

Community Volunteers and their Role in Case Management Processes in Humanitarian Contexts

A Comparative Study of Research and Practice



Background

Community volunteers are an integral part of preventing and responding to cases of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in humanitarian settings. They have a deep understanding of their communities, and help to identify children who are at-risk, have experienced harm, or have been separated from their family. However, Child Protection actors often know very little about the experiences of volunteers and particularly the realities of being a volunteer involved in case management.¹ Many Child Protection practitioners acknowledge that there is a reliance on the work of community volunteers without a clear understanding of their capacities and limitations within case management. This lack of analysis can put children, communities, and volunteers themselves at risk or even cause harm.

About the Project²

In order to fill this gap in research and with the support of the Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs, the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action is undertaking an inter-agency project to provide a better understanding of community volunteers' engagement in the case management process and develop guidance and tools to support their work. The project has two components:

- A review of evidence on effectiveness related to community volunteers and a comparison of these findings with data from current practice. Current practice data included interviews with child protection practitioners and an examination of documents such as trainings, standard operating procedures and guidelines. Volunteers' perspectives were collected via narratives from a variety of contexts and qualitative research with volunteers in four humanitarian settings in Myanmar and Malawi. Findings from this study are summarized in this brief document.
- From the review, evidence-supported guidance and tools are being developed that support best practices among child protection actors working with community volunteers. Child protection staff and volunteers will contribute to the development and field-testing process in order to ensure the tools and guidance can be adapted in a range of humanitarian contexts (to be finalized and disseminated to the Alliance partners at the end of 2021).

1 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2018). *Setting the Global Research Agenda for Child Protection in Humanitarian Contexts*.

2 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, (2021). *Community volunteers and their role in case management processes in humanitarian contexts: A comparative study of research and practice*.

Findings from the Study

The findings provide useful information on volunteers' experiences, roles, and motivations; as well as good practices, challenges, risks and benefits of collaborating with volunteers in the different steps of case management.

1. Community volunteers bring benefits for children, families, and the community

Volunteers are the critical bridge extending support from child protection actors to children and families affected by crises. They are ever-present in the community with a deep understanding of the risk and protective factors. Volunteers have knowledge of the local culture and systems, including power hierarchies, which allows them to mobilize community structures to respond to children's needs and risks. However, what emerged from the research was that very often this knowledge and these relationships are not fully acknowledged by child protection actors.

2. Power dynamics, volunteer motivations and realities

Volunteering is a deeply personal choice and has personal impacts. There is a need for more critical thought about the relationship between child protection actors and volunteers. Volunteers were sometimes seen in terms of their roles, rather than as members of the same vulnerable community as the children and families they are supporting. Power dynamics at many different levels affect the work of volunteers, and thus, have an impact on the quality of programming with children and families.

The review found that it is difficult for volunteers to express challenges or advocate for themselves, especially when they are a member of a vulnerable group, as many volunteers in humanitarian settings are themselves refugees or displaced. Further, the reality is that volunteer work, while often rewarding, can become a burden on family relationships and reduce economic activity.

3. Examining names, roles, responsibilities and relationships

One of the findings of the review was that the form of the relationship, the responsibilities expected and even the names given to members of the community engaged in child protection case management varied widely. It was possible to identify three broad types of volunteers, with placement usually based on the characteristics listed under each type in the table below. The review found that all of these different 'types' could be considered 'volunteers' by different NGOs even though the para-professionals or the incentivized workers are not 'volunteers' in reality.

The review of evidence and the interviews with practitioners revealed a wide concern around how community members are engaged in case management. The key finding was that unbalanced expectations on volunteers in the Type 1 category was common – they are sometimes expected to work long hours and take responsibility for a full case management process, often without adequate training and supervision. What was even more common however, was the use of Type 2 incentive workers, as the main workforce for the daily activities of case management. They were often given responsibility beyond their training and carried a demanding work load that did not allow them time to supplement their often very small stipend. Interviewees felt this created risks for children, families and the volunteers themselves. The results of the qualitative research with volunteers in Myanmar and Malawi showed that community members working in Type 1 and Type 2 were expected to assume substantial case management responsibilities and long working hours. They experienced high personal stress and complex family and community dynamics because of the unequal balance between expectations placed on them by NGOs and their abilities to meet them.

