

# The Challenges and Opportunities of Online Volunteering for COVID-19 Response in Iran: A Qualitative Study

**Hamed Seddighi** (✉ [hseddighi@gmail.com](mailto:hseddighi@gmail.com))

Student Research Committee, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran,  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6214-4830>

**Ibrahim Salmani**

Department of Health in Disaster and Emergency, School of Public Health, Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences, Yazd, Iran

**Polina Ermolaeva**

Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Kazan Federal University

**Olga Basheva**

Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Kazan Federal University

**Mehrab Sharifi Sedeh**

Department of Disaster Public Health, School of Public Health, Tehran University of Medical Science (TUMS)

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

**Background:** The aim of this brief report is to identify the challenges and opportunities of online volunteering to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the managers of the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS).

**Methods:** In this study we have used a qualitative method including semi-structured interviews for investigating the opportunities and challenges of using virtual volunteers. The eligible participants meeting the inclusion criteria for this study were eight IRCS managers who had used online volunteers for COVID-19 pandemic response.

**Results:** Having considered the interviews with IRCS managers, we finally found seven items as opportunities including safety, availability, recruiting more volunteers, cost reduction, participation, geographical scope, and local considerations. Moreover, five items were found as challenges of online volunteering in IRCS including lack of commitment, cultural issues, infrastructure, reimbursement, and volunteer management.

**Conclusion:** Online volunteering is a significant opportunity for humanitarian organizations especially during epidemics like the current COVID-19. Online volunteering for COVID-19 response by the Red Crescent involved a wide range of people including young people, the elderly, people with disabilities and minority groups, and people in rural areas.

## Background

On 19 February 2020, Iran reported its first confirmed case of COVID–19 infection[1, 2]. As a country among the top fifteen countries in terms of people infected with COVID–19 in the world until 22 July, 2020[3], Iran has confirmed 278,827 cases and 14,634 deaths from COVID–19 outbreak[4]. Due to unexpected nature of the emergency, innovative approaches to switch the activities to online mode were needed (educational monitoring as well as collecting information to specify where exactly the help is needed). There are more than 58 million internet users and 33 million social media users in Iran[5]. The internet penetration rate is 87% in Iran[5, 6]. Digitalization has experienced an enormous raise in this country during the last years[7]. This is an opportunity for developing online programs.

Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) since the first day started to respond to the epidemic. One of the activities by IRCS was its attempt to raise public awareness[8]. The IRCS in Iran is responsible for preparedness, response as well as aid collection and distribution in disasters[9]. This organization has more than two million volunteers, 8000 staff, and 300 branches around the country[10] participating personally in humanitarian programs. For example, only in one province (Yazd) of the whole 31 provinces of Iran, the Red Crescent with 2936 volunteer rescuers has responded to 637 hazards in the last year[11]. Using volunteers was different depending on the nature of the disaster (COVID–19). Now online volunteering is a new way for volunteers to participate in humanitarian programs[12].

Although offline volunteers keep on participating in road accidents and natural disaster operations, volunteer in-person activity for other humanitarian programs has been suspended due to the outbreak[3, 13]. To solve this problem, the Red Crescent Society came up with an online capacity to use volunteers[14]. Online volunteering is a type of volunteering widespread all over the world as a result of developing online infrastructures[15, 16]. In line with virtual activities, humanitarian programs have changed, too. Disaster preparedness and first aid training classes were cancelled during the outbreak[3]. The organization recognized the relevant training to prevent COVID–19 as a priority and therefore launched such training programs[14]. Since it was an unknown fast outbreak, finding educational resources for that was a problem in itself. Because of stay-at-home order in Iran, it has been decided to benefit from volunteers to produce content and design training materials virtually[14]. Furthermore, online volunteers contributed to the training program by translating educational material from English into Farsi[14]. With the help of virtual volunteers, more than 2,500 infographics and 760 educational videos were designed and published by the Red Crescent Society for local communities in different provinces[14].

Psychosocial support was another activity of virtual volunteers in Iran in response to the COVID–19 pandemic[14]. Online counseling services are provided through cyberspace for the people experiencing high levels of stress[14]. Also, The Youth Organization and the Red Crescent Volunteers Organization carried out programs to provide virtual psychosocial support for the families of the victims of the disease with the help of virtual volunteers[14].

Although the organization has published a report on the activities of online volunteers in the Red Crescent, there has been no study or evaluation in this regard. Given that online volunteering is a new topic, research on its challenges and opportunities is seriously required. The aim of this study is to identify the challenges and opportunities of online volunteering to respond to the COVID–19 pandemic from the perspective of the managers of the Iranian Red Crescent Society. The results of this study can help decision makers and other volunteer organizations to plan better to engage virtual and online volunteers.

