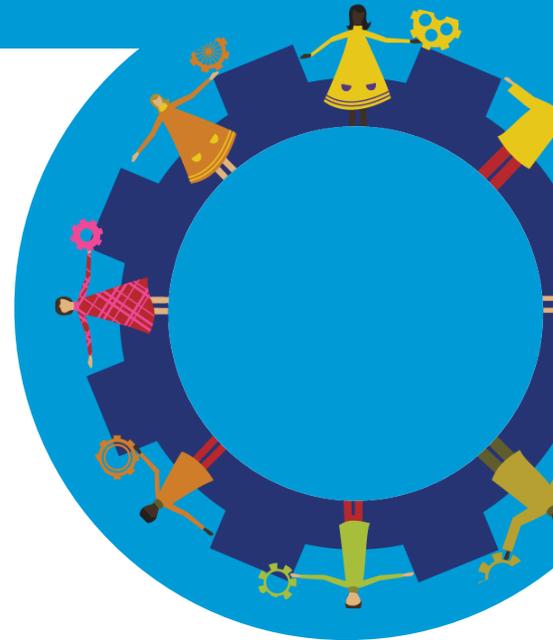# Episode 4: Grassroots Support Networks

In episode four of the Signal Boost: CCPD series, we focus on mutual aid and grassroots networks of support. Through conversations with grassroots leaders in six of Toronto's marginalized communities, we have learned about ways in which they have supported their communities through the pandemic by connecting via mutual aid networks. This episode features voices of grassroots leaders who are actively involved in their community's mutual aid groups, and how they view their relationships with grassroots support networks.

There is a common narrative that posits that during times of crisis people will turn inwards to protect and provide for themselves at the sacrifice of the communities around them. Through our research with the CCPD project, we have seen that this is not always the case. Grassroots leaders, especially those in marginalized communities with histories of disinvestment, reach out and connect in a variety of ways, including through mutual aid networks.

Mutual aid is a practice that emphasizes a *solidarity*, *not charity* model of mutual, reciprocal support between group members that have volunteered to participate. Our research showed that in communities that are marginalized, and have histories of a lack of access to services, grassroots-led mutual aid groups became the frontline pandemic response during the initial stages of COVID-19. Top-down emergency supports, while useful, were not always able to reach into deep community pockets that need targeted approaches to reach people (e.g isolated seniors, newcomers). Grassroots leaders stepped up to fill in these gaps, and by utilizing their assets, were able to provide hyperlocal support based on their relationships to not only service providers with access to resources (such as local agencies), but also to each other.
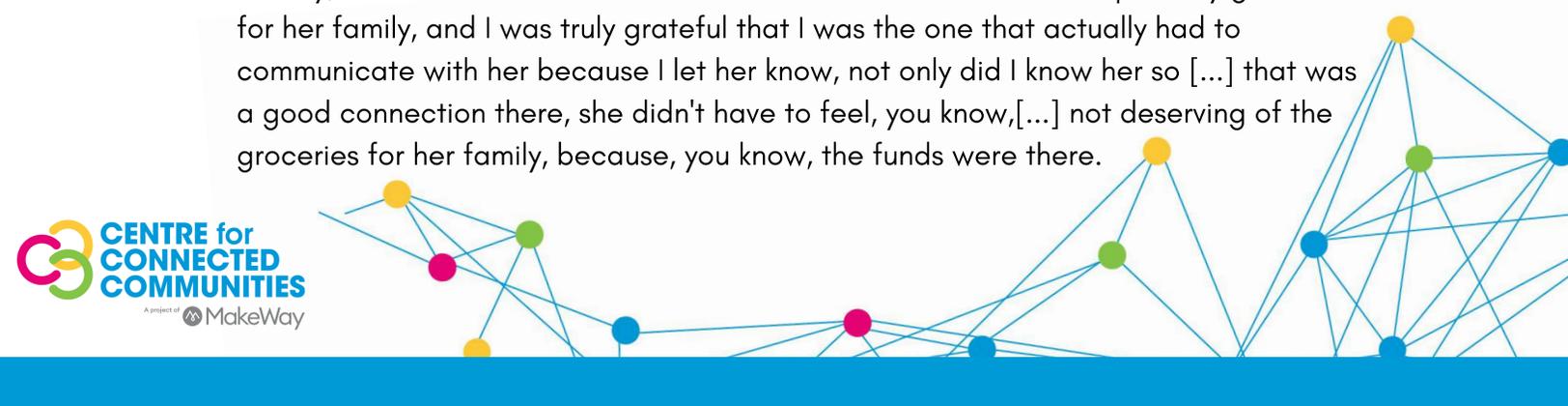
Mutual aid networks were able to offer more support when the grassroots leaders involved had connections to more formalized responses; they were able to access key information and resources and were then able to disperse what was needed back into pockets of society that weren't reached directly by top-down interventions.

A key part of on-the-ground community-led support during crisis events is the mobilization of local grassroots leaders, initiatives and local agencies to create physical connection places where resources and supplies can be distributed. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is unique in that it requires isolation and social distancing as a means of maintaining safety. Our research illustrates that in this unique situation, relationships and communication networks were a vital component of maintaining community safety. Local agencies that act as two-way connections between people on-the-ground and high-level institutions were physically closed due to lockdown procedures, and the ways by which people accessed services, resources and information had to change. By utilizing their mutual aid networks, grassroots leaders were able to connect to community members to meet specific needs, like dispersing information and material goods such as food, medication and personal protective equipment supplies.

