

# Learning from Communities: The Local Dynamics of Formal and Informal Volunteering in Korogocho, Kenya

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**Abstract** Taking the Korogocho community as its starting point, this article explores the respective roles, dynamics and relationship between formal and informal volunteering. Following an overview of the research's participatory systemic action research (SAR) methodology, the article outlines how the widespread use of stipends and allowances by external development organisations has blurred the distinction between formal volunteerism and low-paid work – something that disincentivises volunteering through local organisations who lack the resources to pay allowances. It examines informal volunteering, such as mutual aid and self-help groups, and highlights how they add significant value when they emerge in response to a directly experienced community need. Finally, it discusses the risks and opportunities associated with formal and informal volunteering. Issues include how volunteering can be used in complementary ways to address community needs, the scales at which they are most effective, and their potential in promoting greater inclusion and more equitable gender roles.

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## 1 Introduction

Understanding the contribution of volunteerism to poverty reduction has been a growing subject of interest in academic and policy fields in recent years. Reports such as the United Nations Volunteers' *State of the World Volunteerism Report* (UNV 2011) and the International Labour Office's *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work* (ILO 2011), for example, have highlighted examples of volunteerism's impact and set out guidance to better quantitatively measure the contribution of volunteerism to national economies and development (Leigh *et al.* 2011). There has also been a range of research on distinct aspects and types of volunteerism such as international volunteering (Lough and Matthew 2013), community health workers (Schneider, Hlophe and van Rensburg 2008), micro-volunteering (Brown, Jochum and Paylor 2013), national service schemes (Nesbit and Brudney 2010) its links with social activism (Civicus, IAVE and UNV 2008), social capital and health (Kumar *et al.* 2012) and the added value it has over other development interventions (Devereux 2008). The specific initiatives of volunteering for development organisations have

been researched and evaluated, such as in the case of the country-wide work of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in South Sudan (Zuurmond 2013a, 2013b; Zuurmond, Jones and Richardson 2014) and the UK government-sponsored International Citizens Service scheme (Ecorys 2013). However, although there has been a noticeable increase in research aimed at understanding the development impacts of volunteerism, literature has tended to focus on international volunteering (Comhlámh 2013) and, despite a few exceptions such as Trau's (2015) analysis of volunteering in Vanuatu, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding the highly contextualised dynamics of volunteerism at the level of the community.

This research attempts to reframe the debate by taking the Korogocho community in Nairobi as a starting point from which to investigate the dynamics of volunteerism. In so doing it makes the case for the importance of developing locally rooted understanding of how volunteerism operates and is perceived within specific contexts. Often such community perceptions exist in an iterative and

inherently porous relationship with wider contexts (such as national and international perceptions of volunteerism), yet the research argues that it is at the local level that multiple understandings are both contested and realised in volunteer practice.

The focus community of this research is Korogocho, an informal settlement or 'slum' located approximately 11 km to the northeast of the centre of Nairobi. With an estimated population of 41,000 people (although some projections estimate it to be much higher) it is reckoned to be Nairobi's fourth biggest slum after Kibera, Mathare Valley and Mukuru (Government of Kenya 2013; UN Habitat 2012). Within the 1.5 square kilometres that make up Korogocho are nine 'villages' or neighbourhoods that form local administrative units and which vary significantly in terms of ethnic composition and socioeconomic characteristics (MacAuslan and Schofield 2011). The 2010 Korogocho Socio-Economic Survey (Gathuthi *et al.* 2010) found that 'insecurity' was considered to be the community's biggest problem – 46 per cent of respondents ranked it as the worst problem with inadequate health facilities and prevalence of disease coming tied for second on 7 per cent each. Only 17 per cent of Korogocho residents reported feeling safe while living in their villages, with women often feeling less safe than men (Gathuthi *et al.* 2010).

A key reason for choosing to conduct the research in Korogocho was its 'high levels of poverty and low levels of infrastructure development compared to other urban informal settlements' (MacAuslan and Schofield 2011: 13). As such, Korogocho represented an opportunity to investigate how the dynamics surrounding volunteerism operate within a particularly poor and deprived community; this was deliberate in terms of making the research relevant to assessing the potential role of volunteerism in tackling the most extreme forms of poverty.

Utilising a systemic action research (SAR) approach, developed by the Institute of Development Studies to better understand issues in complex environments, the research found pertinent dynamics surrounding the respective roles, perceptions and interplay between formal and informal volunteering. Section 2 gives an overview of the research approach and methods.

Section 3 looks at formal volunteering in Korogocho – taken here to refer to volunteers participating in officially recognised initiatives with organisations possessing some structure and accepted operating

procedures – and focuses on the impact of stipends and allowances on its functioning in the community. It is argued that the widespread use of stipends in formal volunteering initiatives has led to significant national and community confusion surrounding the distinction between volunteering and low-paid work; confusion that is all the more acute in poorer communities such as Korogocho where lower local wages mean there is a smaller disparity between paid employment and volunteer stipends.

Section 4 shifts emphasis to informal volunteering or what could be termed mutual aid or self-help groups where activities are not linked to a formal organisation or institution (Burns *et al.* 2015). The research finds that because informal volunteers do not self-identify as volunteers, the functioning of such groups largely avoids the financial expectations associated with formal volunteering. Many informal voluntary groups in Korogocho also add value because they emerge to address a directly experienced community need.

