PURITY OR PRAGMATISM: MUTUAL AID IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

Pandemic mutual aid groups are part of a contemporary mutual aid movement which intends to marry the spontaneous suspension of social boundaries of post-disaster collective action with sustained community-building and social justice. This comparative case study examines how two such radical social change organizations navigate the tension between ideology and the need for resources. Specifically, I ask what strategies organizers deployed in pursuit of their dual mandate, under the banner of 'solidarity not charity.' Despite virtually identical philosophies, visions, and circumstances, I find that organizers deployed different resource mobilization strategies to access and generate moral, cultural, and human resources. These strategic differences directly influenced organizational outcomes: One group continued to operate more than two years after organizing, while the other was on an indefinite hiatus. The findings depart from what might be predicted by a longstanding focus on material resources in resource mobilization theory, and support the call for more attention to culture and ideology in resource mobilization scholarship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

"How do you weigh idealism with, like, someone's need to eat? It feels so *stupid*."

It's a punishingly hot summer day and Susan[1] is recounting a difficult conversation from many months earlier. She and her co-organizers were struggling to keep their Covid-19 mutual aid group alive: The group could no longer accept cash donations and resources were dwindling. They would soon have to start turning away community members who came to them for help. But the organizers were reluctant to take the legal and bureaucratic steps that would allow them to receive donations again – doing so felt fundamentally incompatible with their vision of mutual aid and the group's organizing principles, and they ultimately were not willing to make that compromise. So, after two years of providing direct, no-questions-asked assistance to their neighbors, Susan and her fellow organizers decided to pause the group indefinitely. Months later, Susan expressed feeling deeply conflicted about the decision, but the group remained on hiatus.

Susan's group was one of hundreds of decentralized, grassroots disaster-response efforts that emerged around the world to facilitate localized exchanges of resources directly between community members in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

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[1] All participant and group names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

(Carstensen, Mudhar, and Munksgaard 2021; Cutuli 2021; Mutual Aid Hub n.d.). In the United States, many of these radical mutual aid projects organized around a dual mandate: First, they sought to provide immediate relief during the crisis, such as delivering groceries to high-risk individuals and facilitating direct cash transfers between households. Second, they committed to the work of sustained movement-building in pursuit of systems change, specifically addressing racial, income, and other systemic inequalities. On both fronts, organizers aimed to do the work that the state and free market were failing to do, often adopting implicitly anti-capitalist political agendas in the process.

At the core of this mutual aid philosophy was a non-hierarchical, leaderless organizing structure and an egalitarian belief that no one should have to prove their need in order to receive help. Foundational to these projects were reciprocity and trust, principles which conflict with the predominant top-down, paternalistic model of charity that relies on means-testing to distribute aid and typically does not strive to unify the givers and receivers. In addition to their operational challenges, mutual aid organizers were faced with conveying their radical philosophy without alienating potential volunteers, donors, and institutional partners.

This study examines how radical, community-based social change organizations navigate this tension between ideology and the need for resources. Specifically, I ask what strategies organizers deployed in pursuit of their dual mandate, under the banner of 'solidarity not charity.' In short, how did the organizers of Susan's mutual aid group come to prioritize idealism over "someone's need to eat?"

Drawing on volunteer and organizer interviews, participant observation, and text analysis, I find that two pandemic-response mutual aid groups in New England took distinctly different approaches to resource mobilization and steered their groups into vastly different trajectories. Both groups experienced initial success, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars, enrolling hundreds of volunteers, and establishing nimble rapid-response organizations to address the acute needs exposed by the pandemic. However, I argue that despite virtually identical philosophies, visions, and circumstances, Down East Mutual Aid (DEMA) and Mutual Aid Hill Town ("Hill Town") deployed different resource mobilization strategies to access and generate moral, cultural, and human resources. These strategic differences directly influenced organizational outcomes: DEMA continued to operate at the end of 2022, while Hill Town was on an indefinite hiatus. This departs from what might be predicted by the traditional focus on material resources in resource mobilization theory (RMT) (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

DEMA's decisions cultivated a formalized organization with relative homogeneity across its membership base, which helped secure legitimacy, solidarity, and a path toward organizational survival. Members saw the ideological tradeoffs made along the way as temporary and in service of their longer-term vision of social change. In contrast, organizational informality and ideological diversity within Hill Town inhibited collective identity, volunteer recruitment and retention, and community support. Lacking a collective identity within the group and facing opposition from outsiders, Hill Town organizers to pause the group's activities indefinitely rather than compromise their ideals.

This study makes three contributions. First, it extends RMT by examining how emerging social change groups sharing nearly identical origins, goals, and visions pursue

3

different strategies for mobilizing resources. My findings call for further examination of the role of moral, cultural, and human resources among radical social change groups.

Second, I bring RMT into conversation with the theory of disaster *communitas*, or the suspension of social norms and "coming together" that occurs during and immediately following a crisis (Bird et al. 2020; Matthewman and Uekusa 2021). This is a well-documented phenomenon (Solnit 2009), but it is temporary and has very rarely led to sustained social change. This project seeks to understand what happens when disaster communitas fades but the organizations formed within that context remain.

Finally, this study gives historical context to the present mutual aid movement and situates the contemporary model of mutual aid within social movement scholarship. Russian revolutionary Peter Kropotkin theorized that it is collaboration, not competition, that is necessary for group survival (Kropotkin 1902). As the specific model of mutual aid demonstrated in this study has become increasingly popular as a response to climate disasters and social disruption, understanding the processes at work within these groups will support their efficacy and sustainability.

In the section that follows I review the major literature for these theoretical frames. I then describe my data and methods and provide a brief case study of each organization before describing the key findings of this study. I close with an acknowledgement of the study's limitations and a discussion of the implications of my findings.

BACKGROUND

Mutual aid in concept and practice

The practice of mutual aid takes many forms, but the underlying theory centers around the reciprocal coordination of care, in which every participant is giver and receiver and are bound together by their participation (Solnit 2009). The Russian revolutionary anarchist Peter Kropotkin is credited with popularizing the term mutual aid in his first of several counterarguments to social Darwinism, published in 1890 (Kinna 1995). A rebuke of social Darwinists' view that competition between and within species was the central driver of progress and evolution, Kropotkin argued that "mutual aid and mutual support" played a more important role in group survival than competition (Kropotkin 1902). Central to Kropotkin's conceptualization was the belief that people could provide the means of survival directly to one another directly without the permission or interference of the church or state (Kropotkin 1902; McHugh 2021). Kropotkin's examples of mutual aid span centuries and species – he first cites cooperation between wild animals in Siberia before moving on to mutual aid practices among pre-modern tribes in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas and Australia, in medieval village communities in Europe, and persisting into modern communities under the shadow of capitalism up to the late 19th Century. Kropotkin asserts that charity served to replace these reciprocal, lateral relations with a singular paternalistic connection between individuals and the state or state-adjacent actors. This distinction between mutual aid and charity is the basis for the "solidarity not charity"

philosophy, which was adopted by many pandemic mutual aid groups including the two discussed in this paper.

In the United States, mutual aid has a particular history of providing material and social support to people excluded from other types of assistance. While the first official Black mutual aid society was founded in 1780, mutual aid practices existed even earlier among enslaved African Americans who reproduced the cooperative gardening arrangements they had practiced in Africa (Nembhard 2015). Mutual aid societies formed among ethnic and immigrant groups throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, providing sickness and death benefits, loans, education, job and housing connections, and social and spiritual support (Leininger Pycior 2020; Maddox n.d.; Wang 2020). In the 1960s and 1970s, mutual aid became a core strategy of political activist groups like the Black Panthers Party and the Young Lords (Aberg-Riger 2020; Older 2019; Spade 2020b). Self-help communities, often organized around a shared life experience or diagnosis, grew exponentially in the 1960s and 70s, representing another form of mutual aid (Katz 1981; McHugh 2021).

