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## Everyday Humanitarianism

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### Abstract

This paper, the first of six preliminary working papers of Volunteering in Conflict and Emergencies (ViCE) initiative, explores the challenges faced by local volunteers as they negotiate and apply the Fundamental Humanitarian Principles in concrete operational settings. The paper argues that:

- Local volunteers are at the heart of negotiating between the local contexts and broader humanitarian principles.
  - Seemingly neutral humanitarian principles are often interpreted differently in diverse cultural settings.
  - Given their critical role, local volunteers' voices and experiences need to be brought into debates on humanitarian principles and practice.
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### About the ViCE Initiative

The ViCE Initiative (Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies) is a research, development and innovation initiative led by the Swedish Red Cross in partnership with Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies in Afghanistan, Honduras, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine, and Northumbria University.

The data, collected through a listening study methodology<sup>1</sup>, sheds new light on the experiences and challenges faced by local volunteers, and the strategies and mechanisms they adopt to cope with increased risks and vulnerabilities, amid weakened institutional support systems.

The findings offer a greater understanding of local volunteering in conflicts and emergencies, the changing nature of humanitarianism in contemporary conflicts and emergency settings, and the multiple and overlapping roles of local volunteers as humanitarian and development actors in their own fragile communities. The research provides a body of knowledge to support and facilitate a volunteer-led approach towards protecting, promoting and recognising local volunteers working in conflicts and emergencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson et al., 2012

## Introduction

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*"People perceive the work of the Red Cross in a completely different way. That is why we are facing so many difficulties. People do not understand who is a volunteer and what is the Red Cross; neither what is the symbol of the cross, [nor] what our work is and what our principles are." (Male volunteer)*

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This paper explores the 'everyday humanitarianism' of local volunteers - the experiences, practices and dilemmas of local volunteers - as they engage in humanitarian volunteering in conflicts and emergency settings on an everyday basis. As the humanitarian sector undergoes significant transformations and seeks out new strategies to deal with new and increasingly complex configurations of conflicts and emergencies, the relevance and application of universal humanitarian principles have become a subject of great scrutiny and debates.

The humanitarian imperative – the idea that human sufferings necessitate a response – and that assistance and relief should be grounded in humanitarian principles of universality, impartiality, independence and neutrality, broadly define the humanitarian space within which the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), as well as other leading humanitarian organisations, operate<sup>2</sup>. Humanitarianism is recognised as a universal value that resonates in all cultures and societies<sup>3</sup>.

However, in the contemporary humanitarian landscape, where the nature of conflicts, its aims, technologies, and participants have varied considerably and the geography of crises and human suffering significantly expanded, the traditional notions of humanitarianism and the applicability and effectiveness of a universal set of humanitarian principles are now being increasingly called into question and challenged even within the sector<sup>4</sup>. While there are several discussions and debates on humanitarian principles and their operational challenges at the policy and scholarly levels, the experiences

of local volunteers, who negotiate these tensions and challenges on an everyday basis within their particular socio-cultural and political settings, have not always been included in these debates. This theme paper aims to address this gap and bring into these debates, volunteers and their voices, and their everyday experiences and dilemmas in negotiating between universal humanitarian principles and local realities. The theme paper provides an in-depth analysis of how the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, particularly, the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, are negotiated in contemporary conflicts and emergency settings and explores the challenges their application presents for local volunteers<sup>5</sup>. The ViCE (Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies) research reveals that humanitarian principles are often contested and interpreted differently in diverse cultural settings, and it is the local volunteers in conflicts and emergency settings who are at the forefront of these everyday negotiations and contestations.

Our research reveals that local volunteers are particularly vulnerable<sup>6</sup> and subjected to the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with the changing meanings and practices of humanitarianism, as they are at the intersection between the local contexts and broader, universal principles. Local volunteers are also at greater risk as there is a growing perception among some local communities and populations that humanitarianism has lost its impartiality and neutrality<sup>7</sup>, which can have a significant impact on the safety and security of local humanitarian workers. The ViCE research initiative shows that local volunteers, whose everyday volunteering is less formally framed than paid humanitarian 'work', are disproportionately vulnerable compared to international and national staff in contemporary conflict settings, raising significant ethical concerns for how local humanitarian volunteering is enabled and managed.

