"Community volunteers were the only ones putting their hands up... A lot (of volunteers) didn’t want to be part of that. But there were also a lot who said, ‘No-one else will do this. It has to be us. This is our community.’"

– Red Cross aid worker, IFRC, Global Review of Volunteering
For much of the past half-century, efforts to reduce global instability and manage risk have largely followed centralized models that emphasize technical expertise and the coordination of actors external to local communities. These models have viewed local actors as recipients of services rather than as key drivers and participants in reducing risk. More recent efforts to strengthen community resilience have acknowledged the value of participation by a range of traditionally disempowered stakeholders, recognizing local actors as the starting point for community resilience. Such approaches view people not only as vulnerable and at-risk but also as capable of self-organizing and leading efforts to improve community resilience, drawing on local expertise and skills, human agency and ownership and empowerment to do so.

The battle for resilience will be won or lost with communities. Drawing on original field research and secondary sources, this chapter investigates how the distinctive characteristics of local volunteerism, particularly the ability to build relationships and self-organize, expand or diminish communities’ capacities to cope with shocks and stresses. Volunteerism is a principal mechanism through which individuals and households connect and organize with others as part of a resilient system. The relational qualities of volunteerism shape options and opportunities for managing risk, particularly in the most isolated contexts. Yet because volunteerism is based on human relationships, it has its own challenges rooted in local power structures and social inequalities. Exploring these distinctive characteristics of voluntary action illustrates the strengths and limitations of local volunteerism in bolstering community resilience.
We repair our road by ourselves. We start with our own strength and resources instead of waiting for support from outside. If we wait for support, it takes a long time. We just want to solve our problem now.

Focus group participant, Tanzania, SWVR field research

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes a people-centred approach to development. At the same time, the growing influence of major emerging economies and of new partnerships among low- and middle-income countries is shifting the focus from external aid to development cooperation for strengthened domestic capacities. A new emphasis on national ownership and leadership seeks to align external assistance with national frameworks, policies and plans and to situate development processes and accountabilities within a wider social contract. Yet while localization discussions often focus on national ownership, less attention is paid to community-level ownership. Fully valuing local solutions means focusing on community self-reliance, social justice and decision-making; facilitating rights and participation; reducing inequalities; and welcoming continual feedback and course correction.

Recognizing the value of local capacities mobilized through volunteering, this chapter explores its shape in communities at the frontline of disaster and risk. Drawing on the field research, it looks closely at the top two distinctive characteristics of volunteerism highlighted by communities themselves: the human-centred connections and self-organization of local volunteers, qualities that can both help and hinder community resilience. Finally, it balances these contributions with the limitations of voluntary action, particularly when communities are isolated from wider groups of actors within the resilience systems.

Figure 2.1

Scope of chapter 2

How do volunteerism and resilience interact at the community level?
Expressions of local volunteering in the community

Local volunteering, both formal and informal, encompasses a remarkably broad array of activities to support community resilience. As detailed in the 2011 and 2015 SWVRs, these activities range from service delivery to social advocacy and participation in processes that challenge poor governance. Local voluntary action typically manifests as voluntary cooperation among people without reliance on centralized authorities or explicit external command. It depends on the freedom and ability to assemble, to organize and prioritize and to mobilize others based on shared values.

Field research for this report revealed diverse examples of local people voluntarily coming together to prepare for and cope with conflict and crises – for example, by building awareness, by supplying local security and protection, by planting and protecting marshes and forests, by strengthening infrastructure (roads, bridges, water drainage systems, water supply) and by otherwise buttressing their communities against anticipated threats (figure 2.2).

The bubbles represent how many of the 15 SWVR research communities reported volunteer activity corresponding to a sector or type.
During the rainy season, the canal is often destroyed by the flooding so we get together to help each other to repair it… If the volunteers did not perform these activities, they would not be provided for by any other actor. Only our community knows the reality and the problems we have to deal with… We cannot take the liberty to wait for external people to bring solutions to problems that are ours.

Focus group participant, Madagascar, SWVR field research

Often motivated by solidarity and mutual aid, people living under conditions of vulnerability are assuming much of the responsibility for the welfare of their community by staking their survival on shared voluntary contributions. With, and often without, a formal shift of responsibility, power or resources from higher authorities, local volunteers are helping their communities cope with stresses and spontaneously respond to shocks. When supported by freedom of association and freedom of expression, local volunteerism provides avenues for collective action to reinforce strengths and resources from within communities. Although local volunteering reflects diverse forms of expression, social action is at its core (figure 2.3).
COMMUNITIES BENEFIT DIFFERENTLY FROM FORMAL AND INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

The diverse forms of volunteerism discussed in chapter 1 bring different strengths and challenges to community resilience. Although informal volunteers may affiliate with a formal organization or community structure, much local volunteering is spontaneous and informal, unmediated by an organization that may be able to coordinate larger-scale volunteer efforts. Informal volunteering can draw on the power of human relationships to strengthen trust and social solidarity, enhance shared meaning within groups and lead to the types of collective action that communities often rely on in times of adversity. Informal volunteerism was typically viewed by the field research communities as more flexible and responsive and better able to adapt to unexpected changes than formal volunteerism. Its reliance on informal bonds meant that volunteers were also free to exclude certain people from the benefits, reinforcing dynamics that may hold back development.

Formal volunteering also takes place in local communities, but it is less common than informal volunteering, particularly in lower-income countries. The field research found that formal volunteering is more likely to challenge traditional cultural roles and responsibilities, especially those related to gender, and can expand leadership roles for women. Formal volunteering exposes communities to new organizational norms and values. It can open access to community networks, strengthen community capacity by training people in new skills, widen access to resources and enhance opportunities for employment, all of which can strengthen community resilience for the long term (box 2.1). The associated value and benefits to volunteers are also often higher for formal volunteerism, in part because it is typically more visible and thus more valued.

Both types of volunteering are important for building resilience and both come with multiple constraints, from the weaker access to resources and influence over decision-making associated with informal volunteerism to the restrictive policies and norms associated with both local and external manifestations of formal volunteerism. These dynamics suggest that the shortcomings of local, informal voluntary action can be mitigated when local volunteering is complemented by more organized institutional responses.

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**Box 2.1**

FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Exchanging knowledge on gender-based violence in Myanmar

When external actors seek input from local volunteers, volunteers can contribute to the development of context-appropriate interventions for community resilience.

May Doe Kabar National Network of Rural Women, a network of women’s groups in Myanmar funded by the United Nations Development Programme, gathered information on gender-based violence by partnering with the township-based organization Susee Ar Man and its extensive network of women volunteers. The volunteers used mobile phone apps to gather data from 912 women participating in Susee Ar Man groups. May Doe Kabar used the survey data to inform advocacy and action on gender-based violence within their states and regions, and Susee Ar Man and its volunteers identified the key issues and made recommendations to stakeholders on locally appropriate prevention and responses. This joint learning and exchange of information between local volunteers and external organizations resulted in interventions that respondents described as highly appropriate and effective under the local conditions.

