

Collection : Mutual Aid and Crises

Entr'Aide  Crises

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE OVERVIEW REPORT

Recognise and strengthen the mutual ties that save us

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Founded in 1993, Groupe URD is an independent think tank that specialises in analysing practices and developing policies for the humanitarian sector. Our multi-disciplinary expertise, based on frequent field visits to review crisis and post-crisis situations, provides us with insight into the functioning of the humanitarian sector as a whole.

We believe in sharing knowledge and collective learning. We help aid actors renew and deepen the solidarity that supports local actors and strengthens the resilience of people and their land, enabling them better to cope with current crises and future upheavals and emergencies.

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Project
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Premise

In the wake of any catastrophe or disaster, we see a systematically recurring phenomenon, a major organising principle: mutual aid among those affected. Sociological studies of disasters have been recording this spontaneous response for over seventy years. It is given very little coverage, however, in disaster management theory, planning or training.

Our collective imagination sees the opposite: society on the verge of chaos, looting, panic, the collapse of a sense of civic responsibility. This gap between imagination and reality has a cost. It breeds distrust between institutions and local people, hampers preparedness and leads to an underestimation of crucial social services at the very moment when they are most needed. The humanitarian aid sector, which is today underfinanced, and overwhelmed by the increasing number of disasters and emergencies, can no longer afford to ignore the resource that mutual aid represents in times of crisis. There is also mounting pressure on emergency services in western countries: they are expected to prioritise their services and are sometimes unable to keep up with the scale of demand. Local people, on the front line, are an essential part of the emergency response; recognising this becomes a strategic necessity.

This report documents this underrated strength in societies, and examines the way it works, in practice, alongside assistance mechanisms. It proposes changing the paradigm from looking after 'victims', inevitably passive, who are dealt with by the authorities, or by 'the experts' (NGOs in particular), to cooperation with local people who are recognised as part of the response.

Project and methodology

The project originated in 2019 when **Groupe URD**, an independent centre of expertise on

crises, got together with **Pablo Servigne**, a writer and lecturer who popularised ideas about global catastrophes and mutual aid.

The project is operational in concept: setting the subject in a clear framework and proposing courses of action. Four objectives give the project its structure: improving our understanding of mutual aid in times of crisis; working out how to make it a central element in preparedness; identifying mechanisms that strengthen links between institutions and local people; recognising how our imagination tends to hinder mutual aid and how collective confidence might be restored.

Twelve pieces of work make up the project. Six field studies, all using the same methodology taken from the social sciences, address contrasting situations: the **Roya Valley**, hit by Storm Alex in 2020; the **Briançon area** where the arrival of migrants caused a crisis; **La Reunion**, affected by cyclones; N'djamena in **Chad**, flooded in 2022; the Greater Uki area in **Australia** affected by megafires and flooding from 2019 to 2022; and Kharkiv in **Ukraine**, at war. Six webinars complement the field studies by examining cross-cutting themes: gender, public policy, mental health; and several more areas affected by crises: **Valencia, Japan** and **Sudan**. A review of some 300 academic sources fed into discussions that conclude each chapter, and each part of the report.

The report reverses the usual perspective. Instead of describing crisis management through the prism of institutions, it begins with the people affected, then observes the arrival of emergency services, and the points of interface between the two worlds. This changed perspective is also brought to bear on planning, which is organised in four phases, in a different order from usual: the emergency during the crisis, the continuing crisis once the initial emergency has passed, the post-emergency phase and finally the pre-emergency phase. These phases are treated as cyclical, with the post-emergency phase of

one crisis becoming the pre-emergency phase of the next. A fifth element of the planning process offers a synthesis and proposals for action.

Shared vocabulary, common understanding

The report suggests operational definitions, intended to be descriptive, rather than controversial. A **crisis** happens when a system is thrown off balance, when the usual order of things no longer responds adequately. It is different from a **disaster**, a violent, localised event which may lead to a crisis, or from an **emergency**, a situation when vital needs are no longer being met. What we call a natural disaster is the outcome of the interaction between an unforeseen event and the social vulnerabilities of the place where it occurs: a disaster is equally a social and a physical phenomenon.