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<sup>2</sup> Curtis, 2001, p.13

<sup>3</sup> Donini et al., 2008, p.13

<sup>4</sup> Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009; Drązkiewicz, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Volunteering by local actors in humanitarian conflicts and emergency settings. The term 'local' is highly contested, which we explore in Theme Paper 2.

<sup>6</sup> Theme Papers 2 and 3 further explore volunteer vulnerabilities in detail.

<sup>7</sup> Donini et al., 2008; Fast, 2010; Stoddard et al., 2006

## The Changing Landscape of Humanitarianism and the ViCE Research Initiative

Humanitarianism has broadened its repertoire, moving from its original mandate of providing essential relief and assistance to victims of war to a rights-based humanitarian approach, concerned with broader rights and long-term development needs of those affected by conflicts and emergencies<sup>8</sup>. In practice, this means that the humanitarian field now encompasses a plethora of actors, with diverse humanitarian agendas, principles and approaches<sup>9</sup>. The increasing 'nexus' between development, humanitarianism and security, and the militarisation of humanitarian and development activities are also criticised for threatening the humanitarian space and putting aid workers at particular danger and risks<sup>10</sup>.

The resultant merging of multiple mandates and increasingly blurred boundaries between various actors have considerably changed the dynamics of security<sup>11</sup> in conflicts and emergency settings, making them particularly insecure for local humanitarian workers to operate in. The impact of this on local volunteering is rarely captured in academic or policy-related literature on humanitarianism or volunteering. Despite a growing research and policy focus on international humanitarian actors and international volunteers, and popular media focus on volunteers in conflict settings, there has been little research on local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies<sup>12</sup>.

This gap in knowledge is critical, particularly when considering the steadily increasing number of local volunteers who continue to operate throughout crises where other support structures have eroded, being required to carry out complex humanitarian tasks in rapidly changing humanitarian contexts<sup>13</sup>. The ViCE research initiative addresses this gap, capturing the everyday experiences and perspectives of local volunteers engaged in humanitarian volunteering in armed conflicts, violent contexts and disasters.

## Humanitarian Principles and Everyday Humanitarian Volunteering

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*"They cannot understand what impartial means, like, no? These people should be told what we are. If this issue [can be] solved through public awareness, then we will be able to reach even the place where fighting is taking place, where we can bring our message, our assistance to the injured."* (Male Volunteer)

*"The positioning of [NS] as a humanitarian institution, in the context of territory held by one of the other armed groups ... is perceived to be too close to the government. So they really suffer from pushback, where people say: "Surely RC is really part of the government." This territory is held, as you realize by this party of the conflict and maybe your work is not so welcome here. They're finding that the [NS] really repositions themselves as a neutral, impartial, independent institution at a national level."* (Male Staff)

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The seven fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality have been central to the Movement from its inception. The principle of Impartiality requires that humanitarian assistance should be guided solely by need and that there should be no discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions. The principle of Neutrality entails that humanitarian actors do not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of political, racial, religious, or ideological nature. However, our research data shows that not all members of local communities have a uniform understanding of humanitarian principles or accept that local volunteers can be impartial and neutral actors in local conflict situations.

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*"Eastern law is at odds with the seven [fundamental] principles. I say this because we could only help one side of the conflict. If we worked with the other side, we would be beheaded. It was that bad. Although we wanted to go, we couldn't. The [NS] Red Cross couldn't go to any of the refugee camps. Red Cross volunteers from other states and divisions had to come and work in the camps. Even now, the [NS] Red Cross cannot work in those places. This is at odds with the seven principles."* (Male Volunteer)

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<sup>8</sup> Drązkiewicz, 2017; Mills, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Donini et al., 2008, Fast, 2010

<sup>10</sup> Beswick, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Stoddard et al., 2006; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010

