The dangers of being local

Nisha Thomas[1], Matt Baillie Smith[1], Stefan Agerhem[2], Jessica Cadesky[2], Bianca Fadel[1], Bessy Valle Paz[3]

[1]*Northumbria University,* [2]*Swedish Red Cross,* [3]*Honduran Red Cross*

Abstract

This paper, the second of six preliminary working papers of Volunteering in Conflict and Emergencies (ViCE) initiative, unpacks the notion of 'local' in local volunteering in conflicts and emergencies. The paper argues that:

- Local volunteers are identified as offering better knowledge of affected communities and more secure access to those groups in need.
- But local communities, particularly in conflicts and emergencies, are in a state of constant flux which means what counts as local can change rapidly.
- Being local can bring additional risks – local volunteers may be associated with a particular group and often cannot leave the setting, unlike international aid workers.

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[1], 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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[1] Anderson et al., 2012

Introduction

> *"I mean, this movement can't do what it does without [local volunteers]. Without those people who make the choice. Like this gentleman who decided to help his village, despite losing his daughter and his grandkids. The volunteer in [place] who was killed when he was recovering a body. And those are the ones we need to keep as motivation… in our hearts, in our minds…. If we can't connect with them, then we've lost it. So for me, they are the heart of the movement." (Female Staff)*

There is now a consensus among policy makers and practitioners around the importance of the 'local' in humanitarian and development interventions[2]. The notion of participatory or 'bottom-up' development emerged in development debates and practice in the mid-1970s as a response to the mainstream, western-centric models of development[3] and by the dawn of the 21st century, localised participatory approaches became the new development orthodoxy[4]. The localisation agenda of the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects a global reaffirmation that the most critical challenges and objectives of the post-2015 Development Plans depend on local action, community buy-in and local ownership[5]. It echoes a reorientation of approach that highly values the need for home-grown solutions to conflict problems and for partnerships to be locally driven[6].

The local ownership imperative has been central to international humanitarian and peace building efforts as well. One of the key themes to have emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 concerned the localisation of humanitarian aid efforts. The 2010 review of UN peace building architecture has argued that local ownership is not simply desirable or politically correct, but "an imperative, an absolute essential, if peacebuilding is to take root"[7], whilst the 2015 World Disaster Report took 'local actors' as its focus. The strengthening of community resilience by working with local humanitarian actors and institutions is seen as a logical extension of the humanitarian imperative by the IFRC[8]. The involvement of local volunteers is a tangible way for local communities to have a voice in humanitarian efforts and development initiatives that affect them[9]. Local ownership is also seen as critical to ensuring sustainability as well as to ensure that approaches to humanitarian and development challenges are based on local realities rather than parachuted in from elsewhere[10].

Local volunteering has been at the heart of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies since the Movement's inception. The Movement has always recognised that its core strength lies in its volunteer network, their community based expertise and their independence and neutrality[11]. Local volunteering is believed to be at the heart of community building, a key commitment identified in IFRC's Strategy 2020. Local volunteers are playing critically important roles in many conflicts and emergency settings, and sustain humanitarian services when other humanitarian actors, national and international partners, withdraw their efforts or shift to remote management programming due to increased insecurity[12]. The transfer of risks to local volunteers, who are assumed to be at less risk than their international counterparts, is often underestimated[13], and relying on overly simplistic ideas of local communities as homogenous ignores processes of inequality and exclusion within communities[14].

This theme paper explores the concept of 'local' in local volunteering in conflicts and emergencies. Drawing from the ViCE (Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies) research data, the paper challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about advantages, access, understanding and acceptance of local volunteers in communities where they

[2] Mohan and Stokke, 2000
[3] Briggs, 2008; Parnwell, 2008
[4] Mohan, 2008
[5] UNDP, n.d.
[6] Reich, 2006
[7] UN, 2010
[8] World Disasters Report, 2016

[9] Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015
[10] Macdonald and Allen, 2015
[11] WDR, 2016
[12] Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015
[13] Stoddard et al., 2010
[14] Hilhorst et al., 2017

volunteer. The paper argues that we need to be careful not to homogenise and parochialise the 'local' – to see it as something that doesn't have complex inequalities and hierarchies or that is separate from the global. Constructing the 'local' as somewhere stable, uniform and relatively separate from wider forces, risks imagining a space for volunteers and volunteer activities, as safer and simpler, than it is. Our findings reveal that local communities, particularly in conflict and emergency settings, are in a process of continuous flux and transformation which makes identifying who is local and who is not, unstable and shifting, and complicating the scale that can be used to define local.

