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The safety and security of humanitarian volunteers

Background report

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BACKGROUND REPORT

The safety and security of humanitarian volunteers

Executive summary:

An increasing number of Red Cross and Red Crescent and other humanitarian volunteers are operating within highly fragile situations, complex emergencies or protracted conflicts. Today, around the world, for example more than 1 million Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers are operating in countries where there are situations of conflict. This reflects a broader pattern; 80% of United Nations humanitarian aid is being spent in countries where there is some sort of conflict.¹ Natural disaster events, including health emergencies are increasing in their frequency and very often severity, requiring mass mobilization of local volunteers within risky environments. The scale of humanitarian need around the world is expanding, emerging from environments that are so dangerous and highly complex that few organisations can act within them.

While international attention to the dangers faced by humanitarian personnel has grown in recent years, there has been little focus on the particular risks facing local volunteers, even though they are sometimes delivering the majority of the aid and facing the greatest dangers. There is an immediate humanitarian and moral imperative to address this issue face on.

Recent research by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) has shed light on some of the particular risks faced by humanitarian volunteers including facing stigma and danger from the communities they are operating within, lacking access to all of the equipment and training they need for their roles, facing challenges in accessing affected populations, psychological distress and overall low insurance and other 'safety net' coverage rates.

The research indicates there is much that can be achieved through strategies including greater investment in volunteer support structures, better provision of equipment and training, legislation, and raising awareness of the role of humanitarian volunteers.

¹ <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/2015-global-appeal-164-billion-help-57-million-people-22-countries>

Introduction

“In 2012, I was in charge of the medical point... I suffered several injuries during my field missions: one shrapnel wound in the wrist and three others in the chest.

In another mission, I was shot by a sniper in the upper arm; some of that shrapnel is still in my body now. I suspended my work in the first aid department for a while, and then I returned to the training department. Now I am returning to the first aid department.” (Volunteer Syria)

“If we don’t do it who will?” (Volunteer Ebola affected country)

In recent years, there has been increasing alarm about the dangers faced by humanitarian personnel, particularly in highly fragile situations, complex emergencies or protracted conflicts. However, much less attention has been devoted to the particular situation of local volunteers. This has motivated the International Federation to propose a resolution on the safety and security of volunteers.

The resolution, and this background report, draws on findings collected through the International Federation’s 2015 “Global Review on Volunteering”, the largest global study on Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteering ever undertaken. More than 600 experts (including staff, volunteers, academics and volunteer organisation leaders) were interviewed or surveyed across 160 countries. It investigated a number of issues facing volunteers, including emerging trends, patterns, practices and challenges as well as security concerns. The full report from the Global Review will be published in December 2015.

The value of local humanitarian volunteers

It is not unusual, particularly within protracted conflicts and crises, for local infrastructure and government services to break down, exacerbating the already difficult situations many of the population are facing. In many countries, the Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers, along with those from local NGOs and religious organizations, are among the very few remaining formal systems providing aid, medical care and other services.

The role of local volunteers within these complex environments has been steadily increasing in recent years, in part driven by the inability of international aid actors to be able to operate in these contexts and to reach people in the most need. While involvement from international agencies may decline in some of these contexts, there is often a marked increase in local actors most of whom engage volunteers and who often remain operating throughout the crisis.

The scale of need in many of these locations is also 'far outstripping the ability of the world to fund the need.'² In most instances, this means there is a greater reliance on mass volunteer groups, drawn from local populations who are committed, proximate and capable.

Local volunteers can sometimes enjoy much greater access to populations and in some cases, greater trust. Local volunteers are from the community and are facing the same crises that the population is. They have a well-developed understanding of the people, the intricacies of the crisis, the dynamics, social and cultural norms and are connected into local knowledge networks which means they are often well informed on new developments and shifts in the context. The volunteers can also often play strong roles in building social and cultural capital and helping to form trust within the communities again.

