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## More than a snapshot in time

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### Abstract

This paper, the fourth of six preliminary working papers of Volunteering in Conflict and Emergencies (ViCE) initiative, reflects on the importance of time and temporalities when analysing volunteers' roles in humanitarian emergencies. The paper argues that:

- Volunteering in conflicts or emergencies is part of longer histories of volunteering, built on longstanding relationships built between volunteers and communities over time.
  - The rush to use local volunteers for a particular humanitarian response means these relationships and histories can be neglected and undermined.
  - Volunteering is a diverse mix of ways of coping with and responding to everyday and emergency challenges, whose richness and complexity should not be forgotten in a moment of crisis.
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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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*It was a challenging experience working with volunteers, especially in the context where... our context... some people call it post conflict, but for me sometimes, I say it is not yet defined whether it is post conflict because the conflict has not ended, it may resume at any time; disasters and epidemics may occur, so we are in [the] midst of disasters...(Male Staff)*

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In this paper, we explore the ways using different timeframes can provide different lenses on the activities of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies. Time has been a topic of growing interest amongst academic researchers in recent years, particularly in the context of development and humanitarian scholarship<sup>2</sup>. This work highlights the ways ideas of time permeate understandings of and approaches to development. What timeframe we use to explore a topic, shapes which issues are brought to the fore and which are missed or side-lined. For example, the professionalisation of humanitarianism and development, and emphasis on donor accountability, strongly shapes the timeframes of humanitarian and development activities.

Humanitarian and development organisations increasingly work to time-bound project cycles, international goals and impact frameworks that operate primarily in a “perpetual present”<sup>3</sup>, meaning that activities that sit outside these particular frameworks are often overlooked or forgotten in favour of the ‘present’. This can mean that individuals’ and communities’ multiple histories, trajectories and relationships with particular contexts, actors or activities are forgotten as immediate, programmed and time-limited activities are prioritised.

With a few exceptions<sup>4</sup>, ideas of time and temporality are missing in research on humanitarian and development volunteering, despite the fact that most research on volunteering focuses on delivery of specific projects, or on time-limited volunteering programmes. Understanding the roles of

volunteers in conflicts and emergencies demands particular sensitivity to time. The emphasis on an ‘emergency’ immediately implies something with a particular and shorter timeframe than everyday life. Conflicts are spoken about using language that makes time a key factor, evident in the differentiation of ‘protracted’ conflicts – when temporariness is “immobilized”<sup>5</sup> – from other forms.

The ways volunteers’ activities in these contexts are understood also reference particular timeframes. The urgency that comes with emergencies and humanitarian crises engages volunteers in providing relief services quickly to reach as many people and communities as possible. Indeed, the label of volunteers as ‘first responders’ explicitly defines them in terms of a timeframe – being the ones to get there in a shorter space of time than others. It is because volunteers are present in places over a sustained and longer period of time than outsiders, having established local relationships and knowledge, that they are seen as providing safer access and promoting local ownership.

The humanitarian sector is undergoing significant changes as the conflicts, crises and emergencies it attends to are also changing considerably in their nature, scale and impacts. Humanitarian emergencies, be it man-made conflicts or natural disasters, however, do not suddenly break out. Rather, they arise in particular and shifting historical, social, political, economic, and environmental contexts and affect individuals and communities in diverse ways over time. The experiences of crises and the responses towards it differ for different people and vary over time, and are shaped in uneven ways by their historical and current positions and relationships with the contexts in which they live and volunteer, as well as, their aspirations for future. However, when the priority becomes one of immediate containment of emergencies, and when the value of volunteering often gets measured in terms of the direct and tangible impact on those directly affected by crises, this can produce a timeframe that closes off

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<sup>2</sup> Chen, 2017; Lewis, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, 2016; p. 88

<sup>4</sup> Laurie and Baillie Smith, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Brun and Fábos, 2015

consideration of other factors that shape volunteers' experiences and capacities both immediately and long term.

