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Informal voluntarism in disasters management: issues, challenges and way forward in India

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Abstract

A spontaneous response by individuals and emergent voluntary groups is a common and long-standing feature when disasters occur in any regions. Their activities direct and latent, include search and rescue, first aid, transporting and distributing relief supplies, and providing food and drink to victims and emergency workers. The process also, often, add healing touch that cannot be valued in money terms. However, informal actors are rarely incorporated into formal disaster management planning. This paper reviews the current state of knowledge concerning the nature and scale of emergent activity around the disasters occurred in India, its impact in the short and long terms, challenges associated with it in different contexts, and lessons for future disaster management practice.

Keywords: Informal voluntarism, emergent volunteerism, extending volunteerism digital volunteerism

Introduction

The History of disaster management in India suggests that informal voluntarism always played crucial role in managing the disasters. Ordinary citizens are usually first on the scene in an emergency or disaster, and remain long after official services have ceased. Citizens often play vital role s in helping those affected to respond and recover, and can provide invaluable assistance to official agencies and to each other. New technologies and social media have also enabled citizens to participate in emergency and disaster management in new ways that are more decentralised. They are faceless and their efforts are often undervalued in social, political, and financial terms. However sometimes they became nuisance and liability too leading to conflicts, riots, and change in local political status quo.

Despite the key roles citizens play in times of crisis, officials often not included their actions in the formal emergency and disaster management system that is funded with public funds. Professionals and volunteers with official agencies tend to be viewed as legitimate actors, while those who are not part of the system are often seen as illegitimate, impeding effective response, and requiring management. It is a general understanding that ordinary people can obtain legitimacy by becoming part of the system, usually as an accredited or formally affiliated volunteer.

This paper is not only examining the role of informal volunteers in emergency and disaster management. It explores the ways ordinary citizens volunteer their time, knowledge, skills and resources to help the people in times of crisis but also the challenges face by these volunteers and the communities who are served by them.

Definition

Informal Voluntarism is related to the actions of those people who are not the part of formal emergency and Disaster Management System and these actions involve helping of the people who are in danger or are affected by emergencies and disasters. Such voluntarism may occur in pre, during or post disaster phase. Informal volunteers may contribute individually or in a group, they may remain active for a short or longer period of time, consistently or inconsistently, at the original location or away from the location where an incidence or disaster occurred.

Informally citizens can contribute in numerus ways in emergency and Disaster Management. Though two comprehensive categories of informal volunteers are commonly recognised 'emergent volunteerism' and 'extending volunteerism'.

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'Digital volunteerism' is acknowledged as a new mode of volunteering, determined by the growing access and erudition of Information and Communication technologies. (Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan b, John Handmer, 2015)^[1].

Emergent volunteers generally have actual 'real time' knowledge of an incidence and problems face by people in an emergency and therefore they can easily recognize the requirements and configure their role to play. They are free from pre-set of rules, policies and technologies which other formal organizations and emergency services abide and they may constrain the effective local response

Emergent voluntarism is generally emerged by people from affected areas but spur of the moment volunteers and provisions may also reach from neighbouring places and even from far away places, sometimes in large numbers (this is identified as "convergence"). Emergent and convergent voluntarism are spontaneous and unplanned and difficult to strategize, but they are unavoidable in disasters.

Fernandez *et al.* Mention two important risks related to the Emergent volunteers. The first risk is linked with the falling through of disaster managers to efficiently involve volunteers, which makes probability for loss of life and injury, damage of property and poor public perception of disaster response. The second risk is linked with the activities of unorganized and untrained volunteers, who may upset a coordinated response and condense the resource supply for affected (Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan b, John Handmer, 2015)^[1].

There is also a danger that the activities of unskilled and unorganized volunteers may create impediments for emergency responders, survivors and volunteers themselves Liath also mentioned that without appropriate training and backing, these volunteers can distress and by becoming sufferer of disasters may require those assistance that they solicited to dispense (Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan b, John Handmer, 2015)^[1].

BOX 1 Principles to Manage the Work of Informal Volunteers

There can be extraordinary outbursts of support for the victims of disasters, Shown through spur-of-the-moment volunteering. In these situations many have never volunteered before and often they have a convincing need to 'do something'.

Managing of their expectations and particular awareness of the risks of deploying untrained people into unfamiliar situations are important aspects of dealing volunteers in emergencies. In these circumstances managing organization or person should follow these principles.

