
Volunteers and Victims

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Abstract

This paper, the third of six preliminary working papers of Volunteering in Conflict and Emergencies (ViCE) initiative, explores the multiple and shifting identities within the labels of 'volunteer' and 'victim' that shape experiences of local volunteering. The paper argues that:

- The idea of 'giver' and 'recipient' as different is problematic as local volunteers can be simultaneously volunteers and victims.
 - By assuming volunteers are only a 'giver', their needs can be neglected.
 - Recognising the different ways that volunteers are vulnerable is essential to ensuring their safety and security.
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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 methodology¹, 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.

¹ Anderson et al., 2012

Introduction

"Because suddenly ... when there is a huge disaster, sometimes we forget our own volunteers that can be damaged. And they provide humanitarian aid to a family who has a need. But ... it makes the need of the volunteer invisible, while he is having the same needs at that moment as the beneficiary that is being given...And to know in these countries... that sometimes, to the one we give has the same needs as the giver." (Male Staff)

Strengthening the resilience of vulnerable and at-risk communities is at the core of Red Cross humanitarian work². Responding to disasters, improving livelihoods, and increasing access to better health care and basic amenities for affected populations in conflicts and emergencies are among the many activities that the Movement has been doing since inception to build community resilience around the world³. The recognition that individuals and communities have underlying vulnerabilities, and that improving individual lives is essential to building strong communities, is now at the centre of their humanitarian approach.

The 2016 World Disasters Report recognises the "silent suffering" of people in vulnerable communities who "exhaust all coping mechanisms and are left to fend for themselves without the help they so desperately need"⁴, and calls for a stronger focus in humanitarian action that addresses people's risks and vulnerabilities and puts their resilience and empowerment at its core. Local volunteers are crucial to improving community resilience as they carry out the bulk of humanitarian and capacity building activities in communities where they volunteer. However, there can be no resilient communities without resilient individuals, and that includes local volunteers, whose sufferings and needs often remain hidden and invisible in the celebratory discourses of volunteering in humanitarianism and development.

This theme paper explores the vulnerabilities of local volunteers in conflicts and emergency settings, the risks they face and the complexities

of those risks, which are often overlooked amid the overwhelming tragedies, destructions and disasters that engulf humanitarian emergencies. Local community volunteers are, in most cases, the first responders in a humanitarian crisis and perform their duties often setting aside their own needs and priorities and those of their families who may have equally been victims of the same crises and emergencies. In this paper, we argue that the label of a 'volunteer' can obscure some of the complexities and vulnerabilities of being a local volunteer in a conflict and emergency setting and their particular needs, dilemmas, challenges and risks as fellow 'victims'. The legitimacy and assumed advantages that come with the label of local volunteer in many ways disguise the sufferings and vulnerabilities of local volunteers, whose coping capacity and ability to recover may be as fragile as the people that they assist.

This paper challenges the dichotomy of 'giver' and 'recipient' often seen in humanitarian and development discourses, particularly at the local level, and shows how local actors can be both volunteers and victims as contexts and identities change. If we identify volunteering as a reciprocal act, it is important to acknowledge the shifting roles between the helpers and those being helped⁵. In this way, we problematise some of the assumptions in volunteering discourses that imagine volunteers as acting out of benevolence to the less fortunate on the basis of their relative affluence or spare leisure time and resources. Such understandings emerge from ideas and concepts of volunteering that are particularly rooted in European and North American experiences and traditions⁶.

