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# research

## Voluntary 'organic' leadership for community resilience

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This article investigates the qualities of bottom-up leadership that emerges voluntarily and collectively in response to adverse events. With an eye on better understanding the resilience of marginalised communities in the Global South, it seeks to illustrate how bottom-up 'organic' leadership is a clear manifestation of place leadership at the local level. Findings are drawn from qualitative field data gathered in 10 Southern communities. These data illustrate that people are often willing and able to organise organically in response to adversity – and are largely successful at navigating the complex challenges they encounter. However, the long-term sustainability of organic leadership in self-organised groups often requires balanced supports from external actors. Better recognition of the added value of voluntary self-organisation happening in vulnerable communities can provide a platform for more innovative, experimental and co-creative solutions to manage risk.

**key words** volunteers • resilience • humanitarian • self-organisation • mutual aid

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Recent years have seen a growing intensity of instability and fragility in many countries – a result of global issues ranging from environmental degradation and irreversible climate change to civil unrest and the dislocation of people ([World Economic Forum, 2019](#)). These instabilities create multiple vulnerabilities for people at different levels, while also opening up opportunities for interventions by different actors at each level – from local to transnational. Across these different ecologies, the contributions made by citizens and communities are often undervalued. While supportive governmental response is critical, efforts to build resilience often emphasise the role of state institutions without recognising the critical importance of community groups that self-organise to confront challenges. As such, there is a need to better understand how contributions made by people in their own communities can enhance their collective resilience, or their 'ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events' ([National Research Council, 2012: 1](#)). Efforts to understand these contributions highlight people's will and agency to bounce back from adverse events through self-organised leadership.

In recognition of the essential contributions made by community groups, efforts to strengthen community resilience over the past two decades have made a noticeable shift away from a top-down, centralised and hierarchical ‘command-and-control’ style of risk reduction towards a style of ‘people-centred’ or participatory action (Scolobig et al, 2015). This decentralised approach recognises the importance of leadership emerging from a range of traditionally disempowered stakeholders, with a perceptible shift of responsibility for risk management from government to civil society and the voluntary sector. It recognises that people are not only vulnerable but also capable of self-organising to lead and strengthen the resilience of their own communities (Maly, 2014). This comparably democratic approach recognises human agency as a key vehicle for building community resilience as it draws on people’s expertise, skills and resources to manage risk (De Weijer, 2013).

One of the basic ingredients needed for an effective, localised, community resilience approach is the presence of ‘grassroots leadership that comes from within the community and truly represents its uniqueness and aspirations’ (Ganor and Ben-Lavy, 2003: 105). People in resilient communities adapt to shocks and stresses by self-organising. Because vulnerable people often bear the heaviest burden of coping and rebuilding, they often have little choice but to take primary responsibility and help each other restore their lost livelihoods and resources (Oxley, 2013). Consistent with this view, metrics of a decentralised community resilience approach emphasise the importance of collective leadership that transcends the work of any individual (Magis, 2010).

## Place leadership and community resilience

The decentralised nature of community resilience is highly relevant to discussions of place leadership. Rather than focusing on individual qualities, place leadership locates value in the *social and relational connections* between people located in specific places (Beer et al, 2019). It looks beyond the formal authority of individual actors to understand how people mobilise and coordinate to share leadership – often in fragmented and time-dependent ways (Collinge et al, 2010; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017). As such, local place leadership focuses on collaborative and horizontally based relationships founded on principles of mutual cooperation (Beer and Clower, 2014; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017).

Place leadership is particularly relevant for community resilience because questions of place leadership are concerned with understanding how people come together to improve a particular place (Edwards, 2011; Bailey et al, 2013). Consistent with these questions, community resilience is concerned with understanding how the specific qualities of people located in a geographical community enable them to collectively recover and bounce back from adverse events (Oxley, 2013). In localised situations where people depend heavily on each other for survival, community resilience relies on the manifestation of a ‘collective efficacy’ or shared leadership in place (Hannah et al, 2009; Kenney and Phibbs, 2015).

