

2023

GUIS REPORT

Groundup
Initiative Study



Presented by:

National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre



Groundup Initiative Study (GUIS) 2023 Report

Contents

Background	4
Methodology	5
Executive Summary	6
Chapter 1: Mapping the Groundup Universe	8
1. What is a “groundup”?.....	9
2. Landscape of groundups.....	11
3. Who else are in the groundup universe?	15
Chapter 2: Charting the Groundup Journey.....	17
1. The groundup life cycle.....	18
2. Who are running the groundups, and why?.....	23
Chapter 3: Assessing the Groundup Performance.....	26
1. Internal factors.....	28
2. External factors.....	32
3. Seeking support in the ecosystem	33
Chapter 4: Recognising the Groundup Contribution.....	35
1. Meeting needs and complementing other service providers.....	37
2. A potential means for strengthening the social compact.....	40
Chapter 5: Building an Enabling Groundup Ecosystem.....	42
Concluding Remarks	45
Acknowledgement.....	47
Bibliography	48

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the entire world struggled with keeping lives going, Singapore saw many people stepping forward to help each other in the community. Instead of waiting for external intervention, they took the initiative to deliver necessities to people who could not afford them, recycle computers for home-based learning, and develop apps for migrant workers seeking medical treatment. The proliferation of these “groundup initiatives (GUs)” symbolises Singapore’s *Gotong Royong* spirit¹ and prompts us to reimagine what we can do for each other and our society in the increasingly uncertain future.

Why do people step forward? What are the features and scale of the groundup initiatives? What value do they bring to Singapore society? To understand the local groundup landscape, the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) conducted the Groundup Initiative Study (GUIS) 2023. Sponsored by Tote Board, this is the first-ever national-level study providing an overview of the groundups space in Singapore. The study generated the largest dataset on the profile, lifecycle, performance and value of groundups, providing a basis for different stakeholders to understand and support them.

Groundups are not unique to Singapore. In international literature, they are known by various names such as community-based initiatives, grassroots initiatives and citizen initiatives. Although born out of various social contexts, there are similarities in how they are conceptualised across countries, such as citizen-led, action-oriented, serving the community, and solving practical problems (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022; Igalla et al., 2019). The growing body of literature suggests the high expectation for them to be part of the public service delivery and community building. A national study from Singapore will contribute to the discussion.

They are not COVID-specific either. Even without a crisis, there are unmet needs and service gaps simply because we all need help from time to time, and a structured intervention from professional and government institutions is not always the best option. Groundups have been serving the community decades before the pandemic hit; even some of our most well-known charities started off as community-based initiatives. Yet the COVID-19 years did offer us a unique window to observe these informal community initiatives in bloom. What defines groundups? Who are running them? What do they do? What determines how well they do the job? What contributions are they making? How can we support them, so that they can flourish beyond times of crisis? In this report, we take you through the landscape of groundups for answers.

¹ *Gotong Royong* in literal meaning is “mutual assistance”. It involves the spirit of volunteerism, and working together for the benefits of the people of the same community.

Methodology

This study adopted a sequential mixed method approach. The qualitative phase was conducted in 2021, comprising 29 in-depth interviews with groundup founders and core members, and 9 focus group discussions with 45 participants from groundups and other ecosystem players, such as charities, government agencies, funders and corporates. The quantitative phase was conducted in 2022, with two surveys for groundup members and volunteers (n=431) and the public (n= 1000, with 303 additional booster sample on vulnerable population explained below) respectively.

Participants of qualitative phase were selected via a combination of purposive and convenience sampling from NVPC's database and network, covering a variety of groundups of different age, size and cause area, and a diverse range of stakeholders. For the groundup survey, since probability sampling is not possible, quota sampling and snowball sampling were used to reach a total of 431 responses from about 276 different groundup groups. Stratified random sampling was used for general population survey of people aged 18 years and above (n=1000) to understand their knowledge of and attitudes toward the groundups and citizen participation in general, with booster samples (convenience sampling) of HDB 1-2 room flat residents (n=102), people aged 65 and above (n=101), and self-identified groundup service-users (n=100).

Executive Summary

Groundup initiatives are a local form of community-based initiatives where self-organised voluntary groups provide not-for-profit services to address community needs and issues. The landscape is fluid and transitory in nature, and long existing before the pandemic. An optimistic estimation suggests that roughly 1000 groundup groups existed at the time of the study, with 450 active and of known status. Based on NVPC's database, among the 308 groundups with the year of establishment recorded, roughly one third were founded in 2020.

Groundups are as much a mindset and a methodology as they are a mode of organisation. Being community-focused, an overwhelming majority of groundups contribute to community building and development (73%) as part of their mission, with nearly half (49.6%) providing befriending and social time as part of their services. Although not a linear process, groundups experience some common stages of development in their life cycle. Targeted support is needed for our "accidental leaders" based on the different priorities groundups may have over time.

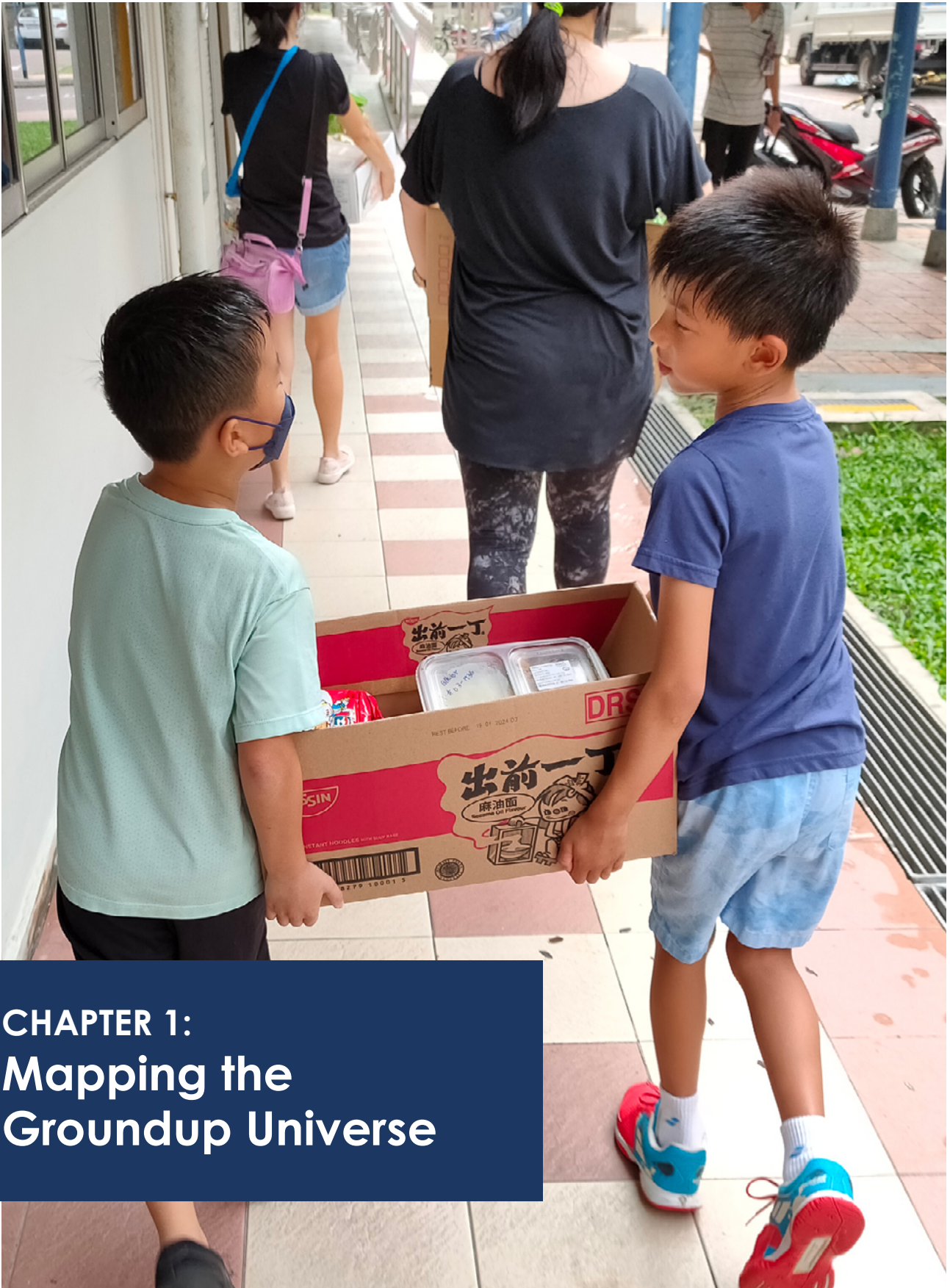
Although the majority of groundup founders are youths, about one third of the founders are 40 years old and above. What they have in common is a broad and stable confidence in their abilities to deal with different situations and achieve specific goals; and they are primarily motivated by the proactive choice to contribute to society and enjoyment in the activities they do.

Groundups need internal capacity and external support to achieve their objectives. Internally, having transformational leaders, sufficient number of volunteers and managing the day-to-day tasks well will boost the groundup performance. Externally, while government support is important, overly frequent interaction between groundups and more "powerful" stakeholders (that have more power and resources) may have a negative impact on the outcome. In terms of daily operations, publicity, planning and recruitment are top areas where groundups need improvement. They could also benefit from more skill-based advice, mentorship and sectoral knowledge provided by partners in the ecosystem.

Groundups have been valued for their ability to stay close to the ground, meet (niche) needs quickly and innovatively, and offer a channel for communities to take ownership of issues and provide solutions. In Singapore's context where 80% of the general public still holds government accountable for meeting social needs, groundups may help strengthen the social compact by reducing the overreliance on structured interventions and helping us be more engaged with one another. For their value to be realised, the quality of the groundup experience matters more than the number of GUs; and we need to preserve the organic nature of groundups.

To build an enabling ecosystem, we need to encourage people to step up, strengthen groundups' publicity capacities; consolidate the existing resources for easier navigation; facilitate quality partnerships to reduce duplication, enhance efficiency and self-sustained growth; and increase groundup credibility and development opportunities without institutionalising the space.

Although our research has been focusing on the mode, the groundup spirit and value rely heavily on the mindset and methodology aspects. It is the proactivity, the resourcefulness, and unique ground perspective that constitute the core of a groundup. Through the collective stories of the groundups, we have seen examples of how seemingly ordinary citizens have the power and autonomy to bring about great change. Let us break new ground together, starting from the ground up!



**CHAPTER 1:
Mapping the
Groundup Universe**

CHAPTER 1:

Mapping the Groundup Universe

1-min summary: Groundup initiatives are a local form of community-based initiatives where self-organised voluntary groups provide not-for-profit services to address community needs and issues. The landscape is fluid and transitory in nature, but long existing before the pandemic. 2020 saw a surge in their numbers. Being community-focused and on the ground, groundups are as much a mindset and a methodology as they are a mode of organisation. Although informal themselves, they interact with a variety of formal organisations, such as government, charities and corporates, to leverage networks and mobilise resources.