## Method

We have used a qualitative content analysis for this study. In addition, a checklist for the reporting qualitative research (SRQR) introduced by The O'Brien et al. (2014) has been applied in this study[17]. It was used semi-structured interviews for investigating the opportunities and challenges of using virtual volunteers in the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) for responding to COVID–19 pandemic.

## Sampling strategy

The eligible participants meeting the inclusion criteria for this study were the IRCS managers who had used online volunteers for COVID–19 pandemic response. Sampling was conducted according to Strauss and Corbin's instructions[18]. Theoretical saturation was used to specify the sample size. Data collection

and sampling procedures continued until no new concepts were generated. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached when further data collection and analysis no longer provided the new information. Data saturation supported the sample size. The Characteristics of study participants is shown in table 1.

## **Ethical Issues pertaining to human subjects**

Respondents were assured that their information would be kept confidential if they wanted. They authorized the interviewer to mention their organizational post in the study. They were also given a full explanation of the project's aims.

## **Data collection methods**

Data collection included semi-structured interviews and lasted for 3 days (3 to 6 June 2020). The senior author contacted eligible persons to inquire about their willingness to participate in this study. The interviewees were invited to tell their experiences on three main themes including the plan itself, their challenges for implementing the plan, and their solutions for tackling the challenges. Interviews lasted for approximately 20–60 minutes.

## **Data collection instruments and strategies**

The interviews were performed in Persian, and then translated into English to be published by a bilingual translator. An interview protocol was prepared and applied for interviewing with managers. The protocol is included in the annex. Interviews were conducted via phone calls and recorded with the prior consent of the interviewees.

## **Data processing**

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full verbatim always with prior consent of the interviewees. Interviews were anonymized and each interviewee was given a code number. The interviewer and another member of the research team reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

## **Data analysis**

As the concepts presented in each interview was potentially influential in the future ones, an initial analysis was carried out following every interview. The principal investigator read all the interviews carefully several times during the open coding process, then listed incidents, information, keywords, or phrases in the document as MAXQDA codes. The researcher divided conceptually similar codes into

categories as the study proceeded, and expanded the characteristics and different aspects for each category. Codes and data were compared in order to find similarities and differences. The associations between all the data were further considered and synthesized in order to obtain a narrative that described the main concepts.

## Techniques to enhance trustworthiness

Interviewees verify their transcripts for validity improvement. For trustworthiness three steps were conducted: member check, peer check, and expert check. In addition, data validation was done by continuous comparative analysis, which involves going back to the data to further validate and improve the categories. Such strategies strengthened the study's rigor by reducing the validity risks.

## Result

Having considered the interviews with IRCS managers, we finally found seven items as opportunities including safety, availability, recruiting more volunteers, cost reduction, participation, geographical scope, and local issues. Moreover, five items were found as challenges of online volunteering in IRCS including lack of commitment, cultural issues, infrastructure, reimbursement, and volunteer management.

## Opportunities

### Safety

Virtual volunteering helped keep volunteers as well as staff safe during the outbreak, by keeping distance, as one of concerns of the Red Crescent managers was the danger threatening the lives of the volunteers during the outbreak.

*"Because of COVID-19 prevalence, we were always worried that either the volunteer or we, ourselves, get sick. But virtualization guaranteed safety." (M2)*

*"Given that the families of some young volunteers were concerned about their child's health, the remote volunteer work relieved their worries." (M4)*

### Availability

Another opportunity of online volunteering for IRCS was availability of volunteers. An interviewee told:

*"One of our problems has always been the coordination of face-to-face meetings with volunteers. It usually took a few days. But one of the good things about cyberspace was that I sent messages via WhatsApp and the volunteer sent me his work in the same way." (M8)*

## Recruiting more volunteers

Cyberspace caused that more diverse volunteers were attracted to the Red Crescent. Several interviewees mentioned such opportunity:

*"There were some volunteers who could not come to the Red Crescent office due to long distance. But through the Internet, they participated and sent us their work." (M1)*

*"Some refugee volunteers announced their readiness to help us. It was an unprecedented event in our province. There is an Afghan volunteer willing to do graphic design jobs for us. I think this is a great opportunity to expand the circle of volunteers of the Red Crescent." (M3)*

*"Once, someone called and said that his son studying in Canada and fluent in English would like to help. We were also looking for a volunteer to translate the Red Cross guide on the virus on those days. We accepted quickly and within a week, he translated more than 20 pages and sent them to us." (M7)*

*The presence of female volunteers in the office environment is not very common. But several girls volunteered to work with us on designing and disseminating anti-Corona messages. We put a female officer in charge of communicating with the female volunteers. (M1)*

## Cost Reduction

The use of virtual volunteers led to savings and reduced costs for the Red Crescent. Two participants emphasized that:

*"We spent a lot of money annually for gather the volunteers in meetings. But during the pandemic they no longer expect to be invited to such meetings, and everything went well as before without any problem. In my opinion, as far as education is concerned, using a virtual volunteer can be very effective." (M5)*

*"Recently, we had a budget deficit problem and could not pay for the transportation of volunteers and trainers. Distance volunteering has the advantage of saving a lot of money." (M8)*

## Participation

The use of virtual volunteers has led to a greater participation of the audience in publishing educational materials.

