

Strengthening Volunteer Management



Learning and Good Practice from CAFOD's Preparing for Emergencies by strengthening Organisational Procedures, Learning and Exchange (PEOPLE) project

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Volunteers have long been part of the fabric of Caritas, playing a key role in emergency response work. Responding to this, and prompted by donor interests, volunteer management as a theme for capacity strengthening was introduced as part of the EU Aid Volunteers (EUAV) funded PEOPLE project, with positive results.¹

The combination of capacity strengthening support, and the relevance of volunteer management to partners, allowed results to be seen across nine out of ten partners within the two-year timeframe of the project. Improvements in volunteer management were seen by partners both as the most significant result arising from the project and a key change that had strengthened their abilities to respond to emergencies. Specifically, partners reported:

Increased knowledge and awareness of the role and potential of volunteers.

Past barriers to engaging volunteers, such as labour laws, were explored with partners.

“Before volunteers would come to offer their services to the church when there was a need...and it was just ok for them to walk in as a Catholic and we allowed them to volunteer. We didn't realize that we need to have policies in place to manage volunteers. We never thought that there should be expectations. Now we know that there is a professional way to engage volunteers and not the casual way we went about it before.” – Partner staff, Sierra Leone

Improvement in volunteer management practices, and the development of volunteer management policies.

Practices in recruiting and training volunteers have become more standardised, including asking volunteers to sign a code of conduct. In some partners, selected staff have been made responsible for volunteer management

in their organisations, and volunteer databases have been established to better manage the pool of people.

“[Before the PEOPLE project] there wasn't a formal agreement...Caritas could sometimes ask too much from the volunteers... The process has helped clarify roles and rights of staff.” – former volunteer and current partner staff member

Positively, as a result of these changes, partner staff observed that volunteers have more confidence, are being treated better than before, and are more integrated into the organisation. There is better coordination and communication between management and volunteers, and higher performance from volunteers.

“Yes, they are volunteers, but we need to treat them like professionals. This has led to a higher calibre of volunteers. Also, the performance is different [improved] because the person knows that they are here for business” – Partner staff, Zimbabwe



Caritas volunteers showcase the PEOPLE project at the International Volunteers Day celebrations in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

1. PEOPLE Mid-Term Review Report (May 2019); and PEOPLE Final Evaluation Report (March 2020).

Recruiting office volunteers for the first time, bolstering partner human resource capacity,

in particular in supporting with core functions such as Finance, Administration, and Report writing. Significantly, this enabled one partner to respond to a donor call for proposals, resulting in additional funding.

“In the past we used to think as there were only three staff in the office we couldn't respond, so we would fold our hands. Now we know we can respond with the volunteers.” - Partner staff, Zimbabwe

Establishing a network of trained community-based volunteers,

selected from across the communities where partners work. Volunteers have been trained in what to expect as a volunteer, their roles, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual harassment. They have been provided with ID cards and t-shirts so are identifiable.

Partners are already seeing that having trained volunteers on stand-by has the potential for a faster response following a disaster. These volunteers are able to take immediate action in response to small scale, local-level emergencies, and are able to gather information rapidly from the ground for sharing with Caritas.

“When there is an emergency our response normally starts from the office, rather than from the community. Now with the PEOPLE project we are trying to recruit volunteers in communities, so that when a disaster strikes these volunteers will spring up. They have already received training and so will be able to mobilise the community to provide assistance to victims.” - Partner staff, Liberia

Case study - benefits of having trained community volunteers in place, Caritas Gokwe (Zimbabwe)

Following the training given to community volunteers, staff saw a shift in understanding among volunteers of their role following a disaster. Before, there was a perception that external assistance was needed following a crisis. Now, volunteers are playing a role in mobilising resources for their community. For example, following Cyclone Idai (March 2019) the volunteers mobilised donations of food, clothing, kitchen utensils and other resources from their communities for people affected by the cyclone.

Caritas Gokwe also saw a change in their ability to access information. Previously, staff travelled to communities to collect basic information, but now the network of volunteers is able to provide an almost instant response. This was tested in response to floods at the end of 2019, when the volunteer system was used to gather information remotely on the level of damage. The preliminary data from volunteers meant staff had an idea of what to expect when they visited affected areas for a more detailed assessment, and were, therefore, more prepared.