*Source: SWVR field research*
Organized volunteerism is more impartial, because they do not care whether they know personally the beneficiary or not... We can rely on them to identify the most urgent needs and vulnerable persons and to act rapidly and in a fair way.

— Farmer, Burundi, SWVR field research

While formal volunteering generally represented a unidirectional transfer of skills, labour and resources, informal volunteering often embodied a more reciprocal form of giving and receiving.

However, the distinction between organization-based and informal volunteerism is not always clear-cut, particularly at the community level. Much of the more formalized expression of voluntary action in the field research communities was self-organized. Volunteers who were not affiliated with formal organizations were sometimes coordinated in ways that straddled the line between organized and self-organized volunteerism. In addition, individuals may have multiple roles within a community that can make it harder to distinguish formal and informal volunteerism. For example, when local leaders organize community action it can be unclear whether they are acting in their formal administrative capacity or as a community member among peers.

COLLECTIVE FORMS OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERING ARE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL OBLIGATION

Respondents in the field research communities stressed that a key reason their communities are resilient is that people pull together to accomplish tasks that the government or other external actors have neglected. Community members volunteered their time, but they also often expected help in return, especially when they engaged in informal volunteering and collective action. One field research participant in Tanzania explained: "When I encounter people who need some support, I help him/her without hesitation. Because I know that I myself may also need support from others tomorrow". While formal volunteering generally represented a unidirectional transfer of skills, labour and resources, informal volunteering often embodied a more reciprocal form of giving and receiving.
Although this communal approach to volunteerism was associated with perceptions of community resilience, it was sometimes viewed as a burdensome expectation. Being constantly on the giving or the receiving end of support can lead to feelings of disempowerment, entitlement and alienation, to the detriment of social cohesion. So while volunteerism as mutual aid can enhance social cohesion, it is embedded in survival strategies that may disproportionately burden those with less to give in return. At what point does community action shift from voluntary to coercive or exploitative, particularly for people with high livelihood opportunity costs associated with their participation? What is the relationship between self-organized volunteering and vulnerability? These issues are discussed later in the chapter.

Local volunteering was also associated with compulsory expressions of collective action. While compulsory actions fall outside the definition of volunteerism, these expressions of "volunteering" were mentioned so frequently in the field research that they warrant attention. Community members often differentiated between compulsory collective action and voluntary community work. They noted that people often participate in compulsory collective action out of fear of community censure or other penalties. People who failed to participate in such unpaid work were fined, shunned or denied access to collectively produced goods or services, such as new water sources or agricultural products.

“There is a rule in the village: even if you do not want to volunteer to solve a problem, you will be forced to do it under pressure by neighbours.”

Focus group participant, Russia, SWVR field research

In contrast, participation in voluntary community work was viewed as intrinsically motivated, as a shared voluntary contribution to enhance the survival and collective welfare of the community. As a focus group participant in Burundi explained: "Compared to local authorities, volunteers are more efficient, because they have more freedom to decide what they do”.

Understanding the different expressions of local volunteering is important for distinguishing it from other types of local and international development and humanitarian action. Several qualities of volunteering set it apart from other approaches to help communities cope with stress and shocks. Of these qualities, communities themselves highlighted volunteerism’s contributions to relationship-building and self-organizing, explored in more detail in the next section.

What communities value: The distinctive contributions of local volunteering to resilience

The field research conducted for this report focused on communities’ perceptions of volunteerism and its distinctive contributions to community resilience (figure 2.4). It revealed how, in difficult times, volunteering brings people in the community together to achieve shared goals, in the process strengthening solidarity and relational bonds and building trust. It also revealed that the self-organizing ability of volunteers was the most commonly noted characteristic among field research respondents, a finding that validates and augments prior evidence of the importance of self-organization for community resilience.
“In times of stress, we share with each other, we help with finding solutions for each other. We’re like family to each other. Some of us may be experienced in one thing, while the other is in another thing; we learn from each other’s knowledge and experiences.”

Focus group participant, Netherlands, SWVR field research

**Distinctive characteristic 1: The human connections in voluntary action shape how communities cope with adversity**

The human-centred connections inherent to local volunteerism are important to communities. The social interactions developed through shared voluntary action create solidarity or “power with others”, as articulated by one community member in Myanmar, which can enhance people’s base of support and make them less vulnerable to the consequences of shocks and stresses. These relationships are also associated with building trust, a critical component of collective action and a self-organized reaction to situations of stress and strain. These relational attributes of volunteering are an important distinguishing characteristic that contributes to building resilient communities. The ability of local volunteers to interact and support each other during stressful times is a prominent predictor of community resilience. As a result, resilience is strongest when people are embedded in a web of diverse networks, relationships and connections that enable capacities and coping mechanisms that are unavailable when people act alone.
Volunteerism is particularly effective in building social cohesion and strengthening solidarity within and between groups as well as in forming networks and relationships. Extensive research has demonstrated how volunteering can create a virtual circle of mutual trust and social cohesion through shared identity, location, experience and motivation. Volunteering allows community members to support each other emotionally in times of crisis, offering encouragement and providing opportunities to meet social needs. Volunteering can enable community members to build relationships with other stakeholders by connecting them with wider support networks. Horizontal local networks developed through volunteering expand people’s access to resources and information in times of stress.

Depending largely on how the relationships are structured, volunteering has the potential to facilitate or block the sharing and distribution of information and learning needed to solve problems, and thus it may enhance or inhibit community resilience.

“Because I know my neighbours very well and we talk a lot about our circumstances, I would call a group of mutual friends, neighbours or relatives and start a lending circuit that my neighbour in need benefits from first. I call people monthly at the time of gathering the money to make sure that everyone gets her share of time.”

Female research participant, Egypt, SWVR field research
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THAT STRENGTHEN TRUST AND SOCIAL COHESION

The field research emphasized the capacity of volunteering to enhance solidarity through mutual assistance. It also identified the value of having a shared vision as a basis for action, particularly in lower-income and rural contexts (box 2.2). Motivations for action through volunteering were often associated with local concepts, such as the Nguni Bantu notion of ubuntu, or humanity towards others, which describes the behaviour that reflects our common humanity. Similar concepts include fihavanana (Malagasy), or recognizing that all people are kin and rely on each other for support; solidaridad (Spanish), meaning working together for the common good; and ujamaa or harambee (Swahili), meaning pulling together to solve a community problem. In one field research community in Russia, “patriotic volunteering” was seen as bringing people together across ethnic and religious lines and expressing a “modern” form of citizenship. These concepts, which emphasize inclusiveness, are central to communities’ perceptions of resilience. When groups share a strong sense of solidarity, volunteering provides a mechanism for managing and sharing risk among peers.

“We live according to the saying: “Stone are those united, and sand those that move apart”.