Those affected by the disaster are always the first priority Everybody has a right to offer assistance and to feel their offer has been valued

Managers/coordinators of volunteers have a right to respectfully decline offers of assistance where they are deemed inappropriate or are not needed Volunteers have a right to the support, training and direction needed to undertake

their duties Volunteers have a responsibility to work collaboratively with, and follow the direction of, their managers/coordinators

Source: BE PREPARED: Managing Volunteers In Emergencies, Volunteering ACT 2015, Australian Government

One more type of informal voluntarism is extending voluntarism. Sets of people and organization which are working in other fields offer their services to volunteer in times of disasters. These volunteers are generally associated with some public group like N.S.S. And NCC volunteers, religious organizations such as Gurudwaras, Missionaries activities, Chamber of Commerce, sporting club or service organisation. Unlike emergent volunteers who work alone or form a new group, extended volunteers generally have good knowledge of local requirements and can use existing networks and resources to fulfil them. NSS is known for its support in the country's disaster management program.

During the disaster situation occurred at the time of upper Cyclone in Orissa the NSS team started managing the crises on 30th October 1999, the next day of the Super Cyclone in Orissa. Volunteers at Paradeep organized rescue operation at the shoreline. The dead bodies and animal carcasses were recovered and disposed. NSS Volunteers were the foremost to help the Air Force for air dropping the relief materials and help army through the use of motor boats for rescuing the people at Ersama Block. NSS also organized its special camps in disaster affected regions and a huge number of volunteers work for relief and rehabilitation of people

On 26th January 2001, when the Gujarat was hit by lethal earthquake the NSS volunteers instantly started their work. They clear debris, arranged medical facility and started community kitchen. NSS worked in Morvi taluka for the rehabilitation work by arranging the work camps and the volunteers became a great support between the affected people and local administration. NSS also deposited more than 71 lakh Rupees in PM Relief funds.

At the time of Tsunami in 2004 NSS team help the district administration for rescue, relief and rehabilitation of

affected people. NSS members also help the people in Mumbai in 2005 at the time of heavy rain. They arranged food, medical help, disinfectant and drinking water.

In 2005 when earthquake hit Jammu and Kashmir NSS volunteers actively worked at Tangadhar, Baramula and Uri districts and help in rehabilitating the people. NSS volunteers not only worked during the natural disaster but also at the time of other disasters like boat capsized, train accidents, fire and maintaining the heavy crowd during fairs etc. NSS volunteers shown significant contribution in the field of disaster and crises management.

It is imperative to understand that maximum emergent volunteerism is not as much of noticeable and does not lead to continuing formal organisation.

Digital volunteerism is a new type of volunteerism. Access to erudite and simple information and communication technology has empowered citizens to join the crises and disaster management in different ways. Especially extensive usage of social media and web-based mapping software has enabled citizens to easily produce and circulate their individual emergency associated information. For instance simple use of Facebook to spread the information to further complicate uses of data mining and crises mapping (Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan b, John Handmer, 2015)^[1].

Floods in Chennai was a great crisis for the people there and at that time people from different places from all over the world tried to help them in varied ways like online campaign, mobile recharge of totally unknown person and transferring the information of vulnerable areas to disaster management teams etc.

Throughout the duration of flood social media platform remain very useful in disaster management drive. For example, a team led by Professor Amit Sheth have make

ready to use their technology to monitor and analyse social media and crowd sourcing to provide better situational information regarding the floods. Social media remain very helpful in that situation, the images showed flood water make available perilous information for understanding the real situation and required arrangements to save the people. Hence Prof Sheth and his team with the help of Twitter and new photo mapping tools have prepared early crises map where picture of flooded places are pinned. A crucial challenge was that maximum photos (or corresponding tweets) do not come with geo location. Therefore, the team tracked crowdsourcing to find the locations in relation of relevant neighbourhood.

A volunteer from Noida Kushal Shah gone through online information regarding the flood and contacted those people who had shared the pictures and was able to tag over 60% of pictures. This facilitated the people to find the recent picture of any area in which they were interested, because many people were worried about the situation of their family and friends. This information also remains helpful for the rescue teams for reviewing the water level and other crowd sourced information as well as the request from the affected places while preparing a plan for a rescue operation (<https://www.oneindia.com/india/chennai-floods-rescue-operations-social-media-technology-twitter-1947228.html>)

At the time of Mumbai Terrorist attacks in November 2008 many Twitter users on the ground provided very relevant information like emergency phone numbers and their location, blood donation facilities and locations of hospitals. A set of Mumbai situated bloggers turned their Metroblog into a news wire service and prepare a list of the dead and hurt, this blog remains very helpful for the users in tracing their family and friend's situation.

