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Mutual Aid in north London during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Between March and June 2020, residents in north London faced the Covid-19 pandemic by creating neighbourhood Mutual Aid groups on WhatsApp and Facebook. These groups not only addressed basic survival needs such as bringing groceries and medicines to infected people, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations in quarantine; they also offered opportunities for social interactions between strangers living in the same neighbourhood during lockdown. Their success was linked to their rapid mobilization, adaptability and local knowledge. A study of their meso-level organization on Facebook shows that we should pay attention to the potential for mobilization of these grassroots structures. Their bottom-up organization, based on the principle 'Solidarity not Charity', showed a singular way to express dissent with policy response to the pandemic, and brought them closer to the horizontal social movements of the 2010s.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 disease in Europe in early 2020 prompted myriads of solidarity initiatives towards the most vulnerable, from the Voluntary Emergency Brigades in Milan, the Brigades de Solidarité Populaire in Paris, to the Mutual Aid groups in London. At first sight, these grassroots structures did not immediately appear as a phenomenon that could qualify as a social movement. They were of various scales (a building; a few streets; a neighbourhood), and shapes (WhatsApp groups; Facebook pages; residents' networks), and were initially created to address basic survival needs, such as bringing groceries and medicines to infected people, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations in quarantine. These forms of relief were seemingly devoid of political intentions; it was just about neighbours helping other neighbours. One could even say that the very specific purpose of these Covid-19 solidarity groups meant that they were doomed to disappear as soon as lockdown would be over.

In presenting a profile of the meso-level organization of North London Mutual Aid groups on Facebook, I show, on the contrary, that we should pay attention to the potential for mobilization of these grassroots structures. Some of these Mutual Aid groups were a form of activism expressing dissent with the state's response to the pandemic and addressing gaps in this response. To do so, they developed horizontal forms of organizing with the help of social media. Between March and June 2020, residents in north London faced the pandemic by creating Mutual Aid groups mostly

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throughout WhatsApp groups, loosely coordinated through Facebook pages. Their success was linked to their rapid mobilization, adaptability, and local knowledge. In a matter of days, a common pattern of organizing emerged: north London Mutual Aid groups covered small geographical areas, usually a few streets, sometimes copied on the existing borough and ward system of London's urban administration. This organization reflected a desire for horizontality which brought them closer to the horizontal social movements of the last decade, such as Occupy Wall Street, the movements of the squares, and some of the Arab Uprisings (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2011). This profile presents the trajectory of these groups over three months, and briefly introduces how some groups had to negotiate the desire for horizontality with municipalities towards the end of the lockdown.

The emergence of north London Mutual Aid groups

The month of March 2020, during which the first groups emerged, was arguably the most challenging political moment for the incumbent UK government. Before that month, the number of official cases in the country was kept extremely low, and government response was minimal. On 3 March, the UK government published its *Coronavirus Action Plan*, a document merely recommending better hand washing and asserting the UK was 'well prepared for disease outbreaks'. Two days later, the Covid-19 disease claimed its first death on British soil and the number of detected cases surged past 100. The following two weeks would appear decisive. On 11 March, as the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak a pandemic, the UK government announced a £12bn package of emergency support to help the country cope with the expected economic impact of the pandemic. However, and contrary to other European countries, no measures of social distancing were put in place. On 13 March, Patrick Vallance, the government Chief Scientific Adviser, defended the government's decision not to close schools and ban mass gatherings because the UK needed to build 'herd immunity' – a form of collective protection that necessitates circulation of the virus. The next day, hundreds of scientists signed open letters warning the government against its slow and inappropriate response, especially the lack of social distancing measures. The government then announced more restrictions: on 15 March, over-70s were asked to self-isolate; on 16 March, 'non-essential' travel was to be reduced; on 20 March, the government closed pubs, restaurants, and gyms, and announced the reimbursement of 80% of the wages of employees temporarily sent home from firms hit by the crisis. Eventually, on 23 March, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared a nationwide quarantine with powers granted to the police to enforce social distancing. Hence, in just 20 days, the UK government did a complete U-turn on its policy response to the pandemic, shifting from a cautious 'delay' response to a police-enforced lockdown.

The brief period of state hesitation created a political opportunity for the social movement to emerge. Eight north London Mutual Aid groups appeared on Facebook on 12, 13, and 14 March, right during the controversy led by scientific experts on government policy response. Their initial aim was to anticipate quarantine by organizing support during self-isolation, by doing shopping errands or picking up medical prescriptions for vulnerable persons. They often relied on leafletting to reach out within the neighbourhood.

