

Extra Hands in Times of Crisis



Norimasa Tochibayashi, UNV, Japan

The idea of volunteers being philanthropists lacking in skills, or being young, fresh college graduates entering the job market and seeking adventure, is rapidly changing. Several international organisations are engaging highly educated and professional volunteers for specialised tasks during emergencies.

Veronica Balderas Iglesias



Deepty Tiwari, UNV, India

As an Urban Planner UNV Volunteer Deepty assists in the production of draft village and Urban Plans in Northern Sumatra, Indonesia. This requires extensive consultation with the community and project staff, plus the ability to analyze available data.

“My mom came before the TV warning. She woke me up and said, ‘Waves’. She told me to move to higher ground. My mom is faster than the TV!” eight-year-old Beam said after a tsunami-evacuation drill carried out in Thailand sometime in March 2005. Her mother Sumontha explained that community members did not always hear the warnings the government broadcasts; it was the neighbours who phoned them and made sure they evacuated from the high-risk areas.

Beam was talking to a TVE Asia Pacific film crew who had tracked families affected by the 26 December 2004 tsunami for months, and documented how they were returning to normalcy.¹

Time and again, local community members are the first to join hands during an emergency situation, and on a voluntary basis they help the most vulnerable. Alas, few of these Samaritans are involved in preparedness activities; nor are most able to adapt available resources to disseminate much-needed information, including alerts on when evacuees can safely return to their homes.

This was the case in Indonesia’s province of Banda Aceh, one of the worst hit areas by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Aware of the isolated state in which their region was at that point in time due to the dreadful conditions on the ground, hundreds of local volunteers quickly organized emergency relief efforts. They succeeded in many ways, but developing communication methods once again proved challenging.

Community radio

It was ten days after the disaster that a group of volunteer experts from the KBR68H radio station in Jakarta were finally able to arrive in Aceh, and set up a community radio station. The crew was given a crash course. They worked hard to ensure that much-needed information (from religious messages and encouragement to sharing data on missing persons) finally got to the people. Had local volunteers already received appropriate training, they would have been able to set up the emergency studio in a period of just six hours.

When disaster strikes, volunteers come to the fore. Community members typically rally to support one another. However they need to be prepared, and their efforts need to be coordinated. Trained professionals can provide crucial support by training people in disaster preparedness and response, and by helping to coordinate national and international relief and rebuilding programmes. The United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV) is often one of the first organisations to respond to disasters on-site. UNV mobilizes national and international UNV volunteers to support the immediate relief and recovery activities of major disaster organisations and domestic institutions.

Beyond the response phase, UNV works with governments and other national partners in the creation of community-level disaster preparedness plans to strengthen their capacities and lessen the impact of possible future disasters. UNV supports countries in the development of disaster mitigation programmes that incorporate the principle of volunteerism for development and foster people-centred preparedness initiatives in communities.

The idea of volunteers being philanthropists and lacking in skills, or being young, fresh college graduates entering the job market and seeking adventure, is rapidly changing. The number of international organisations mobilizing highly educated and professional volunteers is on the rise.

Volunteers associated with United Nations Volunteers (UNV), for instance, have five to 10 years of work experience and are an average 37 years old. Their on-site and online contributions are proving extremely productive in fields as diverse as health, education, human rights promotion, community development, vocational training, industry and population.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are other areas where volunteers are contributing necessary knowledge and expertise. They support in disseminating warnings, coordinating relief

efforts and implementing recovery and rehabilitation programmes.

Volunteers for Prevention

If communities are to brace themselves for weather-related disasters, they need sufficient early warning mechanisms to be able to implement emergency plans of action.

Some initiatives are happening on the ground. As part of the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) daily routine of weather observation, large numbers of people volunteer their time to the most basic level of meteorological prediction: data collection.

Experienced farmers, fishermen, pilots and sea captains read hydrological and meteorological recorders, measure rainfall and test climatic conditions. They report their findings to national meteorological surveys around the world.

Without these volunteer efforts, meteorologists would have less access to information about conditions in remote areas, impeding their ability to provide accurate forecasts of weather patterns around the globe.

