A Research on The Experiences of Disaster Volunteers on 2023 Kahramanmaras Earthquakes

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Abstract: *In Turkiye, where devastating earthquakes are frequent, society's awareness of disaster volunteering and its propensity to contribute has increased significantly over the past 20 years. This research examines the experiences of citizen volunteers, who went to the region in the first days of the Kahramanmaras earthquakes of February 6 2023, which affected 11 provinces and claimed more than 50.000 lives. The research aims to identify areas for improvement to maximise the benefits of volunteers in disaster management planning, based on their experiences. The results of the research show that in order to increase the benefits of volunteers, there is a need for a more flexible structure that is more open to civil participation and for more comprehensive disaster response planning in terms of volunteer coordination.*

Keywords: *Volunteering, spontaneous volunteering, disaster management, civil society, earthquake.*

Afet Gönüllülerinin 2023 Kahramanmaraş Depremi Deneyimleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma

Öz: *Yıkıcı depremlerin sık yaşandığı Türkiye'de toplumun afet gönüllüğü konusundaki bilinç düzeyi ve katkı verme eğilimi son 20 yıl boyunca önemli ölçüde artmıştır. Bu araştırmada 6 Şubat 2023 tarihinde gerçekleşen, 11 ilde etkili olarak 50.000'den fazla insanın hayatını kaybetmesine neden olan Kahramanmaraş merkezli depremlerin ilk günlerinde bölgeye giden gönüllü vatandaşların deneyimleri incelenmektedir. Araştırma, afet yönetim planlamalarında gönüllülerin faydalarını en üst düzeye çıkarılması için geliştirilmeye açık alanların, gönüllülerin deneyimlerine dayanarak belirlenmesini amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma sonuçları, gönüllülerden sağlanan faydanın artması için sivil katılıma daha açık, esnek bir yapıya ve gönüllü koordinasyonu açısından daha kapsamlı bir afet müdahale planlamasına ihtiyaç duyulduğunu göstermektedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gönüllülük, kendiliğinden gönüllülük, afet yönetimi, sivil toplum, deprem.*

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Introduction

Turkiye, 66% of which lies on active first and second degree fault lines, is a country that frequently experiences severe and destructive near-surface earthquakes. The most devastating earthquakes in recent history, measuring 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale, occurred on February 6 2023. 11 provinces in the south of the country were affected by earthquakes. According to official figures, the earthquake caused more than 50.000 deaths, thousands of injuries, forced migration and loss of property for thousands more. It quickly became clear that the devastation caused by the earthquakes would require far more human and logistical resources than had been planned. From the first hours of the earthquake, the state began calling its citizens, and citizens began calling each other, to the earthquake zone to support the effort. According to the criteria of the Turkish Disaster Response Plan, a level 4 alert was declared, meaning that all national resources were used and international assistance was requested. It was announced that anyone who volunteers, even if they have no training or experience, will be considered a primary volunteer of the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and can participate in disaster relief efforts. On February 6 2023, a text message sent to call volunteers to airports stated that AFAD would coordinate volunteers in the earthquake zone. On February 5, one day before the earthquake, AFAD had 600.000 volunteers who had completed basic disaster training. On February 6, 110.000 new volunteers were registered in the system, where any citizen over the age of 15 can apply. On February 7, 8.000 AFAD basic level volunteers were in the field, transported to the region by plane, train and bus. Many citizens who were not registered as volunteers and were acting independently set off on their own, hitchhiked, drove their own vehicles or hired vehicles. A significant amount of donated material was also on its way from day one, again through individual organisations.

Turkiye’s Experiences with Disaster Volunteering

If it is true that experiencing the same disaster many times creates a subculture related to that disaster (Helsloot and Ruitenberg, 2004:100), then Turkiye, which is defined as an "earthquake country", should have such a culture about earthquakes. The Marmara Earthquake (1999) in which 18.000 people lost their lives, is a milestone in this sense. This earthquake, which exposed the inadequacies of official institutions in disaster management and response, also revealed the lack of operational plans, equipment and manpower for search and rescue. The disaster management approach, which limited local initiatives and social participation, has long been criticised by the public (Mızrak and Tolon, 2017:147). A professional, collaborative and transparent structure was set as a goal.

The Marmara Earthquake brought the problems of disaster management understanding and response systems to the forefront of public debate (Kolukirik

ve Tuna, 2009: 296), leading to important structural changes. An important step in this regard was the establishment of the AFAD under the Prime Ministry in 2009 to ensure unity in disaster management. The previous approach, which viewed the state as the only entity responsible for reducing disaster risks and implementing effective disaster response, has been discarded. In its place, the disaster risk governance approach has been adopted, which emphasises the sharing of authority with society. This approach is also highlighted in the UN's international disaster risk reduction initiatives (UNDRR, 2015: 6; Yukseler, Yazgan and Tenikler, 2023:10). AFAD's projects, such as the 2022 Disaster Drill Year, which aims to raise disaster awareness in society and increase the number of trained volunteers, are a manifestation of this new approach.

The significance of civil society in disaster response was recognised through the efforts of NGOs during the Marmara Earthquake (Akgungor, 2010:15). The earthquake strengthened the experiences of existing organizations in disaster response. Moreover, increased awareness during this period led to the establishment of many NGOs operating at national and international levels in fields such as search, rescue and logistics.

