

Primer

All hands on deck needed for social good



Community groups need data specific to the neighbourhoods they are based in for local solutions, as well as national data for larger initiatives. For instance, it is not known how much income an elderly person needs for his daily food, clothing, shelter and care needs. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

This is the fourth of 12 primers on various current affairs issues, published as part of the outreach programme for The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz.



Janice Tai

Few may remember the first Budget speech delivered shortly after Singapore gained independence in 1965.

It was all about survival.

Then Finance Minister Lim Kim San focused on the competition we faced as a country and the constraints we had to deal with.

There was a very strong emphasis on self-reliance and only one sentence to do with social subsidies: The now-defunct Mount Emily Girls' Home was to get 40 more places to house a total of 85 girls. In those early decades, there was very little explicit support for the poor and a very limited array of social policies.

But in the last decade, Singapore has made a more decisive shift to ensure that it remains an inclusive society.

To mitigate inequality and support the low-income segment, the Budgets in the past few years have introduced a range of support measures.

These include higher Workfare Income Supplement payouts, the introduction of a mega \$8 billion Pioneer Generation Package of healthcare subsidies and a lifelong universal health insurance, MediShield Life. Last year's Budget added another missing plank to the social safety net: a Silver Support allowance for the aged.

At the 2013 National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong touched on this rebalancing or tipping point of social policy changes in Singapore when he spoke of the need to "shift the balance" from nation building that was premised on "tough love" to one where the community and Government "have to do more to support individuals".

But building a fair and inclusive society has to go beyond government redistributive schemes and social policy interventions, urban planning, and developing new skills and economic capabilities, noted Deputy Prime Minister Tharman

Shanmugaratnam in a foreword of a recently published book, 50 Years Of Social Issues In Singapore.

"It is at its heart about achieving a stronger social compact for the future, where personal and collective responsibilities reinforce each other," he wrote.

So 50 years on, how successful have community groups been in working with the Government to help those in need?

MANY HELPING HANDS

In considering how the balance between state intervention and the space for ground initiatives is struck in Singapore, it is key to review the "Many Helping Hands" approach adopted here.

Then Acting Minister for Community Development Abdullah Tarmugi said in 1995 that the approach develops "self-reliance in a society that is robust, yet compassionate and caring" through "partnerships with concerned citizens, corporations, community organisations, religious groups and family members".

The "Many Helping Hands" concept involves the state that set the legal, regulatory and financial parameters, the voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) that directly serve beneficiaries, the volunteers, the donors and the larger community.

However, some observers have called the approach "Many Hired Hands" instead because of the dominant role of the Government in the social sector. Its dominance is in part due to the need of the charities to rely on heavy funding from the Government.

On average, governments elsewhere contribute about 35 per cent of the social sector's global revenue through grants and contracts to non-profit groups.

But our spending on the sector is much more generous. In 2013, government grants alone accounted for \$6.4 billion, or nearly half of the \$13.9 billion in receipts of the charity sector.

Government funding, given to family service centres, for example, is often offered for specific purposes and programmes that are aligned with the Government's direction or priorities.

The tension that may come about from too close an association between the regulatory authority and the funder was acknowledged when the National Council of Social

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NATIONAL CURRENT AFFAIRS QUIZ

About The Big Quiz

This primer is part of The Straits Times' initiative to discuss issues of national concern. Each Monday, the paper's journalists will address burning questions in the Opinion section, offering unique Singaporean perspectives on complex issues.

The primers, as well as five campus talks helmed by editors and correspondents, are part of this paper's outreach programme called The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz, nicknamed The Big Quiz.

The nationwide event, whose presenting sponsor is the Singapore Press Holdings Foundation, aims to promote the understand-

ing of civics among pre-university students.

Yishun Junior College won the first round of the year, held at In-nova Junior College on April 6.

The other talks by ST journalists and quiz rounds will be held on:

- April 20 at Victoria Junior College
- April 27 at Anglo-Chinese Junior College
- May 18 at River Valley High School
- July 20 at Raffles Institution

For more information, visit www.straitstimes.com/tags/the-big-quiz

Service gave up its regulatory role to the Charities Unit under the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports in 2010. Its then president Kwek Siew Jin said: "Wielding a stick on one hand and handing out sweets with the other is not an easy task and one that certainly does not breed confidence and trust."

However, though the Government is the major funder of the sector, it has taken pains to ensure that the charities and the public take ownership of social issues and causes through its evolving financing model.

In the early 1990s, the Government came up with a 50-50 funding formula where it provides half of the money needed for capital and recurrent costs, such as staff and programming costs. The agencies needed to raise the other half of the funds from the public for services such as residential homes, family services and day care centres for the elderly and disabled.

The aim was to build a foundation of shared responsibility where the public, people and private sectors work together to provide social services so as to foster community

involvement and active volunteerism.

Today, due to escalating infrastructural costs, the Government puts in at least 90 per cent of capital costs, but its portion of recurrent costs still largely remains the same.

Ms Ang Bee Lian, director of social welfare at the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), said: "This partnership in social service provision allowed the Government to increase and build on social welfare through social agencies using its own brand of strong state-supported welfare without making Singapore into a traditional welfare state."