Three words which are often confused are here given separate meanings. **Solidarity** is a moral point of view, an urge to take action with no precondition as to the form that action may take. **Aid** sets a donor and a recipient in a relationship of structural asymmetry, with no expectation of reciprocity, with a degree of verticality entailed. **Mutual aid** is based on real or potential reciprocity between people who understand that their situation is shared. The report defines it as '*a horizontal force of convergence, self-organised, arising within a group of those affected*'.

The report therefore proposes, in the absence of an exact French term, 'mutual aid volunteer' to refer to a person who, without a mandate, takes action from within the group of people affected, right from the start. This term, intuitive and horizontal, is good for advocacy purposes; the scientific literature suggests in parallel the more precise term of 'independent responder' which matches the term 'first responder', reserved for professionals. This clarification of terms leads to a central conceptual notion, a triptych of **emerging, converging, institution**. *Mutual*

aid volunteers emerge from within the disaster zone, *aid volunteers* converge from outside it with no mandate, *institutions* intervene with a mandate to do so. This distinction is not made in the literature: it changes the idea of coordination, because we do not treat those already present and those who arrive from elsewhere in the same way. The distinction also allows us to recognise a category that is often invisible, the **diaspora**, a form of convergent aid working from a distance, relying on pre-existing communication methods, financial networks and ties based on trust. It is the primary safety net in Sudan and Ukraine.



Mutual aid, a horizontal force of convergence, self-organised, arising within a group of those affected."

Evolution of different types of actors and their relationships when confronted by crises

During the emergency, post-emergency and after the crisis is over

Mutual aid ('mutual aid volunteers' or 'emergers')

In every context, spontaneous mutual aid appears, sometimes as soon as the alarm is given, before aid gets there. It takes various forms (food aid, lodging, help for individuals, cleaning, transport, communication, social support) and makes for remarkable local self-organisation. It relies on a social fabric made of 'densely connected' and 'more sparsely connected' links, structured groups and individuals with a catalysing function. It is sustained by many motives, from the need to save lives to political commitment, and also

including shared identity. Available figures give an idea of the scale of the contribution entailed: three quarters of the people saved from the rubble of the earthquake in Kobe (Japan) were pulled out by local people, and around 43% of people rescued during Hurricane Katrina (in the US) were rescued by relatives or neighbours. This type of mutual aid has serious limitations, especially inequality of access, or when security is very weak, or resources severely lacking. But antisocial behaviour tends to be confined to a minority, even when the situation is critical, although it tends to be exaggerated by reports in the media.

Once the life-threatening phase of an emergency has passed, local mutual aid takes two possible tracks. It vanishes as part of a return to normal life – whether this happens voluntarily or is imposed –, because of exhaustion, vicariously lived trauma, governance conflicts or the political capture of aid. Sometimes, it takes on a structure of its own, if specific conditions come together, such as the care with which the group has been created, flexible governance, access to resources or minimal institutional acknowledgement and/or a memorialising narrative. Performance measures, imported from management frameworks, are observed to be harmful to the dynamics just listed.

After the crisis, groups created during the emergency phase take on varying long-term trajectories, such as support and representation for victims or further work on how to respond in situations where crises recur or where they last for a long time. They may continue to exist after an emergency by taking care of the territory [affected] or committing themselves to preparation or prevention initiatives in view of future risks, or maintaining social life and links, and passing on new knowledge. There is a central tension between giving enough of a structure to enable a group to last, and making it over-rigid as often happens, when the involvement of professionals can change a horizontal organisation into a basic service provider.

