

青少年の自発的な防災活動への参加 — 日本とドイツの比較分析

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Voluntary Engagement of Young Adults in Disaster Management

-A Comparative Analysis between Japan and Germany

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Abstract

Events like the Tohoku Earthquake (JAP) and the Ahrtal Floodings (GER) show that voluntary engagement strengthens the overall performance of disaster management efforts. Vital volunteer work is an important part of resilient societies, especially in times of crises. Our research addresses voluntary engagement in disaster management in both Japan and Germany by aiming to better understand motivational aspects of young people. The reliance on volunteering youth is under pressure: the proportion of young people in the total population is declining in both countries, and traditional ways of recruiting the young generation for long-term engagement in voluntary organizations may not fit anymore. The study looks at motivational aspects of young people for engagement in disaster management from a comparative perspective (Japan / Germany).

1. Introduction

The role of volunteers in civil protection systems is critical for fostering a culture of resilience and preparedness within communities (Pani et al., 2019). The role of young people is of particular interest here, because only by adapting to their motivational aspects, civil protection will be able to sustainably engage a new generation. This comparative analysis aims to explore and understand the varying dynamics of youth volunteer engagement in the civil protection systems of Germany and Japan. Both countries have robust and well-developed emergency management frameworks, yet they differ significantly in their cultural, social, and governmental approaches to disaster management and volunteer involvement.

By comparing and contrasting statements from interviews with young volunteers in Japan and Germany, the study aims to better understand motivational aspects for youth volunteer engagement in civil protection. This analysis does contribute to the academic discourse on disaster management and provides practical insights for emergency response organizations striving to enhance youth participation in disaster preparedness and response activities globally: These organizations should constantly check whether their offerings still resonate with the motivations of young volunteers.

Otherwise, it is questionable to what extent they can attract new members and retain existing ones (Max, 2021; Randle/Dolnicar, 2009).

2. The role of volunteering young adults in the German and Japanese civil protection systems

2.1. Germany

Germany's civil protection system, involving federal, state, and local agencies, coordinates emergency responses. The Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) leads at the national level, while the 16 states manage their agencies, applying federal policies locally. Key components of Germany's civil protection include the Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW) for technical and disaster response, the German Red Cross (DRK), volunteer fire departments, and NGOs, all vital for community-level efforts.

One of the features of the German civil protection system is its collaborative approach, fostering cooperation between governmental bodies, NGOs, and volunteer organizations. The THW, for instance, relies heavily on volunteer engagement (86.000 people or 98 % of THW personnel are volunteers; Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, n.d.), with citizens trained to provide technical and logistical support during emergencies. Fire departments in Germany are almost unthinkable without volunteers, too: As of 2021, 1,014,155 volunteers were active in Germany's 23,977 volunteer fire brigades (in comparison to 35,875 professional firefighters in 111 professional fire brigades; Deutscher Feuerwehrverband, n.d.). Agencies like the German Red Cross (DRK) and the German Life-Saving Association (DLRG) share similar structural characteristics.

Youth groups blend social activities with playful civil protection elements in their regular meetings. Membership starts young and ends at a set age, leading to either a transition to the main organization or dual membership for a while.

2.2. Japan

Japan's civil protection system is a top-down approach. In the event of a large-scale disaster such as the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, the Prime Minister (Central Disaster Management Council) makes the final decision based on information from government agencies such as the Japan Meteorological Agency and consultation with the Cabinet Office (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2011). Following the Prime Minister's directive, the Cabinet Office informs prefectures and municipalities to mobilize disaster response teams, including self-defence forces and emergency services, to address the situation. In response to initial water-related disasters like floods and tsunamis, local volunteers, including fire brigades, play a key role in proactive measures like closing floodgates and evacuations. In fires, they assess and organize the scene until professional firefighters arrive, sometimes actively extinguishing fires (Takizawa, 2016). In Japan, without a THW equivalent, fire brigades handle technical support, with advanced technology tasks falling to specialized teams like the self-defence forces.

Volunteer teams from the Japanese Red Cross (JRC) and similar groups support disaster relief through rescue efforts and public disaster prevention education, enhancing community preparedness. (Japanese Red Cross Society 2022). In addition, local residents play an important role in developing district disaster prevention plans adopted as district policies. District disaster prevention plans are

developed with the participation of disaster response specialists from various fields, such as NPO volunteers, fire brigades, and the JRC, focusing on the local branch in charge of disaster prevention. Because this is a bottom-up approach, it plays a major role in establishing a support system that fits the characteristics of the community (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2014).