Local volunteer, Madagascar, SWVR field research

Shared experiences when facing adversity can also build trust. Trust is enhanced through repeated interactions as people labour together to accomplish shared goals. But mutual trust is also needed to motivate people to voluntarily take shared responsibility for collective decision-making in times of stress. Getting people from divided groups to cooperate in volunteer efforts is difficult when the basic elements of trust have not first been established or restored. Thus trust is both the outcome and the foundation of collective action.

Box 2.2

Expressing solidarity by mobilizing volunteers in Darfur

In many of the field research communities, volunteerism was not discussed as an individual activity but rather as a collective social activity rooted in solidarity. In Sudan, nafeer, or “a call to mobilize”, is a basic social activity that relies on collective volunteer engagement. It is used to muster help with planting and harvesting crops during high seasons or drought, quickly mobilize militias to protect harvests from bandits, reconstruct mosques and community buildings destroyed during conflict and meet similar joint needs. These activities, not easily accomplished alone, rely on collective volunteerism during times of peak stress. For instance, without the correct equipment, harvesting crops within the necessary timeframe would be a monumental task for a single farmer. However, when people come together, harvesting is more productive because crops are gathered more quickly and losses are reduced during periods of drought or poor weather. Shared trust, social cohesion and a sense of solidarity are critical to establishing the type of collective and reciprocal volunteerism needed to make such calls to mobilize successful.

Source: SWVR field research
After completing the project, many residents now have confidence that their community can be improved through their own contributions. This is partially due to their trust of the volunteer group members.

Focus group participant, China, SWVR field research

Voluntary action can enhance community resilience in difficult times by bringing together people from different ethnicities, political parties and socioeconomic positions to work together to achieve shared goals. As people from diverse groups in the field research communities volunteered alongside other trusted community members, their interactions enhanced feelings of mutual understanding. For instance, volunteers in Burundi helped people from different groups come together by using shared livelihoods as an entry point for strengthening trust. Volunteers from Christian Orthodox and Muslim communities in Russia united in their shared desire to provide mutual assistance. These interactions not only helped maintain peace between diverse groups but also changed perceptions among bystanders, who saw what people could achieve by working together.

The social interactions embedded in volunteerism can also redefine relationships between groups that have become divided, bringing them together in the pursuit of a common cause. Such relational contacts are particularly important in building community resilience following conflict, which polarizes people and weakens social bonds. For instance, Christian and Muslim volunteers in the Philippines organized and implemented interfaith environmental protection activities. By working together, the mostly young volunteers from different cultures and faith traditions learned more about each other and increased their understanding of people of other cultural and religious backgrounds. As one of them noted: “There was one thing that we could work on together. It was an eye-opener for us.” Comments like this are consistent with prior research, which has found a positive correlation between people’s participation in volunteer organizations and their perceptions of interpersonal trust.

Volunteer Voices:

JACQUELINE

I think that volunteerism is a wonderful opportunity for people to build peace at the same time as building resilience. In acting together, we learn how to overcome ethnic and political differences. Previously, people only helped family or friends, but through volunteering community members learn to help each other, including people they do not know. This strengthens communities. I am particularly proud to see that youth and women form the largest cohort of volunteers. I think that this is because women and youth are more vulnerable so they are often more aware of issues and the need to help.
People with shared backgrounds and circumstances can also benefit from the trust and cohesion developed through voluntary action.\textsuperscript{121} The collaborative work of self-organized local volunteer groups strengthens shared bonds. In the field research communities, the connections that emerged from volunteerism were described as particularly valuable for women and marginalized groups, who banded together to meet shared needs that were often overlooked by more powerful, mainstream groups.

The social cohesion nurtured through volunteerism was reflected in volunteers’ motivations and commitment. Furthermore, given the agency inherent in volunteerism, people who chose to volunteer were also often described by others as selfless, empathic and communicative. As a community member in Bolivia emphasized, the value of volunteers is far more than their capacity to engage with local communities: “They themselves are the community”. Their embeddedness as members of the community feeds into their motivation and commitment to help others.

“There is a greater commitment because…we live here, and we look after our neighbours…so we have a stronger bond and commitment.”

Local volunteer, Bolivia, SWVR field research

Volunteering can strengthen a community’s social capital, weaving a durable network of human relationships that enable new capacities beyond those possible when people act alone.\textsuperscript{122} Prior research has shown that people with strong social support networks are more than twice as likely to respond to emergencies.\textsuperscript{123} Volunteering can also strengthen community identification, which enhances the likelihood that communities will come together and rebuild after conflict or disaster strikes.\textsuperscript{124} Strong relationships are associated with enhanced mutual help and voluntary assistance during adverse times, including help with caring for children, providing emotional support, seeking shelter, obtaining medical help and gathering information (box 2.3).\textsuperscript{125,126}

### German volunteers welcome and resettle refugees

Volunteers across the world are responding to unprecedented levels of forced displacement and migration. In Germany alone, more than 1.4 million displaced people have applied for asylum since 2014. Many Germans are volunteering across towns and cities in response to immigrants’ needs. These volunteers treat new arrivals with empathy and extend a human touch, something that is often missing in formal, top-down responses. Not only does this mean that displaced people are treated with dignity, but it can prevent the most vulnerable among them from being put at further risk.

The town of Neu Wulmstorf in northern Germany has received around 300 refugees and asylum seekers since 2014. A core group of 40 volunteers established a network called Welcome to Neu Wulmstorf. They have worked to support both the immediate needs of refugees and migrants, including shelter, health and safety, and their longer-term needs for resettlement, self-sufficiency and integration. Three years later, in 2017, the volunteer group was still very active, supporting refugees and asylum seekers through activities ranging from one-on-one counselling and language courses to swimming and bicycle repair lessons.

Sources: Karakayali and Kleist 2016; Le Blond and Welters 2017
Together with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, my role is to bring together all Londoners and strengthen our communities. One of the most important lessons I have learned is the power of volunteering in achieving those goals.

Earlier this year, we launched our social integration strategy. Based on considerable research, it sets out a new definition of social integration, emphasizing that it is about more than simply the degree of contact between people but also includes promoting equality and improving people’s levels of activity and participation in their local communities.

But encouraging social integration is a meaningless exercise unless people are provided with opportunities to come together. Volunteering does just that.

Volunteering helps citizens to connect with others in their local communities who may be from entirely different backgrounds. It creates bonds and shared identities that go beyond superficial differences that might otherwise seem important. Volunteering also provides a meaningful way of grappling with social problems – for example, reducing social isolation or improving mental health – for both the volunteer and the person benefiting from the volunteering.

Of course, volunteering is not the only way to improve social integration, nor does it solve every problem. But it is a hugely important tool that government and local authorities can use to bring people together. We know that all Londoners want to feel like valued members of their community and to play an active role in the decisions that shape our city.

