

# Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid

*One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.*

Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together. The most famous example in the United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum to children. The Black Panther programs welcomed people into the liberation struggle by creating spaces where they could meet basic needs and build a shared analysis about the conditions they were facing. Instead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty,

people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty. It broke stigma and isolation, met material needs, and got people fired up to work together for change.

Recognizing the program's success, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote in a 1969 memo sent to all field offices that "the BCP [Breakfast for Children Program] represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP [Black Panther Party] and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for." The night before the Chicago program was supposed to open, police broke into the church that was hosting it and urinated on all of the food. The government's attacks on the Black Panther Party are evidence of mutual aid's power, as is the government's co-optation of the program: in the early 1970s the US Department of Agriculture expanded its federal free breakfast program—built on a charity, not a liberation, model—that still feeds millions of children today. The Black Panthers provided a striking vision of liberation, asserting that Black people had to defend themselves against a violent and racist government, and that they could organize to give each other what a racist society withheld.

During the same period, the Young Lords Party undertook similar and related mutual aid projects in their work toward Puerto Rican liberation. The Young Lords brought people into the movement by starting with the everyday needs of Puerto Ricans in

impoverished communities: they protested the lack of garbage pickups in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, hijacked a city mobile x-ray truck to bring greater tuberculosis testing to Puerto Rican communities, took over part of a hospital to provide health care, and provided food and youth programs for Puerto Rican communities. Their vision—for decolonizing Puerto Rico and liberating Puerto Ricans in the United States from racism, poverty, and police terror—was put into practice through mutual aid.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, many overlapping movements undertook mutual aid efforts, such as feminist health clinics and activist-run abortion providers, emerging volunteer-run gay health clinics, childcare collectives, tenants' unions, and community food projects. Although this moment is an important reference point for the contemporary left, mutual aid didn't start in the '60s, but is an ongoing feature of movements seeking transformative change. Klee Benally, project coordinator at Indigenous Media Action, argues that mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people across many cycles of colonialism, maintained through traditional teachings that contemporary Indigenous mutual aid projects are working to restore and amplify. Settlers have long worked to undermine Indigenous people's self-sustaining practices by first destroying food systems and then forcing dependency on rations given at forts and missions and, now, by settler nonprofits. Indigenous mutual aid efforts are both a matter of survival and a powerful form of resistance to forced dependence on settler systems.

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The long tradition of mutual aid societies and other forms of “self-help” in Black communities, which, as early as the 1780s sought to pool resources to provide health and life insurance, care for the sick, aid for burials, support for widows and orphans, and public education efforts, is another important example. These efforts have addressed Black exclusion from white infrastructures by creating Black alternatives. Long traditions of mutual aid are also visible in working-class communities that have long supported workers on strike so that they could pay rent and buy food while confronting their bosses. Perhaps most of all, the pervasive presence of mutual aid during sudden disasters of all kinds—storms, floods, fires, and earthquakes—demonstrates how people come together to care for each other and share resources when, inevitably, the government is not there to help, offers relief that does not reach the most vulnerable people, and deploys law enforcement against displaced disaster survivors. Mutual aid is a powerful force.

*Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.*

Mutual aid is essential to building social movements. People often come to social movement groups because they need something: eviction defense, childcare, social connection, health care, or help in a fight with the government about something like welfare benefits, disability services, immigration status, or custody of their children. Being able to get help in a crisis is often

a condition for being politically active, because it's very difficult to organize when you are also struggling to survive. Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps to break stigma, shame, and isolation. Under capitalism, social problems resulting from exploitation and the maldistribution of resources are understood as individual moral failings, not systemic problems. Getting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. This work is based in a belief that those on the front lines of a crisis have the best wisdom to solve the problems, and that collective action is the way forward.

Mutual aid projects also build solidarity. I have seen this at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a law collective that provides free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people who are low income and/or people of color. I worked with the group from 2002 to 2019. Again and again I saw people come to SRLP for help because something bad happened to them in a shelter, in prison, or in interactions with cops, immigration authorities, the foster care system, or public schools. People seeking legal services for these problems would be invited to participate in organizing and become part of SRLP, working on changing the conditions that had brought them to the group. As people joined, things were often bumpy. Members may have had some things in

common—being trans or gender-nonconforming, for example—but also differed from one another in terms of race, immigration status, ability, HIV status, age, housing access, sexual orientation, language, and more. By working together and participating in shared political education programs, members could learn about experiences different from theirs and build solidarity across those differences. This changed—and continues to change—not only the individuals in the group, but the kind of politics the group practices.

Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. In the context of professionalized nonprofit organizations, groups are urged to be single-issue oriented, framing their message around “deserving” people within the population they serve, and using tactics palatable to elites. Prison-oriented groups are supposed to fight only for “the innocent” or “the nonviolent,” for example, and to do their work by lobbying politicians about how some people—not *all* people—don’t belong in prison. This is the opposite of solidarity, because it means the most vulnerable people are left behind: those who were up-charged by cops and prosecutors, those who do not have the means to prove their innocence, those who do not match cultural tropes of innocence and deservingness. This narrow focus actually strengthens the system’s legitimacy by advocating that the targeting of those more stigmatized people is okay.

This pattern of anti-solidarity incentives and practices has been devastating for movements as

nonprofitization has taken hold, as I'll discuss further in the next chapter. Solidarity across issues and populations is what makes movements big and powerful. Without that connection, we end up with disconnected groups, working in their issue silos, undermining each other, competing for attention and funding, not backing each other up and not building power. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together on the basis of some shared need or concern in spite of their different lived experience, cultivate solidarity.

Groups doing mutual aid to directly address real problems in real people's lives tend to develop a multi-issue and solidarity-based approach because their members' lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability. Sometimes even groups that start out with a narrow goal adopt a wider horizon of solidarity and a wider vision of political possibility if they use the mutual aid model. An initial goal of serving people impacted by homelessness quickly reveals that racism, colonialism, immigration enforcement, ableism, police violence, the foster care system, the health care system, transphobia, and more are all causes of homelessness or causes of further harm to homeless people. Solidarity and an ever-expanding commitment to justice emerge from contact with the complex realities of injustice. This is exactly how movements are built, as people become connected to each other and as one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation.

*Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.*

Mutual aid projects help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done.

Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how we can do things together in ways we were told not to imagine, and that we can organize human activity without coercion. Most people have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power. Most people work or go to school inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation, so even in volunteer groups we often find



ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors. But collective spaces, like mutual aid organizing, can give us opportunities to unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities. By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

For example, in the Occupy encampments that emerged in 2011 to protest economic inequality, people shared ideas about how to resolve conflict without calling the police. Occupy brought out many people who had never participated in political resistance before, introducing them to practices like consensus decision-making, occupying public space, distributing free food, and engaging in free political education workshops. Many who joined Occupy did not yet have a developed critique of policing. Participants committed to police abolition and anti-racism cultivated conversations about why activists should not call the police on each other. This process was inconsistent and imperfect, but it introduced many people to new skills and ideas that they took with them, long after Occupy encampments were dismantled by the police.

Mutual aid can also generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority. Taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules. Organizers from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) share the following story in their 2018 workshop

facilitation guide to illustrate their argument that “audacity is our capacity”:

When a crew of MADR organizers [after Hurricane Maria] travelled to Puerto Rico (some visiting their families, others bringing medical skills), they found out about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their MADR badges to the guards and said, “We are here for the 8am pickup.” When guards replied that their names were not on the list, they just insisted again, “We are here for the 8am pickup.” They were eventually allowed in, told to take whatever they needed. After being let in once, aid workers were able to return repeatedly. They made more badges for local organizers, and this source continued to benefit local communities for months.

MADR asserts that by taking bold actions together, “we can imagine new ways of interacting with the world.” When dominant ways of living have been suspended, people discover that they can break norms—and even laws—that enable individualism, passivity, and respect for private property. MADR asserts that “saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action.”

Mutual aid projects providing relief to survivors of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires, as well as those

developed to support people living through the crises caused by poverty, racism, criminalization, gender violence, and other “ordinary” conditions, produce new systems that can prevent harm and improve preparedness for the coming disasters. When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, it was the existence of food justice efforts that made it possible for many people to eat when the corporate food system, which brings 90 percent of the island’s food from off-island sources, was halted by the storm. Similarly, it was local solar panels that allowed people to charge medical devices when the electrical grid went down.

By looking at what still works in the face of disaster, we can learn what we want to build to prepare for the next storm or fire. In *The Battle for Paradise*, Naomi Klein argues that locally controlled micro-grids are more desirable for delivering sustainable energy, given the failures of the energy monopolies that currently dominate energy delivery. In the wake of the devastating 2018 California fires, the public learned that the fires were caused by Pacific Gas and Electric Company’s mismanagement, and then watched as California’s government immediately offered the company a bailout, meanwhile failing to support people displaced by the disaster. Klein describes how large energy companies work to prevent local and sustainable energy efforts, and argues that in energy, as in other areas of survival, we should be working toward locally controlled, participatory, transparent structures to replace our crumbling and harmful infrastructure.

Doing so helps us imagine getting rid of the undemocratic infrastructure of our lives—the extractive and unjust energy, food, health care, and transportation systems—and replacing it with people’s infrastructure. For social movements working to imagine and build a transition from “dig, burn, dump” economies to sustainable, regenerative ways of living, mutual aid offers a way forward.