

Volunteers for Tackling Urban Disasters

Prothom Alo organised a roundtable titled "Institutionalisation of Urban Community Volunteers" in collaboration with Social and Economic Enhancement Programme (SEEP), Save the Children and C&A Foundation on November 29, 2017. Here we publish a summary of the discussions.

Abdul Quayum, Associate Editor, Prothom Alo & Moderator of the Session



Bangladeshi people are generally very compassionate. We saw how common people came forward to rescue Rana Plaza victims, even risking their own lives. This is an asset for the country. We need to build upon this intrinsic humanitarian value of our citizens and our volunteer workforce.

The government has a plan to develop 62,000 urban community volunteers for tackling urban disasters. This is indeed a laudable initiative. Since we do not have adequate manpower to fight the ever-growing risks of urban disasters, volunteers will be of great help in addressing this gap. To ensure effective use of this volunteer force it is really important to institutionalise them and develop a guideline which will include how these volunteers will work, what will be their chain of command, how they will respond to various disasters and so on. There should also be a database of these volunteers.

It is not always necessary to pay volunteers for their work. They work on the urge of humanity. But we must recognise their contribution. There can be some incentives to motivate people to do volunteer work.

Professor Nazrul Islam, President, Centre for Urban Studies



An integral part of urban planning is management of urban disasters. The government has also recognised the importance of this issue and has taken various initiatives to address it. There is a separate chapter on urban disasters in the Detailed Area Plan of Dhaka. It has addressed possible response mechanisms for a wide range of natural disasters including earthquakes, floods and fires. Urban Development Directorate of the government recently conducted a detailed study on Mymensingh town which also highlighted the resilience of the city.

We want a safe and liveable city. We need safety from both natural and social risks. Institutionalisation of volunteers is an important part of the urban resilience system. It ensures people's participation in disaster management efforts and thus makes those initiatives effective and sustainable.

However, there are some problems in institutionalisation. This kind of formalism creates dependency on government and sometimes discourages spontaneous response from common people. We need to strike a fine balance between the two aspects of formalisation and spontaneity.

There might be some remuneration for volunteering service. But they should be recognised by the society and the government for their contribution. We need to create the mindset of volunteering for humanitarian causes. Students and young people generally have time and eagerness for volunteering. We need to get them organised. Student wings of political parties and youth clubs can play a big role here.

Elected representatives of various local government bodies are key forces in mobilising local volunteers and creating a link between volunteers and government and non-government agencies working on disaster management. But these leaders should be honest and pro-active.

Syed Matiul Ahsan, Deputy Director, Humanitarian Sector, Save the Children



Save the Children is developing a large number of volunteers through its various projects in different cities of the country. We are closely working with Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence to train these volunteers. These volunteers will not only lend their support during disasters but also participate in various social development works. But we are worried about the future of these volunteers because till now there is no plan from government to sustain them and utilize in social development process. This is true for all other ad-hoc or project-based volunteer training projects. Hence government authorities should take ownership of these volunteers through concrete plans and guidelines to nurture them throughout the year. For the time being Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence is taking care of these urban volunteers. There should be a permanent agency to look after them. A clearly defined operational plan needs to be formulated. There should also be a database of urban volunteers so that we have a clear idea about the available manpower on the field. Furthermore importance should be given to select skilled volunteers such as electrician, mason etc. so that they could act effectively in case of emergency.

Shahid Alamin, Community Volunteer, Ward 15, Narayanganj City Corporation



I got one-year training and now I am a volunteer. I have already volunteered in various fire-related rescue operations. Now we are working under leadership in an organised way. But once the urban community volunteer project ends what will happen to us? We are really worried about it.

Mohammed Wahid, Community Volunteer, Ward 3, Dhaka North City Corporation



I got training from Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence and became a volunteer. I have participated in various rescue operations and awareness-building programmes. Through these activities we, volunteers, have been able to make our local community aware and they are now more knowledgeable about how to respond in a disaster situation. But if the volunteer projects end how will we continue our work? The training and trained manpower will be wasted in the absence of ownership. Institutionalisation is crucial for retaining the volunteers.

Ahmadul Haque, Director (Administration), Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP)



We work in coastal areas. Currently, we have 55,260 volunteers. There are 106 officers and workers who do the monitoring of these volunteers. It proves that a small efficient monitoring team can operate a large number of volunteers.

We basically communicate cyclone warnings to people living in cyclone-prone areas.



Through our strong communication channels extended up to the village level we can reach cyclone warning remote areas immediately. Besides that we do the necessary evacuation to take people to nearby cyclone shelters and provide first aid, distribute relief and rehabilitate cyclone-affected people. Our volunteers have a clearly defined operation plan.

Eight important criteria need to be fulfilled to be selected as a CPP volunteer. The most important one is that a volunteer has to be a permanent resident of the operational area. Although this criterion is difficult to be fulfilled in urban areas it is important for retention of volunteer force in a specific location. The volunteer should also have financial solvency to respond on his own in a disaster situation.

CPP volunteers' work is generally limited to cyclone seasons. But urban volunteers need to be prepared all throughout the year. There should be regular training programmes and a strong communication channel for operating these volunteers.

