

# Are you Ready2Help? Organizing voluntary community response to disaster

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the disaster response landscape is increasingly complemented by voluntary citizen initiatives on digital platforms. These developments have opened up opportunities for response agencies and NGOs to organize local community involvement. In this paper we focus on the question how citizen involvement can be *proactively* organized toward disaster relief and what kind of dilemmas may arise in this process. We studied Ready2Help, an online platform developed by the Dutch Red Cross. Bringing together 36.000 volunteers, the platform plays a significant role in addressing the current refugee crisis. In our analysis we demonstrate the platform's potential, but also note a tension between control and cooperation. Our results indicate that, in contrast to their initial objective, during the crisis the Red Cross falls back on principles of control to organize citizen response efforts. We end by discussing our future research agenda aimed at bridging formal and emergent citizen responses.

## Keywords

Citizen Response, Social Media, Net-centric coordination, Command and Control

## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, crisis management is organized according to a hierarchical command and control model, in which crisis response agencies are tasked with bringing order to chaos (Dynes & Quarantelli, 1968). This mode of organization is criticized extensively in the literature, since it promotes rigidity in coordination and a focus on following rules, plans and procedures, regardless of outcome (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977; Tierney et al., 2006). It has repeatedly been demonstrated that crisis response actually requires flexibility and improvisation (Boin, 2009). Additionally, once a crisis becomes more severe, response agencies increasingly lack the means, expertise, and resources to effectively confront the situation by themselves.

As societal and institutional constellations often remain in place, coordination between stakeholders and cooperation with citizens and local communities is of vital importance. In fact, citizens, communities, NGOs, businesses and other societal actors have been recognized as equal partners to formal crisis response agents (Helsloot & Ruitenbergh, 2004). Contrary to prevalent disaster myths, citizens generally exhibit pro-social and

altruistic behavior in the wake of a disaster (Tierney et al., 2006). Nonetheless, incorporating citizens and local communities in crisis management remains difficult, for at least two reasons. First and foremost, emergent groups comprise a diverse set of unfamiliar group members, unstable task definitions, fleeting membership, they pursue multiple and often conflicting goals, and are geographically distributed (Majchrzak et al., 2007). Authorities therefore find it difficult to recognize emergent groups and cooperate with them. Further, a greater involvement of citizen groups and other societal actors in crisis management may challenge the authority and legitimacy of response agencies themselves, which generates resistance to their involvement.

The involvement of a variety of stakeholders in crisis management therefore necessitates an alternative mode of organization that functions as intermediate between formal response and spontaneous voluntarism (Drabek & McEntire, 2003; Roberts, 2011). This mode is found in network-centric platforms, which have increasingly gained traction in practice and in the literature (Boersma, et al. 2014; Moynihan, 2009; Roberts, 2011). For example, over the last decade citizens inside and outside disaster zones have organized themselves via open-source digital platforms and social media tools (Majchrzak & More 2011). These media can enable citizens to quickly gather information and provide specific expertise, in support of response efforts. In an effort to capitalize on these resources, response organizations try to incorporate online platforms in their formal response structures.

These developments have opened up important venues and opportunities for response agencies and NGOs to facilitate and organize community involvement in crisis management *before* disaster strikes. In fact, there have been experiments in many countries with mobile phone applications, websites, and other forms of online engagement and community preparation (Zook et al., 2010). However, few studies so far have systematically analysed whether, and if so, how citizen involvement aids or hinders relief efforts. This leads us to the research question: *how can voluntary citizen response to disaster be proactively organized by response organizations, and what dilemmas emerge during this process?* We focus on Ready2Help, an active online platform developed by the Dutch Red Cross. It currently has 36.000 volunteers and plays a significant role in the management of the current refugee crisis in the Netherlands.

