

Research Article



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Keywords

Volunteerism, disaster relief,
community resilience,
professional social work, Kerala
floods 2018

Flood Relief Volunteer Management: A Case Study of Thiruvananthapuram District Administration

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In August 2018, Kerala faced unprecedented floods, prompting a Red Alert in 13 out of 14 districts. With 433 casualties and over 14 lakh displaced individuals, Thiruvananthapuram district emerged as a key hub for disaster relief. Volunteer-driven initiatives played a pivotal role, establishing numerous relief material collection centres under the District Administration. This case study delves into the operational procedures of these centres, offering a retrospective analysis of volunteers' life experiences. Utilizing a case study approach, data was gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The findings highlight the functioning of relief material collection centres, volunteers' motivations, their experiences in flood relief activities, and reflections on the transformative impact of volunteerism in their lives. The study also underscores opportunities for professional social work interventions in disaster volunteer management.

INTRODUCTION

Disaster management aims to prevent, mitigate, and prepare for disasters, thereby minimising the need for response and recovery and reducing the loss of lives and livelihoods (Iwasaki, 2016). Volunteerism, a visible manifestation of fundamental human values, becomes prominent during disasters as individuals are motivated to address the needs of others. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) emphasizes the crucial role of volunteers during such events (UNV, 2011). Despite its significant influence globally, the full potential of volunteerism in achieving sustainable development remains unrealized (UNV, 2021).

International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines volunteering as "unpaid non-compulsory work: that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household" (ILO, 2011, p. 13). Volunteering, broadly defined as providing voluntary services for community betterment without anticipating financial gain, encompasses diverse activities within the spectrum of mutual assistance, formal service provision, and civic engagement (Butcher & Einolf, 2017). In 2020, a paradigm shift in comprehending volunteering practices was

proposed, introducing five components—structure, site, intensity, aspiration, and category—to define volunteering in the 21st century (Millora, 2020). The state of Kerala in India, recognising the importance of volunteerism, established volunteer management systems such as Kerala Civil Defence (KCD) in 2019 (KCD, n.d.) and *Samoohika Sannadhasena* in 2020 (Kerala State Disaster Management Authority [KSDMA], n.d.).

The year 2018 witnessed unprecedented rainfall in Kerala, leading to devastating floods affecting 13 out of 14 districts (Central Water Commission et al., 2018). Volunteers played a crucial role in disaster response and recovery efforts, distributing essential provisions, providing medical assistance, and offering shelter. This paper explores the volunteer management initiative by the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during the 2018 floods, with a focus on Relief Material Collection Centres (RMCC). The study delves into the operational procedures of these centres and reflects on the life experiences of volunteers. Considering volunteer management as a potential area for social work intervention, the findings contribute insights into disaster management, public administration, social work, and volunteer studies.

METHOD

This case study investigated the operational procedures of RMCCs and the life experiences of volunteers under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during the Kerala Floods of 2018. The study adopted a collective case study design, simultaneously examining four cases to gain comprehensive insights into the operation of RMCCs and the volunteer experiences.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling from volunteers registered under the flood RMCCs of the Thiruvananthapuram district administration. The researcher identified respondents who engaged consistently throughout the RMCC operations using participant observation.

Data was collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The participant observation was conducted from August 16th to August 27, 2018, spanning a minimum of eight hours on all working days of the RMCCs. An interview guide, developed based on research questions facilitated in-depth exploration. Each volunteer participated in a one-hour interview. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with informed consent obtained from respondents, and confidentiality ensured.

Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data analysis. The coding process began with data familiarization, followed by generating initial codes from volunteer experiences related to all phases of RMCCs. Broader themes were identified by organising initial codes around the research questions. Themes were then refined and defined, encompassing motives for volunteering, experiences with RMCCs, reflections after volunteering, and operational procedures of the RMCCs.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study triangulated information about RMCC operations obtained from participant observation with data collected from interviews with volunteers. The results revealed insights into the motives, experiences, and reflections of volunteers, along with a comprehensive understanding of RMCC operations during the Kerala Floods of 2018.

Given the limitations of the study, conducted with four volunteers under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during the Kerala Floods of 2018, there is a need for further research to extend and generalise the findings to other disaster contexts.