More recently, the term mutual aid has become linked to survivors' collective care efforts and grassroots crisis response. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, community-initiated relief efforts were the first to provide material assistance to residents. Common Ground Relief, founded in response to Katrina, focused on meeting the immediate needs of community members with an emphasis on working together toward sustainable recovery (Common Ground Relief n.d.). The experiences of the Occupy Movement in Zuccotti Park were still fresh when Superstorm Sandy hit New York City in 2012. Responding to the "apocalyptic" aftermath and the sluggish response of large

charities, Occupy Sandy leveraged a nimble, egalitarian structure to launch a massive mutual aid effort providing clothing, food, blankets, transportation, supplies and information, mold remediation, and opportunities to volunteer with the recovery (Feuer 2012). Subsequent disasters across the United States have sprouted similar neighbor-to-neighbor response networks, some with ties to Occupy. In Oklahoma, OpOK Relief organized a "non-hierarchical, decentralized solidarity effort" in response to an EF5 tornado in 2013 (Zakk Flash 2013). The same year, Colorado University students and members of Occupy Boulder initiated a volunteer response to five days of sustained rain that swamped Colorado's Northern Front Range with widespread flooding and overwhelmed emergency response resources (Tiernan Doyle 2015). West Street Recovery began "as a few friends with a truck and inflatable kayak ferrying folks across the flood waters" and providing shelter to people displaced by Hurricane Harvey in Houston in 2017 (West Street Recovery n.d.). The group has since incorporated as a non-profit and responded to subsequent crises, though it claims to maintain a horizontal structure and grassroots approach.

The Covid-19 pandemic has once again transformed how mutual aid is practiced in the United States. For the first time, mutual aid groups were simultaneously organizing across the country in response to the same disaster. More than 890 mutual aid organized across the United States in response to the pandemic (Mutual Aid Hub n.d.), responding not to physical destruction but a combination of social and economic disruptions. A digital handbook for organizing a mutual aid network was produced by NY Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and organizer Mariame Kaba in the spring of 2020 and circulated widely (Ocasio-Cortez and Kaba 2020). Freely available digital tools like Google Forms and Slack

made organizing volunteer sign-ups and distribution events possible at a time when meeting in person was discouraged and downright dangerous.

Pandemic mutual aid groups are part of a contemporary mutual aid movement which intends to marry the spontaneity and suspension of social boundaries of post-disaster collective action with sustained community-building. These mutual aid 'projects' also adopted a more politicized definition of their practice. The author and organizer Dean Spade writes that mutual aid is "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (Spade 2020a:7). In Spade's definition (which was adopted by many pandemic mutual aid groups), mutual aid is a form of inherently political radical collective care that responds directly to the destruction of social relations wrought by colonialism and capitalism (Spade 2020a, 2020b).

While all of these groups structured themselves as non-hierarchical, egalitarian initiatives, the emergency nature of the situations to which they are responding prioritizes direct service over political action, complicating the group's ability to fulfill its dual mandate. Boulder Flood Relief organizers produced a report in 2015 documenting the context of the disaster as well as the group's impact and decision-making (Tiernan Doyle 2015). In it, organizers recall that accepting monetary donations was a controversial topic: "Several volunteers, especially those previously affiliated with Occupy Wall Street, were deeply opposed to the intrusion of money into the process. … Meetings around the issue of money became heated at times, and resulted in some internal town hall/general assembly meetings that lasted for up to four hours" (Tiernan Doyle 2015:43). But once the group

began accepting donations directly, "there was no option but to incorporate," and register as a charitable organization, complete with bylaws and a Board of Directors.

This philosophical tension occurs not just within mutual aid groups but between them. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) is a decentralized national network composed of activists, organizers, street medics, "and others who are actively organizing around supporting disaster survivors in a spirit of mutual aid and solidarity," that works to coordinate volunteers and help people plug into local mutual aid efforts (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief n.d.). MADR organizers call out the "disaster patriarchy" that emerged within Common Ground in the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, which created a "toxic and unsustainable organizing culture" that allowed individuals to use the sense of urgency and crisis to bypass the groups organizing principles in favor of expediency (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief n.d.).

MADR urges organizers to expect that non-hierarchical organizing will be challenged, and to be prepared to hold themselves accountable to name it and do the work of resolving issues: "It is often not a matter of whether manifestations of hierarchical power arise in our social movements and organizations, but when. When this does happen, it is critical to name it for what it is, and that this power be contested, opposed, and composted for something new to grow in its place" (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief n.d.).

But bottom-up, flexible and justice-oriented mutual aid groups also face challenges from state-led initiatives to implement top-down disaster response frameworks. In 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which is housed under the U.S. Department of Homeland security, launched the Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management, a framework for "increasing individual preparedness and

engaging with members of the community as vital partners in enhancing the resiliency and security of the nation" (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2011). San Francisco's Neighborfest program is modeled after the Whole Community concept, and folds emergency readiness goals into the city's popular block party program. Throughout the process of planning a block party, "block captains" are tasked with implementing a civilian-friendly version of the Incident Command System, or ICS.

ICS is an inherently hierarchical command-and-control model used by emergency response agencies which identifies a central individual as Incident Commander and directs all authority through them (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2017). Unlike community-led mutual aid, state-driven initiatives like Neighborfest identify community members to designate as authorities, valorize relationships with state actors including the police, and come with funding and other resources unavailable to grassroots groups. Under the pretense of emergency preparedness, state actors replace grassroots social relations between community members with top-down channels for exerting social control.

Resource Mobilization

Three major areas of social movement theories provide potential frameworks to understand pandemic-response mutual aid groups. Tarrow's political process approach tends to focus on longer-term mobilization processes and explain the success or failures of entire movements, rather than the social movement organizations (SMOs) therein (Caniglia and Carmin 2005). While this may be useful as the mutual aid movement matures into an established social movement, the emergent nature of current organizations, which I discuss later, limits the relevance of this body of literature.

A second set of theories emphasizes the cultural and social contexts within which movements arise, centering identity affiliation, personal values and beliefs as motivating factors for mobilization and membership (Caniglia and Carmin 2005). I would argue that the pandemic complicates the applicability of these cultural and cognitive theories, because the collective experience of the pandemic eclipsed more individualistic personal beliefs. Pandemic mutual aid groups organized at a particular historical moment when many aspects of social life were temporarily suspended, creating a sense of communitas. Communitas refers to the way people come together spontaneously and collectively in the wake of a disaster or crisis, forming improvised and temporary social bonds and providing mutual support for one another (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021). The solidary feeling that 'we are all in this together,' especially during the earliest days of the pandemic, crossed social class, racial, and political lines, and making secondary the individual identities and affiliations that cultural and cognitive theorists point to as motivating factors for mobilization. In other words, the collective desire to help that often accompanies a widespread disaster is too broad and universal to tie to a specific philosophy or ideology. However, these theories may be relevant for examining the ongoing success of DEMA, where members may have coalesced around a central collective identity.