Voluntary action, which refers to the use of one's time, strength, skills and resources for people who are not close to one, without expecting a material return, can be spontaneous or organised (Hustinx, Handy, Cnaan, 2010:73). Today, while systematic and long-term organised volunteering -a product of traditional volunteering- is weakening, short-term formations formed by people coming together to solve current problems are becoming more widespread (McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer, 2016: 5). A common type of these short-term, situational formations is 'disaster' volunteering (Dynes, 1994: 2) which also referred to as 'spontaneous' or 'informal' volunteering. This type of volunteering consists of work carried out outside formal emergency and disaster management arrangements, in particular to help those affected by emergencies and disasters or those at risk (Oppenheimer and Warburton 2000:3; Twigg ve Mosel, 2017: 443-446).

There are a number of factors, also related to the spirit of the times, that make spontaneous volunteering preferable to long-term volunteering for individuals. With increasing individuality, people's desire to participate in the activities they want, for the reasons they find meaningful, and for the time they want is one of them (Thibault, 2020: 418). Current approaches to disaster management, which include flexibility rather than intensive bureaucratic processes and aim for active citizen participation, also open up space for this type of volunteering (Whittaker et al. 2015: 365). The impact of social media, which allows for instant information exchange and organisation, is also important for increasing this type of volunteerism, especially in disaster situations (Trautwein vd, 2020: 7).

Volunteers, who can work in different areas such as medical services, psychosocial support, shelter, aid collection, distribution, coordination, security and advocacy, can be from the affected region or from outside (Twigg and Mosel, 2017:444). In disasters such as earthquakes, it is important that volunteers come from the affected region to carry out the first interventions on the rubble until professional teams arrive (Whittaker et al, 2015:362; Helsloot and Ruitenberg, 2004:103).

It is believed that volunteers should be coordinated and/or integrated into the disaster response system in order to reduce the risks they cause or face in disaster conditions (Fernandez et al, 2006: 60) and to maximise their potential (Dynes, 1994: 155; Helsloot and Ruitenberg, 2004: 105). To this end, coordination, training and protection-based implementation proposals are made and models are developed to ensure integration into the disaster response system (McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer, 2016:3; Scanlon, Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2014: 57-59).

Purpose of the Research

Turkiye's new disaster management system emphasises social participation. However, some claim that the system is not compatible with modern approaches to disaster management due to the limited scope of the civil sphere in the legislation, which only includes NGOs and AFAD volunteers (Yükseler, Yazgan and Tenikler, 2024:11). According to Turkiye's disaster response plan (TAMP), AFAD volunteers are among the groups that will immediately take action in the disaster area, alongside national and local field support teams, to support activities within the framework of disaster preparedness plans and protocols. However, TAMP does not include a plan for disaster volunteers and there are no provisions for the coordination of volunteers in policy documents and disaster plans (AFAD; 2022). Considering the criticisms, it appears that Turkiye was not adequately prepared for the Kahramanmaras earthquakes in terms of volunteer resource management. Based on this information and criticism, the main research question determined as "*Have volunteers who participate in disaster response efforts experienced issues due to a lack of disaster planning and coordination?".*

In ordinary circumstances, voluntary action can be understood in relation to cultural, economic and moral reasons as well as individual characteristics (Thibault, 2020: 410). For example, voluntary action may emerge as an altruistic act with a sense of citizenship (Twigg and Mosel, 2017: 454). According to the cost-reward approach, volunteering is the result of a rational decision-making process in which costs and consequences are assessed (Smith, 1994:251). The empathy-helpfulness model, on the other hand, associates volunteering with the efforts of people with high levels of empathy, who witness the difficult conditions experienced by others, and their efforts to alleviate their stress (Batson, Ahmad and Tsang, 202:434). In disaster conditions, the factors determining voluntary

action differ. In order to understand these factors, the second question of the research was determined as "*What are the motivations of independent volunteers to take action in the Kahramanmaras earthquakes*?".

In disaster conditions, resources and people coming together at the same time may cause chaos in different areas. The chaos that may be caused by vehicles heading towards the disaster area to deliver aid makes transportation one of the important components of disaster and volunteer management processes. Kahramanmaras earthquakes occurred in harsh winter conditions, far from Turkiye's main centres in terms of logistics and volunteer resources. For example, Hatay, one of the cities most devastated by the earthquake, is 1.100 kilometres from Istanbul. In addition, the traffic generated by volunteers during past disasters in Turkiye and their negative consequences are still fresh in people's minds (Helsloot & Ruitenberg, 2004: 106). In the case of Kahramanmaras earthquakes, volunteers were transported to the disaster area by air, a practice that was used for the first time- probably taking all these factors into account (aa.com.tr, 2023). In the light of all this information, it is believed that the experiences of volunteers during the transport process to the disaster area will provide insightful information on volunteer management in disasters. For this purpose, the third question of the research was determined as "Were there any *problems in the transportation of people and materials to the region in the first days of the earthquake due to lack of organization and planning*?".

Volunteers' self-evaluation of their level of contribution is one of the determinants of whether they will continue volunteering in the future (Kulik, Bar and Dolev, 2016: 704). On the other hand, self-evaluations about an intensive and complex process such as disaster response are also expected to provide insight into the individual characteristics and environmental conditions that determine overall organisational success and performance in disaster volunteering. For these reasons, the fourth research question was "*What are the individual and environmental variables that determine volunteers*' self-*evaluations of their work*?