The need for shared local leadership is particularly evident in low-resource communities in the Global South,<sup>1</sup> where work by formal non-profit organisations is uncommon. The principle of ‘redundancy’ associated with resilient communities recognises that, in a complex system with many actors, each party brings different strengths and perspectives. These actors can provide back-up or inter-changeability

when one source or set of actors is weak or inept (De Weijer, 2013; Arnold et al, 2014). This principle has also been referred to as 'institutional multiplicity' (Oxley, 2013), highlighting 'nested institutions' that enable action by different sets of actors to address problems at different levels (Simonsen et al, 2014). Thus, while local leadership is critical to community resilience, it is ultimately limited if isolated or unsupported. This article assesses the role of place leadership as a nested form of governance within wider geographic institutions that operate in the Global South.

Differences in geographies create a distinctive set of qualifiers across manifestations of place leadership. In the Global North, the emergence of local leadership is hypothetically dependent on the presence of 'slack resources' (Stimson et al, 2009). According to this hypothesis, the emergence of local voluntary leadership (typically conceived as those working in a formal or organisation-based context) is dependent on having excess or uncommitted human resources who are able to 'devote [their time] to questions of strategic significance' (Beer and Clower, 2014: 11). This concept is also reflected in the human capital arguments of volunteer resource theories (Wilson and Musick, 1997), as well as dominant status theories (Smith, 1994), which have been used to explain people's participation in volunteering more generally. While these accounts are helpful for explaining the emergence of voluntary leadership in the Global North, they are less helpful at explaining emergent voluntary leadership in under-resourced communities in the Global South. In the Global North, people's motivations to help each other when times are hard often result in 'nice but not necessary' favours offered by proactive citizens with slack resources (Butcher and Einolf, 2017). In contrast, in communities under pressure for survival without such surplus resources, leadership typically emerges out of necessity. Discrepancies in the need for slack resources across North-South geographies are not entirely surprising considering that the key comparative studies informing discussion of place leadership are only generalisable to nations located in the Global North (Sydow et al, 2011; Bailey et al, 2013; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017; Beer et al, 2019).

While place leadership investigates the complexity of systems of place operating at different levels across diverse geographies, this article focuses on local communities in the Global South. With an eye on better understanding community resilience in marginalised communities, it investigates the qualities of bottom-up local leadership that emerge in response to adverse events. It seeks to illustrate how, when linked to specific community responses, bottom-up leadership is a clear manifestation of place leadership at the local level. The various conceptions of bottom-up leadership relevant to this discussion encompass the varied lingos of:

- organic leadership (Jing and Avery, 2008; Bailey et al, 2013);
- collective leadership (Militello and Benham, 2010; Kenney and Phibbs, 2015);
- distributed leadership (MacNeill and Steiner, 2010; Edwards, 2011); and
- *ubuntu* leadership (see later in this article) (Msila, 2008; Ncube, 2010; Setlhodi, 2019).

This article extends the conception of 'organic leadership', as perhaps the most well-conceptualised bottom-up approach depicting the emergence of voluntary collective leadership in response to shocks and stresses.

## The organic emergence of voluntary leadership in hard times

Organic leadership has several defining attributes:

- it is characterised by voluntary self-organisation embedded in group and team processes, with temporal rather than long-term leadership by any one individual;
- it requires frequent personal interaction and communication – thus, is inherently place-based; and
- it is a preferred style of leadership in turbulent, rapidly changing and dynamic environments that require quick and innovative leadership responses (Rok, 2009; Woodward and Shaffakat, 2017).

As a manifestation of heterarchical cooperation between people in response to challenges, self-organisation is a prototypical indicator of organic leadership (Jing and Avery, 2008).

Organic leadership cannot be divorced from place because the relational capital required to make organic leadership work voluntarily is dependent on regular and repeat interactions of trust-based reciprocal exchanges between people (Bailey et al, 2013). Thus, communication and attention to process are both highly important to organic leadership – as are long-term relationships of trust (Woodward and Shaffakat, 2017). Relying on previous norms of trust established by regular and repeat interactions, collective, heterarchical and localised leadership will hypothetically emerge when exogenous shocks hit. As articulated by Sarmiento and Herard (2015: 227), in the midst of crises ‘an organic leadership often evolves to articulate the community’s interests in common, making the neighbourhood a site for decision making, where residents seek to express their sense of autonomy and agency over territorial space’.

Due to its informal and voluntary nature, organic leadership in local places is often hidden, difficult to study and overshadowed by formal governance structures (Sotarauta, 2018). While organic leadership shares with place leadership a focus on collective and heterarchical structures of governance, much of the scholarship on place leadership has discussed how to foster engagement *with* local communities. Organic leadership is more narrowly focused on voluntary leadership *by* local communities as community-founded and self-organised organic processes. It is considered a particularly effective method for adaptation in quickly changing situations, allowing for innovative responses and mutual problem solving (Stimson et al, 2009; Sarmiento and Herard, 2015).

