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Editorial: Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity (CIGS) in disaster and humanitarian response

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity \(CIGS\) in disaster and humanitarian response](#)

The papers in this Research Topic contribute to the growing body of knowledge on citizen-led initiatives responding to disasters and humanitarian emergencies globally. From conflict and climate change to increased migration and the COVID-19 pandemic, the world faces humanitarian challenges of unprecedented scope and scale. With the globalization of news, travel, and crowdfunding, these crises have become more visible to ordinary citizens, prompting some to start their own aid initiatives. These small, often spontaneous organizations, sometimes referred to as Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity (CIGS), emerge to address urgent needs. Our team has studied the phenomenon of citizen-led aid over the past decade, exploring how ordinary citizens have increasingly become influential humanitarian actors. Their rapid entry (and often exit) into the aid landscape presents challenges regarding governance, sustainability, and resource efficiency (Frydenlund et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2021). Yet, they can also offer alternative solutions, participate in coordinated local efforts (Shults et al., 2021), fill gaps in aid (Frydenlund et al., 2023), and serve as watchdogs over traditional aid actors (Haaland and Wallevik, 2019).

The rise in citizen-led aid initiatives in humanitarian assistance calls for deeper examination. Thus, we aimed to consolidate diverse case studies, methodologies, and perspectives to understand how grassroots responses to disasters and humanitarian emergencies emerge and evolve. We encouraged contributions from scholars with lived experiences of disaster response. The Research Topic includes three empirical studies on humanitarian crisis responses in Colombia, South Africa, and Poland, as well as a conceptual analysis of CIGS, advancing academic debates on the subject.

Humanitarian crisis response in Colombia

Romero et al., focus on the mass displacement of Venezuelans and the coordination among actors responding to this migration crisis. Using Social Network Analysis (SNA), the authors examine the relationships and collaboration strategies between various entities

addressing these challenges. Their research highlights the complex roles of intermediaries and coordination mechanisms, revealing the importance of constructing effective humanitarian network structures. The study advocates for a collaborative approach in migration management, showing that coordination was crucial in driving activities and diversifying responses, particularly through financial resource allocation. It also challenges the conventional view of migrants as mere aid recipients, emphasizing the significant role of Venezuelan diaspora NGOs.

Citizen aid response to the Ukraine crisis in Poland

Sithole's paper investigates citizen-led responses to the humanitarian crisis following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. He examines how ordinary citizens in Poland quickly mobilized to provide humanitarian aid to displaced Ukrainians. The study focuses on the role of digital platforms, revealing that citizen aid actors used a range of platforms at different stages of their aid projects—from establishment to organization and maintenance. Sithole uses the concept of digital affordances to explain how citizen actors leveraged these platforms to achieve their goals. However, he also highlights challenges, including the presence of online trolls, fake news, and internet disruptions, which could hinder the success of citizen-led initiatives.

Migrant-led solidarity in South Africa during COVID-19

Sebakwiye and Bidandi examine migrant-led solidarity initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town, South Africa. Their research sheds light on the challenges faced by refugees and migrants during the pandemic, including health risks, economic hardship, food insecurity, and increased xenophobia. While some efforts were made to address these issues, the need for targeted policies to protect and assist refugees and migrants was largely unmet. The paper explores how migrant communities organized their own solidarity initiatives, providing essential relief to vulnerable groups when governmental support was insufficient.

Conceptualizing Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity

Shults contributes a conceptual analysis of CIGS, challenging assumptions about the role of global solidarity in citizen-led aid. He invites the reader to take a step back and consider the ethical and political implications of assuming that this aid is motivated by or leads to global solidarity. Shults warns of the risk of “parasitical” uses of solidarity, where the term is misapplied or used to justify actions better described as aid or charity. He offers two strategies to address this: (1) replace the term CIGS with a more neutral label, such as “citizen aid” or “pop-up disaster response,” and (2) adopt a more rigorous analysis of global solidarity, ensuring it is ethically and accountably operationalized. By clarifying and operationalizing the concept, researchers and aid organizations can

better understand how solidarity can motivate and sustain disaster relief efforts.

Concluding remarks: the role of citizen aid in humanitarian response

As editors, we argue for recognizing citizen aid actors as a crucial part of the humanitarian aid architecture. Acknowledging that some citizen aid efforts may be less effective or well-coordinated, their role in humanitarian response is significant. Their ability to respond quickly and adapt to evolving needs demonstrates the importance of their presence in crisis. Moreover, while some citizen aid actors may simply aim to help in the face of overwhelming crises, others actively engage with the communities they seek to assist. The latter approach aligns with what Shults describes as a “commitment to asking others how to help, and a commitment to work with, rather than work for, those most affected.” In such cases, these actors may represent a form of solidarity-driven aid.

Throughout our work, we have debated the role of solidarity in citizen-led aid. The conceptualization and operationalization provided by Shults (2024) add valuable insights into how this form of aid can be better understood and strengthened. These insights are crucial for advancing the academic and practical understanding of how small, citizen-driven initiatives can embody solidarity and contribute to humanitarian efforts in a meaningful and impactful way. If researchers can identify the conditions and mechanisms by which citizen aid actors assume a solidarity-based role, this knowledge can inform policy and practice, bringing the concept of solidarity to the forefront of humanitarian efforts.

Editing this Research Topic has been a step forward in our ongoing research journey on CIGS. By highlighting solidarity in citizen-led initiatives, we hope to shift the conversation from mere charity or *ad-hoc* crisis response toward a more accountable and collaborative form of aid that recognizes the agency and voice of those affected by crises. We hope the contributions will inspire further inquiry into how citizen-led aid can improve humanitarian response.

Author contributions

EF: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. HH: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. JP: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. HW: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

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