These have limited utility in the context of emergencies and crises, particularly in the global South, or in the context of austerity in richer countries where communities' own resilience is being increasingly called upon⁷. The paper also explores the complexities of multiple and shifting identities within the labels

² WDR, 2016; IFRC, 2014

³ IFRC, 2014

⁴ WDR, 2016; p.8

⁵ Wojno, 2011

⁶ Anheier and Salamon, 1999; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011

⁷ Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2017

of 'volunteer' and 'victim'. It shows how identities are as unstable as the changing humanitarian contexts that shape their ability to volunteer. It also highlights how issues such as, volunteer access, agency, affordability and inclusivity, that are discussed often in the context of international volunteering debates and not seen as particularly significant for local volunteering, are important factors shaping who volunteers, even at the local level. Understanding the complexities associated with the volunteer label is crucial for humanitarian organisations as it is important to recognise the risks and vulnerabilities faced by local volunteers and the impact of crises and emergencies on their ability to volunteer. It is also important to ensure the safety and security of volunteers, as well as support them in building their capacity to be resilient and cope effectively with the disruptions and transitions that affect their lives as much as the communities that they assist in humanitarian emergencies. Volunteering is not about being separate from vulnerability; volunteers may be from communities that are vulnerable, and volunteering may place volunteers in riskier situations than they would otherwise be in. To understand volunteering in conflicts and emergencies means rejecting the separation of volunteers and beneficiaries.

The Volunteer Label

"Then I come into my senses and say what is happening to me? I am also vulnerable. I can also be a victim. The fact of wearing an emblem is not, is not a bulletproof vest." (Female Volunteer)

"And then the question rises, I help, who helps me? I am always hearing this. I'm helping, but who helps me? Nobody. And many volunteers have left because of this.... Several people have told me. People that have been volunteers for 15 years, 20 years a volunteer, they come here. And there are some who have 15 years who say, 'Who helps me? Nobody'". (Male Volunteer)

The label of 'volunteer' in humanitarian emergencies is often associated with particular ideas and meanings of humanitarianism and volunteerism. The volunteer label also comes

with certain expectations, in terms of volunteers' ability to access affected populations, understand and identify their needs, and provide appropriate support and services to those who are at risk and are most vulnerable⁸.

These normative values associated with volunteering create an image of a volunteer as someone with the capacity and resources to provide humanitarian services, even in the most difficult settings and situations. The challenges, limitations and vulnerabilities faced by local volunteers and the costs of volunteering are often hidden by the volunteer label, and are not paid adequate attention by humanitarian agencies. The above quote suggests that even the volunteers themselves are sometimes caught up in the promises and protections offered by this label, and that they forget about their own needs and vulnerabilities while struggling to meet the demands of their roles. Our data also suggest that the image portrayed by the label of a humanitarian volunteer has considerable safety and security ramifications. Becoming a volunteer may, in some circumstances, offer some form of security, whether in terms of the per-diems volunteers receive or a sense of protection they feel, being part of a humanitarian organisation. But the opposite can also be the case:

"They think that when you are wearing a cross, then you will provide me with all the needs that I have. But if they see that the support is not meeting their demands, then they grow angry against the volunteers. We face a lot of challenges when our volunteers are going to [attend] accidents. Even being beaten by the officials." (Male Volunteer)

"Once there was a video published online where we were accused that, under the guise of helping, we were finishing off the wounded. My personal data was published there, I was receiving threats via personal messages and my friends were receiving messages containing links to this video, which said I was a murderer and a murder accomplice. So this is just one example... Actually, it is not surprising that it happened because regular attendants of the protests know us by sight since long ago." (Female Volunteer)

⁸ See Theme Paper 2 which unpacks the meaning of local, and the challenges associated with it.

One of the many perceptions in local communities about a humanitarian volunteer is also as that of a 'saviour' who has immediate access to necessary resources and has sufficient knowledge and capacities to provide immediate relief and address the needs of at-risk individuals and communities. When the expectations do not match with reality, where volunteers do not have the capacity or resources, situations can become difficult and at times, dangerous, for volunteers. The emblem of a Red Cross-Red Crescent volunteer carries respect in many places, but it also adds a layer of vulnerability to local volunteers as they are often caught at the forefront of local tensions, fears and anxieties⁹.