1. What is a “groundup”?

“Groundup initiatives (GUs)” is one of the many terms used to describe a type of self-organised voluntary initiatives that help solve problems and benefit the community. In international literature, they are commonly known as community-based initiatives (Igalla et al., 2020; Sekulova et al., 2017), grassroots initiatives (Grabs et al., 2016), community enterprises (Van Meerkerk et al., 2018), and citizen initiatives (Igalla et al., 2019). Although born out of various social contexts, there are similarities in how these initiatives are conceptualised across countries, such as citizen-led, action-oriented, serving the community, and solving practical problems (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022; Igalla et al., 2019).

In this report, we refer to them as “groundup initiatives”, or “groundups” for short, not just because it is widely used in Singapore,² but the term “groundup” conveys multiple meanings that symbolise the features of these initiatives. “Groundup” can be understood as “3Ms”, i.e. Mindset, Methodology and Mode of dealing with problems.

As a **mindset**, it refers to being action-oriented, having the ability and resourcefulness to take initiatives, often propelled by a sense of urgency. As a **methodology**, it means adopting a bottom-up approach to understanding and addressing issues. Rather than seeing things from top-down and searching for structural interventions, it prioritises the unique perspectives of communities to reflect, deliberate and act by communities themselves (Hong, 2017). More commonly, as a **mode** of organisation, it refers to the structure of community-based initiatives, the group of people and the activities they do, such as *Smiles Salam SG*, *Break The Cycle*, and *Sixth Sense*.

²They are sometimes called “Ground-up Movements (GUMs)” in Singapore context.

A groundup is **a group of individuals** who voluntarily come together to carry out a **self-organised** project or initiative to **benefit the community**. Groundups are **not-for-profit** and are **not registered** organisations.

As a form of organic, informal organisation, groundups are defined by the five features. Firstly, in most cases, groundups are not a one-man show. There could be either a sole leader or a core team making decisions,³ but for activities and execution, a group of people will contribute together.

Secondly, they are self-organised, not following the directives of other organisations. It is the groundups that determine the aims, means, and actual implementation of their activities (Bakker et al., 2012).

Thirdly, they are not-for-profit. People who participate in groundup groups do so voluntarily without expecting material returns. Moreover, they often contribute material resources to the groundups – the majority of groundups respondents (80%, n=116) acknowledge that their groundups rely on a certain level of self-funding to cover operational costs.

Fourthly, groundups benefit the community. Be it solving social and environmental issues, meeting emerging needs, improving welfare for others, they are on a social mission that creates impact beyond pure recreational purposes and hobbies.

Last but not least, they are not registered entities. There are no legal governance structures groundups abide by, which gives them the flexibility to be agile and nimble, but may also limit their presence and legitimacy in fundraising and stakeholder engagement. Moreover, the experimental nature of many groundups may be disruptive to existing governance and protocols, adding complexity and collaboration opportunities to service delivery (Hendriks & Dzur, 2022; Hong, 2017).

³ A core team making decision is most common (71%) among the respondents surveyed (=431), followed by a sole leader making all decisions (15%) and collective decision making (14%), where all members of the groundup make decisions together.

2. Landscape of groundups

Due to groundups' informal and organic nature, the landscape is fluid and transitory and hard to describe in exact numbers. By synthesising different information sources including NVPC's and our partners' databases and snowball sampling via surveys, an optimistic estimation suggests that roughly 1000 groundup groups existed at the time of the study, with 450 active and of known status⁴.

Groundups are not a COVID-specific phenomenon, yet the pandemic saw a surge in the number of groundups in Singapore. Based on NVPC's database, among the 308 groundups with the year of establishment recorded, roughly one third (n=109) were founded in 2020. The public health crisis highlighted the purpose of groundups and indicated their potential value in meeting urgent needs and demonstrating social cohesion and resilience.

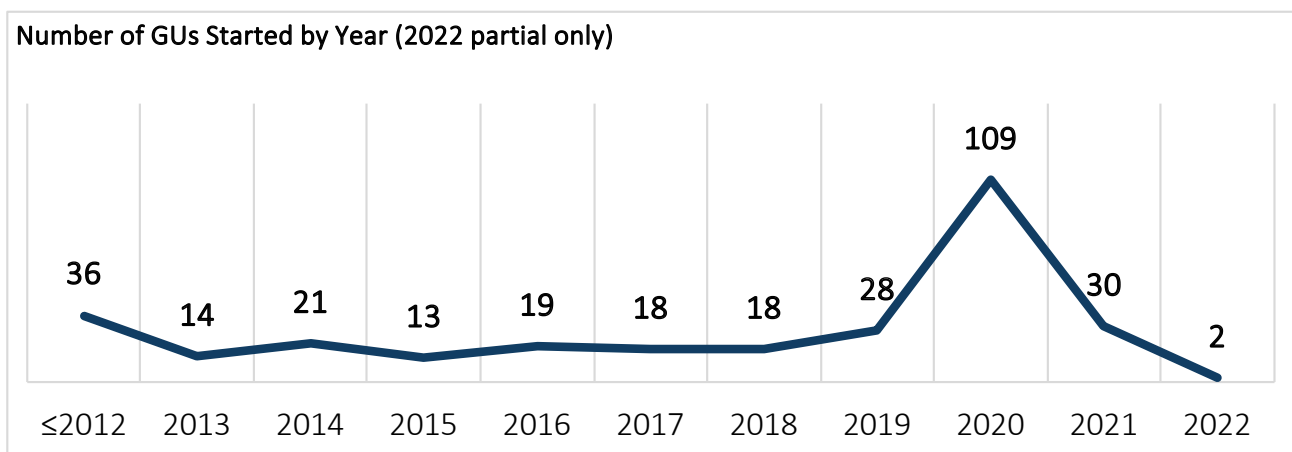


Figure 1: Number of Groundups Started by Year (2022 data is partial only)

“Groundup initiatives are a relatively recent, interesting, and inspiring example of Community-Based Initiatives in the context of Singapore. In these initiatives, citizens determine the aims, means, and actual implementation of their projects and activities. This growing phenomenon is also relevant and interesting from a broader perspective on civic engagement and public value creation.”

- Dr. Ingmar van Meerkerk

⁴Groundups with activity posted in the past 6 months before March 2023.

Embedded in communities, groundups also view their purpose as primarily community focused. The survey results showed that an overwhelming majority of groundups identified community building and development as their cause area (73%), followed by social and welfare (29%), environment (25%) and education (14%). Geographic communities (for example, a few adjacent HDB blocks in Woodlands) is among the top target groups served by groundups (32.5%), followed by elderly (10.7%), low-income families (8.6%), and youth (7.7%).

In line with the community focus, half of the groundups (49.6%) would provide befriending and social time as part of their services, followed by necessities (28.6%, e.g. food, water, household and hygiene products), mental health support (25.8%, e.g. counselling, support groups), and advocacy (25.5%, e.g. raising awareness of certain issues, overcoming stigmas).

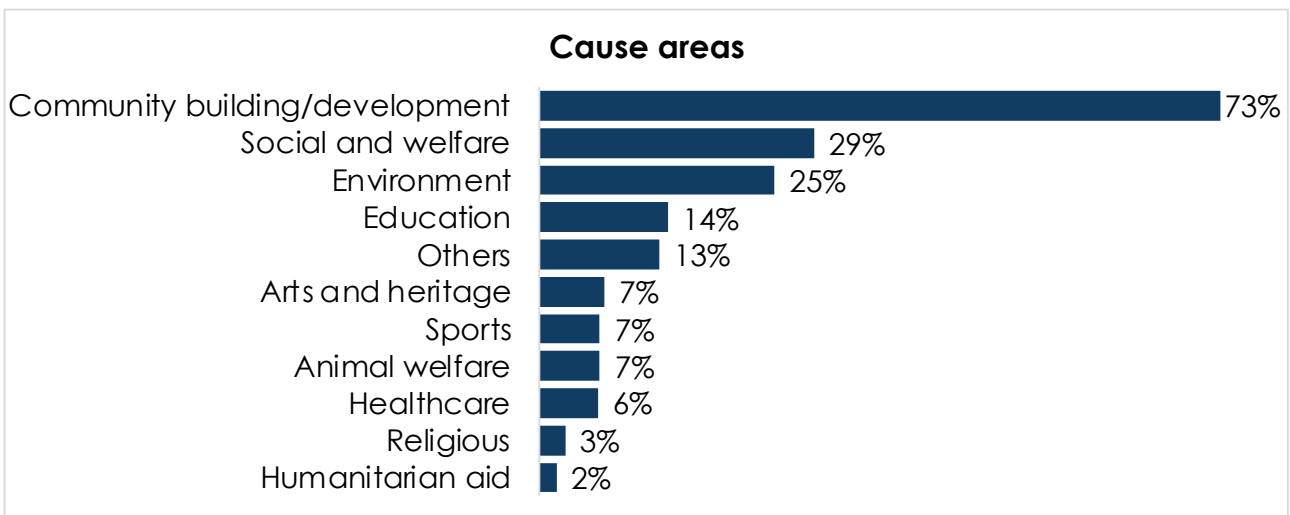


Figure 2: Cause areas supported by % of groundup participants (n=431)

