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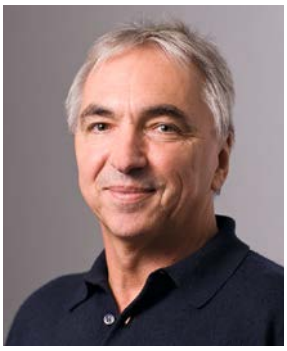
Handout

CRISIS VOLUNTEERING

ACTION PERSPECTIVES FOR VOLUNTEER CENTRES

A discussion paper by Roland Roth



Prof. Dr. Roland Roth. (© ehl)

About the author

Dr. Roland Roth was most recently Professor of Political Science at the University of Magdeburg-Stendal. He has been researching civic engagement for a long time and is active as an expert and consultant in the field of democracy development. He served as an expert member of the German Parliament's Enquiry Commission on „*Zukunft des Bürgerschaftlichen Engagements*" (Future of Civic Engagement) and a jury member of the competition „*Erfolgreiche Integration ist kein Zufall – Strategien kommunaler Integrationspolitik*" (Successful Integration is no coincidence – Strategies of municipal integration policy). Among his recent publications is the book „Promoting Democracy Effectively. Recommendations for Action for Democratic Practice."

He has long been interested in the topic of „Crisis Engagement," both nationally and internationally. Together with the bagfa, Roland Roth has explored this topic for volunteer agencies.

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INTRODUCTION

> *„Volunteer centres are seismographs.*
> *They know that and how needs and demands change. They recognise trends and potentials, discover talents and can adapt to developments.*
>
> *Volunteer centres follow a clear course:*
> *They also navigate through rough seas when crises from climate to environment, and from refugees to pandemics require rapid assistance. When people need people. Volunteer centres act proactively and with foresight. They are sensitive for all kinds of encounters, tailor their approach to each individual and organization, and serve as future laboratories for experimentation.*
> *Getting involved is possible at any time!“*
>
> *(about volunteer centres on the website of bagfa*
> *https://bagfa.de/ueber-die-bagfa/freiwilligenagenturen)*

A dense sequence of crises and emergencies is also a challenge for civic engagement. On the one hand, it is itself affected and restricted by pandemics and other disasters; on the other hand, volunteers respond to emergencies by offering help and support. This traditionally occurs in the conventional aid organisations, largely supported by trained volunteers and are an integral part of institutional emergency management. More recently, independent spontaneous involvement has gained in importance when it comes to dealing with crisis situations. Here, there is an opportunity for volunteer agencies, especially through supporting unaffiliated crisis engagement and connecting it with other actors in emergency assistance. Based on practical experience and an exploratory survey, this article explores the conditions and possibilities for strengthening crisis engagement locally through voluntary agencies.

I. THE NEW NORMALITY OF CRISES AND DISASTERS AS A CHALLENGE FOR ORGANISED EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that civic engagement is increasingly being considered. Traditionally, it plays an important role in coping with crisis situations. This is publicly recognised and widely visible for the volunteers in the „blue light organisations", such as the German Red Cross or the *Malteser Hilfsdienst*. They belong to the Authorities and Organisations with Security Tasks (BOS – *Behörden und Organisationen mit Sicherheitsaufgaben*), a network that can look back on a long history and, according to its own information, is supported up to 90 percent by mostly professionally trained volunteers. It is largely a hierarchical structure of state authorities, relief and rescue organisations that combine professional assistance with organised volunteerism, such as the Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW – *Technisches Hilfswerk*) or the volunteer fire brigade: it is a federally structured, subsidiary system on a voluntary basis, in which public institutions and offices are integrated. The organisations of the emergency network are characterised by the fact that trained and educated laypersons are involved as volunteers in professional emergency management and can reliably offer help in a hierarchical structure. Volunteering thus becomes voluntary activity, which organisations can dispose of in deployment plans. A part of society's potential for help thus becomes well-regulated, needs and goals for help can be specified (cf. Ellebrecht 2020: 140).

In addition, there has always been solidarity-based help in neighbourhoods and from spontaneous helpers who are not integrated into the continuous work of the aid organisations.

