



# Choose Love

Insights for existing and future grassroots groups responding to times of crisis.

A study commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation  
and conducted by The Social Change Agency

This summary is for existing and future grassroots groups or volunteer organisations who would like insights into creating effective movements and campaigns, and the methods of scaling these up.

# Introduction

From the London Riots to Grenfell Tower, technology has enabled citizens and local communities to organise, fundraise and advocate in entirely new ways; forming social movements at a speed, scale and reach not seen before. These highly networked movements are often at the expense of the more traditional approaches used by civil society, cutting through accepted forms of governance, accountability as well as challenging power. Similar to start-ups in the financial and technology sectors, these new movements are disrupting the status quo, challenging accepted wisdom and shaping the future.

In 2015, Help Refugees began as a rapid self-initiated volunteer response to the “refugee crisis”. Their experience of scaling rapidly, their ability to mobilise volunteers very quickly and their use of crowdfunding have enabled Help Refugees to achieve high impact in a very short space of time. This new type of

grass-roots directed, networked response has been made possible through technology, crowdfunding, social media, and different approaches to charity and governance support.

In 2017, The Paul Hamlyn Foundation commissioned The Social Change Agency to undertake a case study of the rapid growth of Help Refugees. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation were keen to understand what lessons could be learnt for charitable foundations interested in providing more effective and timely funding and support to volunteer led initiatives which rapidly emerge, often as first respondents to a crisis. They also wanted to share these insights with other existing and future social movements and volunteer led responses to humanitarian crises.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html>

# Background

From 2014 onwards, the Western media began to draw attention to the huge amounts of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. In fact, in 2015, UNHCR reported that over 1,000,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe by sea, far surpassing the total number of refugees and migrants arriving in 2014<sup>1</sup>. This does not take into account arrivals from other European countries. In the month of October 2015 alone 218,394 arrived by sea - roughly the same as the entire total for 2014 (approx. 219,000), with 10,006 arriving in Greece on a single day. Children made up 20% of the total refugees. Nearly 3,735 people are believed to have died crossing the Mediterranean in 2015, not counting those who lost their lives during other parts of the journey. In 2016, the number of arrivals by seas fell significantly to 363,348 following the closure of the Turkey-Greece route. However the number of fatalities rose to 5,079 in the Mediterranean through 2016.

Civil society groups played a key role in responding to this crisis, with volunteer groups often acting as first responders to the needs of those arriving on the shores.

With the majority of UK press covering the 'Calais Jungle', watching this crisis unfold on the media, members of the public took it upon themselves to respond to it a movement the press have dubbed '*Volunteer Humanitarianism*'. On top of this, newly formed volunteer groups operated across borders. International and multilateral agencies were slower to respond - delayed by a lack of mandate being granted by EU states for both delivery and advocacy work.

In Calais specifically, there were few international non-governmental organisations or multilateral agencies in operation. French NGOs (L'Auberge de Migrants and others), and British volunteers have provided a large amount of support with volunteers mainly channelled through Help Refugees.

# Help Refugees

In the summer of 2015, a small group of four friends in London decided they wanted to do something to alleviate the worsening situation for refugees in Europe. They started a crowdfunding campaign, with the aim of raising £1,000 and filling a van with donations to take across to Calais. Within a week, they had raised £56,000, and were soon receiving 7,000 items every day.

On arrival in Calais, they found thousands of people in a camp with limited aid infrastructure such as water, sanitation, food, shelters, and any distribution points. Horrified by what they witnessed, they began a partnership with local French organisation L'Auberge des Migrants to coordinate volunteers and set up a system of aid distribution in the Calais 'Jungle' refugee camp. Help Refugees was born.

Fast forward to January 2018 and Help Refugees have helped over 722,500 people, managed over 15,000 volunteers, ranging from a scores to thousands at any one time, for a period of a few hours to a few years, and have up to 70 projects funded across Europe and the Middle East. They have established a fieldwork first, networked approach to giving aid, researching need at a local level, establishing local networks and working with local partners to deliver projects.

In just over 3 years, they have built a strong charitable brand over social media, recruiting over 17.5k Twitter followers, 34.6k Instagram followers, 56.5k Facebook supporters, and just under 400 YouTube subscribers. They count a whole list of celebrities such as ColdPlay, Paloma Faith, David Morrissey and Gillian Anderson among their supporters and have raised millions of pounds through individual donations and philanthropy.

## The following insights are based on the experience of Help Refugees:

### *i) The right message, at the right time, from the right people: tapping into public consciousness.*

Help Refugees decided to undertake what on the face of it might seem a fairly simple set of actions: raise some money, collect some donations, hire a van. Four things about this decision were key:

- **Timing.** In the summer of 2015, media attention on the Calais refugees was high, with a strong tension between dehumanising language and human stories. Distressing images were saturating the national press, and the crisis was high on the political agenda. Help Refugees' message #ChooseLove cut through the narrative of dehumanisation and fear to provide an alternative message of hope.
- **Providing a channel for action.** By setting up a crowdfunded appeal, and an Amazon Wishlist for physical and financial donations, Help Refugees gave a simple channel to members of the public to take action. They provided an avenue for anyone who wasn't sure how to help, but wanted to, and presented a simple action-focused alternative to donating to or volunteering with a large aid organisation.
- **Networks.** The individuals who founded Help Refugees have a strong social media presence, as well as being well connected within political, media and musical arenas. Personal connections with musicians, TV presenters and celebrities as well personal links with the festival community in the UK enabled the call to action to happen quickly, and to receive early support from high profile figures.

