

VOLUNTARY FIRE DEPARTMENTS (VFD) IN POLAND AS AN ENTITY OF THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL SECTOR (NGO) ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE WESTERN POMERANIA VFD

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Purpose: The article's purpose was to explore the usage of and activities to enhance human potential and the socioeconomic impact of the VFD units of the Western Pomerania Voivodship, based on research done among the VFD units of the Western Pomerania Voivodship.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employs literature analysis, tabular comparisons, and conducted questionnaires of bathers. The approach for the research was based on a desktop evaluation of accessible information, statistics, and other data national sources. The qualitative data acquired from self-research was used in the statistical analysis. The research group had 338 firemen from 17 VFD units and the research was scheduled from February and the end of March 2022.

Findings: The study found that membership in the NRFS system had a considerable impact on local governments and firemen. The operation of TSOs in the NRFS system is a factor that promotes the improvement of firefighters' funding on the part of local governments, and on the part of TSO units themselves, it is a factor that raises their competence and confidence in the skills of their own team. Both have a considerable impact on the effectiveness of rescue and firefighting operations, as well as firefighters' attitudes.

Research limitations/implications: The research has limitations, such as its specific timeframe and omitted variables.

Practical implications: The study's findings revealed a progressive professionalization of TSO units in NRFS, as well as an increase in social functions, particularly rescue functions - participation in rescue and firefighting activities, which is reflected in increased receipt of financial support from the municipal to provincial levels. Therefore, reduced activity and self-motivation of TSO firefighters from outside the NRFS system may cause less professionalism during rescue and firefighting operations.

Social implications: Volunteer fire stations perform essential social duties in their region of operation in addition to rescue and firefighting actions. The "extinction" of TSO units' activities outside the KSRG system may result in lower social activity in the locations where the aforementioned units operate, among other reasons.

Originality/value: Study documents a certain stage of development of TSO units, with the long-term goal of professionalizing these structures of units joining the NRFS system. In addition to the components (conclusions) described in the article, this is demonstrated by the decreased participation of firefighters outside the NRFS in various activities aimed at raising funds for TSOs' broadly specified statutory activities.

Keywords: public policy, NGOs, social participation, fire protection, volunteer fire departments, public safety, social capital.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Poland operate on the idea of citizen voluntarism and social involvement in the local or regional environment. The Law on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism contains the legal definition of a non-governmental organization. According to the legal definition, a non-governmental organization is any entity that is neither an organ or a subordinate unit of public administration (government or local government) and whose operations are not profit-oriented (Act on Public Service, 2023). Non-governmental organizations are referred to in the public sphere as the "third sector", as opposed to the public sector (first sector) and the business sector (second sector). Volunteer fire departments (VFD) and the VFD organization, which operate from the municipal level and has a statewide reach, are unique in terms of legislative activity in Poland and Europe.

The aim of the article was to investigate the use of and activities to strengthen human capability and socio-economics impact of the VFD units of the Western Pomerania Voivodship, based on the research conducted among the VFD units of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. The study employs literature analysis, tabular comparisons, and conducted questionnaires of bathers. The approach for the research was based on a desktop evaluation of accessible information, statistics, and other data national sources. The qualitative data acquired from self-research was used in the statistical analysis. The research group had 338 firemen from 17 VFD units and the research was scheduled from February and the end of March 2022. The research group was established as the territorial VFD units of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. The activity of separate districts of the mentioned province in various local government programs served as the guiding rationale for their separation. Counties with low, medium, and high levels of involvement were pointed out from this standpoint. Following that, firefighting units belonging to and not belonging to the CRSG were chosen at random within them. A total of 17 units and 338 firefighters were polled. The survey ran from February to the end of March 2022.