External aid ('aid volunteers' or 'convergers')

Spontaneous external aid – regional neighbours, diasporas, distant goodwill donors – also mobilise when there is an emergency. This aid, sometimes disorganised and with poor local connections, is often characterised as problematic. The present report deconstructs the 'myth of the burden', showing that this type of aid is troubled mainly by issues of coordination, which may be resolved by legitimate local organisation, ensuring a match between aid and the needs identified, as well as a fraternal attitude.

External aid following an emergency faces the same alternative future directions as mutual aid: sustainable structures or collapse. Often, we see friction developing about its legitimacy, accountability and coordination.

After the crisis, external aid may become sustainable if it takes root locally, and the diaspora is seen to be a form of permanent, structured solidarity and support. Financing methods appear to be key indicators of the long-term quality of the relationship: flexible financing supports autonomy, when financing arrangements that match the immediate needs of an emergency lead to a perceived consequence of their 'falling off a cliff'. Which may transform mutual aid or destroy horizontal solidarity.

Institutions

In the early days of an emergency, representatives of institutions and aid provided by local people are often complementary. Cooperation with emerging mutual aid that seems only natural, even if it is without established procedures. But as soon as external aid arrives to back this up, there tend to be tensions. Four modes have been identified: worlds or systems that do not know each other; coexistence in tension; fragile complementarity; structured coexistence. Several structural obstacles systematically recur: uncertainty about the insurance and legal position of spontaneous aid donors; a

clash of narratives that renders invisible local people's urge to help; and a reassertion of the vertical, which happens when aid reverts to a command structure in a space that had organised itself horizontally.

After the emergency, when the institutional order is reestablished, large-scale coordination, funding for reconstruction and conformity with the rules become the norm again, but this return to the norm tends to systematically marginalise horizontal dynamics, because they are not recognised, because roles are taken away, timing is changed and/or there may be political capture.

Some examples indicate, nonetheless, that successful coordination is possible: **Japan** where there is a legal obligation to respect the independence of volunteers, **Switzerland** where there is a volunteer civil protection function and **Australia** where there are community resilience teams.

Finally, after the crisis, it is interesting to see how institutions use emerging local aid, with the return of institutional arrangements that almost never include local people, and asymmetrical resources progressively squeezing out emerging dynamics. The key issue is how to coexist without one absorbing the other. Points of interface make this possible: permanent spaces for dialogue, a legal and assurance framework that has been thought through in advance, and neutral area or people with diplomatic functions who assure the link between the two worlds.

It all happens pre-crisis: social capital

It all happens pre-crisis: social capital

Mutual aid is not born in time of crisis, but crisis makes it visible. It is based on the social capital developed during periods of regular life. The report offers comparative examples, from the densely occupied villages of the Roya Valley to anonymous metropolises. Horizontal links between local people become stronger the older they are, grounded in regular local meeting places, the connections linking different groups and the diversity of local competences. They are weakened by anonymity, constant changes of residents, preexisting internal divisions, selectivity of binding social fabric and exhaustion caused by successive crises arriving too close together. Vertical relationships, between local people and institutions, have a particular logic of their own. Vertical trust depends on relationships established pre-crisis, on stable interlocutors, on recognition in advance of groups, and on shared preparedness. It is fractured by old memories of being abandoned, institutional instability, political breakdown and procedural hierarchy that excludes without meaning to.



Sols el poble salva el poble - Only the people save the people'

- Mutual aid volunteers from Valencia

Synthesis: eight characteristics of mutual aid

The single expression 'mutual aid' covers a range of irreducible types, a sort of biodiversity where each type has its own conditions for emerging, its own strengths and weaknesses. The report maps them along two axes. The 'surprise' axis contrasts the mutual aid that is expected because it derives from preexisting links and is predictable to those who know the local area, with unexpected mutual aid, born of the crisis and producing new links. The 'relationship with institutions' axis describes a gradation: without institutions, autonomously; in opposition to or against institutions, challenging them; for institutions, supporting the services they provide in a vertical relationship; with institutions, in co-creation. These axes, at points where they cross each other, give rise to eight ideal or typical types.