FINDINGS

The study's findings are presented in two distinct parts, with the first focusing on the operational aspects of RMCCs, and the second delving into the life experiences of volunteers who participated in these operations.

Operating Procedure of the Relief Materials Collection Centres

Amidst the 2018 Kerala floods, Thiruvananthapuram emerged as a pivotal hub for disaster relief operations, given its relatively lower impact. Following the Disaster Management Act of 2005, Dr. Vasuki IAS, serving as the District Collector, led the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during this crisis. The District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), headed by the District Collector, spearheaded the establishment of multiple RMCCs across Thiruvananthapuram City.

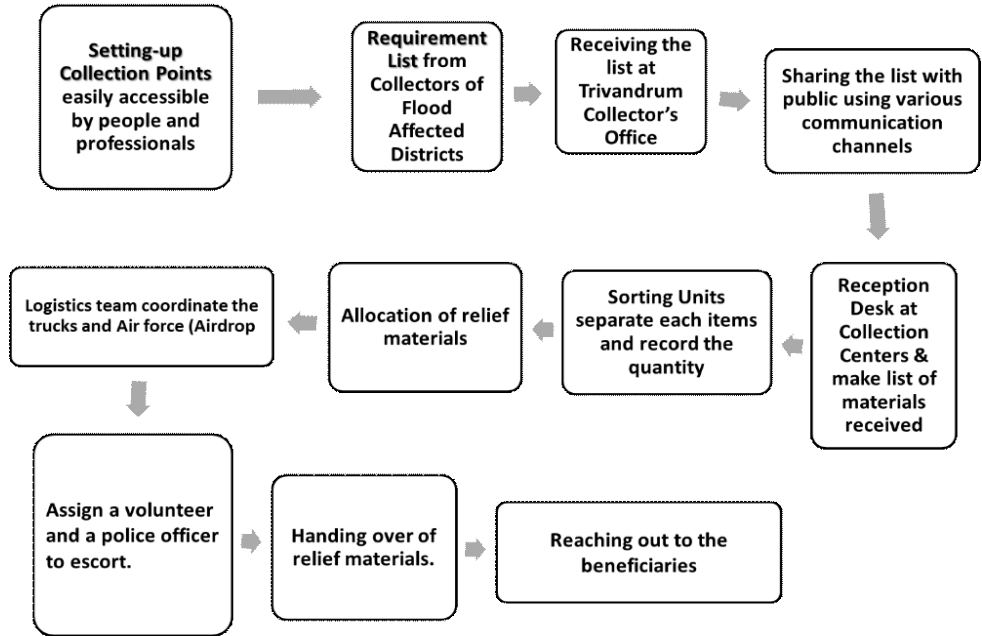
Leveraging social media for widespread awareness, DDMA successfully attracted volunteers from various districts to actively participate in relief efforts. These dedicated volunteers played a crucial role in resource mobilization, collecting, sorting, and distributing essential items such as food, clothing, medicines, sanitary products, cooking oil, cleaning agents, and grains. Operational from August 16th to August 27, 2018, the RMCCs were strategically located at SMV School, Nishagandhi Open Air Auditorium, Barton Hill Engineering College, Trivandrum Social Service Society, Cotton Hill School, and Thiruvananthapuram Corporation Office, the easily accessible locations in and around Thiruvananthapuram city.

During the Kerala Floods in 2018, volunteers played a crucial role in developing and implementing the operating procedures of RMCCs. Figure 1 illustrates the functioning of RMCCs under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration. The data for Figure 1 was obtained through direct observation and interviews with volunteers.

Setting Up Collection Points Easily Accessible by People and Professionals

The process began by identifying suitable locations accessible to the general public while meeting the needs of disaster management professionals. These collection points served as central hubs for gathering and distributing relief materials.

Figure 1: Operating Procedures of Relief Materials Collection Centres



Requirement List from Collectors of Flood-Affected Districts

District collectors of flood-affected areas provided comprehensive lists detailing the specific requirements of relief materials. These lists were crucial for guiding subsequent collection efforts.

Receiving the List at the Thiruvananthapuram Collector's Office

The Thiruvananthapuram collector's office collected the requirement lists from district collectors, disseminating the information through volunteer leaders and various communication channels, including social media. Regular updates ensured accurate and current information

Open the Reception Desk at the Relief Materials Collection Centres and Make a List of the Relief Materials Received

Relief materials, sourced by both the general public and volunteers, were submitted at designated reception desks. Volunteers at each centre meticulously recorded the details of contributions, including item specifics, quantities, and contributor information.

