

July 2020: BRIEFING 3

# Rapid Research COVID-19

## Grassroots action: the role of informal community activity in responding to crises

Dr Rob Macmillan, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research. Sheffield Hallam University

**SYNOPSIS:** The establishment of COVID-19 mutual aid groups at community level has been a remarkable and praised feature of the first few months of the coronavirus crisis. Yet little is so far known about how they formed, how they work, and what role they play. This briefing examines some of the literature on the value of informal community activity- especially in crisis situations- the challenges it faces, and how it relates to formal emergency response systems.

## Key points

- Rather than occupying parallel worlds, informal and formal practices and systems can be seen and blended in all kinds of organisations.
- Informal community responses to COVID-19 can be seen as 'first responders' to the crisis, and these are valued for their immediacy, proximity and agility, and tend to emerge when traditional approaches are delayed, insufficient or inappropriate.
- The value of informal approaches is mirrored by concerns about a lack of coordination, reach and accountability in high-risk situations.
- Literature on disaster responses contrasts a centralised 'command and control' model, which tends to see informal community responses as a nuisance to be managed by formal and professional systems, and a 'problem solving' model, which sees them as a legitimate contribution in a decentralised response system.

This briefing is the third in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

### #RespondRenew

Explore more events, reports, stories and blogs with Local Trust online.

# Introduction

The first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the rapid and spontaneous establishment of thousands of mutual aid groups operating at street, neighbourhood and community level<sup>1</sup>. Groups have been providing meals and emergency supplies of food and medicines, social support and activities for children, and checking in on shielding and otherwise vulnerable people.

Much of this work has been and remains loosely self-organised, guided by the energy, time, commitment and quick decision-making of a few active individuals, and without the formality of policies and procedures or structured hierarchy of 'leaders' and committees. A recent report observes that *'Re-neighbouring, forging new and stronger relationships between citizens rather than between citizens and the state or citizens and the market, has been one of the most remarkable features of the crisis'* (Robinson, 2020: 12).

In this research briefing, the third in our series looking at community responses to COVID-19, we consider some key themes in existing literature around informal community activity. This follows on from earlier discussions of [community responses in disasters](#) and the contrast between [resilience and resourcefulness](#).

The resurgence of mutual aid raises important questions, such as how informal groups are sparked and sustained, what they do and how they work. In the context of COVID-19, the question of how they relate to more formal and established institutional responses, emanating from community groups, voluntary organisations and social enterprises, and from local public bodies, such as town and parish councils, local authorities and others, becomes central. In this briefing we look at what informal community activity entails, its value and challenges, and the relationship between informal and formal responses.

## What are 'informal' responses to crisis?

Gilchrist (2016: 10) notes that formal activity is *'...governed by rules and regulations, by codes of practice and symbolic assertions of status and authority'*. In contrast, informal activity *'...tends to carry connotations of casual, unofficial behaviour, determined by individual choices rather than public codification'*. Further, informal interactions occur spontaneously or 'off stage': *'Conversations tend to be unscripted and unrecorded, allowing more candid exchanges and for people to be their 'authentic selves' rather than acting in a professional or organisational role'* (ibid: 10). In practice, of course, these are neither mutually exclusive worlds and ways of working, nor easily seen as two poles at either end of a spectrum. All practices combine elements of both in different ways. Burns and Taylor (1998) identify four characteristics of informal mutual aid and self-help groups: they have no staff and no formal work assignment, no formal relationship to the state, are based on direct rather than representative decision-making, and work through informal group structures and networks.

Drawing on earlier research into disasters, Whittaker et al (2015: 359-60) discuss four kinds of organisational responses to crisis: *established* organisations undertaking their existing routine work (e.g. emergency services); *expanding* organisations carrying out their usual tasks but in new ways or through new structures to meet the demands of the moment (e.g. larger voluntary organisations); *extending* organisations with their own established structures but taking on new roles in emergencies (e.g. churches, food banks); and lastly

---

<sup>1</sup> As many as 4,300 operating COVID-19 mutual aid groups have been reported (Butler, 2020).

*emergent* organisations, that is new groups and structures carrying out new tasks, often to meet unmet needs.

Each of these can be seen to combine formal and informal approaches in different ways, but perhaps the balance between the two shifts in the move from 'established' to 'emergent' organisations. The latter often form *'...during or immediately after the emergency period, before established and extending organisations arrive. These groups often play critical 'first responder' roles'* (ibid: 360; Aldrich and Meyer, 2015: 256). Stallings and Quarantelli (1985: 94) define these 'emergent citizen groups' as *'private citizens who work together in pursuit of collective goals relevant to actual or potential disasters but whose organization has not yet become institutionalised'*. Whilst existing community-based organisations, including Big Local partnerships, would be regarded in this classification as expanding or extending their work, COVID-19 mutual aid groups are more likely to be regarded as 'emergent' organisations. To date, however, we know very little about them, how they have emerged, how they are organised, how active they are, and how they link into the wider response to the crisis.

