



Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

An Interview with the MAHB to Discuss Resilience

[Mutual Aid Disaster Relief](#) has sprung to the aid of victims of climate related disasters in Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico and, most recently, California. Their template is simple and replicable: What is needed in response to disasters is solidarity, not charity. Frequently, the government and what MADR calls the “nonprofit industrial complex,” has its own agenda and might not have the best outcomes for those it purports to help in mind. As the climate emergency grows more dire, it is unrealistic to assume that governments will be able to respond with the finesse to which First Worlders are accustomed. Response and in some cases survival will be dependent on the action of individuals working together to common purpose. As the people at Mutual Aid Disaster Relief note - special skills, while helpful, are not necessary: Anyone can participate simply by showing up and being willing to help, something worth bearing in mind, not only after disaster, but during any sort of community-building activity.

1. Is the assumption that the work done by Mutual Aid Disaster Relief can be implemented and replicated at a reasonable cost correct?

The workable Mutual Aid Disaster Relief is easily replicated and can be implemented by others. It is people-powered d.i.y. disaster response. Nobody needs to be an expert. Disaster survivors don't need more experts telling them what they need. Disaster survivors are looking for friends, or strangers turned into friends, who can listen and respond with compassion and without stigma or bureaucracy. We do not need to wait until we have a warehouse full of food and other supplies to share with our hungry neighbors, or a fully functional hospital to provide care for the injured and unwell among us. We can open up our cupboards and share what we do have. In so doing, we find that we inspire each other, we find this way of relating to each other outside the dictates of the market resonates, sparks our imaginations, and becomes, ultimately, self-fulfilling.

2. How do you decide on which localities to involve your organization?

So much of disaster response work, at least justice-rooted disaster response work, takes place before the disaster occurs. The local collectives, organizing, initiatives, and networks that are already existent provide the soil and nutrients for a vibrant people-powered response once a disaster occurs. It never happens in a vacuum. As Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, we are continually attempting to deepen our connections with diverse people in diverse places and constantly expand our network's reach. The short of it though is we respond to where we are invited. Generally, mobilizations aren't spontaneously dropping into other communities as outside forces, as much as springing forth, organically, like a flower through a crack in the concrete from the affected region itself. Sometimes folks do so through or as Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, other times folks organize as a newly created, emergent organization, but we leverage the network to support and amplify their efforts regardless.

3. How do you begin making introductions to the people in those places? No doubt some or all of you are complete strangers to the people of those places, do you encounter hostility from some of the people you are trying to help? How do you overcome this? How do you establish trust?

Regardless of how locally-rooted a response effort may be, there is always more work to be done than there are hands to do it. Some people do come from far away to assist with the efforts. They come as strangers, but leave as friends, with meaningful relationships that will last a lifetime. We don't come empty handed. We bring supplies or medical aid or something to offer to begin the dialogue that can break the ice and open the door to exploring together how to meet whatever needs have arisen. We ask, listen, and respond with whatever resources and networks we have access to, being honest about our capacity, and as much as possible try to meet whatever need immediately without forms, red-tape, or other hoops to jump through. When we address the survival needs of people in a way that upholds and highlights their dignity – we can build a deep trust quickly.

4. Your group acts in part in response to institutional failings. What are some of the more notable/absurd/humorous failings you've encountered?

Some more established institutional relief efforts will claim neutrality and impartiality on one hand, and then turn over survivor's information to law enforcement or immigration authorities on the other. After Hurricane Irma, a local sheriff announced that "If you go to a shelter for Irma and you have a warrant, we'll gladly escort you to the safe and secure shelter called the Polk County Jail." These types of activities, repeated in community after community, essentially

weaponizes aid against the most vulnerable and put numerous lives in danger. In addition, there is always a shocking number of guns that show up after a disaster. A dehydrated child without access to electricity or air conditioning in the blazing Florida or Texas or Puerto Rico sun, needs somebody carrying Pedialyte, not an M16. Both the military or police and the nonprofit industrial complex often serve to re-establish the inequitable dominant social order rather than leverage their resources to assist disaster survivors in leading their own recovery, neighbor by neighbor, block by block.

5. Some institutional incompetence is no doubt exhibited before the disasters to which you've responded occurred. What are some that you've encountered?

There are enough spare rooms and empty houses for everybody who is homeless. There is enough food produced to feed anybody and everybody who is hungry, but many institutions would rather throw it away than share it. What we see time and time again is that disasters magnify already existing inequalities, injustices, and vulnerabilities that existed prior to the disaster. In order to face the resource depletion and other climate change realities that are just around the corner, we need to be experimenting now with alternative ways of relating to each other that are based on humanity and generosity, rather than self-interest and greed. It is imperative for our collective survival.