This theme paper then offers some initial reflections on the importance of time and temporalities – an understanding and lived experience of time - when analysing volunteers' roles in humanitarian emergencies. We do this through three themes. We start with a consideration of the ways other forms of volunteering can sit alongside and precede volunteering in crises and conflicts. Secondly, we show how volunteering activities fail to fit within established humanitarian labels, and argue that the type and timeframe of engagement by particular actors play a critical role in shaping volunteer experiences and activities in the long term. Finally, we turn to consider volunteer temporalities, reminding ourselves of the ways individuals' volunteer biographies can stretch beyond short term programming and the needs of particular crises.

Across these three themes, we argue that the use of singular names such as, 'conflict' or 'emergency volunteer' fixes volunteer activity through particular snapshots of moments and practices. This means we fail to adequately situate volunteers in the contexts of the diverse and changing relationships, needs and activities that shape their volunteering over time. But at the same time, the relationships, knowledges and experiences are key to the ways volunteers are understood as humanitarian and development actors, providing legitimacy to the organisations that work through them. Consequently, questioning the timeframes through which volunteering in emergencies is framed is critical to seeing volunteering beyond media spotlights, celebrations of heroism or commemorations of suffering.

## Volunteering in conflicts and emergencies, or just volunteering?

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*There are no different volunteers, they are all under the [NS], they are trained to help in any disaster, man-made or natural disaster, he can help during malaria epidemics, during floods, give first aid in the community, do home visits and everything, this is the idea of the [NS] to build the capacity of the [NS]. There is no difference in the volunteer who helps in malaria or national or aids or community, a volunteer can do any. (Female Volunteer)*

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Humanitarian volunteering is understood by many to be the immediate and spontaneous relief services offered by people that are close to the scene of emergencies, and provided to direct victims of humanitarian crises. Approximately 17 million volunteers participate in the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement each year across 189 countries<sup>6</sup>. Twenty-six percent of these volunteers act in humanitarian emergencies performing a wide range of activities, from providing humanitarian assistance at the frontline of disasters and conflicts, to playing a crucial role in disaster preparedness and recovery, health promotion, treatment and social services, community and peacebuilding activities, as well as, general support services<sup>7</sup>.

The varied areas of work and the multiple roles performed by volunteers in emergencies are recognised by the Movement in many of their policy documents, including how roles shift with changing contexts and the implication for volunteer management, particularly on issues such as, volunteer capacities, recruitment and retention<sup>8</sup>. The ViCE research data shows that there are both emergency volunteering and everyday volunteering occurring simultaneously in humanitarian emergencies. Volunteering in emergencies, therefore, is not just the immediate and the spontaneous, but also the routine and mundane, everyday volunteering that are required to keep communities going in particular moments of crisis and over time.

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<sup>6</sup> Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015

<sup>7</sup> IFRC 2011

<sup>8</sup> IFRC, 2011; IFRC, 2012; IFRC, 2014; IFRC (n.d.)

Despite acknowledging multiple roles of volunteers in humanitarian settings and emergencies, some humanitarian organisations still view volunteering in a discrete form, separate from prevailing practices, relationships and histories of volunteering that emerged over time in diverse cultural settings.

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*Some other [National Societies] haven't got a good tradition of just delivering normal humanitarian services.... There's a need for the NS to completely rebrand itself as a humanitarian institution and deliver normal local humanitarian services in a conflict based environment. It's just an extension of the same, and you're already accepted as part of the community and it was previously a high conflict sensitive environment, and yet [volunteers] were allowed to carry on, because they were already giving good service and perceived to be impartial services built on local voluntarism, not a foreign imported kind of program or project, which can get people into trouble. So I think we need to do more to deepen encouragement for local voluntarism as the platform on which anything additional can be build, other than this country tradition that nothing can happen unless it's funded by somebody else. (Male Staff)*

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The quote at the start of this section however shows the range of activities volunteers provide in emergency settings and how some Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies do not differentiate between volunteers based on the services they offer to different people and communities at different times. For them, humanitarian volunteering is as much about doing routine home visits in communities as providing relief services during epidemics and disasters. Recognising these everyday volunteering that goes hand in hand with emergency volunteering is crucial to understanding what volunteering means in conflicts and emergencies in its entirety. It is also part of recognising a longer timeframe of volunteering activity than the immediate need of a crisis or emergency.