The paradox here is that while local volunteering and local volunteers provide the legitimacy, trust and sense of community ownership that is central to the Movement's humanitarian approach, the complexities and challenges that come with that volunteer label and identity are at times, forgotten or not fully analysed and understood. Not only is the 'local' contested and complex¹⁰, but being a local volunteer can entail new vulnerabilities and risks. Understanding the individuals underneath the label of local volunteer and their particular vulnerabilities and challenges they face, is a critical part of ensuring safety, effectiveness and allocating tasks and roles in appropriate ways. Understanding who volunteers are is central to volunteer management, and it needs to go beyond ascribing an identity such as 'from the local community'. Improving the ways in which volunteers are understood and listened to is crucial for a sector that relies largely on local volunteers and local actors to provide humanitarian relief efforts in diverse situations of emergencies and crises.

Volunteers and Livelihoods

"The volunteers working in that area are beneficiaries themselves; they don't have any source of income and livelihood, just like any other member of the community. They have accepted that

⁹ Theme Paper 1 further explores the challenges this cause for volunteers in negotiating humanitarian principles.

¹⁰ Theme Paper 2 discusses this topic in further depth.

because there is nothing else, they are not working or doing anything, and they find [volunteering] as an employment even." (Male Staff)

"Some people go and... go to the Red Cross because they don't even have running water in their house. They haven't paid for it, because they don't have money to pay for it. Uhm, some people go, and they're working as... I don't know, they are doing their service, their ambulance service, and then we know they haven't eaten, for example." (Female Volunteer)

The discourses of international development have often associated international volunteering with affluent mobility, agency and authority¹¹. Who volunteers in a particular context is determined by who they are - their socio-economic status in their communities, their access to livelihoods and resources, and their agency and ability to access volunteering opportunities and provide services at a particular moment. Our data shows that local volunteering can also be shaped by volunteers' helplessness, rather than their agency or choice in that particular setting.

A willingness to volunteer could also be a potential "cry for help"¹² and it is imperative that humanitarian organisations recognise this in order to address volunteer needs more effectively. Volunteering because "there is nothing else" and seeing it as the only option available for a livelihood, however meagre it may be, and as a means for obtaining a sense of identity, fundamentally raises questions about what volunteering means.

It also compels us to take a critical look at some of the traditional top-down definitions, assumptions and characteristics of volunteering that lose their meaning and relevance in some of the specific contexts in which local volunteers operate. The costs associated with volunteering at the local level further challenge the dominant discourse of volunteering as a non-pecuniary activity and a 'voluntary' service offered by people out of a selfless desire to help fellow human beings¹³. Our research reaffirms the findings from the IFRC Global

¹¹ Sherraden et al., 2008

¹² Barraket et al., 2013; p.38

¹³ Friedman, 2002, Maes, 2010

Review of Volunteering¹⁴ that the poverty of significant numbers of volunteers in the global South complicates the issues of 'payment' and remuneration in volunteering. This raises significant ethical challenges for humanitarian organisations working with local volunteers in poor and vulnerable communities¹⁵, and is particularly acute in conflicts and emergencies settings, where the need to rapidly mobilise labour to deliver services may be particularly urgent.

"We don't have allowances. We don't have promotions...motivations. Maybe you can work for a day, then when you come later that evening, then there is no good hand you are taking. This is a struggle. Maybe if you don't go to that activity [volunteering], then you can do something outside that can help you to get something. So that is a challenge for us." (Male Volunteer)

"We buy the vest. We buy everything.... You want a shoe to go to the mountain? Buy it. You want an urban shoe to go to work? Buy it. Do you want a rescue team of any kind? Buy it!" (Male Volunteer)

The IFRC has made a commitment that no one should be denied an opportunity to volunteer because they cannot afford it¹⁶. However, our data shows that the ability to volunteer shifts with the varying economic circumstances and status of volunteers in a changing humanitarian context. To volunteer or not in certain contexts is, for some, a difficult financial choice rather than a simple act of altruism. Regardless of personal motivations and desire to help others in moments of crisis, volunteering necessitates a certain amount of resources and capital from individual volunteers, which raises questions about agency, affordability and inclusivity even in local volunteering¹⁷. The rhetoric used in humanitarian and development debates about volunteers as the core of humanitarian interventions is often silent when it comes to the realities of volunteer lives and their needs and obligations to multiple others.