A third school of a thought, resource mobilization theory (RMT), offers the most useful theoretical frame from social movement literature. RMT emerged in the 1970s as sociologists sought to understand – in the wake of widespread protests and social unrest of the 1960s – how movement actors effectively access and leverage resources in pursuit of social change (Edwards and Gillham 2013; Jenkins 1983). Social movement literature

had traditionally focused on individual involvement and collective behavior, treating social movements as relatively rare reactions to temporary grievances, and the actors within them as irrational, alienated and deviant (Edwards and Gillham 2013; Jenkins 1983). McCarthy and Zald's entrepreneurial model of RMT – introduced in 1977 and strongly supported since with a body of empirical research – argues that grievances of social movement actors are not newly emerged but durable and constant, and the movements surrounding them are motivated and facilitated by new access to resources (Jenkins 1983). Pandemic mutual aid groups demonstrate this process by taking advantage of several new resources (such as a cadre of volunteers motivated by communitas and with unexpected capacity to help, thanks to pandemic shutdowns, and pandemic-relief funding and donations) to address longstanding social inequities and chronic issues like food and housing insecurity made worse by the pandemic.

The specification and categorization of resources has been an ongoing debate in RMT literature. Early theorists categorized resources based on use, and analysis largely focused on material resources, such as financial and physical assets, and their importance to group efficacy (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Recently, Edwards and McCarthy identified five types of resources and four means of accessing them, developing a schema of 20 exchange relationships through which SMOs can obtain resources (2004). This approach highlights the nature and importance of culture, interpersonal relationships and social networks, internally within SMOs, between an SMO and sympathetic or mission-aligned organizations, and with external actors and institutions.

RMT is an especially interesting lens for examining dual-mandate mutual aid organizations because their ideologies sometimes conflict with traditional social

movement strategies for mobilizing resources. Critiques of RMT argue that the emphasis on instrumental resources ignores the role of ideology, culture, and social contexts in mobilization (Buechler 1993; Edwards and Gillham 2013), among other shortcomings (Buechler 1993). While Edwards' exchange relationship schema incorporates more intangible resources, RMT continues to focus on established social movements and SMOs. Extending Blee and Currier's findings, this study examines emerging social change groups before they have coalesced into recognized social movements, in an attempt to better understand how movements develop the characteristics which define them (Blee and Currier 2005).

In that vein, pandemic-response mutual aid groups may be understood as emerging social movement groups. The emergent nature refers to the absence of affiliation with a parent organization or otherwise established social movement (Blee and Currier 2005). Established SMOs, in contrast, explicitly align their goals to a social movement or countermovement (McCarthy and Zald 1977, as cited in Caniglia and Carmin 2005). Examining mutual aid as emerging groups contextualizes variation in strategies, goals and outcomes between individual groups, as well as differences in how the groups are perceived by their respective audiences. The position of mutual aid groups as emergent also emphasizes the unsupported nature of organizers: they lack both the reputation, solidarity, infrastructure and other tangible resources that come with association with a larger movement.

How groups mobilize resources when conventional tactics conflict with group ideology is an understudied question in resource mobilization scholarship. In the case of pandemic mutual aid groups, certain types of resources and means of access are

13

antithetical to their vision and ideology. Yet RMT scholars assert that groups must

mobilize resources to grow, sustain, and have impact. I seek to address how mutual aid

groups reconcile this conflict, and whether groups sharing similar ideologies, visions and

goals will employ parallel mobilization strategies.

METHODS

Case Selection

The cases discussed in this study are Down East Mutual Aid (DEMA) and Mutual Aid Hill Town ("Hill Town"). Both groups were organized in the Boston area in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing needs of community members. DEMA organized first, and its founders made public several of its organizing and administrative documents as a toolkit for citizens to set up their own local mutual aid projects. These materials were widely used as the backbone for mutual aid in many other New England communities, including Hill Town.

When I began this research in early 2022, DEMA and Hill Town were among the only pandemic mutual aid groups in the region that had not scaled back operations. Both seemed to be maintaining relatively high levels of activity two years after initially organizing. Aside from their relative longevity, DEMA and Hill Town shared many similarities from an organizational standpoint that made them interesting and appropriate cases for comparison. Because Hill Town had used DEMA's "toolkit" for organizing its initial response activities, the groups shared a similar approach to organizing volunteers[2]

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[2] A note about terminology: Case organizations used different terms to refer to volunteer roles. For clarity, in this paper I use the term "volunteer" to refer to individuals who do not hold a leadership position and/or do not provide administrative or managerial labor to the group. "Organizer" refers to individuals whose role includes service to the administration of the group.

and distributing resources. They also had in common an egalitarian, non-hierarchical

organizational structure, and a progressive ideology about what mutual aid is (and is not).

Both organized themselves as neighborhood-based groups, defining themselves and their

service areas according to geographical boundaries. The demographic and social

composition of the communities were relatively similar (see Table 1) and both areas

could be classified as dense suburban communities of a major metropolitan area. Both

groups were located in the same state and were exposed to the same state-level policy

environments, including Covid-19-related restrictions as well as public relief and

assistance programs.

Recruitment Strategy

This project was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board in

June 2022. I conducted 11 interviews with mutual aid volunteers and organizers (five

from DEMA, six from Hill Town, see Table 3 for more details). Interviews were semi-

structured and typically between 60 to 90 minutes. All participants were informed of their

rights as interviewees and verbally consented to participating in interviews and to audio

recording. Recorded audio was transcribed using Otter.ai's automated transcription.

Transcripts were reviewed, edited for clarity, and fully anonymized before I imported

them into NVivo for line-by-line coding and theme analysis. In my analysis, I paid

attention to the information interviewees were sharing as well as *how* they were sharing it

– the language, tone, and emotion in their statements. I also took note of what they chose

to focus on, and how that compared between volunteers and organizers within the same

group, and across groups. Interview participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Individuals were eligible to participate in the study if they had volunteered with one of the mutual aid efforts in any capacity, for any length of time since March 2020. I cast an intentionally wide net with the goal of recruiting participants representing a range of roles and levels of commitment within the groups. This was an effective strategy with Hill Town, where I successfully recruited founding members and core organizers as well as 'rank and file' volunteers.

Organizers I contacted at each group were generally receptive about the study, though DEMA organizers in particular expressed concern for protecting the identities of its volunteers and help-seekers. To address this, I relied on mutual aid organizers to distribute an invitation to participate in the study among their volunteers by email (Hill Town) or via Slack (DEMA). This approach may have helped me build some rapport with mutual aid organizers, but it also slowed down and narrowed the scope of my recruitment. For example, DEMA organizers voted against allowing me to recruit interview participants from the broader member base, and required that I limit my recruitment to only DEMA members who had completed a "trust call" and were considered "coordinators" within the organization. (However, I was able to recruit two non-organizer volunteers through my access to the working group I was able to observe directly.) Hill Town organizers were willing to help me solicit interviews from their entire volunteer email list, but I forfeited control over the timing and frequency of those emails.

When I began recruiting participants, Hill Town was still operational. The delivery team continued to acquire grocery store gift cards and distribute them to

households requesting help, and leaders gathered weekly for organizing meetings. Despite these meetings being open to the public, I was asked not to attend. I would later learn that for more than six months prior to publicly "pausing," Hill Town leaders had been actively trying to secure a sustainable path for the organization, and leaders were not willing to invite an outside observer to those conversations. By the time Hill Town organizers were ready to engage with me on the project, their meetings and all regular service provision were on pause.

DEMA organizers were similarly reluctant to invite an observer to meetings, of which there are many: the group is comprised of a number of semi-autonomous working groups which meet at the discretion of each working group's organizers. Monthly meetings bring together at least one representative from each working group to discuss group-wide issues and make decisions on behalf of the organization. Although I was not allowed to attend the monthly organizer meetings, one working group welcomed me to observe their meetings. I observed five meetings of the working group (five additional meetings I joined were canceled due to low attendance), and a DEMA information session for all new volunteers. I was also invited to DEMA's Slack workspace, where I could observe conversations between volunteers and organizers, and send and receive direct messages to DEMA members. Slack being the main form of communication for DEMA members, this was a rich source of data for the project. Additionally, most of DEMA's organizing documents and meeting agendas and minutes are visible online without formal authorization – "intentionally so," one member told me, to promote accountability and transparency. I relied heavily on meeting agendas and minutes to

understand the evolution of DEMA and its decision-making processes, which helped to fill in some of the gaps created by my limited access to interviewees.