Section 5 discusses a range of issues related to the differing attributes of formal and informal volunteering and highlights examples where the two can be mutually supportive. These areas include how they can be used to address varying community needs, the scales at which they are most effective, their roles in perpetuating or challenging normative gender roles and power dynamics, their potential for furthering inclusion and how they may be utilised in complementary ways as part of development interventions. Section 6 concludes by making a number of recommendations for how development organisations can avoid the pitfalls and make the most of opportunities offered by formal and informal volunteering.

## **2 The research approach and methods**

The research in Korogocho entailed over two years of fieldwork from 2012–14 and formed part of the global Valuing Volunteering project, a joint initiative by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and IDS that sought to better understand the contribution of volunteerism to reducing poverty. Utilising a participatory SAR methodology, the research involved working with participants through repeated iterative cycles of reflection, action and learning (Burns 2012, 2014).

Before detailing the SAR approach employed in Korogocho, it is first worth highlighting how SAR is distinct from action research. Here Burns (2014) identifies two particular defining features. Firstly,

SAR explicitly focuses on bringing about system change through building a better understanding of dynamics within complex systems. In so doing, it acknowledges that isolated or standalone pieces of action research (for example, in a specific community) may not always be able to bring about change without being linked into the wider system where change needs to occur (in the national legislature, for example). Secondly, to facilitate system-wide change SAR inquiries build in multi-stranded and multi-stakeholder processes that deliberately avoid epistemological reductionism in favour of echoing the complexity they seek to understand. As Burns (2014: 2) states:

So instead of one core group and one core strand of inquiry, an SAR process may be comprised of many different inquiries operating in parallel involving different stakeholders working within different parts of a system. The learning architecture links the different learning strands to each other, and to formal programme structures; it also creates spaces for deliberation and sense-making up the hierarchy and into policymaking arenas.

Henceforth, although I focus in this article on learning from the Korogocho community, it is important to stress that Korogocho formed just one of a number of concurrent research investigations as part of a wider SAR process. For example, another two long-term inquiries took place in communities on the Kenyan coast as well as a series of shorter-term case studies conducted across Kenya using a participatory systemic inquiry (PSI) process; the latter typically involved one or two field visits and between 5–20 days' fieldwork during which participants deconstructed and mapped out their 'development system' as a means of setting a baseline against which future change could be assessed (Burns 2012, 2014). Crucially, learning and knowledge were exchanged between these research strands and further linked into a national reference group that consisted of senior representatives of volunteering for development organisations working throughout Kenya. As an example of how interlinkages were facilitated, community participants from Korogocho were able to feed their views, via the national reference group, into the development of Kenya's first national volunteering policy.

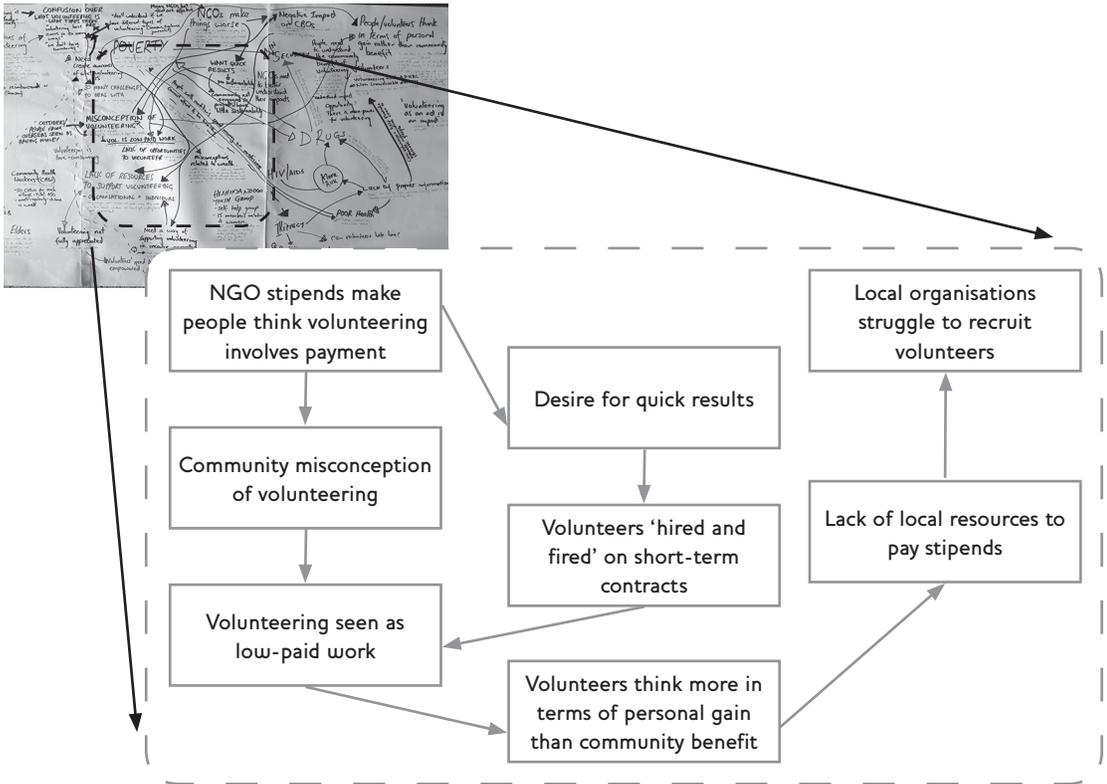
In Korogocho, in my role as lead researcher I recruited 15 local volunteer researchers that formed the community research team and took ownership of and steered the research process. Most of the