The development of models in which volunteers are integrated into the disaster management system and carry out their work in cooperation with professionals is directly related to two main objectives. The first is to prevent volunteers from taking actions that would endanger themselves and others around them by working in a coordinated way within a system. The second is to increase the effectiveness of volunteers through the coordination and guidance of professionals. It is clear that ensuring cooperation and integration depends first and foremost on the willingness of professionals to do so. However, research shows that professionals are often dissatisfied with the presence of volunteers. This attitude, known as the 'inclusion/exclusion paradox', is associated with various reasons, such as professionals' concerns about legal issues (Daddoust, 2021:4) or their reluctance to share authority (Harris et al., 2016:353). It was

assumed that the observations, experiences and evaluations of the volunteers with whom the professionals interacted during the intervention processes would provide important information about the potential for cooperation between the actors in the intervention process. For this reason, "*How professionals assess the work of volunteers in the first days of the earthquake?*" was identified as the fifth research question.

Methodology and Field Research

This research has been conducted within the scope of the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkiye's (TÜBİTAK) *"Natural Disasters Focused Fieldwork Emergency Support Program*", which aims to collect data through field studies after natural disasters. In the qualitative approach, the method of data collection was '*in-depth face-to-face interviewing*', which allows asking questions related to the research topic, listening and recording the answers, as well as delving into the details of the topic with additional related questions. Since the research aims to explore and understand rather than test a hypothesis, the study group to be interviewed was determined by the "purposive sampling" method of non-random sampling. "*Maximum variation sampling*" was applied to reach individuals with specific criteria or characteristics that are appropriate for the purpose of the research and to obtain information about the process from as many perspectives as possible. Within the scope of the research, sixty two people were interviewed, including volunteers, NGO officials and civil servants. Due to time constraints and the size of the area, it was decided to visit the cities most affected by the earthquake and where the most volunteer activities took place. On February 18, the interviews started in Nurdağı and Islahiye districts of Gaziantep province and continued in Antakya district of Hatay. Following the interviews with volunteers, NGO officials and public officials, the research continued in Istanbul and Kocaeli with people who had completed their work and returned home. At this stage, the study group also included volunteers from Malatya, Adıyaman, Elazig and Kahramanmaras.

Most volunteers in the earthquake zone were interviewed at their place of work and during their breaks. Volunteers who had completed their work and returned home were reached through snowball sampling or through announcements on social media. In Istanbul and Kocaeli, interviews were arranged by contacting NGO officials through official communication channels. Officials interviewed included the mayor of one of the cities most affected by the earthquake and AFAD officials in different cities. Telephone interviews were conducted with these individuals due to their busy schedules. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent.

The target duration for each interview was sixty minutes, but some interviews were shorter than the target due to the workload of the interviewees. On the other hand, it was clear that the interviews were becoming an emotionally

intense experience, especially for some volunteers who were experiencing a disaster of this magnitude for the first time. To ensure that these people felt comfortable expressing themselves, we did not take a rigid approach to the length of the interviews. As a result, the shortest interview lasted 30 minutes and the longest 120 minutes. Towards the end of March it was decided that data saturation had been reached and the interviews were stopped. The recordings were collected in a cloud data storage system. Once the interview recordings had been transformed into anonymised interview transcripts, thematic analysis began, using descriptive and systematic approaches to analysis and interpretation. *In thematic analysis, which is defined as the process of identifying patterns or themes in qualitative data,* Braun & Clarke's (2006: 87) six-stage framework was followed. After the records were read several times by the researchers, the first 29 codes were identified. The codes were reworked and 6 main themes were identified. After re-reading to check the compatibility between the data and the themes, 5 themes directly related to the research questions were identified. Of the thirty-six volunteers interviewed, thirteen were women and 23 were men; of the eighteen NGO officials, 2 were women and sixteen were men. All 7 public officials interviewed were male. The average age of NGO officials and public officials was forty-two. The average age of volunteers was thirty-two, with the youngest being eighteen and the oldest sixty-five. The average age of the female volunteers was 27, while the average age of the male volunteers was 33. 14 of the volunteers were single and 22 were married. While seven male volunteers had children, none of the female volunteers had children. All volunteers, except those who were still students, were self-employed, paid employees or civil servants. Some of the volunteers who are paid employees came to the region by taking special leave from their workplace or by using their annual leave. Some of them said that their employers encouraged them to go to the region and supported them financially. Public sector volunteers were the most comfortable group in this respect, as they also acted with the encouragement and organisational support of their institutions.

The 36 volunteers interviewed can be divided into three different groups according to the way they mobilised, the region in which they work, the way they work. The first group is made up of volunteers who live in the region affected by the earthquake, who took action to help after the earthquake but after a certain period of time, joined an institutional organisation because they felt that their individual efforts were ineffective and insufficient in the chaotic environment. These volunteers, who do not participate in search and rescue operations but generally support activities such as aid distribution and organisation, were interviewed in the tent cities in the Islahiye and Nurdağı districts of Gaziantep, which were severely damaged by the earthquake. The work in these tent cities was carried out in cooperation with various ministries alongside AFAD, Kizilay (the Turkish Red Crescent) and various NGOs. The security of the tent city, where volunteers' basic needs such as shelter and food were met, was provided by soldiers. Volunteers who acted independently throughout the process, most of

whom arrived by plane or train during the first two days of the earthquake at the request of AFAD, were the largest group interviewed. One part of this group consisted of civil servants who had received AFAD's basic volunteer training or had some basic knowledge of working in disasters and could therefore be defined as *'potential volunteers'*. The second group consisted of volunteers who had no training or experience in disaster response. The third group of volunteers consisted of people who went alone or with friends, who had previously volunteered in disasters or who had camping experience. Most of these volunteers had been involved in search and rescue operations as they travelled to cities such as Antakya, Adıyaman and Kahramanmaras in the early days of the disaster. During their time in the region, these volunteers received little or no support to meet their basic needs.