<sup>12</sup> Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015; Stoddard et al., 2006

<sup>13</sup> Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015

*"There was a [rebel] fighter who had been injured during the fight. We put him also in a vehicle so he could be taken elsewhere for treatment, but he was arrested at a government post. We tried every argument. People told them that this was a Red Cross vehicle, but they said, "No. This is not going to be allowed." So they took that man away from us by force." (Male Volunteer)*

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The above quotes show how local volunteers from certain Red Cross National Societies are not perceived as impartial and neutral, but as partisan to conflict, and therefore unable to provide humanitarian assistance among some communities. For the beneficiary communities, local volunteers belong to particular ethnic groups, localities, religious affiliations and other identities that shape their perceptions of the volunteers. Local volunteers are part of their community lives - its dynamics, structures and politics - and embody the fractures and lines on which conflicts are drawn. This rootedness of volunteers in local communities is also what makes them more likely to face greater local resentment or perceptions of partiality<sup>14</sup>.

Unlike international actors or national staff, they are part of the everyday struggles, realities and responses of local conflicts and emergencies, so the 'local equals acceptable' perspective does not hold true in all settings<sup>15</sup>. The universal discourses and principles of humanitarianism lose their relevance and significance in these contexts where community members or parties to conflict struggle to understand or subscribe to the principles of neutrality or impartiality, which in turn increases the risks for local volunteers and affects their ability to provide humanitarian assistance equally to all parties, affected by conflicts.

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*"Right now, there is war in our areas between government and [insurgent group], both sides are affected. If we go and help the [insurgent group], we are reported to the government that we are [insurgent group] and we are charged; vice versa if we go here then we are charged by them." (Male Volunteer)*

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These quotes show how 'neutral' humanitarianism can also have unintended consequences. The

original purpose of neutrality as a guiding principle of humanitarian initiatives was the access it enables to all communities in crises and parties of conflicts<sup>16</sup>. However, our research data shows that abiding by the principles of neutrality can at times, lead to volunteers being misperceived as partial to government or particular combatant groups. There are also situations where 'neutrality' obliges them to engage in activities that could sometimes have a direct impact on shaping these misperceptions.

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*"When we were back to our town, we brought only [one] little boy who had stepped on a landmine so there are so much space left in the truck. Suddenly we were stopped by the military soldiers pointing at us with their rifles. They then loaded the injured soldiers into our truck without asking for our permission. We understood their concerns, so we didn't say anything about it. But what we couldn't stand was that their grenades and rifles were also loaded into our truck. We had no say in that." (Male Volunteer)*

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These situations reveal not only a gap between global discourses of humanitarianism and local practices and attitudes towards humanitarian work, but that volunteers are having to work within this gap and amongst all the unpredictability, uncertainty and security risks it brings. This is particularly significant when volunteers are from the locality, meaning the ways that they are framed in this disjuncture cannot be escaped by retreating to their international base or office, and sometimes ethnic proximity, socio-political affiliation or local pressure may affect the impartial delivery of humanitarian assistance<sup>17</sup>. The Movement, however, is aware of the gaps in perceptions and principles and committed to spreading more awareness about humanitarian principles and the international humanitarian frameworks within which RCRC volunteers and National Societies operate.

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*"NSs take care of how they present themselves and how their characteristics lead to impartial independent institutions. They become party to a conflict and they are perceived as one of the conflicting parties. So that's why it's really at the heart of our work. We focused a lot on this realisation on multi-dimensional approach to helping NSs to prepare, first of all, re-*

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<sup>14</sup> Stoddard et al., 2006

<sup>15</sup> Ramalingam, Gray, & Cerruti, 2013, p. 12

<sup>16</sup> Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009

<sup>17</sup> Zick & Krebs, 2015, p. 3

*thinking their legal base, making sure they have a complete objective reading of auxiliary status so that they are not seen as part of the state, but they are seen as an independent, neutral, impartial institution that can indeed push back against the state when they fight and humanitarian issues are violated in any way.”*  
(Male Staff)

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However, despite these efforts, the lived experiences of volunteers in local sites of conflicts and struggles show that they continue to face serious risks and vulnerabilities that arise out of these misperceptions. Our research data also shows that despite being perceived at times as part of state governments or local communities, local volunteers in some contexts are also sometimes caught up within a global humanitarian architecture wherein the pursuing of an external, predominantly northern security and humanitarian agenda is presumed to compromise their ability to appear as a neutral, independent and impartial volunteer.

