

VOLUNTEERS IN DISASTER RELIEF IN ZONES OF ARMED CONFLICT: THE CASE OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN

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Abstract: Volunteerism plays an essential role in the development of any society. Society's level of culture and awareness can be rated by measuring the amount and thrust of volunteerism movements. Volunteerism has proven to be essential in emergency management. Individual volunteers and volunteer groups provide a variety of skills and resources that can be used in emergencies. In Jordan, the concept of volunteerism already plays a considerable role in both the economy and in social development. This paper reviews the implementation of current and future trends for volunteerism systems in Syrian refugee camps' management in Jordan and provides a social analysis of why, or why not, people volunteer in different aspects of society. It suggests a volunteer system for disaster management aiming to enhance mitigation and response capabilities for future disasters.

Keywords: volunteerism, Syrian refugees, economic and social development, civil society organizations, CSOs, volunteering system, first responders' community, trusted reporters, non-governmental organization.

Introduction

Volunteering is an activity that is conducted by an individual without financial gain.¹ The base of voluntary action rejects the notion of 'another.' This enhances integration of the volunteer into the community and encourages a balance in power between the locals and the volunteers.² Volunteerism has proven to be essential in emergency management. Individual volunteers and volunteer groups provide a variety of skills and resources that can be used in emergencies. Hardly any country can survive a disaster unless volunteers are involved.

A volunteering system is the first line of defence against emergencies of all kinds before, during, and after the intervention of public authorities, including the central government. Volunteering plays a vital role in minimizing human and monetary losses due to natural and man-made disasters.³

In Jordan, the volunteerism concept started to have a considerable role in both the economy and in social development. Several agencies and NGOs started to push for an environment encouraging volunteerism in the country, especially in the case of managing camps for the Syrian refugees.

There are several types of volunteerism. Education is an aspect of volunteerism. Teachers could assign time to travel to a region in need and teach subjects that would help improve the lives of people of that region. Health is an important aspect of volunteerism and is very important as some diseases or epidemics may transfer to other regions. Agriculture is also vital for the well-being of people. Volunteers may help with the harvest or provide technical consultancy in order to deliver food and financial means to poor families.⁴ Other aspects of volunteerism occur such as fighting hunger, helping refugees, and building infrastructures. Also, the mediums of volunteerism are versatile, such as supporting a humanitarian project online or being on location in person.

This paper examines current and anticipated trends for volunteerism systems and the ways they are reflected in Syrian refugees' camp management in Jordan. It discusses also why (or why not) people volunteer in different aspects of society. A volunteer system for disaster management is proposed to enhance mitigation and response capabilities for future disasters.⁵

Historical Background

Volunteerism in Conflict Zones

Humanitarian work in war-zones needs all available resources. Volunteer support is important but needs special arrangements, as they will be vulnerable to the threat first hand. Local population is susceptible to several risks such as: losing their lives or losing family members, being injured, losing shelters; the list is endless. Children, the elderly, and women are more susceptible to the threats of war, while boys are often forced into joining the fight. The tasks assigned to volunteers should be adequate to their abilities without jeopardizing their own safety and security.⁶

Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Jordan currently holds the world record for the ratio of refugees to native citizens, at a rate of 1:3 which affects the society in economy, political, and security domains. The influx of Syrian refugees is adding challenges to Jordan in several areas.

Jordan is trying to balance its humanitarian role and internal security by cooperating with the UN and other partners. Jordanian authorities try to intervene in the Syrian refugees' social environment as preamble procedures to prevent violence.⁷

High pessimism is becoming the most important challenge in Jordan. Many reasons lead the Jordanian people to be pessimistic such as: the national debt reached a huge figure for the small country, and an unstable surrounding region (Syria from north, Iraq from east, occupied Palestine of west, Egypt, Lebanon). Also; in education, enrolling Syrian students is a huge challenge for the schools which are already full. Running water is a big problem as it is the second poorest country in water world-wide. Another issue of concern to policy makers is the impact of the Syrian refugee influx on the local labour market.⁸

The rise of populism started to surface, as many Jordanians live under the poverty line and start to be pessimistic as a psychological burden. Another social aspect is the question of national identity, as Jordanians started to feel overwhelmed by the high refugee ratio in the country.⁹

Current Situation

Current Emergency Volunteering in Jordan

Bendania and Al Dini surveyed the status of volunteerism in Jordan and recommended steps toward promoting the concept and culture of volunteerism in all aspects of the community.¹⁰ Volunteering does not get the proper attention in Jordan, yet there are several projects and initiatives that do exist which build a volunteering culture that is based on local and regional practices.

The funds and driving force behind those volunteer projects are mostly through international cooperation grants and Non-Governmental Organizations. All of those projects are important pieces by themselves, but a comprehensive volunteering system will be a force multiplier and also will alleviate their efficiency and benefits that will facilitate rapid integration to deal with future risks and disasters.¹⁰

The main problem for the current projects is that they are fragmented and have no Command and Control system umbrella for them. In this section, some of the volunteering initiatives in Jordan are elaborated.

