# MUTUAL AID

*intro to*

*Our study guide of Dean Spade's 2020 book 'Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next).'*

# summary.

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Mutual aid is a collective effort to meet the community's needs––usually with the understanding that the existing power structures are not meeting these needs. The book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* by Dean Spade is a roadmap to understanding, participating in, and maintaining strong mutual aid networks.

Spade explains that "the contemporary political moment is defined by emergency" (p. 9). During these recent emergencies, more "ordinary" people feel the urge to get involved in their communities. Spade calls it **survival work**; mutual aid once it is done in conjunction with social movements. This idea provides the backdrop for Spade's thesis, which is that mutual aid is fundamental to revolution; choosing to help others, pool resources, and care for the most vulnerable––within the context of capitalism, colonialism, and forced dependency on a hostile system––is a radical act. Spade defends this thesis through examples (we will refer to them as case studies for this guide) such as the Hong Kong protests, the Black Panther Party's (BPP) Survival Programs, the 2011 Occupy Movements, Hurricane Sandy 2012, and more.

The book is split up into three parts. Part 1, "What is Mutual Aid?" explains the three key elements of mutual aid, the differences between mutual aid and charity or federal relief agencies, and the realities of being on the frontlines of mutual aid efforts. Part 2, "Working Together on Purpose," is a practical guide for building sustainable mutual aid networks. Finally, Part 3 will discuss pitfalls mutual aid movements should avoid.

There will be a list of terms or concepts covered in this study guide in the comprehension section. In addition to that, there will be illustrative case studies sprinkled throughout to contextualize the topics covered.

# What is Mutual Aid?

# What Does it Look Like?

According to Spade, there are three key elements of mutual aid.

## ONE. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build a shared understanding about why people do not have what they need (p. 15).

Spade asserts that people do not have basic necessities (or rights for that matter), and we can use our power of community and organization to address that injustice together. We know this is possible because we have seen mutual aid in action since it is a long-standing tradition in historically mistreated communities. According to Indigenous Media Action, mutual aid has been taught for generations across many cycles of colonialism: "[It is] both a matter of survival and a powerful form of resistance to forced dependence on settler systems" (p. 17).

As early as the 1780s, there are records of mutual aid and "self-help" traditions in Black communities. Some of these include pooling resources to provide health and life insurance, aiding in burials, supporting widows and orphans, and creating Black alternatives to white exclusionary infrastructures. These efforts demonstrate how people have a long history of coming together when the government is not there to help.



## TWO. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.

Spade's second element brings up the idea of solidarity. Solidarity is the recognition that you and the people you are helping are equals. The problems you are addressing are there because of an unfair and unjust system, not because the people are "less fortunate" or at a deficit. It is the system that is lacking, not the person.

Solidarity empowers movements by supporting the most vulnerable, stigmatized, or "undeserving" people of that group (p. 70). For example, people may more easily support ex-convicts who were proven innocent and more hesitant towards those convicted of violent crimes. Real solidarity in a mutual aid network would mean helping even those who were convicted of violent crimes. This may not always be easy when expanding your mutual aid network, but it is important to remember the meaning of solidarity: everyone in the network is equal.

People build movements when they contact the complex web of injustices and then decide to connect with the broader vision of social transformation. People already addressing real issues by doing mutual aid typically develop a solidarity-based approach. This is because addressing one issue, homelessness, for example, reveals more abstract issues such as racism, colonization, ableism, and much more. One way to remember the difference is to think of "solidarity" as being a "solid," more permanent dedication to change.

## THREE. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.

People learn valuable skills in collaboration, participation, and decision-making when taking part in mutual aid projects. In addition to that, it empowers people to do things they may not have thought possible before; the system seems more approachable when you have a whole group behind you (as in, you might not need a lawyer to work through a housing dispute!) Spade explains how mutual aid gives people a true sense of autonomy: "Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian ... we can do things together in ways we were told not to imagine, and ... organize human activity without coercion" (p. 23).