As a spontaneous and collective ‘coming together’ during times of crisis, *voluntary action forms the backbone of organic leadership*. On the one hand, voluntary bystanders frequently take charge in the aftermath of disasters and assume critical leadership roles in risk mitigation, disaster response and recovery. While this is often true, this article is more interested in understanding *voluntary responses that are manifested collectively*. Such manifestations are common in communities in the Global South where people rely on each other for survival in hard times. In the African context, for instance, this form of organic leadership has been conceived as *ubuntu* leadership, which emphasises the voluntary, relational, collaborative, interconnective and collective aspects of leadership in place (Msila, 2008; Ncube, 2010; Setlhodi, 2019). As expressed by Setlhodi (2019: 5), ‘[t]he currency of ubuntu leadership underlies values-based practices including

collectivism and voluntarism' and is embodied in idioms such as 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

Beyond Africa, similar culturally specific notions of voluntary and collective leadership models are evident in many resource-poor communities – conceptualised for example in the Javanese notion of *gotong royong* or 'fostering together' through mutual cooperation (Irawanto et al, 2011). A common feature of leadership across these different cultures is its voluntary and organic nature tied to values of collective responsibility, interconnectedness and networked reciprocity (Porter and Monard, 2001; Patel et al, 2007; Aked, 2015; Einolf et al, 2016). When situations are threatening, group qualities such as cohesion, trust, commitment and identification bring people in collective leadership to buffer against threats, as well as the negative impacts of threats (Hannah et al, 2009).

Despite its value, organic leadership is not without critics or challenges. Some question whether 'ordinary' members of a community have the desire to voluntarily take on responsibility during times of crisis, or the capacity to do so (Scolobig et al, 2015). As with other collective action problems, the likelihood that voluntary leadership will emerge organically is not guaranteed. As problematised by Beer and Clower (2014: 11): 'Despite apparent need, leadership roles may not be taken up. Not every vacuum gets filled, which in turn implies that the leadership of places carries with it both the risk of poor leadership and the risk of the absence of leadership.'

Additional concerns acknowledge the psychological and resource constraints of people in poverty, which are further stretched and exacerbated during crises and conflict (Few et al, 2016). A further concern is that, in the absence of a centralised control, leadership that is dependent on voluntary action may exacerbate uncertainty and insecurity (Jing and Avery, 2008). Some also worry that the promotion of organic leadership at the local level could abdicate responsibility from governments to manage risks and responses – pushing responsibility to under-resourced voluntary groups (Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

Despite these challenges and concerns, people are often willing and able to voluntarily organise in response to adversity, and they are largely successful at navigating the complex challenges they encounter. Illustrating such responses is a key objective of this article. It situates self-organised and voluntary expressions of organic leadership as a valuable people-centred mechanism operating in resilient communities, and as an invaluable complement to top-down, command-and-control systems (De Weijer, 2013). Summaries from field research demonstrate how the attributes and qualifiers of organic leadership contribute to various processes of community resilience – such as the value of self-organisation and the importance of social cohesion, trust, connectivity and networking. On the flipside, it also illustrates how organic leadership can occasionally exacerbate exclusivity and exploitation.

## Methodology

In order to assess the attributes of voluntary and collective forms of leadership that emerge organically during challenging times, this article draws on field research across 10 discrete communities in the Global South. This field research was initially conducted as background research for the 2018 *State of the world's volunteerism report* (Lough et al, 2018). During the research process, field researchers noticed that: 'In most cases, there was no [formal] organization behind these volunteers' activities, but

these were also not completely informal or unstructured. Rather, what we observe is a form of “community-encouraged” or “community-structured” volunteerism’ (United Nations Volunteers, 2017: 3). As a study of voluntary action, this article embeds such observations of community-structured volunteerism within a framework of organic leadership. The voluntary action embodied in the field research assessed informal and collective citizen engagement – including mutual aid, self-help and other forms of civic participation that reflect grassroots leadership and engagement (Leigh et al, 2011).