One of the unintended consequences of the well-established emergency network is probably the extensive psychological and cognitive relief experienced by the population and policymakers. There is a lack of awareness regarding risks and disasters, despite WHO guidelines and the Sendai Framework. With 190 fatalities and around 33 billion euros in property damage, the flood in July 2021 was a shock that made the shortcomings in the German system of civil protection and disaster preparedness abundantly clear.

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II. SPONTANEOUS HELPERS AS A NEW GROUP OF ACTORS

Cause-related commitment of people not directly affected by crisis situations is a chance, but also a challenge for organised emergency aid, because they appear to be „unpredictable“ and difficult to organise: „Now that society is entering the digital age, the large remnant of ‚unattached helpers‘ is once again moving into the organisational field of vision. Today, mass media and social networks make it possible to provide timely information about acute emergencies in the immediate vicinity, empowering individuals to take action themselves. Unlike the past, where only those physically present were considered potential first responders, a much larger pool of people can now be considered.

News of major disasters spreads rapidly, and with the right software, even individuals beyond the immediate vicinity can be informed about minor emergencies, motivating them to offer spontaneous assistance. For organizations, this signifies that a previously untapped resource of aid is now accessible through the concept of voluntary work, albeit with more challenging control. These new helpers, as non-members, remain ‚unattached.‘

This unbound, cause-related engagement in emergencies („crisis volunteering“, „emergent engagement“, etc.) is gaining international recognition and becoming increasing important as an independent form of action in emergency management – due to generally improved mobility and digital communication. Such engagement can assume significant proportions and – as in the case of refugee aid – replace and overshadow organised aid structures, at least during certain phases.

The following observations can probably be generalized:

- Unbound commitment is numerically significant. In acute emergency situations, it can even be more extensive than organised volunteering.
- The contribution to the management of emergency situations is increasingly gaining public attention and professional recognition.
- Spontaneous and self-organised groups of people, who are otherwise only found in smaller numbers in voluntary engagement, also become active.
- As a rule, unaffiliated emergency assistance cannot be made permanent.
- The separation of organised and unorganised helpers only applies from the perspective of emergency organisations. Spontaneous help is often provided by people who are voluntarily active in associations and organisations in other areas of engagement.
- Shifting and broadening topics can contribute to the transformation of emergency engagement towards emergency prevention.

Nevertheless, unbound, cause-related engagement in emergency situations does not receive special attention either in the current debates on emergency aid, disaster preparedness and critical infrastructures or in the general debate on civic engagement - apart from engagement for refugees. We will not speculate here on the reasons for this extensive omission, but one thesis should be taken seriously: „The inability to manage such spontaneous volunteering is a key reason for this neglect by emergency/crisis/disaster professionals“ (Aguirre et al. 2016: 311).

For spontaneous helpers, the question revolves around how they can contribute most effectively to overcoming an acute emergency situation without making permanent and binding commitments. Temporary and more self-determined commitments are more attractive to them. They require useful information, autonomy, and a suitable onsite infrastructure (digital tools, mobility options) to avoid frustration. The spontaneous willingness to help presents both an opportunity and a challenge. We still know far too little about spontaneous crisis engagement.

How can it be prepared and promoted, how should forms of support look like to honour the determination and action potential of this form of engagement? What incentives and forms of recognition are helpful for these volunteers?

For these reasons too, it is commendable when voluntary agencies turn their attention to crisis engagement. The oversight of crisis engagement in the public perception has several negative consequences:

- Beyond the authorities and organisations with security tasks (BOS), civil society as an addressee and actor of public crisis communication remains largely overlooked.
- Both the diversity of „crisis volunteerism“ and its specific contributions to crisis management are underestimated and not adequately recognized. Thus, the potentials brought in by the new volunteers may remain untapped (Strandh 2019).
- Voluntary engagement can sharpen crisis awareness and sensitise people to risks. Ignoring the possibilities for civil society action beyond organised emergency aid reduces the chance of finding democratically acceptable responses to crisis situations and, in turn, favours authoritarian „solutions“, which - as the recent Corona experiences have shown - can generate social resistance and denial of danger.
- It is precisely from unbound spontaneous crisis engagement that innovative ideas and contributions to a more resilient society can be expected. The „unprofessional“ perspective can sensitise people to the causes of crises and make a contribution to societal sustainability if the experiences in crisis engagement are given a public platform.

III. EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES WITH SPONTANEOUS EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE – FINDINGS FROM A RECENT SURVEY

The first, perhaps surprising, finding is that dealing with crises and disasters has long been part of the remit of the voluntary agencies. Of the 160 agencies that responded to this question, a total of 89 per cent had already been active in helping refugees, 86 per cent on the occasion of the Corona pandemic, 11 per cent during floods and one per cent during heat events. Only 6 per cent of the voluntary agencies stated that they had never contributed to the management of a crisis or disaster situation.

When asked what role they would like to play more strongly in future emergencies and crises, 45 per cent of the respondents provided answers. The answers focus on strengthening the core areas of voluntary agencies: counselling, networking and coordination of volunteers, organisations and municipalities. Some answers draw attention to capacity limits. Without additional resources, it would be impossible to think of an expanded engagement in this area. Another interesting idea is to build up a network of spontaneous helpers with the help of an app or to act as a contact point especially for this target group. The intention to advise politicians and administrators on crisis management in the future and to participate in crisis teams is also a sign of self-confidence and experience.

In this context, the local self-assessments and situation assessments of the surveyed voluntary centres regarding crisis and disaster relief are also noteworthy:

- Only two per cent mentioned that their municipality was hardly taking any action in the field of crisis prevention, while 28 percent identified clear deficiencies. Conversely, about a quarter of the respondents provided an all-around positive assessment, 46 percent expressing a positive perception.
- More than half (55 per cent) of all voluntary agencies see themselves in an active role, while 44 per cent are waiting for municipal initiatives in matters of emergency planning and crisis prevention.
- Almost three quarters of all volunteer centres surveyed (35 per cent „strongly agree“, 39 per cent „somewhat agree“) perceive themselves as the most suitable actor „to coordinate and accompany the spontaneous engagement of citizens in case of emergencies in our local environment“.
- However, this awareness of competence is not accompanied by appropriate crisis preparation. Only just under a quarter have ever debated the resilience of their own institution.
- Nevertheless, almost two thirds of the voluntary agencies see themselves as sufficiently positioned in terms of digital networking and coordination in the event of a crisis (31 per cent „fully agree“, 32 per cent „somewhat agree“).
- Three out of four volunteer centres agree with the statement that they are aware of „what we could and could not do in emergency and crisis situations“.
- A clear majority (61 per cent) feel that their volunteer management is prepared for emergencies and crises (however, only 15 per cent „fully agree“ with this statement).

Around two thirds of the volunteer centres surveyed have so far been able to participate in crisis teams and emergency planning, one third have not been involved. The experiences of the volunteer centres included in the survey vary greatly overall, with positive statements predominating. In a considerable number of municipalities and districts, voluntary agencies feel that they are involved in emergency planning at an early stage, in an appreciative manner and on an equal footing, and that their contributions to crisis management are adequately recognised. The benefit of such coordination bodies and planning staffs is seen as predominantly positive. The answers indicate that appreciation by the political leadership, clear responsibilities in the administration, its staffing and coordination performance in crisis communication are important success factors. This also applies to positive previous experience in earlier crisis situations as well as the resources and possibilities for action of the voluntary agencies themselves, i.e. they must have something to offer.

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IV. CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

> *Make the people a part of the solution.*
> *(Unesco-IPRED-ITU Workshop 2009)*

In all likelihood, „forced experiments“ will also become more frequent in disaster management. Volunteer centres can make an innovative contribution to this by systematically developing and expanding disaster and civil protection as a field of action. As the survey shows, volunteer centres can develop competencies, capacities and networks involving authorities and relief organisations to specifically support disaster management through voluntary engagement on-site. This applies especially to the core tasks of volunteer centres: recruiting, registering, qualifying and placing volunteers.