team were volunteers with local community-based organisations (CBOs) and were initially identified through local networks for their commitment to community development. As facilitator, I guided the team through a process of ongoing iterative cycles of critical reflection, action planning, action and assessment (Burns 2012, 2014; Reason and Bradbury 2008). Typically, each cycle took two to four months which allowed for multiple cycles over the course of the two-year research project. The cyclical SAR approach placed emphasis on developing the critical thinking of local researchers with regard to better understanding the root causes of poverty and volunteerism's role in addressing them. As such, the process shared many characteristics with the development of 'critical consciousness' or what Paulo Freire (1970) terms 'conscientisation' whereby ongoing cycles of reflection and action (praxis) enable 'people to perceive the social, political and economic contradictions in their lives and to take action against them' (Action Aid 2012: 55).

Importantly, I found that, in communities like Korogocho, building the capacity of people to reflect critically and become active agents of change did not happen overnight. For example, in initial workshops, local researchers were quick to identify the cause of Korogocho's deprivation as poverty without any attention given to the dimensions of that poverty or the root causes of it. However, with every cycle of the SAR process that participants underwent, understanding and findings became more nuanced and detailed; so from the initial issue of poverty, the research team gradually came to investigate and understand the role of factors such as ethno-political fragmentation, the practices of development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), normative gender roles, land rights and tensions between individualism and collectivism. Ultimately, this evolution of understanding and the emergence of findings was considered to justify the long-term and iterative nature of the SAR research approach.

In general, the research team were empowered to decide by consensus on the direction the research should take with my role largely being one of providing research advice on possible methodologies and acting as a 'reality check' in terms of what was possible within appropriate timescales and available resources. I also undertook the role in the capacity of being an international long-term volunteer recruited through VSO UK and had additional responsibilities in providing organisational development support to a local CBO that acted as my host organisation during the course of

Figure 1 Korogocho systems map and the emerging causal relationship between factors



Source Author's own.

my two-year research placement. Taking on this hybrid researcher/organisational development role combined with living in the local community allowed me to approach the research environment from the point of view of a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1983), 'practitioner-researcher' (Robson 2002) or 'insider-researcher' (Lewis 2009). In so doing, the approach also served to model a way in which volunteers can potentially integrate elements of action research into their placements.

With SAR forming the 'meta-methodology', the research employed a number of specific methods and tools to collect and analyse findings. Crucially, the research process was not a linear one so tools were constantly tailored to test and validate emerging findings. For example, when initially gathering information, members of the research team found it particularly useful to have informal discussions with local residents in the community setting where respondents felt most comfortable. This generally entailed informal one-to-one interviews and impromptu focus groups (at markets, bus stops and in community halls) with notes taken and subsequently analysed by the wider research team. When findings

emerged, they were tested and validated through focus group discussions with a range of participants. These included community residents, volunteer groups such as community health workers (CHWs) and self-help groups, representatives of local CBOs, religious leaders and village elders. The participant make-up of focus group discussions was also varied deliberately; sometimes different representatives were combined to facilitate discussion across groups whereas, on other occasions, groups were more homogenous in order to test specific findings with particular demographics. In total, in excess of 200 local residents were engaged in informal discussions and another 250 were involved in focus group discussions and workshops.

Over the course of the research, a wide range of research methods ended up being employed – many of them being taken or modified from VSO's (2004) facilitator's guide to participatory approaches. In addition to informal discussions, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the research made use of rivers of experience to document volunteer journeys, neighbourhood mapping to establish the geographical spread of volunteering

activities, network mapping to ascertain areas of collaboration between local CBOs and a storytelling tool developed by Global Giving and outlined in some depth in Maxson's (2012) *'Real Book' for Story Evaluation Methods*.

One tool that proved particularly valuable in helping the local research team to better understand and develop critical thinking around poverty and volunteerism was systems mapping (Green 2014). When undertaking a systems mapping exercise, team members worked collaboratively to construct big 'messy' maps colour-coded to show the relationships between issues and stakeholders (Burns 2014). The maps, which can be metres across, provided an excellent platform for developing shared understanding of complex issues. Furthermore, following their initial construction, sections or particular relationships were 'distilled into smaller more systematic maps which show[ed] causal relationships, feedback loops, etc' (Burns 2014: 2). Figure 1 shows a systems map created by the Korogocho research team and highlights a key causal relationship that emerged from it.

Such systems maps were useful in developing and challenging understanding through successive cycles of action research. When important relationships were identified by the research team, they then formed the basis for testing and validation in subsequent focus groups and workshops. Importantly, the maps also allowed for potential areas of action and further research to be identified. The tool thereby provided a vital link between the research and action components of the process. In terms of action, research team members developed and ran a number of shows on local radio stations in order to provide accurate information on volunteering in an accessible format; they facilitated networking workshops between local CBOs in order to promote greater collaboration and mediate in cases where conflict and suspicion had arisen between groups; they fed in findings from the research directly into the development of Kenya's first national volunteering policy and they facilitated the development of the strategic plan of a local CBO so that its work was better focused on the needs of the community.

