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Bridging the gap of expectations: a case study of volunteer training in a community-based project in Sichuan Earthquake area

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Background

- Since the devastating Wenchuan Earthquake on May 12th 2008, China has been undergoing an unprecedented boom in volunteerism as well as volunteer organizations dedicated to assisting disaster-stricken areas.
- “*Volunteer*” and “*Voluntarism*” have become the popular key-words in different reports and researches.

(Han, 2008; Tao, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Jiang, 2008; Liu, 2008; Zhang, 2008).

Background(cont)

In Lan's overview of 2149 articles, 32 related topics:

- 1)donation,
- 2)emergency management,
- 3)reconstruction or planning,
- 4)humanity,
- 5)social responsibility,
- 6)volunteer,
- 7)national spirit,
- 8)insurance,
- 9)logistics,
- 10)information disclosure,
- 11)media report,
- 12) legislation,
- 13)psychological aid,
- 14)sustainable development,
- 15)housing building,
- 16)internet,
- 17)reconstruction of finance system,
- 18)transportation,
- 19)price regulation,
- 20)philanthropy,
- 21)culture reconstruction,
- 22)non-governmental organization(NGO),
- 23)fiscal policy,
- 24)international aid,
- 25)housing loans,
- 26)orphan adoption,
- 27)education of disaster,
- 28)emergency communication,
- 29)supervision of disaster relief supplies,
- 30) political system,
- 31)school housing,
- 32)use of money raised for charity.

Background(cont)

- However, among the 2149 articles overviewed, papers with key words as the following are only:
- “VOLUNTEER” (**102**) : 4.75 %;
- “NGO/NPO”: 0.7% ,
- “PHILANTHROPY”: 0.79%
- “PSYCHOLOGICAL RESCUE”: 1.68%

This is despite the fact that many volunteers kept working in many local communities after most organizations were withdrawn.

Background(cont)

*“2008,
the Era of Volunteerism of China” !?*

“Unusual Gains are usually worthy with untraditional payment ...”

- This is a well-known saying shared by volunteers once a while, to show and calm their shocks, unadaptability and pain when coming across with every kind of difficulties from local government, inconsiderate local residents and personal pressures during their daily work and lives.

Short summarization

Those who are under research:

- While confirming the irreplaceable contribution by numerous individual volunteers' immediate aids in the first three months after the disaster, and well as their institutional counterparts, lots of papers point out their disordered movements and unprofessional behaviors during their visit to the affected communities and the earthquake victims, which may lead to a misconception to those people related that volunteers working in quake affected areas are all **impetuous, scattered, unprofessional** and usually **without necessary support and knowledge transfer.**

Short summarization

- Lack of micro and dynamic perspective
- Limited with a source of a long term project
- Myopia to clearly distinguish different groups of volunteers with diversified age, background, education, personal plan of career and living style
- Insufficient application of longitudinal qualitative data, and impossibility to dive deep into the reality faced by a specific group of volunteers

Introduction to this research

1. *With a clear and convenient target:*

A cohort of volunteers

- working in the community of Sichuan Earthquake areas,
- deliberately intended to enrich their working and living experience in SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
- are highly expected to take the role of professional social workers to contribute to the post-disaster recovery.

About this research (cont):

2. A rarely comprehensive project with considerable advantages:

- Experienced human resource
- Sufficient financial pool
- International intelligence and professional support (Ms. Kuroda Yuko 黒田裕子)
- Comprehensively designed training program and the determined initiative of a long-term community based development project aiming at community recovery and capacity building of future leader of social development

About this research (cont):

3. The observable and typical progress, with:

- varied outer environment,
- turbulent interpersonal relationship
- the common psychological disorder among all members of the group

About this research (cont):

4. Practical approach:

to collect longitudinal qualitative data of and beyond training program, taking the advantage of the project evaluation by the author, which demonstrate the integrated set of characteristics of the whole project

About this research (cont):

5. Methodology:

longitudinal in-depth interviews, participant observation and field works undertaken in several working sites along with the adjustment of the project.

Paper documents and observations were mainly from the two trainings which were packed into the four-stage training program, held in December 2008(Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province) and April 2009(Jia County, northern Shaanxi Province), along with the latest field work in mid-June 2009(villages affiliated to Zundao Town of Sichuan Province), as well as my several informal and formal communications with people from the management side in the cities of Chengdu, Xi'an and Beijing.