We do not pay any remuneration to our volunteers. We recognise them institutionally and honour them with certificates and medals.

A distant learning mechanism should be established through which various programmes on disaster preparedness and experiences of volunteers are shared with a wide audience. It will also work as a communication channel between volunteers across the country.

In Article 13 of the National Plan for Disaster Management it is clearly mentioned that volunteers will operate under a national disaster management authority. Formation of this organisation is at the final stage and a draft law regarding this will be passed soon. It will bring all the volunteer organisations under one umbrella.

Asit Baran Biswas, Councillor, Ward 15, Narayanganj City Corporation



Generally, we remain busy with various types of construction work in the city corporation area such as construction and repair of road and drain, setting up garbage bins, and so on. I want to thank Save the Children and Social and Economic Enhancement Programme (SEEP) for approaching us to be involved in developing community volunteers

for tackling urban disasters. Now we are actively working to create volunteers in all the 27 wards of our city corporation. I am also a volunteer. I participated in a three-day foundation course. In city areas it is really difficult to find people who can spare three days for training. Still we have managed to train 100 volunteers in my ward. They are working to create awareness on disaster preparedness. It has inspired others to be involved in volunteering activities. I strongly feel that these volunteers need regular orientation so that they can retain the skills they have received through various training programmes. Local government bodies closely work with people. They also have the mandate to work for disaster preparedness. If the local government ministry takes responsibility of the volunteers and coordinates support from Fire Service and Civil Defence and Department of Disaster Management it will bring a fruitful solution to the ownership problem of urban volunteers.

Nayeem Gawhar Wara, Faculty, Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability, Dhaka University



In the volunteer regulation policy educational qualification has been set at the intermediate level. But an intermediate-pass student has his or her own career plan. So it is difficult for him or her to find time for volunteering activities. We should rethink this provision.

Another important thing is to maintain transparency in recruitment of volunteers. During my visit to Mymensingh to review the training programmes of the urban volunteers I found that all the volunteers are connected to a single person and they are his relatives. We should be aware about these malpractices and ensure proper monitoring of recruitment activities.

During the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the warden system was developed in the country. The civil defence part of the Fire Service and Civil Defence department refers to this system. Under the warden system local influential and respected persons were nominated to be wardens. We can revive the system. It will easily solve the ownership problem regarding urban volunteers. We can also learn from the Myanmar Fire Service force which has successfully developed the warden system through the participation of community people. Myanmar has the least number of fire-related incidents in our region.

Tahmina Jesmin Mita, Deputy Director, Social and Economic Enhancement Programme (SEEP)



We all know about the government's initiative to build community volunteers. Through our urban risk reduction project 'Proyash' we are developing urban volunteers. We have been working since 2015. Currently, we work in four city corporations: Narayanganj City Corporation, Savar City Corporation, Dhaka North and Dhaka South City Corporation. So far

we have developed 320 volunteers in cooperation with Fire Service and Civil Defence supported by Save the Children. We have learnt from our field-level experience that it is not enough to just build volunteers. Therefore we are working to create mass awareness at the community level through various programmes such as organising mock drill, observing various important days and events, campaigns and theatre. As the Proyash project ends in 2017 we are a bit skeptical about the future of these volunteers. Without ownership of any institution of these volunteers they will not be able to perform their responsibilities properly during any disaster situation and the effort we have given to create the volunteer force will be of little use. I hope Fire Service and Civil Defence and other government representatives present in today's discussion will look into this issue seriously and make some arrangements for institutionalising these volunteers. A common guideline should be formulated to facilitate the works of urban volunteers. There should also be a guideline on the recruitment of these urban volunteers. Refresher training programmes need to be organised on a regular basis for the already-trained volunteers. The government should also expedite its efforts to build the remaining number of volunteers to meet its goal of creating a volunteer force of about 62,000 members.

Dr. Engr. Tariq Bin Yusuf, Executive Engineer, Environment, Climate and Disaster Management Circle, DNCC



The Environment, Climate and Disaster Management Circle has been entrusted with the responsibility of disaster preparedness in city areas. Through an extensive study we have prepared an urban disaster risk index for all the 36 wards of Dhaka North City Corporation.

Although many volunteers have been developed in these wards it is difficult to find them on the field. It seems that the training provided by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence has become more about acquiring self-defence skills than participating in community volunteering.

Many members of Scout work in various government agencies. But in the case of urban volunteers we do not see that. We are trying to involve our volunteers in different government agencies.

We are developing a model community through the JICA project. These people are involved in both regular community development work and disaster-preparedness efforts. We have opened a Facebook account through which we keep in constant touch with these volunteers and generate new initiatives. Now we are establishing warehouse and training centres at the zonal level. These institutions will be run by these urban volunteers. We have formed disaster management committee at the ward level involving the ward councillors. This can be an effective model of institutionalisation. We also need to take the resources to the community level and hold regular demonstration of disaster preparation. For example, most people do not know how to use the fire extinguisher. Urban volunteers can train general people about these basic safety measures. We need to choose people with technical knowhow as volunteers such as electricians, plumbers, and so on.

