MO-10 Governance born of disaster: assemblies, mutual aid and what absorbs them

The abrupt dissolution of macro-structural authority—whether catalyzed by sovereign economic default, acute environmental catastrophe, or the physical withdrawal of the state apparatus during civil conflict—reliably precipitates the spontaneous emergence of decentralized, localized governance. Contrary to pervasive Hobbesian cultural paradigms, which presume that the removal of formal state coercion immediately results in brutal civil war and mass panic, a half-century of empirical disaster sociology demonstrates a radically different reality. Acute crises predominantly generate robust pro-social behavior, decentralized mutual aid, and highly efficient horizontal self-organization. However, these emergent frameworks exhibit severe structural vulnerabilities. While they possess unparalleled capacity for rapid logistical mobilization and resource distribution in the immediate aftermath of a systemic rupture, they are highly susceptible to cognitive fatigue, resource attrition, the coercive reintegration of the returning state, and methodical capture by individuals or factions exhibiting dark-triad psychological traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy).
This comprehensive report evaluates historical and contemporary paradigms of emergent governance through the lenses of scale viability, operational efficacy, and structural vulnerability, establishing a foundational empirical matrix for post-collapse institutional design.

The Sociology of Emergence: Communitas and Elite Panic

The modern empirical understanding of disaster sociology and emergent governance originates with the Disaster Research Center (DRC), established in 1963 by sociologists E.L. Quarantelli, Russell Dynes, and J. Eugene Haas at Ohio State University[1]. Over subsequent decades, encompassing hundreds of field studies of organizational functioning in disasters, the DRC definitively refuted the pervasive "panic myth." Analyzing field data, Quarantelli (1954, 2002) concluded that mass panic—strictly defined as irrational, anti-social flight accompanied by the breakdown of social bonds—is a sociologically rare phenomenon, occurring in fewer than 6% of disaster scenarios, and typically only under highly specific micro-conditions involving immediate, visible entrapment within a confined space[2].
Instead of antisocial savagery, the overwhelming default human response to acute disaster is *communitas*: a spontaneous outpouring of altruism, resource-sharing, cooperative labor, and the temporary dissolution of pre-existing class and racial boundaries[3]. The DRC established a four-fold typology of organized behavior in disasters, categorizing groups by their adherence to old or new structures and tasks[5]. Emergent citizen groups (Type IV)—which utilize entirely new organizational structures to execute entirely new tasks—arise predictably when formal institutions collapse or fail to meet acute community needs[5]. Rebecca Solnit's 2009

sociological synthesis, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, extensively documents this phenomenon, illustrating the profound sense of psychological purpose, joy, and horizontal solidarity that survivors experience when alienating macro-structures are temporarily suspended[7].
However, institutional failure is systematically compounded by "elite panic." Extensively analyzed by disaster sociologists Kathleen Tierney in *The Social Roots of Risk* (2014) and Lee Clarke, elite panic describes the well-documented tendency of formal authorities and economic elites to fear the very populations they govern[2]. Operating under the erroneous assumption that the public will devolve into looting and violence, elites historically respond to disasters by hoarding critical information, prioritizing the protection of commercial property over human life via coercive military force, and actively suppressing emergent mutual aid networks[2]. The friction between emergent communitas and elite panic forms the primary crucible in which disaster governance is forged and eventually destroyed.

Typology I: Economic Collapse and Protracted Austerity

When macro-economic systems fail abruptly, leaving industrial infrastructure intact but paralyzing the supply chains and financial instruments that animate them, communities are forced to generate parallel economic and administrative structures to survive. The primary historical models for this phenomenon are Argentina (2001–2002) and Greece (2011–2015).