Interviews for this research were conducted with participants in search and rescue operations conducted in the initial two weeks after the earthquake. Therefore, the accounts given by those interviewed only cover the acute post-crisis period.

Findings

Most of the volunteers mobilised in the first few days of the earthquake said that seeing the photos and videos coming out of the region caused them stress-related reactions such as *'not being able to sit stil'* or *'to stop crying or being able to concentrate on work'*. Statements such as "*What would I do?" and "What would I do if my children were in the same situation*?" were frequently heard from volunteers, demonstrating the level of empathy and resulting anxiety. So why did these people choose to go to the region and not millions of others who had seen the same footage and could say they felt the same way?

One striking common feature among the interviewed volunteers in this research was their experience with disasters. With the exception of a few individuals in their late teens and early twenties, most of the volunteers had either been disaster victims or had volunteered in disaster conditions in the past. For instance, Hasan, a 28-year-old sports coach, had experienced the Van earthquake (2011) when he went to Van for a match with his volleyball team. Hasan stated that he was frightened during the Van Earthquake, possibly due to his age, and was unable to assist his teammates during the relief efforts. This experience made earthquakes his greatest fear. This time, Hasan felt the earthquake at home. After overcoming his fear, his first priority was to help those affected by the earthquake. A teacher, Sema (34) has witnessed numerous floods in her hometown. She was impressed by the work of Kizilay volunteers who assisted them after a flood a few years ago. Now, she feels it is her turn to help people during this earthquake. Mensuri (42), who worked as a volunteer cook in the tent city in Nurdağı, was a young construction worker when he voluntarily participated in search and rescue efforts during the Marmara Earthquake. Mensuri, who has not participated in any

search and rescue operations or training since then, stated that he became emotional upon hearing about the earthquake and did not stop crying until he arrived at the earthquake zone. According to him, it is commendable to voluntarily offer assistance in such situations, and he finds it abnormal that some people choose not to participate in any relief efforts. Although he defined his motivation as 'a religious and humanitarian responsibility', it is evident that the stress, anxiety and excitement caused by the memories he triggered also played a role in his activation.

Businessman Abdullah (43) has been involved in aid work in war and disaster areas across various countries, including the Philippines, Syria, and Yemen, for several years. Meanwhile, 21-year-old university student Yunus began his disaster volunteerism in 2022 by supporting the Marmaris forest fire extinguishing efforts. Yunus hitchhiked to Marmaris with his older brother and provided food and drinks to the firefighters in the areas where the fire continued.

Ibrahim (35), who arrived in Antakya on the third day of the earthquake, said he had never worked in a disaster before, but with his camping experience and knowledge, he was able to survive for days without the comforts of modern city life. Teacher Tuba (35), thought the fact that she was a person who went camping every year, slept outdoors for a week and lived without a phone made it easier for her to participate in the post-earthquake relief efforts. The same did not apply to her 60-member team, half of whom decided to return to Istanbul as soon as they saw how the quake affected the region. Tuba accused these individuals, who she claimed were unaware of their ability to adapt to the environmental conditions caused by the disaster, of blocking many volunteers who could contribute to the work in the region by taking up space on planes.

Some of the information received in the interviews indicated that trust effectively caused or enabled independent action in different ways. One NGO official linked individual relief efforts to low trust in institutions. According to him, because people were afraid that the donations they gave to institutions and NGOs would not reach their destination, they preferred to send the aid they had collected to the earthquake zone in trucks and vans they had organised themselves, or to deliver it themselves. This caused great chaos. Volunteer Abdullah's account supports this claim and shows how trust at the individual level has become a factor that makes it possible to work independently. He and his 10 friends bought 3 minibuses full of belongings with the money they collected from philanthropists and set off. Because people had known him for years from such activities, they did not hesitate to entrust him with money and even preferred to give aid through him rather than through official institutions. The experience of Damla, a 30-year-old lawyer who travelled to Adıyaman after learning that a friend was trapped under the rubble and returned to Istanbul to address the needs she saw there, also highlighted the impact of trust on access to resources. She said that as a former NGO worker, she was known in her neighbourhood for this kind

of work. After identifying the urgent needs in the region and returning to Istanbul, she prepared three lorries full of materials with the money she had collected from her circle and sent them to the region.

On February 6, from the first hours after the earthquake, volunteers began to be transported to the earthquake zone, with priority given to specialised groups such as paramedics. Although air transport is a logical option in terms of speed under disaster conditions, volunteers' accounts of what happened at both the departure and arrival airports suggest that this advantage was largely lost due to long waits and disruptions. Aylin, a 22-year-old nurse, said that as volunteer health workers they had no information as to why they had been kept waiting at the airport for 9 hours and where they would be sent. She thought the flights were disrupted due to weather conditions. In fact, the week of February 6 was the only week with snowstorms in the country's dry winter and flights could have been disrupted for this reason.

