

*Volunteers as helpers in war-related distress*

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# Volunteers as helpers in war-related distress

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*Nowadays, the mental health profession is aware of the importance of the social network for the coping and healing processes in persons affected by war. In war-related circumstances the natural social network is impoverished or lost. Volunteers represent a possibility for the enlargement and enrichment of the social network. They can specially contribute in various ways to the empowerment and well-being of children affected by war and of refugee children. This article describes the activities of volunteers of different provenance and in different war-related situations.*

**Keywords:** war, children, refugees, volunteers, psychosocial helpers

## **Changes in views on the protection of mental health**

At the start of the Balkan war it was possible to obtain funds mainly for professional psychotherapeutic help to traumatised children. It was a considerable time before donors became willing to finance broader psychosocial programmes in which paraprofessionals or lay persons were trained as helpers.

It took some years for the majority of mental health workers to recognise the meaning and importance of the broader social network and social context for the rehabilitation of persons affected by war and exile.

Let us assume that such natural resources should not prove sufficient for the prevention of long-lasting disturbances of the majority of children affected by war events. If that were true, generations of children surviving the Second World War in European countries (especially in those most affected by armed conflicts, persecution and bombing, who had experienced enormous suffering affecting their whole life) would have a higher incidence of different psychiatric disturbances in adulthood. This would be proved by epidemiological figures. But, up to now, as far as the author is informed, there are no data showing a higher number of disturbances in Second World War generations compared to those born later.

If we agree with the assumption that the social network is the most important external source of support, enabling an individual to cope with trauma and loss and increasing his resiliency, the question is how to enforce and enrich the social network and its protective function in war-related circumstances. The involvement of volunteers in psychosocial activities is certainly an important strategy.

### **Volunteers, their psychosocial function and healing tools**

A variety of people can work as volunteers. Mental health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, etc) can become volunteers and contribute their knowledge and education in the field of mental health and psychosocial well-being. Students who have some professional knowledge can also work as volunteers. Lay persons also may become volunteers, usually within psychosocial projects; they usually acquire some basic knowledge during their initial training. Their experience and knowledge is further developed during the course of their helping activities. They usually work under the mentorship of more experienced persons or under the supervision of mental health workers.

The requirements of each unit of psychosocial assistance, including that of professionals, are:

1. specialised professional knowledge (for instance psychotherapeutic techniques),
2. a positive relationship between the helper and the helped person
3. the ability of the helper to make a positive change in the life situation of the helped person (for instance, the enrichment of the child's everyday life by recreational activities).

The activities and helping strategies of lay volunteers possess the listed requirements in different proportions from those of mental health workers. Specialised mental health knowledge in lay workers is very limited. Volunteers acquire this knowledge step by step through various training, but primarily through experience, counselling or supervision. It should be stressed that there is a huge number of persons gifted by God with extraordinary sensitivity and understanding of psychological problems and inborn capacities for psychosocial help.

Although these people have never studied psychology and are not theoreticians, in certain cases they can be better healers than professionals. All mental health workers who have worked in war-related circumstances have met numerous natural healers. Concerning the interpersonal relationship between the helper and the helped, the volunteer can be in a better position than the professional. The volunteer has more social and emotional capacities, more time, often more energy for individuals in need, as he or she is usually not in charge of a huge number of clients. A volunteer can provide benefits stemming from a good social relationship, such as warmth, security, support, empowerment and motivation, which can be more intense than those provided by mental health professionals.

The third component is the capacity to change the life situation of the receiving person and to provide practical help. In the case of children, this could be helping the child move from a position of failure to one of achievement in the classroom, which then influences the self esteem of the child and therefore his capacity to cope. The inclusion of children in various sports, games and cultural activities enriches their lives, improves their quality of life, and broadens their interests and horizons; all of these factors have a healing influence on traumatised and depressed children. Volunteers certainly have more possibilities than professional therapists for organising such activities with children.

How volunteers can help refugee children is demonstrated in the table showing volunteers' activities and their impact on the life and psychosocial well-being of refugee children from Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Slovenia (1992–1995)

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<b>Stress of refugee children.</b>	<b>Help of volunteers</b>
Loss of domestic social network	Creation of new social network
Bad experiences with people, disappointment, emotional harm	Kindness, friendship, the experience 'there are still good people'
Social isolation, life in a ghetto	Volunteers bridging the refugee community and the hosting community
Exclusion, xenophobia, rejection	The message 'we do care about what is happening to you, we want to help you', counter-acting prejudices and xenophobia
Deprivation concerning normal leisure pursuits and other activities	Organization of various leisure time activities for children
Not speaking the language of the asylum country and related difficulties	Teaching the language through befriending, playing and through instructions
School and learning difficulties	Learning assistance
Difficulties in integration in the new environment due to not being familiar with patterns and rules of social behaviour	Host country volunteers teach children characteristic patterns of behaviour, volunteers help children to acquire social orientation and to adapt to the new environment
General impoverishment, deprivation, multiple adversities	Enrichment of life, better quality of life
Psychological traumatisation due to war-related trauma and loss	Volunteers work as psychosocial helpers, contributing to the psychological healing and rehabilitation of children, empowering children to cope better

### **Who are volunteers**

As in other fields of psychosocial activities, volunteers can be of various ages, vocations, and with a variety of personal characteristics.