## The value of informality

Informal community approaches tend to be valued for, and associated with, proximity, immediacy and agility. They are seen to be close to the ground, where new and unmet need arises, drawing on hyper-local connections and knowledge. They can and do respond with urgency, being first on the scene as part of a 'surge capacity' in crisis responses (Whittaker et al (2015: 359). And related to this, they can act without being encumbered or constrained by the caution of established rules, guidelines and procedures – they can take risks and improvise. For example, recent research on 'compassionate organising' in the wake of Australian bushfires highlights the role of new local ventures to alleviate suffering. They are resourceful and effective because they are *'locally driven, speedy, and customized to victim needs'* (Shepherd and Williams, 2014: 954).

The literature on disasters refers to the 'convergence' of individual volunteers offering help and informal community activity in crises or disasters. People do respond in whatever ways they can in emergency situations. Yet informal groups tend to emerge *'when demands are not met by existing organisations, when traditional tasks and structures are insufficient or inappropriate, or when the community feels it necessary to respond to or resolve their crisis situation'* (Drabek and McEntire, 2003: 99). Underlying all of this is said to be a latent capacity for action within communities, based on existing networks which can be activated at short notice.

Whilst these networks might be animated by handfuls of well-connected and active residents, much of this led by women (Enarson and Morrow, 1998), such mobilisations can draw in others, without much in the way of costs or barriers. Informal community activity thus has an 'open' participation and membership style, drawing on and fitting in with a wide range of individual concerns and commitments: people can join, act and withdraw flexibly to suit their changing circumstances, without so much emphasis on credentials, specified roles and long-term commitment. Emergent groups lack hierarchy, have more porous organisational boundaries and fluid identities, and are often fleeting. Given these features, it is often hard for other organisations to establish connections, and for informal groups to gain legitimacy.

The literature affirms that in the collective stress of disaster communities typically rally round cohesively and pro-socially in support of those most affected. During the COVID-19 pandemic the somewhat surprising rediscovery and increased visibility of mutual aid has been greeted with almost unconditional praise, as a modest beacon amidst the

accumulating tolls for infection and death. Yet this needs to be treated with some care and caution, as the literature also highlights the challenges of informal community responses.

## The challenges of informality

Each aspect of the assumed value of informality has its flipside. Alongside proximity, immediacy and agility come a lack of coordination, reach and accountability in high-risk situations. The spontaneous convergence of volunteers and attention in disaster zones can be overwhelming, particularly where it is uncoordinated. Formal crisis response systems and professionals tend to regard informal and spontaneous responses as a nuisance, and liable to hamper relief efforts (Scanlon et al, 2014).

Convergence can lead to duplication and over-supply of help in response to more visible needs, while other needs may be unrecognised or under-served. Such uneven responses may be replicated on a wider geographical scale. For example, there is tentative early evidence to suggest that there are greater concentrations of COVID-19 mutual aid groups in wealthier parts of the country (Felici, nd). If this hypothesis is borne out by further research on the nature and distribution of these groups, it will contrast markedly with earlier research which identified a prevailing neighbourly and informal 'culture of participation' in low income areas, compared with greater involvement in formal constituted groups in higher income areas (Williams, 2005).

Informal community activity in general can often be regarded with suspicion by more formal bureaucratic systems and professionals. Questions are often raised on the one hand about risk, liability, safety and safeguarding in informal groups, and on the other about accountability and diversity (Whittaker et al, 2015; Burns and Taylor, 1998). Given that informal community networks often form through word of mouth, they may mirror existing 'birds of a feather' tendencies for people to associate more with 'people like me', and therefore may be limited in reach and diversity.

Finally, it is worth noting that the rapid mobilisation of informal crisis responses can also dissipate very quickly as energy wanes and the sense of emergency fades, even though the need for support may continue or new needs may develop. Informal community activity in crisis is not without financial and emotional costs for those involved, and support is often needed for those at risk of burning out after responding so intensively.

## The relationship between formal and informal responses to crisis

A recent COVID-19 essay for Local Trust noted the emergence of two main responses to the crisis, which seem to pull in different directions: a centralised model of decision-making and action '*with command-and-control methods (instructions, targets, deadlines) reigning supreme*', and a distributed system of design and decision making at community level, '*with no-one formally in command...with everyone who steps forward contributing their bit, and an underlying assumption of trust*' (Wylar, 2020: 65-6). The uneasy relationship between the two echoes a longstanding debate in the academic and practice literature on disasters, and to a wider concern over the relationship between formal systems and informal practices.

