Filling the void: Rural disaster volunteerism during the Swedish wildfires of 2018

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2018, both fire and rescue services and volunteers fought against the extensive wildfires that spread over the northern parts of Sweden. The challenges were many and one of the most obvious was the lack of resources provided by the state, both material and human. This lack of official resources, together with the long distances that characterize the rural northern parts of Sweden, have been highlighted in subsequent evaluations as one of the main reasons for the widely spread fires. The lack of official resources in itself can be understood as a consequence of several years of dismantling and centralization of the Swedish fire and rescue service. However, the responses from the local community were enormous. Local volunteers, spontaneous as well as organized, assisted in firefighting; in providing food and services; in offering shelter for evacuated, and many other things. In disaster research, volunteer activities have often been described as something that “fills the void” when official resources are scarce. This seems to be particularly true in rural contexts. This paper applies a critical perspective on rural disaster volunteerism by framing it as an expression of rural vulnerability and peripheralization: as something that is performed as a compensatory act in rural communities affected by social dismantling. In other words, both place and politics are central in understanding rural voluntary activity. Inspired by the theoretical concept geographies of voluntarism, this paper argues that people make sense of volunteer initiatives in relation to both the place where these activities take place and in relation to the power relations associated with this place. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2018, both fire and rescue services and volunteers fought against the extensive wildfires that spread over the northern parts of Sweden. The challenges were several, but one of the most obvious was the lack of official resources, both material and human. The evaluations (for example, [1–3]) that have followed from the Swedish wildfires of 2018 all point to the lack of official resources, together with the long distances that characterize the rural northern parts of Sweden, as one of the main reasons for the widely spread of the fires. This lack of resources should be understood against the background of several years of dismantling and centralization of the Swedish fire and rescue service [2].

The lack of official resources was most prominent in the initial phase of the fires; eventually both national and international assistance arrived. The initial lack of official resources, here illustrated by the heavily scaled-down fire and rescue service in rural Sweden, reflects a dominating political trend in Sweden, with severe reductions in public services and welfare in rural areas. In spite of this

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lack of official resources, or maybe more so because of it, the response from local citizens and volunteers was enormous. Spontaneous and organized volunteers assisted in firefighting; in providing food and services; in offering shelter for the evacuated, and many other things. Therefore, this paper addresses both spontaneous and organized disaster volunteerism. Spontaneous volunteers, sometimes also referred to as unaffiliated volunteers, do not have an organizational affiliation (relevant for the disaster response). They volunteer during or following a specific disaster. Organized volunteers are instead volunteers that represent an organization, such as the Red Cross. Organized volunteers are commonly organized already before the disaster occurs, but sometimes become organized during the response [4–6]. Previous research has also pointed out that what is seen as spontaneous or emergent volunteerism in disasters commonly depends on pre-existing social networks (e.g. Ref. [7–10]).

Traditionally, disaster volunteerism has been framed as an expression of solidarity and helpfulness with a large body of research that emphasizes the importance of volunteer activities in crisis and disasters (see, for example: [11–15]). Such volunteer activities have been described as something that fills a void, or vacuum of authority, when official resources are scarce [5,16,17]. This paper takes its point of departure in this void by questioning what it actually represents and why there is a void for volunteers to fill. Previous studies [18,19] have suggested that this void often is related to rurality. In rural communities, where the distances to welfare services are far and official resources are scarce, there is a void while waiting for the fire and rescue services, in which citizens many times step in as volunteers. This void needs to be understood in relation to its social and political context. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to further explore how rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality. Does place, and power relations related to this place, have an impact on how people make sense of volunteer activities? How, then, can the involvement of volunteers in emergency response be understood in relation to power and place?

2. Wildfires in rural communities

Since large wildfires mostly appear in remote and rural areas, they come hand in hand with rurality. Despite this, rurality is seldom considered as a starting point of analysis in research on wildfires or wildfire volunteerism (with some exceptions: see, for example, [20]), nor are different nuances of rurality.

In a Swedish context, several studies have focused on the volunteerism that evolved during the wildfire in Västmanland in 2014, both in terms of spontaneous and organized volunteer responses [5,21,22], and in terms of invisible and not-acknowledged (gendered) volunteer activities (Danielsson & Eriksson, 2021). These studies have mainly dealt with the difficulties and possibilities in volunteer–professional interaction at the incident sites. However, none of these studies put rurality to the fore of the analysis.

There are some Swedish examples of research on wildfires that take rurality as a point of departure. In their analysis of crisis communication in news media during the wildfire in Västmanland in 2014, Öhman et al. [20] analyse discursive constructions of rurality and centre/periphery in Swedish newspaper reports from the fire. In their paper, Öhman et al. [20] do not only examine discursive constructions of rurality – they touch upon volunteerism during the wildfires as well. In their analysis, they conclude that volunteerism is portrayed as gendered activities, where the male volunteers are portrayed in a language of danger, sweat and tears, while female volunteers are portrayed through a language of caring, helping, and supportive actions. They conclude that crisis communication is embedded in discourses of power related to both rurality and gender.