But we need to understand better how we attract volunteers and why some people may choose to volunteer in their communities while others do not. For instance, we know older Londoners are more likely to volunteer, and that is why we are supporting a digital reward and recognition pilot to incentivize and reward volunteering among young Londoners. The Mayor’s new multimillion-pound community sport programme, “Sport Unites”, will also focus on ways to better support Londoners who support social integration through volunteering to teach, coach and participate in sports.

Most importantly, the Mayor is determined to find more effective ways to normalize volunteering as part of Londoners’ everyday lives. That means making it easier for people to find activities that suit their interests but also ensuring that employers better support their staff to volunteer in their local community.
When people identify with a place and have even weak relationships with others living there, they are more likely to volunteer in times of crisis to help those around them.127 This proximity and lived experience gives people personal knowledge of local challenges, and volunteering is a means of expressing their human impulse to relieve the suffering of those they interact with. Many examples from the literature demonstrate how volunteers have used their knowledge to care for those at risk. For instance, in West Africa local volunteers risked their lives to immunize and care for people infected with Ebola even though many were afraid of the disease and knew that they would likely be stigmatized by others in their community.128

By providing opportunities to meet other people’s needs, volunteering also allows community members to support each other emotionally through a crisis. Numerous accounts from the field research mentioned the value of emotional support received through mutual voluntary action as well as the sense of shared challenges and mutual understanding that such support engendered. Such esprit de corps is particularly useful during and after stressful events, as people join with others experiencing similar hardships. Some volunteers mentioned feeling less alienated and isolated, and prior research has documented similar benefits.129,130 Voluntary action also provides opportunities for people to escape mundane stresses by enjoying the company of others as they work. Empathy between volunteers can establish a social buffer and can help people under emotional strain bounce back more quickly from adversity.131

“

When you go out in groups, that’s when you have fun. You joke, laugh with the others, and you forget your problems for a while.

Female volunteer, Guatemala, SWVR field research
Volunteerism can also support people emotionally through the organization of activities, rituals and events that provide spaces to collectively acknowledge shared problems. Numerous volunteer groups in the field research communities used music, stories, drama, poetry and dance to communicate messages to the broader community, covering issues ranging from HIV/AIDS and sexual and gender-based violence to the need for unity, tolerance and peace. Such activities, and the platforms for exchange that they provided, were viewed as particularly helpful in refugee camps, where people from different cultures and ethnicities frequently share a constrained common space.

CONNECTING COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH SUPPORT NETWORKS

In addition to strengthening trust for collective action and enabling people to support each other emotionally during adversity, volunteering can enable volunteers to build relationships with other stakeholders inside and outside the community (box 2.4). Horizontal local networks developed through volunteering can expand people’s access to resources and information in times of stress. Studies have documented how peer training in disaster risk reduction practices, which is often conducted by women’s groups and local volunteer networks, has disseminated local knowledge among participants and transferred that shared knowledge to local authorities.

Relationships established through voluntary action expand people's networks of social support. In the Netherlands, people who receive government benefits are encouraged to volunteer. One of the reported benefits of volunteering is that it gets people out of their homes and forces them to interact with others in the community, and these interactions enhance people’s feeling of belonging, an important aspect of community resilience. People are able to draw on the networks they create in this way to enhance their own resilience in the face of adversity.

> What is most important in being a volunteer is that it offers you a strong network of interpersonal relationships. [When times are hard] you can ask assistance from a doctor, a dentist, an agronomist and so on. So volunteerism helps people without a job or money survive.

Local volunteer, Burundi, SWVR field research

In refugee camps, where people from many countries and cultures occupy severely constrained space, volunteer interpreters play an important connective role in making daily life as normal as possible. In one Malawi refugee camp, volunteer interpreters facilitated community connections and learning by breaking through some common communication barriers associated with multicultural and multinational communities. These interpreters not only assisted in connecting refugees to institutions and service providers but also facilitated interactions between refugees from different backgrounds. Respondents asserted that daily life for many of the refugees and the activities of partner organizations in the camp would have essentially “come to a standstill” without both the official and unofficial volunteer interpreters.

Source: SWVR field research
Three local volunteers in Morocco remove stones and debris from an aqueduct (UNV, 2011).
The relationships developed through volunteering can also help community members develop the skills and connections needed for formal employment. This benefit was most frequently mentioned in higher-income countries and tended to be associated with organizational forms of volunteerism. Some newly arrived refugees in Greece reported that they volunteer in order to make connections with potential employers, learn the language and learn more about the culture, all of which could help them find a job in their new country.

Informal mentoring was another commonly observed benefit of volunteer relationships. In higher-income countries, for instance, these new connections were a key source of support for immigrant communities. In Athens and The Hague, more established immigrants supported newcomers through informal networks and connections, helping them to navigate the bureaucracy associated with integration. Likewise, horizontal networks connected people to others with dissimilar ethnic and language backgrounds but with similar problems. In the Netherlands, immigrants who had learned Dutch or who had experience completing official forms helped other immigrants navigate the system. Volunteers who spoke other languages were able to support those who were not yet able to speak any of the more common languages used in their new country.

However, while the human connections characteristic of local volunteerism generally enhances the ability of communities to cope with stress and adversity, in some contexts it may diminish that ability, as shown in table 2.1 and discussed later in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive contributions</th>
<th>Limits and threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust</strong>: A high level of trust among volunteers is linked to enhanced collective action.</td>
<td><strong>Short-term vision</strong>: Volunteerism based on social solidarity and emotional ties may prioritize immediate and urgent needs over long-term prevention and adaptation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solidarity</strong>: Voluntary action can enhance solidarity or &quot;power with others&quot; through mutual assistance.</td>
<td><strong>Exclusion</strong>: Solidarity and collective voluntary action can lead to the exclusion of out-groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cohesion</strong>: Voluntary action helps renegotiate relationships between groups that have been divided and encourages the formation of networks of people with shared causes.</td>
<td><strong>Division</strong>: Facing stresses, there are few incentives for local volunteer groups to embrace people with different identities or divergent views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional support</strong>: Community-based volunteers are likely to identify with and help those who are suffering, which can reduce feelings of alienation and isolation.</td>
<td><strong>Neglect of local voice</strong>: Voluntary relations are often focused internally and power imbalances and lack of affiliation can limit the uptake of volunteers’ local knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local access</strong>: Local volunteers have linkages and access to vulnerable groups.</td>
<td><strong>Internal conflict</strong>: Volunteer groups composed of marginalized populations can cause intercommunity conflict when they organize against broader community decisions or disrupt the status quo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual knowledge</strong>: Local volunteers can contextualize information about the community for external actors.</td>
<td><strong>Social conflict</strong>: Volunteerism based on social solidarity and emotional ties may prioritize immediate and urgent needs over long-term prevention and adaptation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Links to wider networks</strong>: When local volunteers are organized, they can play a bridging function between local and national or international actors.</td>
<td><strong>Neglect of local voice</strong>: Voluntary relations are often focused internally and power imbalances and lack of affiliation can limit the uptake of volunteers’ local knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Distinctive characteristic 2: Volunteers’ capacity to self-organize is a protective factor in resilient communities**

Much of the volunteering experience examined in the field research occurred in response to chronic and recurrent shocks and stresses faced by communities rather than during preparation for or recovery from major and acute crises. The ability of volunteers to self-organize to cope with these situations was seen as fundamental to community resilience. Self-organization, which depends on strong functional relationships to spontaneously “make order” within a cooperative community, bolsters community autonomy by avoiding dependence on outside agents. Self-organization was the most often noted characteristic of volunteerism across the 15 field research communities.