## **VOLUNTARY GROUPS RESPONDING TO DISASTER**

An established line of crisis research has demonstrated that where existing support and relief structures fail to cope with the adverse consequences of a disaster, emergent initiatives arise (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977; Drabek & McEntire, 2003). These emergent initiatives allow citizens to organize themselves without relying on preexisting structures such as membership, tasks, roles, or expertise (Majchrzak et al., 2007). With the widespread use of information and communication technologies, such emergent community involvement is being further catalyzed. Namely, community involvement is no longer restricted to those affected by specific hazards at disaster sites (Drabek & McEntire, 2003). Instead, citizens both locally and globally are increasingly becoming part of informal response efforts, volunteering through online platforms (Majchrzak & More, 2011). These online platforms provide an emergent structure, in which volunteer groups become more visible, and creating opportunities to connect to NGOs and response agencies involved in formal response efforts.

Given the widespread prevalence of emergent initiatives in the wake of disaster, it is surprising that so far, research has only scarcely charted how they develop, function, and complement formal relief efforts. In fact, studies of voluntary behavior predominantly focus on physical disaster sites. For instance, volunteers have been involved in search and rescue operations, damage assessment and support of emergency workers (Voorhees, 2008). Even in the most difficult situations, such as Hurricane Katrina, pro-social voluntary behavior was abundantly present (Rodriquez et al., 2006). Also in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy such volunteerism was found to be helpful in recovery (Schmeltz, et al., 2013).

However, as attention shifted from on-scene volunteerism towards on-line volunteerism over the last decade, a new, complementary line of research is called for. For instance, various online platforms were activated in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, and played a key role in the disaster response (Zook et al., 2010) – such as Ushahidi, providing web-based mapping services. The Ushahidi-platform was activated within a few hours after the earthquake hit Haiti, allowing local Haitians to report incidents or ask for help by sending (free) geo-tagged text-messages to the platform. Using a network of volunteers, Ushahidi translated these text-messages from Creole, and placed the reports on a map of Haiti. NGOs and response agencies active in Haiti used these messages to direct their relief efforts. Similarly, when Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in 2013, over 1600 volunteers edited an OpenStreetMap (OSM) of the country, and which was used by various response agencies in the country.

As online platforms become more commonplace, their limitations are also becoming visible in terms of representation and isolation. For instance, a study of Philippine voluntary mapping revealed that damage in most locations was underreported by 36% and that in some locations – notably the city of Tacloban – damage was widely over reported (Reach Initiative, 2014). Moreover, online initiatives appear to flourish in the chaotic first phase of the search and rescue operation when information is very limited, but as soon as formal response organizations set up, these initiatives are pushed to the margin (Boersma et al., 2016), and formal response organizations' own information management structures take over to adhere to internal requirements of accountability.

Thus, despite the promise of volunteer-based platforms, their functionality remains ambiguous, particularly in terms of bridging with the formal response organizations. To better understand how such bridging occurs, we studied the Ready2Help platform, introduced below.

## READY2HELP

Ready2Help is a citizen network developed by the Dutch Red Cross. It is based on similar platforms in other countries, such as Team Österreich, an initiative of the Austrian Red Cross. Interested citizen volunteers can register themselves through the Ready2Help website (<https://ready2help.rodekruis.nl/>), where they are asked to provide some personal information and contact details. In case of a crisis situation, volunteers are subsequently contacted by the Red Cross via e-mail, SMS or automated calls. Volunteers are asked whether they are available to provide specific assistance at a designated time (filling sand bags, cleaning a refugee shelter, etc.). This allows volunteers to decide for themselves if they can perform a certain task. From experience the Red Cross has learned that in most areas about 1 in 10 volunteers will be available to help.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The organization of pre-emptive voluntary community response lies at the frontier of disaster studies. The existing literature has predominately focused on emergent citizen response on disaster sites, but knowledge about how to include (online) voluntary groups in existing response structures is only just starting to develop. Consequently, we adopt an explorative research design, in which our study informs the current debate with new perspectives. In order to understand how the Ready2Help initiative developed, and to identify possible dilemmas, we conducted interviews with key informants and observed the first operational exercise. Additionally, we consulted (policy) documents, the Ready2Help website and media reports.

