IVR WORKING PAPER

Organisers' and volunteers' accounts
from mutual aid associations in Kensington and Chelsea during 2020

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1 Introduction

The paper is prepared by Dr Jurgen Grotz as part of an IVR funded, co-produced research project, titled: "*A Case Study of the role of Mutual Aid Associations during COVID-19 pandemic 2020 in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea*". The project was co-designed and is co-produced with Michael Ashe, Chief Executive of the Volunteer Centre Kensington and Chelsea, and Mike Locke, then Vice-Chair of the Volunteer Centre Kensington and Chelsea.

This paper describes the views and experiences of ten mutual aid association organisers and volunteers. The picture that emerges from those conversations is complex and rich, suggesting some prominent themes arising from mutual aid association activities, such as benefits for residents, benefits for volunteers, enablers, barriers, the political nature of the mutual aid association activities and the personal challenges. Furthermore, organisers and volunteers made suggestions about what might be learned from the mutual aid association activities in Kensington and Chelsea during the first lockdown and beyond, from March to October 2020.

2 Rationale

The COVID-19 crisis has elevated reporting of mutual aid associations, in particular their capacity for immediate emergency responses, in contrast to a delayed central government response, and has led to active policy interest regarding their role in future emergency planning and public service delivery.

On the website 'covidmutualaid.org' mutual aid is described as: "*where a group of people organise to meet their own needs, outside of the formal frameworks of charities, NGOs and government*" [accessed 11.04.2021] . Their activities are described as "*local community groups organising mutual aid throughout the Covid-19 outbreak …. providing resources and connecting people to their nearest local groups, to willing volunteers and to those in need"*. These descriptors do not appear to draw directly on academic or ideological definitions of mutual aid such as Kropotkin's (1902) Mutual Aid and Beveridge's (1948) Voluntary Action or on the wider and international literature which encompasses self-help movements, such as Borkman's (1999) Understanding Self-help/mutual Aid.

For two decades IVR has collected first-hand experiences from volunteers in many settings such as faith, school, health service, and student communities. (See for example Lukka et al 2003, Ellis 2005, Teasdale 2008, Brewis et al 2010, Grotz et al 2021.) The purpose of this research project was to systematically collect information to provide a narrative description of the role of the type of mutual aid associations described on 'covidmutualaid.org' during the COVID-19 crisis in Kensington and

Chelsea, from the days before the lockdown announcement by the Prime Minister on 16 March 2020 through to October 2020, from the perspective of those involved and to describe the wider and local context based on policy documents on public record and the literature on mutual aid and the role of volunteering in democratic participation. This working paper addresses the former; further working papers will address the latter.

3 Method

This project uses a case study, mixed methods approach, including gathering organisers' and volunteers' accounts through interviews and deliberative workshops, analysis of policy documentation and participant observation for ethnographic authenticity. The two participant observers and gate-keepers, Locke and Ashe, are collaborators in this co-produced project.

To gather mutual aid associations' organisers' and volunteers' accounts, Ashe extended an invitation to mutual aid associations' organisers and volunteers. The participants contacted Grotz, who arranged and facilitated the workshops and undertook the interviews. Two online deliberative workshops with a total of seven participants (03 November 2020, 11 December 2020) and three individual teleconference or telephone interviews (09 November 2020 and 15 November 2020) were undertaken.

Special consideration was given to maintain anonymity; therefore accounts were summarised, anonymised and verified with participants, by Grotz. The following is the narrative summary of their accounts, based on a thematic analysis.

4 Organisers' and volunteers' accounts

4.1 Mutual aid activities, general

The most notable general features of the mutual aid activities appeared to be the willingness of neighbours to help each other in the face of a crisis, flexibly and quickly, extending and experiencing trust and connecting to the community they live in, organising themselves and others in a non-hierarchical way.

