



**engage**

Engage Society for  
Risk Awareness and Resilience

# **POLICY BRIEF**

## **The Involvement of Spontaneous Volunteers in Disaster Management**

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*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

**Maya Angelou**

## About ENGAGE

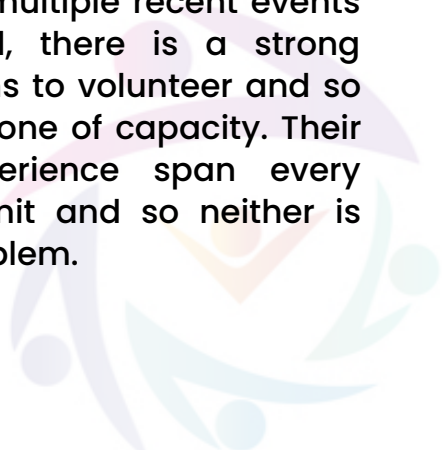
ENGAGE is an EU-funded project, which started in July 2020, whose mission is to provide novel knowledge and identify impactful solutions for exploiting Europe's societal resilience. Since our world is increasingly exposed to higher risks and hazards, individuals and civil society need to maintain the ability to respond to these threats swiftly. ENGAGE addresses the whole of society and tries to bridge different ways of intervention across communities to enhance their capacity to respond to disaster jointly and thus improve their societal resilience. These solutions will aim at bridging the gap between formal and informal approaches to risk and emergency management—increasing the ability of communities to adapt before, during, and after disasters. ENGAGE also aims to contribute to this goal through our policy work, which not only includes the drafting of recommendations, but also the engagement of policy makers, public authorities, and citizens.

Through this work, ENGAGE also aims to directly contribute to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which was adopted by Member States of the United Nations in 2015.

The framework outlines seven global targets among four priority areas to be achieved by 2030 in order to "reduce disaster risks and losses of lives, livelihoods, and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural, and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities, and countries." The policy work of ENGAGE mainly contributes to Priority 1: Understanding Disaster Risk and Priority 4: Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to "Build Back Better" in recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction.

## Scene Setter

Volunteers already make an important and distinctive contribution to crises and disasters and, as the nature and complexity of expected risks increases, it is essential to continually enhance their capability, capacity, and ability to participate at all stages of the disaster cycle. Fortunately, as multiple recent events have confirmed, there is a strong desire for citizens to volunteer and so the issue is not one of capacity. Their skills and experience span every conceivable remit and so neither is capability a problem.



However, what has proven to be a challenge is integrating the work of volunteers and professionals. There is evidence that this is in part due to the nature of the relationship, in which volunteers are often considered in terms of their usefulness or otherwise to professionals. This means the default narrative amongst professionals tends to be on controlling volunteers rather than how to create the conditions for effective coordination and integration of all contributors.

Our own research also suggests that professionals appear to hold the view that volunteers need to be managed, and that it is their duty to do so where their paths cross. And whilst they acknowledge some benefits, they also tend to resent the effort required to do manage volunteers.

“But they prefer this kind of engagement if the citizens follow their roles and are organized in a way that does not make them a burden to emergency organizations.”

“It requires a huge effort and resources from first responders to do this kind of (volunteer) management. Additionally, acquiring resources from external organizations without prior planning is difficult to handle. As a result, interviewees questioned how useful these spontaneous and disorganized external resources are.” (ENGAGE Deliverable 2.1)

Similar sentiments were echoed multiple times in different ways. The significance and impact of this perspective is compounded by the presence of a systemic power imbalance between professionals and volunteers, heavily in favour of the former.

One way this is manifested is through the pursuit of strategies that seek to control and absorb volunteers within the structures and processes designed for professionals. Another is that professionals tend to be very risk averse regarding the roles of volunteers and this may be impeding the opportunity to enhance the individual and collective skills of volunteers through strategic and planned development.

Volunteers operate in multiple ways, from those pre-affiliated to recognised agencies through to the spontaneous and independent volunteer. The degree of interaction each of these have with professionals will vary and be determined by multiple factors. If they are not identified and legitimately resolved, these will remain hidden barriers to integration, encouraging further fragmentation rather than alignment of effort.

Recognising the difficulties of overcoming the challenges inherent within the current approach, our recommendations instead propose an alternative strategy. One that seeks to find a way to ensure the collective efforts of all are aligned and supported (whole society approach) whilst respecting and facilitating their different needs. Where those best placed to help, are enabled to do so, regardless of their organisation or interest. And one that sees volunteers positively and, not merely as an occasional add-on to the professional services. It is also important to recognise the long-term benefits for individuals and communities in having agency (the ability to determine and take their own actions) in response to a threat. Making volunteering accessible and meaningful makes an important contribution towards this.

To achieve this vision, will require structural changes and a long-term commitment. Fortunately, in many areas the foundations are in place and may just need adapting.

For example, in general civic life volunteering is a continuous and well-established activity. As a result, there are existing networks, relationships, practices, and assets available that have often been shaped by the volunteers themselves. It is likely much of these would be relevant to, or compatible with, the needs of crisis and disaster volunteers. We also found that, in some areas, there is some degree of engagement between professionals and volunteers that could be built on.

And many local or regional governments will have robust links with their communities, serving as an effective line of communication. They may even have experience of directly co-creating services with volunteers and communities. National and international level institutions also have a critical role to play in creating the structural conditions and climate for realising the full and strategic potential of volunteers.