Approaching humanitarian volunteering as a distinct model of volunteering may reflect particular programming instrumentalities, but can side-line the histories and ideas of volunteering already existing in those communities and the connections volunteers have with communities and places over time. As the quote suggests, "normal" humanitarian

services that are already being provided and the volunteering that is "accepted as part of the community" play a crucial role in shaping the emergency volunteering services provided in times of disasters and other crises. But a focus on only selected forms of volunteering that fit emergency response closes down spaces for these kinds of volunteering which are crucial to longer term volunteer capacity and resilience, as well as to the ongoing support of marginalised groups.

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*And actually, we did some things in [our country] and it worked extremely well in the south because of the relationships that we had and the understanding and the closeness that we had worked together. This worked very well; then it did not work in other parts of the country because we did not have this relationship, and I think that the volunteers with the [NS] actually played a very big role. (Male Staff)*

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Local volunteers in humanitarian emergencies are acclaimed for their ability to build trust and long-lasting relationships with their communities that enable them to access vulnerable populations and build social capital. There is a risk that the immediate and instantaneous can side-line longer histories of volunteering, whilst at the same time relying on selected aspects of those histories to ensure that practices fit key strategic goals such as effectiveness, low costs and legitimacy. This can then mean that certain features of volunteering in a particular place over a period of time will be promoted and supported, where they fit these goals and their particular timelines. Others risk being marginalised or undermined, meaning that those forms and dimensions of volunteering that are needed over longer periods – 'normal' volunteering – may be put at risk. As we show here and below, these forms need to be sustained through and beyond crises, conflicts and emergencies.

## Volunteer Roles and Multiple Timeframes

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*Because for example, in [place A] or [place B], our volunteers are working in conflict context, then flood came and they have to shift from working conflict to working natural disaster, and it's the same community who are going to be affected, so they have to work in different context now, dealing with the conflict at the same time, so it's not an easy context for them to work with. (Female Staff)*

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Different timeframes of activity and needs not only come together between emergencies and crises, and longer term volunteer activity, but also with the ways multiple challenges and events create simultaneous temporalities which shape volunteer roles. Elsewhere, research has shown how ideas and practices of volunteering move and circulate within and between places over time and undergo several changes and transformations as they interact and overlap<sup>9</sup>. Volunteers live and work through “moments of disparate temporalities”<sup>10</sup> which shape their volunteer roles and capacities. The ViCE data show how volunteering roles do not always develop in a linear way, but are shaped through multiple activities with different timeframes, which engage different forms of volunteer knowledge and capacity and demand different roles.

Changes in volunteering activity can then occur simultaneously as well as over time, which has implications for volunteers’ ability to volunteer, availability of resources, their capacity to understand and adapt to changing situations, and their own shifting status, which affect their responses in diverse circumstances. The impact of multiple or simultaneous conflicts and crises adds another layer of vulnerability to already prevailing inequalities and challenges that both volunteers and their communities face in their everyday lives that further shape humanitarian volunteering.

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*There are many problems to name such as, the insecurity, drought, unemployment. People have been suffering a lot from these areas. About 60 to 70 percent of the youth are unemployed. People with education of 16 and 14 years are jobless. Last year, the drought destroyed 70 percent of the harvest. This year, all grasses have dried up. Lack of rain and poverty is all here. People are very poor. And causes for the poverty are also these three things: insecurity, drought and joblessness. These three things have made people suffer a lot. (Male Volunteer)*

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Different challenges will work to different temporalities, creating difficulties in prioritisation and the allocation of volunteer roles. But unequal temporalities are not always

given adequate attention in understanding what shapes humanitarian volunteering. Conflicts and emergencies do not bring about “clean slates for new opportunities and social constructions”<sup>11</sup>; actions and responses that take place in such situations are considerably shaped by existing relationships within and between communities, and their historical and current conflicts over space, identities and resources.