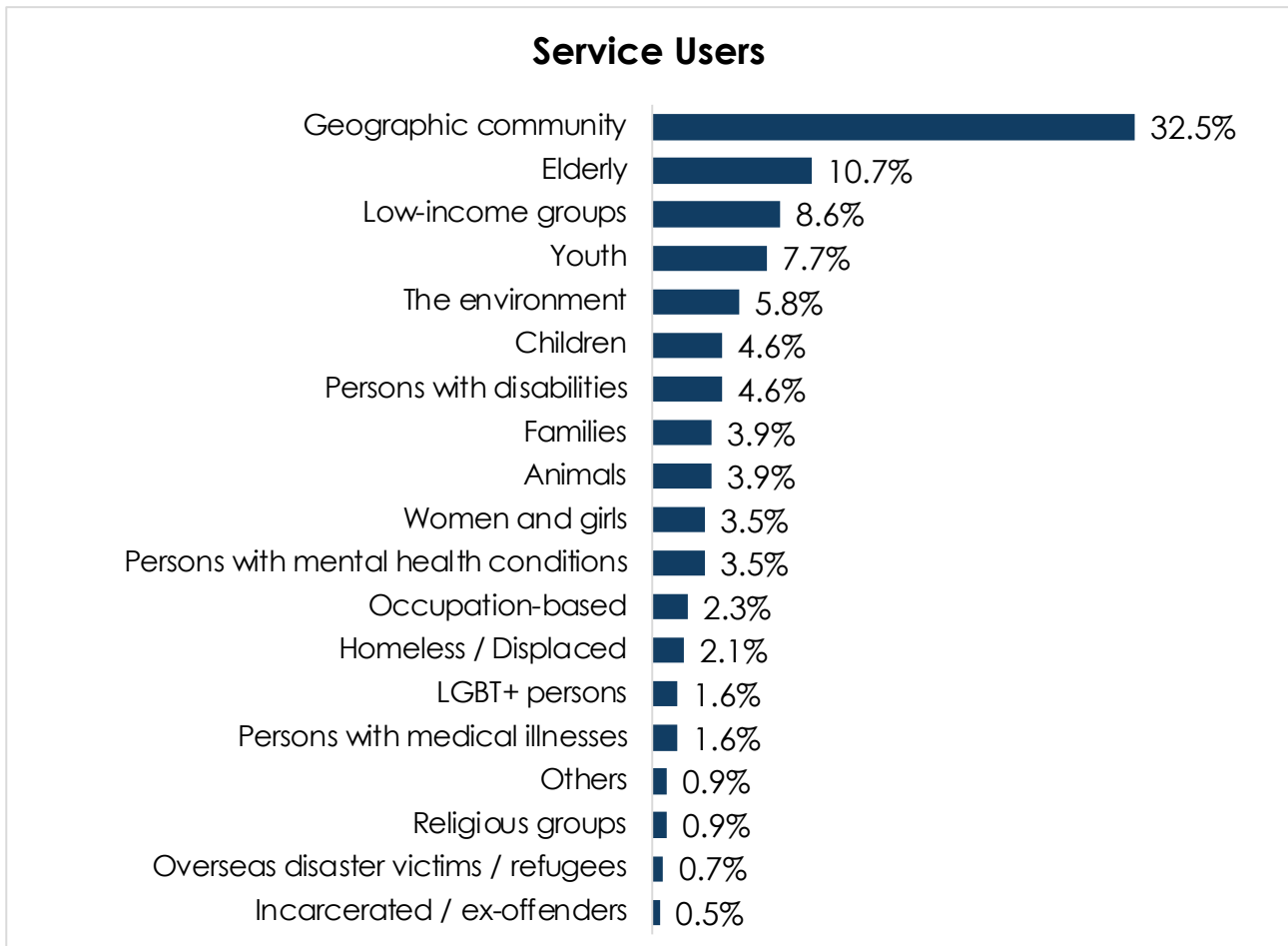


Figure 3: Target groups served by % of groundup participants (n=431)

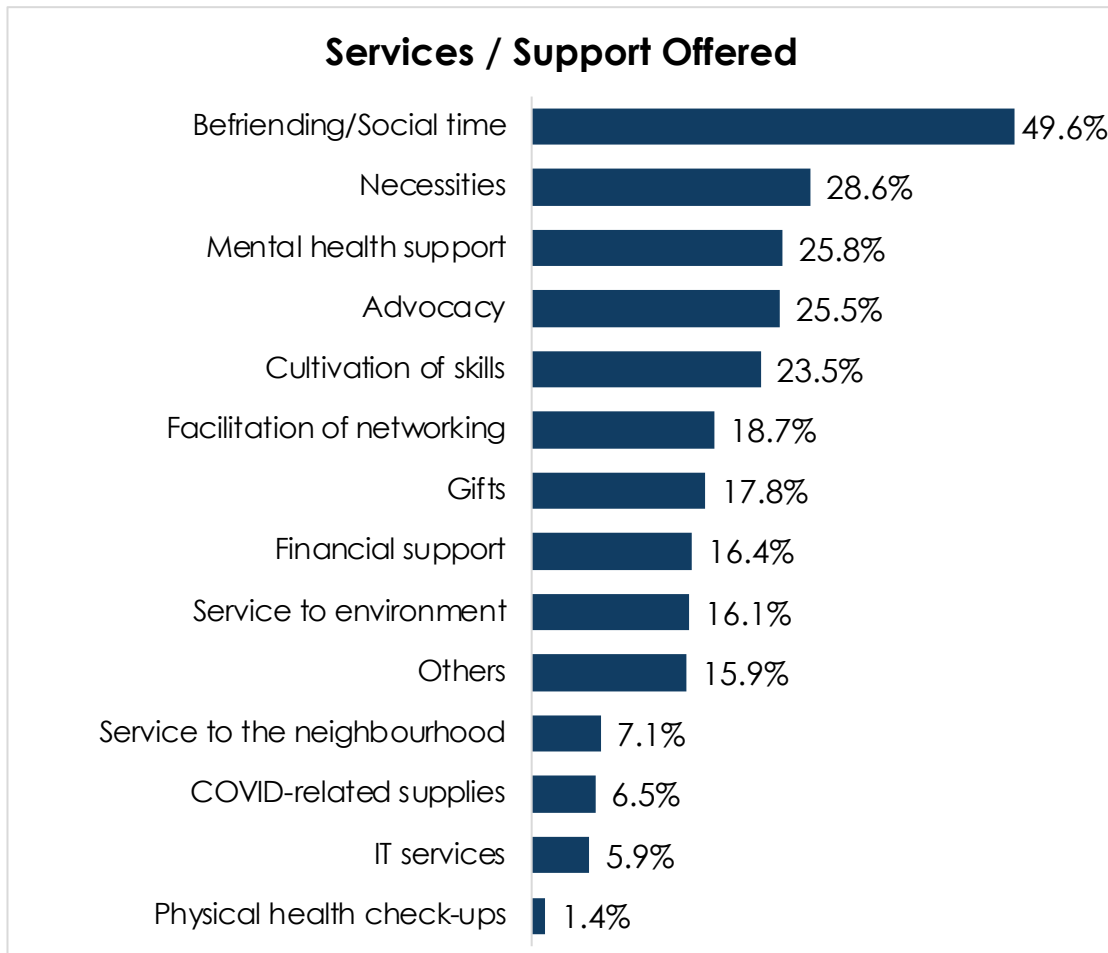
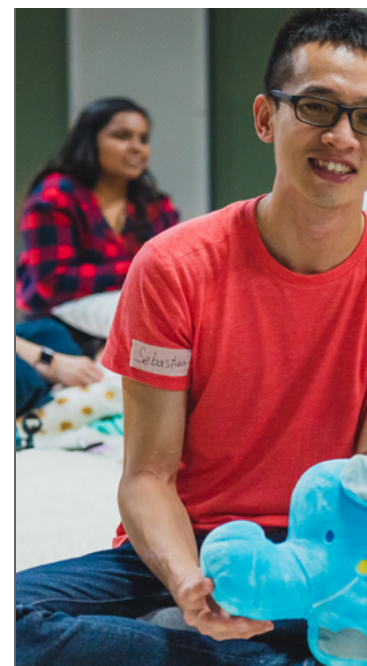


Figure 4: Type of service/support provided by % of groundup participants (n=431)



3. Who else are in the groundup universe?

In addition to the people they serve, groundups interact with a variety of stakeholders to leverage networks and mobilise resources (Igalla et al., 2019). In Singapore, these ecosystem players include government agencies (e.g. ministries, statutory boards, grassroots organisations), charities (including social service agencies and the volunteer centres) and other non-profit organisations who may act as intermediaries (e.g. NVPC, Singapore Kindness Movement), institutional funders (e.g. The Majority Trust, Temasek Trust/Foundation), and, sometimes, corporates (including social enterprises).

Public agencies are interested in groundups as potential partners who complement existing services, fill in gaps in service delivery and engage hard-to-reach groups. They could also function as a venue for citizen participation, a channel for ground voices on issues and solutions and an expression of social cohesion and resilience. Charities may view some groundup experiments as disruptive, but also welcome collaboration in last-mile service deliveries and widened pool of volunteers. Corporates may find groundups as partners to execute CSR programmes and engage employees.


It takes more than passionate individuals and their kind hearts to make a vibrant groundup space. The ecosystem players come in with a spectrum of support to groundups based on different levels of involvement, from creating awareness via their own publicity channels, facilitating coordination via convening networking platforms and curating partnerships, to providing/channelling resources and funds, and upskilling groundup members and advising their operations.



Below is a table that summarises the examples of support that may be rendered to groundups by some ecosystem players.

MAIN TYPES OF SUPPORT

		Creating awareness	Facilitating coordination	Resources (including funds)	Advisory (technical assistance, training, etc)
Ecosystem Players	Government agencies	✓	✓	✓	
	Registered charities (including Volunteer Centres)		✓	✓	
	Intermediaries	✓	✓		✓
	Institutional funders	✓	✓	✓	
	Corporates			✓	✓



Degree of involvement

Figure 5: Ecosystem players in the groundup space

Even within a generally supportive institutional environment, not all groundups are created equal. Depending on the popularity of their activities, leadership style, ability to perform day-to-day tasks and leverage resources in the wider ecosystem, their performance could vary significantly (see Chapter 3 for more information). But there are common features that help us understand why and how they exist. In the next chapter, we will embark on a journey to explore the stages of a groundup.



CHAPTER 2: Charting the Groundup Journey

CHAPTER 2: Charting the Groundup Journey

1-min summary: Although not a linear process, groundups experience some common stages of development in their life cycle, which provide the basis for targeted support and better planning. Groundup founders are of diverse backgrounds, but are commonly motivated by a proactive choice to contribute to society and the enjoyment in the activities they do. They also have a relatively higher confidence in their ability to deal with different situations and achieve goals.

1. The groundup life cycle

Groundups typically go through several stages of development, which are illustrated in the life cycle diagram below. It is not to say that the groundup journey forms a linear process – on the contrary, the journey is full of trial and error, iterations and would hardly be as clean-cut as the summary on paper. However, describing a prototype journey is still helpful as it illustrates common experiences and pain points and highlights the different priorities groundups may have over time. It not only informs groundups' short and long-term planning,⁵ but also facilitates targeted support.