Researcher Positionality

In March 2020, I was involved with organizing a different neighborhood-based mutual aid project in the Boston area. Over time, the project I was affiliated with evolved into a volunteer-powered assistance program 'owned' by a community nonprofit organization, which diverged sharply from the extra-institutional, autonomous mutual aid approach shared by DEMA and Hill Town. This experience afforded me a unique perspective on the trajectory and goals of pandemic mutual aid projects, and also made me both an insider and outsider in the context of my cases. While I had firsthand experience implementing some of the same goals as DEMA and Hill Town, as a mutual aid organizer I had also 'failed' to resist assimilating into the hegemonic industrial nonprofit complex. As a result, my credibility as a mutual aid organizer was limited. I was careful to acknowledge in conversations with DEMA and Hill Town volunteers that I understood how my personal experience was not aligned with the goals and values of their ideal of mutual aid.

CASE STUDIES

Down East Mutual Aid ("DEMA")

Since organizing on March 12, 2020, DEMA had redistributed more than $600,000,

engaged with upwards of 3,000 community members, and made between 5-20 deliveries

a day, according to the group's website and financial tracking documents. Several

working groups met weekly or monthly and there was an active Slack for ongoing

communication between volunteers. DEMA's most active initiatives during my

observations in 2022 were regular grocery gift card deliveries between pairs of neighbors,

direct financial assistance to households on the "pairs waiting list," a hotline, and a quasi-

community garden initiative that loosely coordinates food-producing gardens on private

and public properties.

Mutual Aid Hill Town ("Hill Town")

Hill Town organized in March 2020 using a toolkit of digital resources circulated

by another mutual aid group. By the end of 2021, Hill Town had stopped its direct

financial aid initiative and could no longer take cash donations but continued its other

activities, including a weekday hotline, grocery card deliveries, and political advocacy. In

early 2022, the weekly organizing team meetings began focusing on questions of

organizational sustainability and the search for a fiscal sponsor. Although one volunteer

described the weekly organizing meetings as being open to the public ("they have always been open to anyone who wants to attend"), the group collectively decided not to allow me to observe the meetings as part of this study while they are "in the middle of resolving some critical issues." In spring 2022, Hill Town organizers announced the group would "be taking a pause on all initiatives… through at least the end of the summer." By mid-September, there were no formal plans to reconvene and discuss next steps. Over the course of its operation, Hill Town completed 1,900 deliveries, distributed $140,000 in grocery subsidy program, and transferred $16,500 to community members through its "cash drop" initiative, in which households selected randomly were awarded $300 in cash without any income requirements or spending restrictions.

Tables 1 and 2 provide additional information about the cases and communities served by each group. Of note, the Down East community is considerably more densely populated than Hill Town, more racially diverse, and the median income is about $15,000 lower, according to data from the US Census Bureau. Relatedly, more than half (56%) of Hill Town residents hold a graduate or professional degree, and around 13% have less than a four-year degree. In Down East, nearly a third of residents (30%) do not hold a Bachelor's, and just 29% of residents have earned a graduate or professional degree. These figures highlight the social class differences between these communities, and point to a potential relationship between participation in mutual aid efforts and working- and middle-class status.

FINDINGS

Despite organizing around the same non-hierarchical, radical principles and vision of mutual aid, Hill Town and DEMA organizers pursued different resource mobilization strategies. I find that striking differences emerged in the ways organizers approached mobilizing resources internally, through organizational culture and volunteer relationships and engagement, and externally, through legitimacy, ideological messaging, and public perception.

Edwards' categorization of material, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral resources reflects a range of tangible and intangible assets which SMOs can accumulate, acquire, and leverage, as well as the various access strategies organizers may employ (Edwards and Gillham 2013; Edwards and Kane 2014; Edwards and McCarthy 2004). In addition to a variety of types of resources available to SMOs, Edwards and Kane theorize that SMOs have a range of strategies available for obtaining and utilizing resources, offering a schema of four mechanisms of accessing resources (2014). Self-production and aggregation are the most self-contained methods, involving generating resources directly from actors and organizations associated with the SMO or converting existing individual resources into collective ones – such as fundraising and accepting individual donations. Co-optation/appropriation and patronage both rely on the relationships an SMO has with outside actors, groups and institutions (2014).

This lens of resource types and access strategies is a useful frame for examining the similarities and major differences in how DEMA and Hill Town organizers mobilize resources and the implications of those decisions. In the following section I outline how

DEMA and Hill Town organizers take a distinctly different approach to the mobilization of moral, cultural, and human resources. The relationship is reflexive, both responsible for shaping and shaped by the group's legitimacy, public opinion, community support (moral resources), and organizational culture (cultural and human resources).

Notably, I found that there was not a meaningful difference in the way the two groups accessed material resources. Material resources generally refer to financial capital and physical assets, such as property and equipment (Edwards and Kane 2014; Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Both groups solicited individual donations, and pursued grants and pandemic-related public and private funding. Further, organizers of both groups refused to accept donations or grants if they came with means-testing rules, such as income-based requirements for distributing aid. While DEMA raised much more money than Hill Town (see Table 2), both groups used similar strategies to fundraise.

Additionally, both Hill Town and DEMA were physically decentralized groups. Meetings were held virtually, in public parks, or in spaces available to local groups such as community centers. Volunteers and organizers worked out of their own homes, utilized their own equipment, and group-owned materials such as banners or gardening tools were stored in volunteers' homes or donated spaces. Taylor, who had worked with a mutual aid group for restaurant and food service workers at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown before joining DEMA as a volunteer, saw this decentralization as a marker of the flexibility that made DEMA sustainable.

Further, neither group used proprietary operational or organizing tools that wouldn't have been available to the other group. Organizers relied on Google's suite of free apps, WhatsApp, Venmo, and various social media platforms to collaborate,

communicate, organize, take donations and promote their activities. In other words, I found that Hill Town and DEMA had access to the same types of material resources, and organizers leveraged them in similar ways.

Given the group's similar origins and shared philosophy, it is not surprising that they took more or less the same approaches to acquiring and managing tangible and fungible assets. However, DEMA was able to raise much more funding than Hill Town, despite operating in a community with a slightly lower median income. I attribute this in part to the differences in resource mobilization strategies outlined below.

Mobilizing volunteers and organizational culture

DEMA and Hill Town differed in distinct ways that contribute to the culture of their overall organizations, specifically in how organizers recruited, onboarded and mobilized volunteers, structured their organizations, and approached the 'practice' of mutual aid. Human resources refer to the tangible skills, labor, expertise and experience that individuals bring to SMOs (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). DEMA and Hill Town were exclusively volunteer-run organizations, relying on unpaid participants to develop and deliver all programs and activities, as well as perform administrative tasks of coordinating the organization itself and interfacing with outside actors and institutions. Cultural resources are widely available cultural products and artifacts, including strategies for accomplishing tasks and collective identities (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Cultural resources inform how mutual aid organizers and volunteers practice mutual aid – for example, how they develop organizational values, approach fundraising,

and select tactics for recruiting and engaging volunteers, distributing assistance, and engaging with other organizations and institutions.