The field research followed an ethnographic and comparative case study design. The principal investigator supervised a four-person technical research team, who provided support and quality assurance to 29 field researchers. The field researchers included a mix of international and national researchers who were responsible for conducting primary research activities in 15 communities during the summer of 2017. Ten of these communities (that is, those located in the Global South) were selected for inclusion in this article. Two of the selected communities were in Latin America (Bolivia, Guatemala), three from the Asia-Pacific region (Myanmar, the Philippines and Sri Lanka) and five from sub-Saharan Africa (Burundi, Madagascar, Malawi, Sudan and Tanzania). As part of the selection criteria, each of the communities had shown evidence of notable voluntary and collective community responses to recent shocks and stresses.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted using a semi-formal interview guide and coding schema that were detailed in an extensive field research implementation manual (Lough et al, 2017). Initial data analysis included qualitative coding and interpretation of all interview transcripts using a coding scheme designed to categorise the distinctive contributions of voluntary action to community resilience and the challenges involved. The analysis that informs this article collated relevant findings from across the 10 community reports to identify significant manifestations of organic leadership in diverse local contexts. The total sample used to inform these reports was based on 87 focus group discussions (with an average of nine people per group), 121 semi-formal interviews and 21 informal interviews. Taken together, they reflect the combined perspectives of around 960 participants.

While these data are extensive, they are not without limitations. As a cross-cultural study, language and translation issues often limited the depth of information that could be extracted from the interviews, while cultural misunderstanding provided additional barriers – with some degree of trust and suspicion from respondents reported by the field researchers. In addition, some of these researchers were previously unfamiliar with qualitative research and thus found it challenging to follow research protocol and to interpret and code the data according to the proposed coding scheme. Another limitation of relevance to this study is that women and young people were often poorly represented in comparison with more dominant groups. Despite these limitations, the data provide several new insights on the nature of organic voluntary leadership by local communities responding to shocks and stresses.

## Findings

Findings from these data are presented in this section in three broad categories that illustrate connections between voluntary, self-organised and place-dependent organic leadership in the context of community resilience. The first two subsections examine key determinants that encouraged or stifled the emergence of organic leadership.

The third subsection then turns to a description of several perceived advantages and disadvantages of organic leadership as contextualised in under-resourced local places in the Global South.

### *The emergence of organic leadership in the Global South*

Concrete examples from the field research illustrated how people came together organically to prepare for, prevent and/or deal with the effects of conflict and crises. Examples included the voluntary provision of local security systems for the protection of cattle and property, planting and protecting marshes and forests at risk, collectively strengthening infrastructure (roads, bridges, water drainage systems, wells, water supplies and so on) and otherwise buttressing their own communities against anticipated threats. As one example among many, members of a focus group in Madagascar described their collective efforts to rebuild and maintain a canal that was regularly destroyed by flooding:

‘During the dry season, we work together to repair the canals before the rainy season. We do it ourselves, we don’t wait for the state because our lives rely on it.... If we didn’t perform these activities, they wouldn’t be provided by anyone else.... We are the first and the only people concerned by our problems, so it belongs to us to solve them. We can’t take the liberty to wait for external people to bring solutions to problems that are ours....’

The perception ‘if we don’t do it, who will?’ was a frequently drawn expression in response to queries about leader agency. This expression was particularly evident in more isolated and rural areas, as well as in urban environments where self-organisation was a natural outgrowth of low trust in formal authorities.

While self-organisation may not be the ideal solution in many circumstances, the presence of command-and-control systems to coordinate a response and recovery was not always trusted or immediately available in resource-poor communities – making it necessary to self-organise around shared goals. One community member from Sudan described how the process of organic leadership functioned in her community as they worked together to protect their farms from conflicts with pastoralists:

‘We hold a meeting and count the people who are willing to volunteer. Then we divide ourselves into groups and determine the number of days to work, which is normally two days per week during rainy season. In case of emergencies, we call for a meeting and together we decide what to do.’

Similar processes were described across many different types of stresses and shocks endured by these communities – from the collection and distribution of water and seeds in times of drought, to the rebuilding of roads following mudslides and floods. Out of necessity, and with few alternatives to sustain their livelihoods, neighbours came together in shared governance, and with rotating and temporal leadership roles, to tackle the challenge. In addition to necessity and obligation associated with the low availability of resources, two additional conditions were frequently associated with the organic emergence of shared leadership in local places: solidarity and proximity.