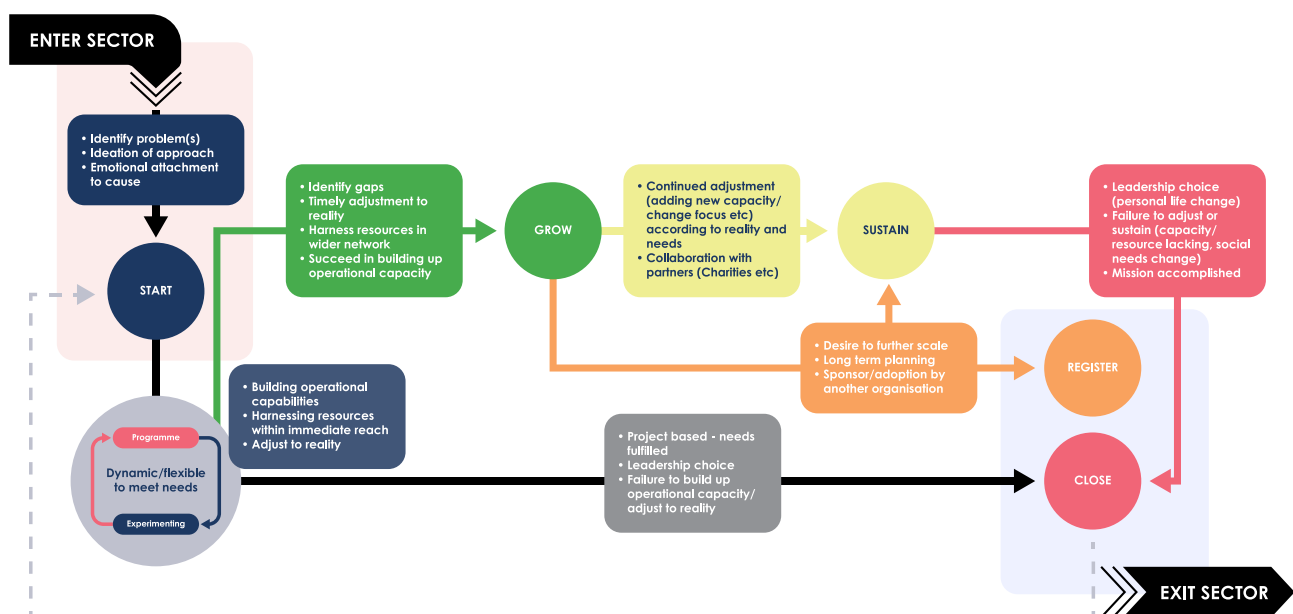


Figure 6: Groundup life cycle

⁵ Long-term planning has been identified as one of the top areas groundups need improvement in, see Chapter 3 for more information.

The beginning

The beginning of a groundup journey is usually seeded in personal life experiences. Witnessing the suffering of others, observing an unmet need, searching for a greater purpose in life, or experiencing hardship and despair – no matter what it is, it makes people realise that something is not quite right, and someone must do something about it. Then why not me?

“It started because I myself was going through some mental health issues and I was looking for support as well. So that’s kind of how it got started.” (IDI, R18)⁶

“I think there’s a lot of people want to do good, it’s just that they may not want to be... the first person who [takes] the first step. So, I realised that I could champion it, I could start it first, you know, let me move the first step... do a shoutout, [then] people come forward. I organise it, we run it.” (IDI, R16)

“What triggered the groundup movement was when I was volunteering with Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore to help hawkers, Grab drivers, taxi drivers to e-file their taxes for about 10 years...and because they actually terminated the programme in 2016 quite suddenly, I actually found that definitely there are still people who are still not so tech savvy.” (IDI, R19)

The founders normally start with their immediate social network for potential resources and solutions, experiment with whatever they can think of. The trial and error will teach them to adjust to reality. If it is a timebound or simple task, after the task is completed, the project may come to an end. However, if the team tackled a more complicated or structural issue, they may stay longer, contact more stakeholders and harness resources from a wider network.

⁶ IDI: In-Depth Interview

The development

As the groundup develops with more volunteers and larger scale activities, some founders may realise that they have become **“accidental leaders”**, who initially wanted to help providing for a need, but found themselves pitching to funders, writing reports, managing social media presence and volunteers. They are often not mentally prepared and may not necessarily have the skillsets, finding themselves at a loss, or even burned out.

“When I start to have volunteers coming in, my team is kind of expanding and then we are working with more partners, I then have the problem of knowing how then I should lead my team, how then I should manage my volunteers, how I should go about communicating to the different stakeholders. All this was very new to me... All of the admin matters were all dumped onto me, like contacting stakeholders, managing my volunteers, finance, like everything was on me. ... I didn't also know how to communicate with my own volunteers. Yes, I was a volunteer once, but you know, as a volunteer and now as someone managing volunteers, is there a difference in how we should approach it? There's a lot of questions I have.” (FGD, G7, RF3)⁷

External and internal factors, such as resource and support in the ecosystem, leadership style and operational capacity, influence how well a groundup may cope when confronted with development challenges (see Chapter 3 for more information). But if the groundup manages to grow and stabilise, they could either maintain an informal status, or consider registration and become a formal organisation – either non-profit or for-profit – based on long-term planning and groundup's needs.⁸

There are pros and cons to registration. On the one hand, having a legal structure reduces personal liabilities and afford legitimacy to the groundup to unlock more resources. On the other hand, the set-up and compliance costs and the administrative burden may be too much for a volunteer group to handle. There are cases where a registered groundup deregisters and becomes informal again.

⁷ FGD: Focus Group Discussion

⁸ For more considerations and options for registration, please refer to NVPC's handbook “Leading from the Ground Up” 8.2 Options to Register.

To find a balance, groundups may choose to collaborate primarily with a charity and provide the last mile services while leveraging on the charity for certain levels of logistic support.⁹

“Definitely have considered [registration], but I think with [name of groundup], our primary target group is the residents of [a charity]. ... Being under the umbrella of [the charity] as a volunteer group movement ... provides us a lot more benefits. But of course, definitely you do disqualify yourself subsequently for grants and all that to a certain extent. But I think, by and large there are more benefits than there are disadvantages.” (IDI, R18)



⁹ Whether such arrangement turns groundups into a mere regular volunteer group depends on what extent the groundup maintains its own purpose and decision-making in operation. It would be more helpful to view these organisational formats as a continuum rather than mutually exclusive and distinctive boxes. Ultimately, what the initiative is called is not a concern as long as needs are met.

The end (and the new beginning)

Like other volunteer journeys, the founder and members may find themselves no longer able to commit due to personal life changes; or the task of running the group becomes too much to handle with the limited time and resources at hand. In happier situations, the groundup may have accomplished its mission, with the needs taken care of via structured service from the government or charities; or the groundup decides to register itself and becomes a formal entity for stabler and longer-term existence.¹⁰

But when groundups cease to operate when needs are yet to be met, it may have broader repercussions for service users than the dropout of a volunteer. Succession planning can help mitigate the risk of a sudden closure. When closure is unavoidable, it is good practice to ensure a smooth transition for groundup members, volunteers, stakeholders, and service users.¹¹

Closure may not be the end of the story though. There are “serial founders” who have started multiple groundups. These groundup leaders embrace the mindset and methodology wherever they go, and crystallise new projects when opportunities arise. What type of people then are behind the groundup initiatives, and what motivates them?



¹⁰ Not all groundups would be willing to go down the route of registration. See the handbook “Leading from the Ground Up” for suggestions on registration (Chapter 8).

¹¹ Refer to the handbook “Leading from the Ground Up” for suggestions on succession planning (7.5) and closure (Chapter 9).

2. Who are running the groundups, and why?

Like one of our respondents said, there are many people with kind hearts, but what makes some take the initiative and step forward? Age is not an issue. Although the majority of the founders in our survey are aged 35 years and below, groundups are not entirely a youth movement: about one third of the founders are 40 years old and above.

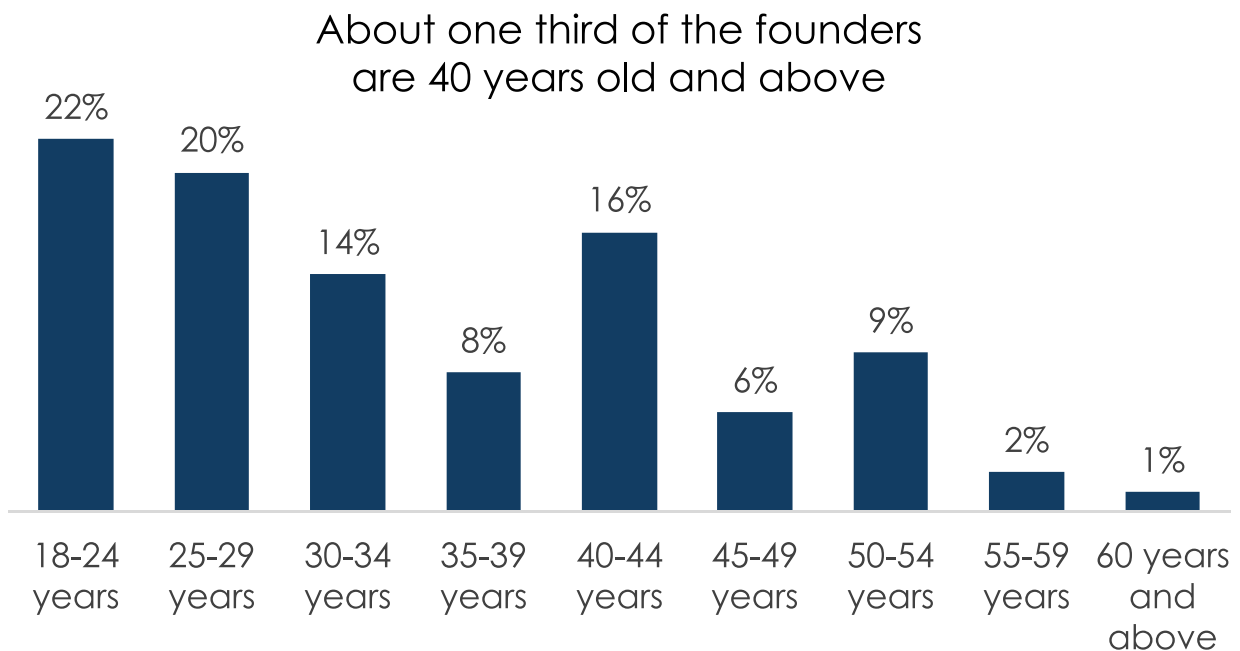
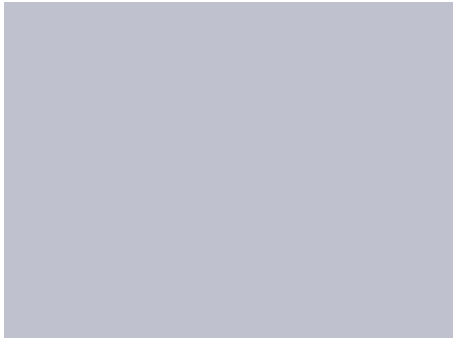


Figure 7: Age of groundup founders (n=85)

What the founders have in common is a broad and stable confidence in their abilities to deal with different situations and achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997); and they are primarily motivated by the proactive choice and enjoyment in taking up the initiatives.

The confidence in achieving goals is measured by the general self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), where the average score of founders is relatively higher than other groundup participants.¹²

¹²Scale reliable to use, Cronbach's alpha = .907; difference in score is statistically significant, p < .01.