With consideration to the rural aspects of wildfires, there is a growing body of literature on the WUI (Wildland–Urban Interface) model, a model that focuses on the impacts of wildfires on peri-urban areas [23,24]. The WUI-model places four community archetypes along the continuum of urban–rural communities to illustrate how different kinds of communities adapt to wildfires [24]. Along this continuum, two archetypes, Rural Lifestyle WUI community and Working Landscape WUI community, especially emphasize rural aspects of community adaption to wildfires. In these types of communities, efforts to reduce wildfire risks tend to be organized locally, from direct experience of, and handed-down knowledge about, wildfires. Carroll and Paveglio [23] explain this as being a matter of rural citizens’ preferences for dealing with issues on their own, paired with distrust towards government and land management agencies. In their study on community recovery and assistance following the Carlton Complex Fire, Edgeley and Paveglio (2017) highlight how distrust in federal authorities (in this case FEMA) evolved and was maintained among local community members during and after the fires. In this case, the distrust was associated with authorities’ lack of understanding about the impact of wildfires on rural communities.

Within the wildfire research, there is also a growing discussion on how responsibility should be shared between different actors. In for example Australia, the idea of shared responsibilities for wildfires between local communities and authorities are today a part of their national strategy. The research on shared responsibilities is discussed in relation to the withdrawal of resources in rural areas where, for example, power is moved from local communities to larger regional centres at the same time as the local communities are expected to take on more responsibility (e.g., Ref. [24–26]). This kind of centralizing tendency characterizes the political landscape, and the relationship between urbanity and rurality, in Sweden as well.

To understand the effects of a wildfire, we also need to acknowledge disaster related vulnerabilities [27]. Research have pointed at several indicators of vulnerability when it comes to disasters such as race, social class, and gender (e.g., Ref. [20,28,29]), and emphasized that these vulnerabilities need to be understood as consequences of social, economic and racial inequalities rather than as consequences of individual or group characteristics per se. To some extent, research has also pointed to the fact that rural areas are specifically vulnerable to wildfires [30,31]. However, the discussion on rural vulnerability is constructed around two different, and to some extent contradictory, narratives. One narrative about people living in remote or rural areas are that these people are among the most vulnerable to climate change and natural hazards [30,32]. As emphasized by, for example, Andersen and Skugg (2019:1), rural communities’ vulnerability is not only a consequence of geographical location but also a matter of being “less equipped for mitigation”
To compensate for this vulnerability and lack of resources, some researchers (see, for example, [33]) have highlighted the need for volunteers to assist in rural communities affected by wildfires.

There is also a second narrative about people living in remote or rural areas that emphasizes resilience and capability rather than vulnerability. This narrative highlights that people living in rural areas are among the best equipped and demonstrate significant resilience in relation to crisis and disasters [34,35]. In other words, rural everyday experiences of living with high levels of uncertainty in remote areas with scarce resources seem to foster resilience. With this paper we want to acknowledge both these narratives of rurality as rural communities and rural citizens are both vulnerable and resilient in relation to disasters such as wildfires.

This paper intends to contribute to the research field on wildfire volunteerism by putting rurality in the centre of the analysis. Taking rurality as a starting point of analysis also makes it possible to emphasize the political conditions of rural disaster volunteerism. In this text, these political conditions are mainly explored through interviewees’ subjective experiences of rurality as a motive for disaster volunteerism.

3. Theoretical framework: Rural volunteerism

Everyday life in rural communities is closely linked to political, economic, and structural processes, processes that become personal as they affect people’s self-images and how they think about the places where they live their lives [36]. Like many other countries, Sweden is characterized by a political climate in which the responsibility for rural welfare, services and infrastructure is increasingly ascribed to individual citizens and volunteer initiatives (ibid.). This in turn has created a norm of active citizenship that emphasizes how rural citizens, to ensure their access to welfare and services, need to act, show commitment, and organize themselves [37]. This form of active citizenship has even more come to compensate for reductions in public service and welfare, not least in rural communities [37,38]. Several studies have shown how rural activism, such as protests against the closure of local maternal wards or hospitals, is motivated and made meaningful against the background of everyday experiences of vulnerability (Berglund-Lake, 2021; [36,39]) and how volunteer activities are made meaningful in relation to everyday experiences of living in peripheral places [36]. In a similar way, researchers [19,40] from the field of crisis and disaster studies have emphasized the fact that rural citizens motivate the need for household crisis preparedness, as well as the need for disaster volunteerism, against the background of rural vulnerability. Such subjective experiences of inequalities are often expressed as feelings of not being prioritized and of, both symbolically and geographically, living in the periphery, far from the political establishment [18]. In this article, we theorize such subjective understandings further by applying the theoretical concept of geographies of voluntarism. Combining research on disaster volunteerism with human geography theories in this way makes an important contribution to the research field on citizen response in crises and disasters, as it makes it possible to elaborate on theoretical and critical explanations to how and why disaster volunteerism evolves in rural contexts.

