

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: *Deep crises seem to multiply and diversify, with recent examples such as the war refugee crisis and the COVID 19 pandemic. At the same time, in these crises, people tend to get involved through various forms of volunteering. However, these can prove useless when unorganised, without adequately trained people. This article, having a theoretical background, examines key aspects of crisis management through a specialised literature review, highlighting ways of involving volunteers effectively so that they can make a real contribution to solving the crisis. The results indicate ways volunteering can respond to the various needs of crisis management, emphasising the need for careful planning, appropriate role assignment, training, and coaching, without neglecting aspects of time management, working under pressure, task satisfaction and well-being.*

Keywords: *crises management, volunteer management, motivation for volunteering*

Introduction

Crisis management has recently become a global focus, driven by the diversity and accelerated multiplication of unprecedented situations with a wide-ranging impact on daily life at social, political, and economic levels. With a high degree of novelty or already well-known, deep crises are challenging for those involved in their alleviation, especially in coordination and control processes. Although the impact is intended to be as low as possible, poor management can have significant negative consequences. Starting from the identification of the epicenter of the crisis, the management process has numerous needs, both for solving the crisis and for the effectiveness of its actions. Considering the resources needed in such situations of deep crisis, we can say that human resource is critical in the process, with high requirements of adaptability, motivation, and involvement. Although some of the effects of such situations can be difficult to manage, especially those with an impact on the health and safety of the population, there is a need for competent management, together with a collective involvement to cover all the needs without insisting on the superficial ones. Often, formal intervention proves to be insufficient, sometimes delayed by faulty chains of communication, and unable to meet the criteria of urgency and promptness. Thus, when formal intervention, often by public authorities, fails to provide immediate responses, there is a phenomenon of spontaneous volunteerism, of the whole community trying to provide answers where the state fails. This spontaneous volunteering, both in organized settings determined by NGOs and in uncontrolled environments, offers various much-needed opportunities in deep crises, covering diverse needs. However, although beneficial, it can have a negative impact when there is a lack of coordinated, specialized people and attempts to help do more harm than good. Therefore, starting from

the essential components of deep crisis, this paper will analyse ways to involve volunteers in safe contexts, considering their needs, assessing both their possibilities of evolution and those of the community to overcome difficult situations in an organized and efficient way

Method and data

Starting from a defining structure of crisis management (Di Loreto, Mora and Divitini, 2012), this article outlines a perspective on the involvement of volunteers in crisis resolution. Thus, through a theoretical approach given by a literature review, a theoretical plan of volunteering as a potential solution in crises is outlined. The benefits and possible pragmatic threats are analysed, considering recent experiences such as the war or the Covid-19 pandemic, related to the theoretical aspects identified in the selected papers.

Discussions

Volunteering becomes a viable method of immediate relief based on a spontaneous response, often as a reaction to the lack of proper management adapted to a deep crisis. However, besides the obvious benefits, such as speeding up the resolution of urgent issues, human intervention and promoting the essential role of the community, negative aspects resulting from a lack of specialists or organisation are also noticeable. Taking a few components of crisis management (Di Loreto, Mora and Divitini, 2012) as a starting point, we will discuss a mirror perspective on the involvement of volunteers in different crisis management processes.

Although complex, sometimes unprecedented, deep crises bring predictable and unpredictable elements to the management team's attention. The involvement of volunteers, taking into account these aspects, is a new type of activity, an episodic one, with higher unavailability and higher costs (Hyde et al., 2016). It is characterized by a continuous need for structure, autonomy, guidance, care and coordination (Simsa et al., 2019), requirements that make it difficult to react quickly in difficult situations, not allowing total focus on the task. However, an adequate response to these needs can make volunteers contribute to the predictability of events and actions, accepting the unexpected more easily through continuous preparation and care. Given the lack of availability and the high turnover rate of volunteers, certain unpredictable elements, surprising in their seriousness or novelty, can trigger a mechanism of immediate action, a desire to get involved that defines the episodic character as intense, complex, and action-packed. At the same time, some episodes of volunteering in crucial situations can be equivalent to constant activities but without a direct impact on the community.

Looking at the next component of crisis management, which is dissecting the problem, volunteers can be given the role of the least important, but often most urgent, issues. Thus, looking at recent deep crises, we have observed volunteers' involvement in humanitarian severe issues, successfully complementing the authorities' work. An example from Greece illustrates the work of volunteers, especially seniors, based on the professions they have or have had, simple activities from cooking to medical services (Chtouris and Miller, 2017). Although they may seem insignificant, the sum of their efforts is a natural step forward in solving any crisis.