# Mutual Aid and Social Change

Mutual aid becomes survival work when mutual aid is done in conjunction with social movements.

There are two big jobs of social movements:

1. Organize to help people survive the everyday struggles;
2. Mobilize large groups (hundreds to hundreds of millions) to tackle the underlying causes of these struggles.

Although all influential social movements have included mutual aid, mutual aid is often overlooked. Below are case studies that exemplify how social movements and mutual aid efforts go hand in hand. When looking at this case study, think about how the two 'jobs' from above come into play.

## CASE STUDY: HONG KONG PROTESTS

In 2019, Hong Kongers were protesting China's increasingly heavy hand over the city's politics. Read more about the history of Hong Kong's protests at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695.

Then, COVID hit. At the onset of COVID-19, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, had an 80% disapproval rating. Lam was unresponsive to COVID-19, despite Hong Kong being particularly vulnerable (a tightly packed city, history of epidemics, and proximity to Wuhan). In the absence of any helpful government action, the people stepped in. Mobilized by the protest movement, they were able to suppress the original COVID-19 wave and mitigate the resurgence.

*How did Hong Kongers organize to help people survive the everyday struggles?*

- They created case-tracking websites;
- Monitored hot spots;
- Reported hospital wait times;
- Warned the general population about places selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE);
- Defied the government ban on masks and countered misinformation from the World Health Organization discouraging their use;
- Distributed masks to vulnerable populations; and
- Set up hand sanitizing stations through the city and created digital maps identifying where the stations are.



*How did Hong Kongers mobilize large groups to tackle the underlying causes of these struggles?*

- 7000 medical workers went on strike to demand PPE and that the border with China be closed;
- Protesters threatened the government with stronger actions (e.g., explosives were found at the border with China after that threat);
- The Hong Kong government responded by creating quarantine centers in dense neighborhoods without the permission of those living in the neighborhoods; and
- Protesters responded by throwing explosives into the quarantine centers until the government moved to less densely populated areas.

# Mutual Aid and Charity

Mutual aid is different than the traditional charity model most of us are familiar with. The **charity model** is a way of giving that stems from the premise that those who are in the position to give have more expertise than the recipients. So under this model, the recipients are in need of the expertise of the givers. In short, the rich know how the poor need the rich to spend their money.

The charity model today originates from Christian and European practices. Many times they go hand-in-hand with a **moral hierarchy of wealth**, which is the idea that rich people are inherently better than poor people and thus deserve to be in their socio-economic position.

As an example of the moral hierarchy of wealth, many charities will put constraints on their help: piety, curfews, cooperation, lawful immigration status, etc. Spade explains that "Rich people's control of nonprofit funding keeps nonprofits from doing work that is threatening to the status quo, or from admitting the limits of their strategies" (p. 30). Basically, charitable solutions are about managing poor people instead of redistributing wealth.

In this model, recipients of charity may have to answer personal questions or accept jobs with exploitative wages to qualify for charity. Many feel stigmatized and degraded by the end of the assistance process. This is the antithesis of solidarity. With charities (as well as federal relief packages), there is usually an air of debt, shame, and impermanence. Where charity models stick to Band-Aid solutions, **solidarity and mutual aid address the underlying issues.**

The case study below is an example of a successful mutual aid project based on a solidarity model that was later co-opted and converted into a charity model.

*Source: Robertson/ Black Perspectives*

## CASE STUDY: BLACK PANTHER PARTY [BPP] SURVIVAL PROGRAMS

In the 1960s-70s, the BPP established key survival programs (mutual aid efforts) for their communities: free breakfast programs, free ambulance programs, free medical clinics, rides for elderly people doing errands, a school with a rigorous liberation curriculum, and more. They welcomed people into their movement by providing basic needs and creating a space—free of shame or stigma—for people to share their analysis of Black poverty. The BPP got people excited to work together for change.