On the night of February 6, volunteers who arrived at the airport pointed to a number of problems. Muhammet, a 27-year-old footballer, said that the hundreds of volunteers went to the airports on the evening of February 6, but contrary to what the AFAD message said, there was no organisation. They couldn't get any information about where they were going and, most importantly, who would be on the planes. Other volunteers who went to the airports that evening also said that there was no preparation or organisation for them. 31-year-old boxer Dogukan said that they were not asked for their identity cards, nor were their clothes or bags searched when they entered the airport or boarded the plane. According to what he said, they did not have the chance to choose the city they were going to. According to him, the only criteria used by airport officials to select volunteers to go to the region was the number of seats on the aeroplane. Because of this misapplication, some trained teams were broken up and people who had nothing to contribute were taken to the earthquake zone. Faced with the disorganisation, many volunteers gave up and returned home. One of those who did not return but continued to wait was Ahmet (23). He arrived at Istanbul's Sabiha Gökçen Airport at 11pm on February 6. He and hundreds of other volunteers waited at the airport for a long time, searching for an official who could answer their questions and provide information about the trip. After thirteen hours at the airport and 4 hours on the plane, they landed in Kahramanmaras at 4.30pm on February 7 and spent ninety minutes at the airport waiting for a car to take them to the city.

The volunteers were not told why they had been waiting for hours, but the scene they encountered at the airport gave an idea of the reasons for the delay. Yunus, who was travelling from Ankara to Adıyaman, said that after the earthquake, air traffic controllers left their posts out of fear or to be with their families, and as a result they learned that flights to some cities were delayed. In addition to air traffic controllers, ground handling staff were also absent from

airports. When they landed at the airport, they were waiting for officials to greet them, direct them to the vehicles and tell them where to go. But apart from a few policemen, no one was there. Most of the volunteers on their plane were miners. As there was no one at the airport to do this job, Yunus and his brother had to search the cargo area for the materials that the miners had brought. They then had to spend a long time in the airport car park to find a large vehicle to take them into the city. They arranged the vehicles themselves, loaded their belongings into the vehicles themselves, decided where they wanted to go and were on their way hours later.

The air transport of volunteers to the region was one of the main complaints of some NGO officials. The head of a search and rescue association, who said that he had been involved in many earthquakes in Turkiye and abroad for more than 20 years, complained that the state had airlifted inexperienced volunteers to the region instead of an experienced team like theirs. The official said that they had travelled to the region by road and by their own means, they had travelled 1.000 kilometres in 23 hours due to accidents they had caused or had to intervene in, and that they had lost golden hours.

While much of the country was under the influence of a blizzard, many volunteers were trying to reach the earthquake zone by road. In addition to weather-related accidents and breakdowns, the collapse of tunnels, viaducts and bridges, the collapse of buildings on the roads and large cracks in the roads caused serious traffic problems. An official from one of Turkiye's leading international NGOs said that the reason for the late arrival of search and rescue teams and equipment to the disaster area was traffic congestion, which they had never seen before in any war or disaster area. The first reason for the traffic was the damage to roads caused by the earthquake. The second reason was the accidents caused by volunteers setting off without chains or snow tyres in the harsh winter conditions. According to him, not giving priority to search and rescue teams in the first 72 hours after the disaster made such chaos inevitable.

On the morning of February 7, 250 people from various professions, including 34-year-old teacher Sema, embarked on a train journey with the hope of being met by AFAD teams in Iskenderun. However, they were informed by an AFAD officer on the train that no one would be able to greet them due to the density. Upon their arrival in Iskenderun, they contacted AFAD. However, the authorities reported having no information regarding their arrival. After contacting the AFAD representative in Istanbul, they were informed that a vehicle would be sent to pick them up. After waiting for three hours for transportation, the group of six teachers realized that no one was coming to pick them up and began searching for a vehicle to take them to the region. Meanwhile, many volunteers had decided to return to Istanbul.

The personal network effect –friends or colleagues acting together- was quite common in volunteering. Doğukan announced his decision to go to the

earthquake region, and some of his friends and former students joined him at the airport. Again, some volunteers had teamed up with people they had not met before the earthquake. Muhammet explained that he and his volunteer friends met a group of young, healthy men at the airport and offered them the chance to join their team. From that moment on, they started working together. In terms of teamwork, male volunteers had less difficulty in forming and mobilising new teams and updating teams on needs and capacity when they were not part of an organisation. Ahmet said that he had travelled to the airport alone, without a team. When they arrived in the centre of Adıyaman, everyone got off the buses and walked towards the ruined buildings where the sounds of people were coming from, and so teams were formed. Ahmet worked with this team for the 12 days he was in the region.

Volunteers who went to the most devastated cities managed processes such as team building, identifying the work to be done and creating resources themselves, as there was no organisation or guidance for them. Aylin stated that she and a group of 60-70 healthcare workers were transported from Elazig airport to a district in Malatya using AFAD's vehicles. However, upon arrival, they were unsure of their purpose and had no one to ask. In an unfamiliar city, they felt out of place. As paramedics, there was little they could do amidst the rubble. They divided into groups, cleared the debris by hand, and listened for signs of life. They spent two days like this. Afterward, they used another volunteer's vehicle to visit nearby villages. They distributed the materials they found in the environment and provided basic health interventions to the villagers.

After experiencing the challenges of working individually and living in disaster conditions, some volunteers joined professional organizations and teams. Huzeyfe, a 30-year-old nurse, stated that on the first day, they filled their vehicles with food and set out. However, they were unable to organize aid distribution in this manner. Consequently, they decided with a group of friends to become Red Crescent volunteers. Volunteers working with the charity in the tent city expressed their satisfaction in being part of a team that helps disaster victims. Elif, a 27-year-old sports coach interviewed at the tent city in Islahiye, talked about the fulfillment she experienced from her volunteer work, such as “meeting the needs of families and comforting children”.

