

The preparation of volunteers for deployment in emergencies

Richard Ming Kirk Tan examines volunteer preparation for emergencies

Abstract

If volunteers are not prepared for the roles they have agreed to take on in emergencies, they might add to the problems that the relief organisation or the national or local authorities will face. In addition, they will also put themselves in danger or difficulties and their families at risk of the consequences that may follow. This paper looks at some of the things that can be done to prepare volunteers for emergencies, dealing with the main issues involved with the pre-deployment screening, personal preparation, proper equipping and adequate briefing of volunteers before they are deployed in emergencies. It concludes with the view that proper and sufficient preparation of volunteers is a necessary prerequisite to the deployment of volunteers in emergencies.

Introduction

The international response to emergencies and disasters in recent years, especially since the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami disaster in December 2005, has generally been unprecedented and heartening. This has come through in various forms including relief assistance from volunteers. While volunteers can and do have a part to play by providing much needed assistance at relatively short notice, they need to be sufficiently prepared. If volunteers are not adequately prepared for the roles they have agreed to take on, they might add to the problems that the relief organisation or the national or local authorities will face. In addition, they are also likely to put themselves in danger or difficulties and their families at risk of the unpleasant consequences that may follow. It has also been said that one of the most important challenges in ensuring the sustainability of volunteerism in disaster preparedness is the prolongation of volunteer motivation (Ozderdem & Jacoby, 2006) and properly prepared volunteers will contribute greatly to this. This paper looks at some of the things that can be done to prepare volunteers for their roles in emergencies. It will give examples from some of the recent disasters and deal briefly with the

main issues involved in the pre-deployment screening, personal preparation, proper equipping and adequate briefing of volunteers before they are deployed in emergencies.

This paper is not intended to be exhaustive on the matters raised but seeks to highlight some areas of concern that volunteers and the organisations that deploy them ought to pay attention to. In addition, it does not propose to deal with other factors that may also be critical for the well being of volunteers e.g. on-going training and other support. While there are some differences depending on whether the volunteer is being deployed in an emergency within his country or overseas, many of the points raised would be applicable to both types of situations.

Nature of emergencies

Before proceeding to deal with the main issues involved, there are three factors about emergencies that should be highlighted. Firstly, the legal and regulatory environment in an emergency situation is likely to be very different from the normal situation in the affected area. Secondly, the physical conditions and the infrastructure of the affected area are often also adversely affected. Thirdly, there is likely to be a major psychological impact caused by the disaster or calamity that resulted in the state of emergency.

Under most national laws, the government has the right to declare a state of emergency when the country or part of it is threatened. The circumstances that may lead to the declaration of a state of emergency range from international conflict, war and invasion to disturbances of peace, public order or safety to natural or public calamity or disaster (Orra, 1982). However, once a state of emergency has been declared, the legislature or government will usually have wide ranging powers that may derogate from the norms of basic human rights (Chowdhury, 1989) such as freedom from discrimination or the right to a fair trial or from other constitutional safeguards. For example, under *Article 150(5) of the Singapore Constitution*, while a proclamation of emergency is in force, subject to certain limited circumstances, no law "shall be invalid on the ground of inconsistency with any provision of this Constitution." Malaysia also has a fairly similar provision in *Article 150(6) of its Constitution*. It has been pointed out that

it is not easy to devise universal norms for regulating the conduct of the ruling elites in different states of emergency and that even in the liberal democracies of the West, suspension of basic human rights during a public crisis has received constitutional sanction. (Chowdhury, 1989, p 9).

When a state of emergency is declared, the area concerned would have usually suffered from destruction and damage from a natural or man-made disaster. This often means that the buildings and other structures there may be destroyed or unsafe. In addition, basic amenities and utilities like food, water, electricity and shelter may be non-existent or scarce. In fact, it was said that after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami disaster “many government structures that were already under-resourced and, in some cases, strained by years of conflict, suffered great losses in the tsunami. At the same time, the enormous influx of international actors put pressure on local, district and national authorities ...” (UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, the usual socio-economic activities like trade and commerce are likely also to be disrupted in an emergency. All these factors contribute to a very chaotic environment and in an extreme situation, it could also lead to anarchy as it did in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (BBC News, 1 Sep 2005).

The psychological impact on the local population is often harder to detect and comes through the loss of lives and injuries and through substantial loss and damage to property and the environment. The unexpected and often horrifying events that lead to an emergency and their consequences are often traumatic and can affect people very deeply. These may also affect

volunteers and relief workers at the same time and at least one study has indicated that humanitarian relief workers may be at high risk of developing symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (Eriksson et al, 2001). After the Indian Ocean earthquakes and tsunamis, Malaysian Medical Relief Society (MERCY Malaysia), a non profit organisation dedicated to the delivery of medical and humanitarian aid, went to Aceh to help. According to MERCY Malaysia’s Founder and President: “At the time of arrival of the initial teams in Aceh, there had not been much media coverage of the disaster there. Thus, the early images of widespread death and destruction did pose some challenges in terms of psychological stress to the volunteer teams. Despite having deployed experienced team members, we very early on recognised the need to conduct regular debriefing and psychological support to the team members” (Mahmood, 2005).