Community members emphasised the presence of solidarity or ‘power with others’ that both precipitated, and was reinforced by, mutual assistance. As noted earlier, motivations for voluntary and collective action were tied up in local concepts such as *ubuntu* or humanity towards others. Similar concepts were mentioned in other contexts, such as:

- *fihavanana* (Malagasy) – referencing that all people are kin, of one blood, and rely on each other for mutual support;
- *solidaridad* (Spanish) – working together for the common cause; and
- *ujamaa* or *harambee* (Swahili) – pulling together to solve a community problem.

These concepts, which emphasise the inclusion and oneness of all people, were also central to perceptions of resilience in their community. When groups shared a strong sense of solidarity, organic leadership was more likely to emerge as a means for managing and sharing risk among peers.

Another characteristic that fostered organic leadership was volunteers’ proximity to others. Because these community-based leaders are part and parcel of their communities, they often described their obligations to help as “a human impulse” to relieve the suffering of those they know and interact with. As one community member in Sudan stated: “We are in the best position to identify vulnerable people. Because we are local, we know people and we meet them every day, but also because we share the same concerns and issues, we know how to identify the most urgent needs and who should benefit first.”

The importance of proximity was most evident in people’s descriptions of immediate response to disasters; it was far less evident in long-term prevention and adaptation activities. Apart from mutual aid, this may help explain why descriptions of organic leadership in the Global South were often associated with situations of desperation or obligation. The sense of urgency associated with proximity may prioritise collective action around immediate and urgent needs over less-urgent preventative activities.

### *Advantages of organic leadership for community resilience*

Several advantages of organic leadership over more hierarchical forms were evident from community members’ descriptions of local voluntary action in adverse times. These advantages were wide-ranging – spanning from benefits of scale, speed and adaptability, to enhanced autonomy, ownership and contextual knowledge that local groups tended to self-organise around when facing adversity.

First, community-based voluntary action had the capacity to engage large numbers of people in spontaneous efforts to improve their communities at scale, far beyond the mobilising capacity of command-and-control centres – at least in the short term. When the conditions described in the previous subsection were met, these small groups were able to self-mobilise in response to crises. As highly diffuse groups operating on a massive scale, these groups represented a feasible way to take action – especially when communities had no formal budget or financial capacity for more formal support. Thus, from a cost-effectiveness perspective, self-organisation was a way for communities to manage costs; thereby making possible activities that would otherwise be impossible to advance from their scarce financial resources. On the other hand, people were careful to assert serious limitations of



reliance on self-organised action over a long-term basis, which are discussed in the following subsection.

In addition to advantages of scale and cost, local community groups were the first and fastest actors to organise in response to problems. People consistently described the value of community-based voluntary action for its rapid responsiveness. One example was provided by a community member from Guatemala who illustrated that the emergence of organic leadership was an urgent necessity in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake:

'Somebody told us [a local resident's] house was destroyed so we organised the neighbours to lend a hand. We all went to the place; we didn't ask permission ... and he was there trapped, and we had to figure out how to get him out.... There were 12 houses that were affected. We were able to get everyone out that same day.'

Often, these self-led groups were not only the quickest to organise in response to crisis but also the only responders available on the front lines during emergencies, thereby filling a critical function in the immediate aftermath of disasters and conflict.

Beyond the immediacy of crises, community members also reported that local and self-organised voluntary action was often more flexible, adaptive, innovative and responsive to local needs than top-down forms of formal leadership. Community members emphasised their freedom to choose responses and reactions from a wide menu of options – being less hampered or bounded by formal organisational protocol and rules. Independence from central commands, along with greater freedom from organisational policies and procedures, allowed people to quickly adapt to sudden and unexpected changes. Many case examples illustrated how this freedom enabled people to devise and experiment with innovative solutions to persistent problems. The informal nature of organically led projects also allowed for the temporal rotation of shared leadership – depending on people's skills and availability. As one respondent from Sri Lanka stated: "We distribute our tasks, and when someone isn't able to come, another one takes over."

The value of flexibility was particularly evident for marginalised and minority groups organising to meet their specific needs. People within these groups banded together to support their shared needs, which were often overlooked by more powerful and mainstream groups, as well as by formal institutions. One example included a women's group in Sudan who initiated a plantation campaign to plant trees around villages against desertification and related food scarcity experienced by their families. People with disabilities living in a refugee camp in Malawi who organised a programme to meet their specific educational and access needs is another clear example. These expressions of organic leadership were tightly connected to place and context – reflecting specific needs and priorities of the people living in places and spaces of vulnerability.

