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Mutual Aid During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

***CLAIRE PANELLA** evaluates instances of mutual aid networks that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic and their long-term efficacy.*

Illustration: Anastassia Kolchanov

Governmental responses to COVID-19 have failed to fully address the impact of the pandemic, especially with regard to already-marginalised populations. Instead, gaps in state-funded welfare programs have been filled by non-profit organisations, and small, community based mutual aid networks. These organisations have provided everything from food to assistance with everyday tasks, running errands for those shielding, and providing medical care and information. The first half of this paper will discuss the successes of mutual aid groups in compensating for the shortcomings of state welfare systems, focusing on the examples of the UK, the US, and Brazil. The second half will outline the dangers of becoming overly reliant on these types of community support, concluding that while mutual aid as a decentralised first response can be a useful, or even crucial, stopgap in times of crisis, it is not a long-term alternative to states creating and maintaining universally accessible centralised safety-nets.

Mutual Aid in the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals and communities across the globe over the past two years, but the degree to which different groups have been affected varies greatly. Poverty proved to be an additional

risk factor for severe illness and death from COVID-19, especially where public healthcare and other social safety nets were lacking (Stiglitz 2020). Additionally, in some already-struggling areas, COVID-19 was just one of many challenges, and not always the most pressing when compared to more immediately existential threats, such as insecure access to food and housing (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 17).

In response to this crisis, there has been an eruption of spontaneous, community-led responses to mitigate the economic and social impacts of steps taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect those most vulnerable from exposure to the virus (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 7). These local, horizontally-organised groups constitute a form of mutual aid. Mutual aid is the structure of community self-help where people join together to meet vital needs without relying on official bodies or formal processes (Power and Benton 2021). It is regularly observed wherever disaster strikes as a spontaneous first response to help others in the community (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 967). Furthermore, mutual aid is typically more agile than governments and large-scale non-profit responses to crises, and thus can be seen as crucial in the early stages of a disaster or crisis (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 8).

During the early stages of pandemic-related lockdowns in 2020, the UK became the site of one of the world's largest mutual aid networks, including more than 4000 individual groups (Shabi 2021). These groups offered different services according to community needs. Some of the most common services offered were food delivery, grocery shopping, and transportation to medical appointments for the elderly and those at high risk (Power and Benton 2021). Individuals became organisers or participants in these groups in huge numbers, using digital platforms like Facebook and Slack to coordinate assistance (Howard and Rebecca 2020, 167). In many cases, these mutual aid groups sprang up in response to COVID-19 related concerns where there had been no previous organisations and were credited with creating a newfound sense of community in these neighbourhoods (Howard and Rebecca 2020, 167). In addition to the material aid provided, many volunteers involved in these groups reported an increased sense of wellbeing and purpose through aiding their communities, which was important in a time of increased social isolation (Power and Benton 2021).

In the US, the federal government failed to provide an adequate early response to the pandemic. There were issues with distribution of crucial supplies like personal protective equipment and accurate tests, a lack of coordination and coherence in a response plan, as well as dismissals of danger and misinformation from the highest levels of government (Jun and Lance 2020, 362). There is a long history of mutual aid in the US, particularly among marginalised communities. The Black Panthers breakfast program is a notable historical example of mutual aid, and more recently Black Lives Matter (BLM) organisers have started mutual aid projects (Lowrey 2021). Washington DC's BLM mutual aid network adapted itself to COVID-19 by expanding to cover the entire city, and became the template for many other mutual aid projects across the country (Jun and Lance 2020, 363). This group has met diverse community needs, from food to transport to providing laptops for schoolchildren who are learning remotely, and sanitation supplies to people experiencing homelessness (Jun and Lance 2020, 364). Other mutual aid groups across the country have adapted to serve the unique needs of indigenous communities, undocumented immigrants, and the incarcerated; these groups were marginalised by the state prior to the pandemic and thus suffered outsized consequences (Bergman et al. 2020, 199).

Brazil also suffered from fragmented and scientifically unsound information being disseminated from the highest levels of government, as well as other structural challenges. Brazil has

one of the most unequal wealth distributions in the world, and many of its poorest citizens depend on unreliable, low-paying, informal work which disappeared during the pandemic (Zettler and Rebecca 2020, 249). These people often reside in Brazil's many favelas (densely populated urban areas of extreme poverty) facing poor sanitation, a lack of food security, and lack of access to health information - all of which compounded the impact of the pandemic (Phillips 2020). Many health directives, such as staying at home, isolating alone in a room, or washing hands with soap and running water were simply not applicable to those living in these conditions (Zettler and Rebecca 2020, 250). Even when the government offered a payment of approximately $115 per month and froze electricity bills for the poor, many were not able to access these resources due to a lack of documents or bank accounts (Phillips 2020). Instead, the established mutual aid networks operating within the favelas provided necessary aid (Phillips 2020). The aid activities of these groups included distributing food, soap, and basic supplies, as well as education on disease prevention through diverse media, like graffiti and rap music, in an effort to reach residents without access to official channels of information (Zettler and Rebecca 2020, 253).