DEMA's organizational structure, and policies and processes around membership and organizing roles were relatively formalized. Individual volunteers engaged with specific working groups focused on activities of interest to the volunteer. Working groups were led by one or more organizers, and organizers from each working group met monthly to share updates and debate and make decisions about issues relevant to the group as a whole. This working group structure seemed to be borrowed from Occupy Wall Street (Maharawal 2013). I observed that organizers adopted several other practices popular among leftist activist groups, such as stating community norms at the top of each meeting, seeking consensus on virtually all decisions, using Slack as a primary communication platform, and deploying a process called "stacking" to ensure all voices are heard in discussions.

Some procedures served to control entrance into the group. For example, anyone could fill out the online interest form to become involved, but joining the DEMA Slack – the primary means of communication among volunteers – required a time-sensitive invitation link that could only be provided by someone who already had Slack access.[3] In other words, anyone could ask to join, but current DEMA volunteers decided whether access was granted. Further, volunteers who wished to become organizers were required to participate in a "trust call" (or "trust-building call") with at least two current organizers. The stated purpose of the trust calls was to provide a layer of protection for

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[3] Slack access used to be unrestricted but became invite-only sometime in the first half of 2022.

the personal information of people affiliated with DEMA, particularly those seeking assistance, who may be undocumented.

Efforts to restrict DEMA membership were perhaps most explicit when discussing law enforcement. The introductory call for new members that I attended began with a land acknowledgement followed by an explicit request that "if you are directly or politically involved with law enforcement, we ask that you not attend." One DEMA organizer told me that they had advised a different mutual aid group not to allow a volunteer to take on more responsibility after discovering the volunteer had expressed pro-police sentiments on social media. Another explained that the DEMA trust calls and the explicit prohibition of law enforcement agents in organizer roles were in part to make sure potential coordinators did not put vulnerable people at risk:

"You cannot pass the trust call in DEMA if you are a member of police, or close to a police officer or close to an ice agent or anything like that. And that is, like, just a very clear line that we still have that like people who are undocumented come to us and we cannot make that information vulnerable to being to being accessed by police or ICE agents." – Joan, DEMA organizer

Only members who had completed a trust call were allowed at the monthly organizer meetings where organization-wide decisions were made, including discussing and voting on proposals. The proposal process in itself is rather formal; Joan's explanation is paraphrased here:

"When folks feel strongly about doing a thing, they bring a written proposal to a monthly organizer meeting and try to come to a consensus about things that might have larger impact on DEMA. We sometimes talk about it on Slack prior to the meeting. The proposal describes potential points of concern and how DEMA values are supported or reflected. The organizer group talks about it and tries to come to consensus. There is sometimes debate or popcorn discussion. We hear from anyone who has concerns

26

significant enough to want to block consensus, and who will champion it. We don't usually vote with fist-to-five, but have sometimes used it." – Joan, DEMA organizer

During my observation period, the proposal process was used to discuss a range of activities, including re-engaging DEMA's Twitter account, onboarding/offboarding processes for volunteers, and responding when individuals are referred to DEMA for help by a government agency. I was also required to submit a proposal expressing my interest in attending meetings and recruiting interviewees for this project.

Enforcement of these norms frequently showed up as policy-related Slack discussions, where coordinators would openly point out one another's missteps, such as asking for coordinator consensus on a topic outside of the monthly meetings or setting up a trust call with the wrong working group representation. Despite these relatively restrictive policies and procedures, DEMA volunteers said they knew they could get more involved or have more of a voice in decision-making if they wanted to. The group's primary method for communicating with volunteers provided visibility and access to organization leadership. Virtually all DEMA volunteers joined the organization's Slack workspace, where constant dialogue was actively happening among hundreds of volunteers on dozens of topics.

Organizers who couldn't attend a monthly meeting were invited to give updates or agenda items via Slack, and topics discussed live in meetings were sometimes brought to Slack to get consensus from a broader group. (Although sometimes, as noted above, this created conflict.) Volunteers who had not "passed" a trust call to become an organizer could not attend those monthly meetings, but the organizers' Slack channel was not private. That is, anyone with access to the DEMA Slack could observe discussions happening among organizers, or read the minutes from past meetings.

These procedures and processes had multiple implications. First, they formalized and organized the group, making it easier for newcomers to get involved because there were systems in place to bring people into the fold and activate them. New volunteers introduced themselves to the entire DEMA membership upon first joining the Slack, and joined "channels" according to their interests and roles in the organization. Engagement norms made it possible for volunteers to weigh in on topics without having to attend meetings or participating in lengthy, in-depth discussions, as Taylor pointed out:

"I do like how we have kind of a method for doing simple polls. So that people can give their opinions without having to do the effort of like, leaving an entire reply on something. ... I think that that has been helpful for getting actual engagement. I know it's been nice for me when like, I feel like I don't have enough to say, to like, actually give a reply, but I like, have a little bit of an opinion. That's been nice." –Taylor, DEMA volunteer

Onboarding procedures also provided a way to "weed out" unwelcome perspectives, such as pro-police stances, creating a relatively homogenous membership where conflict was low. DEMA's procedures also signaled to people familiar with leftist activist spaces that the group was aligned with their values, deploying familiar procedures and language. This strategy may have helped DEMA aggregate and co-opt human resources from sympathetic movements and organizations (Edwards and McCarthy 2004), such as Democratic Socialists of America and other local community organizing efforts.

Finally, DEMA's formalization and organization clarify the group's goals and vision internally. While DEMA interviewees acknowledged that the group's work does not strictly adhere to the principles of mutual aid upon which the group was founded, they generally conceptualized mutual aid in the same way. However, their critiques point

to different aspects of the organization. For Abby, DEMA has not achieved its goal of reciprocity. She explained:

"One additional weakness of DEMA is that while we intend to not practice a 'charity' model with one group of people 'giving' help and people 'receiving' help, in practice that distinction does tend to feel present. It's a topic of ongoing conversation among DEMA." – Abby, DEMA

By noting that DEMA organizers are aware of this shortcoming and continue to discuss it, Abby implies that organizers feel it is a problem to be solved someday, but not at the cost of other DEMA activities. That is, operating under a one-way model of assistance provision that lacks the reciprocity of mutual aid is still a worthy pursuit for DEMA, at least in the near-term.

Mary, another organizer who is primarily responsible for the administrative and operational tasks of a particularly active working group, sees DEMA's community-building work as being focused internally, rather than reaching outward beyond DEMA's volunteer base.

"Part of our goal is like, 'Oh, we want to build community and stuff.'... I mean, we've definitely built community among the people who like, you know, fill out our interest form and join our Slack channel and stuff ... But I don't think we've been very successful at building community, like, within the neighborhoods. Which is, I think, just like partly a capacity limitation. Like people, you know… you'd have to put a lot of effort into it." – Mary, DEMA

Here, Mary highlights organizers' willingness to selectively pursue aspects of DEMA's mission. With limited volunteer capacity, organizers focused community-building efforts internally, between DEMA members, rather than on connecting the organization with members of the greater community. To Mary, this failure to create new

social connections beyond a small group of DEMA volunteers is a critical departure from 'authentic' mutual aid:

> *"I've read articles about history of mutual aid and stuff. And I think that what we're doing in DEMA is like, pretty artificial. It's like, 'oh, we heard about this concept called Mutual Aid, let's make it.' And it's not organic." – Mary, DEMA*

A third DEMA volunteer, Ben, hosts a garden but does not regularly engage with the group. In his view, DEMA's activities only partially satisfy the vision of mutual aid because the group's focus is on addressing material needs. To Ben, DEMA lacks what is necessary to effect long-term social change, one of the group's core values, in part because the group resists defining shared goals beyond meeting material needs of community members.