Volunteer Types Identified in Research

Type 1: Volunteers

- No payment in kind or cash for service
- No educational criteria required for selection
- Responsible only for identification and referral (sometimes also accompanies children through other stages)
- Take responsibility for no cases – not even low risk (i.e., always refer)
- Short training on CM (e.g., from as little as one day to six)
- Monitoring and support
- Supervision is through group report-back/support
- Little or no documentation required

Type 2: Incentive Workers

- A small stipend to cover transport or incentives, such as bicycles, boots, or chickens for income generation
- Required to have secondary education
- Basic training on steps of CM
- Only identify and then refer high-risk cases
- Follow-up with low- and medium-risk cases
- Some documentation required
- Receives monitoring and support

Type 3: Paraprofessional (Caseworkers)

- Paid a salary commensurate with equivalent worker in government or NGO sector
- Longer training (at least two to three weeks)
- Training assessed
- Qualification recognized within a lifelong learning system
- Responsible for all levels of CM, including high risk, though many would refer high risk to a caseworker with professional training
- Receives ongoing structured supervision and support
- High level of standardized documentation

4. Risks of volunteering

It is important when collaborating with community volunteers to manage 'risk' – risks to volunteers, and risks to children and families. Volunteers are frequently expected to work in complex, dangerous, and remote settings. Often volunteers are expected to identify children who are at risk within their community and report them to NGOs or local authorities. This task can be dangerous – for example when a powerful community member is abusing a child.

The research revealed that volunteers are frequently blamed when they cannot provide immediate assistance to community members. Further, volunteers may inadvertently put children and families at risk of further harm if they are not trained and supervised and if systems such as safe documentation procedures and confidentiality are not in place.

5. Volunteer selection and training

The selection and training process of volunteers greatly influences their effectiveness in responding to children in the community. The evidence suggests that relevant selection criteria should not prioritize education level, but rather the interpersonal skills of communication, openness, humility and dedication. The study found examples of evaluated processes of selection involving children and community members identifying people they trust.

What emerged from the review of evidence was that training of volunteers was the most critical factor in quality programs. The research suggests that length of training, depth and quality and ongoing coaching and follow-up are all important for effectiveness. The review of evidence showed that volunteers trained on interpersonal skills, such as communication were more likely to have an impact on child and family well-being. There is also evidence that encouraging volunteers to build on existing positive practices is an effective way of building trust and acceptance in the community.

6. Team approach

A team approach to child protection volunteers work alongside trained caseworkers at different steps in the case management process can be very effective. The evidence suggests that community volunteers who work alongside caseworkers can make an important difference to children and families' experiences of services and facilitate the transition between different layers of support and care systems.

7. Supportive supervision

The impact of relationships between supervisors and volunteers is an important factor in performance effectiveness. Research indicates that high quality supervision that focuses on supportive approaches, coaching, community monitoring, and quality assurance may be most effective.

5 Key Recommendations:



1. Adequately train and remunerate caseworkers

A case management system demands skilled and fairly paid caseworkers. There is an urgent need to advocate and fund the development of caseworkers (including para-professionals from the community). Caseworkers must be adequately remunerated and trained if a case management model is to be implemented in an ethical, effective and sustainable way.

Meanwhile, volunteers should not be expected to carry heavy time burdens nor heavy responsibility and paying them could undermine the existing role that any community members play in helping others as part of their natural social role.



2. Shift to a team approach

True volunteers of the Type 1 category are invaluable in a case management system as they can provide essential support and mediate between children and families and services. It is important to integrate volunteers within the child protection team, and provide supportive supervision and coaching. Facilitate team building and trainings to develop relationships between volunteers and caseworkers in which trust and appreciation of complimentary roles can be built.



3. Recognize and respond to the power dynamics and risks that volunteers experience

Child protection organizations need to acknowledge the power hierarchies that volunteers navigate on a daily basis.

This includes the power dynamics between the organization and community volunteers, within the community itself, between the volunteer and child and family, and between volunteers themselves.

Community volunteers' safety and well-being should be prioritized and they should know the proper channels for receiving support if they encounter risks.



4. Recognize the importance of being context-aware and building on what exists

Organizations should aim to learn and develop their understanding of the context in collaboration with the community, especially community volunteers. Volunteers should be part of the program cycle, including problem identification, program development, implementation, and evaluation.



5. Apply evidence of how to build effectiveness, quality and sustainability into work with community volunteers

This includes:

- a. Develop systems of volunteer selection that prioritize interpersonal skills, while promoting community acceptance and transparency. If possible, include children, caregivers, community groups, and community leaders. Volunteers should reflect the diversity of the community; including gender, culture, religion, etc.
- b. Invest in ongoing capacity building, coaching and supervision of volunteers which prioritize relational skills, and gradually build volunteers' responsibilities linked to case management according to what is contextually appropriate, without placing an unrealistic burden on them.
- c. Advocate for community volunteers to be included in national qualification frameworks, so they can become formal members of national child protection systems. Create opportunities for community members to progress from a role as a Type 1 volunteer to a Type 3 para-professional/ caseworker.

For more information, please email colleen.fitzgerald@planusa.org