While rural volunteerism often is interpreted as an expression of the solidarity and helpfulness that is considered to be characteristic of rural communities [41], it also needs to be understood in relation to the place where it is performed as well as in relation to the power relations associated with this place [42]. Volunteerism has been described by human geographers [42,43] as having a geography, referring to the fact that people make sense of volunteer initiatives in relation to both the place where these activities are performed and in relation to the power relations associated with this place. Local variations in volunteerism appear to depend crucially on the role of the local state in mediating central state welfare policies, and in political discourses, where volunteerism is often framed as the solution to social and political problems facing liberal democracies [44]. Therefore, as argued by Fyte and Milligan [44], rural volunteerism needs to be understood in relation to concerns about the ability of advanced capitalist states to meet the welfare needs of their rural populations. More so, geographies of volunteerism tend to intersect with other categories; for example, researchers [45,46] have shown that rural volunteers are overrepresented by women and tend to comprise an elderly population, compared to urban volunteerism.

Just as much as volunteerism needs to be understood in relation to the geographical and socio-political context where they are performed, there is a need for research that more fully adheres to an understanding of how the “doings” of volunteering are constituted through various lived practices and personal biographies [47]. Focusing on the enlivened geographies of volunteering, Smith et al. [48], p.258) conceptualize voluntary action as a set of situated, emotional and embodied practices. In their work, the “doings” of volunteer activities are understood in terms of everyday interactions, practices and feelings, thus emphasizing the social aspects of volunteerism. In other words, “doing” volunteering is about “more than volunteering” ([48], p.271). And, more than being geographically situated, volunteerism is situated in both place, time, relations, morality and life itself.

The “doings” of volunteerism have also been studied as negotiations of local “moral economies” of the “appropriate” ways of doing volunteering [48]. In their interview study with 50 Scottish volunteers, Smith et al. [48] show how volunteering seems to increase feelings of local belonging as well as feelings of doing something good and meaningful. In a Swedish context, Lundgren and Sjöstedt [49] in a similar way have illustrated how rural volunteerism intersects with a rural moral, where volunteer activities are motivated from the need to be capable, active and responsible citizens. Just like rural volunteer activities per se, such a rural moral becomes a way for rural citizens to compensate for structural inequalities and rural vulnerabilities (36); see also [18]).

In her study on how rural citizens, in the northern parts of Sweden, make sense of their volunteer engagement, Lundgren [36] describes rural volunteerism as a compensatory act – as something that local citizens engage in in order to compensate for cuts and withdrawals in rural welfare services. This way, rural volunteerism becomes a necessity and a matter of rural survival. Approaching rural volunteerism as a compensatory act also means to approach it as a politicized phenomenon, where volunteerism is positioned in relation to contemporary social and political discourses (ibid.).
In this article, the concept of geographies of voluntarism is applied in order to deepen the knowledge of how place, and power relations to this place, affect how people make sense of rural disaster voluntarism. Empirically, we take our point of departure in interviewees with rescue personnel, volunteers and local citizens that all experienced the Swedish wildfires of 2018.

4. Material and method

In Sweden, the summer of 2018 was a particularly intense wildfire season when about 60 fires raged around the country. The summer of 2018 has been described as the worst Swedish fire season in modern times [3,50]. The situation was most critical in Jämtland, Gävleborg and Dalarna, regions that suffered from several large wildfires at the same time. The areas that were worst affected were rural, with limited fire and rescue service resources. The response operation suffered from several challenges where the lack of resources, both material and human, were the most prominent one and one of the main reasons behind the widespread nature of the fires [1,3,50]. Initially, but also throughout the events, the lack of fire and rescue service resources resulted in volunteers and local citizens in the affected areas being required to be a part of the response, and in some cases, also responsible for the response. The lack of official response was most prominent in the initial phase of the fires; eventually, both national and international aid arrived in order to assist in the firefighting.

4.1. The interview study

The following article is based on interviews with rescue personnel (n = 5), organized volunteers (n = 17), spontaneous volunteers (n = 9) and evacuated local citizens (n = 18) from some of the villages threatened by the wildfires in the summer of 2018. Interviews have been conducted in the counties of Jämtland and Gävleborg, meaning that the official responders and the organized volunteers that have been interviewed were all active in the response operations in these counties. The interviewees’ stories and experiences differ in part, of course, but there are also obvious similarities in the interviews. The fact that the interviewees all relate their experiences from the forest fires to their socio-political context (a rural area with a heavily reduced fire and rescue service and long distances between emergency services) is one such similarity. In light of the purpose of the article, the volunteers’ stories dominate in the analysis, but the experiences of rescue personnel and local citizens are also important. In addition, the roles of volunteer and local citizens often flow together, since several of the volunteers interviewed also live in the villages ravaged by the forest fires.