These eight 'boxes' or types are tools for reading a situation, not drawers for filing away case studies or groups. Hybrid types are the rule, pure types the exception. Several types coexist in a single area, often depending on the same people at an interval of just a few hours.

One type may become more like another according to the time it lasts, the institutional response and its decline, whether there is a question of the slow capitalisation of one crisis into the next, rapid escalation when an Aligned type that has been rejected becomes an Unworthy type, or a weak connection with an institution.

This is precisely where the institutional blind spot is found. Institutions are only really open to the Planned and the Auxiliary types of mutual aid, where there are procedures, resources and recognition; Participative and Aligned types are recognised at the margin. The other four types are excessive, troublesome or disturbing, even though in these types we see concentrated the power of societies in crisis to take action. Relying only on the types that are legible [to institutions] to interact with all the other types places too great a burden on the actors concerned and weakens local resilience. The challenge for the authorities is not to choose which type to work with, but to develop the ability to read the whole moving constellation.

	Unexpected (new links)	Expected (pre-existing links)
Without institutions	Irruptive: surprising, ephemeral, universal, immediate	Community-based: autonomous, sustainable, anchored, invisible infrastructure
Against institutions	Unworthy: anger translated into action, unprepared	Rebel: deliberate confrontation, organised, content to break the law
With institutions	Participative: untrained, complementary, co-creative	Planned: trained, prepared, reliable, encouraged by emergency services
For institutions	Aligned: available, subordinate, coordinated by emergency services	Auxiliary: trained, quasi-professional, extension of emergency services

Negative assumptions and beliefs

Our attempt to see things in a new way runs up against institutionally entrenched assumptions and beliefs, incorporated in texts on planning, transmitted during training, refusing evidence to the contrary even when professionals observe such evidence in the zones affected. Such beliefs do not describe the reality of crises but invent it. They are about people's behaviour during crises, our way of viewing crises and also mutual aid.

Each one of these beliefs has concrete, costly consequences. Inherent fear of panic leads to delays in raising the alarm, which costs lives, as seen in Valencia. Beliefs about looting lead to resources being allocated to repression as a priority rather than assistance to those in need. Belief in passivity encourages a policy of waiting and represses initiative on the part of first responders that have already been mobilised. The command-and-control model, a legacy of Cold War era civil defence, pushes aside mutual aid and thus causes the very bottlenecks that it fears. Documented evidence indicates the opposite of each of these beliefs, with panic in its clinical sense very rare, most behaviour seen to be rational and oriented towards helping others, local people the real first responders everywhere, and crises prompting self-organisation. When panic does occur, it tends to be because of élites that take defensive action against an imaginary threat, thus creating the disorder they feared.

These beliefs form their own functioning system. They are institutionally transmitted, provide justification for a command structure and legitimise suspicion of the general public. They work as a performative cycle, beliefs leading to action plans that in their turn generate the vulnerabilities that the beliefs already attributed to people. With assumptions and beliefs inventing what they call reality, changing them entails intervening in what is real.

Political dimensions of crisis management

Crisis management is seen as a technical issue of means and coordination. Above all, however, it is political, since it makes clear who matters, who decides and who covers the cost of crises. Making mutual aid volunteers invisible is one of the primary mechanisms, since an actor without a name cannot, within an institutional framework, be provided with support or training, or mobilised for action. This blindness does not originate in deliberate hostility but in an inadequate institutional grammar, which does not make provision for anyone who takes action without a mandate. When almost seven out of ten people choose to help out in situations where there are real risks, local people themselves are at fault in systematically underestimating the availability of others to help.

