,000 in Lumajang regency, East Java. Twenty-five-year-old midwife Restu Nur Intan Pratiwi was among hundreds of local volunteers to come to the regency’s assistance, driving 90 minutes from her home in the city of Jember after googling volunteering opportunities in the area.

Restu initially worked in a soup kitchen with an Islamic philanthropic organization, however she soon realized existing support services did not address “the specific needs of women, such as providing menstrual pads, or special milk and vitamins for pregnant women.”

She connected with a volunteering organization called Relawan Negeri and through them began to provide medical check-ups for pregnant women at emergency shelters. She also coordinated with a local hospital to arrange pregnant women’s access to free ultrasound services.

Gender sensitive interventions like Restu are vital to helping communities rebuild sustainably after a disaster, but they can be inhibited by unequal gender dynamics within volunteering. For example, men are more likely to take part in formal volunteering, while women are more likely to volunteer

informally, *the 2022 State of the World's Volunteering report* found.

Informal volunteering tends to have a lower status, attracts less recognition and receives less practical support than formal volunteering. The report advises policymakers to adopt gender-sensitive measures that can optimize women's participation in volunteering, for example, by ensuring they have access to decision-making processes. It also urges governments to assess how collaborative decision-making processes reinforce or challenge gender norms and gender inequalities.

The spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) goes back generations, but since 2004, Indonesia's Ministry of Social Affairs has formalized volunteering through Taruna Siaga Bencana (TAGANA), a program that trains young people in community disaster response.

By the end of 2020, there were more than 39,000 TAGANA in Indonesia, with a further 63,000 "friends of TAGANA" in professions such as journalism, the arts, and civil society. In 2021, the UN partnered with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to develop online training modules for TAGANA, including a competency-based capacity-building framework that emphasizes gender-inclusivity in humanitarian assistance.

Twi Adi, a 38-year-old volunteer from Malang, East Java has been a TAGANA since 2006. He has participated in several emergency response activities, including in the wake of the December 2021 Mt. Semeru eruption.

The Social Affairs Ministry provides TAGANA with a small allowance, but Adi says the benefits of volunteering extend far beyond monetary remuneration. "I love helping others and making a difference at the community level," he says, "I am not rich, but I can give my time and energy for my community".

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