The rescue personnel that have been interviewed for this study are three commanders in chief from local fire and rescue services and two police officers from the region of Jämtland. All five worked operationally in the field during the wildfires of 2018. Since this study emphasizes the volunteer perspective on rural disaster voluntarism, the interviews with rescue personnel are to be thought of as background material. As such, the interviews contribute with important knowledge about officials’ view of disaster voluntarism as well as about the working conditions for the fire and rescue services during the fires.

In terms of organized volunteers, our interviewees come from a number of different organizations, such as: FRG (a voluntary resource group), Maskinringen (more or less organized farmers), Mountain Rescue, Home Guard and the Red Cross. A total number of 17 organized volunteers have been interviewed for this study.

Other than organized volunteers, there also arose a large number of different spontaneous volunteer initiatives during the forest fires. For example, citizens without any organizational affiliation assisted in activities such as firefighting and distributing food, water and other necessities to both rescue personnel, volunteers and those who had to evacuate their homes. Many spontaneous volunteers (approx. 6000) signed up for the Red Cross, which had the formal responsibility to organize spontaneous volunteers, and about 900 volunteers were assigned to the local FRG. It is hard to estimate the exact number of volunteers involved in the response activities during the forest fires of 2018. Even if the majority of those who were assigned to the Red Cross and FRG were not involved, interviews with both rescue personnel and volunteers testify to a “massive number of volunteers” assisting during the fires. For this study, a total number of 9 spontaneous volunteers have been interviewed.

In terms of local citizens that had to evacuate during the wildfires, 18 have been interviewed. Four of these were also spontaneous volunteers and one organized volunteer during the response to the wildfires. None of the interviewed evacuated local citizens lost their homes. In this context, it is relevant to highlight that no residential buildings burned down during the fires, only a few summer cottages [51].

In total, 44 people have been interviewed, out of which 18 are women and 26 are men. The interviews were all performed from October 2019 to August 2020, which is 1–1.5 years after the fires occurred. The interviews followed a semi structured interview guide. For the rescue personnel the guide consisted of four themes: (1) Roles, responsibilities and tasks, (2) Experience of the 2018 wildfires, (3) Meetings with the local communities, (4) Cooperation with other actors (volunteers). For the volunteers the interview guide also consisted of four themes: (1) Roles, responsibilities and tasks, (2) Experience of the 2018 wildfires, (3) Meetings with the local community, (4) Cooperation with other actors. Finally for the local citizens the guide consisted of four themes: (1) Experience of the 2018 wildfires, (2) Experience of evacuation, (3) The local community, (4) Information, and communication (from authorities).

The interviews lasted for 45–120 min and were all taped and later transcribed. Before the interviews, all interviewees received information about the research project, including information about how the data material would be managed and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. All interviewees signed an informed consent in taking part in the research project. In the coming analysis, the interviewees are referred to as either rescue personnel, organized volunteer, spontaneous volunteer or local citizen. When the roles intersect, which sometimes is the case with spontaneous volunteers and local citizens, the interviewees are referred to as both.

The interviews were analysed using theory-driven thematic analysis [52]. We used our theoretical framework focusing on geographies of voluntarism to analyse the data, which means that the analysis was guided by a search for how social, geographical and political contexts are embedded in the interviewees’ stories. From this analysis, three themes emerged: filling the void, rural resourcefulness
and rural resistance. These three analytical themes share the fact that they explore how people make sense of rurality and volunteerism and how they relate to each other.

5. Results and analysis

In the following chapter, the results and analysis are presented through three analytical themes: filling the void, rural resourcefulness and rural resistance.

5.1. Filling the void

In the initial phase of the wildfires, many (both local citizens, volunteers and rescue personnel) found themselves more or less standing alone in the middle of a fire. One of our interviewees, a fire fighter and commander in chief, described his arrival at one of the largest fires in 2018, in the following way:

When I arrived I thought: “Where is everyone?” There was no one there. So I understood that I was on my own. There were no resources to come. This is what I had to manage. On my own basically. It was like someone had forgotten this fire. (Rescue personnel)

This situation, and the void that results from the lack of both human and material resources, also needs to be understood against the background of several large fires appearing at the same time. As expressed by another interviewee, a fire fighter and commander in chief: “Forests were burning everywhere, we couldn’t even keep track”. This interviewee went on describing the difficulties in being a representative for a severely down-scaled rescue organisation under pressure in the following way:

I found it a bit hard to answer the questions from the media. They asked “Do you have enough resources and what are your next moves?” Things like that. And my point of view at the moment was that it was impossible for us to perform our work under these circumstances. I can’t allow my fire fighters to go in there. But I had to be balanced and say things like “We are doing the best we can with the resources at hand”. (Rescue personnel)

Rescue personnel acknowledged the fact that there was a void of official response in the initial phase of the fires, in large part they explained this as being a matter of lack of official resources per se, which in turn should be understood as an expression of the social and political conditions of rural rescue services. In the interviews, both fire fighters and the police gave us examples of how this void could be understood in a socio-political context. For example, one of our interviewees above touched upon the changing political conditions for rescue services as he expressed his frustration over the fact that one of his colleagues arrived to the fire in a rental car. This in turn can be understood as a frustration over the situation of rescue services today, where public resources (such as publicly owned rescue service vehicles) have come to be increasingly cut. Another interviewee, a police officer that was involved in the emergency response, described how the “slim” police organisation contributed to organisational strain during the wildfires:

And parallel to all this … You know, the police authority is a pretty slim organisation nowadays. Our resources are limited, there are not very many of us. There is a very limited number of people working out in the field in this region. And now, during summer vacation. We had a lot of over time already and this situation did not help. (Rescue personnel)

However, this “void” and lack of official resources seems to have fuelled disaster volunteerism during the summer of 2018. Similar to previous studies on disaster volunteerism as something that fills a void (for example, [5,16,17]) the responses from local communities during the wildfires of 2018 were enormous. One of the interviewed fire fighters, a commander in chief, described his view of the volunteerism that arouse during the wildfires, in the following way:

Sometimes there is a need for a large amount of volunteers, and this was the case during the fires. And the fact that volunteers are engaged from the very beginning, out in the forests, that is amazing. I have praised this volunteerism many times when I have been out talking about the fires. We cannot manage an operation like this with public resources. Assistance in giving directions, distributing fuel and pizza to the ones fighting the fire, this is all invaluable. But when the volunteers have been working for eight days in a row you also have to say “Thank you! Someone else will take over from here”. (Rescue personnel)

During the wildfires volunteers, spontaneous as well as organized, assisted in firefighting; in providing food and services for those fighting the fires; in offering shelter for evacuated; and many other things. In the interviews, there are several examples of citizens engaging in firefighting while awaiting the fire and rescue service. The “forgotten fire” mentioned above reoccurs in several of our interviews, for example, a local citizen, who literally had the fire just around his corner, explained why he started fighting the fire by himself:

There was no one there. No fire and rescue services, nothing. Everyone was in [name of a nearby village]. And there was no material. Nothing. You know, I went down to the fire station, and it was empty. No pumps, no fire hoses. Nothing. / … / They were all off fighting other fires. (Local citizen and spontaneous volunteer)

In a similar way, another interviewee narrated her decision to engage voluntarily in order to fill the void in official support to those who were fighting the fires:

When I saw that the people who were off to fight the fire only had like a bottle of water with them … I mean, there were no supportive organization around them at all. Then I went home and I started thinking. And I decided to call our municipal manager and I asked: “Is there any support for these people or anything?” And he said that “No, it is up to the rescue services to look af-
ter. It is up to them to see to that the fire fighters get enough to eat and drink”. And I thought “No, I don’t agree”. / … / I mean sure, the fire fighters are good at fighting fires but I don’t think they are as good at putting a supportive organization in place. Offering food, drinks and stuff like that. And this municipality where I live, it is a small one. We don’t have a lot of resources. *(Local citizen and spontaneous volunteer)*

Soon after her talk with the municipal manager, the interviewee organised volunteer support by distributing food and water to those fighting the fire. This support was organized through her local community association, where she normally has a central role, and engaged up to 50 volunteers during the fires. In this way the interviewees’ volunteer engagement also illustrates how *continuous* rural volunteerism extend into *specific* rural volunteerism (cf. [36]), as the local community association became a service provider during disaster.

In a similar way, a local grocery store in a village threatened by one of the wildfires extended their role as an everyday gathering point. Just like in everyday life, it was to the grocery store that people went for information that they could not find elsewhere. The owner of the grocery store painted a picture of how the grocery store became an information hub during the fires:

People came to the store. Especially those who were afraid and lonely. The store was crowded so the police wanted to close it. They thought there were too many people there. I had to convince them that it’s better for people to come here to get the information they couldn’t get elsewhere. So I invited the police as well. They got a free cup of coffee so that they could sit down and talk to people. I mean, there were old, lonely people that came to the store crying. *(Local citizen and spontaneous volunteer)*

While the task of acting as an information centre can be understood as a kind of extension of everyday and familiar tasks, the role of the local grocery store as a gathering point took on completely new dimensions during the wildfires. For example, cooperating with the police is not a part of the local grocery store’s everyday duties, nor is spreading information about an extensive wildfire. More than spreading information, the role of the grocery store was also to meet and manage people’s worries and concerns. As expressed in the quote above, a lot of the local citizens were both afraid, lonely, and worried. In that sense, the local grocery store played a central role in offering social support, and in doing so it also compensated for the lack of public social support for those affected by the fire. Other than contributing with information and social support, the local grocery store also distributed food and water to the ones fighting the fires, in a similar way to that described in the example of the local community association mentioned above, but at a different geographical location.

Compared with official responders, local citizens more often placed rural volunteerism, and the void that it compensates for, in a socio-political context. For example, local citizens made sense of this “void” by relating it to everyday experiences of living in a rural community and of being left in the periphery. Their volunteer engagement is often motivated out of this “void” and the need to fill it. For example, such a socio-political contextualisation of rural volunteerism takes place as one of the interviewees above stated that she lives in a small municipality with scarce economic resources. This fact then, is referred to in order to legitimize the fact that she decided to go against the recommendations of the municipality manager by initiating volunteer activities. Through her resistance, the quote above illustrates both resourcefulness and resistance where the interviewee, rather than defining herself as vulnerable, decided to take action. This is a recurring theme in interviews with local citizens and volunteers and will be discussed further as *rural resourcefulness and rural resistance* in the coming part of this analysis.