Upon AFAD's call, a group of young men from Istanbul who were called themselves “heart team” went to Antakya. On the first day of their arrival, February 7, they tried to pull out the dead and the living from under the rubble with their own efforts. But since they had no knowledge or experience, they were very tired mentally and physically. However, they quickly realized that individual volunteering was not effective, and non-professionals should not go to the disaster area on the first day. Therefore, on the second day, they joined an NGO to work more efficiently. The team's ability to work continuously without breaks for food, water, or rest, while maintaining a positive attitude despite the

challenges, impressed everyone. The team's professionalism and comfort were also noteworthy. However, on the third day, the team could no longer endure the hardships and decided to return to Istanbul. Esma who arrived in Antakya on the morning of February 7, also looked for an authorised person to guide her but could not find one. When she left Istanbul, she believed that once she arrived in Antakya, she would work on the wreckage with her own hands if necessary. However, her lack of experience and knowledge left her feeling helpless in the face of destruction on an unprecedented scale. Consequently, she returned to Istanbul on February 8.

Officials were not in favour of volunteers being called into the disaster area when there were not enough people on the ground to organise and direct them. The head of a fire brigade team involved in the search and rescue operation in Antakya said that many inexperienced volunteers came to the earthquake area, but there were no experienced professionals to coordinate them. In his opinion, these inexperienced and uncoordinated volunteers were of no use. An official in Gaziantep said that AFAD was working hard to increase the number of trained volunteers in the country and that it was difficult to ensure field organisation with people who had not received this training. According to what he said, there had no problems with the accredited institutions, organisations and NGOs sent to the region, or with the volunteers who had been trained by AFAD. However, untrained and inexperienced volunteers caused problems with their impulsive behaviour and made their work difficult. In addition to the heavy workload, managing these volunteers was becoming a challenge. Oppositely, Abdullah, an experienced volunteer, argues that it is difficult to find solutions to problems that arise during disasters without the contribution of experienced volunteers. Hence more lives could have been saved if more volunteers had participated in disaster response. He has witnessed civil servants struggling during disasters or crises in their respective areas of work possibly related to a temporary loss of analytical thinking skills in the first few days due to the shock they experience. On this basis, it may not be reasonable to expect good organization from them during this time. Mustafa (38), another experienced volunteer, reported witnessing tense interactions between the public and authorities in Antakya. People were shouting in the streets, expressing anger and fear. Numerous tasks were at hand, and several officers possessed the necessary equipment. However, without direction and guidance, they were unable to proceed. In such circumstances, volunteers who have not lost their ability to make quick decisions and take action due to bureaucratic rigidity, could make a significant contribution.

Mayor of one of the cities most affected by the earthquake expressed his satisfaction with the work of the volunteers. He acknowledged their significant contribution, particularly during the first three days after the earthquake when the negative effects of the disaster hindered the work of professionals. The volunteers worked without the constraints of hierarchical relationships and institutional roles, which increased their productivity. They were successful in organizing aid

due to their democratic and flexible approach, outperforming some national institutions. According to the Mayor, Kahramanmaras earthquakes highlighted the need to reorganize the distribution of authority and responsibility in disasters in Turkiye.

According to NGO officials, both volunteers and experienced teams faced challenges in the field due to limited opportunities for civil initiative. During an interview at a park in Antakya that had been transformed into an aid distribution center following the earthquakes, an NGO official stated that, there were two main reasons why the plans made with AFAD before the earthquake did not have the expected impact on the ground. One was that the scale of the disaster was unprecedented. Second, officials' overemphasis on superior-subordinate relationships in crisis management prevented the necessary flexibility and speed. Even accredited NGOs struggled to find a place within the disaster response system due to the rigid bureaucracy present in the field. They did not receive sufficient guidance on where to go or what work to do upon hearing about the earthquake. The lack of organization was said to have slowed down the work of volunteers and NGOs. In this premises the February 6 earthquakes was a significant turning point that highlighted the need for change in many aspects of the disaster management system.

During his tea break while working on the rubble in Antakya, an NGO manager and search and rescue team member expressed similar views. According to him, it was not a problem for a large number of volunteers to reach the disaster area. Initially, these volunteers were given simple tasks, but over time they became familiar with the wreckage and gained the necessary qualifications to work in it. As volunteers gained experience working in disaster areas, a pool of experienced volunteers was formed and the number of their volunteers increased after each disaster. The main problem encountered in disaster studies was the bureaucratic and hierarchical approach, which excluded the experiences of civilian teams from decision-making processes. In disasters of this magnitude, decisions should be made through collective processes involving both civil servants and civilian teams, experience and knowledge should be valued more than professional status, and inexperienced civil servants should be prevented from having more say than experienced civilian teams.

NGO managers and representatives agreed that the greatest contribution of volunteers would be in the area of logistics. However, efficiency depended on the establishment of a centralised system, not under the sole control of AFAD, where NGOs could communicate with volunteers according to their needs.