Sorting Units Separate Each Item and Record the Quantity

Volunteers in sorting units categorized and quantified materials based on predefined categories such as food, clothing, sanitary items, medicines, cleaning supplies, and other essentials. This step ensured efficient organization for subsequent distribution.

Allocation of Relief Materials

RMCC coordinators and Thiruvananthapuram district administration officials inspected and allocated materials based on the established requirement lists from flood-affected districts.

The Logistics Team Coordinates the Trucks and Air Force (Airdrop)

Following allocation, the logistics team collaborated with truck drivers for overland transportation. Additionally, coordination with the Indian Air Force and other disaster management professionals ensured airdrop deliveries to areas inaccessible by road.

Assign a Volunteer and a Police Officer to Escort

Once the location and transportation mode were finalized, a volunteer and a police officer were assigned to accompany the relief materials. This escort enhanced transparency, ensured safe delivery, and mitigated potential political controversies.

Handing Over the Relief Materials

Relief materials were formally handed over to officials of the revenue department under the Government of Kerala. This transfer occurred in the presence of relevant officials and representatives from the flood-affected areas, maintaining accountability and transparency.

Distribution of Relief Materials to the Needy

Government officials, assisted by people's representatives, oversaw the distribution of relief materials to flood survivors. In areas lacking road connectivity due to disasters, the Indian Air Force facilitated airdrops to ensure efficient delivery to those in need.

Life Experiences of Volunteers

At the heart of the Thiruvananthapuram district administration's response to the 2018 Kerala floods was its dedicated volunteer force. These volunteers played a pivotal role in collecting, sorting, and distributing relief materials mobilized for the flood-affected areas. Hailing from diverse backgrounds, these volunteers contributed selflessly to the community, emphasizing the importance of conducting a thorough study to comprehend their motivations, experiences, and personal reflections. This section endeavours to explore the intricate facets of the volunteers involved in flood relief activities, shedding light on their reasons for volunteering, the dynamics of their volunteering experiences, and their reflections on the act of volunteering. Figure 2 shows the core themes and subthemes that emerged from this study.

Motives Behind Volunteering

In this investigation, motives denote the personal reasons compelling individuals to engage in volunteering during the 2018 Kerala floods. Volunteers articulated various motivational factors that prompted their involvement in the volunteer efforts under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration. The following motives were expressed:

Volunteers Driven by Values

Values, particularly the sense of societal obligation, emerged as a primary motivator. Volunteers considered it their civic responsibility to contribute when fellow citizens faced adversity, embodying a commitment to giving back to society.

Volunteer (V) 1: I believe that as a responsible citizen, I should give back to society when my fellow beings are in difficult situations and need my help.

Impact of News Channels and Social Media

During the initial stages of the flood, news channels and social media played a pivotal role in disseminating

information. The Thiruvananthapuram district administration utilized these channels to announce the opening of relief material collection centres and the need for volunteers. Volunteers, relying on these platforms, were motivated to participate, with regular updates providing crucial information.

V2: I was following news channels and social media to get information regarding the floods, and then I noticed that the Thiruvananthapuram collector opened relief material collection centres, and they needed volunteers to work with. This news motivated me to participate in the collection camp. Social media on my phone was also filled with volunteer requirement updates.

Inspired by Peer Group Volunteers

Peer influence played a significant role, particularly among volunteers who joined as part of a group. Students from colleges and members of youth clubs motivated their peers to engage in volunteering. Sharing experiences among friends created a positive word-of-mouth effect, encouraging more individuals to participate.

V4: Many of my friends had already started to volunteer in relief materials collection centres, and they encouraged me to join them.