2. Theoretical aspects of voluntary fire departments in Poland and in the west pomeranian region

Volunteer fire departments responded to socioeconomic changes following Poland's political transformation in 1989 and are an example of a non-governmental organization that has been popular in the public eye for years as an organization and its members - volunteer firefighters. The profession of "firefighter" ranks first on the national list of professions, thanks not only to the state fire department's (SFD) standing, but also to the operations of volunteer firefighting groups and departments (VFD). Under the requirements of the Law of April 7, 1989, VFD units became non-governmental organizations - Associations Law (Law on Associations, 1989). The entry into force of the Fire Protection Act of August 24, 2003, as well as the establishment of the national rescue and firefighting system (NRFS) of state security, laid the legal and organizational groundwork for VFD unit job implementation (Dz.U.2022.0.2257). Cooperation within the NRFS is primarily cooperation during rescue operations throughout the country with the participation of specialists, rescue groups, the use of equipment, the preparation of joint training programs on the principles of first aid, the use of basic rescue techniques, the creation of programs informing about disaster risks, natural disasters, fires, and other hazards caused by natural or human activity, and the availability of resources (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 20.07.2023). VSDs have been performing civil protection, fire protection, and rescue operations for almost 30 years. Volunteer fire departments' goals and tasks are based on statutes, with the basis being to carry out activities aimed at preventing fires, participating in rescue operations carried out during fires and other dangerous events and disasters, and informing the population about existing threats. The boards of VFD associations have legal personality and are recognized in the National Court Register (NCR). The distinctive feature of VFD is "to take action to protect life, health, property, or the environment," which distinguishes this organization from others. VFD units conduct large-scale preventive efforts, primarily geared at children and young people (NGO portal, 20.07.2023). The incorporation of VFD units in the national rescue and firefighting system (NRFS) is a critical component in elevating the status of VFDs. In 1995, the inclusion of VFD units in the NRFS was conditional on meeting the requirements set by the Minister responsible for internal affairs and the Chief Commander of the National Fire Service for equipment and training, in accordance with the Minister of Internal Affairs' Regulation of September 15, 2014 on the scope, detailed conditions, and procedure for including fire protection units in the national rescue and firefighting system (Ordinance of the Minister of Internal Affairs of September 15, 2014).

Fire protection units may be included in the NRFS system if their forces and resources are available for use in the district or provincial rescue plan, which is included in the aggregate plan of the network of system entities managed by the State Fire Department. A VFD unit may be included in the NRFS system if it: 1. has: 1.1. at least one medium or heavy rescue and

firefighting vehicle, 1.2. at least 12 trained rescuers, 1.3. an effective notification and alarm system, 1.4. communication facilities on the system's radio network for rescue operations, and 2. remains ready to undertake rescue operations.

VFD units have been continuously absorbed into NRFS's resources during the past 30 years. The NRFS will have 4738 VFDs in 2021. NRFS has 4,929 VFD units at the end of December 2022, with 12,000 rescue, firefighting, and special vehicles. Outside of the NRFS system, there are around 11,000 VFD units whose capabilities are also employed for rescue and firefighting. The total number of VFD units registered with the National Court Register in Poland has surpassed 16 thousand. It is Europe's largest volunteer firefighter rescue group. The VFD phenomenon has been astounding for many decades, on the one hand, while also helping to save life, health, property, or the environment from fire, natural disaster, or other local risk. In 1990-1991, the drafters of the "firefighting laws" extremely efficiently incorporated social and non-governmental potential into the state security apparatus developed after 1989 (Ręclawowicz, 2018).

The social components of VFS activities must be highlighted. In 2012, a detailed research study on the conditions and possibilities of VFDs (Bubak, 2008, Dzieniszewska-Naroska, 2004; Kocowski, 2018; Popis, 2013; Stochmal, 2021) indicated that they are frequently the primary source of social capital in villages and small towns. VFD activity is predominantly concentrated in rural regions, and VFD social engagement is an important component of local social capital, which also creates normative behavior based on trust, reciprocity, obligations, and expectations", contributing to socio-local development. In empirical investigations, social and civic action determines the level of social capital. Common metrics of social activity are those related to social networks and the operation of voluntary associations and social organizations - referred to as a barometer of social involvement by topic researchers (Zakrzewska, 2023).