The Chairman of Palang Merah Indonesian (PMI or Indonesian Red Cross) also said in respect of the same disaster that “psychological support is essential” (Muhammad, 2005). In addition, it has been said that discounting the effects of traumatic events on the relief workers reflects disregard not only for their well-being, but more importantly, for the impact of distressed aid workers on the population they seek to serve (McCall M. & Salama P., 1999).

As a consequence of the severe and more hazardous conditions that exist in an emergency, it is important that volunteer relief workers and the organisations that send them screen and prepare them as much as possible to avoid adding to the problems that are already there.



Emergency volunteers often work in severe and hazardous conditions.

Some measures for the preparation of volunteers

Several things may be done to prepare volunteers who are deployed in an emergency and this section deals with some of them. It is suggested that the main preparation measures may be grouped into the following four categories:

- (a) pre-deployment screening
- (b) personal preparation
- (c) proper equipment; and
- (d) adequate briefing.

A list of self-explanatory items is suggested after a short discussion of each category below but they are not meant to be exhaustive in nature. The lists are adapted from information found in various sources including travel guides and emergency and survival handbooks. However, different organisations and different situations will dictate the inclusion of other relevant items or changes from the given lists.

(a) Pre-deployment screening

Pre-deployment screening is important as it will help sieve out volunteers who may not be ready or competent to take part in the current deployment because of health or other personal circumstances prevailing at the relevant time. The Singapore Armed Forces Psychiatry Team Leader in the earthquakes and Indian Ocean tsunamis relief operations said that apart from a willingness to help you also need maturity and to be able to tolerate “disturbing scenes” and “unpleasant conditions for a while” (Cheok, 2005). Psychological and personality testing has been recommended as a “powerful mechanism for screening potential candidates for employment” in high risk-exposure occupations in disaster and emergency medical organisations (Dunning, 2004) and may also be considered for volunteers before deployment in emergencies. In fact, in order to be deployed by the Green Cross Assistance program, qualified members must, among other things, complete a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Basic Incident Command System course and a Compassion Fatigue Self-Test and obtain approved scores (Figley & Figley, 2005). With regards to the selection and training of disaster relief workers, it has been pointed out that “differentiating personnel in regard to their prior experience is also important (Paton et al, 2004). In addition, prior testing and assessment through assessments centres using, among other things, multiple exercises and simulations are also useful for selecting volunteers to be emergency managers (Paton et al, 2002). Generally, pre-deployment screening may include the following:

- (i) Medical check up (to confirm health)
- (ii) Psychological and personality testing (to confirm mental health)

- (iii) Qualification and certification check (to confirm their currency)
- (iv) Verification of prior experience and training.
- (v) Testing and assessment (e.g. by exercises and simulations)
- (vi) Written consent to risks involved (to confirm assumption of risks)

(b) Personal preparation

Volunteers also need to be briefed to adequately prepare themselves before any deployment. To highlight how unexpectedly a situation may eventually turn out to be, the tragic case of Mr Richard Fong, a 45-year old Singapore real estate agent is pertinent. Mr Fong organised and led a convoy of Land Rovers from Singapore taking relief supplies to tsunami survivors in Krabi, Thailand after the Indian Ocean earthquakes and tsunamis. The relief supplies consisted of clothes, surgical gloves, masks and other medical supplies. He lost control of his Land Rover and died after it flipped a number of times along the North-South Expressway in Kedah, Malaysia (The Straits Times, 2 Jan 2005). More unfortunate was the fact that he left a 10-year old son whose mother had been in a coma for more than two years (The Straits Times, 5 Jan 2005). In one study of deaths in humanitarian workers between 1985 and 1998, it was reported that there was a trend of increasing deaths among relief workers from non-governmental organisations (Sheik, M. et al, 2000). Needless to say, these are usually the organisations most likely to use volunteers. The following is a list of some of the things that may be involved in personal preparation:

- (i) Vaccinations and immunizations
- (ii) Physical training and preparation
- (iii) Will – a legal document to distribute property after death
- (iv) Advance medical directive or living will
- (v) Final message to family and friends (a.k.a. ethical will)
- (vi) Insurance – health, medical, travel, accident and life
- (vii) Employment or business leave and cover
- (viii) Power of attorney and/or appointment of agent
- (ix) Appointment of guardian
- (x) Finance – fund raising and bill payment arrangements
- (xi) Mail handling arrangements
- (xii) Newspaper and other delivery arrangements
- (xiii) Reschedule of appointments – medical, dental and others
- (xiv) Contingency planning in case of delay or failure to return or other contingencies
- (xv) Pets and plants care



Psychological support is essential in decreasing the effects of traumatic events on volunteers.