Progress in information and communication technologies have not only improved mass information spreading but also the development of information and knowledge. There are around 500 Emergency Management Group Pages are available on Facebook. Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) ‘... involves the sharing and mapping of

spatial data... through voluntary information gathered by the general public’. The strong point of VGI is that information gathered from many observers is expected to be more precise than that gained from a sole viewer. Good child and Glenn on mention that despite the apprehension that the quality of data generated by non-experts unrestricted to official and legal outline, the value of VGI can approach and even exceed that of commanding sources. The rich circumstantial information that ‘on the ground’ witness scan provides and the speed with which it can be updated are main advantage. However, there are many challenges linked with use of VGI in crises management. As it is unknown that how much information will be volunteered at the time of crises and what will be the source of information. Therefore, VGI should be used only as an accompanying source of information. The quality and authenticity of information cannot be ensured with the possibility of volunteers to deliberately or inadvertently provide inaccurate information.

Volunteers may also be influenced by the big events and therefore the possibility of smaller events go unreported remain high. All over the world the chances to using digital voluntarism in disaster management is increasing. A strong point of crowd sourcing approach is that volunteers do not essentially have enough time to participate, nor do they required to be remained nearby the crises or disaster affected areas. (Joshua Whittaker, Blythe McLennan b, John Handmer, 2015) ^[1].

TASKs Perform by Informal Volunteers

Reporting of many disasters over the years have showed that emergent groups and unprompted volunteers played significant role in disasters management. The main activities they do are search and rescue, collecting, transporting and distributing relief supplies and clothing and providing food and drink to affected people and emergencies workers. Their participation may be short-term or they may spent long hours to help.

<p align="center">Disaster Response Activities of Emergent Groups and Spontaneous Volunteers</p> <p align="center">Medical search and rescue first aid and emergency medical care giving blood</p> <p align="center">Information/communications registration of victims, displaced persons and evacuees looking for missing persons, compiling lists translating issuing and sharing information and messages</p> <p align="center">Psychosocial and bereavement psychological counselling handling the dead ensuring proper rituals for burials</p> <p align="center">Shelter shelter facility accommodating displaced people</p> <p align="center">Supplies and provisions Collecting, transporting, unloading, storing and distributing relief supplies, clothing, etc. providing food and drink to victims and emergency workers (e.g. setting up kitchens and canteens)</p> <p align="center">Buildings and services removing debris and clearing streets assessment of destruction inspection of infrastructure reinstating services (e.g. communications) and equipment cleaning up after disasters</p> <p align="center">Coordination and security</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">informal coordination of other groups and activities keeping security of property monitoring traffic and crowds Preparedness issuing warnings, helping with evacuation emergency safety (e.g. protective measures against flooding such as sandbags) Advocacy Evaluating and questioning actions and practices of official response organizations giving survivors' grievances and pushing for compensation pursuing public officials to prevent future disasters Other raising funds for victims taking care of animals</p>
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Source: John Twigg and Irina Mosel, 2017^[3]

Most of these works do not require any expertise in these any person can contribute like Mumbai residents provided food, water, medicines and temporary accommodation to huge number of persons stranded during severe floods in July 2005. By doing this basic simple work for example filling sandbags spontaneous volunteers allow crises management trained staff to do more specialist and skilled required activities.

But sometimes volunteers appointed for more critical roles, in which there is not sufficient trained staff available to tackle the crises situation. In the 2005 Mumbai flood informal sector technicians perform an important role in ensuring the formal sector business endurance by repairing office equipment's and reinstating the communication systems. In spite of their important role the unprompted volunteering can provide significant coordination, integration, communication, logistical and health safety challenges to crises managers (Twigg and Irina Mosel, 2017)^[3].

These challenges can be

- The influx of huge numbers of unanticipated volunteers at the disasters place can create congestion and hurdle in formal emergency response.
- Organizing and communicating with various diverse informal groups and individuals distracts the disasters professionals and resource from crucial requirements.
- Volunteers are keen to provide assistance but they are not familiar with administrative decision-making process and service delivery systems. They can annoy because of delays or in absence of information when helping the formal disaster management groups, and more chances are that they start work independently and does not follow the rules.
- Spontaneous groups and volunteers use learning by doing method, in comparison to the proper planning and procedure of organized skilled emergency professionals.
- Regular changes in group membership create group unstable and not allowed to use the newly acquired knowledge, experience and skill in the field. This makes difficult to including them into response efforts.
- Emergent volunteers generally reached a place without proper shelter, food, water, equipment's and protective clothing's that diverts the resources which are required for the disaster victims.
- Volunteers can harm and injured themselves and sometime died while rescuing others from collapsed infrastructures.
- Involvement of volunteers who do not have appropriate equipment's and technical knowledge can make it

difficult to save disaster victim from damaged infrastructure.