About this research (cont):

Volunteers	Gender	Data analyzed	Nov. 2008	Dec. 2008	First training	January to March 2009	Second training (April 2009)	April to July 2009	Field work (July 2009)	July to Aug. 2009	Sep. to now 2009		
HXJ	F	Yes	→										
LZB	M	Yes	→										
LZX	M	Yes	→										
YY	M	Yes	→										
LL	M	No	→										
LYX	M	Yes	→										

About this research (cont):

- **Methodology (to be continued):**

In short, both sides are covered and examined along with the progress:

→ *all members of a cohort of volunteer trainees*

→ *key-persons from the management side,*

including a male project designer and manager [Manager G], a female local coordinator [Ms. Y] and a male team supervisor [Mr. W]

How the project was born:

- “A project that was ‘rationally’ explored, comprehensively designed and sufficiently sponsored”

*“On the way to buy some daily necessities that afternoon, I talked with the two teachers who became more familiar and friendly with us. When answering my question as what were most in need, their answer of radios, battery chargers and full-recharged cell phones were far from our previous expectation like food or water. ... During our later talk, I also learnt that **only the local people with full knowledge, similar background and experiences could better help the victim children**, who could not easily trust any strangers or experts.”*

How the project was born: (to be continued)

*“Also when I joined the so-called ‘psychological consultation’ by 30 volunteers of sophomore or junior students from college, their untimely proud words in front of the children and complaints in private after the activities **shocked** me a lot, and let me think more about **the trust, professionalism** and volunteer related project we were planning to start.”*

*“As **a Sichuan native** and **my experiences** in social development, I will try my best to initiate **a community-based** project providing **qualified subsidy**, effective **training programs** and **long-term career planning** to those qualified potential community leaders who sacrifice themselves in the quake area!”*

How the project was born: (to be continued)

*“Such thought chimed easily with Lao Ma and Lao Gou”. ... They had **full experience** of participating in earlier rescue and relief after the snowstorm hitting Guizhou Province in 2008 , they raised goods and materials by their social capital right after the earthquake, and directly provided services to local disadvantaged people like children and women in the contemporary living areas. ... We found them **quite suitable** for our purpose and decided immediately to **cooperate** with them by providing **monthly subsidy** and **more professional training programs.** ”*

How the project was born: (to be continued)

The project was initiated:

- ◆ Decided the working site in Zundao,
- ◆ Reached agreement with experienced volunteers like Lao Ma, Lao Gou, and Xiao W who became the local team supervisor of the volunteer group,
- ◆ Determined the scale and life cycle of the project,
- ◆ Settled down the fund enough for two year working in Sichuan disaster area,
- ◆ Confirmed the desired qualities of the volunteers to be recruited and published recruitment advertisements in some most popular websites in the field of NPO/NGO
- ◆ Prepared a four-stage training program, with lecturers of children development experts from G's NGO and Ms Kuroda Yuko (黒田裕子), the Chief Director of Hanshin Supporting Organization for Senior Citizen and the Disabled person and a nationwide well-known volunteer of Japan

How the project was born: (to be continued)

- The “ZD project” is well resourced and financed, had good working relationships with the local government during its establishment, and is widely considered professionally designed and organized. These advantages foreground the importance of the problem of induction and training of volunteer.

The training integrated by the project

- 1) integrated a curriculum from basic concepts of social development and community-based social work, to practical experience of working with aged victims after Hanshin Earthquake and first-hand expertise of project management;
- 2) mixed traditional teaching, case discussion and field work supervision, as Ms. Kuroda Yuko went back to the working site together with the volunteers and showed examples of communication and providing services;
- 3) invited key people from community residents to join the discussion, so that the trainees could review their difficult problems with more direct responses from the local victims and partners.

Findings

- 1. Profiles of the volunteers**
- 2. Expectations from the manager side**
- 3. Expectations from the volunteers**
 - motivation and demand
 - tangles and self-identify
 - more rational reflection

