

Let ground-up initiatives be. Don't hold them to formal yardsticks

A void deck community library teaches us why such efforts should be judged on their own terms.

Robyn Tan

Azhar and his wife Yasmin wanted their children and others in the neighbourhood to read more. They also felt family members should spend time together, rather than alone with a screen. So in March 2025, the couple and fellow volunteers turned the void deck of their block in Yishun into a community library, furnished with books and furniture donated by neighbours. There was no five-year road map, just a shared observation that something was missing, and a willingness to do something.

"We wanted to develop a space where children can read, play and interact together," Azhar told *Berita Harian* in February 2026. His wife added that the library has become a place for parents to share experiences, form friendships, and rebuild a sense of neighbourliness many felt has quietly eroded.

The ground-up initiative was enhanced through a grant received in October 2025 from the GIC Thriving Communities Fund,

launched by the philanthropic organisation, The Majority Trust, which funded storytelling props, bonding activities and upcycling workshops.

It is a small, unassuming story. But it carries a lesson for the policymakers and funders now putting resources behind efforts like this one. A growing ecosystem of grants and funders has stepped forward to support ground-up efforts, from government-supported schemes to foundations. Among them is the SG Partnerships Fund, a \$50 million fund announced in Budget 2026 to catalyse citizen-led initiatives. This reflects a growing recognition that community-led efforts like Azhar's deserve institutional support.

But support can come with a tension. The more resources flow towards ground-up efforts, the stronger the pull to manage, measure and scale them the way formal services are managed, with needs assessments, key performance indicators (KPIs) and replicable models. Non-profit researchers call this mission drift, and it is well documented abroad, where funder requirements have

stripped community efforts of the qualities that made them work.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOGIC

Ground-up initiatives take many forms: mutual aid support, resident collectives, informal advocacy groups, and community-run spaces like the void deck library in Yishun. They run on a fundamentally different logic from formal services, and their value lies precisely in that difference.

The first defining feature is embeddedness. Ideas and solutions emerge from the lived experience of the people closest to the issue, rooted in existing social networks, shared histories, and local culture.

The second is the nature of the ties that hold these efforts together. Formal organisations run on instrumental ties: service agreements, service models and KPIs. Ground-up initiatives run on affective ties: shared values, trust and solidarity.

The third is governance. Formal organisations are vertical: decisions flow down from centralised leadership, and accountability runs upwards to funders. Ground-up initiatives tend to be horizontal, often decentralised, consensus-driven, run by volunteers who answer to

one another through trust rather than reporting lines.

We saw this during the Covid-19 pandemic, when mutual aid groups sprang up overnight through social media and neighbourhood ties, delivering meals and care packs faster than formal services could mobilise. Formal organisations, once set up, are built to endure. Ground-up initiatives carry no such weight, and can start, pause, pivot or wind down as needs shift. That is not a weakness but their strength.

WHY THE FORMAL LENS DOESN'T ALWAYS FIT

One temptation is to expect ground-up initiatives to function as though they were small-scale formal services: to identify unmet needs, close service gaps and be evaluated on measurable outcomes. But that misreads what drives these efforts. Azhar did not run a needs assessment before setting up the library; he simply acted on something he and his neighbours cared about.

To judge ground-up initiatives by whether they address professionally defined needs is to measure them against the wrong yardstick. When they do close a service gap, as in the pandemic, that is a welcome bonus, not a default expectation.

Another temptation is to put pressure on such initiatives to adopt short-term, funder-driven deliverables, formalise their structures and report against KPIs designed for formal services. This can hollow out the very qualities that made them work: their embeddedness, affective ties and decentralised structures.

A further temptation is to treat success as a formula to replicate. Find what worked in Yishun, copy it elsewhere. But success is tied to context: the neighbours, the relationships, the history of that residential block or that community.

The Block 137 library now hosts

storytelling sessions, upcycling workshops and bonding activities, drawing residents and corporate volunteers alike. None of this can be credited to the library alone; it rests on relationships that have already taken root. That showed earlier in 2026, when the Town Council needed to renovate the space: residents and volunteers moved the books and shelves to a temporary spot so storytelling could continue uninterrupted. Moments like that are easy to miss in a funding report, but they are what sustains the initiative: not a fixed programme, but a shared sense of ownership residents keep showing up for.

WHAT ACCOUNTABILITY CAN LOOK LIKE

None of this means withholding support or abandoning accountability. It means rethinking what accountability can look like for ground-up initiatives that operate on a different logic.

Philanthropy circles have a name for this: trust-based giving. It is built around multi-year, flexible funding and lighter-touch reporting, on the premise that those closest to a community know best what will work. It shifts the relationship from grantees reporting upwards to funders, towards a mutual partnership where feedback flows both ways.

Some of that is already happening here. The Majority Trust's GIC Thriving Communities Fund adopts a flexible, low-restriction approach, with straightforward reporting, preserving resident partners' agency in how they run their initiatives, while connecting them to wider networks across the neighbourhood.

What follows is a different set of questions. Not whether an initiative hit its targets, but whether it built community capacity, drew on local knowledge, created a sense of ownership, widened participation and inclusion, and enhanced learning and improvement. These questions are harder to reduce to a number, but they are closer to what these efforts actually do.

KNOWING WHEN TO LET GO

The most important shift is in how we think about a ground-up initiative's lifespan. These are not organisations with succession plans, and we should not hold them to that standard. If Azhar one day decides to close the library, whether to pursue something else or simply because life has taken him elsewhere, that is not a failure or a service gap left unaddressed. It should be met with gratitude for what was built.

If we want more stories like the one at Block 137, we need to resist the urge to formalise, professionalise and scale them where there is no need. Let them be sustained through relationships rather than KPIs, and allowed to end, or evolve, in their own time. That is not a lowering of standards. It is a recognition that some of the most meaningful community work was never meant to look like an institution.

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Formal organisations, once set up, are built to endure. Ground-up initiatives like this community library in Yishun carry no such weight, and can start, pause, pivot or wind down as needs shift. That is not a weakness but their strength, says the writer. PHOTO: THE MAJORITY TRUST