Whittaker et al (2015: 365) discuss the distinction between a 'command and control model' of disaster management, which assumes the need to return as soon as possible from disaster-related chaos and disorganisation to a pre-disaster normality, and a 'problem solving model', which more realistically assumes that decentralised and pluralistic decision-making with existing social structure and practices is an effective way of harnessing

resources for disaster response. One model seems to prioritise control and discipline, whilst the other emphasises agility and collective resources.

Although all organisations and groups blend formal and informal practices, the literature highlights differences in culture, assumptions, structures and procedures between formal and professionalised emergency response systems, and ad hoc, improvised, informal responses. The legitimacy of informal responses can be held in question unless they appear to be close to or integrate well with official response systems. That being said, it is often argued that attempts to support, integrate and coordinate informal support run significant risks of incorporating it, making it more formal and ultimately destroying it (Burns and Taylor, 1998). Acknowledging these challenges, Gilchrist (2016: 78-86) discusses techniques for managing the interplay between formal and informal ways of working, a 'knack' involving 'a set of skills, attitudes, emotional intelligence and knowledge that enable people to make judgements about how to behave, what to expect in different situations and what kinds of interventions are likely to work' (ibid, 78). These techniques can break down assumed barriers between formal and informal approaches and serve to harness and coordinate the best of both.

## Implications for understanding community responses to COVID-19, and further questions

Informal community responses have been heralded as a surprising success in an otherwise multi-faceted and still unfolding social and economic crisis. The value of informal groups and activities has been recognised in the literature, but challenges in terms of coordination, reach and accountability are also highlighted.

The discussion suggests three main questions to which, at this stage of the COVID-19 crisis, only sketchy answers are available. Future work in the study will explore these questions:

- *Contributions*: What has been the role, value and challenges of informal community activity during the crisis, such as through mutual aid support groups?
- *Collaborations*: What have been the relationships between informal community activity and the formal response systems involving local authorities, health services and established voluntary sector agencies?
- *Connections*: How in practice do broader community responses to COVID-19 combine aspects of informal and formal working and structures, and to what extent do they act as 'cogs of connection' (Locality, 2020: 12) or 'authentic intermediaries' (Gilchrist, 2016: 81), linking up different services across sectors, translating formal policy and guidance, and deepening connections in communities?

## References

Aldrich, D.P. and Meyer, M.A. (2015) 'Social capital and community resilience', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(2): 254-69.

Burns, D. and Taylor, M. (1998) *Mutual aid and self-help: Coping strategies for excluded communities* (Bristol, Policy Press).

Butler, P. (2020) 'NHS coronavirus crisis volunteers frustrated at lack of tasks', *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/nhs-coronavirus-crisis-volunteers-frustrated-at-lack-of-tasks>, accessed 10-7-20.

Drabek, T.E. and McEntire, D.A. (2003) 'Emergent phenomena and the sociology of disaster: lessons, trends and opportunities from the research literature', *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 12: 97-112.

Enarson, E. and Morrow, B.H. (1998) 'Women Will Rebuild Miami: A Case Study of Feminist Response to Disaster', in E. Enarson and B.H. Morrow (eds) *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* (Praeger, Westport, CT.), pp.171-184.

Felici, M. (nd) 'Social capital and the response to Covid-19', Bennett Institute for Public Policy, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/social-capital-and-response-covid-19/>, accessed 10-7-20.

Gilchrist, A. (2016) *Blending, braiding, balancing: Strategies for managing the interplay between formal and informal ways of working with communities*, TSRC Working Paper 136 (Birmingham, University of Birmingham).

Locality (2020) *We Were Built for This: How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future* (London, Locality).

Robinson, D. (2020) *The Moment We Noticed: The Relationships Observatory and our learning from 100 days of lockdown* (London, Relationships Project).

Scanlon, J., Helsloot, I. and Groenendaal, J. (2014) 'Putting it all together: integrating ordinary people into emergency response', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 32(1): 43-63.

Shepherd, D.A. and Williams, T.A. (2014) 'Local Venturing as Compassion Organizing in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster: The Role of Localness and Community in Reducing Suffering', *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(6): 952-994.

Stallings, R.A. and Quarantelli, E.L. (1985) 'Emergent Citizen Groups and Emergency Management', *Public Administration Review*, 45: 93-100.

Whittaker, J., McLennan, B. and Handmer, J. (2015) 'A review of informal volunteerism in emergencies and disasters: Definition, opportunities and challenges', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 13: 358-368.

Williams, C.C. (2005) 'A critical evaluation of hierarchical representations of community involvement: Some lessons from the UK', *Community Development Journal*, 40(1): 30-38.

Wylter, S. (2020) *Community responses in times of crisis: Glimpses into the past, present, and future* (London, Local Trust).

## About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

They are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as “left behind” because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

[localtrust.org.uk](https://localtrust.org.uk)

# Local Trust

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR  
General enquiries 020 3588 0565 Registered in England and Wales  
Charity number 1147511 | Company number 07833396