### **3 Formal volunteering: the distorting effects of volunteer stipends and allowances**

A recurring theme from community conversations and focus group discussions was the local confusion between officially recognised volunteering and low-paid work. Furthermore, much of this confusion emanated from the common practice of many

development organisations – particularly national and international NGOs (INGOs) – paying stipends and allowances. One Korogocho resident<sup>1</sup> remarked that 'people view it [volunteering] as a low-paid job but that is the truth about it... the truth is it is a low-paid job'. Complementary research in other Kenyan communities and validation workshops with a national reference group found that volunteerism was nationally perceived as either being a 'stepping stone' to paid employment or a means to gaining a (usually small) allowance or stipend (Graham *et al.* 2013). In both scenarios volunteerism was often perceived as 'working for less than you are worth' and a distinction was rarely drawn between volunteering and low-paid work.

Despite being a feature of the Kenyan national context surrounding volunteerism, the research found that Korogocho was especially negatively affected by what some respondents referred to as the 'distortion', 'corruption' or 'capitalisation' of volunteering. One of the reasons for this was the smaller disparity between volunteer allowances and local market wages combined with high rates of unemployment, particularly among younger people. While the International Labour Organization states that 'services such as a meal or transportation may be provided to the volunteer so long as their value does not equal or surpass the value of local market wages' (ILO 2011: 14), the problem in Korogocho was that stipends/allowances were rarely tailored to local market rates.

The research found that many organisations stuck to their own standardised rates (which often varied to those of other organisations) across communities – the most noticeable exception being the occasional adjustment for urban and rural areas. With high rates of unemployment in Korogocho, local people were also more likely to view any position with an associated payment as an opportunity. As Graham *et al.* have found in their broader research on volunteering in Africa, 'for some community volunteers, stipends are an important source of livelihood and survival and in these situations can be a motivation for volunteering' (2013: 28). Put simply, for many of the poorest and most marginalised people living in Korogocho, the distinction between paid employment and volunteering is an artificial one as both represent a potential source of livelihood (Chambers 1995). The very poverty that volunteerism seeks to reduce therefore makes Korogocho all the more vulnerable to the 'stipend culture' of volunteering for development organisations.

Formal volunteerism's confusion with low-paid work in Korogocho is significant because it negatively affects both development organisations (external and indigenous) and volunteers in formalised roles. In relation to organisational impacts, the research identified three key themes.

Firstly, the payment of volunteer allowances predominantly by external development organisations creates a normative expectation in the community that formal volunteering involves payment. This presents a particular challenge to local CBOs looking to work through volunteers as they often lack the resources to match the allowances of larger development organisations. Potential local volunteers are thus disincentivised from volunteering with local indigenous organisations. As one member of a local CBO stated:

*An NGO comes and recruits volunteers, gives them 5,000 Shillings for 2 days and something comes out of that and [the volunteers] say now I will not volunteer for free. This makes things very difficult for organisations like [a local CBO] and other local organisations.<sup>2</sup>*

Secondly, the social expectation of payment resulting from stipends and allowances traps development organisations into a reinforcing feedback loop whereby they are inclined to continue offering stipends in order to attract volunteers. Linked to this, the differing levels of stipends offered to volunteers was observed to create a hierarchy of development organisations in the minds of community members; as a result volunteers competed for the better paid positions and development organisations came under pressure to offer higher allowances to attract more interest. As one village elder<sup>3</sup> observed, 'if they [a well-known INGO] call a meeting, it will be packed whereas if [a less well-funded NGO] do the same, the attendance will be low because they pay less'. The research also found that a lack of coordination of allowances across organisations meant that community suspicions of corruption emerged when higher stipends were not offered. As one workshop participant<sup>4</sup> highlighted, 'some NGOs will come and pay 1,000 [Shillings], so if another comes and pays 500, they know the standard is 1,000 so they think they [the NGO] are keeping 500'. On this issue, the local research team concluded that development organisations needed to become much better at coordinating and communicating volunteer allowances and stipends across organisations.

Thirdly, the pursuit of paid volunteer allowances and stipends by local community volunteers was found

to distort the memberships of local organisations. In workshops with local CBOs, many reported a significant disparity between 'active' members who were committed to the organisation and would volunteer without payment and 'dormant' members who were officially on the organisation's register but rarely participated unless there was funding to pay them. As one founding member<sup>5</sup> of a Korogocho CBO stated, we 'started as 75 members but now there are only 25 active members because there is no hope of outside help'. In this case, the remaining 50 members were still registered with the organisation which made it appear more active to potential funders than it actually was. Research participants noted how it was not uncommon for people to be members of multiple groups in the hope that one of them would manage to acquire external funding. This situation was found to present difficulties to external NGOs when selecting local partners to implement initiatives; the challenge being avoiding the locally termed 'briefcase NGOs' (Lee 2014) that exist more on paper than in reality.