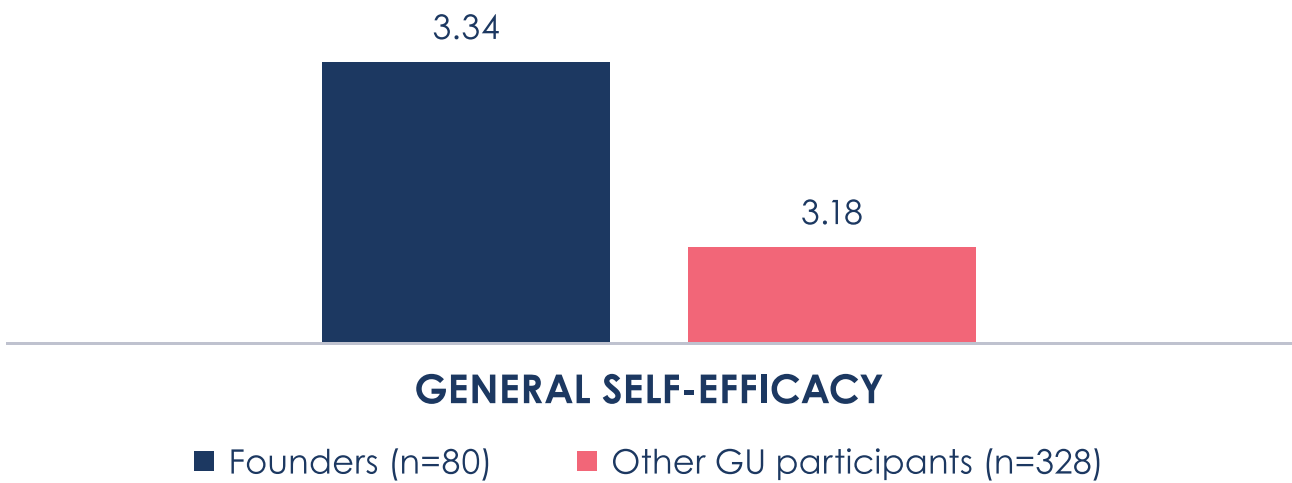


Figure 8: Mean score of general self-efficacy scale.

The top 3 motivations to start groundups among founders are: 1) the desire to do something meaningful for the society; 2) passion for the groundup activities; 3) being surrounded by like-minded individuals in the groundup. These motivations remained top 3 across age groups, and are “self-determined motivations”, referring to the behaviour that is performed because of personal choice and because the subject finds pleasure in it (Haivas et al., 2012, p. 1197). Studies have shown that when people feel they are taking actions based on their own choices, there could be an increase in overall functioning, personal growth and physical and psychological health (Güntert et al., 2016, pp. 312–313).



Figure 9: Top 3 Motivations to start GUs among Founders (n=85)

One does not have to possess a lot of wealth and/ or knowledge to start a groundup. In fact, many founders have experienced the social issues themselves. What is more important is a keen eye to identify the needs and gaps, a heart for common good, the confidence in making a difference and the ability to enjoy the process.

Want to know more?

For inspiring stories of groundup founders who have experienced issues themselves and stepped forward, read our case study "[From Personal Setbacks to Strength: Case Study of 5 Groundup Founders](#)".

To sustain the groundup in the long run, support from within and beyond the community will be crucial. Next, we will highlight some conditional factors that enable groundups to do good, better.



CHAPTER 3: Assessing the Groundup Performance

CHAPTER 3:

Assessing the Groundup Performance

1-min summary: Groundups need internal capacity and external support to achieve their objectives. Internally, having transformational leaders, sufficient number of volunteers and managing the day-to-day tasks well will boost the groundup performance. Externally, while government support is important, overly frequent interaction between groundups and more “powerful” stakeholders (that have more power and resources) may have a negative impact on the outcome. In terms of daily operations, publicity, planning and recruitment are key areas where groundups need improvement. They could also benefit from more skill-based advice, mentorship and sectoral knowledge provided by partners in the ecosystem.

The concept of performance in the public and voluntary sector is by nature “multidimensional” and involves many stakeholders (Igalla et al., 2020, p. 611). To quantitatively analyse the performance of citizen initiatives is very difficult not only because there are few established models in other countries to refer to, but the understanding has to be contextualised. Being a niche population, it is also not always operationally possible to obtain a sample size large enough to demonstrate meaningful structures.

Nevertheless, conceptually we can identify several factors that could influence a groundup's performance, that is, the ability to meet its overall objectives and mission and achieve both organisational and community-level outcomes. They are: leadership style, network structure, and organisational capacities of groundups as well as government support (Igalla et al., 2019). These factors could be interrelated, for example, leadership styles will influence both the internal management of the team and the external network it has.

The groundup experience in Singapore points to the importance of these factors, with distinct features worth noting. We have broadly categorised them into three internal and two external conditions. Internally, having transformational leaders, sufficient number of volunteers and managing the day-to-day tasks well boost the groundup performance. Externally, while a supportive institutional environment enabled by the government is important to groundups, excessively frequent interaction between groundups and stakeholders who are more “powerful” (that have more power and resources) may have a negative impact on the outcome.

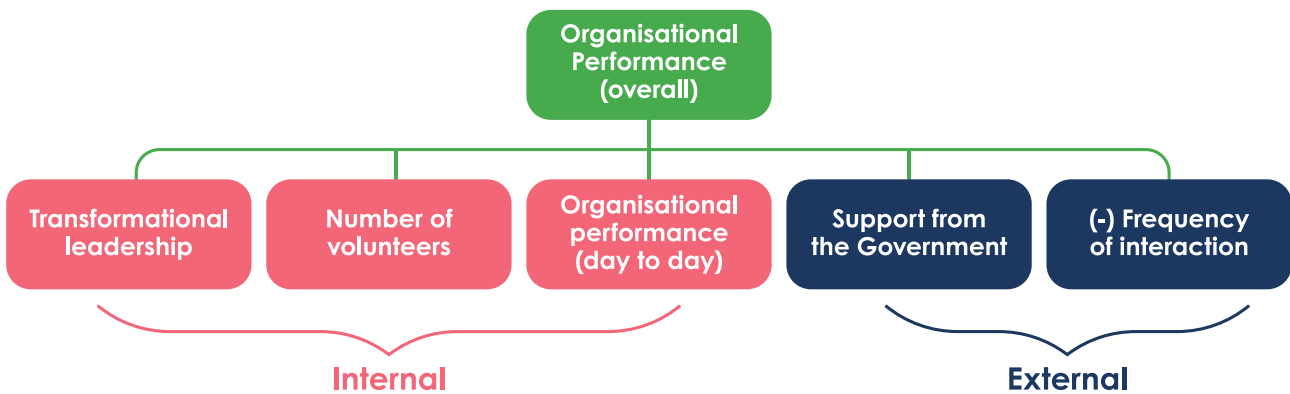


Figure 10: Several factors influence groundup performance.¹³

1. Internal factors

Transformational Leadership

If leadership is about mobilising people to tackle problems, transformational leaders mobilise people primarily by inspiring them with a clear agenda of change, an appealing vision of future, and alignment of values and outcomes. In addition, “transformational leaders stimulate and encourage creativity and innovativeness of those around them” (Igalla et al., 2020, p. 607). Below are some examples of this leadership style at play:

“And it doesn’t matter if you know a million people or you don’t know anybody. It’s up to you as a person that starts a project to know where your project fits in the landscape. ... Even [if] you tap on your network, ... you must be able to sell your idea, ... and convince [other people].” (IDI, R12)

“So you must think of something creative to inspire yourself and those around you and keep yourself motivated.” (IDI, R16)

“We usually want to do things in a different way because it is harder to keep that momentum going when something has been done and repeated over and over again, and that’s what we’ve also experienced in the past.” (IDI, R5)

¹³ This is primarily a conceptual model with relations supported by survey results. We tested all factors identified in Igalla’s 2020 article in a multiple regression model and focused on the significant predictors here (i.e. government support, frequency of interaction, transformational leadership and number of volunteers). Operational performance is separately evaluated for its conceptual importance, and developed from our own qualitative data.

“I used to help out in the curation of exhibitions and so on. And I think that’s why when we started [groundup name], it was also an outlet for us to kind of work with artists to bring a meaningful message forward. So, it’s tapping into the creative element and freedom, especially when you are a groundup, you are not governed by certain rules that’s required of a non-profit organisation and I think that’s where the collaboration really happens and that’s really fun. So, I think I embed quite a number of my hobbies (laughs) within the other stuff that I do, [groundup name] included.” (IDI, R5)

Number of volunteers

Lacking regular, stable volunteer supply is not only a groundup problem. Yet groundups may have even more difficulty managing their volunteers due to the lack of knowledge and resource in volunteer management. Although we do need enough manpower to do the job, it is not always a “the more, the merrier” situation. In some cases, the quality of the volunteer matters more.



“Some cyclists brought in bad cycling habits that compromised the safety of our regular cyclists. Some weren’t able to put the community interest above theirs and regarded our ground up as merely a cycling group. So though the numbers were coming in and looking healthy, the alignment towards the social mission and our values was compromised.”
(Case study, R-A)

On average, the groundups we surveyed are run by 2 core members and 8 volunteers. But the optimal number of volunteers will indeed vary case by case and over time. It depends on the groundup’s mission and its ability to manage volunteers.¹⁴

¹⁴For more information on resources volunteer management, refer to the Handbook “Leading from the Ground Up” 7.4 Volunteer Management.

Operational Performance

Operational performance is about how well a groundup executes its day-to-day tasks. Leadership style and number of volunteers indeed contribute to operational performance, but rather than how much resource the groundup currently has, operational performance is more about the capability to get things done when needed. It is roughly divided into the following five areas:

1. Skills, programmes, and strategy;
2. Practical resources;
3. Recruitment and retention;
4. Awareness and government partnerships; and
5. Funding, non-profit partnership and legal.