Beryl Ann is a grassroots leader and mutual aid network member in her Parkdale neighbourhood. She describes the importance of relationships in providing support at a person-to-person level:
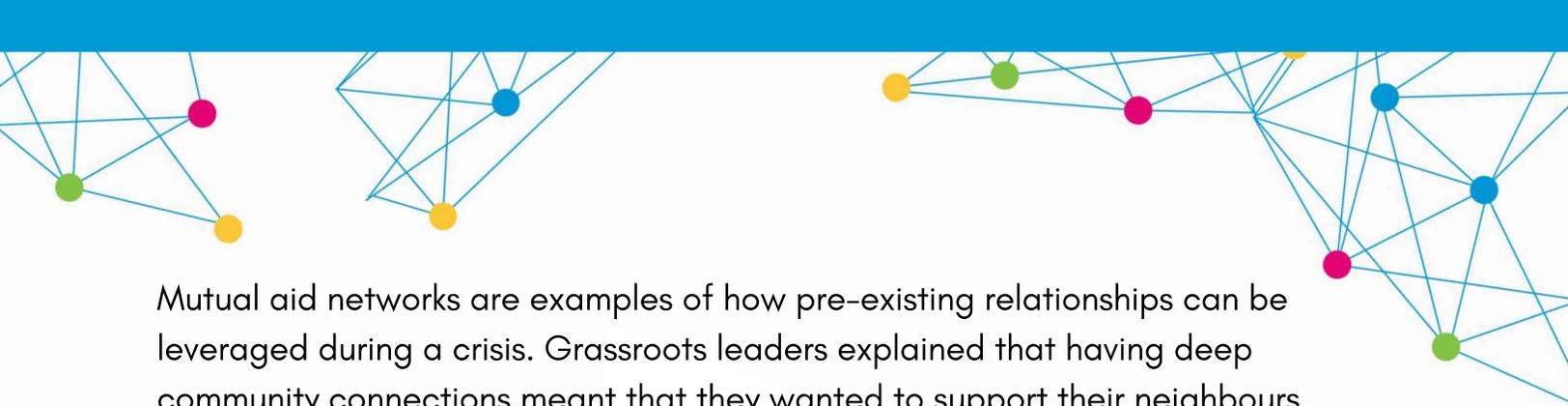
> We have resources already in our community. So, whether people want to share their skills or they want to share certain items that they have, we could put that in their information and share it with our partners as well as our pod members. [...]. And I remember one of the families I went out to buy groceries for, she was a bit hesitant, uneasy, because she felt uncomfortable that she had to ask for help to buy groceries for her family, and I was truly grateful that I was the one that actually had to communicate with her because I let her know, not only did I know her so [...] that was a good connection there, she didn't have to feel, you know,[...] not deserving of the groceries for her family, because, you know, the funds were there.

A common theme that emerged through our research is the important role that relationships play in adequate, responsive and effective crisis support. We learned that mutual aid networks were the primary mechanism by which grassroots leaders were able to "respond rapidly and reach the most vulnerable in their communities", and these mutual aid networks were facilitated by the strength of their existing relationships. Grassroots leaders who feel compelled to support their communities will draw on their existing networks and relationships to address issues related to the pandemic, and its impact on communities. The existence of pre-existing relationships facilitates networks of support that includes locally-created place-based social infrastructure and mechanisms that can be activated in times of crisis to expedite the flow of resources and relief into communities.

Many grassroots leaders expressed that they felt that top-down pandemic responses did not adequately listen to, or engage with them or their communities, and this led to worsening of inequities or overlooking the on-going work of grassroots leaders and their related initiatives. Therefore, grassroots leaders activated their own networks to bolster their community-led pandemic responses with their own assets, networks and expertise. However, the ability for mutual aid groups to continue to support people through the drawn out length of the pandemic calls into question the sustainability of these groups, especially without access to funding. The effectiveness of mutual aid groups should in no way be interpreted as replacing formalized responses, nor should we rely on them without resourcing them. The Canadian Emergency Benefit Response (CERB), an emergency payment provided by the federal government was meant only to support individual needs, however, it was was cited by grassroots leaders as a beneficial intervention not just to support themselves, but as a mechanism that allowed them to direct their time and limited resources into mutual aid initiatives.

Mutual aid networks are examples of how pre-existing relationships can be leveraged during a crisis. Grassroots leaders explained that having deep community connections meant that they wanted to support their neighbours through inequities and marginalization, and were able to rely on their assets in the absence of formal resources to do so. But this sense of wanting to help and build out this support network extended to other community members that they did not necessarily know as well. Those involved with mutual aid told us that they felt a need to support everyone in their communities, and wanted to build those relationships because they combatted feelings of being vulnerable or socially isolated. Nash Pual, a member of a mutual aid network in Parkdale, describes it this way:

> this process started of me getting to know the neighbors who I didn't know on my street, and also getting to know the other coordinators [...]. [...] and I started empathizing a lot more with, with my neighbors, And it's interesting because I've really found myself empathizing, seeing more accurately the view of how my neighbours are, and seeing the inequality in the whole system. [...] our goal was always to build connection, more than anything else, just kind of make anyone, irrespective of their background, or, or any anything, make them feel included and welcome and their views as welcome as anyone.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, many communities, especially those with histories of marginalization, came together to support each other via mutual aid networks that centred grassroots-led initiatives. Having pre-existing relationships facilitated flows of information and support into deep community pockets, reaching those that were not included in formal top-down emergency responses. Grassroots leaders and mutual aid networks have a lot to teach us about how to prioritize relationships and create social infrastructure that is truly community-centred, supported, and effective in supporting everyone during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can listen to the fourth episode of the Signal Boost: CCPD podcast: Grassroots Support Networks, here.

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