VFDs employ approximately 700,000 people, with 228,394 firefighters actively involved in rescue and firefighting operations, as well as technical, flood, chemical and ecological, medical, high altitude, water rescue, and search and rescue activities. Within the VFD, there are also various Youth Fire Departments Teams (YFDT), which are naturally centers for training and recruiting young firemen.

VFD activity includes not only programs targeted at direct support to local communities, but also activities promoting culture, sports, relaxation, and environmental protection. The VFD includes almost 800 orchestras, 20,000 musicians, 300 artistic teams, and 600 sports teams. Although the memory of fire history is gathered and made available in over 1000 chambers of tradition, it is worth noting that VFDs are distinguished from other secular NGOs working in rural regions by their professed dedication to tradition and religiosity (Marcysiak, 2021).

As it goes with the West Pomeranian Voivodship, by the end of 2021, the potential of its national rescue and firefighting system included:

- 20 municipal/county SFD commands,
- 26 SFD rescue and firefighting units,
- 4 SFD stations (Darlowo, Debno, Miedzdroje, Nowogard),
- 200 VFD units included in the NRFS,
- 5 units of military fire protection included in NRFS.

The system is being supported by the following forces and resources (from outside the NRFS):

- 243 VFD units,
- 5 units of Company Fire Service and Company Rescue Service,
- 8 units of military fire protection (Ordinance of the Minister of Internal Affairs of September 15, 2014).

The number of VFD units in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship is as follows:

- Number of VFDs according to the IT SYSTEM of VFDs – 475,
- Number of VFDs registered in the National Court Register – 468,
- Number of VFDs in NRFS – 205.

The number of West Pomeranian VFDs resulting from the IT SYSTEM of VFDs as of 08.12.2021 are:

- members - 14,555 persons, including 11,197 men and 1494 women, including:
 - supporting members - 1026 persons,
 - honorary members - 838 persons,
- 47 Women's Fire Teams with 420 members,
- 237 Youth Fire Brigades Teams with 2794 members, of which 1149 are girls and 1645 are boys.

Analysis the infrastructure potential of VFD in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, 214 VFD units own light rescue and firefighting vehicles, 97 units own heavy vehicles, and 152 units own other vehicles: 12 hydraulic lifts, 4 mechanical ladders, 12 cars, 46 technical with equipment, 9 trucks, 2 coaches, 1 tractor, 64 boats on trailers, and 60 other vehicles. There were no fire stations in 16 units, and 34 VFDs lacked rescue equipment such as a car or a motor pump.

Thus, taking into account the statistics cited above, it is possible to distinguish three basic areas of firefighter activity:

- fire protection and rescue,
- branch activity, in terms of training, maneuver competitions,
- activities for the local environment.

In turn, the way in which the above-mentioned tasks are fulfilled is determined by many factors among which are economic factors (e.g., the building of the fire station, the equipment owned by the unit, the level of wealth of the municipality in which the unit operates), the condition of the cadre (e.g., its number, age, level of training, etc.), the technical infrastructure of the municipality (e.g., transportation availability, access to water), social conditions (institutions operating in its area).

3. Conducted research – methodology and research group

For the purposes of this study, the analysed region of the West Pomeranian region compared to Poland is identified with each of the sixteen existing regions in accordance with the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Territorial Statistics (NTS) in force in Poland, prepared based on the European Nomenclature of Territorial Statistics Units (NUTS) (Zalewski, Sikora, Czapiewski, 2021). The region included in the study is of size corresponding in this classification to the NUTS 2 level as a unit of the administrative division of the second-level country, as indicated by many authors (Korenik, 1999; Strahl, 2005; Paradysz, 2012).