This expanded network had a positive knock-on effect for the organisation. Caritas Gokwe became one of the main sources of information from the affected area and, as such, the capacity of Caritas Gokwe is now better recognised by the local authorities.

“It is a blessing to now have specific people to consult in order to get information from point A to point B – before we had challenges knowing who to consult” – Focal Point

What worked well?

Volunteer Management as a **topic was relevant for partners**. It played into the strength of the Caritas network and expanded the capacity of offices. There are clear links between the presence of trained volunteers at community level and **partner capacity to respond rapidly to emergencies**. Ensuring volunteer management is incorporated into capacity assessment tools and processes going forward will allow partners to reflect on the role of volunteers as part of their emergency response capacity.

Observable results from the progress made in volunteer management provided additional motivation for continued efforts in improving volunteer management. For some partners these results have helped take them closer to institutionalising this practice, with greater senior management support and wider interest from across teams.

“For us the volunteer stipend [provided by the project] has already ended, but having volunteers is part of our practice, so we are looking for funds beyond PEOPLE. Volunteerism is not going to stop – it is something that is here to stay.” – Partner staff, Nigeria

A **combination of capacity strengthening approaches were used that complemented and built on each other** (see diagram below). Crucially, there was an **emphasis on supporting partners to apply learning**, and test newly developed procedures and policies in practice through recruiting and training volunteers within the timeframe of the project. The content on volunteer management and remote technical support was provided by a **consultant experienced in both technical content on volunteer management and effective capacity strengthening**. This gave CAFOD and partners confidence that they were following good practice.

As the first step, theory on volunteer management was provided **through workshops and webinars**. This provided new ideas and thinking that allowed partners to explore the topic and to consider the potential of volunteers, as well as a level of exchange between partners.

Capacity Strengthening grants for partners provided the resources needed to apply learning. These covered the costs of rolling out training to staff and volunteers, and the payment of volunteer stipends where needed.

CAFOD's Humanitarian Capacity Support Officers (HCSOs) **accompanied partners** in adapting and replicating the training on volunteer management to key staff, and developing their volunteer management policy. Supported remotely by the expert consultant, they provided **mentoring and coaching** support to partner Focal Points and facilitated access to example materials.

Peer-exchange visits allowed partners to explore volunteering in practice in different settings, speak to front-line staff and volunteers, and reflect in more depth on how practice could be applied. These brought the theory to life, and both motivated and bolstered the staff's confidence to take steps to improve volunteer management within their own organisation.

The differing experience of partners provided an opportunity for **exchange and peer learning between partners**, significantly for partners through the international peer exchange visits. For example, partners from Nigeria learnt about models of community volunteering by visiting partners in Zimbabwe, where, compared to Nigeria, stipend payment is less common. Partners from Zimbabwe visited Sierra Leone and Nigeria, learning about working with volunteers in large-scale emergencies.

Given the progress in volunteer management to date, **future support could focus on identifying learning based on further application in emergency settings**. For example, how was the pool of existing volunteers maintained so that they were ready to respond? What has been learnt from applying good practice in volunteer management during a rapid scale-up of activities? How have improvements in volunteer management affected the quality and effectiveness of response work, in addition to the speed of delivery?

Concluding comments

Volunteer management is highly relevant for local organisations and provides a tangible means of connecting organisational capacity strengthening to community-level. Through combining theoretical learning with opportunities to apply this in practice, partners have gained experience, and seen positive results from improved volunteer management within a short timeframe. This has bolstered partners' emergency

response capacities, in particular their ability to rapidly gather information from affected areas. The level of progress seen is motivating for staff and senior managers alike and increases the chances that the results seen are sustained. Positively, through overlapping with topics such as human resource management and safeguarding, work on strengthening volunteer management also has the potential to drive forward changes in other areas.



Caritas Gokwe community volunteers mobilise relief items for people affected Cyclone Idai.

In memory of Father Joseph Maung Win (Director of KMSS Yangon, Myanmar) and Father Philip Wreh (Assistant Director of Caritas Cape Palmas, Liberia) our dear friends and committed humanitarians, who sadly passed away this year.

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Front page photo: 20 year old Rhoda is a community volunteer with JDPC Maiduguri, supporting crisis affected communities in north-east Nigeria. (JDPC Maiduguri)



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