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THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT: A BEACON OF SOLIDARITY AND RESILIENCE

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GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

In 1862, Swiss businessman Henri Dunant authored 'A Memory of Solferino', inspired by his experiences at the Battle of Solferino in 1859.¹ In this influential work, Dunant described the compassionate actions of the women of Castiglione, who cared for all the wounded regardless of their nationality, embodying a spirit of universal camaraderie and expressing this sentiment with the phrase '*Tutti Fratelli*' (all brothers). Dunant's reflections led him to propose the creation of relief societies in peacetime to care for the wounded during wars by zealous and devoted volunteers. This concept laid the foundation for establishing the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) National Societies and the Movement in 1864. This historical event, the birth of the Red Cross Red Crescent International Movement, is a testament to the power of solidarity, human compassion and the potential of voluntary service.

With 191 National Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Movement is the oldest and most widespread humanitarian network globally, with 15.5 million volunteers currently active. These volunteers are vital to responding to various crises, including natural disasters, conflicts, and health emergencies. Often hailing from affected communities, these volunteers provide essential services, including medical aid, disaster relief, and community support. Their efforts address immediate needs and contribute to communities' long-term recovery and resilience, helping to rebuild the social fabric and foster social cohesion.

The nature of volunteering has evolved as societies and their forms of organisation and needs have changed. The recognition of growing and intersecting crises provides important new contexts for thinking about volunteering, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has long experience of mobilising volunteers in response to humanitarian crises. Volunteering is not uniform across contexts or crises, taking place both through formal structures, as well as informally. Volunteering through organisations involves structured systems for mobilising and managing volunteers. It is accompanied by agreed practices and codes of behaviour which, in the case of the Red Cross Red Crescent, are particularly consistent with its Fundamental Principles. In contrast, informal volunteering may be less organised and harder to quantify, occurring when individuals or groups come together independently to provide aid. This presents challenges for organisations and the wider sector, since integrating different forms of volunteerism that operate in very different ways is not straightforward. While the cause needs to be championed over the organisation, this is hard to realise in practice. But recognising and valuing all forms of volunteerism is crucial to fostering a sense of inclusivity and unity within the humanitarian community.

The concept of solidarity provides a useful starting point for volunteer-involving organisations to be more sensitive to diverse forms of volunteerism and how they can support communities in crises and disasters to be stronger catalysts for resilience. It highlights the importance of mutual support within and between groups, especially in the face of adversity, transcending geographical, cultural, and political boundaries and reinforcing the notion of our shared humanity.

[1] Dunant, H. (1986). *A Memory of Solferino*. International Committee of the Red Cross.

The potential catalytic role of organisations like the IFRC in fostering this solidarity cannot be overstated, not only in providing logistical and material support but also serving as a unifying force that channels the compassion and willingness of individuals into coordinated, effective action. However, delivering this requires commitments to more practical capacities and logistics. One dimension of this is the training and preparedness of volunteers. While the spirit of volunteerism is invaluable, proper training ensures that volunteers can provide safe and practical assistance in a crisis. There is also a need to emphasise volunteers' safety, security, protection, and well-being. Providing a supportive environment that prioritises volunteers' health and safety can strengthen relationships and a sense of connection that promote solidarity. This includes comprehensive training programmes that equip volunteers with the necessary skills and knowledge to operate safely in challenging and often hazardous conditions, strict security protocols and access to mental health and psychosocial support services, ensuring that volunteers are well prepared and physically and emotionally supported. The deaths of volunteers in frontline response during times of crises underline how vital – and urgent – this issue is.

Looking ahead, there are several ways to enhance the roles of volunteering in crises. First and foremost, we need to recognise and integrate the efforts of volunteers into formal crisis response plans at local, national, and international levels. This will help ensure that the invaluable contributions of volunteers are acknowledged and utilised. We need to be able to protect and safeguard our frontline volunteers by providing investment in safety, security, protective equipment, and training. We must build stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships to pool resources and expertise and make crisis response more effective. Lastly, we need to start engaging early in schools and with young people, instilling the values of empathy and civic responsibility and encouraging more people to engage in voluntary activities throughout their lives. This is something that the IFRC and its network focus on strongly, as young people represent more than half of the Movement's 15.5 million volunteers globally and are a driving force of humanitarian assistance locally.

Volunteering is critically important as the world faces multiple and intersecting crises. Its capacity to foster connections and build solidarities is essential for overcoming adversity and achieving global unity in facing these challenges. The enduring spirit of Solferino is still celebrated annually, reminding us of the compassion and dedication of volunteers who are the torchbearers of a humanitarian ethos. The spirit of Solferino is not exclusive to Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers; it is a universal call to action that urges all of us to build a better world through humanitarian values and service.

About the Author

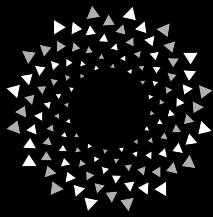


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