

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AMONG DISASTER RELIEF VOLUNTEERS: A SURVEY *

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Introduction

The successive years of drought (1968–74) in the Sahel in West Africa gave rise to a famine situation (see Seaman et al., 1973; Greene, 1974; Kloth et al., 1976).** In view of the emergency, in May 1974 a joint medico-nutritional program was set up by the government of the Republic of Niger, the League of Red Cross Societies and the United Nations Development Program.

This program included the formation of ten medico-nutritional teams established in the camps giving refuge to the victims. Some 80 European and North American volunteers, most often recruited by their national Red Cross Societies, worked for periods of varying length. The actual time spent in Niger varied from 7 to 37 weeks. The onset of the rains

brought an improvement in nutritional conditions shortly after the beginning of the program, changing the epidemiological picture and imposing far-reaching readjustments on the part of those responsible for the program and the volunteers. The general opinion of the beneficiaries and the local authorities was that the results of the operation were largely positive. Nevertheless, because of the problems arising through the large-scale use of foreign volunteers, the Red Cross initiated a detailed inquiry into the degree of integration of volunteers in a medico-nutritional program calling for special qualifications.

The study was carried out by the Research Center in Disaster Epidemiology at the University of Louvain (Brussels, Belgium). Among the data and materials obtained were:

- 30 end-of-mission reports drafted in Niger by various delegates;
- 57 anonymous questionnaires filled out several months after the end of the program (this number represented 77 percent of the 74 volunteers contacted);
- an evaluation report on each delegate prepared by the heads of mission;

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**Editor's Note: The drought affected 23 million people in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Upper Volta. Niger, upon which this article focusses, experienced catastrophic difficulties: 1.6 million people were severely affected; the refugee camps discussed here served as many as 250,000 displaced persons.

— an overall technical report also drafted by those responsible for the program in the field.

In the end-of-mission reports, the delegates were asked to express, informally and without constraint, their opinion on a series of themes. Written while the volunteers were in the midst of the field activities, these carry an important emotional component. The questionnaires involved a number of open and closed multiple-choice questions. The official reports by mission heads included both an expression of their own opinions and a retracing of the development and the climate of the operations. In addition, the interpretation of some results called for direct observation by some of the authors of this article who actively participated in the medico-nutritional program.

FINDINGS

The responses to the questionnaire reflect the great diversity of the volunteers. Volunteers came from ten countries, with more than ten percent each from Norway, United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada. While para-medical workers made up 35 percent of the volunteers, physicians 14 percent and nutritionists 8 percent, more than 40 percent of the volunteers were without qualification in the medico-nutritional field. The latter category included mostly personnel from the tertiary sector — administrators, teachers, social workers, etc. A majority of the volunteers had no prior experience in developing countries. In fact, only 14 percent had two or more years of experience. Furthermore, only 15 volunteers had had prior exposure to Black Africa. Volunteers were as a whole rather young (81 percent between 22 and 35 years old, of whom 28 percent were less than 26 years old). Seventy-five percent of the volunteers were unmarried, which is a high proportion compared to the corresponding age category in a normal population.

These characteristics of the volunteers were used to analyze the questionnaire data and other materials along four dimensions involved in social integration: personality, motivation, qualification and communication.

PERSONALITY

One very clear constant becomes evident from the many correlations between the various items of the questionnaire. It is that the types of opinion were almost never significantly associated with professional background, nationality, sex, age or any given degree of previous experience.

On the other hand, end-of-mission reports supported the view of those who believed in the capital importance of the personal psychological components of the volunteers. Singled out was the immaturity of many volunteers, regardless of age, as well as temperament, excessive individualism and a “St. Bernard” tendency. Virtually all the volunteers declared themselves desirous of pursuing a similar experience in identical conditions. But in their final evaluation, mission heads thought that more than half of the personnel should be refused for future similar activities.

This suggests the necessity for having recourse to selection by appropriate means (test, interview, etc.) perhaps derived from models for military selection. Of course, an emergency created by drought differs considerably from the classic catastrophe situation. The latter often arises suddenly, and it is virtually impossible to select volunteers in such cases (Barton, 1969). It is equally important for relief organizations to retain contact with the most valuable elements capable of establishing the bases of later missions. Our study has shown that recruitment takes place above all through personal contacts based upon professional and individual affinities. Recourse to the mass media appears to be of little importance.

MOTIVATION

The problem of motivation is many-sided. Volunteers were questioned on their motivation by means of a closed question mentioning four not reciprocally exclusive items: professional interest, idealism, spirit of adventure, and money. Eighty percent of the respondents mentioned professional interest; fifty percent mentioned professional interest exclusively. Twelve percent cited idealism exclusively and 40 percent mentioned it in combination with others. Four percent admitted to having been motivated by adventure only, but to this 30 percent added one or the other of the beforementioned motivations. A single answer mentioned monetary gain in association with other motivations.

