

RESEARCH REPORT

# The Emergence and Impact of Local Ground-up Initiatives



RESEARCH FUNDED BY

THE  
Majority  
TRUST

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# About SGStrong Fund



**When Covid-19 hit our shores, The Majority Trust with the support of Singapore-based family foundations, philanthropists and corporate partners launched the Singapore Strong Fund (SSF).**

**It was the start of challenging times for Singapore. But the unprecedented difficulties compelled us to do more for ground-up initiatives that rose up to face the challenges head-on.**

The Majority Trust is a philanthropic organisation, recognised as an IPC, that seeks to work with partners to build a thriving and sustainable community for all in Singapore.

Learn more about us at  
<https://www.majority.sg/>

# Executive Summary

**The COVID-19 pandemic has made it apparent that societies everywhere have complex and persistent problems to address which call for concerted action. As reports of the virus spread and its adverse economic impact grew, more individuals stepped forward to help those in need.**

Singapore witnessed many individuals and groups initiate voluntary, ground-up initiatives to support the vulnerable in various communities through a wide variety of projects. Responding to this and the need for a culture of solidarity amidst crisis, in February 2020 The Majority Trust (TMT) launched the Singapore Strong Fund aimed at galvanising and supporting such civic-minded efforts.

This report presents findings from a survey of SG Strong grantees who started ground-up initiatives. Our focus was on individuals who initiated and led ground-up initiatives ('civil society activators', henceforth 'activators'). In the survey, respondents were asked about their backgrounds, motivations and experiences of

running community projects, as well as their feedback on the grant scheme. Our goal was to study the emergence of local ground-up initiatives and their challenges, so as to better understand how such informal groups operate and how they can be better supported.

Following a brief literature review on the topic of ground-up initiatives, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders from a total of 11 selected funded projects, to glean preliminary insights into their backgrounds, motivations and experiences with running their projects. An online survey was then developed based on the interview findings and administered to the full population of SG Strong ground-up initiatives.

**Our key findings from the research study are:**

**(i) Approximately one-third of the funded ground-up initiatives were started by new activators who were leading a community project for the first time.**

Naturally, these individuals reported lower levels of confidence in their ability to execute projects than more experienced activators<sup>1</sup>, and the types of projects they undertook may also have been simpler, at least in terms of self-reported manpower needs. This is a heartening outcome, however, that was likely made possible in part by the SG Strong Fund’s accessibility to individual citizens and informal, unregistered groups.

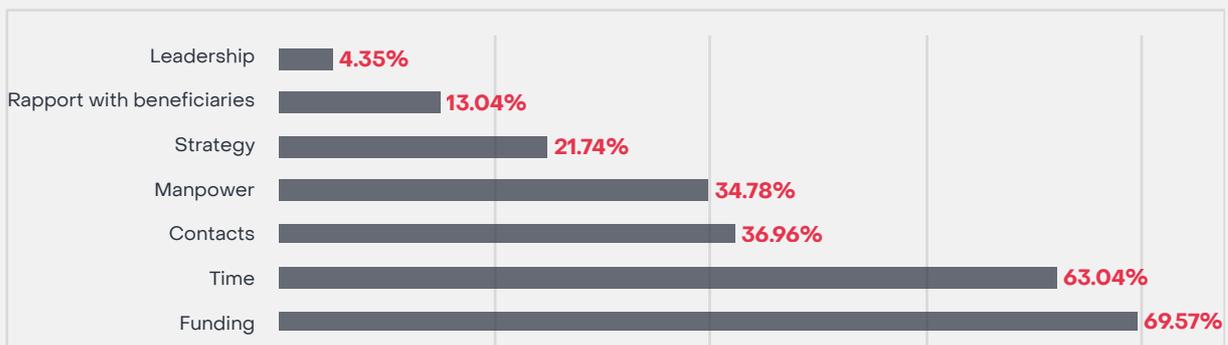
| Question   | New activators            | Experienced activators        |              |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>Before you began your project, how confident were you of your ability to execute the project well?</b><br>(1 = Not Confident at all; 5 = Extremely Confident) | Mean = 3.29<br>(out of 5) | Mean = 3.93<br>(out of 5)     |              |
| <b>Which of the following best describes your project’s manpower needs? (Choose One)</b>   | <b>New activators</b>     | <b>Experienced activators</b> | <b>Total</b> |
| Simple - volunteers are optional, I can do it by myself  | 23.5%                     | 10.3%                         | 7            |
| Slightly Complex - I only need a few volunteers, and anyone will do  | 23.5%                     | 10.3%                         | 7            |
| Complex - I need a team that is organized, which can include anyone willing to help  | 29.4%                     | 44.8%                         | 18           |
| Very Complex - I need a moderately specialised team, comprising a mix of people with specific skillsets and anyone willing to help                               | 17.7%                     | 31.0%                         | 12           |
| Extremely Complex - I need a highly specialised team, with specific skillsets  | 5.8%                      | 3.5%                          | 2            |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>17</b>                 | <b>29</b>                     | <b>46</b>    |