Ecosystem and Opportunities for Volunteering

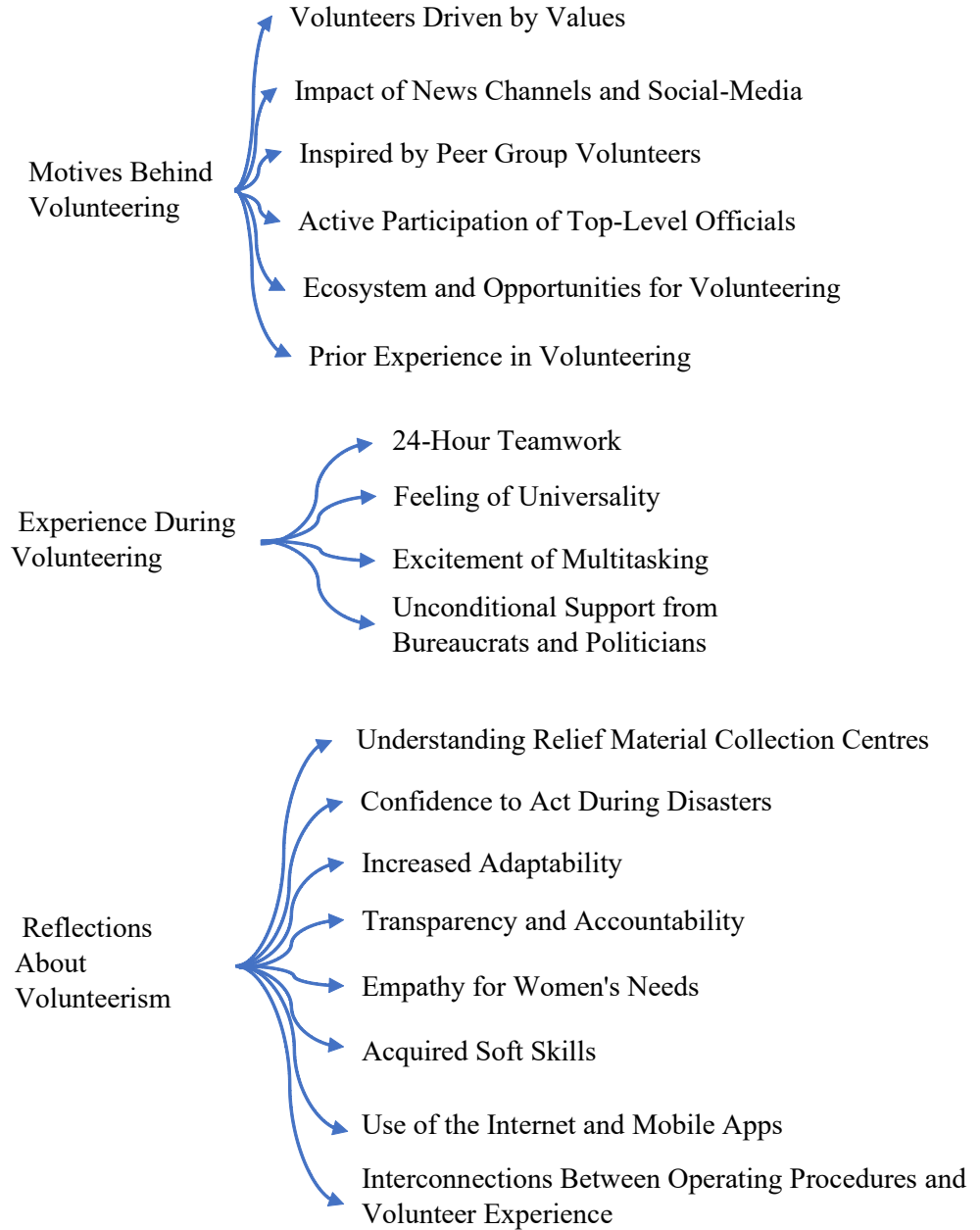
The overall environment and opportunities provided by relief materials collection centres were instrumental in attracting volunteers. A friendly, self-driven, and systematic atmosphere, coupled with the provision of necessities, enhanced the volunteering experience. Group activities, such as singing and playing musical instruments, added to the enjoyment.

V2: On the first day of volunteering, I was a little bit anxious about the situation in relief materials collection centres, but the friendly environment and facilities of the collection centres made me comfortable, and it gave me a good feeling. I enjoyed volunteering with a huge group of new friends.

Active Participation of Top-Level Officials

The active involvement of higher government officials, including the District Collector and District Police Chief, served as a significant motivator. Young aspirants preparing for civil service exams were inspired to join the volunteer team, aligning with their real-life role models. The participation of officials from various

Figure 2: Themes and Sub-themes on the Life Experience of Volunteers



government departments ensured effective coordination in collection centres.