To conclude, the “void” that has been the subject of discussion throughout this theme can be perceived as being both material and symbolic. It is material in the sense that it illustrates an actual lack of resources: both material and human, and the consequences that come out of this. It is symbolic in the sense that this void illustrates the social and political conditions of peripheral disaster management: illustrated above with the initial example of the forgotten fire. This forgotten fire, and the fact that a large fire in the northern rural forests does not even get any media coverage, can be understood as an example of the invisibility of rural communities and the fact that national media to large extent is guided by an urban norm [53]. Both the material and symbolic aspects of this “void” emphasize the importance of rural volunteerism which is performed in order to fill, or compensate for, this void.

This analytical theme also illustrates how rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality, here actualized by the lack of official resources, slim public organizations and the invisibility of rural communities in media coverage. More so, the analysis above also illustrates how rural citizens compensate for such structural conditions by practising active citizenship [37,38], here transformed into disaster volunteerism.

5.2. *Rural resourcefulness*

Taking a closer look at how local citizens made sense of the need for volunteerism during the wildfires in 2018, reveals they did so both in terms of resourcefulness (for example, by presenting themselves as a capable, resourceful, rural citizen) and in terms of resistance (for example, by questioning the fact that rural fire defence depends so heavily on volunteer initiatives). Both arguments (resourcefulness and resistance) take their point of departure in rural disaster volunteerism as a compensatory act – that is, as something that is performed out of necessity, in order to compensate for the lack of official resources and rural welfare services (cf. [36]).

In terms of resourcefulness, there are several different examples of how citizens step in in order to compensate for the lack of official response. For example, volunteerism as a compensatory act is performed through actual firefighting while waiting for the fire and rescue services. One example of this was mentioned above in order to illustrate how volunteers fill the void of official response. A similar example comes from a local citizen in another village:

I know these forests. It is where I hunt. And I had to start doing something since there was no one else around. / … / eventually we were about 50 locals engaged in putting the fire out. *(Local citizen)*
Here, rural resourcefulness is not only illustrated by the convergence of locals and their willingness to assist in fighting the fire. By emphasizing “I know these forests. It is where I hunt”, the interviewee brought important rural competencies to the fore. In doing so, he also claimed his right to this specific place, and this specific forest. Thereby, the quote above becomes a vivid example of how place, or geography, and voluntarism are understood in relation to each other [42] as well as how the “doings” of rural voluntarism intersect with rural everyday life experiences (Smith et al., 2011), such as hunting.

Rural competencies such as local knowledge or knowledge and habit of being in the forest were highly appreciated by rescue personnel in their search for competent volunteers. This was expressed by one of our interviewees, a fire fighter and commander in chief, in the following way:

I didn’t want just anyone running around in the forest. I wanted ‘forest people’. People who know the forests and are used to being out there. (Rescue personnel)

This sort of resourcefulness, locals and “forest people” who know their way around in the forests, is not an endless resource, however. Rural citizens, and rural volunteers more specifically, often wear “double hats”. For example, many are members of several different volunteer organizations at the same time such as the mountain rescue and the (semi-volunteer) part-time fire brigade. Others wear double hats in the sense that their professional role and their engagement in a voluntary organization collide, as they might be needed in both positions during a crisis or disaster. A volunteer from the mountain rescue, who is also a part-time fire fighter, described how his double hats came into play during the wildfires:

When we [the mountain rescue] arrived they [the rescue personnel] were just like “Okay, but you are all fire fighters as well, right?” And we all were. “Just grab a hose then.” (Organized volunteer)

Another example of how rural citizenship might collide with rural voluntarism during disaster is drawn from an example of how the part-time firefighters from the village worst affected by the wildfires had to simultaneously look after their own houses while also fighting the fires. A colleague of theirs narrated their story:

Imagine sitting outside your house and feeling the fire getting closer. First, you look after your own house and then you change to your uniform and go out to fight the fire. At the same time you want to get back home to check on your own house. There is always this mixture, it’s never either or. (Rescue personnel)

While these double hats illustrate rural resourcefulness and active rural citizenship [37,38] it also illustrates the necessity of rural citizens’ volunteer engagement in order to fill the chairs in both voluntary and official organizations. More so, it illustrates that rural engagement is not an endless resource: once a crisis or disaster strikes, someone will have to prioritize and decide which hat to put on.