Discussion

In emergencies, volunteers are mobilised by the call of their relatives (Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009: 41), while in disasters, proximity to the affected area and getting to know the victims are among the mobilising factors. Indeed, personal convergence is one of the foundations of direct physical human mobility to the affected area (der Heide, 2003: 464). Most of the volunteers interviewed in this research had no physical or social proximity to the earthquake zone. There were also no volunteers among the interviewees who went to the earthquake zone at the invitation of their friends who were involved in the work in the earthquake zone. These volunteers can be classified as "the helpers" in Fritz and Mathewson's (1957: 29) classification of disaster volunteering. It can be said that the mobilising effect of social networks in disaster volunteering (Barraket et al., 2013: 22) was observed in this research in the form of acting together with friends, colleagues and co-workers. At this point, a gender difference- presumably due to women's search for safety- stands out: While female volunteers acted with people they knew throughout the process, male volunteers formed teams with people they did not know beforehand according to the needs and opportunities that arose. Social media accelerates access to information and facilitates organisation, increases the propensity to volunteer during disasters (McLennan et al., 2016: 12; Chui & Chan, 2019: 91). In this research only one of the volunteers interviewed reported being part of a volunteer group through social media.

In the case of disaster or emergency volunteering, motivations may include identification with the victims (Beyerlein and Sikkin, 2008: 192), the desire to reduce the uncertainty and insecurity of the chaotic environment through useful actions (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003: 298), the desire to reduce one's sense of helplessness by helping people in distress, the search for relief (Sharon, 2004: 16; Eyre, 2004: 24), the effort to increase self-confidence (Aguirre et al., 2016: 1151) are the goals associated with disaster volunteering. In addition to the nature of the event and the extent of its impact, increased knowledge of its impact also increases people's willingness to volunteer. In this context, the fact that it was a natural disaster, the high risk to life, the high number of people affected and the sharing of information and images on social media can be considered as factors that led people to volunteer after Kahramanmaras earthquakes.

When volunteers were asked about their reasons for volunteering, the most common response was *'humanitarian responsibility*', which people also identified as their main motivation for non-disaster volunteering. This is a motivation that can be linked to Clary and Snyder's (1999: 157) 'values', especially for those who were not affected by the earthquake themselves. However, Shye (2009: 186) argues that asking volunteers directly about their motivations may lead them to give answers such as *'humanitarian responsibility'* by creating a social desirability effect and, more importantly, very few people have the awareness to accurately define their own motivations. Furthermore, it

has been stated that not only intrinsic reasons such as self-perception, risk perception, willingness to accept change and motivation are not enough to take voluntary action in disasters, but also one's social resources, ability to self-organise and belief that what they are going to do will actually make a difference (Shaw et al., 2015: 39). In light of these considerations, it would be appropriate to try to understand volunteers' reasons for taking action in the context of their whole story. The first conclusion to be drawn from such an assessment is that having experienced disaster conditions in the past, either as a direct victim or as a volunteer, increases the propensity to volunteer in disaster situations. This effect may be a result of *'altruism born of suffering'*, which refers to psychological development following disaster experiences and trauma (Staub and Vollhardt, 2008: 271).

Some of the respondents with experience of volunteering in disasters said that they had only participated in activities during disasters and had not volunteered in non-disaster conditions. Considering the "*person-event coherence*" approach (characteristics of the person and the impact of the circumstances) (Clary and Snyder, 1999: 159), the opportunity to work independently (the person) in conditions of high difficulty (the event) may have mobilising effects for these individuals. Having a style compatible with current volunteering trends (Mclennan, Whittaker ve Handmer, 2016: 5), which is informal, episodic and autonomous, it can be said that these individuals represent stability in disaster volunteering, which –by definition- involves many instabilities.

It is known that an individual's social capital is one of the factors that facilitate voluntary action (Thibault, 2020: 9) and that access to all types of resources needed to act in independent volunteering is possible through the power of micro-level social networks (Wilson and Musick, 1997: 695; Dussaillant and Guzmán, 2014: 8-20). In this research, it was understood that having strong social networks and being recognised as a trusted person within these networks made it possible to act independently, especially for volunteers who carried out aid work with individual organisations. These volunteers associated their recognition as a trustworthy person with their previous volunteering. It is interesting to note that at a time when NGOs and public organisations were collecting donations, people gave their donations to people they trusted because of their past work or acquaintance. It can be assumed that the low level of trust in institutions and the high level of trust between individuals in Turkish society (Eroglu Durkal and Korkmaz, 2017: 178; Tan Eren and Ozkul, 2023: 20), some negative experiences in past disasters (Jalali, 2002: 126), and distrust towards NGOs (Çakı, 2020: 37) created such a tendency.

Volunteers' accounts of their journeys to the earthquake zone from different cities in Turkiye show that different problems were encountered at different stages of the process due to a lack of planning and guidance. In the first

few days after the earthquake, citizens who were unprepared for the weather conditions and set out to deliver aid to the region caused serious traffic congestion due to breakdowns and accidents. It is understood that this traffic, in addition to the damage caused by the earthquake to the highways, seriously hampered the access of search and rescue teams and equipment to the region, especially in the first few days.

Airports are important in the disaster response system because they are places where shelter and health services can be provided, and where relief supplies and search and rescue equipment can be organised and transferred (Polater, 2018; 367). Although airports have a key role to play in disaster situations, there is a risk that the movement of people and goods will be severely disrupted and that the expected efficiency will not be achieved. For reasons such as lack of infrastructure and preparedness to cope with the extraordinary load that can ccur in disaster conditions, inadequate contingency plans, inability to reach the airport, staffing problems (Choi and Hanaoka, 2017: 12; Hanaoka et al., 2013: 297). The disruption of air transport during the Kahramanmaras earthquakes was not caused by damage to the airports. Out of the 11 airports in the region, only Hatay airport was damaged to the extent that it was closed to flights. The disruptions in air transport were caused by several factors, including the airports' lack of preparedness for disaster conditions, the abandonment of airport employees after the earthquake, and the absence of alternative transport routes between the airports and the city centers. It is clear that the unpreparedness of airports for disaster conditions not only delays transport to the disaster area, but also poses significant risks to flight safety.