While the distorting effects of a 'stipend culture' presented organisational challenges, the research also found that formal volunteers were negatively impacted. Particular issues related to community suspicions as to volunteer motivations and rewards, a lack of understanding surrounding the roles of formal volunteers and opaque processes in terms of volunteer recruitment. As one participant<sup>6</sup> observed, 'sometimes people don't trust because they don't understand the process'. For CHWs – one of the most visible formal volunteer initiatives in Korogocho – community scepticism and suspicion were seen to present a daily challenge when undertaking their duties. As one local CHW stated:

*People also have trust issues when it comes to volunteers. They tend to think we [CHWs] are using them for our own selfish reasons. When we ask HIV+ individuals for their cc numbers [the numbers they use at the hospitals to collect drugs], they refuse or are reluctant to give them to us because they think we are using them for our personal gain.<sup>7</sup>*

For development organisations looking to implement local initiatives through volunteers, it is important to recognise the extra challenges faced by volunteers in more formalised schemes. Local volunteers, for example, stressed how they risked being labelled as a 'betrayor' if they were perceived to be unduly benefiting from their volunteering or if their activities took them into close contact with official authorities such as the police. However,

local volunteers also reported that over time it was possible to build relationships with the community that could overcome such suspicions.

Volunteers noted that being patient and proactive in building trusting relationships was vital in gaining the respect and acceptance of the local community, while being able to witness first-hand the impact of their activities was valuable in motivating them to continue volunteering. The findings therefore suggest that the 'softer skills' of volunteers such as relationship building can be particularly important in terms of creating an enabling environment in which to carry out their more officially recognised duties (Lough 2012; Lough and Matthew 2013). Integrating opportunities for relationship building as well as nurturing the 'soft skills' of volunteers should therefore be seen as valuable components of formal volunteering interventions.

#### **4 Informal volunteering: the value of locally emergent and less structured forms of volunteering**

Under the umbrella of informal volunteerism, the research encountered a range of loosely structured associations, organisations and groups. These included self-help groups for single mothers and women living with HIV/AIDS, drug and crime rehabilitation support groups, networks of friends that would provide security within their neighbourhoods and respond to emergencies such as fires, and a wide range of associations that provided financial support to their members and which fell under the labels of table banking, 'merry-go-rounds' and Savings and Internal Lending Committees. The following example of a Korogocho table banking/'merry-go-round' describes how the latter typically operate:

*The [local] group comes together every week on a Friday and every member contributes 50 Shillings [UK £0.35, US \$0.60] to a common kitty. The group has 40 members and each of them gets a turn to be given money as a loan to grow their businesses and then later give back the money so that another person also benefits. The money is used to enhance the livelihoods among members.<sup>8</sup>*

The informal volunteering observed in Korogocho can be classified as mutual aid in as much as there are few or 'no formal rules or systems of accountability and there is no differentiation of tasks between members, but there may be informal conventions' (Burns and Taylor 1998: 8). Despite their informal nature and a blurred line between 'participants' and 'beneficiaries', the research found

that, for many people in the community, these groups and associations played a vital role as coping mechanisms that increased resilience to deal with development challenges. This finding echoes the conclusions of Graham *et al.* who found in research into volunteering across Africa that:

[M]ost volunteering happens through community-based networks of support and reciprocity. This form of volunteering is often unaccounted for and unrecognised. However, it plays a very important role in building the resilience of communities (2013: 6).

Where informal volunteering was effective in Korogocho, two key factors were critical to its success. Firstly, the research noted how very few people considered their memberships of mutual aid and self-help groups to be a form of volunteering. This detachment from the 'volunteering' label meant that it avoided some of the negative connotations and associations that accompanied more formalised volunteer schemes in Korogocho such as expectations of stipends/allowances and community suspicions of the motivations of volunteers. The result was that while informal volunteering embodied many of the core principles of volunteerism – being non-compulsory, unpaid and for the benefit of others – it escaped the distorting effects of stipends and allowances. For volunteering for development organisations, this raises the interesting prospect that in some contexts it may be more effective to avoid using the term 'volunteering' in favour of terms that are locally relevant but not associated with the negative connotations of formal volunteering.

Secondly, the research found that informal initiatives often emerged organically in response to a directly experienced community need. Informal activities were far more likely to be initiated by local people than external development organisations and, as a result, they generally aimed at addressing a local need that was perceived to be going unaddressed, either by state authorities or other development organisations.

The expertise of local people in identifying their own needs was found to be a key strength of informal volunteering in Korogocho, and demonstrates how volunteerism can extend the reach of services to the poorest and most marginalised (Burns *et al.* 2015). For example, one research participant told the following story of how a group grew organically out of a need to rehabilitate criminals and drug addicts.

*Here in Korogocho, it is a usual thing for very young children to get involved in crime. This can go as low as five years, where children are used as conduits to carry stolen goods and even firearms to recipients of such... About 20 young men and women joined together to form an organisation... These young men and women are former drug addicts and mostly hard-core criminals. So far, the group has transformed an uncountable number of young people. They are actively involved in programmes on reproductive health, working with commercial sex workers to change; they operate a car-wash business. They also promote peaceful coexistence among the various ethnic groups in Korogocho. The group also offers community policing services to the community as well as garbage collection.<sup>9</sup>*

Groups such as this – and the research encountered many in Korogocho – have inherent value in the fact that they emerge in order to address an identified community need. It was also notable how such approaches were locally regarded as more likely to address community needs than the formal interventions of external development organisations. As the following example illustrates, without adequate community engagement, interventions can easily fail:

*NGOs come with initiatives like for the CHWs. The initiatives do not even necessarily solve the problems. They do not consult the community. Like even the latrines [a well-known INGO] once built. The latrines ended up being demolished because they did not consult the community on the drainage and the general upkeep of the toilets. They became hazardous when they were all filled up (local volunteer).<sup>10</sup>*

In Korogocho, where a separate socioeconomic survey revealed that 77 per cent of people felt they were not involved in the design or implementation of development projects (Gathuthi *et al.* 2010), the case of informal volunteering initiatives represents a potentially valuable resource in terms of effectively identifying and responding to community needs. Otherwise, to paraphrase Robert Chambers, development actors risk falling into the trap of being the person who is not poor pronouncing on what matters to those who are poor (1995: 185). For volunteering and development organisations, this suggests that there may be significant worth in both understanding and engaging with local informal volunteering initiatives rather than seeking to implement their own independent interventions.