*The advantage of using a virtual volunteer in training was that the volunteer helped us with the design, posted it on Instagram, and told his friends to do the same. This caused a lot of people to see our content. That is, the volunteer himself participated in all stages. (M2)*

## Geographical scope

Another opportunity that online volunteering provided for IRCS was the possibility to recruit more diverse volunteers in terms of city of residence:

*“One of the benefits of cyberspace for our volunteer work was that we could form teams from different provinces to work on the specified topics. For example, in the case of infographic design, a volunteer from one province prepared the material, and another volunteer prepared the infographic in Persian. Then another volunteer translated and designed it in Arabic. We have never had such an experience in the Red Crescent. We had to hold a meeting and invite everyone to Tehran (the capital)”. (M6)*

## Local issues

The use of cyberspace helps local communities to make their voices heard by Red Crescent leaders at the headquarters. This means taking into account various local considerations in designing and disseminating educational messages related to the coronavirus.

*“Usually we provided educational content at the headquarters. But the experience of using volunteers from all over the country made us realize that they can better identify their local issues and find solutions. Therefore, they prepared and designed the material according to their own culture and language. Having over 20 years of experience in responding to various disasters in the Red Crescent, I declare that recent online volunteering was really a unique experience in my career.” (M6)*

## Challenges

### Lack of commitment

The non-accountability of the virtual volunteer was one of the challenges of using them. In other words, non-observance of time schedule and deadlines by the candidates was a serious problem for the Red Crescent.

*“Once we had rush-jobs and the volunteer promised to do it in a day. But he failed to do the job and finally submitted the work after several days. I think there should be a mechanism for managing volunteers through cyberspace as well.” (M8)*

### Cultural issues

Cultural considerations in Iran, especially restrictions on the relationship between men and women, have also affected virtual activities:

*“Communication with female volunteers through cyberspace is not a social norm. That’s why we had to ask a female colleague to follow up on the matter, which certainly caused a delay.” (M1)*

## Infrastructure

Infrastructure problems, especially in terms of Internet speed, have had a negative impact on the workflow (whether for the Red Crescent as a service recipient or a virtual volunteer as a service provider).

*“Internet speed was a big problem for us in the office. Because the internet is very slow and you could not download medium size files. This is a problem faced by the volunteers, too”. (M3)*

## Reimbursement

Reimbursement of volunteer expenses is one of the principles that must be observed in volunteer management. But in the case of using virtual volunteers, one of the challenges would be the one mentioned by one of the managers.

*“The volunteer has to pay some expenses including internet fee when he intends to cooperate with us through the net (especially mobile internet). We don’t have a way to pay for such costs because volunteer internet fee is not an accepted expense in the IRCS.” (M4)*

## Volunteer management

The management of virtual volunteers was a vague concept for the interviewees as the Red Crescent Society has not yet planned a mechanism for that.

*“There were some people intending to volunteer for the Red Crescent. However, the recruitment of volunteers is a job carried out through another deputy. Therefore a specified mechanism for recruiting online volunteers in the Red Crescent should be developed.” (M8)*

*“We used to give gifts to volunteers who worked with us. But now we don’t know how to ask the Red Crescent financial deputy to buy a gift for a virtual volunteer and how to receive it, how to present it, and many other questions we haven’t yet thought about.” (M2)*

*“At the end of the COVID–19 screening plan, we held an appreciation party for the volunteers. But we don’t know how to appreciate virtual volunteers. Because they can not attend the Red Crescent office.” (M3)*

## Discussion

We have shown in this study that online volunteering is a great tool for humanitarian programs. Online volunteering and using online tools for voluntary work is widespread in different fields including heritage, health, disaster preparedness, emergency response, learning language, and sport[19–23]. Our study indicates that beside usual volunteers, there are opportunities for refugees, women, and citizens in other provinces and countries to participate virtually in humanitarian activities. This finding is in line with previous studies. For example, Atkins and Thompson (2012) introduced six potential groups of which



talented online volunteers may be recruited including volunteers facing geographic constraints, skilled immigrants, stay-at-home parents, retirees, individuals with physical limitations, and young adults[24]. Various studies have indicated that online volunteering is a way to reduce inequality in volunteering participation[20, 25]. However, it should be noted that refugees and minority groups may have less access to cyberspace infrastructures such as personal computers and smartphones[26]. Also, low-income people may not have enough money to buy the Internet, as we have found in our research. Thus, the participation of minority groups, people with disabilities, refugees and marginalized groups represented both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that these people may not have access to expensive online volunteer infrastructure, and it is an opportunity in the sense that they can participate without discrimination and paying no transportation costs[27]. It seems that if humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Crescent, intend to use such people as online volunteers, they should provide the required infrastructure as well. As stipulated in Iran's telecommuting law, government agencies are required to provide the necessary facilities such as computers and the Internet for employees who work from home[28].