As they were gaining traction, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote a memo stating that the Breakfast for Children Program is the most influential BPP activity, and is thus a threat to government efforts to destroy the BPP. In response, the police broke into the church where the program was supposed to open and urinated on all of the food.

After all of this, not one year later, **the government co-opted the program and expanded its federal free breakfast program in 1970** based on a charity model instead of a liberation model.

There is a lot to take in from the case study above, as it touches on a variety of topics we have already covered and will cover in this guide. For now, let's focus on the "charity model" it introduces, and how that manifests in other parts of service.



# Working Together on Purpose

## The Nitty-Gritty of Collaboration

In order to build strong structures for mutual aid projects, activists must be "effective at saving lives and mobilizing people" (p. 65). To build strong structures, we must factor in the following:

- Groups are more effective when people know how to raise concerns, propose ideas, or if they generally feel as though they are part of the decision making process.
- Clear decision-making structures should be created. When they're not, the groups are more vulnerable to selling out and burnout is common due to improper delegation.
- Three organizational tendencies can cause issues: 1. Secrecy, hierarchy, and lack of clarity; 2. Over-promising and under-delivering, nonresponsiveness, and elitism; 3. Scarcity, urgency, competition (p. 67).
- Group culture will vary from group to group. Refer to the following chart for a comparison of the helpful vs. potentially harmful qualities in a group | https://bit.ly/qual-group-cultures

## Consensus Decision-Making

Groups can only work effectively if people feel like they are part of the decision making process. For mutual aid groups, Spade recommends utilizing **consensus decision-making**, which gives room for *all* members' concerns to be addressed. This in turn can make members more interested in the group's activities because they had a say in them. A **majority-rules system** can breed competition over ideas, whereas consensus decision-making systems can foster a new sense of participation where we learn to value and desire other people's ideas.

**So, what does it actually look like?** Consensus Decision-Making can take many forms, but Spade clearly outlines the process in Chart 5 | https://bit.ly/consensus-steps (p. 78).

- Group hashes out a proposal and works with it until it becomes something most can agree on;
- Call for a consensus check to see if there are any **stand asides** (members who want to show that they disagree, but don't want to block the proposal), or any **blocks** (members who feel the proposal cannot be passed without modification).
- The blocks can share their concerns, and then the group will re-examine the proposal.

With consensus, decision-making members can speak more openly whereas, in hierarchical organizations, people may be discouraged because they either think no one is listening or that there may be negative consequences to disagreeing. More open decisions mean better decisions overall.

This method can also help prevent co-option. **Co-option** is when a mutual aid group's service is rebranded and separated from the mutual aid group by an individual. To prevent this, every individual must feel heard. Some mutual aid groups have criteria and guidelines set up to make sure that typically marginalized voices are heard. For example, if all of the undocumented people or all of the women in a group disagree with something, the decision should be reevaluated.

Five practices that set up efficient, effective consensus decision-making:

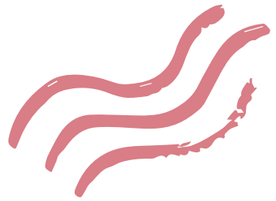
1. Creating a decision-making chart: Deciding which decisions can be made by each team, and which should be brought to the whole group.
2. Practicing proposal-making: Treat ideas as a "proposal" rather than an idea. Group members are more inclined to modify and discuss a proposal.
3. Practicing meeting facilitation:
    a. Start and end on time;
    b. Write an agenda (refer to the following chart for an agenda template | https://bit.ly/agenda-mutualaid);
    c. Assign a notetaker; assign each agenda item an allotted amount of time;
    d. Provide food, beverages, poetry, game, or music; and
    e. Consider going around to each person of the group on more important issues.
4. Welcoming new people by:
    a. Making meetings accessible and interesting to new members;
    b. Allowing new people to share their ideas; and
    c. Making meetings transparent so people don't feel lost. This could mean explaining the decision-making process, sharing budget information, or simply opening up the floor to questions frequently.
5. Creating teams: Breaking off into task-specific teams within your group to address the different facets of the issue you're solving.