### **5 The distinct and potentially complementary attributes of formal and informal volunteering**

Over the course of the research a number of factors emerged that related to areas in which formal and informal volunteering could be effective,

both separately and as part of complementary or evolutionary approaches. The following five subsections, which are by no means exhaustive, highlight the key findings.

#### **5.1 Understanding where different types of volunteering are most fit-for-purpose: the issues of needs, scale and motivations**

The research found that formal and informal volunteering had a tendency to cater for different needs and used different approaches in doing so. For example, formal CHWs spent most of their time addressing the medical needs of their allocated households using prescribed and generally standardised practices. In contrast, people with particular medical conditions were far more likely to seek emotional support from more informal peer-to-peer support and self-help groups. In such cases, formal and informal volunteering were found to provide complementary support to poor and marginalised groups.

Formal and informal volunteering were also found to vary in effectiveness according to scale. Offe and Heinze (1992) have found that the practice of moneyless exchange works best when it occurs at a small scale within trusted social groups that possess significant ‘solidarity capital’. However, ‘once the limits of that particular social frame have been reached, the very factor that was such a potent help at the beginning turns into a barrier to further growth’ (Offe and Heinze 1992: 167). In other words, the informal expressions of volunteering in Korogocho such as table banking and ‘merry-go-rounds’ gain their strength from their small-scale operations and sense of solidarity – things that cannot be easily scaled up or formalised. The presence of ‘solidarity capital’ at the highly localised and informal level is thus a factor that both empowers informal volunteering and limits its expansion. This also serves as a warning to development organisations that may seek to scale up such informal and localised activities.

Connected to the above is the importance of understanding how people’s motivations and attitudes vary according to forms of volunteering. Here Manatschal and Freitag (2014) have found that individuals undertaking informal volunteering are more likely to be motivated by ‘altruistic reciprocity’, whereas those engaging in formal volunteering are more likely to be driven by ‘strategic reciprocity’ such as the anticipated personal returns on their volunteer activities. The psychology behind volunteer motivations therefore has important potential implications in terms of the suitability

of informal or formal volunteering initiatives. In communities such as Korogocho, this means that attempting to formalise more informal expressions of volunteerism has to be understood against the backdrop of how volunteer motivations are also likely to change – for example, informal volunteers may be much less likely to sacrifice their time to more formal initiatives if there are no anticipated ‘strategic’ personal benefits (Tiessen 2012).

### **5.2 Challenging or perpetuating the status quo: normative gender roles and power dynamics**

The research found that formal and informal volunteering presented different opportunities, particularly in terms of challenging entrenched gender roles and unequal power dynamics. For example, community workshops revealed that, within informal volunteering, men and women were more likely to adhere to locally accepted normative roles – women took on more caring and domestic roles, often within the immediate vicinity of the household whereas men went further afield and were the dominant members of informal groups responding to insecurity concerns and community emergencies such as fires.

In contrast, formal volunteering was found to have the potential to more rigorously challenge gender roles, although the reality was that development organisations rarely made the most of that potential. An excellent example is that of CHWs. Focus groups revealed that over 90 per cent of CHWs in Korogocho were women, which reflects community perceptions of women as primary care givers. Development organisations often utilised women in these roles to implement their health interventions but avoided the issue of how this may further entrench gender stereotypes; in essence, normative gender roles were seen as a means to an end and not a subject for change. Despite this, formal volunteering initiatives with their recruitment processes and structures do have the potential to start changing perceived gender roles in a way that informal volunteering may struggle to do.

A second issue relates to the challenging of unequal power dynamics. In Korogocho, it was common practice for official formal volunteer initiatives to require the tacit or explicit approval of the state apparatus – the local chief being the highest state representative at the community level. The challenge such formal schemes then face is dealing with unequal power relations that the state may be a lead actor in perpetuating. In such situations, the research found that less structured, more informal

and locally emergent expressions of volunteering may be more effective in challenging and holding to account power holders or what are often referred to as ‘duty bearers’. The following example from a local Korogocho community member highlights how unstructured local action or a social movement can bring about change:

*In 2010, together with other youth groups, we led a rebellion against some trigger happy police officers who were killing suspected criminals at will in Korogocho. They were transferred, one was sent to jail.<sup>11</sup>*

In this situation, it is unlikely that a formal volunteering initiative would have been able to facilitate a ‘rebellion’ against the state authorities. However, as an informal expression of social activism it was able to influence the practices of the local state administration, although it is also worth highlighting that such activities came with a significant degree of risk for the local participants.