V3: As I am also preparing for civil service exams, this volunteering initiative helps me to witness how top-level officials work in disaster situations. This motivated me to continue my volunteer efforts.

Prior Experience in Volunteering

Some volunteers drew motivation from their previous volunteering experiences, gained through college and university-level activities such as the National Service

Scheme (NSS) and National Cadet Corps (NCC). Confidence and a sense of duty were instilled by their prior engagement in such activities.

V1: I felt confident that my prior experience in participating in college-level volunteer initiatives could help provide better service; this also motivated me.

Experience During Volunteering

In this context, “experience” encapsulates the firsthand, practical encounters volunteers underwent as active participants in various volunteering activities

orchestrated by the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during the Kerala floods. Volunteers shared diverse experiences:

24-Hour Teamwork

The noteworthy aspect of volunteering during the Kerala floods was the intense teamwork, with volunteers engaged in nearly continuous shifts spanning 24 hours. This relentless and collaborative effort was a novel experience, especially for first-time volunteers. Importantly, many officials also embraced this 24-hour duty.

V3: It was my first experience working late at night; we never worked based on the fixed working time.

Feeling of Universality

Volunteers expressed a profound sense of universality during their service. Regardless of gender, status, education, religion, caste, and political affiliations, volunteers united in their shared commitment to aiding fellow beings. Strangers transformed into a cohesive team, fostering connections that were anticipated to endure beyond the immediate event. Numerous formal and informal groups and associations emerged as a testament to this enduring camaraderie.

V1: We worked as a team irrespective of differences; now strangers have become friends, and we are planning to continue this group for the benefit of society.

Excitement of Multitasking

RMCCs offered a dynamic environment that encouraged multitasking. Volunteers engaged in diverse activities, including fund mobilization, collection and sorting of relief materials, cleaning, transportation, and volunteer management. The flexibility in timing empowered volunteers to explore different facets of work across various areas within the relief materials collection centres.

V4: This volunteering initiative provided a lot of opportunities to work and helped me to realize my potential for multitasking. I worked in all the areas of the relief materials collection centre, from fund mobilization to transportation.

Unconditional Support from Bureaucrats and Politicians

Volunteers gained a unique perspective by working closely with bureaucrats and politicians. The unwavering support and guidance received from these officials proved

invaluable, impacting volunteers both personally and professionally. This collaborative effort bridged the gap between the public and government machinery, particularly enhancing the synergy during disaster situations.

V2: This volunteering changed my perspectives about bureaucrats and politicians; actually, it was my first experience working with them, and they provided every possible support for our efforts.

Reflections on Volunteerism

In this study, “reflections” denote the transformative impact that volunteerism had on the lives of those who actively participated in the volunteering efforts under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration. Volunteers shared insights into the profound changes brought about by their involvement:

Understanding the Functioning and Importance of Relief Materials Collection Centres During Disasters

Volunteers, especially those unfamiliar with the concept of RMCCs, gained a new perspective on their functioning and significance in disaster management. Recognizing their effectiveness, volunteers acknowledged these centres as vital platforms for individuals without specialized knowledge in disaster management.

V1: The concept of a relief materials collection centre was new to me, but now I understand the workings of relief materials collection centres and their effectiveness during disasters. I think these relief materials collection centres provided a platform for common people who didn't have any specialized knowledge in disaster management.

Confidence to Act with Available Resources During Disasters

The volunteer efforts instilled confidence in participants to work and act resourcefully during disasters. Faced with limited time and resources for relief operations, volunteers practically learned to maximize the utilization of available resources, showcasing resilience and adaptability.

V4: I started volunteering with available resources; I used my contacts for fundraising and purchased relief materials from known shops so I could get discounts. In relief materials collection centres, we also collected packing materials for airdrops from nearby shops.

Increased Adaptability

Volunteerism enriched participants with adaptability toward crises, fostering skills in teamwork, collective thinking, and creative problem-solving. Volunteers highlighted the enduring benefits of these developed skills, positively impacting both their personal and professional lives.

V2: Being afraid during a disaster will never aid anyone, so adaptability to work in a disaster situation is very important. Volunteering during the disaster helped me develop the confidence to work in any situation.