A particularly unique feature of these locally driven responses are the scale at which they can operate. Local volunteer groups, particularly those from the Red Cross Red Crescent can often number in the tens of thousands and are generally spread out across most parts of the country, maintaining a large infrastructure and network where most others have eroded. Consider for example some of the responses that National Societies has been involved in recently;

- In 2014 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, volunteers helped protect more than 2 million people from Polio
- In Syria, Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers reached more than 9 million people affected by the conflict between July and September 2014 alone;
- Local volunteers reached 3.2 million people affected by Ebola in West Africa in 2013-14.

As noted by one aid worker in an Ebola-affected country: *"The scale is a major thing, we have large numbers of them (local volunteers) operating all over the country. Also they can move at pace, because of their local knowledge and their training, they know where and how to get things done quickly. We need this in operations this complex, for example, they know where the wells are, how to find petrol etc."*

Ensuring training for complex demands

The increased reliance on local volunteer groups means they are often being asked to perform much larger and more complex and technically skilled roles. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent for instance provides the major ambulance service in the country and the volunteers who staff the ambulances are, on an almost daily basis, providing advanced medical care to patients who have been exposed to conflict related injuries. In Yemen volunteers provide maternal and child health care in areas cut off or besieged by conflict. And in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea during the Ebola response, volunteers conducted safe and dignified burials, preserving extraordinary infection control procedures whilst providing some semblance of peace of mind to their communities.

The skills required to perform these roles are significant under 'normal' circumstances but to perform them within these environments requires even greater capacity. A significant amount

² <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/new-era-valerie-amos-reflects-her-five-years-un-humanitarian-chief>

of training and support is required to help prepare and support the volunteers. Many volunteers will perform a variety of functions on any given day, conducting assessments, distributing aid, delivering health campaigns, vaccinations, primary medical care and evacuation to name a few, all the while operating within tight security management frameworks, where on a regular basis they may have to be negotiating access with local power structures, combatant groups or other gatekeepers within what can be a very complex web of relationships and alliances³, all of which demands a skill set both broad and deep. *As noted by a volunteer in Syria: “We do many things: repairing the main water line that supplies the whole city, evacuating dead bodies, repairing water and electricity lines, transporting medication and vaccines to the needy throughout the governorate, exchanging processes between parties to the conflict, and bringing flour to Aleppo when the roads were cut off.”*⁴

The reporting, accountability and monitoring requirements associated with the disbursement of international aid, have been observed to have become more complex and demanding over time. Whilst many are supportive of these developments, the requirements have placed even greater burdens on the volunteer role. This means that volunteers also need to develop further specialised skills around these mechanisms as well and that more of their time is spent in meeting these policies and procedures. As significant amounts of the support provided by the large global institutions goes through local volunteer groups, volunteers are being asked to deliver higher and greater levels of support than their capacity often allows. These demands are being made of individuals who have often personally experienced considerable trauma already⁵ and live in a day to day context of extreme stress and risk. The complexity of these roles requires that there is sufficient time and resources invested into preparing, training and supporting these volunteers and that project plans are cognisant of this.

Safety and security of volunteers

While the value added by humanitarian volunteers – particularly in crises where no one else can help – is clear, the cost for the individual volunteers has sometimes been unacceptably high. In the first 10 months of 2015, 20 Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers lost their lives while in the performance of their duties, and many more have been injured, detained or assaulted. Thousands have been exposed to such dramatic levels of suffering that they may never fully recover from the psychological stress.

The Sierra Leone Red Cross for example operated 55 teams performing safe and dignified burials for people who had perished from Ebola. This was both a critical role and a highly dangerous one, as the virus remains highly infectious once the carrier has died. The volunteers worked 12-hour days, often seven days a week, with physically and psychologically exhausting tasks.

Compounding this, most of volunteers responding to the Ebola crisis experienced significant stigma from their own communities. Some of their families would not let them stay at home; hotels would not rent rooms to them (requiring National Societies to rent specific houses to

³ “Engagement between Local and International Humanitarian Actors in Armed Conflict” ICRC. Paper published for the World Disasters Report 2015

⁴ <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/ibrahim-fadel-aleppo-branch-syrian-arab-red-crescent-66845/>

⁵ For example 40% of the 60 volunteers interviewed in C.A.R. were widows

accommodate them); and anguished communities even lashed out at them physically. In Guinea, Red Cross volunteers were subjected to an average of 10 attacks per month at the peak of the epidemic.