In themselves, these goals may be described as survivalist. The (short) literature on mutual aid defines it as an organizing principle for grassroots cooperation and care between small groups of people, usually directed towards survival needs (Kenney, 2019; Kropotkin, 1902/1987; Spade, 2020). Initially formulated by Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin in 1902, the principle has recently re-emerged in the vocabulary of collective action, for example, among local residents who led community-based responses to natural disasters, such as Common Ground following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Occupy Sandy after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and the cross-national American network Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (Kenney, 2019; Spade, 2020). These groups provided basic survival needs for people who, for various reasons, were left out from traditional relief response. Members were both helpers and receivers and therefore immediately identified basic needs for populations who were struggling. Reflecting on the shortcomings of relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina, Kenney noted that the emergence of mutual aid groups revealed that 'state, federal, and industrial non-profit assistance often fall short in meeting the needs of marginalized individuals and communities' after natural disasters (2019, p. 2). Mutual aid is therefore a form of political participation and dissent with the way care is administered and managed in society (Spade, 2020, p. 136).

Similarly, at the start of the first 2020 lockdown, the UK government did not identify access (in the sense of physical movement) to medicines and foods during self-isolation as a key issue as quickly as Mutual Aid groups did. Rather, the government put emphasis on providing monetary resources like wages, which, although fundamental, did not resolve basic problems such as how vulnerable persons would go for groceries or get their medicines.

Based on their local knowledge of what was immediately needed, Mutual Aid groups presented high adaptability. Very early in the lockdown, they diversified their panel of solidarity activities, sometimes in coordination with charities and other organizations. Among other things, they centralized donations for foodbanks, delivered free hot meals, set up seed swaps, helped people find accommodation after expulsion, and created online workshops on community-organizing, or to raise awareness on issues like racism and domestic violence. They also organized social activities to respond to what became an anxious demand for social interaction. Online pub quizzes, window-drawing competitions for kids, and free online yoga classes proliferated, in addition to the 'friendly call' proposed on every leaflet. While physical interaction in London was drastically reduced under lockdown, Mutual Aid group members engaged in intense social interaction online.

'Solidarity not charity': towards horizontal organizing

Throughout April, the inflation of members and activities was accompanied by an intense phase of group structuring. The emerging pattern of organization was not without resemblance with the horizontality of movements characterising the last decade of contention; Mutual Aid groups showed a strong preference for horizontal and small structures. Members created lead roles, set up working groups or divided themselves in yet smaller groups more prone to consensus decision-making. They experimented with a panel of digital tools (i.e. Zoom, Slack, Google Docs), crowdfunding platforms and documents on safeguarding. As budgets, name lists and guidelines multiplied, recurrent

norms emerged to organize the groups, laying the foundations of a singular internal culture.

The first aspect of that culture pertains to the urban identities of the city. Like most metropolises, the Greater London Authority devolves considerable power to local municipalities, the boroughs and their Local Councils. Mirroring London's urban administration, the very first Mutual Aid groups created mid-March named themselves after eight north London boroughs: Barnet, Brent, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Harringay, Islington and Waltham Forest. These boroughs were further divided into a sub-level – the ward – an administrative division the size of a neighbourhood. Many wards existed as WhatsApp groups, which formed the heart of Mutual Aid: they organized actions in their allocated neighbourhoods. In total, the eight north London boroughs counted between 100 and 130 ward-like Mutual Aid groups.[1]

According to their Facebook, borough groups connected small Mutual Aid groups, for example, by directing people to their wards, and by sharing information such as safety guidelines. But note that nowhere did these borough groups claim leadership over the smaller groups. In fact, five borough groups (Harringay, Hackney, Camden, Barnet and Brent) insisted on their Facebook that their role was only to help 'coordinate', 'support' or 'connect' Mutual Aid groups together and share information. Their role was to be a hub, not a super-structure, and to allow groups to adapt their structures and activities to local needs:

> This group is for grassroots mutual aid across the borough of Haringey. We want to support coordination; we don't want to centralise or create a grand plan we want everyone to follow to the letter.
>
> (Haringey Covid 19 Mutual Aid, n.d.)
>
> In basic terms, this group is a way of connecting us with our communities so that we can come together and help one another outside of state and charity structures and institutions. This means that we support one another.
>
> The group is NOT:
>
> - a volunteer coordination centre.
>
> - a professional operation.
>
> - a charity, or anything to do with charities.
>
> (Barnet COVID-19 Mutual Aid, n.d.)

The distinction between Mutual Aid groups and charities is not anodyne. It reflects a second, and more dissenting, dimension of Mutual Aid: the critique of 'top-down' approaches to relief which was consistently mentioned on the Facebook groups, and often summarized by the slogan 'Solidarity not Charity', for example, on Islington group's Facebook cover photo (see also Spade, 2020). Group descriptions on Facebook frequently mentioned two Mutual Aid websites that developed this particular conception of aid.