<sup>1</sup> ‘Experienced’ activators are defined here as those who answered no to question 1.5 of the survey, “Is this your first time initiating a non-profit project to meet a community need?”, with all who answered yes considered ‘new activators’.

## (ii) The three greatest challenges faced by ground-up teams were funding, time, and contacts.

Correspondingly most leaders expressed a preference for support in terms of finding connections to potential funders and partners, as well as media coverage or other publicity of their project. The survey data also revealed challenges specific to the ongoing public health crisis: many felt time was an overwhelming concern due to the urgent needs of certain vulnerable groups and the quick implementation of Singapore’s ‘Circuit Breaker’ restrictions in

early April 2020. Others highlighted difficulties with logistics and doing volunteer management virtually amidst social distancing. Interestingly, most respondents did not rate ‘higher order’ concerns such as strategy and establishing rapport with their beneficiaries among their foremost concerns, which might reflect the relatively short-term nature of most SG Strong projects.



### How useful would the following types of support be to you, for future projects?

|   | Not useful at all |    |    |    |    | Extremely useful |  | Mean |
|---|-------------------|----|----|----|----|------------------|--|------|
|   | 0                 | 1  | 3  | 14 | 27 |                  |  |      |
| Connections to other potential funders and partners   | 0                 | 1  | 3  | 14 | 27 | 4.49             |  |      |
| Media coverage or other publicity facilitated by The Majority Trust   | 2                 | 2  | 6  | 10 | 25 | 4.2              |  |      |
| Networking sessions with other ground-up initiatives  | 3                 | 6  | 12 | 10 | 14 | 3.58             |  |      |
| Training opportunities, such as workshops on relevant skills  | 5                 | 7  | 8  | 15 | 11 | 3.43             |  |      |
| Online resources on aspects of project planning, implementation and evaluation - such as toolkits or podcasts | 4                 | 10 | 6  | 12 | 12 | 3.41             |  |      |
| Direct mentoring and guidance   | 8                 | 8  | 13 | 7  | 9  | 3.02             |  |      |

### (iii) Most people surveyed plan to continue the work they have embarked on, but more existing activators with prior experience do compared to new activators

Naturally, this raises the question: why don't new activators want to continue? One reason could be that the pandemic crisis situation changed individuals' assessments of their resource availability, whether in terms of time, money, or ability – perhaps some who felt ill-equipped or reluctant to volunteer under normal circumstances were compelled to do what they could given the crisis. Another likely reason is that

in some cases it was also irrelevant for activators to continue the work; projects such as crisis response efforts to provide large numbers of displaced workers food and shelter would eventually become unnecessary as the situation changes. Lastly, the converse could also be true, as many who plan to continue may already have been doing similar work well before COVID-19.

|                        | New activators | Experienced activators |
|------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Likely to continue     | 10             | 24                     |
| Not likely to continue | 7              | 5                      |

### Next Steps

As our analysis of the data found some statistically significant differences in motivations and priorities between new and ground-up activators, more in-depth research on a larger sample of new activators may be beneficial to understand the extent of these differences and their implications for efforts to encourage more volunteering in Singapore. For now the current study captures a snapshot of who ground-up leaders are and how their teams work, which sheds light on the research agenda ahead.

### Our report concludes with brief recommendations on ways for organisations like The Majority Trust to better support ground-up initiatives, summarised below:

- (i) Continue existing grant models that provide a small funding quantum but quick turnaround time to applicants, with a selection process that prioritises project proposal over track record
- (ii) Supplement financial support with programmes or events that are designed for structured introductions between corporate funders (whether business or non-profit) and ground-up leaders
- (iii) Facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and community-building among all activators, e.g. via an online platform
- (iv) Facilitate connections with grassroots organisations to increase ground-up initiatives' marketing efforts via more localised, offline means

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