The Role of the Digital Medium in Volunteerism

There is a growing influence of the internet on the volunteer sector. The internet is providing a valuable service to potential volunteers in helping to search for suitable volunteer opportunities and organizations within their reach to recruit new volunteers.⁵

Pioneers in Jordan started sites to promote and spread the word of volunteerism, such as the following: <http://www.nakhweh.com>. Mr. Kamel Al Asmar, Entrepreneur, describes Nakhweh.com in the following way: "It is a platform that seeks to enhance

the volunteerism and social entrepreneurship culture in the Arab World by serving those committed to social change from youth and non-profit communities. The initiative offers a variety of services that takes advantage of the internet and social media to facilitate and connect volunteers to opportunities, share stories and provide a platform to establish new initiatives and promote existing ones.”

Nakhweh.com assists volunteers in finding the appropriate opportunities that meet their needs and interests, expanding the capacity of civil society, and encouraging a culture of individual empowerment and participation. With the participation of non-profits and initiatives on the website, volunteers are able to create a clear image of where and how they can participate.¹¹

Mr. Mohamad Jboor, from a Jordan Volunteers link on Facebook, elaborated further on the vision: “to watch Jordanian people at the top of life pyramid of the world, improving all their life skills, communication skills, urbanism, learning, socializing... etc., starting by the volunteers themselves passing to the normal Jordanian citizen.” Jordan Volunteers mission is to develop, supervise, and facilitate any type of activity which aims to improve life skills for the Jordanian people.¹²

In 2010, Jordan Inbound Tour Operators Association (JITOA) launched the first phase of the “volunteer tourism project in Jordan” which seeks to promote the concept of volunteer tourism in tour operators and institutions in Jordan. Started in 2003, JITOA is a voluntary business association that offers tourism education and training opportunities for members and non-members.

This project is funded by the European Commission of the European Union, and managed by the Jordan Enterprise Development. The concept of tourism volunteers is a combination of voluntary service and the essential elements of tourism and travel, and combines the arts and culture, geography, history, and entertainment of the tourist area.

Lessons Learned

Volunteers to Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Volunteers can improve the ability of response for humanitarian agencies to react by doing their jobs efficiently and can make a difference in how quickly the community is able to respond to, and recover from, a disaster of war.

The best volunteers for a given disaster are the people living in the area of the hosting county. They know better than outsiders about their area and community needs to facilitate quick and better responses that could save lives and properties.

Communities are the main users of an effective volunteering system and they should be the main facilitators to establish a volunteer system for their area. Communities should be aware of and be involved in the volunteer organizations before the disaster strikes, through public education and awareness of risks which will enable them to implement preparedness response activities. If not aware of natural and man-made risks, communities could mislead response efforts by activating emergency response operations or calling an end to the emergency situation due to lack of knowledge, training, and experience, as well as mismanagement.¹³

Campaigns of Volunteers

With snow and extreme weather conditions in the region, Jordan has witnessed the emergence of numerous voluntary initiatives, both individual and collective, which seek to support official bodies in their work to assist citizens and refugees.

A volunteer campaign launched by Jordanian youth to collect in-kind donations of blankets and clothes to be distributed to Syrian refugees at the Za'tari camp, who are the most affected by these storms and the harsh ones that pass through the area. They live in tents or caravans that do not protect them against these snowstorms.¹³

With charitable activities compounded by bad weather conditions, community solidarity is increasing, and assistance is being provided. Many are rushing to help Syrian refugees in Jordan who are suffering from difficult living and humane conditions.

Volunteers were keen to be present in the field to help the rest of the official relief agencies that support the refugees. Warmth and prevention of cold were needed, as well as the provision of winter clothing for a large number of children.

Although the volunteer work was intense in the Za'tari camp, Bakri said that the group has provided assistance to a large number of refugees outside the camp, especially those residing in Irbid, as “emergency situations,” pointing to the response of many citizens to interact with this campaign.

This movement is one of the voluntary campaigns and collective initiatives that educate the Jordanian community to intensify their work during harsh weather conditions in the region. There are dozens of volunteer campaigns that have proved their existence with the support of the official bodies in their work recently. Social solidarity in society have taken more organized forms than before, and are trying to deliver aid to those who need it.

Future Work

This paper sheds a light on volunteerism management in Jordan with respect to Syrian refugees. It is important to start the volunteer spirit within the government and so-

ciety, to create more awareness regarding volunteering in terms of education, training and periodical exercises.

It is recommended that volunteering be introduced in legislations to the community such as: if someone violates the law, he should volunteer to a certain agency which will promote volunteering culture and practices in all aspects of life in Jordan.

Teaching concepts of volunteerism through Imam's at Friday prayers are a channel to promote volunteerism, and by using the media to campaign for volunteerism in Jordan.

Universities should provide fund windows to researchers and academics in the field of volunteerism, organize a local conference with a volunteerism theme and participate in International conferences in the domain of volunteerism, and provide practical implementations for small voluntary errands for students in schools, especially at the elementary stage.

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Dr Naill MOMANI is Associate Professor of Management within the School of Logistic and Management at the German Jordanian University in Jordan. He is highly

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