Historical Context: Argentina and Greece

Following the December 2001 sovereign debt default, the sudden evaporation of the Argentine economy birthed two primary emergent structures: *asambleas barriales* (neighborhood assemblies) and *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs)[11]. When owners abandoned bankrupt facilities, workers occupied the physical plants and restarted production under horizontal self-management. The most prominent example is the Zanon ceramics factory in Neuquén, Argentina, renamed FaSinPat (*Fábrica Sin Patrones* or "Factory Without Bosses"), which successfully protected jobs and integrated with the local community by donating materials for public hospitals and infrastructure[13]. Quantitative analysis by Marcelo Vieta notes that approximately 400 such worker-recovered enterprises successfully stabilized and continue to operate decades later, sustaining thousands of households[12].
Similarly, during the peak of the Greek debt crisis (2011–2015), the collapse of the state healthcare apparatus and the imposition of severe austerity measures led to the emergence of localized solidarity clinics and the massive Syntagma Square assemblies. Medical professionals and citizens operated over 40 decentralized, horizontally managed clinics across Greece, providing free primary care, pharmaceuticals, and psychological support to tens of thousands of uninsured citizens.

Scale Ledger: Economic Default Emergence

Scale Rung	Status & Efficacy	Rationale / Historical

		Record
Household (4–10)	Works seamlessly	Immediate households pooled caloric and financial resources flawlessly.
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Works exceptionally	The optimal scale for factory floor sub-councils and initial neighborhood block organizing in Buenos Aires. Allowed for rapid consensus.
Village (150–500)	Works efficiently	The operational scale of FaSinPat (Zanon) and mature *asambleas*. Participatory democracy functioned efficiently via direct physical assembly[14].
Parish/District (1,500–5,000)	Struggled to stabilize	Inter-factory coordination occurred, but inter-assembly meetings at this scale suffered from ideological fracturing, meeting fatigue, and coordination overhead.
Town/Watershed (15,000–50,000)	Failed / Paralyzed	Attempts to create city-wide parallel administrative structures in Athens and Buenos Aires collapsed under ideological disputes and logistical impossibilities.
Region to Planet	Untried / Failed	Neither movement successfully scaled into a regional parallel government. They were ultimately reabsorbed by

		the returning state macro-economic frameworks.

Capture Test: The Charismatic Cadre (Machiavellianism)

Dark-triad capture in the Argentine *asambleas* and Greek assemblies typically occurred through pronounced Machiavellianism. Seasoned political cadres from traditional Marxist, Peronist, or anarchist parties infiltrated the assemblies as entryists. By utilizing dense ideological jargon, dominating speaking time, proposing endlessly complex procedural motions, and exploiting the political naivety of newly radicalized citizens, these factions systematically exhausted the majority. This psychological exhaustion led to plummeting participation rates, leaving control of the assembly name, legitimacy, and physical resources to the entryist faction. The structural defense that reversed this capture in FaSinPat was strict rotation of administrative duties, the prohibition of full-time union officials, and the constitutional mandate that delegates could be recalled at any moment by a simple majority vote of the base[14].

Three Perspectives: Asambleas and ERTs

The analysis of economic emergence requires separating participant rhetoric from historical mechanics.

- **What participants said:** Workers and assembly members universally claimed they had successfully abolished capitalist hierarchy and representative politics, replacing them with pure horizontal solidarity, unmediated direct democracy, and a post-capitalist social relations model[14].
- **What the record shows:** While FaSinPat and the Greek clinics maintained rigorous internal democracy, they were fundamentally forced to operate within a hostile capitalist market and state legal apparatus, requiring them to function as cooperative businesses and registered NGOs rather than sovereign post-capitalist communes[12].
- **What modern scholarship infers:** Scholars argue that the ERTs and solidarity clinics succeeded primarily as defensive shock-absorbers against extreme precarity. Over time, state intervention, legal regularization, and the necessity of market competition absorbed the radical political edge of the movement, normalizing them as conventional worker cooperatives integrated into the broader neoliberal economy[12].

Typology II: Rapid-Onset Disaster Mutual Aid

Rapid-onset catastrophes—hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and immediate military invasions—trigger a distinct form of highly specialized, short-term logistical governance aimed at immediate biological survival and infrastructure triage.

Historical Context: Katrina, Sandy, Fukushima, and Christchurch

In New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina (2005), total state collapse and severe elite panic—where police and white vigilantes in Algiers Point actively targeted Black residents—prompted Malik Rahim and Scott Crow to found the Common Ground Collective[18].