Transparency and Accountability

Volunteers recognised the essential role of transparency and accountability in fund mobilization and material management during disasters. Learning to handle public money and materials with meticulous care, volunteers understood the potential repercussions of even minor mistakes, emphasizing the need for transparency.

V3: I became aware that the handling of donations for purchasing relief material should be very careful. So, I keep proper accounts and provide statements to the donors about spending money.

Empathy for Women's Needs

The volunteer experience prompted a positive change in the perception of women's sanitary products, challenging associated stigmas. Many male volunteers, for the first time, empathized with the needs of women, purchasing sanitary pads and undergarments. Volunteerism played a role in reducing societal stigma surrounding women's sanitary products.

V1: As per the requirement list from the relief materials collection centre, I have purchased a women's sanitary pad for the first time in my life. It made me think and empathise with the difficulties faced by women in the time of disasters, particularly during menstruation.

Acquired Soft Skills

The collaborative nature of relief materials collection centres, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, facilitated the development of social and communication skills among volunteers. These improved skills proved beneficial in both personal and professional spheres.

V2: Volunteering helps me to improve my communication skills by providing opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds.

Effectiveness and Creative Use of the Internet and Mobile Apps

Volunteers gained insights into the effective and creative use of the Internet and mobile apps during disasters. Leveraging technology, including social media, volunteers disseminated information about relief materials collection centres, highlighting additional societal benefits beyond entertainment.

V4: Before volunteering, I used my phone and internet only for personal purposes; now I realize how I can use my phone and internet for societal benefits. I got most of the information from relief materials collection centres through my phone and social media.

Interconnections Between Operating Procedures and Volunteer Experience

The volunteer experiences and operating procedures demonstrated a symbiotic relationship. Well-structured operating procedures provided clarity, reduced confusion, and enhanced opportunities for multitasking, impacting volunteers by enriching their experiences. Simultaneously, the motives of volunteers, such as values, peer collaboration, and prior volunteering experiences, contributed to the seamless functioning of relief material collection centres.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the critical role and transformative impact of volunteerism during the 2018 Kerala floods, specifically focusing on the operations and experiences within the RMCCs under the Thiruvananthapuram district administration. The study underscored the indispensable contribution of volunteers in disaster management, particularly in the context of relief materials collection centres. Volunteers played a pivotal role in the collection, sorting, and distribution of essential items, demonstrating a commendable spirit of community service. The findings align with existing literature emphasising the effectiveness of volunteerism in enhancing disaster response and recovery (United Nations Volunteers, 2017).

Understanding the motives behind volunteer engagement is imperative for effective disaster response. The study identified values, information from news channels and social media, peer influence, ecosystem support, top-level officials' active participation, and prior volunteering experience as key motivators. These diverse motivational factors highlight the multifaceted nature of volunteerism

and the need for tailored strategies to mobilise volunteers in different contexts.

The study illustrated a symbiotic relationship between well-defined operating procedures and volunteer experiences. The structured approach in RMCCs not only provided clarity and reduced confusion but also enhanced the overall volunteer experience. This interconnection emphasises the importance of organised frameworks in maximizing volunteer engagement and effectiveness during disaster relief efforts.

The experiences shared by volunteers during their engagement in relief activities provided valuable insights. The 24-hour teamwork, universality of purpose, excitement of multitasking, and interactions with bureaucrats and politicians contributed to a transformative volunteer experience. These experiences not only bolstered the volunteers' confidence and adaptability but also fostered a sense of unity and shared purpose among individuals from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the reflections of volunteers offered a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of volunteerism on personal and professional development. From gaining insights into disaster management to developing soft skills and leveraging technology effectively, volunteers emerged from the experience with a broader skill set and an increased sense of societal responsibility. The study suggests that volunteerism serves as a catalyst for positive change, fostering empathy, accountability, and a proactive approach to crisis situations.

Implications for Professional Social Work Intervention

The insights drawn from this study underscore the pivotal role that professional social workers can play in optimizing volunteer management, particularly in the context of disaster relief efforts. The identified competencies and areas of intervention present opportunities for leveraging the expertise of social work professionals to enhance the overall effectiveness of volunteer engagement and disaster management initiatives.