Volunteering in humanitarian emergencies is also shaped by the multiple and interlocking problems and everyday challenges affecting communities and volunteers in humanitarian settings and their individual and collective struggles to respond to it. Ignoring these multiple temporalities operating simultaneously will fix contexts and volunteering approaches in specific moments that are partial and selective. The result will be a snapshot of humanitarian volunteering that fails to capture the entire range of activities, roles and their overlaps that constitute volunteering in humanitarian settings and their long-term impacts.

Just as changing contexts require diverse volunteer roles, shifts in programme strategies and sectoral priorities can also have an impact on volunteering and volunteers’ roles in different ways. These then come together with the long-standing relationships and histories, and the challenges facing communities who are also humanitarian actors.

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*The Red Cross has changed its range of work, because, if you ask someone from the civil society in the country about the Red Cross, they will say that we're ambulances and the blood bank, and we do so much more. Right now, we have over 22 projects underway all over the country, we have so much investment from friends, participating National Societies, and we are making quite a large social impact, but society still regards us as the ambulance service, even though we have expertise in many other areas. We have expertise in disasters, we do great work within the migrant sphere of the country, and I could mention so many more, but society still sees us as the ambulance service and nothing more. (Male Volunteer)*

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<sup>9</sup> Baillie Smith, et al., 2017 (forthcoming)

<sup>10</sup> Davidov and Nelson, 2016

<sup>11</sup> Ruwanpura, 2008

The humanitarian responses of the Movement have transformed significantly over the years, bringing medical assistance just one element among its broad range of activities. The separation between 'humanitarianism' and 'development' has also progressively dissolved<sup>12</sup> over this time, with humanitarian organisations increasingly involved in long-term development projects in various settings. The quote suggests that although the Movement and some of its volunteers recognise the broader and more fluid nature of humanitarian volunteering and the need to not categorise them as specific instances and activities, this is not the case in all settings and contexts they operate from, as some still see Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteering as certain types of activities provided at particular moments of time. The lack of understanding of the multiple roles volunteers carry out in crisis situations and over time can lead to misperceptions among the broader public about what humanitarian volunteering means in emergencies and post-emergency situations. This can have considerable implications for the identity and acceptance of the Movement in these communities, and the safety and security of humanitarian volunteers.

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*Just after this conflict we hmm... in our country, the conception of volunteering is very blurred. Some people think, that we have such fraud artists, walking with boxes and collect money for their needs although they hide behind somebody's problems, and ... well, most of the people think, that volunteers are those who are in the [specialist operation] zone. All the time, it seems to them, that since you are a volunteer here, but have you been there and did volunteer work? (Male Volunteer)*

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The categorisation of volunteering under singular names such as 'conflict' volunteering or 'humanitarian' or 'development' volunteering does not convey the full extent of activities and roles that volunteers undertake in humanitarian emergencies, and the transitions among and between volunteers. In fact, humanitarian categories tend to fix people in particular places and social positions which become statuses that work to restrict people's abilities to social and geographical mobility<sup>13</sup>.

The shifts and transitions between volunteer roles have operational implications for the Movement in terms of their ability to manage volunteer transitions and the effects it has on volunteer preparedness, volunteer development and management, community acceptance, network building and volunteering effectiveness. Yet, the quote also suggests that it is imperative to spread more awareness about the Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteering among the public and wider stakeholders, in order for National Societies to build a connection of trust with their local communities. There has already been significant progress achieved in this regard in engaging with broader communities and stakeholders in spreading awareness about the Movement and its extensive repertoire of humanitarian work. But data from ViCE continue to highlight the need for more work on how volunteer activity is understood by wider stakeholders.