Common Ground established decentralized health clinics, cleared debris, and managed thousands of volunteers over several years[18].

Following Hurricane Sandy (2012), Occupy Sandy mobilized an estimated 60,000 volunteers across New York and New Jersey, utilizing sophisticated hub-and-spoke models and online registries to deliver meals and clear debris exponentially faster than the formal Red Cross apparatus[22]. In Japan, the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster prompted the creation of Safecast by Pieter Franken and Sean Bonner. Because the Japanese state actively withheld radiation data (a classic symptom of elite panic aiming to prevent evacuation chaos), Safecast utilized decentralized networks of citizens building and deploying open-source Geiger counters to map radiation across the country, compiling over 50 million data points[25].

In New Zealand (2010–2011), university student Sam Johnson organized the Student Volunteer Army (SVA) via social media following the Christchurch earthquakes. The SVA mobilized thousands of young people to clear hundreds of thousands of tons of liquefaction silt across the city, bypassing paralyzed municipal authorities[28]. Similarly, in the opening weeks of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, emergent citizen networks bypassed the paralyzed state apparatus, using encrypted messaging to organize complex regional evacuations and supply lines under heavy artillery fire.

Scale Ledger: Rapid-Onset Disaster Logistics

Scale Rung	Status & Efficacy	Rationale / Historical Record
Household to Village (4–500)	Works flawlessly	High interpersonal trust, rapid communication, and immediate feedback loops allow for perfect logistical targeting and resource distribution[31].
Parish to Town (1,500–50,000)	Works (briefly)	Achieved by Occupy Sandy, Safecast, and the SVA, but purely on a short-term basis. Sustaining heavy logistical operations at this scale without formal payroll leads to severe burnout[21].
Region (0.5–5 million)	Struggled	Safecast achieved regional data collection, but purely as an information layer. Physical logistical

		governance at this scale by volunteers proved impossible.
Nation to Planet	Failed / Untried	Ad-hoc volunteerism cannot coordinate heavy infrastructure repair (e.g., rebuilding power grids, repairing nuclear reactors) and inevitably cedes sovereign authority back to the formal state.

Capture Test: The Psychopathic Informant

The Common Ground Collective serves as the archetypal empirical warning for dark-triad capture in a rapid-onset disaster environment. Brandon Darby, an early organizer who was later revealed to be an FBI informant, exhibited deep narcissistic and psychopathic traits. Darby cultivated a hyper-masculine, militant aesthetic to attract young, impressionable volunteers. He actively manufactured artificial security crises to make himself indispensable, centralized control over critical logistics, and systematically marginalized women and critical thinkers within the organization[33]. By exploiting the lack of formal accountability structures, Darby centralized control over information flow, ultimately destroying the organization's trust matrix from within. The network possessed no structural mechanism to expel him because, in a purely "structureless" horizontal environment, power defaults to the most aggressive, sociopathic, and charismatic individual capable of dominating the social space.

Three Perspectives: Disaster Mutual Aid Networks

- **What participants said:** Volunteers described their networks as permanent paradigms of horizontal care that rendered the state obsolete, proving that anarchy and mutual aid could sustain a modern metropolis[18].
- **What the record shows:** Participation rates exhibited steep exponential decay. Empirical studies of Occupy Sandy and UK COVID-19 mutual aid groups (of which over 4,000 formed) demonstrated that solidarity behaviors decline sharply once the immediate adrenaline of the crisis fades, even if the material need remains extremely high[31].
- **What modern scholarship infers:** Daniel P. Aldrich's quantitative research on the 3/11 Japan disasters demonstrates that pre-existing social capital (bonding, bridging, and linking ties)—not the physical attributes of the hazard or state funding—is the primary determinant of disaster mortality and long-term recovery[27]. Modern sociology infers that mutual aid networks do not replace the state; they act as a vital, temporary shock absorber bridging the gap between state failure and state return.

Typology III: Civil War and State Collapse

When the state collapses violently, leaving a sovereign territorial vacuum, emergent

governance is forced to adopt the functions of defense, jurisprudence, and macro-resource allocation. The Spanish Civil War (1936) and the Syrian Civil War (2011–present) provide the most extensive empirical data on emergent governance at the regional scale.