Whether volunteer centres acquire this mandate in civil protection also depends on how the local government sets itself up (Mende et al. 2021) and what competences the emergency organisations themselves build up, for example in the registration and training of potential volunteers (cf. DRK 2016). In any case, a future-oriented and locally coordinated approach makes sense.

Wolfram Geier from the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) agrees: „Only a coordinated strategy of overarching good framework conditions and accepted, functional local practical concepts in which it is possible to positively combine ‚old‘ and ‚new‘ will be suitable for solving the problems that arise in the long term. Adapting the system to current and future needs is the order of the day!“ (Geier 2021: 6). Local businesses should also be involved in this process (Kusterer 2015; Hämmerle 2020).

For voluntary agencies, it is crucial to be prepared to collaborate with spontaneous aid initiatives and establish connections with organized emergency aid as well as local authorities. There is often a lack of ‚fit‘ between different organizational cultures. This is a genuine task of volunteer management, as it involves ensuring that organizations are adaptable to new groups and generations of volunteers.

In brief, the following points should be noted:

- Strengthening the role of unattached, spontaneous helpers in disaster management should become a central focus of volunteer centres. These centres, within their task profile, are the most suitable institutions for this purpose. If not already implemented, the initial step should involve gaining experience in managing spontaneous, sporadic involvement and developing corresponding skills.
- Supporting disengaged crisis engagement can be an important contribution to risk communication within the local community, not only by strengthening the perception of risks, but also by addressing existing competencies and potentials for action in the population. Committed emergency aid contributes to crisis communication because it counters ignorance and denial of hazards, avoids feelings of powerlessness and the production of enemy images, and strengthens solidarity potentials and social cohesion by making the potentials and opportunities of voluntary engagement visible.

- In this context, resources must be taken into account. Particularly in the area of spontaneous engagement, (additional) resources are required that allow and secure reliable, lasting and successful support for this form of voluntary engagement. Whether maintaining tools to register the special skills of those willing to get involved, coordinating and mediating in crisis situations, or organising information events or working in local crisis teams, questions about the staffing and professional capabilities of the mediation agencies will quickly arise. In this field of action, the focus is on reliability – towards those who wish to get involved, those affected, and in collaboration with other actors in emergency aid. As a rule, a longer-term development process is to be expected. Voluntary centres gain experience with their possibilities and can evolve into a recognised partner for municipalities and blue-light organisations, making their involvement in crisis management routine. This improves the potentials of acquiring resources on a permanent basis, especially when the special significance of spontaneous commitment in crisis situations is (more) recognised locally, in professional circles and in the general public.
- Volunteer centres exhibit varying levels of resources, ranging from exclusive volunteer management to those with a significant number of full-time staff. This diversity must be considered when developing skills to support spontaneous crisis engagement.
- Volunteer centres should prioritize becoming crisis-proof and strengthening their own resilience. Whether facing floods or pandemics, local voluntary agencies are typically affected, with limited ability to act. It is often a matter of chance whether agencies are still able to act in crisis and emergency situations. Volunteer centres should therefore examine whether and how they can make their work more resilient. Incorporating location-independent digitalisation or having alternative facilities can help to ensure that mediation platforms and networks function even under pressure. Is there a plan B: What can (still) be done if electricity and the digital networks fail?
- Simultaneously, the independent nature of spontaneous crisis involvement must be kept in mind. Volunteer centres cannot guarantee spontaneous engagement, nor can they ensure that it leads to long-term organised volunteer commitment.
- Strengthening spontaneous engagement presents an opportunity to harness civil society potential in dealing with crises. Voluntary agencies, community foundations and other institutions promoting engagement often offer responses to emergencies and crises that focus on solidarity, subsidiarity, self-responsibility, and self-design. The (few) citizens‘ forums on Corona serve as an example of how civil society can develop and assert its responses to crises publicly.
- This encompasses participation in participatory local resilience policies, in climate, flood or pandemic protection plans, and a citizen-oriented redefinition of „critical infrastructure“. Trust is built through participation and transparency in crisis situations.

> It revolves around experimental building sites for a post-crisis society, or at least a more crisis-resistant society: ***„There is glory in prevention!“***

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