"So you need, first, to support yourself; to have the capacity when your family are looking for you or waiting for you to help them, before you help other people. So it is also another challenge as a volunteer." (Male Staff)

"Well, one of the challenges is to have to leave our families at the time of an emergency, or a natural disaster, or floods which are so common at the port; that knowing that the area we live in gets flooded... So, this is very difficult you have to choose fast because it's a matter of deciding whom I'm going to leave waiting for me, my family or the Red Cross. So, it's difficult making a choice." (Male Volunteer)

The ability of volunteers to respond in humanitarian emergencies will also depend upon their own resilience; their ability to cope with and effectively manage the traumas and losses that they themselves and their families have suffered along with the 'victims'. As these quotes suggest, volunteers often have to negotiate between their concern for others and their duties and responsibilities towards their own families in order for them to be able to volunteer. Volunteering in these situations is a choice one makes at the sacrifice of doing something else¹⁸ and it is important for humanitarian organisations to recognise the magnitude of these choices so that they can ensure adequate support for volunteers' resilience and capacity building.

This has implications not just for volunteer mobilisation in emergencies and humanitarian operations in general, but also for issues of diversity and gender dynamics in local volunteering¹⁹. Who can afford to be a volunteer in a particular context is shaped by how structures, agencies, authorities and power dynamics operate in that context. This is critical for a humanitarian sector that constantly commits to ensuring volunteer participation from across diverse cultural and ethnic groups, and gender and age divides. The power dynamics and the inequalities that operate at local levels need to be closely scrutinised to understand the various ways in which identities

¹⁴ Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015

¹⁵ Baillie Smith et al., 2017

¹⁶ Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015; p.55

¹⁷ Thomas, 2016

¹⁸ IFRC, 2011

¹⁹ Theme Paper 5 explores the gender implications of volunteering in conflicts and emergencies

intersect as contexts change, and how this then impacts on local volunteering.

Humanitarian Contexts and Changing Volunteer Identities

"So yes, we came here. There was war going there, our house was gutted. We had no belongings. And people here helped us. And we are trying now, after we've got to our feet, got the hang of the situation, now we help others. ... It is getting easier for me. Others arrive, they need help like we did."
(Male Volunteer)

"In the beginning, my wife was hysterical. She kept repeating, "I want to go home, I want to go home." Now she has more or less got used to this, after we've settled down. More or less now. It has got easier. I feel sorry though. I had just finished my apartment. We hadn't even got to live there half a year. I don't know how it is going to be, I don't know. Well, basically, I came [to volunteer], like I said, to be with people and not have all the past events in my mind." (Male Volunteer)

As contexts change, volunteers can be simultaneously victims as well. The above quotes show how changing contexts and circumstances can shape who you are and where you are on the volunteer-victim continuum. Whilst a conflict may result in your needs becoming acute and you becoming a beneficiary of humanitarian aid and support, common experiences of suffering can also motivate you to be a volunteer, demonstrating the relational nature of volunteering and how bonds are formed and people may feel accountable to each other²⁰. This indicates that the identity of a volunteer can fluctuate with the changing contexts and socio-economic circumstances that often come with humanitarian emergencies and conflicts²¹. Identities are transitory and are as fluid and unstable as the contexts of volunteering.

It is important for the humanitarian sector to understand how the changing nature of humanitarian contexts and emergencies impact on volunteer lives and livelihoods, to better plan for, facilitate and support local volunteers. These shifting roles and identities of volunteers come with multiple and often

conflicting needs and expectations that humanitarian organisations need to pay particular attention to, in order to support volunteers and strengthen their ability to provide effective humanitarian services.

