OVERVIEW

VOLUNTEERISM: THE THREAD THAT BINDS

Resilient communities allow for dynamic interactions between people facing threats and their environments. Understanding how such interactions occur is essential for supporting people-led approaches to peace and development. Volunteerism enables individuals to work together, shaping collective opportunities for dealing with risk and connecting individuals and communities with wider systems of support. Volunteerism as a universal social behaviour is therefore a critical resource for community resilience.

At the same time, communities around the world are changing, often in response to an increased frequency and intensity of shocks and stresses. Little is known about how this influences volunteerism and its manifestations across different contexts. In light of these changing patterns of risk, it is important to understand if and how individuals and groups are continuing to organize and connect and whether collective responses within communities are ultimately reinforcing or challenging the wider social, political and economic inequalities that exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalized groups.

This 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR), *The thread that binds: Volunteerism and community resilience*, looks at how volunteerism and community resilience interact across diverse contexts. It explores the strengths and limitations of community responses to a range of shocks and stresses, and it examines how external actors can build on communities' self-organization in a complementary way, nurturing the most beneficial characteristics of volunteerism while mitigating against potential harms to the most vulnerable. In doing so, the report is an important contribution to the evidence base on inclusive, citizen-led approaches to resilience-building.

KEY FINDINGS

Local volunteerism is a fundamental resilience strategy and a property of resilient communities.

The scale and scope of volunteer activity in responding to shocks and stresses are unparalleled. Moreover, the contribution of volunteerism goes far beyond its magnitude because, like other types of civic participation, it is both a means to development and an end in itself.

Local volunteerism enables collective strategies for managing risk.

By bringing together individual actions under a shared purpose, volunteerism expands the choices and opportunities available to communities as they prepare for and respond to crises.

The characteristics of local volunteerism most valued by communities are the ability to self-organize and to form connections with others.

Community members appreciate the ability to set their own development priorities and to take ownership of local problems. The networks, trust and empathy generated through social action are acknowledged across all contexts.

These distinctive characteristics of local volunteerism can both boost and diminish community resilience under different conditions.

The duality of volunteering as both a means and an end of development means that each characteristic of volunteerism is potentially positive or negative depending on the context.

Volunteerism is particularly significant for vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Mutual aid, self-help and reciprocity are important coping strategies for isolated and vulnerable communities. Self-organized actions can help marginalized groups meet their own needs in the absence of wider provisions and services.

The costs and benefits of volunteerism are not always distributed equitably.

Women are more likely to take on the majority of informal volunteering in their own communities – for example, in an extension of domestic caring roles. Access to formal volunteering opportunities to develop skills, create new connections and access resources is not available for all, particularly those in low-income contexts.

The manner in which external actors engage with local volunteerism matters.

Collaborations should nurture the positive characteristics of volunteerism valued by communities: its self-organizing and relationship-strengthening properties. Peace and development actors can undermine volunteerism when they engage with people merely as a cheap and proximal resource. Done badly, partnerships with local volunteers can reinforce inequalities.

Effective collaboration with volunteers can transform volunteering from a coping mechanism to a strategic resource for community resilience.

Forming complementary partnerships with communities helps to balance risks more equitably, maximizing the potential of volunteering to positively impact those often left furthest behind. Appropriately pooling resources and capacities across actors enables communities to take longer-term preventative approaches to dealing with risk.

An enabling environment for volunteerism strengthens community resilience.

Governments and other stakeholders can strengthen the contribution of volunteerism to resilience-building in two ways: firstly, by nurturing an ecosystem for effective volunteering, and secondly, by forming partnerships based on greater appreciation of the value of communities' own contributions. This will ensure that localization processes under the 2030 Agenda build on the commitment and innovations of citizens everywhere.

CHAPTER 1

"A powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation": Volunteerism as a global asset for peace and development

Volunteerism forms part of the fabric of all societies. It can be a critical resource for peace and development, yet more evidence is needed to understand the value of volunteer contributions to economy and society, particularly in fragile contexts. To improve the evidence base on volunteerism and as a starting point for revealing the diverse manifestations of volunteering globally, this report presents a new analysis of volunteerism's scale, scope and trends using data from United Nations Member States.