Beyond minority groups, locally based volunteers of all types drew on their wealth of indigenous knowledge to enhance resilience-building efforts in their own communities. In addition, this knowledge provided potential value for critical feedback to external actors. As will be seen later in this article, although local groups could tap into collective knowledge networks to stretch the depth of information and feedback provided to other stakeholders, this feedback was not always well received. On the

other hand, several community members cited examples of how feedback from their group provided context to the issues and multiple vulnerabilities experienced by their community – claiming improvements in the legitimacy and validity of external interventions and programming decisions.

The complex relationship between place-based local leadership and non-local external leadership was a recurrent theme in people's discussions and descriptions of voluntary action. Organic leadership emerging from voluntary action was often described as an expression of autonomy, as well as a pathway to enhance ownership. Many community members expressed a preference for solving problems internally (that is, within their community) without waiting for assistance from outside their community – from either governments or humanitarian organisations. As one participant from the field research in Madagascar expressed: "Our community is like a household. As much as we can, we do not call external people to sort the problem, we try to do it internally." Such expressions were partially connected with statements of collective responsibility emerging from voluntary engagement to strengthen "our community". Some also concluded that voluntary action in their community made them more excited, committed and influential. Furthermore, the governance structures that emerged during the initial self-organisation of groups to tackle an immediate threat often remained long after the disaster was over – in both autonomous and semi-autonomous forms. Thus, what can start with an emergent voluntary leadership during threats and crisis can lead to longer-term and more complex shared governance systems to enhance resilience when future danger arises.

A final advantage of organic forms of leadership that emerge during crisis is a strengthened sense of solidarity, trust and recommitment to place. In this sense, organic leadership creates a virtuous circle with positive feedback loops for group and community solidarity. As noted earlier in this article, while qualities such as trust, mutual commitment and obligation all enhance the likelihood that people will self-organise, the successful implementation of co-led projects can further strengthen shared bonds between members of the group. Strong group bonds and robust social networks are indicators of long-term community resilience (Oxley, 2013). As discussed in the following subsection, however, community-level voluntary action was not automatically inclusive, and primarily tended to foster cohesive networks and relationships of solidarity between people with shared backgrounds and circumstances.

### *Challenges of organic leadership for community resilience*

There was little evidence to suggest that organic leadership emerged in groups composed of people from significantly different social, ethnic, age or even gender identities or backgrounds. Because expressions of organic leadership emerged from voluntary and collective action, people within resulting self-organised groups that shared leadership responsibilities typically had full freedom to exclude others – and often appeared to. The social cohesion circumscribed within one group appeared to foster the exclusion of people from other groups. In these cases, self-organised groups presented the danger of being or becoming exclusive – thereby potentially weakening collective responses to conflict or crisis at the wider community level. For instance, a voluntary loan group in Sri Lanka working to strengthen the financial capability of its members was effectively a closed network, which limited opportunities for new members (often those in greater need of financial support) from joining.

At the community level, such exclusions are not positive indicators of resilience. The exclusion of young people, women and people with dissenting opinions was commonly mentioned in other case examples.

Challenges also emerged among groups that actively sought to give more leadership responsibility to those who would otherwise be excluded. For example, one group leader in Madagascar described the challenges with actively including more young people in their *focontany* (the smallest administrative division in a village):

'Before it used to be easier to organise ourselves; the older people take command and make decisions, and the others execute it without discussion. But now the young people want to take responsibility and ask too many questions before executing ... they bring new and good ideas, but they also ask questions.'

This challenge was quite uncommon in examples of place leadership described in the field – as organically formed groups were more likely to exclude than to explicitly include people with dissenting backgrounds and views. The exceptions suggest a clear potential upside, however, as questions arising from difference may ultimately result in more innovative and relevant responses.

As a further challenge, not all people desired to be included in groups with a collective responsibility. Group members who volunteered their time to provide help also typically expected help in return; the collective obligations embedded in the groups often embodied a reciprocal form of giving and receiving. Thus, while shared leadership and responsibility were protective factors associated with community resilience, they were also sometimes viewed as a burdensome expectation. In instances whether these expectations were tied up in survival strategies, these concerns were further exacerbated as they appeared to disproportionately burden those with less to give in return. Those who fail to reciprocate fairly can be shunned, fined, stigmatised or otherwise punished by other members of the group. As one focus group in Madagascar articulated:

'No one refuses to help. And if someone refuses, they will be sanctioned. The community will reject and ignore that person who refused to help. This sanction is called *hazofotsy*. This person won't have friends and family and will need to manage their lives on their own, in case they have problems, no one will help them. It is our way of sending someone to prison.... We live according to the saying: "Stone are those who are united and sand those that move apart."'