> *"All DEMA is … it's very, like, 'these are needs in our community, and this is how we're gonna fill them in.' And I don't think there's a lot of coherence there ideologically, in terms of what it means to be part of the community, what it means to help the community, who's allowed to help the community, and all of that kind of stuff." – Ben, DEMA*

Despite acknowledging various ways DEMA has not advanced its mission uniformly, all three of these volunteers remain involved in the organization. The contradictions they observe between the ideology and implementation of mutual aid has not dissuaded them from participating. Rather, shrinking volunteer capacity is the issue which DEMA volunteers agree should be resolved urgently because it threatens the organization's sustainability. Ideological compromise, on the other hand, appears central to DEMA's survival. As DEMA volunteer Taylor put it: "If you die on the hill of ideological purity, then… you're dead. You know?"

30

In contrast, Hill Town was far less formalized. Anyone could fill out the volunteer interest form and be added to the group's email list, which was the Hill Town's primary means of communicating with volunteers. A volunteer's capacity was the only obstacle to taking on an organizing role, although a training was required to become familiar with system for processing requests for help and assigning them to volunteers as a "dispatcher." There was much less formal organization between the core leadership team, organizers responsible for specific activities (like grocery delivery), and rank-and-file volunteers. There were no restrictions on who could attend the weekly organizing team meetings (volunteers were welcome even if they had not been trained as dispatchers), and people from outside of the Hill Town community were often invited to attend. In practice, informal leadership roles were filled by those who were able and willing to commit more time to the group, and so took on the more time-consuming tasks like coordinating deliveries and tracking group finances.

But there was still division within the organization. Volunteers I spoke with were not aware of Hill Town's political advocacy work or the major principles of the mutual aid philosophy Hill Town organized around. They did not know Hill Town organizers by name, did not regularly interact with other volunteers or organizers, and received information from organizers via email updates.

In practice, Hill Town organizers kept volunteers at arm's length. There were fewer procedures and obstacles to getting involved with Hill Town, but also no mechanisms for sharing the underlying philosophy, or converting people from more peripheral positions of observer or supporter into more active participants and leaders. Organizers relied on passive communication methods (emails, social media posts) to

share resources and information with volunteers and the community and express needs. Those communications were not particularly transparent: volunteers noticed an increasing focus on fundraising in Hill Town emails in the months leading up to the group's "pause," but they did not understand why the group was having so much trouble raising money. Several volunteers suspected that the official message didn't tell the whole story.

"If you can only help ten percent of the people who ask for your help, is that not better than helping zero percent? ... Yeah, that's what I wondered. It sounded so black and white to me. 'Demand is outstretched, what we can do? We can't do it all, therefore we're not going to do anything.' That's how it came across, a little bit. And that is I think it's because it seemed so counterintuitive to me. And I wondered, is this not just a polite way of saying we just can't do this anymore?'" – Barb, Hill Town volunteer

Hill Town organizers did not question whether their group was effective in implementing mutual aid as they had initially envisioned – they were steadfast in their belief that they were doing the work of mutual aid. In addition to assistance-focused initiatives, Hill Town volunteers actively engaged in political advocacy. At least three organizers were tapped to sit on town task forces and commissions, and one organizer was elected to the town government shortly after Hill Town was founded. But organizers spoke with frustration about times when elected officials, town administrators, and recipients of Hill Town's programming suggested the group should incorporate as a non-profit, or at least follow bureaucratic procedures common among non-profits, to be eligible for accessing established philanthropic funding sources and grants. Organizers had assumed they were doing enough to communicate their vision of mutual aid, and how it differed from traditional charities and nonprofits.

"I don't know why we didn't understand that this was going to happen. But like, they were like, yeah, just become a nonprofit. And we were like, well, we don't do that because that's not what mutual aid is." – Susan, Hill Town organizer

As the pandemic shutdowns eased and a sense of normalcy returned, it became clear that perception of Hill Town's role and purpose did not match organizers' vision.

"Everybody was super supportive of Mutual Aid Hill Town until, you know, until the Covid started normalizing. And now, we're all back to right where we were before. … None of us are paid, you know, like, we are all struggling to get what we need as well. And like these municipal employees, and like organizations were sending people to us, because we could -- we didn't have any red tape, we would just do it. And we were really nimble. That was the whole value of it, like, oh, you know, most of the people that are calling need money. So now we need to develop a system to get people money. It was also, legally… you know, we took a lot of risks." – Susan, Hill Town organizer

Susan and the other founding member of Hill Town, Tessa, took on the role of "General Organizers," responsible not for specific activities but for administration and leadership of the group as a whole, including speaking publicly on behalf of the group and as a representative from Hill Town. This created to a tension for Susan, who came to be seen as the public face of Hill Town.

"I am not Mutual Aid Hill Town. I just was there in the beginning. I was just simply the person that thought to Google 'how to respond,' you know, I took bold initiative in the beginning, and then it became everybody's… I couldn't have done this without Tessa and her spreadsheets and her protocols. You know, and Bridget taking on the delivery and grocery stuff… I happen to be the one with my name on the accounts, and I happen to be the one who is publicly visible. Therefore, everyone assumes it's me. A town-wide organization named me Woman of the Year 2021. That was really awkward. Awkward! Because I'm publicly 'the person.'" – Susan, Hill Town organizer

This public perception seemed to be present among Hill Town volunteers as well. Volunteers referred to Hill Town organizers as "they" and "them," indicating they did not

experience as sense of membership to the group or ownership over decision-making. Volunteers did express a high amount of trust for organizers – in particular, trust that money and resources were being allocated fairly, and trust that the decision to pause was the best choice. While this trust helped volunteers buy-in and remain involved over time, it further illustrates the distance between volunteers and organizers – volunteers felt "*they*" could be trusted, viewing organizers as a distinctly different group of people from the rank-and-file volunteers.

A small group of Hill Town organizers spent much of winter and spring of 2022 trying to find ways to remain solvent and operational without compromising their vision of mutual aid. Meanwhile, volunteers were largely unaware of the political activism organizers were undertaking on behalf of the group and of the group's ideology. They saw their volunteer work as just that: volunteering, mostly to provide people with food. Interviewees often used language more closely associated with charities and non-profits, and were not as familiar with the philosophical foundations of mutual aid as organizers would have guessed. For example, Rachel, a retired teacher and Hill Town volunteer, insisted that the group was doomed without the help of external funders, specifically grant-making institutions, because seeking support from within the community – a tenet of the mutual aid philosophy – was not sufficient.

"[Mutual Aid Hill Town] depended on donations from the community, which is not a tenable long-term solution. ... Yeah, you have to have funding sources to be sustainable." – Rachel, Hill Town volunteer

Barb's volunteerism with Hill Town focused on delivering library books to people who couldn't safely leave their homes during the pandemic. She was surprised to hear that Hill Town's mutual aid ideology had anti-capitalist roots.

"If there was an anti-capitalist bent, or I would have picked [up on it], I don't think I would have been able to volunteer because I mean, look at me! I'm in this house. I wear jewelry, blah, blah, blah. I don't think I would have felt… I might have felt like the enemy." – Barb, Hill Town volunteer

Volunteer Kyle acknowledged the likely left-leaning position of Hill Town's organizers but saw the work as largely apolitical.

"I could, like, make some guesses as to what political leanings or the kind of POVs of like, its organizers were. But I never felt like... I didn't feel like the work was happening in a political context. Like, it just felt like these are just people trying to help get groceries to people who aren't able to get them themselves." – Kyle, Hill Town volunteer

Kyle shared that he had reached out to organizers to suggest a more efficient way of delivering assistance to people using electronic (instead of physical) gift cards.

