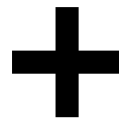# A1 & A2: Informal Volunteering Symposium

Lessons from mutual aid: informal volunteering & lessons for public policy

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The MoVE project

UKRI-ESRC funded collaborative research project between universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds, for 18 months (May 2020 – November 2021).

- How to understand collaborative responses, and scale and maximise the effectiveness of volunteering?
- Examined experiences across different levels:
  - ➢ national government responses
  - ➢ national level responses (volunteer platforms & national charities)
  - ➢ local level partnerships (focusing on collaborative relationships between local authority and voluntary sector)
  - ➢ examining the mutual aid movement
- Worked across England, Scotland and Wales

What does mutual aid tell us about informal volunteering?

- The pandemic was the catalyst for most people to get involved in informal volunteering

- The way that mutual aid groups have sustained and evolved their approach points to something **unique** about mutual aid.

- Informal volunteering has been under-researched, despite representing a large proportion of volunteering (DCMS, 2018).

- We should resist trying to apply formal volunteering theories and frameworks to understand mutual aid.

We tried to really avoid the word "volunteer" and keep the word "neighbour" to encourage actually this is what people around here do for each other (Mutual Aid organiser)

The MoVE mutual aid research

– We set out to understand the mutual aid movement, by carrying out:

➢ 31 one-to-one interviews, 8 focus groups, representing 29 different mutual aid groups, covering 12 local authority areas, with a total of 59 mutual aid participants

➢ Findings published in *Communities are doing it for themselves: lessons from the mutual aid experience*

Understanding mutual aid

- Mutual aid groups shared a common set of **values**:
  - Solidarity, not charity
    - Bottom-up structures of working together
    - Blurs the 'beneficiary/charity' 'service-user/service' distinctions
  - Support with humanity and without judgement
  - Social justice & political, collective action
- Whilst some groups have folded, many have evolved to meet community needs under new crises (cost-of-living, war in Ukraine)

What made groups so effective?

- By all accounts mutual aid groups responded to local needs quickly, effectively & creatively. This was enabled by:
  - Hyperlocal footprint
    - Being close to the ground gave groups a natural agility
  - Relationally driven
    - Mutual aid built lasting and organic community relationships
  - Informal and flexible
    - Volunteers appreciated the ease of getting involved with their local group, compared to their previous experiences of volunteering in the formal voluntary sector
    - Support was equally flexible, with an open-door philosophy and creative solutions to people's requests/problems
  - Horizontal decision-making
    - By sharing power and decision-making, groups were able to make quick decisions, unimpeded by hierarchical structures

- These organising structures are closely linked to the groups' *values*

"I still do this gentleman's food shopping but it's more like he's become my adopted grandfather. I actually have a better relationship with him than my own grandfather."

"There's lots of red tape when you're going down a formal volunteering process…[mutual aid is] not quite so onerous"

What is needed for effective collaboration with mutual aid

– Our research identified three types of relationships
  – Collaborative
  – Antagonistic
  – Co-existent, arms' length
• Common enabling factors behind strong partnership working
  – Recognition of the value & autonomy of mutual aid – letting go, trusting local people and valuing local insight
  – Frequent channels of communication, reciprocal collaboration and knowledge sharing
  – Support and resources – always an offer, never an imposition
  – Supportive local councillors and public officials (an intermediary role)
– Blockers were created as a result of:
  – Inflexible and risk-averse organisational cultures, resulting in **mistrust**
  – Protectionism
  – Political dynamics (unsupportive local councillors)

*"I think we've really struck gold with [liaison officer name] because **she's completely at one with what mutual aid is about and really…just really responsive, but not interfering at all**"*

*"I think there was a lot of fear around who we were, because we weren't part of any mechanism…They're just **so risk-averse**. I think they're frightened…there's just **no real trust**… it's a shame, really … that's why citizen-led stuff doesn't happen"*

Lessons for public policy working with mutual aid

➢ MA was driven by crisis responses but it hasn't disappeared – **Here to stay?**

➢ Key is that it offers something **distinctive** to formal volunteering.

➢ **Reaches people and communities** in a way that existing structures cannot.

➢ Autonomy, independence and **community defined, owned and le**d action are powerful motivators.

➢ **Tensions between informality and bureaucracy/politics** can lead to a resistance to collaborate.

➢ MA as a **dissident movement**/way of organizing representing a challenge to LA and VCS approaches

➢ Varies across groups – with voluntary sector, like-minded LA outreach workers being key to supporting informal volunteering.

*"I think the **voluntary sector itself, for a long time, have had to bow down to the rules and regulations** of the way that they are funded and **they don't get a choice in terms of how they do things**, so I don't think the problem is with the voluntary sector, the voluntary sector actually, probably wants to support the system that mutual aid groups have been able to do during this time..."*

Insights on how to support informal volunteering

For collaboration

➢ Understand what's needed and offer practical support – including community spaces, microgrants, funding, bank accounts, printing

➢ Focus on creating *mutual/reciprocal relationships* working with, supporting rather than encompassing mutual aid volunteers.

Rethinking volunteer opportunities

➢ Offer more flexible volunteering &community engagement opportunities (rethinking some of the bureaucratic barriers)

➢ Are there areas where informal volunteer opportunities can be part of a wider volunteering offer.

For engaging communities more effectively

➢ Engage with mutual aid groups to reach unheard and marginalized voices

➢ Engage with communities on their terms and in their spaces,

➢ Listening &supporting citizens to make the changes they want, valuing and taking onboard community insight to deepen local democracy.

➢ Flipping the power balance: communities are the hosts, and the council is the invited guest

Thanks!

– If you'd like a digital copy of the report, please do get in touch h.r.Thiery@hull.ac.uk

– Or download it from our ecosystem

https://doit.life/esa/article/md/139132