To the group organisers it seemed clear, from the beginning, that there would be extensive need amongst vulnerable people. In the face of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 lockdown they noted a real willingness of people to help. They saw that people can pull together in solidarity. They experienced mutual aid as an individual human response, rather than an organisational response, which brought out the best of people with neighbour helping neighbour. Without being instructed by anyone,

they began to build systems enabling them to match hundreds of volunteers to tasks such as delivering food and medicines. They also began to work together and shared resources with other mutual aid associations. The speed with which they could build up this response to the crisis contrasted with the response of existing systems, political and charitable. People's different skills could complement one another's to make a mutual aid platform work efficiently, working flexibly, connecting people quickly, responding to specific, individual needs. Furthermore, mutual aid activities enabled volunteers to get closer to, and to connect or reconnect with, their community, and enabled people to extend and experience trust. The activities were co-ordinated in a non-hierarchical way which was described as there being no responsibility except the responsibility to each other.

4.2 Benefits for residents

The mutual aid activities were seen to provide clear and immediate practical benefits such as food and medicine, but also wider benefits such as the feelings of security and belonging, and in some cases helping people in serious distress.

Organisers felt that the activities helped to reduce people's worries, fearing that they would run out of basics such as milk and bread, showing them solidarity. The volunteers' activities meant that people who could not go out themselves, some of whom had run out of money, got the food and medicine they needed. In contrast to more generic responses, like the 'Government Food Offer' for example, they could assemble food supplies appropriate to individuals and their living conditions.

Also, the organisers and volunteers quickly noticed that the needs could not just be met by delivering food and medicines. Even if mutual aid activities excluded befriending, volunteers listened and helped with loneliness. They met many people who appeared to be suffering from mental health issues. Mutual aid association volunteers eventually identified and referred very vulnerable people to social services and supported vulnerable individuals whose complex needs the combination of statutory services and charity support had not yet resolved how to support or had decided were too hard to help. Organisers and volunteers felt they were assisting people who had nowhere else to go or didn't know where else they could go and were falling through the net. Organisers and volunteers recalled helping people in serious distress, some of whom seemed dangerous to themselves and some of whom were abusive.

4.3 Benefits for volunteers

The organisers and volunteers recalled the wellbeing benefits they experienced themselves and what else they took from their activities.

They spoke of how inspiring and empowering it was to have a shared purpose to achieve something positive in a crisis. Connecting with others made them feel less isolated during lockdown and made them feel closer to the community they live in.

Their activities provided them with a sense of purpose and control, achievement and direct and personal appreciation, making them feel better. They experienced an increased sense of belonging and purpose as they were able to support their neighbours, as well as feeling able to give and to make a difference. Some described their volunteering as good for their own mental health. In addition, they recalled learning a lot, gaining new skills and making new friends.

4.4 Enablers

The most notable enablers, the organisers and volunteers recalled, seemed to be the use of technology, people's time on furlough and their professional skills, as well as effective information sharing and networking.

The skilled use of technology was seen as a very significant enabler, which became easier as people on furlough could offer time and professional skills. Some organisers also had some prior experience of organising volunteers and brought a range of important skill sets from their respective professional and volunteer lives. This was also complemented by organisers with experience and standing in existing political and charitable bodies and by identifying volunteers who had existing Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. The national platform of mutual aid associations helped to amplify the message and enabled rapid signup, while expert advice on operational and policy issues, such as a safeguarding mass meeting on zoom, helped to quickly create processes that could be strengthened over time. The administration of DBS checks by the local authority was also seen as an enabler.

4.5 Barriers

The initial resistance by statutory bodies and some of the existing voluntary organisations towards this non-hierarchical movement's activities and the overburdening of volunteers were seen as significant barriers.

It appeared that, initially, statutory bodies wanted to respond through established channels like national charities and NHS Volunteer Responders and pushed mutual aid associations away; albeit that changed once mutual aid associations had set up systems the statutory bodies recognised. For example, while the local authority was initially reticent to support mutual aid associations and to provide resources, it later supported them practically.

Faced with tremendous and initially unceasing demand, organisers and volunteers worked excessive hours, had to make stressful decisions and were dealing with people in distress, which eventually left some feeling overwhelmed or overburdened. Their volunteering experience became gruelling, leading to them feeling burned out.

4.6 The political nature of mutual aid association activities

Organisers and volunteers repeatedly mentioned how they felt that mutual aid association activities became increasingly political. This included political and

ideological differences of those involved as well as local party politics and local voluntary sector differences. This political dimension became problematic for some volunteers, and what started out as a beautiful, inspiring and empowering experience, became divisive and negative for them.