- Volunteers who reach from outside the disaster affected area generally happened to be unaware of local culture, requirements, practices and preferences of the communities they help and it can create chaos.
- There is also an ambiguity about the legal obligations of volunteer's responders (or official institute for they work) for death, injuries or damages suffered by volunteers or by disaster victims as a result of their actions. A related issue is volunteers do not have insurance cover.

Spontaneous actions in disaster time are mostly selfless and to help the people, though people can self-organized abruptly for personal interests like for getting the emergency supplies for their personal use or safeguarding their private properties. Some spontaneous group activities can be rapt in the direction of looting. The fear of looting and the antisocial activities undoubtedly stirred people of some areas to close off access to the roads where they stay (John Twigg and Irina Mosel, 2017)^[3].

Loyalties towards their own community can also affect the volunteer's role in assisting the other people. In Tamil Nadu, India after the 2004 tsunami, social capital and associations speeded up recovery process for some, but strengthened barriers to regaining process in society like women, migrants, Dalits and Muslims (Rahill *et al.* (2014)^[4]; Aldrich (2011) India does not have any specific legal framework to handle the informal volunteering.

Another significant challenge is that there is no accurate data and information available about the informal volunteers, who worked during the different disasters in India.

National Disaster management Authority of India had launched a central sector scheme 'Aapda Mitra' in May 2016 to trained 6000 community volunteers (200 volunteers per district) in disaster response in 30 most flood prone districts of 25 states of India. The main objective of the scheme is to make available the local volunteers with the skills that they may require to respond to their area s in emergency in the aftermath of a disaster thereby empowering them to carried out the basic relief and rescue work at the time of sudden crises.

The Scheme is launched to prepare and Standardization of training modules at National Level; setting up of information knowledge Management System at National level linked to states /UTs; Training institutes to be empanelled by the corresponding States and UTs ; Training should be provided to 6000 local volunteers in flood prone areas and PPT and emergency response kit should also be

arranged for them; A reserve of essential items like light search and rescue equipment, medical first aid and kits can be created for small communities'; The training modules and equipment should be disseminated further in the subsequent phase of the scheme. The report of some of the states mentioned that the services of these trained volunteers remain very useful to rescue the stranded population during the flood and cyclones.

The requirement for Volunteerism has been promoted in the consecutive Five-Year Plans, in the National Youth Policy and in the Volunteer based Programmes of the Government. Though, the National Policy on Voluntary Sector in India was proclaimed only in 2007. The policy was formulated by Planning Commission of India.

India has well demonstrated the use of volunteers in its objectives to achieve Millennium Development Goals such as the lessening in adult illiteracy and the attainment of health targets. India has largest youth population in the world, with about 40 per cent of its population falling in the 13-35 age groups. This section of the population is considered to be the most vibrant and dynamic segment of the population. If India has to reap the demographic dividend, it is necessary that we utilize the services of India's youth in disaster management.

Volunteers in India have significantly contributed directly or indirectly in achieving many goals such as literacy, the Red Ribbon Express Project to create awareness about the transmission of HIV/AIDS, the Pulse Polio Immunization campaign etc. All this clearly indicates that there is a huge potential of youth work force, which can be tapped to address the emergency response during the disasters. Student volunteers from law colleges can impart legal literacy about the compensation and other legal rights. Volunteers from Geography background can help with development of disaster warning system, vulnerability and risk mapping. Geospatial technology has huge potential in safeguarding the population from many natural disasters. Volunteers from engineering background can develop new tools and techniques for rescuing the population. Medical practitioners are always required for treating the sick and injured people at the time of crises.

Incentivizing volunteers by providing cash incentives, weightage in marks or preference in recruitment, letters of commendation to volunteers or honouring volunteers during Republic Day or Independence Day would help combat volunteer fatigue.

While volunteerism is noticeable in rural areas and small towns, in the metropolitan towns the response has not been encouraging. It is essential to espouse motivational approaches to harness youth energy and youth power in the metropolitan towns. Short-term courses on volunteerism through the distant learning mode can help build a professional cadre of volunteers who could be deployed in specialized work like disaster management. On the issue of engagement with VOs in the tasks of Nation Building the National Policy on the Voluntary sector states, "The country faces a number of complex problems that require adaptive, multi-sectoral solutions where sustained social mobilization is particularly important. The roadmap for the volunteer's effective engagement needs to be drawn up. India is fortunate that it has a pool of millions of volunteers with the potential, zeal, enthusiasm and commitment. All they need are well-defined goals.

The purpose of this review is to encourage significant reflection and debate across India into the dimensions around volunteering during the disasters.

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