According to a review of the literature, the subject of volunteer firemen is studied in three contexts:

1. volunteer firemen (Blaney et al., 2021; Bryant, Harvey, 1995),
2. volunteer firefighters (Hwang et al., 2019),
3. volunteer firemen working as part of a larger group (Henderson, Sowa, 2018; Oliveira, Pinheiro, 2021).

Several subject groups can be defined based on the concerns addressed in the literature. The physical health of firefighters, as well as the elements that influence it, is frequently the focus of investigation (Petruzzello et al., 2016). Firefighters' mental health receives a great deal of attention (Frost et al., 2021; Cramm et al., 2021), which is undoubtedly due to the unique nature of their operations (Kovac et al., 2022), particularly in crisis and traumatic situations (Smith et al., 2022; Schnell et al., 2020). Because the phenomenon "affecting" Volunteer Fire Departments is staffing problems (Malinen, Mankkinen, 2018), much attention has been paid to the motivations for joining TSO units and the factors that encourage long-term activity in them (Gazzale, 2019; Henderson, Sowa, 2018; Huynh et al., 2023). The role of family is frequently emphasized in this context (Cowlshaw et al., 2008; McLennan et al., 2009; Huynh et al., 2013). There have also been research on the effect of rescue and firefighting experience on their responses (Petruzzello et al., 2016; Poh et al., 2014). However, no studies have been found in which firefighter activity toward institutional support or social participation has been studied. Therefore, quantitative study's goal was to inquire into firefighting activity variables

such as: a) attitude toward institutional support, b) opportunities for action, c) social engagement, and d) existing problems in VFD units.

The approach for the research was based on a desktop evaluation of accessible information, statistics, and other data national sources. The qualitative data acquired from self-research was used in the statistical analysis. The research group had 338 firemen from 17 VFD units and the research was scheduled from February and the end of March 2022. The research group was established as the territorial VFD units of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

4. Research results considering attitude towards institutional support

Municipalities finance the activities of firemen in VFD units, which is the foundation for their operation. According to the report, the majority of firefighters favor local government assistance. A total of 286 people (84.62%) evaluated their authorities as 3 to 5. The majority, 112 (33.4%), thought the level of subsidies was adequate. 91 respondents (26.92%) gave a good rating, and 83 (24.56%) gave a very high rating. Opinions differ between the two distinct types of VFD units. While opinions among NRFS firefighters are similar with the entire data, firemen who are not participating in the described system have more diverse evaluations. On the one hand, we have two groups of 15 persons who provide evaluations of adequate and excellent. There are also 10 responders who are pleased with the municipality's financial assistance. However, greater than in the NRFS units of individuals 6 (taking the entire category into account). Provide a dismal mark to their local administrations (Table 1).

Table 1.

Level of financial - organizational support provided by municipal authorities to VFDs

Evaluation of support	VFD units in NRFS			VFD units outside NRFS			Total	
	N	% ¹	Location	N	% ²	Location	N	% ³
0	2	0,70	VI	2	3,77	V	4	1,18
1	11	3,86	V	6	11,32	III	17	5,03
2	26	9,12	IV	4	7,55	IV	30	8,88
3	97	34,04	I	15	28,30	I	112	33,14
4	81	28,42	II	10	18,87	II	91	26,92
5	68	23,86	III	15	28,30	I	83	24,56
No data available	-	-		1	1,89		1	0,30
Total:	285	100,00		53	100,00		338	100,00

%¹ - percentage calculated from the size of the NRFS category = 53 people; %² - percentage calculated from the size of the NRFS category = 285 people; %³ - percentage of all respondents = 338 people; Place - options to choose among the distinguished categories of firefighters.

Source: Authors' own research.