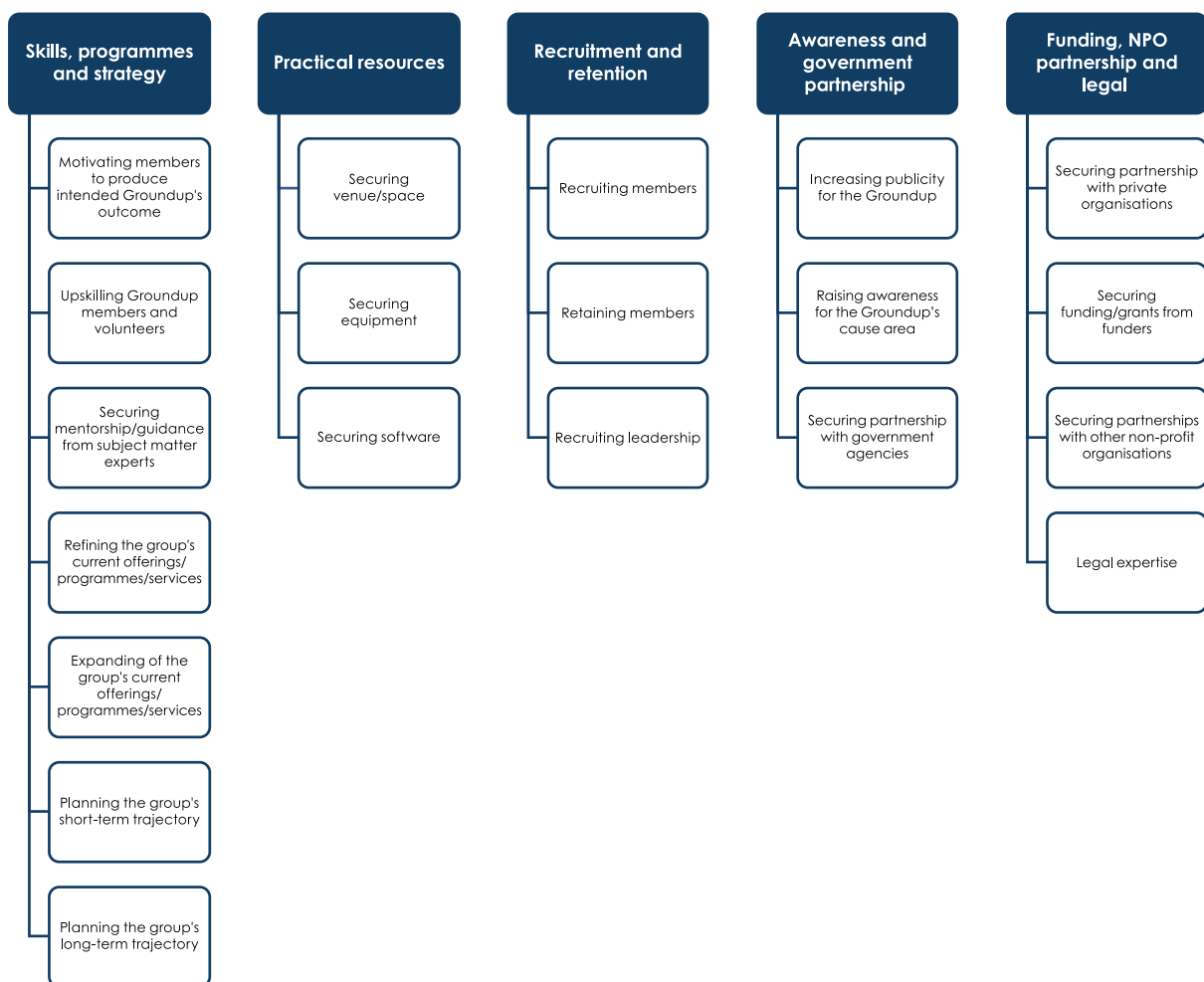


Figure 12: Operational performance items

The top 5 areas in operational performance where improvements are needed include: 1) Increasing publicity for the groundup; 2) Planning the group's long-term trajectory; 3) Recruiting leadership; 4) Recruiting members; 5) Raising awareness for the groundup's cause area.



Figure 13: Areas where improvements are needed based on self-evaluation by groundups (n=196)

Not all operational performance areas will be relevant or of equal importance to each groundup. The developmental stage of the groundup is also at play. Funding, for example, may be of a top concern for some but not so relevant for others. It would be thus more useful to treat operational performance as a “pulse check” for individual groundup, and design targeted support accordingly.

2. External factors

As discussed in Chapter 1, groundups in Singapore generally enjoy a supportive institutional environment, but the recognition and resource provision from the government is particularly important because groundups operate in the public domain and are often dependent on how authorities react to them (Brandsen et al., 2017). Government recognition and support could be even more useful for getting started and gaining traction (Bailey, 2012). Given their informal status, groundups sometimes reach out to stakeholders to gain credibility, and government, more than anyone else, is the stakeholder groundups turn to for such legitimacy and endorsement.

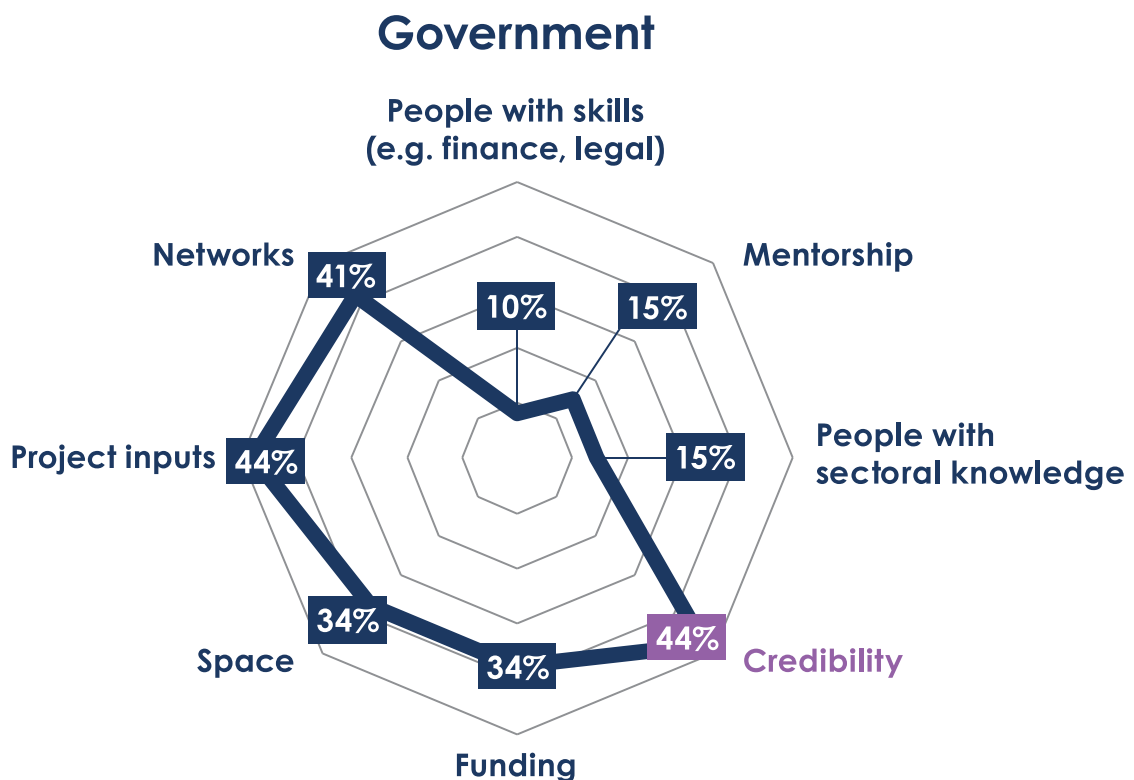


Figure 11: Purpose of interaction with government (n=172)

That being said, overly frequent interaction with more 'powerful' stakeholders (including government, funders, other resource providers, etc.) may not be good for groundup performance. Multiple reasons could be at play, such as the quality of interaction, the reason for interaction or the consequences thereof. Empirically, we have heard groundups voicing their concerns about administrative burden when receiving grants or a sudden increase in the number of volunteers from corporates. No matter what it is, groundups need to be wise in prioritising their focus – not all interactions with resource providers are desirable, and it is certainly not about quantity.

3. Seeking support in the ecosystem

Even without intentionally reflecting on performance, groundups naturally interact with other players in the ecosystem to mobilise resources for a better delivery of projects, such as people with relevant skills who can advise the groundups' work, leadership mentors, funding, space for events, project inputs and networking opportunities. Currently, more than 40% of respondents have interacted with stakeholders for network and project input, while only between 13% to 19% have done so for skill-based and knowledge-based advice and mentorship.

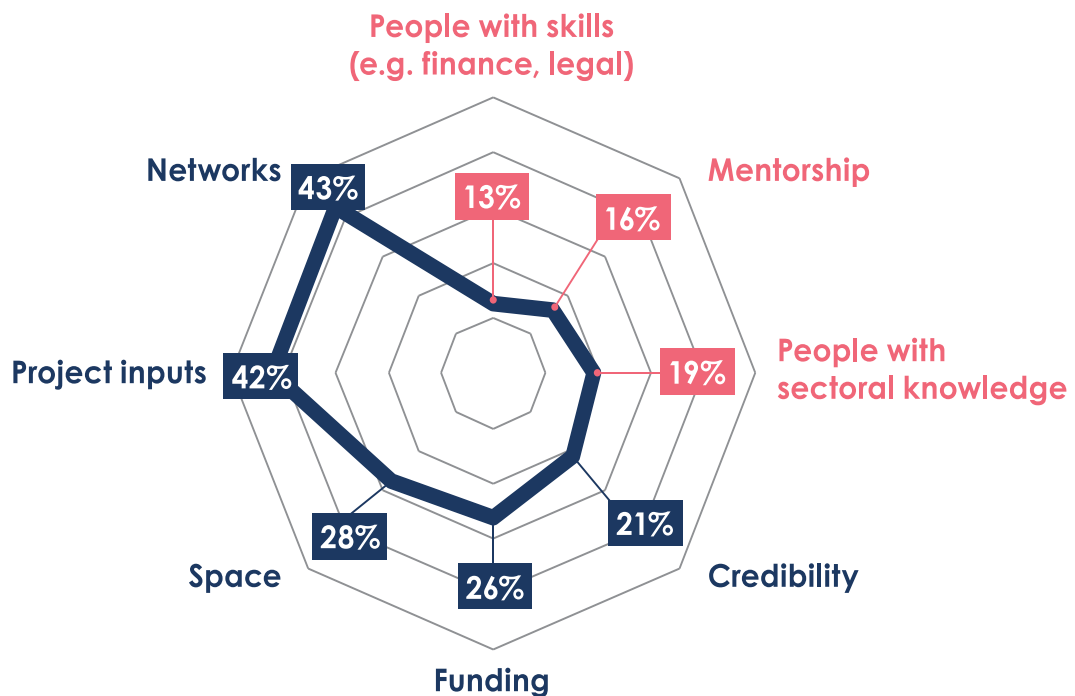


Figure 14: Purpose of interaction with stakeholders (at least once every few months) (n=165)

In other words, skill-based advice, mentorship and ground knowledge are areas where groundups are not getting as much support from the ecosystem. Credibility, funding and space are also recurring bottlenecks. When talking about what changes people would like to see for the groundup space, various stakeholders commented on the benefits of knowing the landscape, for which some sort of information repository on who is doing what could be helpful. In addition, having a pool of potential resources and support is considered beneficial as well:



“If I can build on that repository, I would actually add experts in the field or people who are willing to give that mentorship or training over a certain period, ‘cause I think that’s a huge [block] that we face when we start off something from new, it’s like when we don’t really know whether we’re doing the right thing, or we don’t know whether we’re doing it the right way.” (FGD, G1, RF4)

Indeed, it is a lot of hard and creative work that makes a good groundup experience. Fortunately, the values and contributions of those efforts are increasingly acknowledged and celebrated by Singapore society. What exactly about groundups that make them unique, and why would we cherish them?