New analysis puts the global volunteer workforce at 109 million full-time equivalent workers, a number exceeding that of many major global industries. Of this 109 million, 30 per cent is volunteering that takes place formally through organizations, associations and groups. More difficult to capture and often less visible to mainstream development actors, the majority of global volunteer activity (70 per cent) occurs directly through informal engagement between individuals (definitions of key terms can be found in annex 1).

As volunteerism is a social behaviour, geography, gender, age and other social, economic and political realities affect people's ability to volunteer. Overall, more volunteering is undertaken by women than by men, at 57 per cent and 43 per cent respectively. Formal volunteering is relatively evenly distributed between the sexes, but women account for a larger share of informal voluntary action – nearly 60 per cent worldwide. This is significant not least because informal volunteering tends to have lower status and attract less practical support from stakeholders outside of the community.

A qualitative analysis of global trends shows that volunteers have been at the forefront of every major crisis since the last State of the World's Volunteerism Report published in 2015. Technology, policy and social norms are all shaping the new conditions under which voluntary efforts are made. While this provides new opportunities for volunteering for some people in some contexts, for others it can represent additional barriers to participation.

Globally, new data and analysis in this report illustrate that people are volunteering at scale, although access and participation are affected by variables such as geography and gender and influenced by a wide range of norms, customs, policies and investments. Informal action is the most common form of volunteering globally and is a major feature in most of the communities participating in the field research for this report, many of which have insufficient access to basic services, security and protection.

Recognizing that volunteering is prevalent in communities struggling to cope, what does this look like on the ground? How are vulnerable communities organizing themselves to deal with the risks and threats they face each day? How do the distinctive contributions of local volunteerism enhance or inhibit community resilience?

CHAPTER 2

"It has to be us": Local volunteerism in communities under strain

The battle for resilience will be won or lost together with communities. Volunteerism provides a mechanism for channelling individual actions into collective strategies for coping with risk. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes a people-centred approach to development, but while localization debates often focus on national ownership, less attention is paid to the

mix of capacities required at the national level down to the community level. Exploring the role of local volunteers provides insights into the possibilities and limits of locally owned action and the thresholds for external support.

Communities value the distinctive contributions of volunteers. The field research for this report focused on communities' perceptions of how volunteerism helped or hindered their ability to cope. Two distinctive characteristics of volunteering were prioritized by research participants: the human-centred connections created through voluntary action, and the opportunity to self-organize.

Participants spoke highly of the social relationships developed through shared voluntary action, noting that such relationships forge bonds of solidarity, enhance trust, expand people's support base and lessen their vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Volunteering also opens channels to other stakeholders, connecting community members to wider support networks. 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 to people acting alone.

Equally important is the ability to self-organize to cope with stresses and shocks. Self-organization sustains community autonomy by avoiding dependence on outside actors. Self-organized volunteering is a key strategy for marginalized groups whose needs are not adequately addressed by formal institutions.

Beyond a romantic view of volunteering in communities in crisis. Although local voluntary action offers a wealth of advantages to communities, it also brings substantial challenges. While voluntary community action is a consensual endeavour, it is not inevitably inclusive or egalitarian. As a survival strategy, people under stress tend to focus on helping those within their own circles. The burden of volunteering can disproportionately disadvantage more vulnerable groups, stretching the already limited time, capacity and resources of vulnerable people to breaking point. Furthermore, constrained by resources, local volunteering can often prioritize immediate needs over prevention and adaptation, so long-term solutions to persistent shocks may be overlooked.

Where stresses and shocks exceed the threshold of positive contributions by community volunteers, there is good reason to explore connections outside the community. Done well, contributions from external actors can complement local action.

CHAPTER 3

"We see the limits of what we do": Collaborations with local volunteerism for community resilience

Despite the strong relationships, self-organizing capacity, quick response and flexibility that characterize local volunteers, it is difficult for self-organizing communities to be optimally resilient without complementary support from external stakeholders.[1] For the purposes of this report, external stakeholders are considered to be those originating from outside the community's boundary, be it from neighbouring communities, subnational or national authorities, international organizations or any other private or public actor.

Resilient systems share risk and responsibility at the appropriate level, from local to international, protecting the positive impacts of volunteering while mitigating against harms.