In Japan, volunteer fire corps are established in every municipality. In 2022, Japan's volunteer fire corps had around 783,600 members, marking the lowest count in the last ten years. This figure has been consistently declining over the years. In contrast, the total number of professional firefighting personnel has been on the rise, reaching approximately 167,500 in 2022.

3. Method

The empirical data has been gathered in semi-structured interviews with young volunteers in disaster management in Germany and Japan. In total, 9 interviews with 15 interviewees were conducted, thereof five interviews in Germany (4 individual interviews, 1 group interview with 4 participants) and 4 in Japan (1 individual interview, 3 group interviews with 2 participants each). Table 1 shows the composition of interviewees in this research.

Table 1: List of interviewees.

Age	Gender	Organization	Country
23	m	German Red Cross & German Life Saving Association (DLRG)	Germany
23	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Germany
21	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Germany
21	f	Volunteer Fire Department	Germany
18	f	Volunteer Fire Department	Germany
18	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Germany
19	m	Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW)	Germany
21	f	German Life Saving Association (DLRG)	Germany
22	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Japan
22	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Japan
22	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Japan
22	m	Volunteer Fire Department	Japan
21	f	Volunteer Fire Department	Japan
22	m	Japanese Red Cross	Japan
20	f	Japanese Red Cross	Japan

The interviewees were between 18 and 23 years old. The total average age of interviewees is 21.03 (Germany 20.5 years, Japan 21.6 years). The organizational affiliations represent the diversity of disaster management – including technical, medical and social tasks, as well as the operational and management level.

Interviewees were first asked for self-reports to understand their background, including the duration and nature of their volunteering, and the time they dedicate to training and deployment. The key focus was on their motivation for volunteering, explored through open-ended questions: Was there a specific reason to choose exactly this activity? What did motivate to join and what does motivate to stay involved (Clary et al. 1998)? Is there any specific gain that the volunteer gets out of the engagement?

The voluntary functions index (Clary et al., 1998) lists 6 main motivational factors: Protection, Values, Career, Social, Understanding, and Enhancement. By analysing motivational factors in both countries, a deeper understanding of the variety of motivational factors and their cultural embeddedness may evolve. Using identical interview and coding guidelines ensured comparability, revealing key insights into disaster management volunteering. The next section will detail these findings.

4. Results

4.1. Germany

Despite their young age of between 18 and 23 years, six out of seven interviewees already have spent a long part of their life in civil protection organizations. With one exception of having started nine months ago (at the time of the interview in August 2023), all other volunteers have joined a civil protection organization at least eight years ago and have been part of the youth units of their respective organizations. Since leaving their youth groups, all interviewees have joined the main unit, focusing on civil protection operations. Their motivations varied from seeking belonging, skill development, to an interest in risky professions:

I always found that quite fascinating, whenever they jetted off to the mission. (Fire-Ger-01)

The diverse sample includes various ranks from officers-in-training to squad leaders, with tasks tied to their organization's specialization. Despite different "career paths", responsibilities like participating in exercises and operations, and ensuring mutual support, are common. Interviewees view themselves as part of a dynamic system, always open to further training in both social and technical skills:

[T]he personal development, my further development of becoming a group leader. [...] That is, I believe, individually, but that is a point, which motivates me to continue with training, to also develop the personality. (RedCross-Ger-01)

When analyzing the results with regard to the voluntary functions according to Clary et al. (1998; also Clary/Snyder, 1999), a clear dominance of the social function can be seen among the interviewees from Germany. One characteristic that is traditionally associated with voluntary civil protection units appears to continue to be of particular importance for young people as well.

Regardless of the specific organization, fellow members are repeatedly described as “a second family”, even across organizational boundaries.

Civil protection volunteering involves facing unique, sometimes hazardous situations, making camaraderie crucial. Social activities play a key role in fostering unity among volunteers.

That's definitely [...] one of the aspects why I'm still there. Exactly, you rely on each other in the classic way during operations. You experience both good and bad things together. (Fire-Ger-01)

It's the beer and the bratwurst after the service, I think. (Fire-Ger-05)

Recognition plays a key role in volunteering, involving both internal appreciation and external acknowledgment from citizens and politicians. (Voluntary) leadership also requires recognition to effectively perform their voluntary roles. Out of the various voluntary functions (Clary et al., 1998), the protective aspect has not been mentioned at all. The career function seems more dominant here: Volunteering acts as a trial for those considering a professional career in the field, testing if it aligns with their interests and skills.

For me, it's also a very good preparation: What can I expect in the job and also the first basic courses are like: "OK, is this really what I want?" (Fire-Ger-05)

4.2 Japan

Most joined the JRC or fire brigade through referrals from close acquaintances, with a keen interest in disaster volunteer work.

