

GRSI COVID Response Series: Outcomes

Workshop 4: Mobilizing new sponsors in the time of COVID

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22 // 15:30 – 17:30 EST

57 participants from **8 countries** joined this final Workshop in the GRSI COVID response series. The focus was dynamic and forward looking: what does the disruption of this current moment mean for longer term planning in sponsorship, and mobilization of sponsors in particular?

Four leading experts shared their ideas and strategies for building and sustaining a unified, positive narrative in this difficult moment and beyond; developing effective communication and mobilization campaigns to push for program development and sponsor recruitment; and improving the refugee sector's skills in change management, community mobilization and communication outreach.

Contributors from [More in Common](#), [Amnesty International Australia](#), [Refugee 613](#), and [Amnesty International Ireland](#) led a discussion about the following strategies for sponsor mobilization:

1. Unified narrative development:

Contributors summarised the narrative arc of times of great social disruption, stressing that we are currently in a moment of great solidarity, where communities are united in gratitude towards heroic figures, including first responders. Such moments are often followed by a period of disillusionment, when people are fearful of resource scarcity. This means we are in a pivotal moment to build on the current wave of solidarity and gratitude. More in Common's [recent research](#) in the USA indicates that people are less moved by evidence-based arguments about open borders, but more moved by 'heroic narratives' that show the humanity and risk taken on by frontline workers. Refugees and migrants can play a pivotal role here, as many essential workers in our communities are migrants. The overarching narrative arising out of COVID-19 needs to be a cohesive story that emphasizes 'we are all in this together', not an 'us versus them' story that separates out the experiences of refugees and migrants.

Contributors discussed Amnesty Australia's approach to building a supportive narrative for community sponsorship through the '[My New Neighbour](#)' campaign. This emphasises the core message of 'neighbourhood', which complements the 'we are all in this together' unified narrative. The campaign aims to highlight the value of shared neighbourhood to Australian communities, the fact that we all rely on one another to thrive, and the fact that sponsored refugee neighbours are critical contributors: not only to their local communities but also the broader Australian 'neighbourhood'.

2. Developing effective mobilization campaigns:

Some contributors stressed that now is the time to take stock and prepare effective mobilization strategies, to ensure these are targeted and effective over the longer term. Contributors highlighted four components for an effective mobilization strategy to identify and reach new sponsors:

- 1) **Get to know your audience.** Audiences will be distinct in different locations. Assess who you are trying to recruit, and why? Collect data or use the data of other stakeholders to identify a target audience and assess its needs. This could also be a potential area for further funding.
- 2) **Stay visible.** The sponsorship sector needs to stay relevant and seen. In order to keep currency with local communities, we should stay engaged with the current sponsor ecosystem.
- 3) **Build new relationships.** It's a time to expand the circle of volunteers and stakeholders to leverage different skills, and to draw on new relationships to increase our impact.
- 4) **Create a ladder of commitment.** There is a willingness in the community for people to support others; however, largescale messages can be overwhelming in a time of chaos. We don't need to start by telling the whole sponsorship story every time or require a large degree of immediate commitment: rather, we could start a localized dialogue that can spread 'up the ladder' to reach a larger welcoming community. This could tap into the 'micro online communities' that exist now on Facebook or WhatsApp (for example, book clubs, church groups, family and friend groups, local donation collectives).

Contributors noted that the mobilization campaigns we embark on in the world of COVID-19 should be context sensitive and take into account the justified health concerns and experiences of trauma that new sponsor communities might have experienced. One suggestion was to embed societal trauma into the mobilization strategy, and for sponsorship to be part of the healing process.

It was noted that some newer sponsorship programs could be at real risk if there is no active sponsor recruitment in this period, particularly in contexts where it can take up to 18 months for sponsors to go from forming a group to welcoming a family. Given these risks, it may be important to continue sponsor recruitment in certain countries, while recognizing that it will need to be carefully nuanced and sensitive.

Contributors discussed the possibility of disaggregating audiences. For example, one receptive audience may be young professionals who may currently be time rich and have a deep interest in global issues and inequality. It was noted that group-specific outreach should be carefully targeted to needs and interests, and organizations should be wary of adopting a 'one size fits all' approach to community outreach.

3. Upskilling and capacity building:

Contributors highlighted the importance of upskilling in the areas of community engagement and mobilization, noting that this period is a great opportunity for the sponsorship sector—and the refugee protection sector more broadly—to deepen core knowledge on how to build community demand, how to mobilize communities and how to manage ongoing community engagement. These competencies are vital to ensure the expansion of sponsorship programs in the future. In addition, there is a need to build local capacity and in-house expertise in these areas or work closely with organizations who are experts in these fields. Civil society organizations do not have a consistent history of telling stories well and maintaining positive community engagement, but this is a chance for us to improve in these areas and bridge knowledge gaps between groups.