Rural resourcefulness was not only manifested through physical activities and actual firefighting. Voluntarism as a compensatory act was also performed through engaging in risk communication activities. Some of the interviewees described that they receive very little information from the authorities about the forest fire. Residents compensated for this void of information by starting a Facebook group to spread information:

People are really engaged in this village. For example, these two women, they started this group on Facebook. Since we didn’t get any information from our municipality. So all official information they could get their hands on, they shared in this Facebook group. (Local citizen)

In the empirical material, there are several examples of neighbour-to-neighbour assistance during the wildfires, not least when people quickly, and often under dramatic circumstances, had to evacuate their homes. For example, neighbours helped out by evacuating the vehicles of others in need of assistance or assisting those who were not able to evacuate on their own. More distant neighbours, who did not have to evacuate during the fires, offered their homes and cabins for those who had to evacuate their homes. There are also examples of neighbours who were engaged in fire prevention at an early stage of the wildfires by watering around both their own and their neighbours’ house with a hose in order to prevent the fire from getting to their house. A local citizen who had to evacuate her home during the wildfires described the scene when neighbours assist in evacuating the village they live in:

My brother-in-law, he has two cars, one tractor and a trailer. But there was such a hurry so everybody just jumped into their cars and left. And his new tractor, surely worth about 2,5 million, he just had to leave it behind. But then, later on, a couple of neighbours drove by and picked up the tractor. Drove it to the village where he was currently staying. So there is a lot of care and kindness here. People helping each other out. I would say that it is typical of this village, that people help each other out. (Local citizen)

All these examples of neighbour-to-neighbour assistance during the wildfires exemplify rural voluntarism as an extension of the everyday rural social relationships and engagement (Smith et al., 2011). Here, the neighbour-to-neighbour assistance during the evacuation can be understood as a specific form of rural voluntarism, sprung from the continuous [36] rural voluntarism of neighbours helping each other out in the rural everyday life. In that way, rural voluntarism, here exemplified by neighbour-to-neighbour assistance, reproduces the structures and roles of rural everyday life in a disaster.

The rural resourcefulness and the rural voluntarism that have been the subjects of discussion under this analytical theme illustrate how rural voluntarism is performed as a compensatory act: as something that local citizens engaged in in order to compensate for cuts and withdrawals in rural welfare services [36]. The resourcefulness that, by the interviewees themselves, were described as being characteristic of “their village” or “people living in the countryside”, also illustrates the norm of active citizenship where rural citizens, in order to ensure their access to welfare and services, need to act, show commitment and organize themselves [37]. We will
now move on to an opposite narrative of rural resourcefulness: *rural resistance*, where the rural dependency on volunteerism is questioned and positioned in relation to rural socio-political conditions and vulnerability.

5.3. Rural resistance

While the themes filling the void and resourcefulness covered a number of different examples of people coping with the lack of official resources by engaging in volunteer activities, there are also several examples of people questioning the fact that they, as rural citizens, had to be dependent on volunteerism. In this article we understand such examples of questioning as forms of rural resistance. The following theme, rural resistance, reflect such stories, where the interviewees question the unequal distribution of welfare services (here exemplified by a heavily down-scaled fire brigade) and the dependency on rural volunteerism that follows from this. Thus, here resistance is studied in terms of different speech acts rather than in terms of for example demonstrations or more active ways of fighting back.

A local citizen that had to evacuate her home during the wildfires is one of several interviewees that questions the unequal distribution of welfare services and the void in official firefighting response that follows from this:

I mean, we live here and we pay taxes like everybody else. Don’t we deserve safety? Don’t we deserve a fire brigade like everybody else? (Local citizen)

Not only did this interviewee contextualize the lack of official resources, the void, in a socio-political context by drawing on the unequal distribution of welfare through the rhetorical question “Don’t we deserve a fire brigade like everybody else?”, she also demands her rights in terms of access to welfare and safety. In that sense the quote above also becomes an example of moral positioning and the rural moral [49] that not only characterizes rural volunteerism but rural everyday life as well. In a similar way, a police officer that worked out on the field during the wildfires questions the dependence on volunteerism:

I am not sure that we, as an authority, should be dependent on volunteerism. That we should organize our preparedness on a volunteerism that we can’t take for granted. (Rescue personnel)

While the quote by the local citizen above echoes frustration and resistance, other interviewees made sense of, and almost excused, the lack of firefighting resources with expressions like “we live in a small municipality where the resources are scarce”, “in this small municipality” is a frequently used expression by several interviewees as they narrated their experiences of the official wildfire response. Although in a more understanding way, this is also a way to situate rural volunteerism in a socio-political context of dismantled rural welfare and related inequalities [42]. A local citizen that had to evacuate his home during the wildfires described, and questioned, the fact that the municipality where he lives was left on its own in managing a strained situation:

I mean, this tiny, tiny municipality with a small number of inhabitants. And it is in the middle of summer vacation. They had some sort of crisis management down at the fire station. I feel sorry for those who tried to coordinate that work. The workload must have been enormous! In the best of worlds, there should be a group of people, from anywhere. I mean, a team of professionals that come here and organize an action plan. (Local citizen)

Another example is a narrative from the wildfires in which one of the interviewees, a member of the rescue personnel and a commander in chief, gave an example of some volunteers questioning the lack of coordination on the part of the authorities in the response:

Two volunteers that had been out distributing fuel, for a very long time, came in and said “We can’t do this anymore”. They came in where the staff had their offices and said that “We can’t do this anymore. We don’t get any support at all”. (Rescue personnel)

In contrast to previously mentioned examples of rural resistance, where the resistance is related to the structural conditions of rurality, the quote above illustrates more of a resistance towards the situation than the lack of official resources per se. Here, the volunteers actually resisted by not offering their services anymore.