5. Research results considering attitude towards opportunities for action

The purchase of new equipment for firefighters, particularly a fire engine, demonstrates the municipality's economic capacity. The capacity of firemen to perform during actions is heavily influenced by the availability of modern equipment. The majority of responders, 174 (51.48%), said their VFD unit has a new fire vehicle. There are discrepancies between the divided categories here, as in the previously stated table. Firefighters from units other than the NRFS are more concerned about a lack of modern equipment (1st place in the selection possibilities) than those from the system (2nd place). Surprisingly, as many as five firefighters outside the NRFS claimed that their unit had received a new truck, despite the fact that the majority of their unit members claimed the reverse. These individuals may have previously belonged to a different VFD than the one they represented on the day of the poll. However, it is possible to deduce that firefighters outside the NRFS have older equipment than those within the system (Table 2).

Table 2.

Acquisition of new rescue and firefighting vehicle by VFD unit in the last 5 years

Selection option	VFD units in NRFS			VFD units outside NRFS			Total	
	N	% ¹	Location	N	% ²	Location	N	% ³
The unit has a new truck	151	52,98	I	23	43,40	II	174	51,48
The unit does not have a new vehicle	129	45,26	II	30	56,60	I	159	47,04
No data available	5	1,75		-	-		5	1,48
Total:	285	100,00		53	100,00		338	100,00

%¹ - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 53 people; %² - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 285 people; %³ - percentage of all respondents = 338 people; Place - options to choose among the distinguished categories of firefighters.

Source: Authors' own research.

6. Research results considering respondents' social participation

There are differences in the activity of firemen based on their classification. Firefighters in the NRFS system are undoubtedly more frequently involved in rescue and firefighting operations. Every year, the majority of firefighters here participate in more than 30 actions, with those who are less active (up to 20 actions) coming in second. The opposite is true in the SFD outside of the system. Every year, firemen participate in no more than 20 activities. The most active responses have a small number of responses. The participation of the investigated firefighters' units in the NRFS system appears to be the distinguishing element of their actions. In addition, 37 firefighters (20.95%) do not participate in direct VFD tasks.

These are mostly retired firefighters and a few women. Firefighters' activity is measured by their participation in rescue and firefighting operations (Table 3).

Table 3.

Number of rescue and firefighting operations in which firefighters participated during the year

Selection option	VFD units in NRFS			VFD units outside NRFS			Total	
	N	% ¹	Location	N	% ²	Location	N	% ³
0	30	10,53	IV	7	13,21	III	37	10,95
up to 20	93	32,63	II	28	52,83	I	121	35,80
above 20 to 30	53	18,60	III	11	20,75	II	64	18,93
above 30	109	38,25	I	7	13,21	III	116	34,32
Total:	285	100,00		53	100,00		338	100,00

%¹ - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 53 people; %² - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 285 people; %³ - percentage of all respondents = 338 people; Place - options to choose among the distinguished categories of firefighters.

Source: Authors' own research.

The capacity to offer first response is another key indicator of firefighters' social participation (Table 4). With 92 answers (27.22%), firefighters who rate their skills as very good are the most numerous. 86 respondents (25.44%) rate themselves as having a high opinion of themselves. Following that are mediocre 70 firefighters (20.71%), sufficient 54 druhs (15.98%), and insufficient 31 persons (9.17%).

Table 4.

Assessment of first responds skills of firefighters

Selection option	Evaluation	VFD units in NRFS				VFD units outside NRFS				Total	
		N	% ¹	Location	Average	N	% ²	Location	Average	N	% ³
Own skills	0	4	1,40	VI	3,43	-	-	-	3,02	4	1,1
	1	23	8,07	V		8	15,09	III		31	9,17
	2	58	20,35	III		12	22,64	II		70	20,71
	3	42	14,74	IV		12	22,64	II		54	15,98
	4	73	25,61	II		13	24,53	I		86	25,44
	5	84	29,47	I		8	15,09	III		92	27,22
A firefighter's away team for rescue and firefighting operations	0	3	1,05	VI	3,78	2	3,77	IV	3,23	5	1,48
	1	8	2,81	V		5	9,43	III		13	3,85
	2	59	20,70	III		8	15,09	II		67	19,82
	3	29	10,18	IV		8	15,09	II		37	10,95
	4	77	27,02	II		14	26,42	I		91	26,92
	5	111	38,95	I		14	26,4	I		125	36,98
Other firefighters in the VFD unit	0	2	0,70	VI	3,55	-	-	-	3,53	2	0,59
	1	23	8,07	V		8	15,09	IV		31	9,17
	2	48	16,84	III		7	13,21	V		55	16,27
	3	39	13,68	IV		13	24,53	II		52	15,38
	4	85	29,82	II		14	26,42	I		99	29,29
	5	87	30,53	I		11	20,75	III		98	28,99