The evaluations of volunteers' work and the feedback they receive from others are crucial to many issues, such as the impact of volunteering on their mental health (Tierney et al, 2020: e341) and their decision to continue volunteering (Trautwein et al, 2020: 1148). The research indicates that several factors influence volunteers' evaluations and satisfaction with their work. The variables that have the most significant impact are the earthquake's impact on the city where the activities were contucted, the volunteer's experience with disasters, the time between the earthquake and participation, and the quality of the work done. Working individually or as part of a team is also a factor that influences self-evaluation. For instance, volunteers who worked in towns with high levels of destruction and loss of life in the early days of the earthquake, without prior disaster experience or team membership, expressed the most negative self-evaluations. Many volunteers who went to Antakya, the city worst hit by the earthquake, regretted acting individually as they were not part of an organized structure. They lacked the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience for search and rescue operations and did not have access to the required equipment.

Volunteers who had experience of working in crisis environments such as war or natural disasters, who worked as a team or were able to form a team

during activities, who had knowledge of logistics, who went prepared or who had access to the necessary equipment, gave positive self-evaluations. It is said that people who keep their cool are the most useful in disaster situations (Helsloot and Ruitenberg, 2004: 102). Experienced volunteers also said that the most important contribution they made was to remain calm among panicked people and officials, and they associated their composure with their experience. Therefore, it is assumed that variables such as experience and high self-efficacy perceptions are more effective in these volunteers' self-evaluations than environmental conditions.

Two groups of volunteers were identified who gave positive self-assessments, despite having no training or experience in disaster work. The first group consists of volunteers who work with organizations in towns that were relatively less affected by the earthquake and are involved in activities such as aid distribution. The second group consists of volunteers with hobbies such as camping who work independently in towns with major destruction. The ability of the second group to adapt to challenging conditions, despite their lack of experience in disaster work, indicates that awareness of the potential for adaptation to disaster conditions is a crucial factor in disaster volunteering.

The potential of independent volunteers may be under-utilised because they are often secondary to formal volunteers and not fully integrated into the disaster management system. Therefore, although it is difficult to plan for volunteers in advance, it is argued that recognition of volunteers by the authorities and their inclusion in legislation will increase their productivity (Stallings and Quarantelli, 1985: 99). In addition to the fact that independent volunteering is a resource that is difficult to organise due to its emergence and structure, the dissatisfaction of professionals with the presence of volunteers is one of the important obstacles to such integration (Fernandez, Barbera and Van Dorp, 2015: 61). The NGO representatives and public officials interviewed in this research assessed volunteers as a group that is difficult to control and carries different risks, claiming that they are not suitable for search and rescue operations. In this context, it can be said that their assessments are generally in line with the literature. The fact that volunteers were sent to the region in the first few days without any co-ordination from the authorities was the most common criticism from both groups. The practice of sending volunteers to the region by air was particularly criticised by small and medium-sized search and rescue NGOs who had to travel to the earthquake zone by road using their own resources.

Conclusion

The aim of this research, which discusses the experiences of volunteers who have participated in disaster response activities and the evaluations of professionals, is to obtain information about the current situation of volunteers, the problems they face and the potential they have within the disaster management system. It is

expected that the information provided will contribute to efforts to update and develop disaster management plans and disaster response systems.

Upon examining the research results in the context of the volunteers' characteristics, it was determined that experiencing a disaster in the past as a victim or volunteer was a significant motivator for current disaster volunteering. The ability to take independent voluntary action is influenced by the strength of social networks at the individual level and the trust built through past volunteer work. Most of the volunteers were not physically or socially close to the earthquake zone, which contradicts the literature.

The research aims to understand the impact of the lack of provisions for volunteers in current disaster response legislation and plans on volunteer activities and the overall disaster response process. The results of the research show that the impact of this lack is felt in different areas and in a negative way. For example, it is understood that many hours were lost during the transport phase due to inadequate volunteer organisation and that there were significant safety risks. Among the volunteers who mobilised in the first days after the earthquake, there were many volunteers who had the opportunity to do extremely useful work, as well as many volunteers who experienced problems due to lack of organisation and gave up their participation in the work. The problems faced by the official organisations in organising the citizens called to the disaster area prevented the huge potential of volunteers from being fully reflected on the ground.

The information received from NGO officials interviewed to hear their assessments of volunteers showed that the problem needs to be looked at from a different perspective. It is clear that NGOs, which in theory are a fundamental part of the disaster response system, are confronted with practices on the ground that make them question their own position. The fact that volunteers were flown into the region instead of being flown in themselves, the strict bureaucratic approach that restricted their freedom of movement in the disaster area, and their exclusion from decision-making processes were the main complaints of NGOs about their experiences on Kahramanmaras earthquakes.

Although it is not possible to identify resources in advance and develop plans that can be fully implemented in disaster volunteering, recognising volunteers as a component of the disaster response system is the most basic suggestion to increase their efficiency and reduce the risks they bear. It is clear that Turkiye needs various legislative changes and planning in this regard. However, the experience of NGOs suggests that any plan or legislative amendment will not have the desired effect unless a flexible, participatory, community-based approach to disaster management is internalised by the public sector.

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