# Leadership Qualities that Support Mutuality and Collaboration

First, we need to shed our preexisting notions of what we believe leadership is. Traditionally, that model is more about individuality, competition, and domination. Instead, we must adopt cooperative leadership. Refer to the following chart | https://bit.ly/leader-qual (p. 108).

Mutual aid work, however, isn't easy. There are certain obstacles and challenges that any mutual aid network should be prepared for.



## Handling Money

Mutual aid groups will have to handle money eventually, but doing so may be contentious. Because of this, many mutual aid groups opt for doing work that doesn't require raising money at all, and some just stick to grassroots fundraising (as opposed to applying for grants, etc.) to get closer to the community.

Some groups will have paid staffing. It could be helpful to go over the pros and cons of paid staffing: on one hand, it can increase capacity, on the other hand, it can breed an environment of pandering to funders, losing autonomy, and more.

## Burnout

One of the most common reasons why people leave mutual aid groups is burnout. Burnout is not just being exhausted. It can manifest as the combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration that makes us lose our passion for the project. It will lead people to encounter feelings of avoidance, compulsion, control, and anxiety. Unfortunately, it can rarely be fixed by taking a break, as people who are experiencing burnout may feel that returning to work is toxic.

However, burnout can be lessened when we feel connected to others, when there is transparency in how we work together, when we rest as needed (as opposed to working until you're burnt out and then only taking one weekend off), when we feel appreciated, and when there is a way for members to give and productively receive feedback.

Ways for mutual aid groups to prevent and address burnout and overworking:

- Make internal problems a top priority by facilitating discussions on difficult topics, regularly schedule conversations, mediate conflict, building transparency;
- Make sure new people feel welcomed and trained to co-lead;
- Establish mechanisms to assess the workload and scale back if someone is taking on too many hours or there is too much on the group's plate. Some important questions to ask might be: What are people in your group doing to maintain their wellbeing? Did they actually track their hours worked, or did they undersell themselves? Assess the workload and bring it to the group;
- Build a culture of connection by talking about the wellness of the group during regular check-ins;
- Make sure facilitation rotates by changing the meeting facilitator or agenda-making duties regularly;
- Recognize the conditions that create a culture of overworking as a group; and
- Recognize that perfectionism is a harmful force that can shrink our mutual aid groups by making them an exclusive, contentious, and a breeding ground for burnout.

## Conflict

Conflict is a normal part of group work, and it should be normalized to avoid placing blame on specific people within the group.

Here are three ways we can check in with ourselves when conflict is arising:

1. Get away for a moment to feel what's going on inside. Maybe talk to a friend or write things down;
2. Remember that no one made us feel this way, but each feeling deserves attention and care; and
3. Pay attention to the 'raw spots' for yourself and others. Are there specific topics that make you or another member of the group particularly upset?

## Working with Joy

Many of us have a distorted relationship with work. Refer to the following chart to view some of the habits that could show someone who is working joyfully versus someone who may be working compulsively | https://bit.ly/working-joyfully



# Dangers and Pitfalls of Mutual Aid

Even when trying to avoid the charity model, we can easily slip into the practices of it if we don't watch ourselves. Mutual aid groups face four major charity model tendencies:

1. Dividing people into those who are deserving and undeserving of help;
2. Practicing saviorism;
3. Being co-opted; and
4. Collaborating with efforts to eliminate public infrastructure and replace it with private enterprise and volunteerism.

Each of these four concerns will be addressed on the next few pages.

## ONE. Deservingness Hierarchies

### CASE STUDY: FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY (FEMA) 2018

*Source: John Sepulvado/KQED*

While many mutual aid groups are aware of these charity and relief pitfalls, they are not immune to setting up their own problematic deservingness hierarchies. This could take the form of replicating **moralizing eligibility frameworks** common in charities and NGOs by, for example, requiring sobriety, excluding certain criminals, and excluding single people without families.