> This work can’t be measured by a financial ruler. We know what we are doing; we value ourselves as the “helping hands” of the village. Without us, the village would be disorganized and poor people would be stuck.

Local volunteer, Myanmar, SWVR field research

**INFORMAL AND LOCAL VOLUNTEERS ORGANIZE IN RESPONSE TO PERCEIVED NEEDS**

Evidence demonstrates that informal local volunteering is more flexible and responsive than both formal volunteerism and development and humanitarian programmes. Being less tied to specific methods and strategies, informal volunteers can quickly adapt to sudden and unexpected changes. Previous research found that around 80 per cent of survivors of the Tangshan earthquake in China were rescued by informal local volunteers who lived in the community and were able to respond quickly. During any crisis when no centralized authority has stepped in to guide and coordinate the response, informal volunteers will

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**Collective action sows resilience in Guatemala**

Ten years ago, nobody cared about the community’s forests. We kept cutting down trees. Then I decided to create a volunteer group to plant trees. I spoke with women in the community and many were interested to participate, which motivated me more. At the start we were 50 women, and a member of the community lent us a piece of land to plant our trees. That is how our group was born.

Volunteering helped me a lot. Ten years ago, I was a different person. I ignored my rights. Before, a man could tell me that I didn’t know anything and I used to cry and think: “Yes, he is right”. I was afraid to say anything in front of men, but not now. Now we discuss and I am not afraid to say what I think. For example, one day someone offended the women in the community and I defended them. The women told me: “Roselia, you are no longer afraid of anything”.

In our group women make their own decisions. Before we had nowhere to go and no way to participate. Before it was only “casa y casa” (house and house). Now we have a place where we can talk, meet, relax and exercise our rights. In the plant nursery, we share our joys and problems. We are united.

We want more people to reforest their mountains across the municipality, so we will spread the message of our volunteer work.

**Volunteer Voices: ROSELIA**
organize to provide emergency assistance. Motivated by humanitarian principles and proximity to those facing an emergency, local volunteers act and respond even without a formal shift of responsibility, power or resources.

A key advantage of self-organized volunteering during crises is its capacity to spontaneously engage more people more quickly than command and control systems are able to. Highly diffuse networks created through local volunteer groups and operating on a massive scale are able to recognize early warning signs and signal a need for a response to immediate threats and hazards. In the field research community in Burundi, local volunteers were referred to as the “community’s eyes spread over the hills”. During the field research period, communities did not experience the types of shocks that would have required mobilizing thousands of additional volunteers; however, numerous reports and media stories recounted instances of emergency response by thousands of self-mobilizing volunteers.138 For communities beset by ongoing stress rather than acute shocks, volunteers can also extend specialist services. Community health workers, for example, provide primary and frontline health care at a level that doctors and nurses cannot generally manage.

The field research also found that communities considered self-organized volunteering to be a feasible way to respond in situations where there was no financial capacity to hire people outside the community. By mobilizing volunteers, communities could reduce costs, making it possible to take actions that they otherwise could not afford to take. In Tanzania, for example, community leaders mobilized volunteers to begin building a school and then leveraged that initial construction to convince the government to provide resources to complete the work.
SELF-ORGANIZATION OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS REFLECTS THEIR AUTONOMY AND OWNERSHIP

People’s ability to organize through voluntary action was valued as an expression of their autonomy and ownership. Some respondents in the field research communities asserted that volunteering in their own community made them more influential and more eager and committed to serving their community, and some local volunteers expressed a preference for solving problems internally. As one volunteer in Madagascar expressed: “Our community is like a household. As long as we can, we do not call external people to sort the problem; we try to do it internally.” Such sentiments are often connected to statements of personal responsibility emerging from voluntary engagement – for example, “strengthening our community.” A comment on the role of volunteerism in communities under strain summarizes this rationale well:

“Community volunteers] were the only ones putting their hands up... A lot [of volunteers] didn’t want to be part of that. But there were also a lot who said, “No-one else will do this. It has to be us. This is our community”.

SELF-ORGANIZED VOLUNTEERING IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR ISOLATED AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Although self-organized volunteering was evident in all 15 field research communities, the need was particularly acute in communities with few alternative options for support. This includes communities in remote or rural areas or in areas recovering from conflict and communities of people who are not well integrated into the local social structure, such as migrants in large cities. For such communities, a lack of formal services or prohibitive barriers to reaching those services mean that self-organization may be the only way to get things done.

“People who have money in town may solve problems by paying money, but we solve problems by our own cooperation because we are not rich.”

Research participant, Sri Lanka, SWVR field research

Self-organized volunteerism is especially prevalent in rural areas, where other types of support are less available. Small and rural communities are likely to be hit especially hard when disaster strikes, including adverse weather, environmental changes and conflict, because residents are often dependent for their livelihoods on conditions that are adversely impacted by such calamitous events. Because these outlying areas are often beyond the reach of national and international development and humanitarian assistance services, they rely on self-organized voluntary action as a survival strategy.

Self-organized volunteering is also a key strategy for marginalized groups whose needs are not adequately addressed by formal institutions (figure 2.5). Self-organized volunteering gives voice to marginalized groups and connects them with others in advocating for their needs. For example, in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi a group of people with disabilities organized to improve their limited access to education and to address their
In the absence of wider support structures, volunteers decide their own community priorities on their own terms.

Some groups may need to self-organize separately in addition to what they are expected to contribute to their community if their specific needs are not met, meaning extra responsibilities.

Community action can help identify the most vulnerable members and provide additional support in times of crisis.

In the absence of response systems, local volunteers speedily and directly respond where required, providing services and support within the community.

Efforts are pooled to recover from events, usually with a clear division of labour and in some cases sanctions for those who do not participate.

In some contexts, volunteers can connect beyond their own groups and communities to others to help balance risks more widely and/or prevent conflict and competition.

Communities may work together to advocate for resources and support from elsewhere.

Volunteers help connect excluded groups to systems of support which already exist (for example, statutory systems of welfare support).

Volunteers help tailor services and needs to increase outreach and relevance for excluded groups, improving accessibility.

Strong bonds of trust and reciprocity may develop within a group as a counter to being excluded by others.

Where groups are stigmatized or marginalized, volunteers may provide support deliberately not extended by others.