Likewise, during the conflict in the Central African Republic, volunteers lived in the Red Cross offices to protect their safety, while working long shifts for many continuous days. They faced numerous incidents of violence and threats.

These issues are not confined to a few countries; they happen in multiple locations across the world in different forms. The incidences of attacks against both humanitarian staff and volunteers has been significantly increasing over recent years. In 2000 there were 41 significant attacks on aid workers recorded across the globe. By 2014, it had risen to 190. In those 15 years, over 3,000 aid workers have been killed, injured or kidnapped⁶, a significant portion of which have been local volunteers. Although data relevant to the safety and security of humanitarian volunteers is available more readily, more efforts are needed for consolidation of data collection at national level, including information on volunteers, as well as disseminating it.

In circumstances such as these, there is much that can be achieved by local authorities and others in conducting promotional and educational activities with communities to help them understand the role of local volunteers in these responses and promoting an environment that is more supportive and enabling.

While local volunteers do have strong networks within their countries, there must be caution in the frequent assumption that local volunteers are safer in these environments than international actors. This is an assumption that does not hold true. In fact, even among paid aid workers, the majority of those targeted are local staff⁷. In order to better equip them to face these challenges, further efforts to disseminate the humanitarian principles and thus build the volunteers' acceptance within communities is required from all stakeholders.

Promoting insurance or equivalent protection

We do a lot of work in IDP camps and other insecure environments and it creates problems for the volunteers like there is security problems everywhere, like we have bomb blasts, terrorists activities in different part of the country. Like some of the volunteers from different organisations they got killed, in addition there are some kidnapping cases and some other cases, so that made it difficult for organisations to work in the communities, so for us security is one of the main problems we are facing, this political chaos and now circumstances of the security situation.” (Volunteer Manager South Asian National Society)

“Volunteers are always at the front line of critical and dangerous places, the volunteer becomes more susceptible to danger threatening his life. The most common accidents include injuries during the fights in battle. In addition, some volunteers were detained, I was detained for 18 months during my work as a paramedic providing emergency medical services. There are volunteers who are still detained and we lost 17 volunteers who were killed. However, these

⁶ <http://www.irinnews.org/aid-worker-security-map/dataviz.html#.VadUjtZIOek.facebook>

⁷ <http://www.irinnews.org/aid-worker-security-map/dataviz.html#.VadUjtZIOek.facebook>

*accidents do not discourage volunteers, and they would provide their moral, humanitarian and religious duties toward the people”
(Volunteer Middle Eastern National Society)*

Disconcertingly, many of the volunteers responding to these humanitarian crises remain uninsured despite the significant risks they face. More could be done to ensure that volunteers are either insured or that they and their families can access other safety nets in the event that they are injured or killed. In Colombia, for instance there is legislation that ensures that all volunteers participating as response teams to disasters must be insured.

Providing psychological support

*“Our volunteers go out on a daily basis and are collecting bodies to return them to their families, in the last 18 months they have retrieved over 1,000 bodies, but it is not unusual for a volunteer to retrieve the body of someone they grew up with or went to school with, this goes on constantly”
(Red Cross aid worker Central African Republic)*

The collection and return of deceased people to their loved ones is a function performed in many countries by Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers including Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria, and brings some comfort to loved ones, but it also exacts a toll on those volunteers who took part, as do the many other tasks performed under these conditions.

What is perhaps most alarming is that there is some evidence to suggest that the stress and trauma that the volunteers working in complex environments are being exposed to in this work is impacting them in more severe ways than their paid staff counterparts. There is once again little formal investigation into these matters, but there is some evidence to suggest that volunteers in complex emergencies have higher complaint levels of mental health issues than paid staff, including 24-46% of the volunteers being at risk of developing a PTSD disorder.⁸ These figures were obtained from research conducted with volunteers in post disaster environments, however the finding seems to be anecdotally similar at least, in conflict situations. Again further research is warranted here, but it is clear that volunteers should benefit from substantial psychological support within these contexts including a well-developed plan for after-care once the crisis has abated.