*Photo credits: Department for Emergency Situations, Romania*

## Our recommendations

### **1. Adopt a strategy that enables and optimises the contribution of volunteers.**

This is our primary and overarching recommendation within which the other four should be considered. It is important because it addresses the sense that progress towards the effective integration of volunteers is to some extent being inhibited, rather than enabled, by current strategies. This is due to indications that many of them have an implicit aim of seeking to make volunteers conform to the expectations, structures and practices of civic bodies and professionals. This results in strategies that seek to control them or sees volunteers only in terms of their perceived utility to professionals. It effectively seeks to absorb volunteers within its own operating model.

Whilst this is to some extent understandable, it is a narrow lens and fails to recognise to the true nature, scope, and scale of volunteering. A significant amount of which occurs independently and out of sight of professionals. Much of this is to some extent self-organising but, by necessity, has a character and way of working distinct from that of the professionals. To optimise the contribution of all participants, consideration must be given to understanding their specific needs, motivations, and ways of working. Neither professionals or volunteers are a homogenous group and so we do not propose a specific and standard solution. We do, however, advocate for the acceptance of creating strategies which provide common purpose but allow flexibility in how it is organised and delivered.

## **2. Review the appropriateness of the term 'volunteer' as a primary descriptor**

A widely agreed and durable definition of 'volunteer' has so far proven elusive, perhaps reflecting the level of nuance associated with this generic term. Another possible reason for the difficulty is that the term itself is potentially unsuitable or unhelpful. At a fundamental level, it simply indicates that the person is contributing in some way without the expectation of payment. Extending this taxonomy, we would only need one other generic term to group all those who are paid for their role in emergencies. But this binary model of describing one of many possible motivating factors for participating in emergency activities does not help much in practical terms, when organising for disaster management.

Planning for, responding to, and recovering from an emergency requires an extremely diverse range of expertise and skills. The titles used by professionals recognises this and usually relays their function and position. This eases the process of working together and understanding the collective skills and expertise. And yet, conversely, despite an often equally wide range of functionality, volunteers are often just categorised by this single term. There are also some indications that, amongst professionals, the term volunteer may have negative connotations and be detrimental to the relationship between the two.

As such, it would be helpful to reduce reliance on the term 'volunteer' as a primary and generic descriptor, and to seek more suitable ways to describe the contributions they can make.

## **3. Formally recognise and manage Values, Ethics, and Trust (VET)**

In undertaking their duties, professionals are guided by organisational policies and practices, that codify various legal, civic, and professional competence frameworks. The standard operating procedures and practices that result provide a safeguard that will usually avoid or limit the need for them to routinely consider VETs on from a personal perspective..

Conversely, volunteers are often not bound by the same duty to an employer or requirement to follow established procedures (unless for specific safety purposes). As such, they may be much more attuned to potential VET issues, and in doing so will have to make a personal assessment and decision. They will also have to live with the consequences where any of them feel these have been violated, and in doing so creating the risk of moral injury. Another important practical VET factor is the role and benefits of personal/collective agency (the ability to determine your own actions). The influence of this for individuals and in terms of resolving incidents requires greater recognition.

Given their importance and influence on both the experience of volunteering and longer-term wellbeing outcomes, it is recommended that consideration of VET issues should be formally assessed and managed.

#### **4. Use technology to strategically enhance the volunteer experience and contributions.**

Technology continually provides new solutions and capabilities for all those involved in crisis management. These include the potential to enable a strategic transformation of the volunteer contribution and experience. This can be realised by ensuring individual solutions are assessed not just for their specific functionality, but also for their ability to contribute towards wider principles or aspirations.

For example, it offers the opportunity to create an environment in which everyone can contribute (whole society approach), and in doing so could make a valuable contribution to enhancing diversity and inclusion. It is also important to appreciate that the needs and experience of technology will differ. For example, what works for professionals may not for volunteers where issues such as trust may be more important and influential.

Technology will continue to play a key role in enhancing societal resilience and integration. However, its ability to transform relies heavily upon adopting strategies that understand it through the lens of the humans who use or experience it. And there must be a vigilance for unintended consequences e.g. will the continued digitisation of services be detrimental to social contact and networks?

#### **5. Strengthen learning structures to advance the contribution of volunteers.**

Every crisis and disaster offers an opportunity for all stakeholders to learn and be better prepared for future ones. But ENGAGE found that the role and potential contribution of citizens and volunteers does not seem poorly represented within, or absent from, data collection or post event processes.

Every crisis and disaster will see a significant and, often crucial, contribution made by volunteers, often independently of professionals or other formal oversight. Understood in this way, it does not matter whether a volunteer assists once or for multiple events. Their individual and collective experience must be captured to build a cohesive and full understanding of the incident. Doing so will enhance every aspect of subsequent crisis and disaster activity.

Advancing volunteer capability and capacity will require an intentional and progressive process that can only be underpinned by continuous and structured learning. However, learning new skills is an iterative process and takes time. Given the nature of their involvement, it is likely that volunteers will typically achieve most of their learning through direct involvement of live processes and emergencies. The implications of this should be fully recognised in policy development.



## Policy Implications

- Policies should reduce the emphasis on using divisive terminology such as 'professionals' and 'volunteers' which may contribute towards an 'us and them' culture.
- Policies should recognise that volunteers contribute in a variety of ways. It is important that policies do not assume a single model or impose restrictions that would unnecessarily prevent those who wish to do so from contributing. They should actively aim to make volunteering easy and accessible.
- Policies should be bold and ambitious and create incentives for the continuous development of the role of volunteers, both individually and as a collective resource. This is an essential requirement for creating resilient societies. By default, policies should be volunteer positive.
- Policies should ensure that the experience of volunteers is routinely captured and informs future strategies, policies, and practice.
- When relevant, policies should aim to provide volunteers with an independent mechanism by which their views are represented and influential. They should also be engaged in the creation and review of policies that relate to or impact them.
- Where it would act as an impediment, policies should recognise and try to address power imbalances that reside within the system.