## FINDINGS

### Phase 1. Ready2Help exercise: searching for ways to organize community response

Ready2Help was first tested in a field exercise on March 14, 2015. Registered volunteers were called into action to combat the fictional flooding of the Dutch town of Dordrecht. The exercise consisted of two elements: an on-site cleanup operation with volunteers and an online web monitoring team responding to questions posed by volunteers under the Twitter hashtag #R2Hoefening. The on-site scenario required volunteers to reinforce dikes with sandbags, clear a neighborhood of debris, and rescue valuable art items from a museum. Since this was the Red Cross' first experience with Ready2Help, the organizers did not know whether the registered volunteers would actually show up. Fortunately, this fear proved unfounded, as hundreds of volunteers were present at the exercise.

At the start of the exercise, volunteers were divided in groups of 15 and put under the (trained) supervision of a Red Cross Team Leader. Team Leaders have no formal authority, so the Red Cross was anxious to see whether volunteers would follow Team Leaders' orders. To make sure that volunteers did so, Team Leaders stressed the efficiency of working together in small groups with designated tasks in the pre-exercise briefing. The briefing also underscored the importance of personal safety, the role of volunteers vis-à-vis Team Leaders, and the Ready2Help command structure during the exercise.

After the briefing the volunteers were guided to the disaster area. It was not immediately clear for volunteers what tasks they should perform, so they turned to Team Leaders for guidance and supervision. Once tasks were divided, volunteers spread out across the exercise site and frantically started to clean up debris from the flooding. While doing so, it was difficult for Team Leaders to keep an overview of 'their' volunteers. As a result, one volunteer inadvertently crossed over to another team without his Team Leader or himself being

aware of this. Not until the coffee break did the volunteer realize that something had gone wrong, suddenly encountering people he did not know. In a real crisis situation this could have turned into a clear issue of accountability, since the Red Cross is not only responsible for the actions of its volunteers, but also for their safety and whereabouts.

The second part of the exercise took place online and was centered around the interaction of volunteers and a three-person Web Monitoring Team (WMT). The goal was to communicate clear advice to affected citizens. According to one of the members of the WMT: “*What we notice on social media is that all kinds of questions are asked. We need to give advice to those people who need additional information. We will give online aid*”. During the exercises 2275 tweets were sent that needed to be processed by the WMT. Quickly the WMT struggled to keep up with the information overload. Tweets that were received in the morning were only answered later that afternoon.

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9:05u: NathanW010 – Can somebody help us!!! Everything is flooded! Wife is not mobile. #R2Hoefening

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11:47u: Ready2Help\_NL - @NathanW010 If possible move to top floor. Pick a room where you can escape through the window. #R2Hoefening ^MV.

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In reviewing the exercise we discerned a number of difficulties and challenges. Due to the nature of the Ready2Help system and the command and control structure adopted in the exercise, volunteers not only asked for clear guidance and structure, but the Red Cross was also expected to organize its operation in a rather Tayloristic manner, with all tasks pre-defined, demarcated, and supervised by a trained Red Cross Team Leader. This mode of organization evidently posed organizational challenges, when volunteers freely roamed a disaster site, leaving accountability questions toward volunteers (what if they were to get lost or harmed, what if they left the disaster scene on their own initiative?) wide open.

After the exercise, the Red Cross performed its own evaluation. It was decided that the WMT would be dismissed, because it was too labour intensive. The Red Cross kept its organizational command and control structure, and it tried also to control volunteer groups responding to disaster by employing a strict Tayloristic ‘division of labour’ structure.

## Phase 2. Ready2Help in the refugee crisis

After the March 15 exercise, Ready2Help was activated several times for comparatively minor incidents. However, when conflicts in the Middle East and Africa led to a large influx of refugees from countries such as Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and Eritrea into the European Union, Ready2Help was actively deployed. The ‘refugee crisis’, as it was framed in the Netherlands, reflected a significant challenge for the Dutch authorities: how to organize shelter, medical help, food and other basic necessities, often at short notice? It became clear during the second half of 2015 that the Dutch government was ill equipped to address this challenge on its own. Agencies tasked with processing refugees – from checking their documents, to performing medical tests and building shelters – had faced budget cuts over the past decade, consequently lacking resources to deal with the continuous arrival of new refugees. Thus, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) were quickly overwhelmed by requests for food and shelter for hundreds of refugees at once.