Bringing narratives of resistance into the analysis makes it possible to both nuance and problematize the solidarity, helpfulness and resourcefulness that dominate previous studies on disaster volunteerism. The theme of rural resistance illustrates the friction, and power relations, between urbanity and rurality as the interviewees question the unequal distribution of welfare services and the inequalities that follows from this. The quote: “Don’t we deserve a fire brigade like everyone else?” is a vivid example of the power relations between urbanity and rurality where “we” (the rural) is positioned in relation to “everyone else” (the urban). In other words, these everyday experiences of living in that which others have defined as “the periphery” does not only foster resourcefulness and active citizenship – it also fosters a resistance towards being dependent on volunteerism and the goodwill of others in times of disaster.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to examine how rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality. By exploring if, and how, people make sense of volunteer activities in relation to place, and how power relations relate to this place, three analytical themes evolved: filling the void, rural resourcefulness and rural resistance. Through the analysis it becomes evident that rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality in different ways. First of all, this paper illustrates how rural disaster volunteerism is performed as a compensatory act – as something that compensate for the lack of official firefighting resources. This void, or the lack of official firefighting resources, is not only a consequence of several fires occurring at the same time, it
is just as much a consequence of a heavily dismantled rural fire defence (see also [2]). Secondly, the paper also illustrates how both resourcefulness and resistance are fuelled by the structural conditions of rurality, for example: resourcefulness as something that is extended from the everyday experiences of rurality into an actual disaster, and resistance manifested as the interviewees question the rural socio-political conditions of today.

In disaster studies, just as in studies on volunteerism in general, rural volunteerism is often understood as an expression of the solidarity and helpfulness associated with local communities and rural areas (Beel, 2015). Thus, rural areas, and the people who live there, are often portrayed as action-oriented and helpful [32]. However, reasons behind this sort of action and helpfulness are rarely sought. This article contributes with a nuance and problematisation of the helpfulness and volunteerism that are often described as a central part of the success story of the wildfires in the summer of 2018 by emphasizing the socio-political context where rural disaster volunteerism evolves.

In different ways, and through different voices, this article has shown how people's experiences of volunteering during the Swedish wildfires of 2018 can be understood against the background of their everyday experiences of living in a rural community. The feeling of living in a place where community service and welfare is no longer present and where the distance to responsible authorities is long (in both a physical and symbolic sense) characterize the interviewees' stories about volunteering during the wildfires in different ways.

The lack of resources provided by the state that rescue personnel, volunteers and evacuees in this paper describe should be understood as an expression of structural inequality, a consequence of a centralization and dismantling of rural security, welfare and services. The void that arises when society's disaster management resources are insufficient raises interesting questions for the disaster and crisis research field to develop further. Within social science disaster research, people's voluntary aid efforts have for a long time been described as filling the void that occurs before society's disaster management organizations have the situation under control [11,12,16]. However, few, if any, have questioned what this void is due to. In this article, it becomes clear how such a void is associated with peripheralization (see also [19]), here exemplified by long distances to the nearest fire and rescue services and lack of both material and human resources within local fire and rescue services. This raises important questions about the disaster volunteerism that arises in such a void. Perhaps volunteering must also be understood as an expression of rural survival, a compensatory act [36] when society's disaster management resources are not enough, rather than as merely an expression of people's unconditional and solidarity aid efforts.

Understanding rural volunteerism is essential to improve societies preparedness for future disaster. Research has since long shown that volunteers converge when crises and disasters occur [54]. In the literature, volunteers are commonly viewed only from the perspectives of the authorities; and several researchers have emphasized the need for more research on volunteerism from the volunteer's perspective [4,6]. That reasons for volunteering in a disaster might depend on causes that are beyond the specific disaster is thus rarely discussed. In this paper, we show that the withdrawal of society's resources affects volunteerism also during crises and disasters and that this needs to be acknowledged by the officials in their preparedness work.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrate that rural disaster volunteerism intersects with structural conditions of rurality. During the studied wildfires the initial lack of official firefighting resources in rural areas resulted in that efforts from local citizens and volunteers were necessary for the response. It was clear that the local citizens and volunteers had to fill the void which existed. Two themes emerge from the interviews related to how the interviewees made sense of the need to fill this void. The first theme is rural resourcefulness were rural volunteers present themselves as capable and resourceful and thus able to fill the existing void. The second is rural resistance were the fact that rural disaster management are so dependent on volunteer initiatives to respond to disasters is questioned.

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Linda Kvarnlof: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. Kerstin Eriksson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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