Inequalities shape a crisis both before and after the fact. Vulnerability is a social construct, where ordinary inequalities build up in exponential fashion, so that those who have least are the most exposed and the least well served by aid. Then the bureaucratic complexity of reconstruction excludes the poorest, some rehousing policies actively destroying the social capital that had enabled them to survive. The social infrastructure of a place offers better protection than income, as the Chicago heatwave demonstrated, with the 'social temperature' of different zones of the city deciding mortality. The gender dimension is the most structurally significant and the least visible, with women taking on a disproportionate share of the work involved in coordination, caregiving and making memories, the latter hidden by media coverage that is almost exclusively masculine in most cases, as seen notably during Storm Alex in the Roya Valley. In addition, mental health, which is treated as an individual clinical issue, really originates with governance choices, since secondary modifiable stressors carry as much weight as the initial shock, and since being part of a

group acts as a social remedy, directly protecting health.

In this context, the concept of resilience calls for caution. What is designated is something real, highlighting a possible range of responses according to available social resources, but current preferred usage of the concept can offload on local people responsibilities that belong properly to the domain of governance. The neoliberal version of resilience says: 'Sort yourselves out', while mutual aid suggests 'Let's get organised'. The conflict between vertical management and horizontal mutual aid is not a coordination issue that better procedures would solve but reflects two notions of power. Mutual aid is not disorder, as the theory has it, but a different form of order, one that is distributive and adaptable, often making better sense than a centralised response, where the authorities may fail or are simply overwhelmed. The responsibilities of mutual aid call for commitment on the part of local people, for whom the activities entailed are as much about capacity as about duty, requiring back-up so they do not run completely out of steam. In the global South, a reversal of the usual way of looking at the situation is called for. There, the providential State has not been reproduced, and disasters are frequent: as a result, societies have preserved forms of coordination and robustness that the global North has unlearned.

Towards a mutual aid culture

The most ambitious recommendation in the report, the result of analysing difficulties and successes recorded in the work we have done and in 70 years' worth of literature, can be summed up as the **mutual aid culture**. This is made up of a body of connections or ties, shared meanings and the actions that build these in ordinary life, making mutual aid possible, probable and transmissible in each local situation. This capacity depends on work done before a crisis. Mutual aid does not simply help people to survive but also to live

better. The recommendation goes further than the culture of risk, centred on the unknown and on information and community resilience, which tends towards the notion of 'government by means of disaster'. At its scientific heart are united two bodies of literature that are unaware of each other, the social capital that takes account of the mutual aid that is expected because it is born of preexisting connections or ties, and the shared social identity that explains how people that do not know each other can organise themselves in a matter of hours, without any previous link between them.

This culture has several goals, across an increasingly wide range. **Surviving**, because the denser the fabric of connectivity before a crisis, the better the chance of survival and recovery. **Living**, because the links and connections that save in an emergency are those that make everyday life liveable and prevent isolation. **Living better**, because a crisis experienced together opens a window, suspends the usual hierarchies and opens minds to ways of living and decision-making that seemed out of reach. The mutual aid culture depends on two pillars: connections and meanings. **Cultivating connections** entails working in different dimensions, horizontally between local people and vertically with institutions. **Constructing meanings together** entails pushing out the boundaries of our selves, by means of inclusive, shared narratives, giving priority to shared projects, mistrusting the common enemy. As well as these two pillars, there is a societal memory, where people's memory of mutual aid, vivid and owned by local people, complements institutional memory without being lost within it.

This culture redefines attitudes. Mutual aid requires that institutions adopt a role neither of commanding, nor of disappearing altogether, but of **supporting**: providing resources, accommodation, recognition and a framework to help with increasing responsibilities without changing their nature or swallowing them up. Support entails

holding back to some extent, reinforcing without owning and must be directed as a matter of priority to the most isolated, people who are without sustaining links. A first condition is the recognition of mutual aid, including the forms of mutual aid that appear troublesome. From local people's perspective, the report contrasts two narratives. The narrative that describes collapse and people turning in on themselves is empirically false, self-realising because turning inwards destroys in advance the links and connections needed in a time of crisis. The narrative that describes mutual aid matches the facts and is also performative, because believing that others are going to cooperate helps to make cooperation happen. From this narrative may be deduced principles of action for local people and also for crisis management teaching: prepare in advance by strengthening the social fabric rather than by withdrawing, print what is human on the material available, ensure that all preparation improves life as it is at present, commit to understanding and enlarging the local social fabric, practice together along with the first responders.