Findings

1. Profiles of the volunteers:

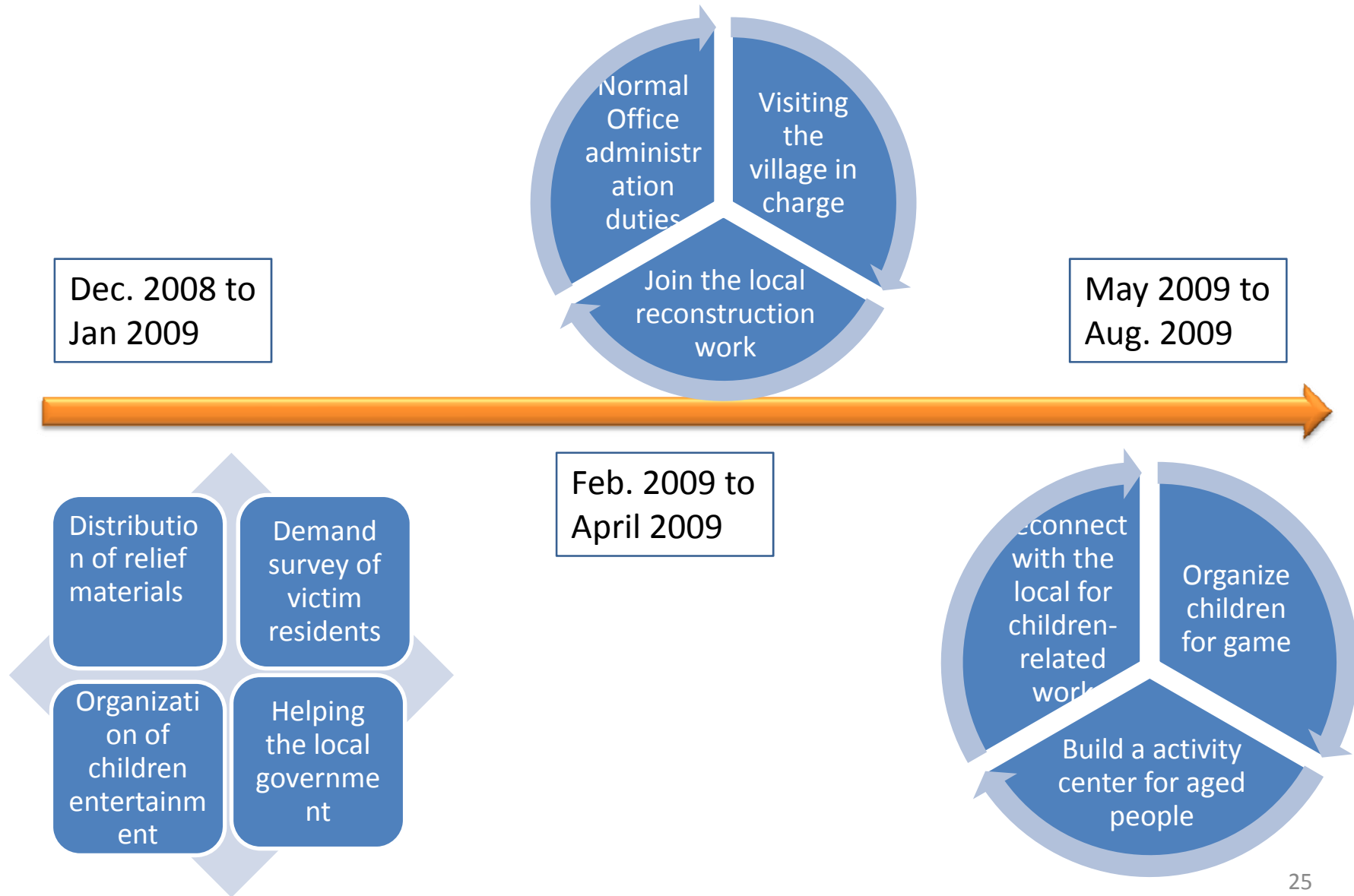
Young, energetic and emotional

With related educated or living experiences and similar planning for future development