**CHAPTER 4:
Recognising the
Groundup Contribution**

CHAPTER 4: Recognising the Groundup Contribution

1-min summary: Groundups have been valued for their ability to stay close to the ground, meet (niche) needs quickly and innovatively, and provide a channel for communities to take ownership of issues and provide solutions. They are a good means for strengthening the social compact as they could reduce the overreliance on structured intervention and help us be more engaged with one another. The quality of the groundup experience matters more than the number of GUs. While we need to strike a balance between trust and accountability, there is more potential in sharing best practices, consolidating resources and support available to groundups, and building their capacities, rather than trying to formalise and institutionalise the space.

Singapore society is known to be “organised” rather than “organic”. Of course, being organised is good in many ways, and it served our developmental purposes well in the past. To date, we still primarily hold our government and institutions accountable for addressing societal needs. 80% of the public surveyed named the government as “to a good/very large extent” responsible in meeting social needs, and close to 60% named charities and grassroots organisations for that.

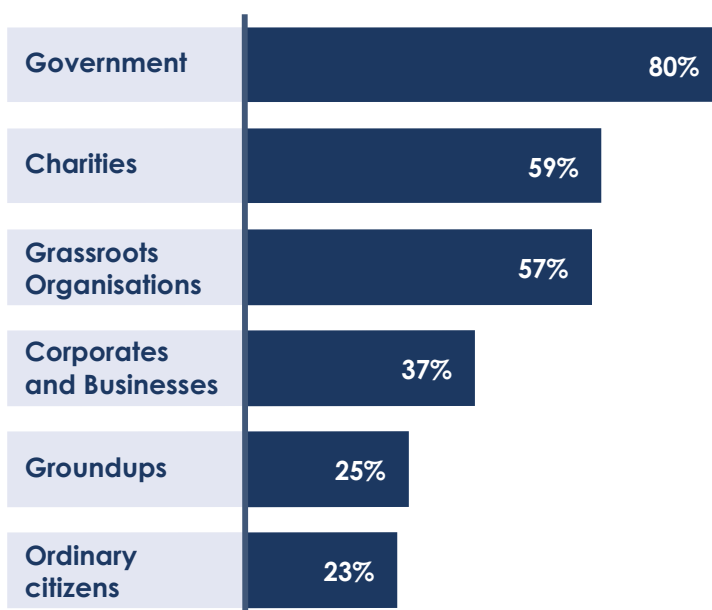


Figure 15: To what extent should the following be responsible in addressing the needs of society? Percentage selected “to a good/very large extent”. (n=1000)

However, as we chart our way forward in an increasingly uncertain world, where aspirations are evolving and there are new challenges, structured interventions may not be the best solution all the time. Groundup initiatives, although not a mainstream trend yet, highlighted the potential of our communities taking ownership to identify problems and provide solutions, which may afford us the resilience and solidarity needed when crisis hits.

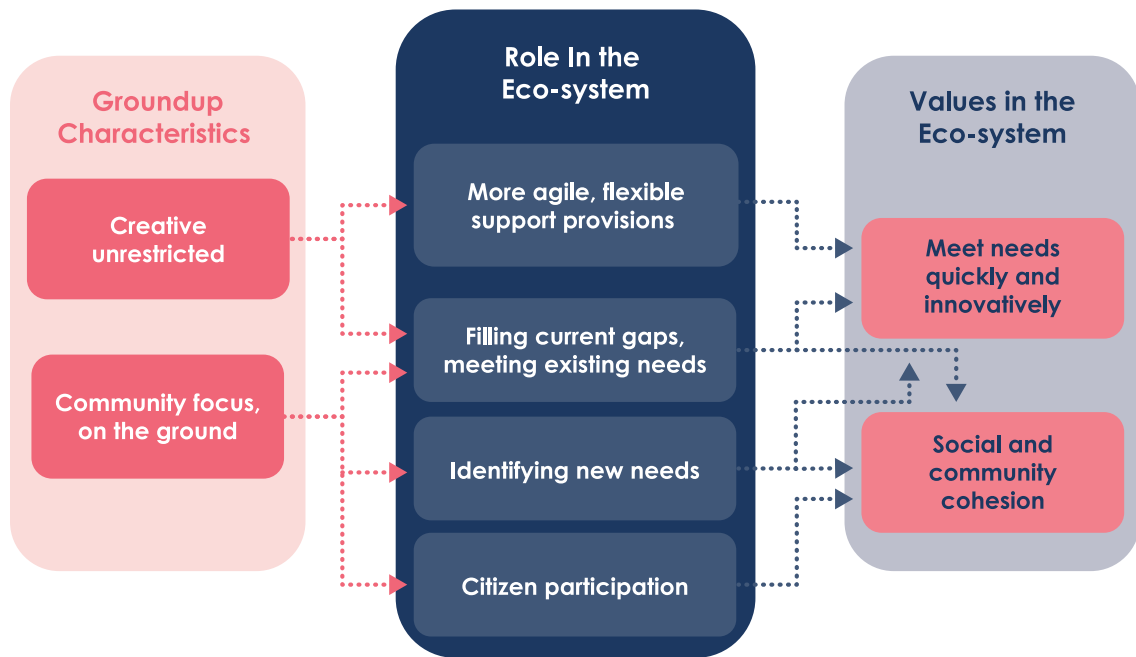


Figure 16: How groundup characteristics facilitate roles and enable value creation in the ecosystem.

Specifically, groundups have been valued for their ability to stay close to the ground, meet (niche) needs quickly and innovatively, and provide a means for citizen participation, which could potentially translate into social cohesion and resilience.

1. Meeting needs and complementing other service providers

Being informal, small scale and close to the ground afford groundups the space to react quickly, often informed by community wisdom and enabled by community resources. Often serving a few adjacent blocks in the neighbourhood, they can afford to provide more customised services and access the harder-to-reach population. From the survey, we can see that groundups complement other service providers by covering a distinct group. Due to sampling limitations, the numbers may not be nationally representative, yet they are indicative of the relatively low levels of overlaps in service users covered by groundups and other service providers.¹⁵

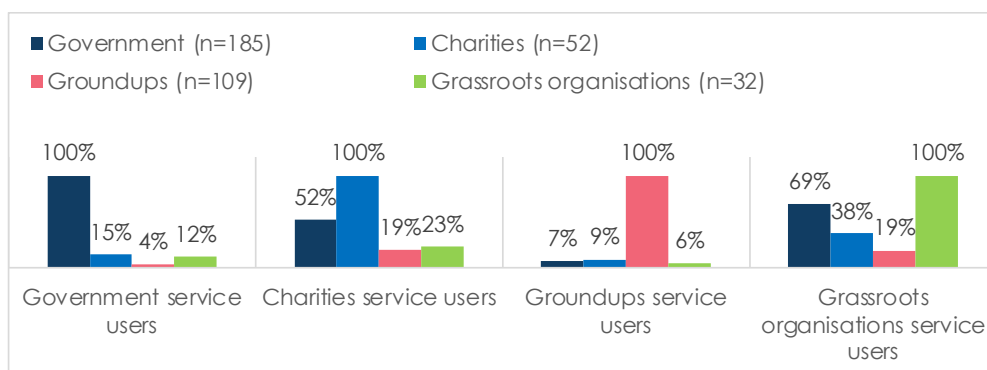


Figure 17: Among those who have received help from groundups, only 7%, 9% and 6% also received help from government, charities and grassroots organisations respectively. The numbers of services users of each service provider are derived from self-identification by the n=1303 general population with booster samples on vulnerable groups.

¹⁵ People who received help from groundup n=109, including n=100 self-identified groundup service users not from probability sampling, and natural fallout from general population and other booster samples. See methodology section for details.

More importantly, there is much potential in communities designing their own solutions to issues they face. The first-hand and lived experience offered unique perspective in what kind of intervention is more effective, and this is where innovativeness comes in.

“As an ex-offender myself, I experienced the challenges (both internal and external) of reintegrating and rebuilding of a new life. At the same time, I also learnt what are the key ingredients that contribute to a success[ful] reintegration and rebuilding of a new life. ...One key step was changing my circle of friends. ... (and) not just being part of community, but also having a mentor. Even as I was working on rebuilding my new life, I was volunteering and helping other ex-offenders. ...Through that, I concluded that an ex-offender is more receptive to receiving and asking help from another ex-offender who have been there and done that. Fast forward to 2020, when I started to cycle better and improved my fitness with the mentoring of two friends who were more proficient in cycling, I had an epiphany. Understand the challenges an ex-offender face in breaking the cycle of re-offending, I recognised how cycling could be used to connect and help an ex-offender to reintegrate by using the sport and the cycling community.” (Case Study, R-A)

Sometimes, the value lies not in creating new ways to help, but how fast help can be made available. Groundups have an advantage as they are often less restricted by administrative requirements and can have a higher risk appetite. Among the groundup service users surveyed, 88% agreed that the amount of time taken for support to be provided is acceptable, higher than that of other service providers (ranging from 67-69%).

“If you want the government to do something about it, it’s a long process, ...and maybe it will only surface after three years. But if a groundup does it, it’s very fast because they know exactly where to pinpoint, they solve it with their own hands, they find resources from whoever can give them, ... and they get it worked out. So, ... the value of groundups is ... they help to solve problems faster.” (FGD, G1, RF1)

“In this sense, groundups really complement the structured programs in the different locales to actually plug in the gaps of the services that are provided by other charities.” (FGD, G2, RF2)



2. A potential means for strengthening the social compact

Beyond solving problems and providing a type of public service, at the core of groundups' characteristics is their community focus, which offers them the leverage to be the voice of the community that sheds lights on emerging issues and a channel for civic engagement.

“We see groundups also as a way to engage Singaporeans, or as a way for them to respond and a way for them to plug into community efforts.” (FGD, G7, RF1)

***“So to me, I think they serve as ... eyes and ears on the ground and that’s been my experience that they see things in their own immediate community that sometimes are not so apparent to us, and the value is also being able to quickly identify and say, hey, there are all these needs and maybe it’s something we should look at.”
(FGD, G8, RM2)***

More importantly, as the solution also comes from the community, groundups become an effective channel for civic participation and engagement. It is realised through establishing a common goal for the community, mobilising resources, building trust, and strengthening relationships and ties, expanding friendship networks, thus increasing the social capital of community members. It also reinforces reciprocity, mutual support and solidarity, caring and altruism, which constitute the shared norms and values that bind a community together and create a sense of belonging. All these are essential factors the literature identifies as related to social cohesion at the community level (Fonseca et al., 2019, p. 247).