It is the blurring of roles and identities of being a ‘local’ actor and a ‘global’ humanitarian volunteer simultaneously that makes local volunteering tricky to perform in certain contexts and makes local volunteers more susceptible to potential dangers and threats.

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*“To be frank there are people out there who accuse us of being United States’ spies. They do not even consider us as Muslims. They call us infidels. They tell us why do we do volunteer work! They tell us that people do not even go to Mosques without expecting anything return.”* (Male Volunteer)

*“For example, we are walking to the event and accompanying a group of one of the opposing sides, and, ...[some of the] elder women or men start ... saying that either we will be killed, there will be murders (inaudible), or that we get paid by the United States and that we work for the other side – such aggression was from both sides of the conflict. So this was a really big issue, and very often were we molested, so to speak, and we... really we did not know how to protect ourselves from those people.”* (Male Volunteer)

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The linking of humanitarian assistance with foreign policy objectives, particularly in a post-9/11 world and with the subsequent ‘Global War on Terror’, has led to a growing perception of humanitarian actors, at least in some communities and contexts, as default

political actors pursuing ‘foreign’ interests<sup>18</sup>. Local volunteers are particularly vulnerable and subjected to the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with the changing meanings and practices of humanitarianism at the global level. As volunteering also becomes more professionalised<sup>19</sup>, the meanings of selfless community service that were once attached with volunteerism in the global South are gradually changing.

Despite living in and working in local communities, volunteers, due to their association with international organisations, can be perceived as subsumed by foreign governments and organisations in the pursuit of an externally imposed development and humanitarian agenda. This misperception that volunteers are part of an external and politically defined agenda has significant impact on the safety and security of local volunteers.

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*“There were some people from the Red Cross working in [...] They went to [...] to vaccinate children there. When they were returning at about 4.30pm, they found two armed men who shot the vehicle, and one of the volunteers was injured in his leg. All of these challenges that we had referred to, the warriors don’t know anything about laws of the humanitarian action.”*

(Male Volunteer)

*“We have had situations in which I have been pointed at with guns because if one patient dies, they are gonna kill me. That should not be happening. That’s not normal. And they tell you when they train you: “That’s gonna happen, just act calm and stay safe.” And you have all these manuals on what you can do and how you should act... But if you have a gun pointed at your head, it’s very difficult to stay cool.”*

(Female Volunteer/Staff)

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The processes by which actors view each other in contemporary conflicts and emergencies do not follow traditional laws or principles of humanitarianism as such<sup>20</sup>; they are very much shaped by the unique socio-political conflicts and local power struggles. Local volunteers are

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<sup>18</sup> Colinson and Elhawary, 2012

<sup>19</sup> Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010, p. 1136

often caught at the apex of these struggles and vulnerabilities. Attacks against local humanitarian actors are particularly on the rise since the mid-1990s, when humanitarian agencies, in response to increased insecurity, started to rely more on local actors and localised responses<sup>21</sup>.

Local humanitarian actors, being from the beneficiary communities, are presumed to be at less risk than the expatriate staff. However, our research data challenges this assumption and reveals how local volunteers are more at risk due to their embeddedness in local communities and uncertainties surrounding their roles<sup>22</sup>.