%¹ - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 53 people; %² - percentage calculated from the size of the CRSG category = 285 people; %³ - percentage of all respondents = 338 people; Place - options to choose among the distinguished categories of firefighters.

Source: Authors' own research.

When the opinions of the surveyed types of TSO units are compared, those who work in the NRFS system rank their first aid skill much higher, with an average value of 3.43. Druhs from outside VFDs give themselves worse grades. Their average is 3.02 points. The respondents rate their teammates' competence higher than their own. Very good marks are the most common in both separate categories. This is how 125 individuals (36.98%) ranked their team. At the same time, firemen from VFD units in the NRFS assess the companions' skills higher - the average here is 3.78, which is 0.55 higher than among firefighters outside the system. Respondents' ratings of non-team members in the unit are similar in both categories evaluated, at 3.55 for those in the NRFS system and 3.52 for those outside the system. Better belief in teammates, more connection to their own team, and belief in their team's competency fall into the first category, which should convert into increased trust in colleagues and efficacy. Lower self-confidence, admittedly better appraisals of colleagues, but much better, those with whom they do not engage, characterize individuals in the second category of weaker self-assessment. These ratings here are based on the idea that where we are not is better (Table 4).

7. Research results considering challenges and problems in VFD units

Firefighters were also polled on the most prevalent issues they encountered in their VFD unit (Table 5). Insufficient training and the need to invest in the firehouse structure - 121 individuals (35.80%); staff shortages - 110 people (32.54%); lack of money for activities - 107 people (31.66%); and antiquated equipment - 102 people (30.18%).

Table 5.
Firefighters' opinions on problems occurring in their units

Type of problem	VFD units in NRFS			VFD units outside NRFS			Total	
	N	% ¹	Location	N	% ²	Location	N	% ³
Tough working conditions	14	4,91	XIV	3	5,66	VII	17	5,03
Poor interpersonal relations	32	11,23	X	2	3,77	VIII	34	10,06
Poor work organization	36	12,63	VIII	2	3,77	VIII	38	11,24
Frequency of participation in TSO actions and related remuneration	18	6,32	XII	1	1,89	IX	19	5,62
Excessive workload	18	6,32	XII	2	3,77	VIII	20	5,92
Conflicts	37	12,98	VII	1	1,89	IX	38	11,24
Low level of discipline among firefighters	45	15,79	VI	3	5,66	VII	48	14,20
Insufficient qualification of the crew	27	9,47	XI	4	7,55	VI	31	9,17
Lack of money for activities	98	34,39	III	9	16,98	V	107	31,66
Insufficient training for TSO members	102	35,79	II	19	35,85	II	121	35,80
Outdated equipment	76	26,67	V	26	49,06	I	102	30,18

Cont. table 5.

Mental load resulting from the tasks performed by the firefighter	33	11,58	IX	1	1,89	IX	34	10,06
Investments related to the fire station building	104	36,49	I	17	32,08	III	121	35,80
Staff shortages	94	32,98	IV	16	30,19	IV	110	32,54
Other (what kind?)	17	5,96	XIII	-	-	-	17	5,03
Total:	751	263,51		106	200,00		857	253,55

*data does not add up to 100% because respondents were given any choice; %¹ - percentage calculated from the size of the NRFS category = 53 people; %² - percentage calculated from the size of the NRFS category = 285 people; %³ - percentage of all respondents = 338 people; Place - options to choose among the distinguished categories of firefighters.