During the initial phase of the response there was no time to resolve discussions about how collaboration would work. Volunteers who had no interest in ideology, who joined simply wanting to address the need of their neighbours, worked alongside others who joined the effort with clear ideologies. Such ideologies did not seem to come from just one ideological direction. Once the immediate needs had been addressed, the various (and at times competing) priorities and interests of volunteers asserted themselves, leading to disagreement and conflict. To those more familiar with non-hierarchical movements it appeared that mutual aid associations offered similar opportunities but also faced similar problems as other non-hierarchical movements. They suggested that setting up a non-hierarchical system may create a power vacuum which offers a space for manipulation, with some people trying to centralise and grab power. This appears to have been exacerbated as volunteers had different levels of prior community engagement experience which led to some tensions.

These tensions seem to have surfaced early, also described above in Section 4.5 Barriers, as existing systems, political and charitable, appeared unable to respond to the crisis in a timely and locally specific fashion, whereas mutual aid associations did. Amongst some organisers and volunteers there was a perception that the need for mutual aid was linked to the context of years of austerity, which meant there was no safety net for those most vulnerable as services were no longer there, though now most needed. They felt that mutual aid association activities were happening in the context of a crisis for which the Government was not prepared. With this perceived failure of central and local government to know and understand communities, volunteers felt they got caught between the local authority, MPs, voluntary sector and community organisations, in an already polarised community. However, they also felt that over the period of the first lockdown mutual aid activities gained credibility in the eyes of statutory bodies and were being integrated, to a degree, into statutory services.

4.7 The personal challenges

Organisers and volunteers spoke of the personal toll involvement in the mutual aid association activities took, ranging from stress arising from the personal responsibility they felt, to being harassed and abused on some occasions.

Organisers and volunteers could feel a heavy responsibility, recognising that things could go wrong and that they had to be careful. Beneficiaries were not always appreciative, and, on the contrary, might take their anger or frustration at the lack of

state support out on volunteers. Those volunteers needed some form of detachment to help people who were stressed themselves, but they might find this hard to deal with, simply difficult not to take personally. This was also dislocating, as the necessary detachment could be felt as not in the spirit of mutual aid. Such stress could be exacerbated as operational frictions appeared common. Also, behaviours that would not be allowable elsewhere, such as bullying or abusive language, were not consistently challenged. For some, harassment of individuals online and in person became a serious concern. This led to some volunteers stepping down altogether, as well as a result of returning to work and other calls on their time.

Organisers' and volunteers' engagement in mutual aid association activities appeared to be based on a range of individual assumptions such as reciprocity, trust, collective ownership and a shared vision. Some faced difficulties in building relationships of trust, and their assumptions about positive motivations were not always borne out.

4.8 Learning for the future

Through their activities the organisers had more than to face the practical needs in the community they lived in. They had to deal not just with food inequalities and isolation, but also with a polarised community. They became aware that the vulnerabilities of different communities had been seriously underestimated, that many people needed help and were in delicate positions, such as slipping into dementia or developing serious mental health issues during the lockdown. To the organisers, national government and local statutory services in this crisis did not appear to be prepared to deal with it appropriately. They stepped up and bridged that gap and, in the process, learned important lessons. While each of them seemed to be drawing their own conclusion about how this may be avoided in the future, they called for the recognition of some important points and a commitment to build on their learning. Such learning was suggested not only for organisers and volunteers but also for local authorities and voluntary sector organisations.

One focus of the learning is that organisers and volunteers should be aware of personal dynamics, and should be clear about boundaries, especially around the time they can give. Processes and the way they are developed need to be transparent. They also suggested that there needed to be a clear demarcation between what people do as volunteers and their professional role. They shared an observation that a relatively small core of the people, in their case around 20% of people who signed up, do the bulk of the work.