"These cases highlight the benefits of mutual aid in times of crisis. Such organisations are able to respond quicker than governments or larger aid organisations (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 18)."

These cases highlight the benefits of mutual aid in times of crisis. Such organisations are able to respond quicker than governments or larger aid organisations (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 18). Those who participated as volunteers also felt the benefits of community, solidarity and a sense of purpose (Power and Benton 2021). This was an important lifeline to many who lost a sense of structure as measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 forced them to stop normal activities.

In interviews with four people involved in UK mutual aid efforts, all described an increased sense of wellbeing and a restored faith in people as caring and community-centred (Howard and Rebecca 2020, 172). Those interviewed all expressed hope that some of the transformations due to the pandemic would be permanent, and that their communities would remain connected and dedicated to performing everyday acts of mutual service (Howard and Rebecca 2020, 172). This hope for a future that is better than a return to 'normal' demonstrates the lasting impacts of mutual aid on communities. There is some evidence that mutual aid groups in the UK will continue post-pandemic. While there was a drop in group membership as the country exited lockdown, many groups shifted to other focuses, like addressing food insecurity or poverty, or helping members of the community experiencing homelessness (Power and Benton 2021).

Limitations of Mutual Aid in the Long Term

While mutual aid can be an effective first line of response in times of crisis, it is important to recognise that these initiatives arise because other assistance is unavailable (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 969). The emergence of mutual aid to meet basic needs implies the absence of sufficient state provisions. The challenge of transitioning from crisis specific networks to permanent sources of support is weighing on many mutual aid networks in the US and the UK. In the UK, mutual aid groups are increasingly relied upon to provide assistance with complex issues like housing debt and mental illness due to insufficient resources in public services, despite volunteers' lack of training or capabilities to deal with these issues (Power and Benton 2021). In the US, mutual aid groups are struggling to face challenges they were not formed to address, taking on the logistical and financial challenges required to provide stable and reliable aid to those who need it

on a regular basis, and not just as a stopgap (Freytas-Tamura 2021). Brazil's favelas are an example of communities that have learned that little—if any—state support is available, and thus mutual aid forms the main social safety net.

This pressure on mutual aid groups to provide ongoing support in areas that are typically the responsibility of the state can be seen as an abdication of state responsibility for some of the most vulnerable populations. Research has found that, in many cases, mutual aid is centred on sharing and redistributing resources to those who need them most but not on developing sustainable, alternate or supplementary income sources (Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021, 19). Furthermore, not all communities can support the formation of a mutual aid network. While for some it is a viable crisis solution, historically disadvantaged areas can often lack the social infrastructure for mutual aid and thus fare worse when crises do occur (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 977). This is compounded by the fact that socio-economic status, race, and other sources of social capital are important for determining which communities can access additional resources in partnership with mutual aid efforts (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 975).

Relying on communities that are already under-served to redistribute their limited resources among themselves should not be seen as a viable, permanent alternative to long-term larger redistribution of resources through major state welfare programs. In a system where entire communities are disadvantaged based on class, race, or other marginalised identities and unable to reach an acceptable standard of living, mutual aid can be a solution for keeping more people afloat. However, it fails to address the root of the problem: societies with deep wealth divides and unequal access to resources. Modern neoliberal welfare states often focus on full employment and fiscal balance, limiting efforts aimed at equality and linking benefits to employment, or the search for it (Myles and Quadagno 2002, 45). In times when employment is unsafe or unavailable for many, this strategy shows its weaknesses. Welfare aimed at those of working age is popular, suggesting political viability for expansion rather than contraction of the welfare state (Curtice 2020, 104). As the post-industrial economy evolves and societies face new, globally scaled problems, new strategies and paradigms must emerge to serve the changing needs of people within these welfare states. Redistributive welfare policies remain crucial to address the problems caused by society-wide inequality, by providing opportunities and resources to help compensate for historical disadvantages.

Finding a balance between encouraging these organisations and becoming too reliant on them can be difficult. Many people realised during the pandemic that the status quo social 'safety net' left too many uncared for in times of crisis and are now hoping for permanent social change (Howard and Rebecca 2020, 168). Mutual aid groups can be a source of tangible human security, intangible social infrastructure and community, and a strong first response in times of crisis and should thus be encouraged as a way to build resilience (Jun and Lance 2020, 374; Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 979). However, the link between the presence of strong mutual aid networks and the absence of appropriate levels of government services should be interrogated and gaps in the formal social safety net should be addressed.

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