Volunteers may organize based on group solidarity, influence wider service provision and work towards inclusion.
Without the voluntary networks they established, their needs would have remained invisible to others in the camp. Likewise, in Russia volunteers supported community members who were marginalized because of their HIV status or drug or alcohol addiction to access services. Whether ostracized or simply unable to tap into mainstream areas of support and services, marginalized community members may come together through formal and informal volunteer networks and associations to create their own support structures to address these sensitive issues.

Disenfranchised women also organize to meet their needs through volunteerism. Women in the field research communities reported participating in volunteer women’s groups to overcome feelings of vulnerability. They relied on collective action with other women to reduce the stresses and insecurities they encounter as women, particularly related to household responsibilities such as child rearing and other care roles.

In some communities, however, women were unable to benefit from volunteer opportunities. This was most common in rural communities and in areas without a strong presence of external actors. In some rural communities women suggested that men could speak for them in the field research, yet their perspectives suggested that women could be doubly and even triply burdened when volunteering was added to their productive and reproductive responsibilities. Self-organizing to address women’s own priority needs often came on top of their household and livelihood responsibilities as well as other forms of voluntary work in line with community priorities determined by (often male) community leaders. Where such hierarchies exist, taking the community as a starting point for shared interests and priorities and as a basis for collective action may be problematic, as is explored later in this report.
These examples demonstrate some of the barriers to self-organization in less open and equal communities and societies. Social and political challenges often constrain people’s freedom and space to associate and organize for voluntary action. Lack of access to resources also limits what can be accomplished. Whereas in more open contexts self-organization may be a useful “stepping stone” to changing the policies and practices of wider actors, in other contexts self-organized volunteering may be only a short-term solution.

While the self-organizing characteristics of local volunteerism generally enhance the ability of communities to cope with stress and adversity, in some contexts they may diminish that ability, as shown in table 2.2 and discussed in the next section.

**Limitations and challenges of local volunteering**

Although local voluntary action offers a wealth of distinctive advantages to communities, such as strengthening relationships and connections and self-organizing for mutual support, it can also face substantial challenges. Some observers question whether community members have the desire or capacity to voluntarily manage risk.140 Others are concerned that volunteering may crowd out public provision. Imbalances of power in the community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive contributions</th>
<th>Limits and threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speed and immediacy:</strong> Local volunteers provide frontline and immediate first response in a crisis.</td>
<td><strong>Exploitation:</strong> Local volunteers who organize to meet particular needs can be used as low-cost labour with insufficient compensation or support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scale:</strong> Spontaneous volunteering can mobilize large numbers of people during a crisis; wide geographic dispersion of volunteers enables early recognition of threats.</td>
<td><strong>Substitutive:</strong> Local volunteers fill gaps in government services, potentially discouraging public investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability:</strong> Local volunteers are often the only sources of help available in a crisis and can organize when centralized authorities are unavailable to guide and coordinate an emergency response.</td>
<td><strong>Compulsory:</strong> Some local community resilience strategies require “voluntary participation,” with people who fail to participate being fined, shunned socially or denied access to collectively produced goods or services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility:</strong> Informal local voluntary action is less tied to standard methods and procedures and can more readily adapt to changing local conditions.</td>
<td><strong>Scale:</strong> In some contexts, self-organization can mean an inability to effectively use large numbers of local volunteers during crises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Innovation:</strong> Local volunteers often problem-solve based on immediate needs and resources.</td>
<td><strong>Isolation:</strong> Volunteers not connected to mainstream services are dependent on local resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership:</strong> Self-determined priorities and limited control by external actors foster a voluntary response and ownership of solutions.</td>
<td><strong>Segmentation:</strong> Local volunteering is often a survival strategy for vulnerable or minority groups that self-organize to meet specific needs that are not being met by the wider community. This may not counter processes of marginalization and instead increase the burden on the most vulnerable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost-effectiveness:</strong> Efforts to organize draw on the available and in-kind resources of volunteers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
might mean that, in practice, agency is not genuinely devolved to voluntary groups, throwing into doubt the legitimacy and representativeness of voluntary action.\textsuperscript{141} And even though volunteerism is influenced by wider social processes and political structures, the efforts of local volunteers can be isolated from those processes and structures, limiting the resources and formal support structures available for local action. As a consequence, communities may be stuck in a reactive cycle of coping with stresses and shocks rather than investing in prevention measures. These challenges are explored below with an eye to better understanding how to alleviate or overcome them through links with external agents, the subject of chapter 3.

VOLUNTEERS MAY EXCLUDE THOSE MOST IN NEED OF HELP

Voluntary community action is often depicted as a harmonious and consensual endeavour. But that view fails to consider the countervailing influences of powerful interests, local elites, social differences and prejudices related to gender, class, caste and ethnic differences within communities, which can block inclusive action. Unequal power relations within geopolitical, social and economic systems can leave communities, groups and individuals more vulnerable to risk because of their marginal position. As a relational approach to cooperation, volunteerism may be influenced by the status of those involved.

Volunteering is not inevitably inclusive or egalitarian and can take advantage of people who are vulnerable (often youth, women, poor people and people with disabilities).\textsuperscript{142} Even in communities that are relatively cohesive, the exclusion of vulnerable groups is a persistent reality because of complications created by interpersonal power relations and social inequalities. In addition, when people collectively experience stress they tend to focus on helping those within their own circles. How marginalized groups are incorporated into resilience systems through volunteerism may determine whether volunteerism is empowering or disempowering.

PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION AND EXCLUSION MAY DIFFER BY TYPE OF VOLUNTARY ACTION

Research participants frequently noted the exclusion of youth, women and people with dissenting opinions from local voluntary groups or their lack of voice and decision-making power in the groups that they did belong to. The roles of local informal volunteers often matched traditional gender roles. For both women and men, but especially for women, this restricted their participation in the full range of volunteering roles. Although local volunteering takes place outside the household, for women it was often seen as an extension of their domestic or caring duties, so volunteering often provided less obvious benefits to women beyond personal fulfilment and strengthening their networks of solidarity. Men’s activities were also compartmentalized. Particularly in low-income countries men were most often tasked with activities requiring technical skills or physical strength, and they were often stigmatized for volunteering instead of making money as the family breadwinner. This social expectation often discouraged men from participating in any form of voluntary activity, a particularly pronounced phenomenon in informal volunteerism.

\begin{quote}
Male volunteers may receive negative stigma as they're expected to be the breadwinner of a family. They're not expected to work for little to no pay.
\end{quote}

- Local volunteer, Netherlands, SWVR field research
What images come to mind when you think of a disaster? Search and rescue teams pulling people from the rubble? Relief camps filled with displaced families receiving aid from international organizations? These are the typical images we see in the media. However, they misrepresent the reality that the vast majority of people are rescued and helped by their fellow community members after a disaster.