At that time, the teacher in charge of the Japanese class was a volunteer who often went to volunteer like that, so he took me with him. (RedCross-Jap-01)

I was thinking of joining the club because I've been invited by my former soccer coach. (Fire-Jap-03)

Japanese voluntary firefighters emphasize training and competition preparation, blending physical exercises with tool use for a sporty approach to disaster readiness. Given that none of the interviewees in either groups have actual experience in real disaster response, their primary focus appears to be on preparedness.

The Japanese interviewees mentioned several functions of their volunteer engagement. Some of the responses were psychological, such as the fact that their voluntary activities help them feeling good and being proud of themselves:

I'm part of a firefighting organization, so I don't feel lonely after all. They always make me feel welcome. (Fire-Jap-03)

Almost all interviewees felt a strong responsibility for society, not only in disaster situations. It seemed that their own preparation for an actual disaster is a perceived obligation in helping individuals or communities in need:

I was thinking about whether there was anything that would be beneficial, and in that aspect, yes, it's for the people in the event of a disaster, well, it's for me, and it's for the people. (Fire-Jap-01)

It is interesting to note that for young people, the disaster relief efforts have had enough impact to actually lead to a job. For students in particular, this activity seems to have more or less influenced their job choices:

My motivation for joining [the voluntary fire brigade] was that I could use it to get a job. (Fire-Jap-02)

All respondents recognize the significance of possessing skills and knowledge in disaster preparedness to effectively handle natural disasters. Additionally, they appear to derive a sense of achievement from developing these skills through practical hands-on training.

I feel gratified when members tell me that I have improved in areas I previously struggled with. Hearing that I can now do things that I couldn't do before is what makes it all feel worthwhile to me. (Fire-Jap-03)

Fire brigades emphasized the social benefits of their involvement, such as meeting diverse community members and forming friendships, with social gatherings after training being a key aspect of their experience.

Well, every time, after the training is over, we all go out to eat. Yes, I enjoy that time. [...] I don't think I would have had the opportunity to interact with local seniors or older people if I hadn't had a place like this. This is the reason why I keep doing it. (Fire-Jap-04)

5. Discussion and Outlook

Young German volunteers often start their engagement through youth groups of civil protection organizations – which nationwide do have a remarkable number of members. Commonly, they experience some real work experience during emergencies and disasters at a young adult age. The Japanese youth, on the other hand, are undoubtedly familiar with natural disasters, but actual experience as a responder in emergencies and disasters is rare – training focuses rather on disaster preparedness, not so much on everyday emergencies.

In Japan, skill enhancement through competitive activities is favored over structured progression, unlike in Germany where competitive firefighting events are present but less emphasized. German volunteers focus on fitness and sportiveness, especially in water rescue, and are quickly introduced to emergency situations. Japan prepares for sudden, large-scale disasters with prevention-oriented training, whereas Germany's training is reactive, aimed at immediate responses to smaller emergencies. This reflects the distinct training and volunteerism approaches shaped by each country's unique context.

Volunteering provides social benefits, with Japanese respondents highlighting its role in reducing loneliness. Both German and Japanese youths value the social connections made through volunteering, likening it to a second family and counteracting the isolation intensified by the pandemic.

The German respondents showed a greater focus on aligning the benefits of participation with their personal goals, whereas the Japanese interviewees displayed a more general motivation towards

preparing for natural disasters and assisting others. In Germany, attracting young people to civil protection activities seems more feasible if these activities align with their individual needs and if this aspect is emphasized and promoted within the organization. Conversely, in Japan, where the threat of natural disasters is a constant, promoting activities and campaigns that highlight the triple benefits of contributing to the welfare of others while also enhancing one's own disaster-related skills as well as safeguarding oneself from loneliness and isolation could be particularly effective. These insights aim to contribute also to the scientific discourse on “crisis management in transition” (Max 2019), in which “unaffiliated responders” and “informal citizen responses” (Lorenz et al., 2018) seem to continue to be phenomena that have not been satisfyingly addressed. Understanding the motivational factors of young people is one important factor for adapting existing structures. As Lorenz et al. (2018: 363) put it, “existing hierarchies and structures of professional rescue services prevent unaffiliated responders from being incorporated (Barsky et al., 2007; Helsloot & Ruitenbergh, 2004; Skar et al., 2016).” If this does not happen, young people may stay out of the traditional organizations but engage in civil protection anyway, e.g., as an unaffiliated responder, which may not be in the interest of those organizations.

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