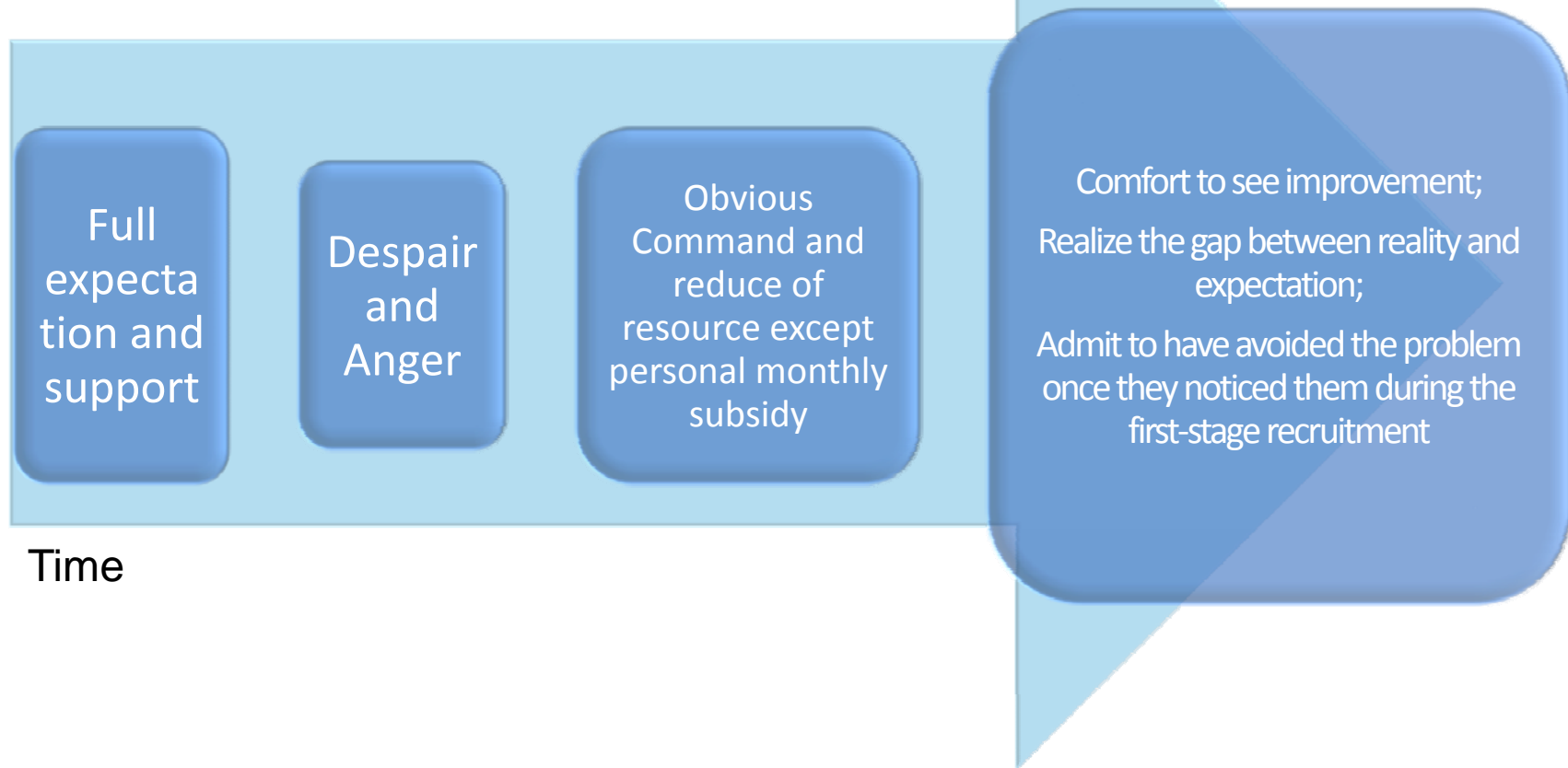
Ready for self-reflection and peer evaluation

		<i>HXJ</i>	<i>LZB</i>	<i>LZX</i>	<i>YY</i>
Personality	Self-assessment	Amiable	Ok	Normal	Easily introspective, different between face and heart, like to be paid attention to and given comments
	assessment from peers	Nothing special	A little irritable	Petty trick, seeking cheap and convenient, selfish in working	A little irascible
Working capacity	Self-assessment	Clear, experienced to some extent	Good at expression, ready to learn	Clear in mind, orderly	Seems to familiar with strangers, but hard to communicate with people and mutually recognized; enquiring and argumentative
	Assessment from peers	Nothing special	Good at expression and ice-braking, "He could find QQ number of any stranger"	inactive	Good at communication and ready to perform in public

Their generally works:



2. Expectations from the manager side:



3. Expectations from the volunteer side:

I. Their motivation and demands [by 1st interview]

HXJ:

*“The working environment is not worse than my expectation, since I could sometimes use **internet**, have some compulsory and flexibly arranged short-period **holidays** and get **800** Yuan per month, which is **enough** in addition to the pocket money given by my family. My mother even came to Chengdu to meet me and we **shopped** there happily. I’m preparing IELTS and may leave the project before the due deadline if my **grade** is good enough so I could go to the **universities in Hong Kong**. ”*

(cont)

LZB:

*“I felt there’re so many things to **learn and do** in the community. I try to get familiar with the local people and grasp every chance to talk to them. I’m very happy when **playing games** with the kids of the village where I’m working now. Because I’m almost good at every sports and games, I planned and am working on some badminton game and table tennis game of the children and feel very **proud** to see their **smiles**. I learnt to manage the reading room where the children could find some book to read after school. And I’m very keen on finding out some new ideas to extend my work and help more people.”*

(cont)

In short, they have passion and dream, no resigned to live a simple and traditional life, respect and weigh their psychological demand more than caring pressures and expectation from outer environment, and take action to explore the strong and unknown wish inside.