The 2018 Camp Fire which notably burned through Paradise, California, and surrounding areas was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history. It left around 52,000 people displaced from damage and living in a tent city. Following the fire, people with more resources began leaving the tent city and those without those resources or connections stayed.

FEMA epitomizes the hierarchy of deservingness through their eligibility process: it excludes people who cannot confirm an address before the disaster (homeless people or those living in dwellings that do not give out individual mailing addresses).

This shows us that charity and relief discriminates, and while charity models can work to stabilize the current disaster, they do not work to transform the system and help people that are poor.

## TWO. Saviorism and Paternalism

**Saviors** are encouraged to use their presumed superiority to 'fix' the old or dysfunctional ways of being with 'smarter' solutions, or more 'moral' ones. For example, philanthropists, politicians, and celebrities worked together to remake New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Those methods eliminated public housing, privatized schools, destroyed the public health infrastructure, and permanently displaced Black residents.

**Paternalism** is "the idea that those giving aid need to 'fix' people who are in need is based on the notion that ... [their problems are] caused by their own personal shortcomings... [and] that those who provide aid are superior" (p. 52). Examples of this might be parenting classes, financial management classes, etc.



## THREE & FOUR. Co-optation and collaboration to eliminate and replace mutual aid

Co-option is when the government steps in to provide the services previously only provided by mutual aid networks. We saw this in the above case study about the Black Panther Party in the 1960s-70s. Usually, co-option combines attacks on public infrastructure and public services (e.g., destruction of welfare) with endorsements of privatization and volunteerism (e.g., telling people that their family or the church will support them).

### CASE STUDY: OAKLAND POWER PROJECTS (OPP)

**Privatization of fire services** – Public firefighting is inadequate due to increasing wildfires amidst climate change and budget cuts on top of that. For private firefighting services, however, business is booming. Wealthy homeowners can pay to seal their homes or spray them with fire retardants. All of this while poorer folks are scrambling over FEMA "benefits." Here, **public firefighting, which should be a communal good, has been co-opted** by private firefighting services.

**Alternatives to 911** – Similar to private firefighting services, the OPP saw a need for firefighting reform. They, however, emerged out of anti-police and anti-prison groups. Usually, when 911 is called, a police officer is sent no matter what the call is about, and they have a history of hurting or killing those who called for help in the first place. OPP sought to build an alternative to 911 to avoid confrontation with the police. In doing so, the OPP responds to the needs of the most vulnerable within the community––unlike the private firefighting services.

## Conclusion

"Mutual aid work plays an immediate role in helping us get through crises, but it also has the potential to build the skills and capacities we need for an entirely new way of living... As we deliver groceries, participate in meetings, sew masks, write letters to prisoners, ... we are strengthening our ability to outnumber the police and military, protect our communities, and build systems that make sure everyone can have food, housing, medicine, dignity, connection, belonging, and creativity in their lives. That is the world we are fighting for. That is the world we can win" (pp. 156-7).

# comprehension.

Before engaging in critical analysis of mutual aid as outlined by Spade, we must first make sure we understand what he is saying. Take the following questions and answer them in your own words. When doing so, try to limit the number of sentences you use and aim to explain these concepts succinctly. To double-check your work, or if you are truly stuck, you may visit the summary sections that address the question.

1. What is mutual aid and what makes it different from other forms of assistance?
2. How does mutual aid relate to the concept of solidarity?
3. What are the 'two big jobs' of social movements, and what do they look like in action? For this question, think about how both of these jobs manifest in each of the case studies.
4. Describe the decision making process Spade recommends for mutual aid groups. Why is it important?
5. What are the four dangers and pitfalls of mutual aid? Where do these come from? Why are they so common? How can they be avoided and mitigated?
6. How can we effectively and sustainably "scale up" mutual aid networks to reach a point where everyone has what they need? How does this differ from governments scaling up?
7. When looking at organizations to get involved in, what sorts of qualities can you look for to determine if the organization in question is a mutual aid group as opposed to a charity?