### **Towards an Understanding of Volunteers' Timeframes**

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*I worked with the volunteers since 1986, some of them are still volunteering till date, and they don't want to quit, they have their own jobs and they give their free time for the National Society. (Female Staff)*

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Volunteering in humanitarian and development settings is largely understood in terms of the programming and response needs of humanitarian and development organisations. In this way, volunteers' experiences, activities and needs are located within the particular modalities of an intervention in a particular place. The needs that require attention are largely those that then relate to programme efficiency and delivery, as well as retention and wellbeing of volunteers insofar as this supports a response. Consequently, volunteers can come to be named in line with organisational function, such as a humanitarian volunteer, or community health volunteer. This undoubtedly reflects volunteers' significant engagement in particular activities in particular moments, and

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<sup>12</sup> Drazkievicz, 2017

<sup>13</sup> Brun, 2016

over time. But this lens is one which starts from the organisations' agenda, not the experiences of the volunteer.

For many of the volunteers that participated in the ViCE research initiative, their volunteering stretches beyond media spotlights and public ideas of momentary interventions. The roles may differ and their activities and organisations may change over time, but their approaches to volunteering at any given time is shaped by their histories of living in the communities affected, previous experiences of coping with emergencies and their own survival and livelihood strategies, as well as prior experiences of volunteering and providing humanitarian assistance.

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*I joined the Red Cross in 1998, when the country was going through a great disaster situation, when [the event] happened. I started as a victim, because I was a victim of the [event]. I started when they were handing out aid, and I ended up staying in the Red Cross as a volunteer helping other people. (Male Volunteer)*

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Here, we can see how particular experiences of a crisis or emergency are part of an individual's volunteering biography; their volunteering doesn't only relate to the crises or emergencies happening now, but to experiences over time, as we have discussed. This can also be seen in the following example, where people who volunteer have lived through conflicts and crises, have to deal both with immediate challenges in trying to uphold humanitarian principles, but also the ways these connect with their experience of a crisis or conflict over time:

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*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. (Male Staff)*

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The ViCE data then shows that emergency volunteering in humanitarian contexts is often

not performed spontaneously, but shaped by histories and practices of volunteering in a community, and affected by the relationships volunteers and communities have built with each other over time. This can present challenges, but also work as a resource for organisations working to respond to crises and emergencies:

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*Organisations come and enter in [place] generally... when this organisation needs volunteers or they need some people to work, ... the [NS] provide their volunteers this opportunity, to the old volunteers and ask them because they know their experience and know their profile to do that, and they tell them to make a link between the others and the organisation [so] that they can provide this job and this service for them..(Female Volunteer)*

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Volunteers' histories of volunteer activity can become part of the range of connections and sources of knowledge that enable humanitarian responses. What follows from this is that individuals' volunteering transcends the timeframes of humanitarian and development organisations and activities. This can happen over time, since volunteers work in multiple humanitarian crises as they affect communities. But it can also work within the specific timeframes of conflicts and crises, which can be short-term or protracted, but which do not fully contain the types of activities volunteers do.

The ViCE Initiative reveals the importance of paying attention to whose timeframes we use to talk about volunteering in conflicts and crises. By working within particular organisational approaches or responses, the long-term challenges, experiences and implications of volunteering in a crises situation are likely to be missed, unless they support immediate delivery goals. This is significant in the context of the emotional impacts on volunteers<sup>14</sup>, as well as in terms of the wider volunteering economy. For example, as the IFRC Global Review of Volunteering notes, remuneration for volunteering that fits donor needs can undermine sustained community volunteering<sup>15</sup>. This highlights the importance of sustained engagement as a volunteering

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<sup>14</sup> Theme Paper 6 discusses this topic in further depth.

<sup>15</sup> Hazeldine and Baillie Smith, 2015

engaging organisation within a setting – such as a Red Cross National Society – as opposed to actors who engage volunteers periodically.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have offered some initial reflections on the different timeframes that are used to capture the activities of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies. We have argued that it is critical to recognise the diverse range

of activities volunteers carry out in different circumstances and the transitions and overlaps, among and between them, to understand what constitute volunteering in conflicts and emergencies. A more fluid understanding of volunteering and its connection with multiple temporalities also helps to recognise volunteering as a process of diverse ways of coping and responding to everyday and emergency challenges and inequalities, rather than as a snapshot solution to spontaneous crises and emergencies.

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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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