"We also have the poverty situation in our country, and we are seeing the volunteers are starting to be scarce. Now it's hard for us to find young people, hard to find people, hard to find ladies to join the organization, hard to find people who want to belong to the board of directors... but often people have restrictions because many of them have to work double shifts, others have to go far away to work, others have obligations, so they don't have time to give, which is what volunteering is..."
(Male Volunteer)

The ability to mobilise local volunteers and retain them can be compromised unless the Movement pays closer attention to the diverse needs, challenges and obligations of local volunteers. This means looking both at how a conflict or emergency context shapes volunteers' identities and needs, but also how they have needs and challenges outside the focus of humanitarian actors, but which impact on their capacity to contribute. If local volunteers are impeded by their personal or livelihood circumstances to continue to offer their volunteering services, the efforts that the Movement has already put in to build a strong and steady local volunteer network in communities will be futile.

This calls for a non-essentialist approach to volunteering and volunteer management strategies that is adapted to particular organisational and environmental contexts and takes into account the specific needs and challenges of volunteers in each context. It demands forms of knowledge gathering on volunteers that goes beyond auditing or recruitment processes, and is sensitive to changing circumstances and contexts, and how these can weave together. Only with such knowledge can adherence to global humanitarian principles and guidelines also take place in ways that are not at the cost of local volunteers' wellbeing and needs.

²⁰ Burns, 2015

²¹ Baillie Smith et al., 2015

"Sometimes, it has been given here that, due to the policies, who knows, that a volunteer could not [be] helped because it looked bad for the community. ... But I am one of those people, I'm rescuing people. I set aside my family and I'm rescuing out others. But no one pays attention; that my family needs help Like other people, or other volunteer's managers said no, why? it's because they are quite based, strictly following the rules, or the regulations."

(Male Volunteer)

There is a risk that the commitments to uphold global humanitarian principles hinder humanitarian organisations from creating meaningful support systems for and partnerships with volunteers that would enable long-term sustainability of local volunteering. Humanitarian organisations have ethical and social obligations with regard to their volunteers, and adhering to humanitarian principles of neutrality or impartiality should not lift them out of their accountability towards local volunteers, communities and support systems²². This is particularly difficult to maintain as humanitarian principles are highly contested and interpreted differently in diverse cultural contexts, and has significant safety and security implications for local volunteers²³. However, as our research suggests, discourses on humanitarianism that engage with local volunteer action and capacity should start not from policies, but from a dialogue between overarching principles and commitments, and detailed understandings of who local volunteers are, their shifting identities and local realities.

Conclusion

The IFRC volunteering policy²⁴ acknowledges that in certain circumstances, volunteers may themselves be vulnerable and calls for National Societies to ensure that their needs for assistance and protection are given due attention. This paper explores these vulnerabilities of volunteers in changing circumstances of humanitarian emergencies and the impact this has on local volunteering. The ViCE research findings show that a 'volunteer' label allows certain assumptions to be made about volunteer capacities and resources, but it can obscure the needs, dilemmas and challenges local volunteers often face in humanitarian emergencies. Understanding the complex needs and dilemmas of local volunteers is critical for humanitarian organisations to support local volunteering, which is at the heart of their efforts to build community resilience.

The paper also explores how changing humanitarian contexts shift volunteer identities and shape their ability to volunteer in changing socio-economic contexts, bringing into focus issues such as, access, agency, affordability and inclusivity in local volunteering. Recognising how identities intersect and vulnerabilities and capacities vary in diverse contexts for local volunteers is important for humanitarian organisations as it is part of understanding who they rely on, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

²² Drązkiewicz, 2017; p. 93-96

²³ Theme Paper 1 explores the dilemmas local volunteers face in negotiating humanitarian principles.

²⁴ IFRC, n.d.

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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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