“I think it portrays a better picture to show that, Singaporeans actually care for each other. It’s not like a top down driven thing where you know, the government or whichever organisation is trying to tell you to do something, but it shows that the people even neighbours around us actually care for each other, they want to reach out to each other, that’s why we volunteer.” (FGD, G8, RF1)

If strengthening our social compact is about more collaboration and co-creation in dealing with challenges, groundups indeed offer us a potential way to be part of that process, with either well-defined community outcomes or broader societal goals in mind.

In strengthening our social compact, it is not about growing the numbers of groundups; rather, it is about growing the spirit of stepping up in the community. To achieve this, we need to strike the right balance between trust and accountability. Too many checks and balances may kill the “groundup” spirit, but too little due diligence and lack of integrity will constitute a damaging blow to social cohesion and resilience that is hard to recover. In Singapore’s context where stepping up is admired by the community and encouraged by the government, but not yet a norm, we see potential in sharing best practices, consolidating resources and support available to groundups, and building their capacities, rather than trying to formalise and institutionalise the space.

How, then, can we better support groundups and build a conducive ecosystem for them to thrive?

CHAPTER 5: Building an Enabling Groundup Ecosystem

1-min summary: To build an enabling ecosystem, we need to encourage people to step up, strengthen groundups’ publicity capacities; consolidate the existing resources for easier navigation; facilitate quality partnerships to reduce duplication, enhance efficiency and self-sustained growth; and enhance groundup credibility and development opportunities.

There are broadly four areas we can work on in building an enabling ecosystem for groundups to emerge and thrive. Firstly, more resources/ programmes can be devoted to encouraging people to step up. Indeed, it is a national-level task and embedded in strengthening our social compact; and it requires long-term and systematic investment in education and cultural change. One immediate measure we can take is providing channels and tools that can assist groundups in their publicity efforts. While addressing an area where groundups need improvement in,¹⁶ it also enhances the visibility of groundups as a way of citizen engagement in general. Examples of such support include, but are not limited to, subscription to creative art tools, training in how to use them, or audience profile analysis of different social media platforms – anything that enables the groundup while preserving its own agency and character.

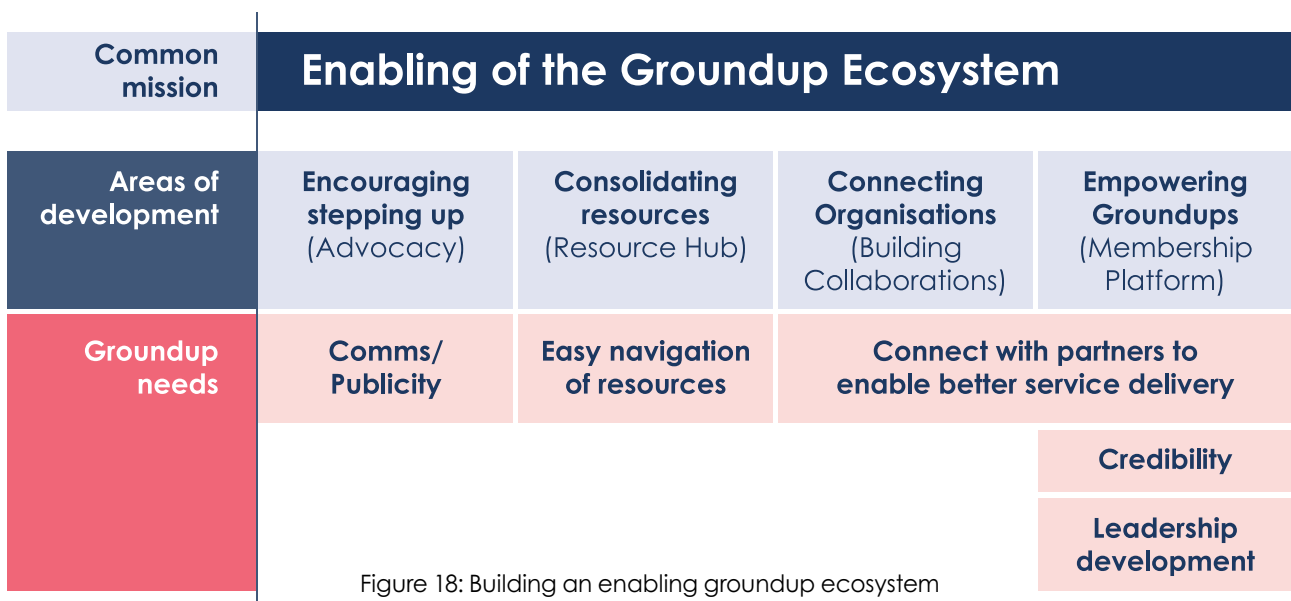


Figure 18: Building an enabling groundup ecosystem

¹⁶ See Chapter 3, Operational Performance.

Secondly, rather than a lack of support, many groundups find it difficult to navigate the different options of support. In other words, our primary issue in providing support is not availability but awareness and accessibility. To make the most of the already supportive environment, a resource hub or portal that consolidates available resource guides and specifies access criteria would help lower the barrier of entry into the groundup space. The resource hub would serve as the first contact point for new joiners or existing groundups to discover what are already available. The experience would still be a steep learning curve, but hopefully made more efficient.

Thirdly, forging good connections and quality partnerships among groundup groups and between groundups and other public service providers will reduce duplication of effort on the ground, enhance efficiency in resource utilisation and achieve self-sustained growth. Partnerships and collaborations between groundups and formal institutions should not imply co-opting groundups into a formal structure; rather, it is best based on the respective strength and complementary roles each side can play.

Closely related to curating quality partnerships is the empowerment of groundup groups themselves. Lack of credibility as an informal organisation is one of groundups' pain points in collaborating with other organisations. Our study has highlighted that it may not be a good idea to direct groundups onto the route of registration, not only because the majority of them (59%) are not planning to register, but also directive relations with groundups may kill the spirit and thus the value they bring to society. Therefore, one possible idea is a membership platform as a middle ground that would help maintain the trust in the groundup space while retaining the flexibility. It also forms a natural community of leaders where mutual learning and mentoring can be promoted, addressing the current gaps in getting skilled, knowledgeable people and mentors from network and partners.



Concluding Remarks

At the end of the report, let us go back to the definition of groundup as 3Ms – mindset, methodology and mode of organisation. Although our research has been focusing on the mode, the groundup spirit and value rely heavily on the mindset and methodology aspects. It is the proactivity, the resourcefulness, and unique ground perspective that constitute the core of a groundup. Offering help has nothing to do with how much you possess and how strong and privileged you are; it is about whether you care enough to take the action. Why should we care? Because it could have been us – any one of us – who happens to need a helping hand.

If the hope is for us to be an inclusive society with a strong social fabric, we have to make sure no one is left behind. The question is, who can provide help in times of need? Intuitively we might turn to the government, charities, or social work professionals for answers. However, it is worthwhile to take a step back to consider if they are the only solutions available. Perhaps, we, as seemingly ordinary citizens, have unique perspectives and assets that formal institutions may not be able to offer.

Indeed, a lot of work goes into establishing, growing, and sustaining a groundup, and oftentimes, simply banking on personal insights and passion is not enough. That is why we need to build an enabling ecosystem. Ultimately, we need many hands to make light work, and fun work! For Singapore to move forward in the uncertain world, “we owe it to each other, and to ourselves” (Shafik, 2021), to build a more caring, compassionate and inclusive future.

Concluding Remarks



Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all groundups and charities for sharing their collective real-life experiences with us.

NVPC would also like to thank our key partners:

Sponsor:
Tote Board

Project Advisor:
Dr. Ingmar van Meerkerk, Associate Professor,
Department of Public Administration and Sociology
at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Bibliography

Bailey, N. (2012). The role, organisation and contribution of community enterprise to urban regeneration policy in the UK. *Progress in Planning*, 77(1), 1–35.

Bakker, J., Denters, B., Oude Vrielink, M., & Klok, P. J. (2012). Citizens' Initiatives: How Local Governments Fill their Facilitative Role. *Local Government Studies*, 38(4), 395–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2012.698240>

Bandura, A. (1997). Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control. In W.H. Freeman and Company. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885512472964>

Brandsen, T., Trommel, W., & Verschuere, B. (2017). The state and the reconstruction of civil society. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(4), 676–693. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852315592467>

Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S., & Brazier, F. (2019). Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 32(2), 231–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480>

Grabs, J., Langen, N., Maschkowski, G., & Schöpke, N. (2016). Understanding role models for change: a multilevel analysis of success factors of grassroots initiatives for sustainable consumption. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 134, 98–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.10.061>

Güntert, S. T., Strubel, I. T., Kals, E., & Wehner, T. (2016). The quality of volunteers motives: Integrating the functional approach and self-determination theory. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(3), 310–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2015.1135864>

Haivas, S., Hofmans, J., & Pepermans, R. (2012). Self-Determination Theory as a Framework for Exploring the Impact of the Organizational Context on Volunteer Motivation: A Study of Romanian Volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 41(6), 1195–1214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764011433041>

Hendriks, C. M., & Dzur, A. W. (2022). Citizens' Governance Spaces: Democratic Action Through Disruptive Collective Problem-Solving. *Political Studies*, 70(3), 680–700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720980902>

Hong, D. (2017). Exploring Informal Social & Cultural Activism in Singapore: A Study on Local Ground-up Initiatives. In *The ISEAS Working Paper Series (Issue 2)*.

Igalla, M., Edelenbos, J., & van Meerkerk, I. (2019). Citizens in Action, What Do They Accomplish? A Systematic Literature Review of Citizen Initiatives, Their Main Characteristics, Outcomes, and Factors. *Voluntas*, 30(5), 1176–1194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00129-0>

Igalla, M., Edelenbos, J., & van Meerkerk, I. (2020). What explains the performance of community-based initiatives? Testing the impact of leadership, social capital, organizational capacity, and government support. *Public Management Review*, 22(4), 602–632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1604796>

National Volunteer And Philanthropy Centre. (2021). Individual Giving Study 2021. <https://cityofgood.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NVPC-Individual-Giving-Study-2021-Report82.pdf>

Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio* (pp. 35–37). NFER-NELSON.

Sekulova, F., Anguelovski, I., Argüelles, L., & Conill, J. (2017). A 'fertile soil' for sustainability-related community initiatives: A new analytical framework. *Environment and Planning A*, 49(10), 2362–2382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17722167>

Shafik, M. (2021). *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract for a Better Society*. Princeton University Press.

Van Meerkerk, I., Kleinhans, R., & Molenveld, A. (2018). Exploring the durability of community enterprises: A qualitative comparative analysis. *Public Administration*, 96(4), 651–667. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12523>

<https://cityofgood.sg>

NVPC is the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre.

We are stewards of the City of Good vision for Singapore, where individuals, organisations and leaders come together to give their best for others. NVPC is the corporate brand and legal entity. City of Good is the vision we celebrate, aspire to, and seek to embody.