Source: Authors' own research.

Both groups of firemen agree that inadequate training is one of the primary issues with VFDs, ranking second in significance among the obstacles. Other problems rated similarly by the separated categories of firefighters are: personnel shortage - 4th place in terms of importance; poor work organization - 8th place in terms of importance; and mental burden resulting from firefighter tasks - 9th place in terms of importance. The membership of VFD units in the VFD is a criterion that differentiates respondents' attitudes in the remaining selections. Among the most significant challenges in carrying out tasks, both types of firemen mention comparable elements; they only assign them a different rank. For example:

- investments related to the fire station building are being replaced on the first place among brigades in the NRFS system; third in units outside the NRFS,
- lack of money for activities; obsolete equipment: fifth place among firefighters in the NRFS system; first in units outside the NRFS,
- low level of discipline among firefighters, sixth place among firefighters in the NRFS system; seventh in units outside the NRFS,
- insufficient qualification of the crew, eleventh place among firefighters in the NRFS system; sixth in units outside the NRFS.

It should also be noted that druhs from VFD units affiliated with the NRFS report more diverse obstacles in completing the duties of a firefighter than those from outside the system. Statistically, one respondent reports 2.63 difficulties in the first of the investigated groups, while 2.00 in the second. The firefighters rank various challenges differently, not just in the critical issues described above, but also in ones they mention less frequently. A lack of discipline, for example, is scored VI by firefighters from NRFS VFD units, but VII by those outside the system. When it comes to harsh working conditions, the gap between the two groups is considerably wider. This difficulty is ranked 14th in the first of the assessed categories, while firefighters outside the system rank seventh. Furthermore, firemen from NRFS units in the VFD differentiate better between the challenges they encounter while executing jobs - a level extending from I to XIV. Meanwhile, respondents from outside the system regard many challenges identically. For example, tough working circumstances, poor interpersonal interactions, and low levels of discipline among firemen are ranked as VII in importance. The range of importance of problems ranges from I to IX.

8. Conclusions and findings

According to the results of the study of VFD units, membership in the NRFS system has a significant impact on local authorities and the firefighters themselves. It is a factor that stimulates improved funding of firemen, including the retrofitting of proper equipment (Table 2), which clearly affects their ability to carry out their jobs in the case of municipal governments. For firemen, membership in the NRFS is a factor that improves the frequency with which they participate in rescue and firefighting operations (Table 3), resulting in a gain in experience, which surely influences the effectiveness of their activities. Furthermore, the inequalities between firefighters in the system and those outside the system are reflected in perceptions on firefighters' skills (Table 4). VFD unit representatives in the NRFS better assess their own and their teammates' abilities. Belief in team members' competence boosts trust in their ability to properly execute activities during an action; it also implies a better level of acceptance of their own team members, which affects their effectiveness indirectly. Outside-the-system firefighters have lesser confidence in themselves and their teammates; they are more likely to assess individuals with whom they do not directly collaborate. The discrepancies between NRFS and non-NRFS units are likewise related to perspectives on the problems in their VFD units (Table 5). And they implicitly confirm the preceding statements. The most pressing worry for firefighters whose units do not belong to the NRFS is outdated equipment. Non-NRFS firefighters are more likely to complain about insufficient crew qualifications, while non-NRFS firemen who participate in actions less frequently complain about excessive duty load (see Table 3). Many concerns, in the opinion of these firefighters, are of a similar type, which can be read as a symptom of the problems confronting these firefighting units. We appear to be dealing with a type of "divergence" of the TSO system. There are still issues that VFD units in NRFS and outside NRFS face (Table 5), such as poor training and staff shortages, although there are growing disparities between them. Participation in NRFS activities also helps VFD units gain more funds for upgrading their units and, as previously said, develops trust in the skills of their own team. Both of these elements have an impact on the condition of s and the effectiveness of firefighters' efforts.

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