"They replied very, very thoughtfully about like, 'Yep, we're aware that there are things that we could do to, like, reduce the friction, or essentially speed the transfer of funds from the pool of money that Hill Town overseas to people that need it. But that the goal of this form of mutual aid is not necessarily to maximize the speed of delivery.' … there are more personal elements that do make a difference – the literal handing of a gift card to someone, knocking on someone's door who maybe hasn't had anyone knock on their door in a little while – and that those are things that are prioritized along with the delivery of resources. I remember when I got that message I, I like work professionally in nonprofits at like the strategy and analysis level, and so to me, I was just like, 'that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.' Like, why would you not want to try to figure out how to get the most money, or like the most people the things they need, as fast as possible? Why is that not your goal?" – Kyle, Hill Town volunteer

It was Kyle's girlfriend, not a member of Hill Town, who later explained to him how mutual aid differed from traditional philanthropy and charity models.

Unlike DEMA volunteers and organizers, who were aware of the political underpinnings of the mutual aid ideology and strategically downplayed them as needed

according to their audience, Hill Town volunteers demonstrated a very different understanding of the role and purpose of their group compared to Hill Town organizers. This misalignment between organizers and volunteers' perception of the group hints at a lack of collective identity among Hill Town participants. Tilly found that strong distinctive group identities, along with dense networks of interpersonal relationships, were key features of readily-mobilized groups (Jenkins 1983). Hill Town interviewees demonstrated that the group lacked both.

Mobilizing legitimacy and support

The second major point of departure between the groups' mobilization strategies has to do with moral resources. Moral resources include legitimacy, integrity, attention from celebrities, and solidarity and sympathetic support, and are most typically bestowed upon a social movement from an external source rather than being generated from within (Edwards and Kane 2014). Legitimacy is the most studied form of moral resource (Edwards and Gillham 2013). Unlike cultural resources, moral resources are retractable and proprietary (Edwards and Kane 2014). In other words, the legitimacy of one mutual aid group is not necessarily transferrable to another, which is observed in the different public perceptions of DEMA and Hill Town within their community contexts.

DEMA acquired moral resources through several means. Soon after forming, DEMA organizers were featured in a major news publication with worldwide readership. Abby, an active DEMA organizer involved in several working groups, remembered seeing an op-ed penned by Progressive Senator Bernie Sanders that mentioned the group by name: "I was like, oh this is really taking off."

36

The local business community sought partnerships with DEMA and political candidates courted them for endorsements. These all signaled to people in and outside of the organization that DEMA was a legitimate effort, endorsed by figures on the left and local institutions. Abby considered the name recognition as a core strength of DEMA:

"I guess one strength could be like, like name recognition or like familiarity, or, like awareness of DEMA among people, mostly locally? Even maybe, somewhat nationally, with the opinion piece by Bernie Sanders… or like, among other mutual aid people? I don't know. I don't know how true that is. But definitely locally, like people have heard of DEMA like, not everyone, but people in the city have heard of us. It's like, I think that is a strength, that it's good that at least people know that there's a possibility that they can turn to DEMA or meet their neighbors through DEMA, I guess." – Abby, DEMA

This broad receptivity to DEMA may have been facilitated by the more flexible and pragmatic approach to implementing – and communicating – the group's ideology. DEMA organizers and volunteers conveyed the purpose and vision of their organization differently to non-mutual aid audiences, including community members receiving assistance, elected officials, and other community institutions. Abby recounted sharing her DEMA volunteer experience during a job interview, and how she simplified the organizational structure and mission to "translate" her volunteer work for a non-DEMA audience.

While DEMA volunteers were acutely aware of the group's political and philosophical vision, they recognized that it could be off-putting to people outside of DEMA who they were trying to help, or who wanted to help DEMA. Taylor, known for delivering excess produce to their neighbors, deliberately de-emphasized the political

nature of DEMA when explaining that the free produce was the harvest of a mutual aid garden.

"I think that de-emphasizing that has helped me in certain situations, especially for things where I've been helping out like, older people in the community. Presenting it just like a neighbors-helping-neighbors thing. I think, like, it gets people on board." – Taylor, DEMA volunteer

Joan, a DEMA organizer, acknowledged having to explain to neighbors the nature of their mutual aid garden, and that people who do not live in the home have Joan's permission to go onto the property and take produce. These experiences show that DEMA organizers and volunteers were aware of how their activities and mission might be perceived in the broader community, and that they felt it was worthwhile and in the organization's interest to help people understand DEMA in more familiar terms. Depoliticizing DEMA's vision and philosophy made the group accessible to a diverse population and more familiar (and thus easier to support) to legitimating institutions. Collective action efforts typically benefit in their own hegemonic legitimacy when they mimic the features of institutionally legitimated organizations (Edwards and Kane 2014).

Hill Town did not gain national notoriety but enjoyed similar local support early on. However, the group began to receive backlash around the time of their "cash drop" initiative in 2021. The cash drop program redistributed more than $15,000 in private grant funding to households in need, with no means-testing or limitations on how the money was to be spent by the recipient. Although the grant-making organization supported this use of funding, the plan seemed to raise suspicion among community members and public officials, who began asking questions about the legitimacy of Hill Town's bookkeeping.

Maggie, a Hill Town organizer, explained that this became an urgent problem when an unidentified person reported Hill Town to the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, "and implied we were not above board with money, and that we should be registered as a public charity." Like most of their peer organizations, Hill Town began taking donations immediately after organizing in March 2020, and redistributing that cash either directly to community members in need or through reimbursements to volunteers who paid out of pocket for groceries or other material goods for help-seekers. But because Hill Town was not a registered nonprofit organization and did not have an organizational bank account, those transactions were made through individual volunteers' bank accounts and cash transfer apps (like Venmo).

Susan, the founding organizer of Hill Town whose personal accounts had been used to move donations and reimbursements, received a letter personally from the AG's Office.

"I got a letter, because everything was under my name… we had moved like $120,000 through my account, or something like that. And so yeah, it was terrifying, terrifying. … So they used it as a tool to drag us in and scare us. And they did." – Susan, Hill Town

Some organizations, like DEMA, were able to secure a fiscal sponsor, a registered nonprofit willing to act as a legal pass-through for donations to an unregistered community group. Hill Town organizers discussed the possibility and asked multiple local groups if they would be willing to provide fiscal sponsorship, but they struggled to find a local organization that would partner with them in that way. Susan said it had seemed like the local food pantry would be willing to act as fiscal sponsor, but after Hill Town organizers presented to the food pantry board, they declined.

"They thought that because we are not incorporated, or because we were volunteer-run, at any point we could just take off on them and leave them with… whatever. But that's so stupid, because the only thing they would be left with is a bank account with money in it. … No one would put their neck out for us. To this day." – Susan, Hill Town

To Susan, the idea that Hill Town would 'take off' was both incomprehensible and inconsequential to a sponsoring organization. But potential fiscal sponsors perceived Hill Town's lack of formality and unwillingness to institutionalize as a risk to their organization, even if the risk was not material. Likewise, Hill Town organizers also feared a fiscal sponsor or board of directors would compromise their values by requiring them to implement means-testing.

"One of the discussions we had quite a bit in team meetings was, well, if we partner with this organization [so we can take donations], are they going to demand that we have income guidelines? And people were adamant: We don't want to do that. We don't want to do that." – Maggie, Hill Town

Another option available to Hill Town was incorporating as a 501(c)3 organization, a registered, tax-exempt charity. Maggie explained her own objections to incorporating into a nonprofit: "I think it would be too easy to fall into the institutional trap. You have a board of directors, now you have to placate your funders." The consequence of this decision was not lost on organizers. Susan articulated the tradeoff that the group made in upholding its vision for mutual aid:

"It's like, well, how do we make this argument to the people that we're serving? That we're failing this because we don't want to be a nonprofit? Why don't we want to be a nonprofit? 'Because that's not what mutual aid is.' That's not gonna fly with someone who we've been providing $250 grocery gift cards every two weeks to. So that's when we started to, like, fall apart." – Susan, Hill Town

Susan and Maggie emphasized that the primary obstacle to Hill Town's longevity was the fundamental incompatibility of the group's mutual aid ideology with the dominant systems of capitalism and charity. Organizers might have been able to overcome the many other discrete challenges the group faced, but they were ultimately unwilling to try without the guarantee that their organizing principles would be protected. This commitment to the mutual aid philosophy not only prohibited Hill Town from accessing traditional routes toward legitimation, it deepened the gulf between organizers and volunteers, who were largely unaware of the group's political and ideological principles and lacked a sense of solidarity and collective identity.