Similar sentiments were expressed in most of the communities where self-organisation and mutual aid were an expected response to adverse events and crises. Respondents consistently emphasised the peril of standing alone in the face of persistent challenges. As expressed by one villager in Burundi, "[not taking part] makes you risk being overlooked by other members of the community.... It might be dangerous not to take part as others."

Unfortunately, choosing not to "take part" is often the most dangerous for those with the least to give. The characteristics that underpin self-organisation are the same characteristics that can set it up to be unfair. Those without resources often

have little recourse but to contribute their time. As one woman from Sri Lanka articulated: “People who have money in town may solve problems by paying money, but we solve problems by our own cooperation because we are not rich.” As a largely unregulated practice, self-organisation relies on organic mechanisms of self-governance that may not always protect the interests of vulnerable people with the least to give. Those in a constant state of stress or crisis are at a higher risk of exploitation due to sheer desperation – particularly when ‘voluntary participation’ in group processes is essentially mandatory.

These inequities highlight several essential limitations to the self-organisation that characterises organic leadership in local places. When systems are closed, the resources, knowledge and expertise embedded within these systems are limited. This challenge was illustrated in case examples that described group leaders who provided the wrong (or low) knowledge or expertise, who had poor access to critical technical information sources, who practised beyond their competencies or who otherwise unintentionally caused harm. Many respondents articulated the value of tapping into new sources of knowledge, technical expertise and capacity from outside the local system.

Relatedly, although respondents provided many examples of self-organisation in the immediate response to challenges, they consistently asserted how difficult it was to maintain these voluntary efforts over the long term without ongoing complementary support. In situations where emergencies were complex or local capacity was very weak, respondents emphasised the high value of district-level, national or international organisations that play a supporting role by financing and coordinating humanitarian initiatives or developmental resources. In Madagascar, for example, communities formed their own security groups to deal with cattle rustling through voluntary *dinas* (self-organised security groups). However, the efficacy of these groups was greatly strengthened after a district-level initiative was established to support the communities’ voluntary actions with additional resources. In contrast, research participants in Myanmar highlighted that a key barrier to long-term organic local governance was “no official structural cooperation between any volunteering group and the township’s administrative department”.

Finally, although complementary responsibility between self-organised groups and wider administrative bodies was often described as an ideal outcome, local groups were also viewed by some as potentially competing with higher governance structures characterising governments, non-governmental organisations and other actors in humanitarian and development organisations. Because the people-centred processes that characterise organic leadership mark a perceptible shift of responsibility from governments to civil society, some communities expressed concerns that encouraging community groups to take the lead may abdicate responsibility from governments to manage risks and hazards. While this was not an entirely common sentiment, it was a concern for some community groups.

## Conclusions

The findings presented in this article illustrate several of the advantages, disadvantages and general characteristics of organic leadership that emerged in local communities in the Global South. By critically appraising the complex ways that organic leadership is expressed through voluntary and collective self-organisation, the article provides new

information about the complementary aspects of voluntary and organic leadership as a means of strengthening community resilience in Southern communities.

Consistent with characteristics of place leadership, findings from this research highlighted community identification as a key precursor to action, as well as to shared ownership of the problem and solution (see also [Trickett and Lee, 2010](#)). The findings also illustrated the value of organic leadership by local communities as community-founded and self-organised organic processes. These findings provide an alternative perspective to much of the previous scholarship on place leadership from the Global North, which tends to focus on how leaders can engage *with* local communities rather than on leadership *by* local communities.

The findings also illustrate why organic forms of leadership are common in isolated, vulnerable and fragile locations, and why voluntary leadership is considered an essential part of communal survival strategies. In response to adverse circumstances, organic leaders in self-organised groups often emerged in scale, quickly and with the adaptability and ownership needed for an effective response in crises. These findings are consistent with theories of place leadership, which suggest that self-organising in place is essential for tailoring strategies to the specific needs of communities ([Beer and Clower, 2014](#)). However, they also suggest that people self-organise in response to problems without or without (that is, independent of) tailored strategies from external actors.