Elements such as support from the team leader, access to adequate equipment and training to do the job, the types of roles being undertaken by the volunteers (for example providing psycho-social support to affected community members) and length of working hours, have been cited in IFRC studies as contributing factors to the mental health issues of volunteers and their overall safety. This then means that there is much that can be achieved by organisations and donors responding to disasters, conflict situations and protracted crises that will contribute to healthier living for volunteers.

“(The National Society) ...taking care of me is important, I was in an ambulance there was fighting all around and lots of shooting and the driver was erratic and he crashed the ambulance, it rolled two times. I ended up in the hospital, but I was taken care of, so I will go again, I won’t give 100% if they aren’t looking after me, I probably wouldn’t stop but they wouldn’t get 100% from me anymore.

⁸ Sirry b. Thomar PHD thesis, published 2015

Getting support is important, either from the people or from the National Society. We need equipment, tools, materials, team support, comradeship, support. If I go to manage dead bodies I need the equipment and the training for it..”
(North African volunteer)

Many of the staff supporting these volunteers have reflected on the high levels of commitment displayed by the volunteers in these situations. The severity of the issues being faced by the populations seems to drive a deep passion for trying to help their fellow people, often while at the same time, the ‘paid worker’ services were breaking down.

We are motivated by the humanitarian needs, the good feeling of helping people and the respect and recognition we get for it from the people. We feel responsible, we have skills, first aid, how to respond, give support and we have a duty. It’s not something light, we are rushing to help, we are the first ones there. There is a huge obligation.” (Volunteer North African Natinal Society)

There is again, a need for caution here, the commitment of the volunteers to the cause and to their communities coupled with their effectiveness and scale, can then make them vulnerable to being exploited as ‘cheap and proximate labour’ for highly dangerous settings where international aid workers often cannot operate anyway.

The volunteers who are involved in these operations are often among the poorest in the world, sometimes the least formally educated and trained and with the least access to resources and support, yet they are carrying out life-saving tasks under a shadow of extraordinary risk. Their local knowledge is critical in these complex environments, but at times, the international response system that depends on them, is not listening well enough to them:

“They (the volunteers) often know what is going on, not always, but they certainly know better than outsiders, like where the power is shifting hands or where there might be outbreaks of violence. But we don’t always listen to them very well, we are focused on getting aid out to certain populations and perhaps sometimes they are not as likely to come forward and speak because, well, there is no money there you see, this is the only aid and money coming through, so they are sometimes hesitant to say ‘no’ in case it stops or slows down, money rules everything here. But we have to find better ways to have their voices come in to the process.” (Aid worker Central Africa)

In these instances where volunteers are mainly used as an available source of ready labour rather than being engaged as active decision makers in responses, some of the tremendous advantages of supporting and mobilising local volunteers can be undone. The reality is that too often there is an uneven power relationship between these local volunteers and the donors and international agencies. The need for local partners during these crises has become more central in recent years but these must be genuine partnerships that have an equal footing rather than sub-contractors who deliver services for money. International agencies and donors must invest more in working alongside these local agencies and in learning about the complex local power relationships, alliances and dynamics that they are operating within and how their critical financial support can contribute to strengthening local community organisations and their volunteers.

Conclusion

Humanitarian need is likely to continue to outstrip the capacity of the international community, and investment in local volunteers makes good sense not just because it is cost effective, but also because it will contribute to strengthening local communities, organisational capacities and humanitarian responses. The work of local volunteers in crises and conflict needs to be acknowledged and steps taken to ensure that they are properly resourced, compensated and protected, that includes adequate training that is delivered on time, having the equipment they need to do their job, increased awareness of their role and acceptance from the communities they work within, safe access to those communities and robust personal, psychological and health support for their needs. This is not only to ensure they can continue their work, but because we have a moral obligation as a humanitarian community to do so.

“I am not sure if I will stay in this team or not... but one day I will remember these emotional events. I will not forget the looks of gratitude and admiration directed toward us. I will not forget a single day that there were volunteers who pledged their lives to save a life.” (Volunteer Syria)