Historical Context: Spain and Rojava

In Spain, following the fascist coup attempt of July 1936, the anarcho-syndicalist labor unions (CNT and FAI) orchestrated the total collectivization of agriculture and industry across Aragon and Catalonia. Historians such as Frank Mintz and Helen Graham document that this encompassed hundreds of villages, millions of acres of land, and tens of thousands of participants operating without formal bosses or landlords, utilizing localized assemblies to plan planting, harvesting, and militia supply[36].

In northern Syria, the physical withdrawal of the Assad regime's military in 2012 allowed the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to establish the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), colloquially known as Rojava[38]. Ideologically grounded in Abdullah Öcalan's theory of "democratic confederalism," the region organized around a nested, fractal network of assemblies. By 2025, the region supported an estimated population of 4.6 million people, managed through 3,950 household-level communes, 152 town councils, and 36 city councils, all mandating dual-leadership (co-chairs) representing strict gender parity[38].

Scale Ledger: Democratic Confederalism and Syndicalism

Scale Rung	Status & Efficacy	Rationale / Historical Record
Household to Village (4–500)	Works seamlessly	Communes in Rojava effectively manage local conflict resolution, basic food distribution, and neighborhood defense perfectly[40].
Parish/District (1,500–5,000)	Works adequately	Town councils successfully aggregate commune delegates to manage localized utilities, regional clinics, and broader resource allocation[38].
Town to Region (15,000–5,000,000)	Works (via coercion)	Scaled governance in both Aragon and Rojava fundamentally required the establishment of professional, centralized

		military forces (YPG/YPJ in Syria, CNT militias in Spain) that ultimately dictated macro-policy over the civilian assemblies[40].
Nation to Planet	Untried / Failed	Hostile encirclement by neighboring nation-states (Turkey, Nationalist Spain) necessitated total war economies, preventing organic expansion beyond regional territories.

Capture Test: The Vanguard Monopoly (Machiavellian Factionalism)

In both Aragon and Rojava, capture occurred not by an erratic individual, but by an organized, highly disciplined Vanguard entity. Because the overarching threat of physical annihilation by hostile neighbors required rapid, decisive, and centralized military action, the armed wings (CNT-FAI higher committees, PKK/PYD cadres) monopolized the use of force, intelligence, and macro-diplomacy[36]. The structural feature that enabled this capture was the functional separation of the military command from the civilian assemblies. Once a specialized security caste was formed to fight a mechanized war, the horizontal assemblies became subordinate logistical nodes rather than sovereign decision-makers. The Vanguard dictates strategic reality, and the communes are reduced to managing local compliance.

Three Perspectives: Armed State Replacement

- **What participants said:** The AANES presents itself to the international community as a stateless, radically democratic, ecological, and feminist society built entirely organically from the bottom up[40].
- **What the record shows:** The administration maintains a highly centralized standing army, powerful internal security forces (Asayish), enforces military conscription, manages a state-like bureaucracy, and engages in conventional geopolitical diplomacy with global superpowers (the US and Russia)[40].
- **What modern scholarship infers:** Leading political scientists Harriet Allsopp, Wladimir van Wilgenburg, and Thomas Schmidinger argue that while local communes operate democratically, the macro-structure is fundamentally authoritarian[39]. The PYD exercises complete hegemonic control over the security apparatus, actively suppresses rival Kurdish political parties, and enforces strict ideological conformity to Öcalan's doctrine[43].