- **Skill sets.** The founding individuals had the right combination of skills sets to get the campaign and call to action off the ground, including digital Press, PR and Comms. The volunteers that joined through specialised networks brought specific skills too.

### ***ii) Filling a gap.***

Help Refugees met a pressing need that was not being fulfilled by other organisations. Being unhindered by the legal and financial structures of larger organisations, they were able to deliver aid quickly. Which was both a blessing and a curse as it was a much steeper learning curve pretty much in all areas.

### ***iii) Reactivity and flexibility.***

Early on, Help Refugees found themselves with a large amount of money, not tied to specific funding priorities or charitable aims. This enabled them to react to direct need on the ground and to be flexible to emerging requirements.

### ***iv) Authenticity of message.***

Help Refugees had a strong style of communications from the start – collecting personal stories, connecting these to practical action and building viral campaigns online. The fact they were filling a gap and were reactive and flexible, enabled real-time collection of stories and demonstration of impacts. Their storytelling was unfiltered and unhindered by any specific comms strategy or policy, other than to report back on what they saw - leading to authentic, values-led messages that resonated with the public. There was no message testing or conscious re-framing of issues, no opinion or analysis, they simply acted as a conduit and a witness for those who were in the camp.

### ***v) Willingness to learn and ask for help.***

It is clear the founders of Help Refugees were taken by surprise at the initial speed and scale of donations. They recognised the need for structural support and sought the help of Prism the Gift Fund for assistance with back office management and governance. Several interviewees point towards the humbleness and willingness of Help Refugees to learn as a key factor in its ability to scale and develop networks in the early stages.

### ***vi) Volunteer management and Safeguarding.***

At the beginning of the work in Calais, Help Refugees was managing over 15,000 volunteers, with little or no experience in volunteer management. The founders became acutely aware of the need to learn quickly, not only in terms of organising volunteers, but also in managing risk and safeguarding while supporting their needs. As the crisis evolved and became less of an emergency, volunteer needs have adapted to the situation on the ground.

Right from the beginning safeguarding for volunteers and beneficiaries were key. Very early on in the camp, Save the Children were asked to run a safeguarding workshop by Help Refugees to help establish safeguarding procedures where there were none. From day one, potential volunteers were asked to fill in an application form, alongside being offered advice on planning their trip, a set of frequently asked questions to manage their expectations, and given a code of conduct to ensure they understood what was expected of them.

### ***vii) Organisation and professionalism.***

The ability to organise and coordinate quickly and professionally was key to Help Refugees' capacity to deploy volunteers and resources. They built on this initial level of organisation to capture learning, undertake risk assessments and develop documentation over time.

# Top Tips for new organisations from Help Refugees

1. Don't have a remit - don't tie yourself down to one type of intervention. Be prepared to pivot.
2. Don't underestimate the value of everyone you work with and help; every single person is valuable and important so make sure you listen.
3. Invest in your team and lose control This is part of our magic, we really let people fly and give them responsibility.
4. Don't be afraid of speaking out against injustice; #Chooselove at all times.
5. Always diversify your funding - never get comfortable. Remember that bank starts at zero every day.
6. Be careful risk takers; don't be afraid to say no to anything - but if you do say yes ,make sure that you plan your exit if you need to get out.
7. Trust your instinct -Don't be scared to enter worlds you don't have experience in.
8. Always ask advice, never make a decision on your own and never stop wanting to learn.
9. Protect your reputation at all times and ensure you have thorough safeguarding, financial and impact reporting.
10. Leave your ego at the front door - Have integrity all the way.

# Conclusion

- The **speed** at which Help Refugees gained traction and formed as an organization was largely down to having the right message, at the right time, from the right people. Beyond this “good timing”, Help Refugees filled a gap not being met by existing organisations. It was able to operate flexibly and reactively, being unhindered by the legal and financial structures of larger, more established organisations.
- The **consistency** and **authenticity** of message communicated by Help Refugees has been key to its ability to connect with, and gain support from, members of the public. Help Refugees is a well-networked organisation, with natural advocacy skills – these factors have contributed not only to its ability to mobilise action from its supporters, but also to its ability to lobby for change and to make important connections on the ground.
- **Professionalism, organisational skills** and – most importantly – a willingness to learn and ask for help where needed, have been vital to Help Refugees’ ability to manage the unexpected influx of donations (in terms of time and money) in the early days and then to scale up activities.

the  
social  
change  
agency

The Social Change Agency is the leading consultancy for movement building. Specialising in community organising, crowdfunding, peer networks, innovation and systemic and organisational change.

[www.thesocialchangeagency.org](http://www.thesocialchangeagency.org)

@socialchangeag

phf Paul Hamlyn  
Foundation

Paul Hamlyn Foundation was established by Paul Hamlyn in 1987. Upon his death in 2001, he left most of his estate to the Foundation, creating one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK. Our mission is to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives. We have a particular interest in supporting young people and a strong belief in the importance of the arts. Social justice is the golden thread that links all our work.

[www.phf.org.uk](http://www.phf.org.uk)

@phf\_uk

For more information on this report please contact [esther@thesocialchangeagency.org](mailto:esther@thesocialchangeagency.org)