Whilst rhetoric of the local abounds, the ViCE research initiative raises fundamental questions about what local means - at what scale is someone or something local, and what are the boundaries that give a local identity from which follow a set of assumptions around the things that can and cannot be done. This has significant implications for a humanitarian sector that relies heavily on local volunteers and their expertise, activities and acceptance in local communities. Unpacking what local precisely means in diverse humanitarian settings, and developing a critical understanding of local is essential for humanitarian organisations engaging volunteers, since it is central to the boundaries of safety, remit and authority that shape how volunteers' activities are organised and structured.

The Scale of the 'Local'

"It's true, you do face challenges, because you never know what community you are going to, and you need to know what the conventions are in order to enter that community. Knowing the troubles that exist in the place we live in … We are in a very troublesome sector due to the [groups'] conflicts among themselves." (Female Volunteer)

"We cannot predict the situation and how it will look like. Because any time anything can happen. So it is really dangerous, especially like, engaging some volunteers, like taking volunteers from one community and taking to other community. So it becomes a problem, because security is not easy." (Male Staff)

The rhetorical value of the 'local' in humanitarian and development discourses often risks making generalised assumptions about the knowledge, advantages, safer access and acceptance of volunteers in local communities. The ViCE research reveals that the scale of localities is more ambiguous than these discourses suggest. There are multiple layers to localities and communities, and 'local' volunteers often have to operate in communities that they have no knowledge of or have any connections with. Living in a locality or identifying with a particular geographical area alone does not always guarantee the volunteers an understanding of the communities in which they are expected to provide humanitarian assistance. Local can be 'less local' than imagined in situations of emergencies and conflicts, and often even dangerous, as discussed below.

"Assuming that, if you go to the villages that are 15 kilometres away from the town, you cannot risk those places. Why? Because there are some people that kill other people on the way… So, say we are sent to do an assessment in the village, we cannot risk it, because security is becoming a problem." (Male Volunteer)

"Some of the challenges are related to access. Sometimes when there is violence it is difficult to access, especially when it comes to the armed conflict. It is very difficult at times for the volunteers to have access to the victims." (Male Staff)

The above quotes reveal the dangers and risks local volunteers face within their own localities during humanitarian emergencies and conflicts. The unpredictability of what counts as community, and how communities change and are defined, poses important challenges for volunteering, in terms of who is allocated to tasks, where and how security is set up and handled, and how communities are briefed on the presence of volunteers. Local then becomes highly fragmented and divisive in these contexts, with the potential to cause significant harm to volunteers working in those communities, since very subtle or rapid shifts can significantly alter the balance of variables which shape safety and effectiveness. Despite often being portrayed as fixed in time and parochial, local communities are inherently dynamic and flexible in nature. In conflicts and emergency settings, population movements,

displacements and the wider disruption of lives and livelihoods make the challenges of the local particularly acute:

"We have refugees, IDPs, people coming to [the country], leaving [country]. There's a lot of movement, and it is one of the things that, we can't keep our volunteer for long in the same place... So, the volunteers themselves are changing, and their requirements are changing.... Their skills and knowledge and--, even the attitudes are changing within the volunteers themselves...The volunteers that we are using before, are not the same ones that are required for this stage within [country]... I don't know how to explain it better, but it's different. The context is different." (Female Staff)

"So at the moment you've got communities that's been decimated by conflict, people will start to move back into those conflict...with all the divisions that they will bring with them. Not just about whether I'm on that side or that side, but all the divisions the communities have. Volunteers will be in the middle of it, as part of that community, with their own feelings, allegiances, and attachments, and animosities. So how do they relate to that environment, and I think, that's a real challenge." (Male Staff)

The diverse patterns of internal displacement and migration are altering communities in various ways, often blurring the boundaries and changing the meanings of who is local and what local volunteering entails in these community settings. The changing communities and contexts, as seen in the quotes above, necessitate different priorities, approaches and expectations in local volunteering at various stages of humanitarian assistance, development and peace building efforts. Just as local communities do not remain a static space, as discussed earlier, local volunteers are also not a fixed category of actors, but vary in accordance with the context, bringing different experiences, approaches to and ideas of volunteering into local spaces. Who is available to volunteer and how, also moves with the changing dynamics of community when volunteers are also beneficiaries or from those communities themselves, and whose changing personal circumstances affect their ability to volunteer in

different ways[15]. Unpacking the 'local' in each humanitarian context therefore becomes a crucial part of understanding the specific dynamics, flows and experiences that are shaping the constitution and position of communities and their needs, and the ways volunteers can help address those needs.