In September 2015 the authorities therefore turned to the Red Cross and Ready2Help for emergency assistance. Some Dutch Safety Regions already had contracts with the Red Cross to provide emergency relief at times of crisis. Since then, Ready2Help volunteers had been actively mobilized on an almost daily basis in different parts of the Netherlands. An overview on the Red Cross website shows that volunteers have primarily helped with fairly simple, but labour-intensive tasks, such as setting up shelters, cleaning, assisting with logistic tasks (Red Cross, 2015). To a lesser extent, volunteers helped with translation, medical help and other more specialized activities. This demonstrates that the Red Cross followed through with its logic of providing volunteers small, pre-defined tasks.

Because of the refugee crisis and subsequent media attention for Ready2Help, its membership grew steadily, from a few thousand at the beginning of 2015 to 36.000 at the end of the year. In fact, the Dutch Red Cross now has more Ready2Help volunteers than its 29.000 traditional volunteers. The Ready2Help volunteers are

generally younger and have a higher education than these regular volunteers, clearly distinguishing themselves as a group, which presented the Red Cross with an organizational question, of how to manage these volunteers, how to respond to their expectations, and how to monitor and maintain their commitment. In their effort to respond to these questions, and their attempt to organize and structure the Ready2Help citizen response efforts, the Red Cross appeared to fall back on principles of command and control – somewhat ironically, given the bottom-up, voluntary nature of the initiative.

## CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper set out to understand whether and how response organizations can manage voluntary citizen response efforts based on cooperation and coordination rather than conventional modes of command and control. Our study of Ready2Help indicated that the organization of voluntary citizen response efforts to disasters is well on its way, but that such initiatives appear particularly well suited for organizing relatively simple, well-structured tasks.

Community response to disaster ranges from informally (emergent) organized community initiatives to formally and supported developed initiatives by response organizations, as in the Ready2Help case. While some emergent initiatives are increasingly developing into institutionalized forms of response (such as the Digital Humanitarians platform, a collaboration between UNOCHA and CrisisMappers), informal volunteer initiatives keep playing an important role in mobilizing aid in the direct aftermath of a crisis situation. In fact, emergent community initiatives often develop and evolve before the formally organized response system kicks in; however, when response organizations arrive to the scene, they have a tendency to take over and push informally organized grassroots initiatives out. In so doing, both worlds run the risk of functioning separately, thereby excluding potentially relevant information and expertise from the response effort.

This presents researchers and practitioners with a dilemma: should response agencies organize and formalize community response (e.g. via volunteer recruitment), or should they become more adaptive, aligning themselves with emergent community initiatives? As our case shows, both forms have benefits and drawbacks. Often the reason for the abandonment of emergent citizen initiatives is that they do not adhere to the formal response organizations' internal information sharing and accountability structures. On the flip side: the inclusion of citizen initiatives in formal response structures also risks diminishing the flexibility and serendipity that make these initiatives so effective in turbulent disaster situations. The quest thus remains, to find initiatives that are able to function as a bridge between formal and citizen disaster responses. What may be a way forward in the new era of digital voluntarism is the development of network-centric platforms that allow for community involvement and are simultaneously geared toward formal response systems (Boersma et al., 2014).

We identify a number of questions that can guide future research:

- The worlds of online volunteerism and NGOs appear mostly as separate environments. How can online and offline communities be bridged, and where can benefits be identified?
- So far, the Ready2Help system has been utilized in comparatively stable environments. How do Ready2Help and similar systems perform during dynamic, fast-paced crisis situations, where supervision of volunteers is complicated and safety risks are greater?
- Organizing voluntary community response can lead to issues of accountability when volunteers are deployed in more stressful environments or when volunteers face greater safety risks. How can accountability be effectively managed in those situations?

With this study, we emphasize both the potential and the risks embedded in voluntary community response, thereby hoping to encourage further study into a fascinating research topic, and important form of disaster response.

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