Tied to local geographies, such expressions of organic leadership embodied a collective governance structure with indigenous knowledge of cultural customs. Linkages between the proximity to others and the emergence of organic leadership are consistent with theories of place leadership, which suggest that place leaders tend to be motivated by their strong attachment to place and the people that occupy that space ([Horlings, 2012](#)), as well as the importance of trust and relational capital to leadership in specific spaces (see [Beer et al, 2019](#)). However, in contrast to much of the previous scholarship, this research illustrates collective and relational expressions of leadership over the more individual expressions.

A further benefit of this study relates to theorising about the role and importance of slack resources for the emergence of place leadership ([Stimson et al, 2009](#)). As noted earlier in this article, not every void in leadership gets filled and the emergence of collective leadership to tackle needs may never happen regardless of need. In contrast to scholarship hypothesising the need for slack resources, determinants of organic leadership in the Global South emphasised urgency and the inherent lack of resources, human or otherwise, as key motivating factors for action. Across the research communities, even people with highly stretched time and resources regularly contributed their distinctive assets and capacities in response to stresses in their communities – often drawing down their own scarce resources to help. These community-based volunteers assumed leadership with or without a formal shift of responsibility – taking on much of the responsibility for solutions through spontaneous actions motivated by shared solidarity within their communities. While laudable, such expressions of self-organised leadership were often the only option for people in poor and isolated communities, and thus came at a price – particularly when sustained over a long duration. The types of issues that self-organised groups regularly dealt with often stretched them beyond their capacity to tackle these issues on their own.

While it is unlikely that people will stop voluntarily assuming responsibility when directly confronted with immediate and proximate crises, the findings indicate that

failure to support and sustain these efforts can result in harm to volunteer leaders over the short and long term. Systemic perspectives value shared responsibility and respect the complex and overlapping roles and responsibilities of civil society, governments and the voluntary sector at different levels of place (Simonsen et al, 2014). The findings indicate that bottom-up and centralised governance processes have different but complementary roles, and partnerships based on these distinctive roles and comparative advantages can enhance long-term community resilience.

This systems perspective is also consistent with scholarship on place leadership, which asserts that wider levels of governance have a significant influence on the type of leadership able to emerge and find expression in local communities (Sotarauta and Beer, 2017). Higher-level governmental laws and policy environments can both enable and constrain place leadership (Beer and Clower, 2014; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017). As a constraint, strong, authoritative, top-down and centralised systems of governance are unlikely to encourage the rise of place leadership – and can actually deter people from engaging voluntarily when future crises arise (Hannah et al, 2009). On the other hand, supports by governments, non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations and other external actors can encourage and support voluntary leadership emerging in local places – but only when carefully balanced. As expressed by Einolf et al (2016: 231): ‘Governmental provision of services through welfare-state policies might crowd out direct helping, making it unnecessary. On the other hand, governmental provision for basic human needs might create prosperity and security, conditions that foster individual relationships and the crowding in of informal volunteering.’

Limitations to self-organised expressions of leadership acknowledge significant value in sharing greater responsibility between governments and citizens through the co-generation of leadership and action during crises and conflict (McLennan et al, 2016; Lukaszewicz et al, 2017). To maximise the value of organic leadership, the voluntary and self-organised action provided by community groups can be better matched with resources, capacitation, incentives and channels for influence. However, these efforts must provide a balanced level of support to encourage, without crowding out, heterarchical and voluntary self-organisation (see Beer and Clower, 2014).

Humanitarian actors have not always viewed local voluntary actors as central partners in their efforts to provide relief. This lack of foresight fails to take advantage of the agency, leadership capacity and indigenous knowledge of leaders that emerge organically in local places. Better tapping into the distinctive characteristics of organic leaders can provide mutually reinforcing benefits for local and external actors. Greater attention to their distinctive characteristics can also define the complementarity of roles that is required for a resilient ecosystem and can better balance risk across actors at different levels. The value of organic leadership is more than effort voluntarily given in the absence of reliable provisions from the state or humanitarian agencies. Better recognition and integration of the added value of organic leadership can provide a platform for more innovative, experimental and co-creative solutions to manage risk.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Global North' refers to comparatively wealthy and economically developed regions, while the term 'Global South' refers to middle-income and economically developing regions.

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