We've made a Quizlet flashcard set to help you take note of key words from this study guide | **https://bit.ly/mutual-aid-quizlet**



# Analysis & Praxis

Spade provides many practical ways to address common problems that may arise with mutual aid. The next section will give you some questions to reflect upon alone or discuss with others to help you put these ideas into practice.

## analysis.

1. Usually, co-option is accompanied by endorsements of privatization and public safety nets. How would the mutual aid critique compare to the neoliberal (**https://bit.ly/04-15-16**) critiques that politicians and corporations make against these models?
2. In many schools across the U.S. and abroad, students are tasked with doing a certain amount of volunteer hours to graduate. How might Spade respond to this?
3. What other organization models might be useful in preventing co-option? Think about cooperatives (also known as co-ops), which you can read about in the following links| **https://bit.ly/co-op-tbsb** | **https://bit.ly/co-op-worcester**

## praxis.

1. What mutual aid groups are active in your community? What are some of the issues they address? If you want to challenge your praxis further, try going to a meeting for one of the local mutual aid groups that interest you.
2. Over this past summer 2020, we saw large-scale protests across the U.S. demanding police reform (defund the police) and justice for those who died at the hands of officers. Based on what you have read...
    a. What made those social movements effective?
    b. If you have taken part in any of the mutual aid efforts accompanying the protests, how were they run?

c. Did you notice any of the common pitfalls in the groups you were a part of? How were they addressed?

d. If you are unfamiliar with a relatively 'successful' defund the police movement, check out **this podcast** | https://bit.ly/defund-vox

3. Carefully look through the following chart on leadership | https://bit.ly/leader-qual. Circle qualities you see in yourself and are working to cultivate:
   a. What might help them grow?
   b. Circle qualities that you see as obstacles to cooperative leadership and ask yourself where you learned those qualities, how they have served you, and how you can act more in alignment with your values.
4. Think about a group you are a part of, whether it be a specific group or culture as a whole.
   a. Does your group enable or produce perfectionist behaviors? If so, how?
   b. How does it impact your group work, relationships with each other, and relationships with people who come to your project for help or to volunteer?
   c. How could we add more flexibility, care, compassion, and trust to our group culture? (p. 142)
5. Have you ever experienced burnout in any aspect of your life? If so, how did you manage it?
   a. If it was while part of a larger group, did the leaders of that group talk about burnout?
   b. If you are experiencing burnout while you're reading this, what are some changes you can make to begin to ease your burnout?
6. Spade spoke about four common pitfalls that mutual aid projects are vulnerable to. In an effort to avoid these pitfalls, he offered these questions for self-reflection:
   a. Who controls our project?
   b. Who makes decisions about what we do?
   c. Does any of the funding we receive come with strings attached that limit who we help or how we help?
   d. Do any of our guidelines about who can participate in our work cut out stigmatized and vulnerable people?
   e. What is our relationship with law enforcement?
   f. How do we introduce new people in our group to our approach to law enforcement? (p. 61)

# Find mutual aid networks in your community

- National search of mutual aid networks Mutual Aid Hub | https://www.mutualaidhub.org/
- Try searching Google and various social media sites such as Instagram
- Reach out to community organizers for guidance



# Further Reading


- "Give Some, Take Some: How the Community Fridge Fights Food Insecurity" (article) by Dayna Evans | https://bit.ly/06-17-2020
- "Solidarity vs. Charity" (blog post) by Leila Janah | https://bit.ly/solidarity-charity
- Domínguez, D. G., García, D., Martínez, D. A., & Hernandez-Arriaga, B. (2020). Leveraging the power of mutual aid, coalitions, leadership, and advocacy during COVID-19. *American Psychologist,* 75(7), 909-918. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000693
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