Neither professional background nor nationality seemed to play a determining role in the motivation claimed, nor did experience. At the most, the attraction of adventure was admitted to slightly more often by the inexperienced. It seems, however, that the search for adventure was more often present and stronger than was admitted to in the answers. Virtually all the volunteers declared themselves ready to participate in a strictly similar action, although half of them denied any short-term beneficial result from the program and half of the professionally motivated members considered that their skills had been used only occasionally.

Hypertrophy of the idealistic motivation has sometimes proved to be a source of difficulty in the field, as already mentioned. It might be pointed out that the purely "charity" approach is, at the present time, questioned, both by the relief organizations and the beneficiaries. At the individual level it seems, wrongly, to be closely associated with the notion of voluntary service. This has been stigmatised by some of those responsible for the program who would prefer at least part of the personnel to be "professional" and paid as such. This preference is obviously based

on the observation of marginal cases of maladaptation to this type of mission. The absence of rewarding situations has indeed been discouraging to some persons (feeling of uselessness) or – on the contrary – it has led to misplaced initiatives (ill-considered distributions of foodstuffs and medicines or a policy of medical care contrary to instructions). In Niger this phenomenon was exacerbated by the circumstances: recruited for a situation of acute nutritional distress, some volunteers arrived when, due to unexpected rains, the essential tasks had been reduced to those of alimentary rehabilitation.

QUALIFICATION

The original aims of the operation demanded a high proportion of participation by health and nutrition technicians (physicians, nurses, nutritionists) assisted by unqualified volunteers. Problems arose from the relative over-qualification of those involved.

Over-Qualification at Group Level

By unanimous opinion, there were too many foreign volunteers, particularly since the autochthonous participation was found to be of excellent quality having the huge advantage of cultural identity with the human and environmental scene. The foreign volunteers felt that part of the work they carried out (minor treatments, driving vehicles) could have been entrusted to the Niger personnel, and that this large proportion of foreigners was sometimes a hindrance as regards cohesion.

Individual Over-Qualification

Half of the technicians (notably physicians) had a very negative feeling about the too reduced or too occasional use they considered to have been made of their skills. Reactions of disillusionment and disheartened passivity, or else imprudent initiatives, expressed the

incapacity to adopt a rational attitude towards the preconceived role and the conditions established beforehand in a European and North American context.

Finally, qualifications seem to lead to the claim for a more equitable and bilateral participation in decision-making (among others, the discussion of aims and means of action). Some of those responsible in the field, inclined to favour organisation of an authoritative type, considered this to be an operational hindrance.

COMMUNICATION

Most of the problems of personality, motivation or over-qualification were expressed at the level of social communication. This communication, already damaged by technical factors (distances, insufficient means of telecommunications, language problems, movements of personnel at all levels), was complicated by distortions within the teams and a certain opposition to the direction based in the capital. The heads were very often regarded as outsiders to action in the field ("city dwellers"), or as being frankly undesirable in the eyes of individualists, idealists and disappointed professionals. This is expressed, among other ways, by the unflattering opinion of the information transmitted by the leaders: briefings, in-mission communications, visits in the field. Fifty-nine percent of the volunteers had a poor general opinion about the previous briefings in the capital. The in-mission information received from, for instance, the head-delegate was frequently regarded as either "excessive" (11 percent) or "insufficient" (40 percent) or "non-existent" (11 percent). Similar patterns were found in the volunteers' assessment of medical coordination. End-of-mission reports sometimes express the feeling that the leaders did not know local problems and hindered the teams' actions. This situation of conflict between the "field" and those responsible in the capital arose very frequently

during relief operations.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study is to draw attention to a particular type of situation arising in disaster relief. Volunteers in prolonged nutritional aid operations seemed to fall halfway between, on the one hand, the "classic" rescue workers implicated more personally in the disasters and, on the other hand, the health-service staff participating in long-term development programs. The sometimes ambiguous mixture of motivations of idealism, professionalism and adventure has created a special psychological and sociological context to which some persons (both volunteers and leaders) have shown themselves to be little adaptable. Further studies are necessary in order to evaluate in terms of efficiency the advantages of groups of volunteers working possibly within the framework of a permanent professional structure. Since this type of humanitarian action is likely to become more frequent in the coming years, it would be useful to determine a psychological, sociological and technical profile of the most adequate voluntary personnel. Use of volunteers allows considerable flexibility and adjustability of action. It can nevertheless engender situations of conflict, particularly as regards communications and especially conflicts of authority. Some volunteers would benefit by developing a sense of commitment and an unconditional acceptance of the necessity to have some hierarchy in a relief program at a time of emergency. Those responsible for a program formed of volunteers must exercise a degree of adjustment in the methods used for directing. Participation and dialogue with the higher-skilled volunteers are indispensable. Although volunteers cannot be considered professional in relief, they do not necessarily have to be considered amateurs.

The excellent results obtained by the League

of Red Cross Societies in using volunteers and the great flexibility of action resulting from this confirms without any doubt the value of the method. However, the increasing technical complexity of interventions, particularly in the field of nutrition, demands more rigorous selection based on personal qualities as well as on competence and professional qualifications. Scientific research workers can make a significant contribution to studying and reducing the partly inherent drawbacks of voluntary work.

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