Although when speaking about volunteers in war-related situations one first thinks of

international volunteers, these do not constitute the majority of important human resources.

The majority of volunteers working with refugees are members of the host country. This has many advantages in the helping process. First of all, such volunteers bring

the message to refugees that the people of the host country care about them, in contrast to the constant reports of xenophobia and rejection of refugees. Volunteers from the host country can act as intermediaries in dealings between refugees on one side and individuals, institutions, NGOs and the general public of the host country on the other, for obtaining individual or collective benefits for refugees (practical, administrative, etc) or as advocates or lobbyists for groups, or for the refugee community. They are able to facilitate the integration process, to teach the language of the host country, etc.

The involvement of refugees themselves in voluntary activities is an important step on the way to empowerment, and prevents them becoming fixed in the role of helpless victims. Being socially active is an efficient way of coping. Being needed and respected by others raises self-esteem, which is so endangered in the position of victims, and of course refugees can improve their real life situation through activities. Unfortunately, initiatives to involve and empower refugees themselves through voluntary activities are often lacking. Young volunteers active in asylum situations or in post-war conditions can be a huge resource of human energies. They are especially beneficial in working with children, as children have a decided preference for young persons. The small age gap and the proximity of interests, possible common activities, the optimism and joyfulness of youth are certainly facilitating factors in the process of psychosocial aid of young volunteers to children affected by war. In post-war situations the involvement of young people in volunteering activities gives new meaning to their life, occupies their time, develops social sensitivity and strategies for solving or mitigating problems in their communities. A good example

of youth involvement in community-based voluntary activities can be observed in the region of Gračanica, Tuzla Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina where thousands of young people are helping the elderly, children with special needs, Internally Displaced People (IDP's), returnees, etc.. These volunteers are working within an organisation called OSMIJEH. OSMIJEH (*translated: smile*) – also known as the Association for Psychosocial Help and Development of Voluntary Work, is a non governmental organisation. OSMIJEH was established in 1996 in Gračanica, and is active in the region of Tuzla Canton. During the Bosnian war, the president and some other members of the NGO were refugees in Slovenia, where they had plenty of opportunities to become familiar with volunteers' activities aimed at helping refugee children. For more than three years the president was a collaborator of Slovene Philanthropy, the most important organisation in Slovenia for the development and promotion of voluntary work. Soon after the creation of the NGO OSMIJEH, the organisation started to develop voluntary work among children and young people. In one year they succeeded in mobilising about 2000 volunteers active in the community of Gračanica, Zavidovići and Brčko District and surrounding villages. Volunteers mostly assisted elderly people, children with learning and psychosocial difficulties and with special needs. Another important project based on voluntary work was the establishment of a day-care centre for children with special needs, which today caters for more than 75 children, run by adult volunteers. Receptiveness to the idea and practice of community-based voluntary work in Bosnia was extraordinary. Volunteers contributed to the social reconstruction of their communities. Young vol-

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unteers are still an important human resource for mitigating the problems of many deprived groups. In addition, volunteering is important for young people's personal development. It also contributes to inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. For example, it helps internally displaced persons (IDPs from Srebrenica) and other newcomers (for instance children from SOS Kinderdorf) and returnees to integrate in their communities and to overcome some difficulties (children's learning problems, for example). Young volunteers also invest a lot of effort in running the NGO, thereby acquiring experience in civilian activity. OSMIJEH developed a solidarity network, becoming a centre of reference for other NGOs, schools and other institutions in the region willing to mobilise their community's human resources.

Young people do not represent important human resources simply because of their energy, enthusiasm and disposable time. Young people are the future of their communities. Through volunteering they learn to become socially responsible citizens. In addition, being a volunteer has an important protective impact on the psychosocial development of young people, preventing delinquency and drug abuse by endowing the young with a sense of purpose and dignity.

### **Volunteers in different war-related situations**

In the situation of *war-related emergencies* we scarcely envisage planned psychosocial activities on the part of volunteers. Psychosocial help is somehow spontaneously integrated into other practical activities such as the distribution of food, logistics, care for the sick and wounded, etc.

Like other disasters, war-related circumstances evokes a huge amount of sponta-

neous human solidarity in people directly affected by the tragedy. People provide mutual help within the framework of their groups and communities. But their ability to help their fellow human beings is mostly limited, and is generally devoted primarily to the care of family members and other loved ones. Traditional ways of volunteering within the framework of the Red Cross do exist, for example, but for understandable reasons, psychosocial programmes are not introduced.

But, in *long-lasting situations of armed conflicts* (for instance during the siege of Sarajevo) many psychosocial programmes run by volunteers are developed first of all for children.

