Chapter 6
The Experience of Volunteers and Frontline Workers in Marginalized Communities Across Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the experience of volunteers and frontline workers who serve in marginalized communities across Southeast Asia. More frontline workers and volunteers are taking the initiative to support marginalized communities in the region. With the rise of human rights violations towards marginalized communities in the past decade, frontline workers and volunteers face unique experiences in working with these communities, ranging from stigma and discrimination to unaddressed levels of burnout. Based on the authors' experiences working with these communities and the summary of the interviews with fellow frontline workers, the experience of working with marginalized communities, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS and refugees, are elaborated in this chapter. Current challenges as well as recommendations are highlighted to ensure that the frontline workers and volunteers are supported throughout their vital work towards society.

INTRODUCTION

In community service, frontline workers serve as the first point of contact and avenue of support for clients. Even though they are usually associated with healthcare workers and supporting physicians in a medical setting, the roles are changing to fit the current needs of the communities in the environment they live. Now, frontline workers are divided into a several categories – administrative support, community outreach or public health, physician-related care as well as mental health (Ross, Svajlenka,

& Wiliams, 2014; IntraHealth, 2016). However, the increased spread of social and health issues has encouraged organizations to create a new form of workforce which is the volunteer sector. Currently, millions of volunteers are engaging with communities on the ground to deliver healthcare, education and social protection services in areas with limited access to health and government support (Bansal, 2012).

Volunteers and primary frontline workers are currently recognized as vital components in the area of community service. Volunteerism and community work has been cited as the society's Third Sector which contributes to the growth of the nation. It is recognized as an important agent of democracy due to the diverse backgrounds of its volunteers and workers that transcends borders (United Nations Volunteers, 2015).Local support is a huge contribution to get communities involved in managing social issues and strengthening public health programs. With the reduction of international funding, grassroots NGOs and campaigns have included more volunteers as part of their workforce (Bansal, 2012).

It is acknowledged that volunteers and non- medical frontline workers contribute to increased or- ganizational efficiency by handling the 'human' aspect of the work such as administrative duties, con- necting with community leaders, and managing networks between communities (Randle & Dolnicar, 2012). Most of them are posted in areas impacted by poverty, famine, or war whereas others do focus on urbanized communities which have less visible issues such as child abuse, gender-based violence, and discrimination. This is based on the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs), a declaration signed by a total of 189 countries to eradicate poverty across the globe (Brassard, Sherraden, & Lough, 2010; MDG Achievement Fund, 2017). There are a total of eight goals in the declaration as of the year 2015 – the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education for all; gender equality and women empowerment; the reduction of child mortality rate; the improvement of maternal health; the work to combat HIV, AIDS, malaria and other diseases; environment sustainability and; the development of a global partnership (Jung, 2010; United Nations Development Programme, 2017).

However, frontline workers and volunteers aren't just labels or figures in an annual report. They are people. They are human beings with emotions and lives that have been enriched by the work that they do to serve those who are less fortunate. As both frontline workers and volunteers based in Malaysia, we were given the opportunity to experience what it was like to be on the ground with a few of the marginal- ized communities. Based on our combined experiences as well as interviews with our fellow colleagues in our line of work, this chapter highlights the characteristics and challenges that frontline workers and volunteers experience as they work with marginalized communities in Southeast Asia.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia is a region well-known for its melting pot of cultures and diversity. With a population of roughly 600 million as of 2010, Southeast Asia is considered as one of the least populated regions in Asia with rapid urbanization and growing equality between genders and social statuses (Jones, 2013; CARE, 2014). Despite its smaller visibility in global politics, economics, and global health as compared to India and China, the region is currently undergoing rapid expansion, thanks to financial support from China (Hashim et al., 2012). Therefore, it is no surprise to know that the economic growth of Southeast Asia is a source of admiration and envy for other regions (Patel, 2017). However, seeing this region through rose-tinted glasses is deemed unwise by many. Since development has accelerated across the region in the past decades, this gives way to a raised awareness of the social issues that have plagued its citizens such as child abuse and racial violence that has displaced countless people to different areas.

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