Collaboration with external actors can complement local volunteering. Local volunteers in the field research communities stressed how difficult it was to maintain voluntary efforts over the long term without ongoing external support. Collaborating with external actors can help communities safeguard their assets and livelihoods during acute adversity by bringing in financial, human and technological resources to sustain local action and co-produce more efficient solutions. Examples from the field research communities also highlighted how collaborations with external actors can increase the participation of people who would otherwise remain isolated and excluded, enabling volunteerism to realize its potential as an inclusive and empowering force. Furthermore, local volunteers can strengthen their standing in the community through legal recognition by government and the formalization that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies and other development and humanitarian actors can confer.

Local volunteers can strengthen development interventions by external actors. Connections with external actors can help communities engage more effectively within wider risk-sharing systems to enhance their resilience. Local volunteers are well positioned to help development experts and national and international responders understand the needs of the more vulnerable and hidden groups in their community, and as intermediaries, volunteers can build bridges of trust that enable them to relay important information from technical agencies, governments and other external actors to community-based groups (top-down), while also bringing issues of community concern to the attention of those external organizations (bottom-up).

Collaborations must be designed carefully so as not to undermine community capacities. Support from external agencies can weaken local self-organization and ownership if it is too heavy-handed or lasts too long. Local ownership can be undermined when community volunteers are not able to articulate their own priorities but are still called upon to implement the priorities of external agencies. Local volunteers cannot substitute for the responsibility of government and humanitarian aid systems to meet basic community needs. Ultimately, governments and their development partners need to balance the autonomy and independence that self-organized volunteer groups have achieved with efforts to integrate them into external systems of support.

CHAPTER 4

"This work can't be measured by a financial ruler": Volunteerism as a renewable resource

Volunteerism strengthens local ownership, solidarity and inclusive participation, and it allows for swift responses to proximate crises. At the same time, under certain conditions volunteerism can be exclusive, burdensome, short-term and of limited effectiveness. This potential duality of volunteerism means that governments and development partners have an important role to play in maximizing volunteerism's positive contributions. Stakeholders must be mindful not to partner with volunteers as a source of cheap labour but rather would be well advised to nurture volunteerism as an attribute of resilient communities. This can be done through developing an ecosystem for resilient volunteering and creating new community partnerships with that work towards local resilience.

Nurturing a renewable resource by building an ecosystem for resilient volunteerism. Governments and development partners can best support communities through the development of nationally owned resilience ecosystems that align with national development priorities and plans and broaden access to the benefits of volunteering to the most marginalized groups. In doing so, the increasingly irrelevant divide between "official"

and "unofficial" actors can be broken down, allowing due recognition and acknowledgement of the innovation, flexibility and significant time and effort provided every day by citizens to address development challenges.

Enabling more equitable partnerships between communities and wider actors. Community compacts or agreements would enable the voices of community volunteers to be heard in the context of resilience planning by local and national authorities. Such agreements would also form the basis for joint initiatives between communities and wider stakeholders, allowing the decentralization of resources and more predictable investments for prevention and adaptation. Embedding standards and principles for inclusion would also help foster a more equitable division of responsibilities within and across communities.

CONCLUSION

Weaving new patterns of resilience

If resilient communities are part of the fabric of society, then investments in voluntary action can prevent at-risk communities from fraying at the seams. Exposed to persistent shocks and stresses and with inequitable resourcing and underdeveloped capacities, local volunteers on the frontlines can struggle to stay ahead. Under threat, communities marshal the limited time and resources at their disposal to cope, but external actors can safeguard the natural human response of volunteering as a core property of resilient communities by balancing their support with the autonomy required for self-organized voluntary action to thrive.

Collaborations that understand and nurture local capacities can help transform volunteerism from a coping strategy to a strategic resource for the prevention of crises and to enable adaptation to new risks. Furthermore, sustainable partnerships with communities can strengthen the potential of volunteerism to more meaningfully include vulnerable groups in development processes.

Under the 2030 Agenda, there is often an implicit assumption that "going local" will address marginalization and open up pathways to empowerment. Although the potential benefits of localized, voluntary and people-centred approaches to development are abundant, this report calls for a new urgency in ensuring that inclusive standards receive greater prominence in discussions of community resilience so that voluntary action can become an inclusive and equitable means of preparing for and coping with risks and, ultimately, a renewable resource for peace and development.