The specificity of the 'Local'

"If [volunteers]were from the wrong ethnic group, theirs [exposure to risk]would be much more extreme than yours. I think those are the things that we have to understand about.... volunteers. That's a challenge for us as well, because there's a whole, you know, diversity thing, which is an important ... principle for the Red Cross movement. But just how much can you really represent diversity in some of these contexts. I mean, you know the situation here for example, uhm a lot of staff, a lot of agencies have not been able to employ staff of certain ethnics groups in certain areas of the country ... It's just a complete reality." (Male Staff)

The meaning of local varies for different sets of people in culturally diverse contexts. As the above quote suggests, being the 'wrong' local is riskier in some conflicts and emergency settings than being a non-local. This highlights the dangers of making generalised assumptions about safety of local volunteers over international volunteers and other actors in humanitarian emergencies and conflict settings. This finding is also significant for a sector that constantly strives to democratise the humanitarian mission. The IFRC volunteering policy states that National Societies recognise the value of a diverse volunteer workforce, and actively recruit volunteers irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, disability or age. However, our findings show that it is important for the Movement to recognise the challenges faced by different sub-groups within local volunteers in increasingly changing local humanitarian contexts, and be cognisant of the implications this has for local volunteering. In some communities, belonging to certain ethnic and racial identities can bring more challenges than benefits for local volunteers.

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[15] See Theme Paper 3 that further explores the challenges of volunteers who are victims themselves.

> *"I faced problems in the field of humanitarian work … One of these problems is racism. I attended camps and my colour was unacceptable, so they ask me many questions in one of camps… I changed my nationality, my tribe and they asked me if I am [ethnic group] and I said no. I changed my tribe and said to them I am from [tribe]."* (Male Volunteer)

> *"But this ethnic issue in [place] is so transversal deeply rooted, it can affect everything. It has an impact on how [NS] is perceived and how it works. Yeah, it's not yet, clearly not an independent organisation. That's very clear. And they are going in that direction, but even when they manage to do, to be more independent, for the people to acknowledge it, that will take some time anyway."* (Male Staff)

> *"So people are more easily going to tribal lines when there is a problem. And also that added into the big challenge of the volunteer conducive environment to operate and support the communities around."* (Male Staff)

These quotes reveal the internal diversities and fragmented nature of communities that are not often considered in making assumptions about local volunteers' access to and acceptance in local communities. But it also has implications for the level of detailed knowledge needed to determine who can volunteer in what specific setting. Our research highlights the need to be attentive to this at different scales – from the very local to regional and national. This needs to be understood in the context of ensuring volunteer voice in shaping decisions about volunteer activity locally. For example, it is possible to imagine a context where local volunteers indicate that, on the basis of their understanding and experience, they cannot volunteer safely in a setting. There then need to be systems of knowledge gathering and communication that escalate such perspectives and information through branches to National Societies, as well as to international donors. This ensures that, even if local volunteers are unable to work in that setting, it is local volunteers and actors, and their knowledge that shaped that decision.

Another perceived advantage of local volunteers is their ability and effectiveness in providing more meaningful and sustainable humanitarian assistance in their local communities. Our study echoes other similar research studies in identifying the advantages and effectiveness of deploying local volunteers from affected communities in the humanitarian relief efforts, needs assessments, reconciliation processes and peace-building programmes of the Movement. However, our research also reveals that being from a locality alone is not a guarantee of their ability to and effectiveness in providing humanitarian services.

> *"I am from the [A] district. I cannot interfere in the [B] district. No matter what I become, I cannot implement the processes in another district just as well as I do in my own district. Our ability to work well in our own district is based on knowing the people, something that we have had for a long time."* (Male Volunteer)

> *"Really language is the problem in [country] because normally most people speak only their own languages, like right now if you are taken to [area], the people speak only one language … so this is also another big problem we face."*
> (Female Volunteer)

Language is as locally varied as cultural and ethnic cleavages, shaping local volunteers' ability to perform effectively in diverse cultural settings. There are 'locals within locals'[16] with diverse identities and affiliations, and varying advantages and limitations that need to be understood in specificity to each cultural context. Therefore, it is imperative that the Movement recognises the elasticity of 'local' as a community as well as a geographical space, and the implications this has for the organisational identity in specific settings and their effectiveness in delivering neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian responses in complex conflicts and emergency settings.

Locality and Neutrality

> *"[National Societies] are seen very differently in different parts of the country… it depends on where you go… You can't just put an emblem. People have to understand what it stands for. Because in some parts of the country, because they were part of the government, even formerly, then this is a government symbol. And it will protect you in some places, but it will definitely not protect you in other places…So it takes a lot of time to change that perception."* (Female Staff)

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[16] Donini et al., 2008

The Movement's identity is contingent on how National Societies are viewed in specific local settings, their histories in those places and the past and present relationships they have with broader communities and stakeholder groups. The ViCE research has already revealed how humanitarian principles are shaped and constructed by the specificity of each context in which they are applied[17]. However, a closer examination of the local further reveals how the Movement's networks and connections within specific local settings impact on volunteers' ability to appear and remain neutral, impartial and independent.