6. In the village you are working in in Puerto Rico, you seem to be building a stronger community that existed before the hurricane. How have you achieved this?

In many localities, the act of coming face to face with tragedy and trauma forces us to come together. If we wait on the state or the nonprofit industrial complex to come save us, we will not survive. We find common cause with each other. In these collective dark nights, we find hidden depths to ourselves and we do things that we might have thought were impossible before. Over the last year, people in Puerto Rico have built up mutual aid – apoyo mutuo – networks and organizations. And we are fortunate to have played a small role in providing resources and volunteers, including some solar infrastructure to these inspiring emergent collectives. It's been Boricuas, on the island, and in exile, who have dreamed with their hands – and when we merge vision and action like that – powerful things happen.

7. In your efforts, I'm certain you've had some failures. What were some of these and how would you avoid them in the future?

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, the organization and national network, is a recent phenomena. We formed about 3 or 4 years ago. But mutual aid disaster relief, the tactic, is older. There is a term Rachel Luft calls “disaster patriarchy” and it refers to political, institutional, and cultural

practices around disasters that produce intersectional gender injustice. The example Rachel uses is that after a series of sexual assaults were reported by volunteers of Common Ground Relief in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Common Ground created training materials warning volunteers of sexual violence by the surrounding black community members, despite the fact that almost every accused perpetrator was a nonlocal white man. Sexism furthered racism and racism furthered sexism, even among this disaster relief effort that was supposed to be rooted in solidarity. The sense of crisis and urgency that leads one to bypass principles for expediency is a part of disaster patriarchy. So is militant posturing and the minimization or denial of basic human needs. These are all red flags that paint a toxic and unsustainable organizing culture. In Common Ground Relief, these crystallized in the figure of Brandon Darby, a misogynist agent provocateur, FBI informant, who used his position of leadership in Common Ground to take advantage of young women. Knowing this history of the failures and shortcomings of previous iterations of solidarity-based disaster relief, we at Mutual Aid Disaster Relief put up “we use consent here” posters throughout all our organizing spaces, have a survivor-centric zero-tolerance policy regarding sexual violence, educate new volunteers about consent, and have designated advocates on standby to bottomline support and advocate for survivors. In addition, we still respond with urgency to people’s needs, but with an eye towards fostering an organizational culture of internal support, where it’s ok to take breaks, talk about other things, laugh, be creative and so on. We understand the necessity of caring for ourselves and each other, not just as an afterthought, but integral to how we engage in all aspects of our work. So we brainstorm coping skills to reduce burnout together, have trainings about vicarious trauma, activate massage therapists and other healers to provide services to stressed volunteers and more.

8. What would you say was your organization's biggest success and what would you attribute to that success?

On a macro level, we have done right by spontaneous, locally-rooted emergent mutual aid organizations and collectives. We haven’t sought to supplant or replace them, but instead leverage a national network to support their efforts. That is one of our biggest successes. On a micro level, it’s the individual relationships that matter. We can’t do everything for everybody, but we can act with integrity and do right by the people we serve. When a disaster survivor says to us, “Thank you for what you have done for me and my family. I don’t know what we would’ve done without you. I hope we will be friends for life.” That’s success – that’s what it’s all about.

9. What is the greatest need of your organization going forward?

We can always use people rooted in social movement organizing and capable of communal work and self-initiative willing to put in time and effort on the ground after a hurricane or flood or fire or earthquake. We can always use funds to continue and expand our survival programs – we make even a little stretch a lot because we are an all-volunteer network with little to no overhead costs. But our greatest need is for people to do what they are already doing, but to the nth degree possible. A poet Andrea Gibson says, “If you’ve been writing letters to the prisoners, start tearing down the bars. If you’ve been handing flashlights out in the dark, start handing out stars.” We are facing, with climate change, profound and terrifying shifts in our political, economic, and climate futures. Storms are coming. They are already on the horizon. Learn the skills you need to learn to take care of each other. Experiment with ways of living that give you the freedom to do what you know needs to be done. And don’t give up because we need each other now more than ever.

10. What else would you like our readers to know about how Mutual Aid Disaster Relief does things?

If any of this resonates with you, please reach out. Finding each other is a revolutionary act. What we do today, these experiments in prefiguring a better world in the ruins of the old are an echo from a not too distant future. It matters. Everything now is a learning opportunity for what will come next. We would say, “join us”, but we know, chances are if you are reading this, you already are us. In countless ways, you are already dreaming a more just and sustainable future into being. This is a movement of movements. So we will leave you with these words – You are not alone. Thank you for every simple act of courage and compassion – and may the bonds between us be stronger than the toxic oppressions and oppressive toxins that threaten to drown us all.