Researchers have documented the effectiveness of community voluntary groups that spontaneously self-organize after disasters, noting the need for outside aid providers to not undermine local resilience. Women are often the architects of community resilience, and empowering women is critical to ensuring that community-led disaster responses are strong and effective.

For example, in pastoral communities of Kenya and Ethiopia, the provision of capacity-building support to women’s savings and loans groups improved livelihood diversification and helped communities better manage the risks associated with the 2005–08 drought cycle. In Nepal, grassroots women’s organizations are upgrading settlement infrastructure to reduce disaster risks, participating in multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaborating with local government. The resulting credibility has earned women’s organizations public roles in emergency preparedness and seats on committees that allocate resources for disaster risk reduction.

These are two examples in a body of mounting evidence that women’s empowerment is key to the resilience that leads to effective local responses to disasters. They also demonstrate the value of recognizing communities not as project beneficiaries but rather as partners who can set priorities, influence policies, and act and react in ways that are responsive to community needs.

While volunteering can unite people around cohesive goals in confronting adversity, differences between the types and expressions of volunteerism can affect who is excluded and how volunteerism contributes to community resilience. Informal volunteer groups have the flexibility to exclude people outside their own circles. For example, reflecting on the decision not join a formal volunteer emergency team, one informal local volunteer in Burundi explained: “I prefer not to engage in the Red Cross volunteer team because I do not want people to tell me how I have to work, and for whom, for free. I prefer to decide by myself who to help and what to do when the opportunity or the event occurs.”

Though barriers to participation in formal volunteerism may be higher, for those actually engaged, formal volunteerism as driven by organizational policies and standards appeared to be more structured and fair. In contrast, informal volunteering was perceived as less inclusive since it relied on the ability to guarantee reciprocity among close connections and consequently required the freedom to exclude and even discriminate. In the field research community in Sudan, the introduction of formal volunteerism provided structured opportunities for women to participate in volunteer work and gain recognition for their activities. For example, the conditions for participating in volunteer savings associations stipulated that both women and men should be selected as representatives and trained for leadership roles. This is an important finding because inclusiveness and the participation of diverse groups in decision-making are key attributes of resilient communities.
The lake has saved many people from starvation, but only people located close to the lake. Red cross volunteers have saved everybody without discrimination. In this sense, we can say that volunteers are more generous than the lake.

24-year-old fisherman, Burundi, SWVR field research

VOLUNTEERING CAN BE STIGMATIZING

As a people-centred and relational approach to building community resilience, volunteerism can lead to exclusion through the social judgements that people make about volunteers and voluntary action. In some communities volunteer participation is stigmatized, while in others conversely a failure to participate is stigmatized. A woman in the field research community in Egypt shared her experience of stigmatization by a family member: “One day what prevented me from continuing my volunteer services to neighbours was my husband’s comment, 'What will people think? Will they think that you’re taking something in return?’”. Another respondent reported, “We also face criticism from some community members, reproaching us about having time to waste or mocking us because we are silly enough to work without remuneration. Sadly, our work is depreciated because our work is free.”

Sometimes because of the nature of volunteering work I need to travel in the early morning or evening. I was criticized for being out in the community away from my house, talking to lots of different people, including men. Lots of people gossiped about me.

Female volunteer, Myanmar, SWVR field research

Similar sentiments were expressed in more economically developed contexts as well. For instance, new immigrants in the Netherlands reported feeling distrusted and stigmatized by native residents, which discouraged them from volunteering. Others said they felt judged for volunteering after overhearing comments that volunteering is appropriate only for people with surplus time and resources. Citizens in Greece who volunteered to help recent immigrants and refugees often reported being stigmatized, reflecting the polarization of opinion on immigration. A small number of respondents also viewed volunteering as counterproductive, believing that it exploited young people and women and discouraged governments from solving social problems.

There is a prejudice in the Greek culture that volunteers are exploited by people that have money, and this association is overshadowing the word “volunteer”...so they don’t want to consider themselves as volunteers. They consider themselves as active citizens.

Local volunteer, Greece, SWVR field research
In addition to stigmatization, other cultural and contextual issues, such as conflict and safety, influence people’s decisions about volunteering in unstable conditions. As emphasized in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, concerns about safety are particularly relevant to women, who often feel threatened in situations that could result in violence. This sentiment was reflected in a comment by a female focus group participant in Egypt:

“Some volunteering conditions, like in refugee camps, are not accepted by me or my family because sometimes they are in remote places or occur during dangerous emergencies. As a female and a parent, places that pose a danger or that have unreliable organization might hinder my participation.”

Focus group participant, Egypt, SWVR field research

LOCAL VOLUNTEERING CAN DISPROPORTIONATELY DISADVANTAGE VULNERABLE PEOPLE

Adverse events and circumstances put even more demands on the limited time, capacity and resources of vulnerable people. Resource constraints make it difficult for people to volunteer, and respondents considered such constraints to be a limiting condition for sustaining self-organized volunteerism over the long term. Certain cohorts are particularly stretched during crises and are more likely to be severely affected by shocks and stresses. People living in extreme poverty are often hurt most by disasters and conflicts, both physically and psychologically, in part because of the fragility of the conditions in which they live. Risk reduction measures rarely include them, so the poor are more likely to suffer the economic, physical and other consequences of crises.

Women and girls are also disproportionately vulnerable to crises, including natural disasters, and typically suffer higher fatality rates during disasters than other groups. This vulnerability is often linked to cultural and behavioural limitations on their mobility, along with socially prescribed norms, roles and obligations for care taking. Yet women are not inherently vulnerable to disasters, and their risk of dying during disasters can be greatly reduced when social norms reflect greater gender equity (box 2.5). On the positive side, engaging women in disaster planning can greatly reduce their risk and mortality. In 1991, Cyclone Gorky killed 138,866 people in Bangladesh. Women who died outnumbered men who died 14:1. Over the next 16 years, community-based disaster preparedness groups, many led by women, developed disaster response plans, including enhanced early warning and evacuation plans. When Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh in 2007, far fewer people died (around 4,400) and the gender mortality ratio decreased to 5:1. While any gender disproportion in fatalities is unacceptable, the progress made over those 16 years reveals the value of including women as community mobilizers: training them, working with them to communicate early warning messages and creating women-only spaces for discussion and action.