Volunteers are probably most numerous and active nowadays in *exile situations*. Besides providing practical assistance, psychosocial, educational and other kinds of support, volunteers have a positive influence on the public attitudes and behavior of the host country. They bridge both communities – the community of refugees on one side and the community of the exile country on the other side. Volunteers often act as a pressure group in favour of refugees in political decisions of the asylum country. Prolonged situations of exile are characterised by general dependency, passivity and depression. Activating displaced persons and refugees to volunteer in the interest of their community and facilitating such activities provides multiple practical, social and psychological benefits for refugees and especially for those volunteering.

The *post-war situation* is of crucial importance for the recovery process. Human resources available in post-war circumstances are reduced. Humanitarian organisations, foreign volunteers and other 'imported resources' leave the country quickly. The mentality of the population after war undergoes a change. The solidarity characteristic

of the war situation vanishes. After war everybody becomes much more self-centred. However, war traumas have not yet healed and new problems of a social nature emerge. People experience many disappointments, numerous expectations are not fulfilled. In the regions of former Yugoslavia affected by war a multitude of social problems emerged: poverty, unemployment, injustice. The state institutions and services for health-care, social welfare, etc. are dysfunctional and corrupted. In such a situation, there are enormous unmet needs. For instance, to mention just one: returnee children often have often great difficulty integrating in their native schools, because of social and emotional reasons, not least because they have been studying a different curriculum and often have language difficulties. Volunteers can be invaluable helpers to different groups in need, especially children. They can compensate for family deprivation and parental dysfunctions to some extent. Parents are more affected than their children by loss of family members and property. The atmosphere of the family is depressive. Numerous parents have no energy or emotional ability to support their children. A volunteer who is not burdened by distress and sadness can bring positive emotions, humour, joy, positive dreaming, etc. into the life of the child. In the post-war situation, besides being a human energy and 'here and now' resource to people in need, volunteering represents an important moral value for the community. It acts as a counterweight to the morality of the newly initiated market economy, which is certainly not based on solidarity and care for one's fellow man. The organised activities of volunteers enrich the social tissue of post-war communities and provide socially deprived individuals with a little more sense of security.

The development of new forms of post-war community-based voluntary work can result in a sustainable local or regional culture of voluntarism, and the social responsibility of every citizen to improve the quality of life of the most deprived and vulnerable; in fact, of the whole community, as all of the above have an influence on the individual and collective healing process.

The post-war period should also be a time of reconciliation. The process of reconciliation is effected mainly through common activities, uniting all sides involved in conflicts. Involving volunteers from different ethnic and religious groups in common pro-social activities is an important means of working for social reconstruction and reconciliation in the community. The volunteers' network contributes to the development of tolerance, confidence building and conviviality in the community.

### **Some warnings**

When engaging volunteers, the organiser must pay attention to the selection process. Some people who wish to be volunteers in situations related to armed conflict do not have adequate qualities, ability to cope, for instance. Their volunteering can cause harm to themselves or to persons with whom they work.

A patronising attitude of volunteers towards victims of war and refugees can be harmful. It shows lack of respect for the coping capacities of those people. On the other side it can push some more vulnerable persons into the position of helpless victim, thus preventing the mobilisation of their own coping energies and efforts. Volunteers should act in partnership with those they wish to support. Their behaviour should be culturally appropriate.

The activities of volunteers in the context of war-related situations should be properly

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organised and monitored. Volunteers should be prepared for their work, they should have regular group encounters with opportunities to discuss problems and their own difficulties and dilemmas. Volunteers should be supported, but organisers and supervisors should not devote most of their time and energy to volunteers' problems. There is a danger that the volunteers' group becomes centred on its own problems, so that war-affected persons are no longer the main beneficiaries.

There are situations when volunteers should be protected; for instance, from unjust accusation by refugees. The organiser must be aware that volunteers who dedicate their time and energy to war-affected persons are very vulnerable to such harassment. In addition, volunteers may have an unrealistic and idealised image of the war-affected population.

Domestic volunteers helping refugees in the host country may be regarded with suspicion, by their own community if this is unfriendly towards refugees, or by negatively minded refugee camp managers. On the other hand, volunteers often reflect a positive image of refugees to their family or institutional environments.

## **Conclusion**

We must not idealise volunteers' activities linked to war and post-war circumstances. Nevertheless, those concerned with the issues of psychosocial assistance to war-affected persons and the social reconstruction of post-war communities and societies should bear in mind that volunteers are more than an important potential human resource for meeting many needs, for both recovery and healing processes at individual and at societal level.

In situations of armed conflict and refugee situations, volunteers do not provide only

practical or psychosocial support to people in need. Their presence has a broader impact on the affected population. They bring the message 'we care'. They represent a moral counterweight to the forces of evil, to inhumanity and terror. Bosnian children in a refugee camp said: '*Volunteers are good people, they are our joy.*'

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