Online volunteers have different motives. Silva et al (2018) investigated Volunteers' perspective on online volunteering. They found that altruistic motives and learning/career rewards are the most common motivations[12]. Another study indicated the advantages of online volunteering projects in group level including finding similar interest group, group identity, group supervision, and handling the conflicts[19].

The present study found several challenges in online volunteering for COVID–19 response in Iran including lack of commitment, cultural issues, infrastructure, reimbursement, and volunteer management. These are the challenges from managers' point of view. A study about online and offline volunteering in Dutch Red Cross has indicated that online volunteering infrastructures such as data management is a challenge for response organizations[29]. Private big companies are able to manage information overload and online issue with the help of their web care teams. However, relief organizations such as Red Cross do not have the experience and resource of those big companies. Abdelkader was indicated significant concerns influencing online pro bono volunteering by faculty members including hacking, data loss, damage to the electronic devices, lack of trust between volunteers and beneficiaries, and legal issues[30]. In this study, interviewees did not point out mental health challenges of online volunteers. Psychosocial support of volunteers specially in emergency organizations is vital[31–35]. However, according to another study on Wikipedia online volunteers, burnout, stress, and dropout are the challenges associated with the work[36].

Online volunteering is some activity like working from home, excepting that one is not paid in such kind of activity. During COVID–19 pandemic, many people were obliged to work from their home because of quarantine situation. So the challenges of telecommuting can be partially generalized to online volunteering. In time of the recent pandemic, employees from different organizations was working with limited cybersecurity resources and facilities.

## Conclusion

Online volunteering in the IRCS during COVID–19 outbreak showed that it should be emphasized and invested in as one of the serious types of volunteering. Online volunteering can be used for large geographical areas, specific topics such as content production, training, design, translation, online counseling, and many more. Volunteer oriented organizations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent need to plan for the management of virtual volunteers, exactly as they plan for in-person volunteers. In addition, they should define the volunteer management cycle, including recruitment, placement, training, motivating, support, recognizing, assessing, and internal transition. Planning to improve Internet infrastructure and providing the items needed for online volunteering, including Internet packages, hardware, and software, can dramatically increase online volunteer participation. At the same time, there are some people who would like to take part as virtual volunteers but do not have enough financial resources to provide the facilities.

## **Abbreviations**

IRCS: Iranian Red Crescent Society

V: Volunteer

BM: Branch manager

M: Manager

RQR: reporting qualitative research

## **Declarations**

## **Availability of data and materials**

The anonymized datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## **Author Contributions**

HS conceived of and designed the study. HS and IS supervised data collection and analysis. MS collected the data. HS, IS, PE, OB, and MS analyzed and interpreted the data. HS wrote the original draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript.

## **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

All participants in this study consented to participate and publish their answers and interviews.

# Consent for publication

Not applicable.

# Competing interests

We declare that all authors had: (1) No financial support for the submitted work from anyone other than their employer; (2) No financial relationships with commercial entities that might have an interest in the submitted work; (3) No spouses, partners, or children with relationships with commercial entities that might have an interest in the submitted work; (4) No Non-financial interests that may be relevant to the submitted work.

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# Ethical Clearance

This paper is a part of a research project at the University of Social welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences with ethics code IR.USWR.REC.1399.101 approved by the Ethics Committee of the above-mentioned university.

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## Tables

**Table 1:** Characteristics of study participants

Code	Organizational Post	Province	Gender
M1	Deputy Director for Youth affairs	Fars Province Red Crescent	Male
M2	Deputy Director for Education	Kerman Province Red Crescent	Male
M3	Deputy Director for Education	Isfahan Province Red Crescent	Male
M4	Deputy Director for Youth affairs	Qom Province Red Crescent	Male
M5	Directing Manager for Public Education	Iranian Red Crescent Society	Male
M6	Directing Manager for Professional Education	Iranian Red Crescent Society	Male
M7	Provincial Directing Manager	Yazd Province Red Crescent	Male
M8	Chief of Professional Education Bureau	Yazd Province Red Crescent	Female