(c) Proper equipment

It is important that volunteers bring with them the proper clothing and any necessary equipment to avoid taxing the local resources or worse, being inadequately equipped. A list of things to bring along may include the following items:

- (i) Clothing (spare clothing and inclement weather clothing)
- (ii) Toiletries
- (iii) Personal medication
- (iv) First aid kit
- (v) Insect repellent
- (vi) Identification documents (identity card or driving licence)
- (vii) Passport (with appropriate visa)
- (viii) Mobile phone and charger
- (ix) Radio
- (x) Multipurpose pocket knife/tool
- (xi) Writing material
- (xii) Torchlight
- (xiii) Whistle
- (xiv) Food
- (xv) Water purifier/filter
- (xvi) Sunscreen
- (xvii) Cash
- (xviii) Others – e.g. additional batteries, guidebooks and handbooks

(d) Adequate briefing

Sometimes, even proper training may not sufficiently prepare a volunteer for the actual situation. A medical doctor with previous pre-hospital emergency experience who helped out after the London terror attacks in July 2005 stressed the need to improvise and had this to say:

“I have trained for such a situation for 20 years – but on the assumption that I would be part of a rescue team, properly dressed, properly equipped, and moving with semimilitary precision. Instead, I am in shirtsleeves and a pinstripe suit, with no pen and no paper, and I am technically an injured victim. All I have is my ID card, surgical gloves, and my colleagues’ expectations that I will lead them through this crisis” (Holden, 2005).

Although volunteer relief workers often have to adapt at the disaster location, pre-deployment briefings that are as comprehensive as possible would help to prepare them for that situation. One study suggested that better pre-travel health and medical briefing and preparation would minimise preventable morbidity and mortality among relief workers (Sharp et al, 1995). Among other things, they need to be briefed about the risks present and the possibility of becoming victims themselves. The Chief Officer for Muhammadiyah Committee for Aceh Recovery, a Muslim non profit and social organisation, said in respect of their experience in Aceh that many Muhammadiyah members became victims of tsunamis and some also “suffered from traumatic situation” (Husein, 2005). In addition, in many current conflicts, “it is well known that civilians have become common targets, children are increasingly the soldiers and terror

is used as a weapon” (Smith, 2002). Volunteers should also be briefed about cultural sensitivities, including the “dos and don’ts” in a foreign culture. The Medical Team Leader of the Medical Task Force (Banda Aceh) of the Singapore Armed Forces mentioned the need to be “mindful of local differences” in respect of cultural matters (Fan, 2005).

Another important briefing topic would be the legal rights and liabilities of the volunteers and their organisations. Dunlop argues that about a decade ago in Australia, “emergency service organisations (ESOs) were rarely sued, rarely questioned and rarely thought to be affected by legislation such as Occupational Health and Safety Acts.” He believes that the situation is infinitely more complicated today and that “changes in the law and in community expectations have increased the legal responsibilities, liabilities and the legal scrutiny of ESOs”. He goes on to say that “these changes can be said to affect or even threaten the sustainability of ESOs, particularly those that are reliant on volunteers” (Dunlop, 2004). While there may not have been much research done about this in other countries, it is submitted that this is a likely trend in a world where people are becoming increasingly more aware of their legal rights. It has been mentioned by Kanarev (Kanarev, 2001) that there are “potential legal liabilities associated with operational decisions” and “crisis decision-making and evacuation management are examples of operational decisions”. Currently, the main legal issues concerning emergency management seem to be in the areas of negligence, employment law and administrative law (Douglas, 1999). However, emergency and humanitarian workers are increasingly likely to find themselves operating in countries experiencing armed conflict and it is “essential for them and their personnel to understand the aspects of international law that may apply to them so that they can provide the greatest assistance with the

least risk of inadvertent offence” (Layton & Bannon, 2000). These aspects would include international humanitarian law, human rights, international criminal law, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity (Layton & Bannon, 2000).

One aspect of the legal briefing should also highlight that law in the books and law in action may be two entirely different things. It has been pointed out that one weakness of human rights and humanitarian law has been its lack of enforcement (Guest & Bouchet-Saulnier, 1997). In fact, one writer mentioned that “many people engaged in and leading the shooting have neither heard of nor can they read the Geneva conventions” (Smith, 2002).

A list of briefing topics could include the following:

- (i) Packing list
- (ii) Preparation checklist
- (iii) Travel/transport arrangements
- (iv) Food and lodging arrangements
- (v) Physical and other conditions of location
- (vi) Risks present
- (vii) Cultural and religious sensitivities – a list of dos and don’ts
- (viii) Job requirements
- (ix) Legal rights and liabilities (under national law, foreign law and international law)
- (x) Safety and security arrangements
- (xi) Emergency evacuation procedures
- (xii) Self-care
- (xiii) Available assistance – e.g. Medical, psychological and legal help



The physical conditions of the subject area can be a major factor needing to be highlighted to volunteers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is submitted that the proper and sufficient preparation of volunteers is a necessary prerequisite to preventing or reducing the dangers and problems that might arise from the deployment of volunteers in emergency operations. While lists of a number of things that need to be done to prepare volunteers before deployment have been included in this paper, they are not meant to be comprehensive nor exhaustive. It is hoped that further work can be done in this area so that more comprehensive information may be available to address the concerns raised. More studies of past disasters and emergencies around the world would be helpful and likely to enable better preparations for the future. George Santayana's statement that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it is very apt in this regard.

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