

Volunteers in Conflicts and Emergencies



The Challenge

The experiences of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies is poorly understood, despite the central role they play in responding to crises. The Swedish Red Cross asked to work with Professor Baillie Smith and the Centre for International Development to jointly develop a program of research, development and innovation which built understanding of the lives of this group of volunteers in order to raise their profile, and improve their effectiveness and safety and wellbeing.

The Partnership solution

Professor Baillie Smith and the Swedish Red Cross worked together to develop an approach which included capacity building, research and innovation. Practitioners from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were supported to gather data on volunteers' experiences through a series of 'Listening Studies' in Afghanistan, Honduras, Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Ukraine. Capacity building activities also supported practitioners to learn how to read and explore data, and their ideas then shaped the ways the Centre for International Development analysed the material gathered. Through this, the findings have responded to practical needs on the ground, whilst sustainability has been ensured through building the capacities of practitioners to undertake research and analysis.

Pop-up Innovation labs were developed bringing together stakeholders in particular countries to address some of the issues and challenges raised in the research. A series of thematic papers have also been produced which highlight key issues, and which have been used to shape debate at a conference bringing together key global stakeholders. A project exhibition shares some of the findings in an interactive format, enabling people to understand the lived experience of being a volunteer in a conflict setting.

Our impact

The collaboration has raised the profile and needs of volunteers in conflicts and emergencies and built the capacities and skills of practitioners in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Critically important issues raised by the research are now being debated and explored in new ways as a result of the collaboration, including: how to provide volunteer insurance; ways to ensure the emotional well-being of volunteers; how volunteer leadership takes place in crises; gendered impacts of volunteering in conflicts and crises; how to build resilient volunteers.

Organisation Overview

The Swedish Red Cross is a Swedish humanitarian organization and a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.



"The Swedish Red Cross has, in Centre for International Development at Northumbria University, found a very agile and supportive partner. Together, we have spearheaded research on volunteering in conflicts and emergencies. The nature of the initiative has been constantly changing, involving a large number of people contributing in a co-creative research and innovation process. Throughout this work, the University has adapted and adjusted to what has been required and mobilized extremely skilled and knowledgeable staff to join the team. Through this partnership, Northumbria University has enabled Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers to have their voices heard and become a credible force shaping the future of volunteering."

Stefan Agerhem
Senior Advisor, International
Department, Disaster and Policy Unit



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