Also, their choice as a volunteer are more practical and functional, driven by a personal development exploration, compared with the stereotype of their earlier counterparts holding more impulsions and altruism.

3. Expectations from the volunteer side:

II. Their “inevitable tangles” and problems of self-identity [by 2nd Interview]

HXJ:

*“I feel **un-meaningful** about what am I doing now at all, with **the inefficient group** and **weak leader**, and the **repeating useless daily work** which is not cared or needed by the residents at all. We cannot help them build their new houses, and cannot provide much help to the children and the old, who is **vigorous enough** to live well. And I felt **desperate** when I last time went to Chengdu as seeing so many cars, clear air and people in beautiful clothes, while here I could see nothing more than the polluted air and dust from the construction sites. And I even don't have **interests** to study English now, and don't know whether I could take the exam soon. I wonder so **much why I'm here still** and almost cannot stand with it anymore and even felt very **reluctant to come to this training.**”*

(cont)

LZB:

*“... The village under my charge was chosen as the piloting site by our volunteer group where we try some new programs here, yet the progress seems **slow** and I feel **lost** sometimes as well. I felt better than some of my colleagues about the recent working environment, both internal and external, but I still think there're lots of **things to be improved** and I'm looking forward to this round of training. ... I don't know why we should work like this, he (the team leader) is **irresponsible at all**, as **never** gave us clear orders, advices or examples. I could not understand what he meant by “Pattern”, “Model”, “Development”, “Equality”, but definitely know **we are wasted** and have not been improved. ... I think the training is OK, but more importantly we haven't **got enough training or practice in daily work**. We know nothing about it.”*

- The immaturity and psychological instability intensified the effect pressured by the outer environment, threatened and which the project and the training program with the expected outcomes.
- They are also young people with inadequate capacity of social adaptation and working innovation, as they were so easy and ready to be influenced by a simple unconscious remark by other aged volunteers or complaints by their emotional peers.

- Without enough practical training during their three or four years of formal collegiate education, they haven't developed into independent and tough individuals who can learn, practice, take lessons and get self-motivated with enough confidence, but still they depended on an un-existed "MASTER" for the solution once they faced any difficulty – Such attitude of "APPRENTICE" not only limited their initiative to well perform in their daily work, but also estranged them from the project managers, whose trust decreased gradually as noticing the sagged morale of the working group and the ineffectiveness of their work in the reconstructed communities.

3. Expectations from the volunteer side:

III. Their rational reflection: after half of the year, clearly showing their changes of both understanding and working, though still questioned by the managers. **[by 3rd interview]**

LZX:

“I can now understand the differences between YY and me. He paid much effort than I did during the working, that’s why he would be that unimaginably angry and tangled in April, while I was just enjoying my life here. ... But now I have got more involved into the project, thinking out the solution, connecting with the local government for my first time, and even deciding to maintain my one year’s work here, even though the whole project is to be compelled to withdraw from Sichuan and I will lose all my subsidy. ... I think I’m changing during the time, though not very clear the how soon I would change back as a lazy bone again ...”



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Short summarize

- → Natural and common progress of personal development
- → Inevitable progress of information impartation and effective communication
- → evidence of effects:

Formal short-period condensed training

- V.s.

Informal learning progress
(to learning to cultivate professional social work and new
leaders of community development in China today)

Discussions

- 1) there is a severe mismatch of expectations between organizers and volunteers. Volunteers greatly misunderstood what is entailed in organized volunteer and community work. The organization overestimated the degree of maturity, ability to operate independently, and general skill level of the volunteers.
- 2) training did not work well without close daily supervision and guidance, and this lack of supervision also entails a neglect of the general emotional demands of the volunteer group, especially problematic due to the general lack of experience of the volunteers;

Conclusions (cont)

- 3) the interaction between organizers and volunteers, like the mismatch and over-expectation of the two sides, hinders the adjustment of the skill transfers and incorporation into the program; and
- 4) graduates from the collegiate education system lack adequate practical knowledge and “street smarts” to operate independently in difficult context. Despite choosing graduates of related fields (social work, etc), organizations need to be more realistic in their expectations on their abilities.

Thanks !