"I think that nowadays the relationship of the community with the Red Cross has been lost. The community thinks that the Red Cross is part of the government, and they're wrong. So we should constantly teach the community so that they know we are, we could say, a society, ruled by certain principles, and not ruled by the government."
(Male Volunteer)

"Safer access needs to take into account, each country's specificities, because what could be unsafe in one might not be in another. The measures taken for a safer access in one country might not work in another country. This needs to be really taken into account, not only the position of the central bases or that of directorates or project leaders, but mainly consulting with the volunteers." (Male Staff)

The relationship that National Societies have with their stakeholders differs from context to context, across time. As old conflicts cease and new ones emerge, and contexts and affected communities transform over time, the relationships, networks and connections the Movement has with local stakeholders in each specific setting also change. The meaning of local is also contingent on the history of a context, the sub-national politics of conflicts and the socio-cultural and political economy of these specific settings. This then affects how regional branches of the Movement are perceived, identified and accepted in different communities.

"Historically the term volunteering is perceived with difficulty, in our country... I believe that the reason is because of the situation on the territory of [ ] countries, and the work of the Red Cross in the [ ] in the past, it was very different from the work of this organization, say, in Europe, in America and so on. There was completely different information support, and people perceived the work of the Red Cross in a completely different way. That is why we are facing now so many difficulties...The problem itself, it did not disappear, it stays, that is why each of us makes some kind of informational work, as much as possible." (Male Volunteer)

The histories and presents continue to shape and reconstruct the Movement's images and perceptions in various ways in different contexts and affect their ability to operate effectively in these settings. This has implications for the ways in which National Societies communicate about who they are; if there is a negative history of state affiliation[18], then particular strategies are needed to delineate a new role that departs from such histories.

Locality and neutrality are complicated not only at the organisational level, but also at the volunteer level. The advantages of being local and neutral can also lead to greater risks for local volunteers in some settings.

"[Volunteer] will go probably to respond to gun violence or ... you, know gang related violence and stuff like that, in to neighbourhoods... And sometimes those neighbourhoods are the ones where they are living at, so they will go back, without their [Red Cross uniform] shirts and vests on. And they will have to go back to those communities. So if you really ask me about challenges, I think that that's one of the biggest challenges that we are facing right now. (Male Staff)

"There are times when you have to take volunteers from... other countries, these volunteers cannot go there, they will not respond- we'll fly in other volunteers who will be accepted. So you feel like you want to do something but you will not be accepted, you'll maybe even die from the other side." (Male Staff)

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[17] Theme Paper 1 on Everyday Humanitarianism explores this further.

[18] Bailie Smith et al., 2017 (forthcoming)

Volunteering becomes a balancing act when local volunteers have to negotiate between their locality - personal affiliations, identities, and connections with different groups within their communities - on the one hand, and the universal humanitarian principles and frameworks, on the other. Unlike their international or even national counterparts, they do not have a 'safer exit' strategy from the communities where they work as volunteers as they belong to and are part of these communities themselves. As explored earlier in the paper, volunteers in some contexts are not perceived and accepted as neutral because of their ethnic, racial or regional identities. In other contexts, their neutrality and independence are not seen as an act of impartial humanitarianism by different groups within their own communities, but as partisan or disloyal, making them susceptible to increased attacks and risks. In many occasions, being 'distant' is often beneficial and safer than being local.

Conclusion

Local actors, particularly, local volunteers, bring considerable advantages to humanitarian organisations such as the International Red Cross Movement. As the Global Review on Volunteering revealed, "local volunteers have a well-developed understanding of the people, the social and cultural norms and are connected into local knowledge networks, and can often play strong roles in building social and cultural capital and helping to form trust in the communities again"[19]. However, the advantages of being local can also pose significant challenges for local volunteers in diverse cultural and socio-political settings. This theme paper unpacks the notion of local in humanitarian practice and challenges some of the generalised assumptions about the advantages, access, understanding and acceptance of local volunteers in specific communities where they volunteer.

The ViCE research findings reveal how volunteers' identities as local – at least in terms of wider humanitarian discourses and practices - frequently didn't do the work it was thought that it did. Our findings showed that the meanings of local vary considerably in diverse cultural settings. The complex relationships, exclusion and cleavages that shape societies within and between different scales, present a more complex context than the label, 'local', allows. Being from a locality alone does not guarantee local volunteers an automatic ease or ability to provide effective humanitarian services.

The precise meaning of who is and not a local has significant implications for volunteer diversity, safety and security and their ability to remain and appear neutral and impartial in complex humanitarian settings. Saying volunteers are local does not smooth away the complexities or difficulties or offer a panacea to the problems of using actors who are not local. Indeed, our data show that volunteers' local identities are not stable, in the same way that the constitution of the communities they are from or serve, can shift rapidly and unpredictably. Our findings reveal the importance of recognising the challenges that come with the 'local volunteer' label despite the potentials and promises that it offers against a top-down humanitarian approach.

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[19] Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015; p.75

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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.