The first website was called *Big Door Brigade* and was often used to help members understand the principles of mutual aid. A leftist activist group born in the US in 2016, Big Door Brigade intended to increase 'participation in left social movements' through

the principle of Mutual Aid.[2] Its promotion video called 'Shit's Totally FUCKED! What Can We Do?: A Mutual Aid Explainer' posted on 9 July 2019 criticized charities because they were selective in the aid they deliver (for example, by conditioning aid on immigration status), while Mutual Aid groups were not. According to the website, a Mutual Aid group aimed at being egalitarian rather than humanitarian: its horizontal member-led organizing meant that helpers and receivers could switch roles. This model had two advantages: it prevented the disempowering approach of relief efforts, and it ensured quick response because of the unconditionality of aid.[3]

Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK was another commonly referenced website. It mapped out UK Mutual Aid groups and listed resources for Mutual Aid organizing, such as queercare guidelines, links towards domestic violence and NHS websites. The Q&A page explained that 'there are no "leaders" or unelected "steering committees" in mutual aid projects; there is only a group of people who work together as equals'.[4]

What transpires from these websites and Facebook group descriptions is that several Mutual Aid groups were explicit about their horizontal structures, and therefore attached to it. For some of these members, this organisation was even a way to express a form of critique of traditional relief organisations, whether their pilots were the state or charities.

End of the lockdown: the local is political

We may imagine that the Mutual Aid groups of today will inform social movements of a post-pandemic society. If members were certainly not all aware of the slogan 'Solidarity not Charity' and of the political critique that it carries, their social media networks allowed for the rapid circulation of political ideas to address pressing societal issues. In fact, transformations of survivalist strategies into political actions already took place. Here too, state action was a key trigger.

On 24 May, the government announced that schools would reopen on the 1st of June. This was the signal that an end of the lockdown was in sight, at least in the government's opinion. But many citizens did not see eye to eye with it. They turned to their new networks and mobilized members against de-confinement. The Mutual Aid groups hence became the vortex of online discussions and online protests for teachers, unions, health workers, parents of schoolchildren, and other groups who judged the government's decision to be too hasty. This propensity of social media networks to propagate political ideas could also be observed in the spectacular worldwide mobilization under the reappearing hashtag #BlackLivesMatter after the death of African-American George Floyd during a cruel police arrest on 25 May. It would not be surprising if the demonstrations of support in London on 31 May, 3 June and 6 June were in part connected to anti-racist mobilization within London's Mutual Aid groups.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, north London Mutual Aid groups had to negotiate their existence with relief actors already present in their neighbourhoods. Online mobilizations never stay in the cloud but ultimately take root in the concrete, in local sites and landscapes. Having adopted the borough and ward organisation upon which were organised Local Councils, this situation created opportunities for collaboration but also risks of overlapping. All Local Councils of north London set up special Covid-19 webpages, mapping out resources and initiatives for community response to the pandemic. Perhaps more telling, some councils set-up or mobilized their own volunteers to

offer services (prescriptions and groceries) identical to those proposed by Mutual Aid groups: these were Barnet's Community Response, Camden's Time to Spare, Haringey's Community Enablement Group and Waltham Forest' Connecting Communities team.

Bracketing for now the matter of whether some of the new council initiatives were inspired by the model of Mutual Aid, note that cooperation between the two worlds have existed. Philip Glanville, Labour Mayor of Hackney, leafletted with his Mutual Aid group in De Beauvoir.[5] In Haringey, Mutual Aid groups were very well advertised on the council's website. Its Labour Councillor Sarah James announced that she met representatives of Mutual Aid groups.[6]

Interactions with state actors of this sort can change the structure of Mutual Aid. A good example of this may be observed in the various ways in which councils have made funding available to the groups. On the 'Coronavirus Support' page of Hackney Local Council, grants were made available for local initiatives, however, it was indicated that Mutual Aid groups must partner with an eligible organisation, a similar requirement put in place by Brent Local Council.[7] Ultimately, these financial partnerships may force Mutual Aid groups to align their organisational structures on existing charity models to receive public funding.

In favouring a bottom-up approach to relief, Mutual Aid groups contrasted with approaches led by the state or humanitarians, such as council-led community responses. Their organization, based on horizontality and the principle 'Solidarity not Charity', not only helped fill the gaps of emergency planning, but also offered possibilities for political mobilization. Mutual Aid groups started as survival organisations, but they quickly developed into more complex forms of collection action and social interaction. Indeed, when a whole city went under one of the strictest lockdowns in its history, its inhabitants helped reimagine community belonging at the local level.

Note

1. The eight Mutual Aid groups gathered some 31,000 members on Facebook by 22 May. Facebook-related data presented in this article was retrieved from the public profiles of the Facebook groups, i.e. as they appear to non-members. Lists of ward groups can be found on the map 'Covid-19 Support Services/Groups' produced by Andy Jeffrey with local (Haringey based) community group Coffee & Computers. Retrieved 21 May 2020, from: https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1_clxQT1KL4R7H1qFZa4iqDlBlHKCAEi8&ll=51.58861458985151%2C-0.2657465746017973&z=13
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Disclosure statement

The author was a member of one of the Mutual Aid local groups between March and June 2020. However, only data that was publicly available to non-members is presented in this profile.

Notes on contributor

Adélie Chevée is a Teaching Fellow in Politics and International Studies at SOAS. Her research explores the relationship between media, social movements and knowledge practices. Since this article was submitted, Chevée became a Max Weber postdoctoral Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

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