### **5.3 Formal support to informal volunteering: effective complementary approaches**

Within Korogocho, examples were encountered where informal volunteering benefited from formal support. In one case, a major international health-care NGO succeeded in supporting a number of condition-specific locally owned self-help groups in a sustainable way. What members of these self-help groups highlighted as being vital was that, rather than seeking to appropriate or co-opt these groups, the NGO offered arms-length support in a non-intrusive way. This typically involved providing access to free and safe spaces for members to meet, signposting them to other services that they may require and sensitively using local ‘formal’ volunteers as facilitators. In a focus group discussion with one of these self-help groups that provided support to women living with HIV/AIDS, one member reflected on how the group had affected her:

*When I was tested positive, I was so afraid, but when my friend here moved in to be my neighbour, she encouraged me that all would be well. She took me to [the group supported by the NGO] and I was sensitised on how to live a positive life. Now I am so happy and strong I can do anything<sup>12</sup>*

Wilson (1995), Wann (1995) and Burns and Taylor (1998) have found that self-help groups can be effectively supported or nurtured by intermediary organisations as long as they are ‘left to determine their own directions and priorities’ (Burns and Taylor 1998: 24). The successful examples of

complementary informal volunteering with support from formal volunteering organisations very much embodied this principle. Firstly, by having the maturity to stand back and not seek to formalise or co-opt, self-help groups were able to keep their informal nature which helped to foster local ownership. Secondly, by taking a back seat, the groups did not become a symbol or branded entity of the NGO which would have likely increased member expectations of receiving a stipend.

#### **5.4 The evolution of informal volunteering**

Although informal volunteering can risk losing its inherent power through formalisation and co-option, the research also found cases where such occurrences were positive signs of development (Tarrow 1994). This particularly related to times when the state took notice of the services being provided informally and stepped in to provide them instead. The following example highlights how the Kenyan government has gradually increased its role in providing health-care services in Korogocho:

*When [a local voluntary group] started, there were no health facilities any closer. We experienced an overflow of patients seeking medical and health services. During this period we did hundreds of referrals to major health facilities like Mbagathi District Hospital and Kenyatta National Hospital. The government, through the Ministry of Health, got very interested in our work and some staff were seconded to our clinic at the chief's camp. With a statistic of almost 200 patients every day, the government saw the need to expand to another facility close by. As it were, there was no available space elsewhere and so, the government built another medical clinic within the same compound... to offer affordable services to the people (local resident).<sup>13</sup>*

It is arguable that the government should have been providing basic health-care services from the outset. However, in such cases, the emergence of the informal volunteering initiative not only succeeded in filling a much needed gap in service provision but also acted as a bridge or intermediary stage until the state was able to take on responsibility for the delivery of health-care services. Henceforth, while government or development organisation co-option is sometimes a significant risk to informal volunteering, it may also occasionally represent a positive step in terms of improving the social contract between the state and its citizens.

#### **5.5 The inclusiveness of formal and informal volunteering**

Inclusion was found to be a key issue for formal and informal volunteering and an area in which one

could support the other. Despite the strong sense of participant ownership of informal self-help groups, questions often exist around the inclusiveness of their memberships. As Burns and Taylor (1998: 16–17) state, 'Informal networks are defined by who they exclude as well as who they include... belonging helps to define an identity for people who feel excluded, but it is often based on the exclusion of others'. In contrast, more formal initiatives may be more inclusive through standardised processes and practices such as recruitment requirements.

The issue was found to be particularly pertinent in a community such as Korogocho, where inter-ethnic fragmentation fuelled by 'politicised tribalism' (Lonsdale 2008) has caused people to become insularised within family and tribal networks (Oucho 2002; MacAuslan and Schofield 2011; Prunier 2008). One local resident summarised the situation within the community:

*It [ethnicity] is an issue and leads to dependency because people will not trust each other so everyone wants for themselves and their tribe and their friends and family (local resident).<sup>14</sup>*

In such situations, some authors have pointed out that it is the presence and building of 'weak ties' between people rather than the 'strong ties' of family and kinship that are pivotal to facilitating development (Granovetter 1973; Perri 6 1997). As Burns and Taylor (1998: 13) state, while 'weak ties might have limits on the claims that can be made of them... they also tend to provide indirect access to a greater diversity of resources than do stronger more socially homogenous ties'. Within this context the social exclusion such as that experienced in Korogocho can be seen to restrict the development of 'weak ties'.

The implications of this for volunteering are potentially significant. With an absence of weak ties, informal volunteering in Korogocho is more likely to be based on the strong ties of family and ethnicity. While membership may help build resilience within those groups, they are unlikely to do much to overcome the entrenched issue of inter-tribal tension and fragmentation. This is where providing formal support to informal voluntary groups may be able to promote greater inclusion within them. As Burns and Taylor (1998: 28) state, 'There is some evidence that mutual aid networks facilitated by outside professionals can be more inclusive than those which grow from within the community'. In Korogocho, for example, an international health-care NGO used some of its formal community volunteers to provide

facilitation to self-help groups. In so doing, the formal volunteers were able to bring people into the groups, working across tribal affiliation, in ways that the informal self-help groups would not have found natural to do. This complementary mix of informal and formal volunteering thereby helped to increase inclusion and foster the development of greater 'weak ties' within the community.