The Mechanics of Dissolution: What Absorbs Emergent Governance

The empirical record demonstrates with brutal consistency that emergent governance born of

disaster rarely survives intact beyond three to five years. It is absorbed, degraded, or destroyed by three primary vectors:

1. **The Tyranny of Structurelessness:** Feminist theorist Jo Freeman's seminal 1970 essay established an iron law of group dynamics: there is no such thing as an unstructured group; there are only formal structures and informal structures[48]. When disaster communities eschew formal rules (voting mechanisms, strict agendas, delegated and bounded authority) in the romantic pursuit of absolute horizontalism, power is not abolished—it is masked. Decision-making is inevitably usurped by unspoken cliques of friends, those with the most free time, or those with narcissistic and psychopathic traits who are comfortable aggressively dominating social space[50]. This leads to widespread disillusionment and the rapid exodus of highly competent, but less socially aggressive, participants.
2. **Burnout and Cognitive Load:** Mutual aid networks operate on immense emotional arousal and adrenaline. Rachel E. Luft's analysis of post-Katrina organizing highlights the profound gendered and racialized burnout that occurs when the initial adrenaline of the crisis wanes[21]. Without formal mechanisms for caloric, physical, and financial compensation, individuals simply must return to wage labor to physically survive, starving the emergent assembly of its workforce and institutional memory[32].
3. **The Returning State:** Once the crisis stabilizes, the formal state inevitably returns. The state wields a monopoly on macro-resources (fiat currency, heavy machinery, property law, and legitimate violence). The state absorbs emergent groups not by crushing them, but by institutionalizing them—turning radical solidarity clinics into state-funded and highly regulated NGOs, or recuperated factories into legally compliant, heavily taxed cooperatives trapped within capitalist markets[12].

The Strongest Case Against Emergent Governance

The most rigorous critique of emergent horizontal governance asserts that its localized efficiency is an illusion born of limited geographic scope and temporary adrenal response. The critique posits that attempting to scale this model inevitably recreates the coercive apparatus of the state, often *without* the liberal democratic safeguards of formal constitutions and individual rights.

Leading critics such as Harriet Allsopp, Wladimir van Wilgenburg, and Thomas Schmidinger demonstrate this through the empirical study of Rojava[39]. The critique argues that horizontal assemblies are fundamentally incapable of executing complex, multi-year, resource-intensive projects (such as maintaining a specialized electrical grid, enforcing epidemiological quarantines, or fighting a mechanized war) without generating a specialized bureaucracy. When assemblies attempt to manage these complex tasks, they succumb immediately to Robert Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy." A managerial class must emerge to handle the complex data and logistics. Because the ideology of the movement explicitly denies that a hierarchy exists, this new oligarchy operates entirely without checks and balances. In Rojava, this manifests as the PYD's absolute ideological and military dominance[43]. The commune system functions largely as a localized administrative tool for civil disputes and ideological

dissemination, while all genuine strategic power is held by unelected military and executive councils[42].

Furthermore, romanticizing emergent governance risks the **naturalistic fallacy**—the assumption that because these structures are small, organic, and locally grounded, they are inherently just. Old does not mean good, and small does not mean fair. Without formal, codified protections for minority dissent, consensus-based assemblies can easily devolve into majoritarian tyranny, executing parochial prejudices, xenophobia, and localized vendettas with absolute impunity.

Summary of Robust Findings

Mass panic in disasters is a sociological myth; prosocial altruism, spontaneous mutual aid, and communitas are the deeply ingrained default human responses to acute systemic crises. Elite panic—the irrational fear held by authorities that the public will riot—frequently causes massive secondary disasters as elites hoard resources and deploy violence to maintain perceived order. Pre-existing social capital is the single greatest statistical predictor of community survival and long-term recovery, heavily overriding both the physical quality of infrastructure and the influx of centralized state aid. Emergent horizontal governance functions exceptionally well at the village and neighborhood scale (150–500 people) for immediate logistical triage, conflict resolution, and resource distribution. However, without formal constitutional structures and codified rules, horizontal groups reliably fall victim to the "tyranny of structurelessness," allowing individuals with dark-triad traits to seize informal power. Furthermore, the operational half-life of emergent disaster networks is incredibly brief; participation decays exponentially as adrenaline fades and the biological necessity of traditional labor resumes. Scaling horizontal governance beyond the district level (5,000+ people) historically requires the creation of a standing military or centralized bureaucracy, fundamentally nullifying the horizontalism. State apparatuses reliably absorb emergent networks by institutionalizing them into regulated NGOs or cooperatives, neutralizing their political threat. Finally, charismatic entryism and vanguardism are the most common vectors for the capture of assemblies, and only the strict rotation of delegates, immediate recall power, and rigid constraints on security centralization have proven historically effective at resisting this capture.