Sources: Arnold and de Cosmo 2015; Paul and Rashid 2016
there is some evidence that shocks and stresses can also alter gender roles and norms – for example, when women take on traditionally male governance or economic roles during conflict.\textsuperscript{155}

Indigenous peoples, whose livelihoods often depend on natural resources, are severely disadvantaged when these resources are damaged or destroyed.\textsuperscript{156} People with disabilities have fewer employment opportunities to diversify their livelihoods and cushion them during hard times, and they are more likely to experience discrimination when resources are scarce.\textsuperscript{157} Transportation difficulties often make it hard for them to cope with shocks and stresses.\textsuperscript{158} Children suffer more when people and communities are under strain, as rates of child labour, forced marriage, child trafficking and abduction and other forms of exploitation and abuse rise.\textsuperscript{159} For older adults with limited mobility, disasters can be particularly damaging and can aggravate underlying health problems, increasing their risk of illness and death.\textsuperscript{160}

These vulnerable groups are not only inequitably affected during adversity, but in some cases they are likely to be relied on to volunteer during shocks and stresses even though they may be the least able to spare the time and resources to do so. As a largely unregulated practice, informal local volunteerism relies on mechanisms of self-governance that are not always equitable. Communities under constant stress or experiencing acute shocks are at a high risk of exploiting some of their members. For instance, in the field research community in Greece, where unemployment was high, young people complained that volunteering was used primarily to provide low or no-cost labour, with organizations taking advantage of their skills and education without compensation.

LOCAL VOLUNTEERING CAN PRIORITIZE PRESSING NEEDS OVER PREVENTION

Although voluntary action is a necessary component of community resilience in times of acute stress, it is not sufficient as a long-term solution to persistent shocks. When volunteerism is undertaken as an urgent response to a crisis, it tends to prioritize immediate and pressing needs over long-term prevention and adaptation. Communities that lack the human and financial resources to sustain resilience can become stuck in a cycle of shock and response, precluding efforts to engage in strategic measures. Effective, immediate responses by local volunteers to shocks can moderate acute threats to people’s livelihoods, but there was little evidence from the field research that, when acting in isolation, local volunteers were able to engage in prevention and adaptation strategies. Rather, vulnerable communities tended to be in a persistent state of reaction that diverted attention from long-range planning for disaster avoidance or mitigation. Some of these challenges could be addressed through collaboration with external organizations (box 2.6), as explored in chapter 3.

LOCAL VOLUNTEERS MAY BE DISCONNECTED FROM WIDER SYSTEMS OF RESILIENCE

Local volunteers were often valued for their knowledge about local conditions. As a community member in China articulated: “The volunteer members are familiar with the community’s history and its relationship with...the local and non-local residents. They know exactly how to get along with the residents and handle their problems.” Despite this validation of the advantage of local knowledge, there was little evidence from the field research to show that local volunteers were able to use their local knowledge to influence the strategies of external organizations. There was indeed evidence that power imbalances influenced the acceptance of local knowledge by both local communities and external agencies and conferred special legitimacy on external knowledge. Reflecting a common refrain among local volunteers, a group in Madagascar lamented: “We are not being heard
because of our education level”. As a further limitation, in some cases informal local volunteers had limited access to critical technical information.

“The volunteer groups have the mechanism to express their opinions, but their voices are not fully responded to and respected.”

NGO leader, China, SWVR field research

Although local volunteers have a wealth of indigenous knowledge that can inform wider strategic thinking, in practice most information flows down rather than up. Collaborations need to take better advantage of the complementary benefits of the local knowledge of volunteers and the wider connections and access to technology and resources of external partners.\(^{161}\) Such effective and functional collaborations with local volunteers can lead to more appropriately designed interventions and more effective emergency responses.

Another complication, perhaps owing to poor internal/external coordination or a mismatch between immediate needs and the skills of spontaneous volunteers, is that local volunteers are not often used to their full capacity. Furthermore, they are sometimes thought to be disconnected with the “bigger picture” of activities occurring through more formal response mechanisms.\(^{162}\) Some prior studies have reported that local volunteers can be a distraction from centralized responses, complicating the work of emergency services, blocking or delaying the delivery of resources to affected areas and risking injury or death because of their lack of training.\(^{163,164}\)

Ensuring the safety of local volunteers can be problematic. Even when community-based volunteers are offered a formal role, few agencies plan for their participation, provide training or perform background checks.\(^{165}\) Local volunteers are often mobilized quickly in response to an urgent need and are not typically in a strong position to negotiate basic security provisions.\(^{166,167}\) There may also be an assumption that local volunteers are relatively safe even in high-conflict environments because they are viewed as more neutral than external actors and thought to be able to draw on local networks and knowledge, an assumption that is not well supported. Local volunteers, because they often work in situations of conflict and crisis, may be even more likely to be in harm’s way than external actors.\(^{168}\) As well as being in physical danger, volunteers in conflict and post-disaster
settings are also at psychological risk. \textsuperscript{169,170,171} Overall, there was little evidence that the safety of local volunteers was assured simply by including them in wider resilience-strengthening systems.

Despite challenges with coordination and ensuring the safety of local volunteers, emergency management systems often take for granted that local volunteers will be ready to respond. In many crises, local volunteers are the first responders because they are available and proximate, not because they are best suited to the task. The sentiment “if we don’t do it, who will?” was particularly evident in more isolated rural areas and in urban areas where there was little trust in the authorities. The ready availability of local volunteers, though often perceived as a benefit, highlights a lack of public services and external partnerships in times of need. While it is true that local volunteers may engage when they see no other option, it is also true that volunteers who are not well supported, heard or integrated into management planning will be less effective over the long term and may eventually burn out and disengage. \textsuperscript{172}

As this chapter illustrates, volunteerism provides a mechanism for channelling individual actions into collective strategies for coping with risk. The framework, norms and connections that volunteerism provides make it a foundational institution for local resilience-building. The distinctive strengths of volunteerism, as recognized by communities themselves, include a human-centred and relational approach that strengthens social cohesion as well as an ability to self-organize around individual or community priorities. When the equilibrium of a community is disrupted, volunteer participation can prepare communities for change while providing opportunities to confront norms of exclusion and social inequity through new forms of participation.

Yet volunteering is not inherently inclusive or equitable, and not everyone contributes or benefits equally. The field research showed that the exercise of human agency to include or exclude others was at once a benefit and a challenge. These findings challenge the assumption that focusing on the local will automatically enhance participation and empower volunteer groups in a transformative way. Whether social norms can be reshaped to enhance inclusive and more equitable participation depends largely on the creation of an environment that recognizes and uses the distinctive characteristics of volunteerism to help communities “bounce back”.

Communities themselves provide essential knowledge about the limits of local volunteerism for community resilience. Flexibility, human-centred relationships, self-organization and local resources provide a strong foundation for and vital contribution to communities’ resilience, but importantly the benefits and challenges of the connectivity and relationship-building inherent in local volunteerism signal huge potential for complementary collaborations with other actors. Where stresses and shocks exceed the threshold of positive contributions by community volunteers, there is reason to explore connections outside the community. As one national development agency report emphasizes: “Resilience does have its limits. It is necessary to provide relief when people have exhausted their ability to manage the disruption caused by conflict or when conflict overwhelms their ability to cope and causes total livelihood breakdown.” \textsuperscript{173} Done well, contributions from external actors can complement local action. The importance of nurturing complementary collaborations between local volunteers and external agents is the theme of the next chapter.

\textbf{These findings challenge the assumption that focusing on the local will automatically enhance participation and empower volunteer groups.}