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*"I think a very important step for us to make, as a NS, is to go to those communities, and maybe not work with the gangs directly. But go to the communities and let the communities know who we are, and what we do, which is one of the pillars of the safer access thing anyhow. But let the communities know who we are and what we do. So that we are not posing any danger for them, and that we are gonna do our job and be neutral and be humane with them." (Female Volunteer)*

*"Most people don't even know the Red Cross. It is a fact. In most places and districts, Red Cross has volunteers who provide health services to their communities and that is it. There is no awareness about Red Cross itself or that they are volunteers of Red Cross. There is no effort to let people know about the Red Cross as an organization." (Female Volunteer)*

The lack of awareness in local communities about the Movement and the role of local volunteers in humanitarian assistance is a worrying concern in the face of growing attacks against local humanitarian actors. The everyday roles and responsibilities of local humanitarian volunteers are less formally framed than paid humanitarian jobs, such as that of national and international staff, or that of more 'formal' international volunteers. The local volunteer identities and roles are less distinct and more ambiguous when compared to their international counterparts. They have multiple and overlapping identities that affect their ability to appear and (or) at times, remain

neutral and impartial in local conflict situations. The following quote from a National Society with a recent conflict history shows volunteers' challenges in adhering to humanitarian principles in certain situations where they were as much a victim of the conflicts as their potential beneficiaries.

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*"It was very difficult to stay objective. In [place] the level of patriotism is very high, and my people, who joined the team, they were not ready to help an opposing party." (Male Volunteer)*

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Not all local volunteers in conflict settings are 'third party' volunteers who merely assist affected victims in conflicts; many of them are victims and survivors of the same conflicts as their beneficiaries, with varied experiences of tragedy and sufferings. They are not 'neutral' actors unaffected by local conflicts, but are people living through the crisis, with their own personal fears, disruptions and anxieties about their and their community's future. Unlike international humanitarians, local volunteers cannot 'leave'; they provide humanitarian assistance to others in the midst of local hostilities, ambiguities, misperceptions and personal struggles<sup>23</sup>.

Our findings reveal the need for local volunteers to be constantly aware of these juxtapositions of roles and identities, as they continually negotiate their way through local contexts and global discourses of humanitarianism. The ViCE research initiative reveals that local volunteers are at the heart of multiple, interlocking inequalities and identities<sup>24</sup>, where their very advantage of being 'local' can also undermine their ability to abide by the humanitarian principles.

## Conclusion

This theme paper discussed the everyday practices, dilemmas and experiences of local humanitarian volunteers in conflict and emergency settings. The paper explored how the Red Cross humanitarian principles of Neutrality, Impartiality and Independence are contested and interpreted in diverse ways at

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<sup>21</sup> Stoddard et al., 2006

<sup>22</sup> Theme Paper 3 further explores the particular vulnerabilities that local volunteers face due to being 'local'.

<sup>23</sup> Theme Paper 3 further explores the volunteer-victim dilemmas and challenges associated with it.

<sup>24</sup> Theme Papers 2, 3, 4 and 5 further explore volunteer identities in detail.

different levels, and its implications for local volunteering. Our research data shows that while the fundamental principles of humanitarianism are still important and relevant at an institutional level, in practice, they are essentially shaped and constructed by the specificity of each conflict situation.

While debates about the gap between universal principles and the messy realities on the ground often transpire at the elite policy and academic discussions, our research emphasises the need for local volunteers to be brought into these debates, as it is they who are

at the heart of negotiating between the local contexts and broader humanitarian principles.

The volunteers' multiple and overlapping identities - their simultaneous positioning in local communities and the humanitarian sector, their status as beneficiaries and their roles as humanitarian actors - shape what it means to be a volunteer and what volunteers can do in conflict and emergency situations. Recognising and understanding this is critical to establishing the principles for humanitarian work and practical measures for ensuring that volunteers can act safely and effectively.

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The Swedish Red Cross is a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). It is the world's largest volunteer based humanitarian network with more than 190 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Together we reach 97 million people annually through long-term services and development programmes as well as 85 million people through disaster response and early recovery programmes. We act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality as to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

Guided by the Strategy 2020 – our collective global plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed to 'saving lives and changing minds'. Our strength lies in our volunteer network, our community based expertise and our independence and neutrality. We work to improve humanitarian standards, as partners in development and in response to disasters. We persuade decision-makers to act at all times in the interests of vulnerable people.

The result: we enable healthy and safe communities, reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.

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