Satyabrata Saha, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief



Creating awareness and motivating people to learn basic disaster preparation skills is also a kind of institutionalisation. Our awareness campaign needs to be innovative. Mina cartoon played a huge role in motivating families to send their girl children to schools. We can learn from that.

I do not want to connect jobs with volunteering. We can still give priority to volunteers when it comes to recruitment in relevant government bodies such as Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, Ansar VDP, and so on.

We need to establish strong coordination among various stakeholders who are involved in disaster management programmes. We have repeatedly requested to transfer the fire service department to the disaster management ministry. The government has recognised its importance but it is yet to be done. We also need to involve the private sector in disaster management programmes.

Md Reaz Ahmed, Director General, Department of Disaster Management



The urban volunteer project was initiated by Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) of the government with the support of various donor agencies. It planned to create 62,000 urban volunteers to respond to urban disasters. So far 32,000 urban volunteers have been developed. Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence Department is

maintaining regular contact with them. In the Hyogo and Sendai frameworks for disaster risk reduction it is clearly mentioned that disaster management initiatives need to be mainstreamed. It does not only mean creation of volunteers by government. Volunteerism should be promoted at every level of the society including educational institutions, market, business houses and so on.

The Disaster Management Act clearly mentions creating an umbrella organisation to incorporate all the volunteer organisations in the country including Scout, Rover Scout, Girl Guide, Ansar VDP, Community Police, Red Crescent Society, and so on. We can bring them under an umbrella organisation and clearly define their responsibilities. It will solve a lot of problems we are discussing today.

M Khalid Mahmud, Joint Secretary, Planning & Development, Department of Disaster Management



Currently, we are revising the Standing Order on Disasters (SOD). We are incorporating the role of volunteers in the SOD. But it does not include institutionalisation of these volunteers. In the Disaster Management Act there is a provision of establishing a national volunteer organisation. The government is working in this regard. I am not in favour

of giving any monetary or career-related incentives to the volunteers because volunteering comes from humanitarianism. There are many organisations that are working to develop volunteers. We need to bring these volunteers into the mainstream. As long as we don't establish a national body for volunteers all the volunteers can be attached to Bangladesh Fire Brigade and Civil Defence Department. The volunteering work can be mentioned as extra-curricular activities in the CV. The employers can prioritise these people in employment which would be an incentive for them.

Reefat Bin Sattar, Director, Programme Development and Quality, Save the Children



We need to know what the volunteers think about disaster preparedness training and incentives. It should be an integral part of formulating any policy regarding volunteerism. Besides that the government should also consult with the organisations that are closely working with the volunteers. Save the Children will be glad to help in formulating any policy for volunteers. It can

also help in preparing a database of volunteers. In the private sector social responsibility has not yet gotten adequate importance. We need to make them aware about their role in fighting disasters.

Brigadier General Ali Ahmed Khan, Director General, Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence



After the Kobe earthquake disaster in Japan we saw that 98 percent of help came from volunteers. If we can develop our community preparedness for disasters it will be a great boost for our disaster management efforts. Community people are sufferers as well as the first responders during any disaster situation. Currently, our volunteers help a lot in facilitating disaster management work of Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence. Local representatives can play a very important role but we need to be careful about politicisation of the workforce.

Many organisations are working in the development of volunteer workforce. Now we need to integrate this workforce. Everyone needs to know each other and have a clearly defined role about how to respond in any disaster situation. Local representatives have a very important role in leading their local volunteers. There was a project under which 200 volunteers were developed in each ward of a city. They were organised into five groups of 40 members, each of which has three firefighters. We have already put search and rescue materials in place and the volunteers have been given outfits and personal protective gear. Now we need to institutionalise them. We are providing training regularly. But after the end of these projects, these volunteers will drop out.

We have a database of volunteers where you will get detailed information on them. Currently, we have around 600 fire stations. Each of these stations is a hub of training for volunteers. We always encourage NGOs to get all kinds of disaster-preparedness-related support from these stations. We even provide a place for meeting and training.

Our prime minister has directed to create a disaster response force in collaboration with local volunteers and Fire Service and Civil Defence. Local governments will provide us with administrative support and the ministry of disaster management and relief will provide us with policy support. There should be a policy guideline where there is clear direction on insurance and medical treatment for injured volunteers. It will encourage the volunteers. We can also prioritise volunteers in employment in our organisation.

Dhirendra Devnath Shambhu, Honourable Parliament Member, Chairperson, Standing Committee for Relief and Disaster Management



This is a great opportunity to learn about the current status of our disaster-preparedness. Bangladesh is far ahead of many developed countries in volunteering. That's why Bangladesh has achieved a lot in fighting deadly disasters. Now we need to organise all the volunteer forces and work in a planned manner. Only then will we be able to build a safe and disaster-resilient Bangladesh. Our Honourable Prime Minister has given clear directions to bring all the volunteers under one umbrella. The proposal to create urban volunteers is a great initiative. It truly reflects the main theme of SDGs that is "leave no one behind."