In the case of formal CHWs, they provided health-care services to a number of households within a geographical area irrespective of the tribal affiliation of those households. CHWs reported investing significant time into developing relationships with local people; while this was central to them undertaking their core health-care duties, a positive side-effect was the building of 'weak ties' or 'bridging social capital' (linkages across groups as opposed to the bonding social capital of links within them) across social groups that previously had limited interaction (ONS 2001; Lough and Matthew 2013; Putnam 1995). When understood as acting in this way, formal volunteers can be seen as important agents in facilitating the growth of 'weak ties' and social capital within communities.

As a final word of warning, it is important to stress that formal volunteering only has the potential to support greater community interaction. There is a significant risk that, if the context and power dynamics behind community fragmentation are not identified and understood, formal volunteering initiatives may inadvertently support embedded community divisions and the 'strong ties' of family and ethnicity. For example, cases were recorded in Korogocho where reputable organisations fell into this trap as highlighted by the following research participant:

*Some organisations have favouritism and tribalism. So it's only people from that ethnic group who compete for those opportunities. Like in the case with [an INGO working in Korogocho] who in most cases only recruit CHWs who are [a specific tribe].<sup>15</sup>*

Such cases serve as a reminder for the need to fully understand local contexts and ensure that the localised practices of implementation match up to any organisational values that exist surrounding inclusion, accountability and fairness. Only in so doing will formal volunteering be able to play the bridging role that it has the potential to do.

## 6 Conclusions

Utilising an SAR approach, the inquiry in the Korogocho community worked with local

volunteer researchers through repeated cycles of reflection and action to develop a detailed and shared understanding of the local dynamics of volunteerism. Despite appearing here as findings at the end of a research process, it is important to stress that findings emerged iteratively over the course of the inquiry. As and when findings emerged, the local research team tested and validated them across multiple stakeholders and subsequently developed new lines of inquiry in order to deepen and further contextualise understanding. The use of a long-term international volunteer as an 'insider-researcher' (Lewis 2009) working in collaboration with community-based volunteer researchers also modelled a way of working that combined the added value of 'outside' perspectives and expertise with 'inside' contextual understanding and expertise – something that Burns *et al.* (2015) refer to as the merging of 'insider-outsider' knowledges. In many ways the research embraced the principles that underpin what Booth and Unsworth (2014) call *politically-smart locally led development*, and the approach has potential application for volunteering for development organisations seeking to embed participatory action research processes within volunteer interventions.

The use of stipends and allowances in formal volunteering initiatives was found to have significant organisational and volunteer-specific impacts in Korogocho. However, the local research team identified a number of measures that could be taken to change perceptions and mitigate against negative effects. Firstly, development organisations could better coordinate their volunteer processes, in particular their use of stipends, across the community in order to reduce confusion and promote greater transparency. Secondly, with the term 'volunteering' commonly associated with low-paid work, development organisations may find it more productive to use alternative terminology in order to avoid negative associations. Thirdly, the use of stipends and allowances should not be seen as something that cannot be changed. The local research team found that providing associated training or certificates of participation may be just as effective incentives for potential volunteers. For formal volunteers, community suspicions and a lack of transparency in recruitment procedures present challenges that they have to overcome by prioritising relationship building with the community. For development organisations, this highlights the importance of integrating relationship building and developing the 'softer' social skills of volunteers into volunteer interventions.

Formal and informal volunteering were found to present different opportunities in bringing about change in Korogocho and, in some areas, offered significant potential for being combined into effective complementary approaches. The implication arising from this lies in understanding how formal and informal volunteering can meet different needs, how they can be more effective at different scales and how volunteer motivations can shift from one to the other. All of these factors need to be considered when designing volunteer interventions.

Informal volunteering was found to have inherent value through the sense of local ownership it fostered and the fact that it often emerged organically in response to identified community needs. Any efforts to provide more formal support to such groups needs to be sensitive to the factors that make it powerful; otherwise there is the risk that formalisation and co-option undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of informal groups. Nevertheless,

### Notes

- 1 18 March 2014, Korogocho, focus group.
- 2 Interview, 8 April 2014, Korogocho's chief camp.
- 3 Interview, 10 April 2014, Korogocho chief's camp.
- 4 Interview, 11 February 2014, Korogocho.
- 5 Interview, 26 September 2014, Korogocho.
- 6 Interview, 30 January 2014, Korogocho.
- 7 Interview, 7 April 2014, Korogocho.
- 8 Workshop participant and local community resident, focus group, 6 February 2014, Korogocho.

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examples from Korogocho show that with the right approaches it is possible to support informal volunteering and potentially increase the inclusivity of certain groups. It is also important to recognise when formalisation or co-option may represent positive signs of development; the state taking on responsibility for services previously provided by informal groups is potentially a progressive step and may also free up local capacity to focus on other under-served areas and marginalised groups.

Through in-depth engagement in the Korogocho community, this article has sought to demonstrate how factors critical to the success of volunteering activities often lie semi-hidden within localised dynamics and contexts. By making the most of local expertise and collaboratively seeking to make sense of the complexity within such settings, it is possible to develop valuable shared understanding that can help improve volunteerism's role in reducing poverty.

- 9 Interview, 6 October 2014, Korogocho.
- 10 Interview, 23 May 2013, Korogocho.
- 11 Interview, 27 September 2014, Korogocho.
- 12 Interview, 14 March 2014, Korogocho.
- 13 Interview, 13 October 2014, Korogocho.
- 14 Interview, 18 February 2014, Korogocho chief's camp.
- 15 Interview, 9 April 2014, Korogocho.

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