Even though the level of immediate need seems to have changed since the first of the lockdowns and seems to be less pressing for mutual aid associations now that established organisations have become better organised, it was felt that governments local and national should evaluate the mutual aid experience and

learning. Based on those evaluations and learning, statutory services should develop a policy on how to work with grassroot activities, supported by national guidance. It was suggested that rather than resisting the challenge of mutual aid associations, they should be promoted and strengthened, by advertising how people in need of help can make contact and know what to do if they needed help. They felt that mutual aid activities could be a pathway into more volunteering as there are more ways to help people. Preparing for a future crisis could be helped with a framework in place, knowing in advance what resources are available for support and with key information such as on safeguarding readily available. This could make a response much easier and quicker, for example, with easy access to resources such as DBS checks and information leaflets.

Organisers and volunteers felt there was a need for general recognition of mutual support, respect and empathy among the general public, who should be encouraged to be socially responsible as, for example, in following social distancing rules. They also pointed to the threat of 'fake news', affecting any emergency response. Finally, they pointed to critical structural inequalities around digital exclusion and banking. Some people simply cannot access information or support online, and some don't have a bank account and so cannot buy anything without using cash. This meant that they were excluded from many offers of help.

4.9 Summary

Looking back at their involvement, the tenor amongst the organisers and volunteers we spoke to was that the response of mutual aid association volunteers was absolutely the right thing to do, something to be proud of, something inspiring. They suggested that much needed to be learned from it to inform how ongoing need may be addressed and also how communities might be better prepared for future emergencies. However, what begun for many volunteers as a beautiful and empowering experience, ended with some feeling overwhelmed or overburdened and also disillusioned by the disagreements between different political factions and some of the existing organisations. They felt caught up in local politics when their mutual aid association activities were seen as new and challenging to existing structures. They felt that distrust was being stoked in a polarised community, to challenge their activities which were meant to be built on trust. The conversations with the mutual aid associations' organisers and volunteers illustrated that neighbourhoods are complex, that they form a difficult patchwork of interests in which new people may not be easily welcomed, even if well intentioned. It illustrated that not all neighbours are good, but that with some appropriate support mutual aid associations, their organisers and volunteers could make a significant contribution to their communities, as they did under the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis 2020/21.

5 Discussion

The enthusiasm

The first few weeks of the lockdown after 23 March 2020 saw tremendous activity and achievement from the mobilisation of up to an estimated 2000 volunteers through quickly established new mutual aid associations in Kensington and Chelsea. Those volunteers connected at the speed of emails and Facebook posts, used WhatsApp to bring together different skills, worked flexibly and helped not just delivering food and medicine to some of the most vulnerable who could not leave their homes, but also provided reassurance to the community that no one was being left behind. For the volunteers themselves the speed and achievement of this movement was inspiring, making them feel connected to their community and giving them a clear sense of belonging and purpose, at a time that was emotionally challenging for all.

The learning

The skills volunteers, many on furlough, brought to this joint effort enabled them to quickly build systems to match hundreds of volunteers to tasks. As the weeks went on they were increasingly collaborating with organisers with experience and standing in existing political and charitable bodies, for example, to put together safeguarding policies and they gathered guidance from many different existing sources. While the movement remained largely non-hierarchical it quickly became more bureaucratic. This was seen as necessary because the needs they addressed were far more complex than those originally met with the simple delivery of food and medicine. With the many positive encounters came those where volunteers or beneficiaries needed to be kept safe.

The disappointment

What begun for many volunteers as a beautiful and empowering experience, ended for some feeling overwhelmed or overburdened or disillusioned by the disagreements between different political factions and existing voluntary organisations. Non-hierarchical working was challenged when polarised positions and ideologies that did not feature at the beginning, began to re-emerge as the most immediate need receded. At its worst volunteers experienced the effects of bad neighbours, as they felt bullied online. And so, once the first immediate desperate need had been responded to, volunteers began to remove themselves from the movement.

There is no suggestion that the above is generalisable. It is very likely that experiences will have differed in locations across England and the other nations of the United Kingdom. Also, it is unlikely that the accounts presented here are comprehensive and reflect all the experiences in Kensington and Chelsea. However, the accounts provide a record that can be compared and contrasted and it offers important pointers for the wider and ongoing discussion of the activities of mutual aid associations and their role in the landscape of local voluntary action. They also suggest the need for further exploration of the potential of this type of associations to address existing social inequalities.

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