Volunteerism has also served as an effective communication support system in the wake of disasters. In India for instance, a victim of the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001 himself, Information Technology specialist Hemang Karelia declined an offer from a private consulting firm and decided instead to help thousands of victims of the quake, which had devastated his hometown of Bhuj. After signing up as a UNV volunteer a few days after the disaster, he took charge of the computers in the control room and made sure relevant data was collected to help affected people. Easily-readable maps, which helped to track and channel the scarce resources available in those trying times, were also produced.

Right information

"It gave me great satisfaction to provide the right information at the right time and direct resources in the right direction," Hemang recalls.

Before that, Sanjaya Mohanty in Orissa also used modern tools in communication to take information about government programmes right to the doorstep of poor villagers, whose livelihoods were destroyed first by a cyclone and soon afterwards by floods in October 1999. Furthermore, he established



Metumo Tunikka, UNV, Nambika

UNV Volunteer Metumo works as Assistant Field Security Coordination Officer in Banda Aceh. She collects data and makes sure all parties are informed of the security risks in the province.



Normasa Tschibayashi, UNV, Japan

Shocked by the magnitude of the tsunami devastation and number casualties, he quit his job in January 2005 and decided to join the relief efforts as a Volunteer in Banda Aceh. He was later appointed UNV Volunteer and worked as an HIC Field coordinator supervising the work of the Field Information Officers. He provided key data to the governmental agency BRR and UNIMS. He furthermore customized, stored and managed all the recovery projects in the 'Recovery Aceh and Nias' Database.

information technology kiosks at a minimal cost to serve as disaster management tools.

"Local communities are now able to access early warning information about impending cyclones and learn about new agricultural practices," Mohanty explains.

After the immediate response, there is always a need to ensure a long-term engagement of different parties in the recovery and reconstruction process of areas hit by natural disasters. UNV volunteers working as Field Reporting Officers help ensure commitments are met. They play a crucial role in the analysis and dissemination of data, and are thus instrumental in assisting communities to gain better access to services.

They also participate in meetings that serve as the main channel for recovery information collection and data sharing, and their reports and findings are uploaded to websites accessible to any interested person.

Kenyan-born Anita Shah flew all the way from her country to assist as a UNV volunteer in the early days of the emergency operation in Sri Lanka in 2004. She made valuable contributions to emergency information management.

“We channeled valuable information on damage and losses, as well as needs, gaps and response efforts. I compiled a bulletin twice a week on the activities being carried out, and was able to provide real time and credible information for planning and decision making,” she recalls.

Challenges ahead

While volunteer contributions like these have proven extremely valuable at the country level, there is still a need to fully integrate them into strategic partnerships, such as those aiming at communicating disasters at regional levels.

International organisations engaged in mobilizing volunteers should join forces and prepare a database of volunteers with specific professional backgrounds in fields such as journalism, communication technology, disaster management and public health, to respond to the needs of mass media and other communication partners in times of emergency.

The print and broadcast media would probably welcome an extra hand that would assist in their work and help ensure that reliable information is promptly gathered or disseminated. Overloaded news bureaux could greatly benefit from having on-site and online specialized volunteers carrying out field research, extending advice and even giving interviews on disaster management or health recommendations, at least until official sources are ready to do so.

Experienced “volunteer journalists” could also be deployed on-site to act as team leaders for local amateur reporters and photographers, and help speed up the collection of data on casualties and ground conditions. Information centres set up by the specialists would ensure that latest news reached main-stream media for broader dissemination in a timely manner.

When disaster strikes, volunteers are the ones who spearhead activities to support those most affected. The ingenuity solidarity and creativity of ordinary people are harnessed through voluntary action. And since each and every human being has the potential to volunteer, encouraging and supporting their involvement in strategic partnerships will enrich disaster preparedness, mitigation and, ultimately, management.

Note: This chapter draws on UNV, UNDP and Radio KBR68H (Jakarta) published materials. The author wishes to acknowledge the prior work and ideas of other volunteers working in disaster response and preparedness.

Endnotes:

1 “Children of Tsunami” was a media project of TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP), in which local film-maker teams documented the recovery stories of families and communities affected by the Asian Tsunami in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand on video and online. See: www.childreoftsunami.info