This principle of shared responsibility still informs social service provision today.

Last year, the Government pledged \$500 million to match donations raised by the Community Chest and VWOs here dollar-for-dollar. Charities can use the extra money to build new centres or start new projects on top of the regular services.

The idea of the one-to-one matching is to get the charities and public involved in these efforts by

raising awareness of various issues and, in the process, raising their own donations.

GROUND-UP INNOVATIONS

But more needs to be done because there are areas of social and community interventions that the Government is not able to take on.

For example, VWOs can respond more nimbly and with more immediacy when it comes to emerging needs or gaps because they work directly on the ground.

They can provide niche and customised solutions to meet the diverse and unique needs of their beneficiaries.

Mr Laurence Lien, former Nominated MP and ex-chief executive of National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, said: "Where innovation and experimentation are needed, non-profit organisations are better placed at conducting and abandoning as needed."

So the Government can work with the community on this aspect by providing the resources and the coordination needed to scale up good ideas or feasible innovations.

An example would be an early detection and intervention programme – piloted by philanthropic group Lien Foundation, KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the PAP Community Foundation – in 2009 to help children with mild learning difficulties. The results were so encouraging that the Government came on board and scaled it up nationally years later.

Tsao Foundation has also spearheaded a \$5 million initiative in Whampoa to enable older people to age in their own flats and familiar neighbourhoods, with the help of a coordinated community-wide system of health and social support programmes and services.

Such an experiment would not have taken off without the \$4 million funding from the Tote Board – a statutory board of the Government – and the support of more than 20 government, healthcare and community agencies in the area.

LACK OF DATA

In order for community groups to come up with more innovative ideas to help those in need, one key obstacle that needs to be tackled is the lack of data.

Community groups need both localised data specific to the neighbourhoods they are based in to develop hyper-local solutions for that area, as well as national data to determine if such a problem is catching on elsewhere before rolling out initiatives on a larger scale. But there is a dearth of data on various social issues.

For instance, we do not know how much income an elderly person requires to meet his daily needs for food, clothing, shelter and care.

Neither do we know the geographic locations of Singapore's poorest households, or the proportion of working mothers.

ComCare – the Community Care Endowment Fund – was launched in 2005 as a key social safety net to support the needy in our midst.

But it was only a few months ago that the Government, for the first time, released a detailed breakdown of the profile of the households which received financial aid from the state.

If more data was collected and provided freely to community groups, all parties will stand to gain.

Community groups and the public also have a role in helping to aggregate this big data by reporting cases to the authorities.

MSF said it has been receiving more online alerts from the public in recent years that enabled it to locate people in need of assistance.

In an increasingly globalised and fast-paced world, social issues have become more complex and multifaceted. We need more than "many helping hands" to meet those challenges.

We need all hands on deck.

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you ask. we answer.

Have a burning question related to this week's primer topic?

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The Singapore Perspective

An example of community and Govt working together

Some kindergarten children cannot tell their teachers if they needed a toilet break while others simply refused to speak.

They have difficulty identifying the sounds associated with the letters of the English alphabet and reading simple English words.

These are children with mild learning or developmental needs who may fall through the cracks when they enter Primary 1 in a

mainstream school and face difficulties in keeping up with their peers.

But an early detection and intervention programme for slower learners, including those with mild autism, speech development delays or motor-skill coordination problems, has given them a leg up.

In 2009, Lien Foundation, KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the PAP Community

Foundation (PCF) piloted a three-year programme in 25 PCF kindergartens in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

The programme was so successful that the Government adopted aspects of it and scaled it up nationally in 2012.

The project later became known as the development support programme and about 2,000 children in mainstream

pre-schools have been enrolled in it, at a cost of \$4 million a year.

So one way the Government can work with the community in helping the vulnerable is by providing the resources and the coordination needed to scale up good ideas or feasible innovations.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development, which runs the programme now, found that with just a one-hour session each week with learning support educators, a group of about 290 children aged four to six improved nearly 100 per cent in language, literacy, handwriting and social skills.

It also found that mild learning delays can be arrested through early intervention.

Through repeated, regular learning cues, children can level up

to be equal with their peers.

The initial pioneering concept had a mobile team comprising a paediatrician, a psychologist, therapists and other learning support providers visit the pre-schools to offer therapy to the pupils, advice to teachers and guidance to parents.

Its key objective was to help children with milder development needs within the school itself. This early intervention forestalls the need for them to be referred to doctors or therapists in hospitals and be put through a long wait for their appointments.

Back then, children with mild developmental needs can easily go unnoticed because only those with severe disabilities have programmes serving them.

Doctors estimate that about 5 per cent to 6 per cent – at least 2,000 children – from each cohort of pre-schoolers have a range of developmental problems that could trip them up as they make their way through the education system.

"The Government and funding agencies should create the right incentives and environment to encourage stakeholders to practise the art of the possible, and not just tinker with what is permissible," said Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive officer of Lien Foundation.

"Such experiments, innovation and collaboration must be anchored on interdependence, mutual trust and respect."

Janice Tai