Contested or Open Questions

The historical and empirical record leaves several critical boundaries of emergent governance unresolved. First is the **Threshold of Specialization**: at exactly what population scale, or at what level of technological complexity, does horizontal governance irrevocably require a permanent, unaccountable managerial class to function? Second, the role of the **Digital Assembly**: can encrypted, decentralized communication networks (such as Ukraine's 2022 volunteer logistics apps) permanently bypass the geographic and temporal limits of physical assemblies, or do they merely accelerate the "tyranny of structurelessness" by shifting absolute, unseen power to those who control the algorithmic architecture and server infrastructure? Third, the problem of **Inter-Communal Conflict**: in the absolute absence of a sovereign state arbiter possessing a monopoly on violence, how can thousands of autonomous communes resolve zero-sum disputes over shared macro-resources (e.g., a single river

watershed) without resorting to localized warfare?

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Implementability after the Fall

The following outlines the minimum viable versions of emergent governance following the permanent loss of industrial supply chains, the electrical grid, and state reach.

Household (4 to 10 people)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** A shared caloric accounting system combined with a daily task-allocation briefing (a morning stand-up assembly).
- **Needs to Start:** A shared calendar, a physical ledger (paper/pencil) for tracking consumed and stored calories, basic numeracy, and absolute consensus on caloric rationing metrics.
- **First Failure to Expect:** Interpersonal emotional fracturing. In a confined, high-stress, zero-sum resource environment, pre-existing familial resentments will rapidly paralyze consensus decision-making.

Village (300 people)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** The bi-weekly general assembly and the establishment of functional, delegated working groups (e.g., perimeter security, agriculture/foraging, sanitation).
- **Needs to Start:** A large, weather-proof physical meeting place; high literacy among delegates; a standardized physical record-keeping system (a "book of decisions") open to public audit at all times; an agreed-upon parliamentary procedure to strictly bound speaking times.
- **First Failure to Expect:** The Tyranny of Structurelessness. The most charismatic, narcissistic, or aggressive individuals will attempt to monopolize the assembly space, speaking at length and exhausting the patience of others until attendance drops. They will then capture informal, unaccountable control of the critical working groups.

District (3,000 people)

- **Minimum Viable Version:** A federated council of delegates representing the constituent 10 villages, tasked strictly and exclusively with managing inter-village infrastructure (waterways, regional defense) and arbitration of inter-village disputes.
- **Needs to Start:** Human couriers or localized short-wave radio for secure inter-village communication; a formalized constitutional mandate dictating that delegates are strictly messengers of their village's decisions, subject to instant recall, possessing zero autonomous executive power.
- **First Failure to Expect:** The emergence of a specialized security caste. Faced with a severe external threat, the district will centralize its strongest fighters into a unified militia. This militia will eventually recognize that it controls the ultimate monopoly on violence, will stop taking orders from the civilian council, and will transition the district into a coercive warlord fiefdom.

Principles

- Panic is a sociological myth; spontaneous pro-social altruism and mutual aid are the biological and behavioral defaults of humanity in acute crisis.
- Elites reliably fear the populations they govern, causing devastating secondary disasters by deploying state violence and hoarding critical information to maintain perceived social order.
- Pre-existing social capital—not physical infrastructure, military protection, or centralized aid—statistically dictates community survival and recovery rates.
- The absence of formal rules in an assembly does not eliminate power dynamics; it simply masks them, allowing those with dark-triad traits to seize control via informal psychological manipulation.
- Sustained mutual aid without economic or caloric compensation operates on a highly limited half-life, inevitably destroyed by physical exhaustion and cognitive burnout.
- To scale localized governance beyond the district level historically requires the creation of a coercive military or bureaucratic apparatus, fatally and permanently compromising horizontalism.
- Assemblies resist dark-triad capture only when they enforce the strict rotation of duties, utilize rigid parliamentary procedure to distribute speaking time equitably, and maintain the immediate recall of all delegates.

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