Developing this kind of culture can be done right now, without extensive means, using the fabric of our ordinary lives, but we would all benefit from seeing it put rapidly into play, functioning in the long term thanks to sustained interventions from institutions.

Taking it forward would be a way of recognising the resource that mutual aid represents as well as the cost it places on those who take responsibility for it, would bring together institutions and local people around a shared cause, and would set up as a challenge to inequality a horizon and a method: diversifying ties and connections and strengthening the membranes that bind us together.

For the full report:
Recognising and strengthening the mutual ties that save us. July 2026
Véronique de Geoffroy and Pablo Servigne, Groupe URD

COLLECTION MUTUAL AID AND CRISES

CASE STUDY FRANCE (the Roya Valley)

The emergence and the future of the dynamics of solidarity (aid and mutual aid) in the Roya Valley after Storm Alex. March 2025. Pablo Servigne and Aliénor Desclais, Groupe URD

CASE STUDY CHAD

'We can't stand there with our arms folded': ambivalent mutual aid interventions during the 2022 floods in N'Djamena. March 2025. Cécile Petitdemange and Aline Hubert, Groupe URD

CASE STUDY AUSTRALIA

How mutual aid strengthened the community resilience of Greater Uki, 2019 – 2022. March 2025. Dr Claire McLisky and Emma Pittaway (principal authors) with contributions from Dr Jean Renouf, Dr Jo Longman, Dr Richard Hill, Groupe URD with Plan C.

CASE STUDY UKRAINE

Surviving in a war zone: mutual aid, local solidarity and beyond. March 2025. Iryna Pidkurkova and François Grünewald with the collaboration of Daniil Bilous, Ilona Hetman, Valeria Nahorna, Illia Storozh, Groupe URD.

CASE STUDY FRANCE (Briançon)

The fabric of solidarity in Briançon: emerging mechanisms of aid and mutual aid on the French-Italian border. March 2025. Florence Chatot and Thomas Albertini, Groupe URD

CASE STUDY FRANCE (La Reunion)

Citizen mobilisation during cyclonic episodes in La Reunion, especially after Cyclone Belal (2024). December 2025. Valérie Léon, François Grünewald, Groupe URD.

OVERVIEW REPORT

Recognising and strengthening the mutual ties that save us. July 2026. Véronique de Geoffroy and Pablo Servigne, Groupe URD.

RECOGNISING AND STRENGTHENING THE BONDS THAT SAVES US

When a crisis strikes, and all the more so when relief services are overwhelmed, a massive and systematic phenomenon emerges: **the people affected help one another spontaneously**. Seventy years of research confirm it, and yet it remains invisible in the doctrines, plans and training courses that organise crisis management. This report documents it from six case studies (La Roya, Chad, Australia, Ukraine, Briançon, La Réunion) and six webinars, together with a body of nearly 300 academic references.

Its main findings: mutual aid always emerges, whatever the crisis; it comes before institutional relief. It can take various forms depending on residents' relationship with institutions and on how prepared they are; and over time it either grows more structured or wears itself out, according to the quality of the pre-existing ties between residents and how well these connect with the institutions. The institutions, for their part, by leaving these mutual-aid dynamics unnamed, can neither see them nor anticipate them, nor even draw on them, and so tend to push them to the margins, which leads to damaging outcomes.

This diagnosis leads to a proposal: to develop a genuine **culture of mutual aid**. The concept would rest on two pillars cultivated in ordinary times: bonds and shared meaning. The new posture this implies for institutions is neither command nor withdrawal, but what we call **supporting**, that is, support without absorption. For residents, the culture of mutual aid counters the narrative of individual retreat with one that is less dangerous and truer to the facts: faced with shared danger, people organise quickly, spontaneously and intelligently.



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