Professional social workers, with their expertise in social work administration, bring a wealth of knowledge to the administrative processes of volunteer management. The study suggests that the well-established administrative process, encapsulated by POSDCORB (Planning, Organising, Staffing, Directing, Co-ordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting), can be instrumental in coordinating and ensuring the well-being of volunteers. This aligns with

existing literature emphasizing the need for structured administrative frameworks in volunteer management (Brudney & Meijs, 2014).

Historical perspectives reveal the longstanding connection between professional social work and volunteerism. The study draws attention to the historical role of volunteers, particularly as "friendly visitors," and underscores the views of social work pioneers like Mary Richmond, who perceived professional social workers as administrators responsible for organising and maintaining efficient volunteer teams. This historical context emphasises the enduring partnership between social work and volunteerism (Becker, 1964).

Professional social workers can act as vital liaisons between top-level officials, politicians, and volunteers, advocating for the active engagement of social workers to enhance coordination and communication in relief operations. The study rightly emphasises the need for networking and lobbying efforts by professional social work associations to demonstrate the potential benefits of social work involvement in disaster management, thereby creating employment opportunities in the government sector.

The study identifies motives behind volunteerism as a key area for professional social work intervention. Drawing on their knowledge of psychology, sociology, and human development, social workers can address the emotional and psychological needs of volunteers, whether driven by values, media influence, or peer inspiration. This tailored approach aligns with the person-centred focus of social work practice. Moreover, professional social workers can significantly enrich the volunteer experience by leveraging their expertise in working with groups, and communities, life skills, networking, and resource optimisation. By creating a supportive and inclusive environment, fostering teamwork, and providing necessary resources, social workers contribute to a positive and empowering volunteer environment.

Acknowledging the transformative potential of volunteerism, professional social workers can design and implement training programs for volunteers. Collaborative efforts with NGOs, *Samoohika Sannadhasena*, and KCD can focus on disaster management awareness, life skills development for crisis adaptability, and soft skills training, thereby enhancing the capabilities of volunteers. Furthermore, by actively advocating for specific roles in disaster management policies, social workers can contribute

to shaping comprehensive strategies that integrate their expertise into disaster response and recovery.

The study emphasises the need for extensive research and development activities in the field of volunteerism. Professional social workers can actively engage in social work research related to volunteer management, providing valuable insights for policy formulation and strategic planning. Furthermore, training and capacity-building initiatives, in collaboration with social work institutions, can equip government officials with the necessary skills for effective volunteer management.

The findings of this study offer practical implications for formulating comprehensive operating procedures for flood relief material collection centres. This highlights the potential impact of integrating professional social work insights into the design and implementation of relief operations. Finally, to ensure sustained collaboration, social work academic institutions can prioritise volunteer management in their syllabi, preparing future professionals for active engagement in disaster relief efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study portrays the volunteering dynamics orchestrated by the Thiruvananthapuram district administration during the 2018 Kerala floods. It meticulously dissects the operational intricacies of RMCCs and evaluates the profound impact on volunteers, encapsulating their motives, experiences, and reflections. The research underscores that volunteer service programmes are catalysts for fostering community-driven initiatives. Key factors identified, such as values, media influence, and peer inspiration, amplify the potential for successful volunteer movements. The grassroots mobilisation witnessed in one district, as exemplified in this study, radiates benefits that extend to other flood-affected areas in Kerala.

Volunteers emerged not only as a crucial resource but as a unifying force, forging stronger community bonds and a heightened civic consciousness. The study illuminates their selfless commitment, versatility in tasks, and empathetic response to specific needs, notably addressing women's sanitary requirements during crises. Moreover, volunteerism emerges as a dynamic force that complements government efforts, bridging gaps in service delivery during disasters. The study advocates for the indispensable role of professional social workers in optimising volunteer management, emphasising their administrative acumen and

capacity to enhance overall coordination. In essence, this research showcases the transformative potential of volunteerism, enriching social connections, promoting civic engagement, and fortifying community resilience—a testament to the enduring impact of collective efforts in times of adversity.

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How to cite this article: Kannan, G.S., & Thomas, S.P. (2023). Flood Relief Volunteer Management: A Case Study of Thiruvananthapuram District Administration. *Rajagiri Journal of Social Development*, 15(2), 78-86.