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Mutual Aid Chart

Dean Spade

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This fall, I taught a class about mutual aid where we talked a lot about the differences between mutual aid projects that provide direct aid as part of radical movements trying to get to the root causes of problems and charity or social services organizations that provide direct aid in ways that often supplement, stabilize, or sustain violent and coercive hierarchies. We also talked and read about organizations that have started out as mutual aid projects and become social service or charity organizations. We talked about how organizations get de-fanged or co-opted, and what kinds of efforts mutual aid participants make to prevent this. As we read various texts about mutual aid projects from different places and times, I tried to keep track on a chart of some of the qualities and tendencies that seem to be present in mutual aid projects, versus those that seem to define social service or charity projects. I hope this might be a helpful tool for people within organizations providing direct aid to talk to each other about. None of the observations below are meant to be absolutes—many organizations have a mix of these tendencies and qualities. The chart only hopes to suggest that an overwhelming presence of qualities in the right-hand column or a drift toward those tendencies and qualities some-

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times undermines the potential for mutual aid projects to build new social relations.

Other observations:

- When groups that have been all volunteer get money, they often fall apart in conflict about that money and how to manage and use it. When they get enough money to have staff, there is greater danger of institutionalization and pandering to funders, because someone's income will be impacted if they lose the funders' favor.
- When groups get staffed, the volunteers sometimes expect that staff person or few people to suddenly do *all* the work or more than they can do, and volunteers sometimes check out. This can make the group vulnerable to loss of capacity, and also to becoming more solely governed by a few staffers. It can also be a set up for initial staffers to be heavily criticized and considered failures.
- Burnout is more likely when less people are involved in a group. Burnout is less likely when there are transparent participatory decision-making processes that let people feel like they are holding the project together with lots of people instead of alone. Burnout is less likely when there is a culture of feedback and humility that lets people address harmful dynamics between people or ways that hierarchies of valuation (racism, classism, sexism, etc) are showing up in the group. Burnout is more likely when there are not clear feedback processes and people stifle concerns, gossip about each other, and blow up at each other as pressure mounts.
- When organizations are dependent on funders, they have an incentive to declare false victories, so that they can keep getting funding. This can prevent innovation in the work, or realizing the work needs to be scrapped

Horizontalist and Participatory Characteristics of Mutual Aid Projects

“Members” = people making decisions

De-professionalized survival work done by volunteers

Beg, borrow, and steal supplies

Use people power to resist any efforts by government to regulate or shut down activities

Survival work rooted in deep and wide principles of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, racial justice, gender justice, disability justice

Open meetings, as many people making decisions and doing the work as possible

Efforts to support people facing the most dire conditions

Characteristics of Hierarchical, Charitable Non-Profits and Social Service Programs (or what tends to change about mutual aid projects as they move toward becoming charities or social service programs)

“Members” = donors

Service work staffed by professionals

Grant money for supplies/philanthropic control of program

Follow government regulations about how the work needs to happen (usually requiring more money, causing reliance on grants, paid staff with professional degrees)

Siloed single-issue work, serving a particular population or working on one area of policy reform, disconnected from other ‘issues’

Closed board meetings, governance by professionals or people associated with big institutions or big donors, program operated by staff, volunteers limited to stuffing envelopes or other menial tasks occasionally, volunteers not part of high level decision making

Imposing eligibility criteria for services that divide people

because it is having an unintentional bad impact. When organizations are volunteer-based, people are more likely to want to scrap bad ideas because their time and energy is precious to them and they want to direct it toward something effective.

- When organizations have no staff, it can be a challenge to do mutual aid work that takes place during typical work-day times, such as accompanying people to courts or social services offices. Unstaffed organizations may want staffing because they want to increase their capacity to provide aid.
- Organizations may want to become non-profits or get a non-profit fiscal sponsor so that they can receive grants and/or tax deductible donations. The downside is that this requires financial tracking and organization skills that can concentrate power in the hands of people who have had more access to such skills and systems. It also may bring government attention and cultivate a culture of less boldness and risk-taking within the organization as it considers government and funder surveillance.