Limitations

The emergent and temporary nature of pandemic mutual aid groups was a significant challenge to primary data collection, resulting in a small sample of interviews for this project. Many mutual aid groups had disbanded or paused operations by 2022, and remaining volunteers had limited energy and interest in participating in interviews. There was also a sense of distrust among some organizers, particularly in DEMA, regarding my position as an academic researcher without an existing relationship to the group. The non-hierarchical structure of the groups was incompatible with my plans to identify a point of contact with decision-making authority to gain access to the groups; similarly, volunteer churn and part-time availability prolonged data collection. The implications of these access issues, and the emergent and transitory nature of the groups, made it impossible to develop complete and objective histories of the group. All of my data for Hill Town relied on volunteers' memories of their participation and experiences,

and could not be corroborated with documents or observation. While this limits the extent

to which my findings can reliably explain causal phenomenon, the data nonetheless

provide rich insight into the experiences and perceptions of mutual aid volunteers and

organizers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participants in pandemic-response mutual aid groups were faced with the conflicting challenges of mobilizing resources to sustain and grow their organizations while upholding a commitment to their radical ideological vision. This study sought to understand the strategies mutual aid practitioners deployed in navigating this tension, and how they made sense of their choices.

I found that DEMA interviewees accepted that their organizational priorities narrowed over time, focusing primarily on short-term goals of delivering aid. Putting the bigger vision of social change on hold was an acceptable temporary trade-off, if it meant DEMA could continue to operate and grow sustainably toward its long-term vision. Hill Town organizers told a story of pausing the group to preserve the integrity of their mutual aid vision. Believing the only financially sustainable path forward would have conflicted with the 'solidarity not charity' principle and other core values, they weren't willing to make that compromise. This study supports the call for more attention to culture and ideology in RMT scholarship (Buechler 1993), and for identifying and examining emerging groups not yet part of a cohesive social movement (Blee and Currier 2005).

Central to this study is the Covid-19 pandemic, and the widespread but unequal impacts and disruptions caused by the virus itself and the associated lockdowns. Solidarity and a shared belief that 'we are all in this together' in the early weeks and months of the pandemic generated a sense of communitas and motivated the organization of hundreds of volunteer-led, direct-action mutual aid efforts worldwide. Like more

43

traditional disaster mutual aid, these groups organized in response to a crisis situation and the unique pausing of social norms (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021; Solnit 2009). The left-leaning politics of pandemic mutual aid groups would be divisive under normal circumstances, but the communitas of the early pandemic smoothed those divisions and made supporting mutual aid somewhat more palatable for politicians and institutional leaders. However, communitas is a temporary state (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021:976–77). As it fades, the perception of mutual aid groups can shift. Hill Town organizers experienced this shift when, after months of strong civic support, community leaders began to publicly question the group's legitimacy.

Concurrently, the pandemic made visible and worsened extreme need that has long been present but largely invisible in many communities. While groups like DEMA and Hill Town admirably worked to meet the acute needs of their neighbors, their model of mutual aid is not designed, nor is it sufficient, to address chronic, intergenerational poverty and inequities. In other words, the pandemic made these mutual aid efforts possible, and at the same time revealed where the model falls short. In their pragmatism, DEMA organizers have demonstrated a path for sustainability by working within the system and accepting a longer-range view for broader social change, while Hill Town's trajectory illustrates the limitations of ideological purity for mutual aid in a capitalist system. As extreme need persists and climate-related disasters become increasingly severe and frequent, future mutual aid organizers can learn from the experiences of DEMA and Hill Town to build robust, sustainable, and effective organizations. Future research should consider the role of social class and the political context in which mutual aid groups organize.

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Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of Hill Town and Down East communities

	Hill Town	Down East
Area	6.76 sq mi	9.07
Population	63,191	140,704
Population of one race:	57,845	127,510
White	42,233	94,862
Black or African American	2,069	9,426
American Indian and Alaska Native	108	279
Asian	12,124	15,453
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	15	48
Some Other Race alone	1,296	7,442
% More than one race	9.24%	10.18%
Hispanic or Latino	6.76%	8.76%
Population density (pop./sq mile)	9,348	15,513
Median age	35	34
Older population – age 65+	16.10%	13.75%
Language other than English spoken at home	33.20%	30.10%
Spanish	4.70%	8.20%
Indo-European languages	13.90%	14.55%
Asian and Pacific Islander languages	11.20%	5.45%
Other languages	3.40%	1.00%
Foreign-born	30.90%	24.65%
Employment rate	68.40%	70.80%
Median income	$122,356	$107,752
Education		
High school or equivalent degree	5.60%	17.05%
Some college, no degree	5.50%	10.40%
Associate's degree	2.00%	4.30%
Bachelor's degree	27.60%	31.80%
Graduate or professional degree	56.80%	29.00%
Without healthcare coverage	1.50%	2.60%
Disability - disabled population	7.50%	8.65%
Poverty rate	10.20%	8.20%
Homeownership rate	48.30%	46.50%

Sources: 2020 Decennial Census, 2021 ACS 5-year estimates

Table 2: Case descriptions

	Mutual Aid Hill Town	**Down East Mutual Aid**
Organization details		
Active	March 2020 – Spring 2022	March 2020 – present
Funding sources	Individual donations Private grant	Individual donations Grants (multiple)
$ Redistributed (end of 2022)	>$150,000	>$600,00
Activities *italicized = no longer active at time of data collection*	Hotline Grocery gift cards Political advocacy *Childcare matching* *Direct financial assistance* *Grocery, medicine shopping and delivery* *Library book deliveries* *Small business support* *Virtual companions* *Speaker series* *Odd jobs* *Weekly newsletter* *Language and translation*	Hotline Grocery gift cards Direct financial assistance Mutual aid gardens Free stores Political education (revived 2022) *Childcare and pet care* *Grocery, medicine shopping and delivery* *Resource support* *Translation* *Emotional and spiritual support* *Housing justice*
Study participants		
N	6	5
Median age	52	28
Median yrs in neighborhood	16	2
Gender	5 female 1 male	2 female 1 male 2 non-binary

Table 3: Study participants

Organization	Name	Role	Race	Age	Political orientation	Years in neighborhood
Hill Town	Susan	Organizer	White	42	Radical-left Progressive	17
Hill Town	Maggie	Organizer	White	55-74	Very left of center	8
Hill Town	Rachel	Volunteer	White	78	Progressive	28
Hill Town	Kyle	Volunteer	White	31	Liberal aspiring to progressive	9
Hill Town	Barb	Volunteer	White	58	Bleeding-heart liberal	18
Hill Town	Amber	Volunteer	White	48	Democrat	15
DEMA	Abby	Organizer	White	28	Leftist	2
DEMA	Joan	Organizer	White	40	Lefty/Progressive	16
DEMA	Mary	Organizer	White	33	Not very political	2
DEMA	Ben	Volunteer	White	24	Lefty/Leninist	2
DEMA	Taylor	Volunteer	White	28	Extremely far left	3