Making plans, the third component of crisis management raises a significant issue in the NGO planning process: human resource allocation. Especially in the context of spontaneous volunteering, which may be motivated by a sense of responsibility towards the community, trying to help oneself in the fight against negative emotions (Yang, 2021), altruism that impacts all the motivational dimensions (Burns et al., 2006) or a desire to give something back to the community (Aguirre and Bolton, 2013), planning proves to be as challenging as identifying and providing an adequate response to these motivations. At the same time, given the unpredictability, formal planning is more problematic when it involves bureaucratic matters which, in non-profit organisations, should be carried out by paid employees. Thus, the role of these employees in volunteer management is greatly diminished by these activities, which involve time, effort, and energy, without valuing the relationship between management and volunteers (Nesbit, Christensen and Brudney, 2018). The next crisis management issue, local versus global reporting, has a profound significance, especially regarding recent events. Although the tendency to resolve issues that directly impact us is more significant (Baker and Grant Ludwig, 2018), global reporting ensures an in-depth understanding of the different courses of action without imposing a limited tendency to resolve them.

Regarding communication, an essential aspect in the crisis, in addition to cooperation and compatibility between members, digital volunteering networks stand out, characterized by secure and fast access to information (Chernobrov, 2018). Especially in humanitarian crises, this digital volunteering helps to ensure effective communication into a broader community, creating links between those who need help and those who can help, with significant involvement of those who get the message out where it is needed. Social media platforms actively contribute to strengthening civic engagement, becoming more than the sum of its parts (Kaun and Uldam, 2018).

Crisis management is defined through the characterization of organizational and individual roles. Lack of direction and support have become some of the most critical factors leading to people giving up volunteering, highlighting the importance of defining roles in which volunteers can be consistently supported (Yanay and Yanay, 2008). Therefore, in assigning roles, management must consider two essential issues: offering tasks commensurate with each person's skills and creating contexts in which volunteers can interact with each other and with the beneficiaries of the activities (Lorente-Ayala, Vila-Lopez and Kuster-Boluda, 2019). In this way, their roles, even in deep crises, will strengthen their commitment and satisfaction.

Making decisions in a limited time can also lead to problems related to burnout and stress. However, rapid intervention sometimes requires the presence of trained people, even from local authorities, and volunteers who may be specialised. In deep crises, this meeting of the two categories can be a blessing but also a negative thing because of their incompatibility, transforming the desire to do well into something that amplifies the crisis (Barsky et al., 2007).

Human resources management in deep crisis situations has an urgent need for coaching and training of volunteers. Besides improving their performance in emergencies, training also contributes to job satisfaction (Alexander, 2010). At the same time, the collective efforts of training and coaching activities are directed towards the cultivation of soft skills without emphasising the technical ones (Di Loreto, Mora and Divitini, 2012). One of the most important soft skills is effective communication in times of crisis, divided

into group communication and decision making (Haferkamp and Krämer, 2010). Referring to volunteering activities, in addition to training focused on personal development, these soft skills can be acquired through appropriate coaching and the power of the example of a leader able to inspire, not just lead (Schreiner et al., 2018). Volunteers need to produce cognitive and behavioural changes among beneficiaries (Gilat and Rosenau, 2011) and provide practical help so that the training process can be extremely costly.

However, in addition to the components of the deep crisis management process mentioned in this article, it is necessary to remember human predispositions to help in difficult situations, especially when these situations are relevant to them (Strandh, 2019). Volunteer activities are proving to be viable methods of concretizing helping tendencies, and crisis resolution desire; at the same time, the potential of volunteerism development by continuing activities after crisis resolution is proven in the USA, the number of volunteers has increased after such difficult situations, volunteers identifying themselves with potential victims (Rotolo, Wilson and Dietz, 2015). However, this is where the NGO's essential role comes in, retaining volunteers even after disasters through actual retention mechanisms.

Conclusions

In an attempt to provide appropriate contexts for volunteering in situations of deep crisis, based on theoretical aspects presented in the literature, it can be concluded that there is a promising path for such activities. Moving away from emergencies and disasters, volunteering through the values it promotes is a foundation of a society based on empathy, trust, reciprocity and helping each other. Although managing crises can be challenging, with time pressure playing a crucial role in determining the success or failure of interventions, voluntary activities can prove useless when they are disorganised, without trained people and efficient coordination between them and public authorities. Therefore, the need for structure, planning and coordination is critical in crises, emphasizing high-level community involvement. Everyone should find their role through authorities and NGOs to contribute as effectively as possible to prevent harmful effects. Beyond the non-financial rewards, volunteering organized on any platform, both online and offline, starting from the simplest activities, represents a new perspective on community involvement, aiming at unity and the common good. Time management, training and coaching are priorities for NGOs in creating mechanisms to attract and retain volunteers, ensuring their satisfaction with the task, and contributing to their well-being at the same time.

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