

Ex-Offenders and the Singapore Aftercare Sector IPS-CSU Case Study Workshop

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“IN OUR country, one small mistake can have very severe consequences, and that is a big part of the problem.” – Gerard Ee, Executive Director of Beyond Social Services (BSS).

Given the changing profile of drug offenders—younger, and more educated—how can Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in Singapore’s aftercare sector provide the best for their clients, whilst operating within the larger policy and legal context that takes a zero tolerance approach to drugs?

This was the central question examined at the IPS-Case Studies Unit of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (CSU) Workshop on 23 March 2018. The workshop was based on an IPS-CSU Case Study, “[Community-Based Approaches to the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Drug Offenders](#)”. Funded under [Tote Board’s Case Study Collaborator programme](#), the case was written with the aim of building capacities and capabilities in Singapore’s People sector. CSU wrote two cases (appended in the full report), giving a historical overview of Singapore’s War on Drugs and Singapore’s Penal System for Drug Offenders, while IPS presented a case study on the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) examining their challenges as a VWO in the aftercare sector.



Photo [credit](#).

“These cases are for learning purposes,” shared Dr Justin Lee, one of the co-investigators of the project. Referring to the [Harvard Business Review's Case Study publications](#), Dr Lee said that the SANA case study was meant to provoke the question, “if you were in the driver’s seat, what would you do?”

Around 20 people from the aftercare sector, including Halfway Homes, regulatory authorities such as the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), SANA, and other VWOs attended the session.

Drugs and Singapore: the historical legacy and penal system

Mr Hawyee Auyong from CSU, who oversaw the writing of the CSU cases, said that the cases focused on a historical overview Singapore’s war on drugs and how the penal system processes drug offenders, as these were necessary to understand SANA’s strategic position.

“Many inmates in Singapore have drug antecedents,” pointed out Mr Auyong. “To understand policy implications for ex-offenders and the penal system, you must therefore first look at the war on drugs and its history.”

Mr Auyong highlighted three key points from the cases:

- 1) The Misuse of Drugs Act was passed in 1973 and has gone through several amendments that mark a progressively punitive stance in Singapore’s war on drugs, with the death penalty as a key deterrent of drug smuggling and where repeat drug offenders face long term incarceration.
- 2) These legislative changes led to the expansion of the prison population, and also catalysed the Singapore Prisons Service to focus on rehabilitation and reintegration.
- 3) Currently, about 70 percent of inmates currently incarcerated or admitted to Singapore Prisons Service’s Drug Rehabilitation Centres are those convicted of drug-related offences.

Mr Auyong and Mr Ee of BSS pointed out that it is tempting to consider crime and drug abuse as the result of individuals making bad moral choices, but the problem is also structural because offenders typically come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are trapped in cycles of poverty.

Community Approaches to Prevention, Rehabilitation and Reintegration: Findings from the SANA Case Study

Referring to findings from his fieldwork at SANA, Dr Lee noted that while strong ties to enforcement agencies and alignment with the zero tolerance message towards drugs have allowed SANA to gain the trust and resourcing from the government, SANA has to actively carve out an approach to engage with ex-drug offenders (i.e. the clients) and the larger community who may be resistant to such an approach.

As a result, SANA’s preventive programmes have sought to engage the public and youths in particular with a softer approach compared to the harsher enforcement message of the CNB

or the SPS. SANA also empowered ex-offenders who were role models to lead peer-support groups so that they can help those on a similar journey.

“It’s like getting your clients to be part of the solution,” explained Dr Lee. However, while community approaches deliver better outcomes for the clients, there are a lot of trade-offs to consider—for instance, it is a lot harder to retain volunteers and expect consistent performance compared a paid professional.

Mr Abdul Karim, Executive Director of SANA agreed, saying that it was challenging to fully engage diverse community partners. For example, SANA attempted to reduce the stigma surrounding drugs through a rebranding effort in 2015 by truncating their name (Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association) to the acronym, “SANA”, removing explicit reference to drugs while still retaining their corporate identity. Such stigmatisation creates real barriers, as schools may not want a drug-prevention programme on their premises in case it creates the impression that their students have drug problems. Therefore, SANA’s Preventive Drug Education programmes have to be marketed carefully and creatively, with an emphasis on “decision making” aspects over a strictly “anti-drug” message.

Case discussion: Paradigm shifts in thinking

To elucidate insights on the case study, Mr Ee and Ms Sim Phei Sunn, Principal Consultant at the Institute of Leadership & Organisation Development, Civil Service College, spoke as expert panellists. In considering trade-offs, such as achieving immediate demands versus prioritising long-term organisational goals, there is a tendency to view them as an “either-or” trade-off, noted Ms Sim. A more empowering alternative, particularly where allocating resources and supporting ex-offenders are concerned, is to reframe them as “both-and”.

“We frame many things as trade-offs to be resolved, like it is win-lose either this or that. Why not see them as a polarity or tension to be managed? For example, recognising that SANA needs to *both* deliver to meet today’s demands, *and* start building new capabilities for tomorrow, how will that change decisions on priorities, programmes, and actions to take?” said Ms Sim.

Reflecting on the two CSU cases, Mr Ee of BSS shared that reading them had sent chills down his spine. “The context has changed but we still base our decisions on [outdated] contexts from many years ago.” His reflections offered another paradigm shift to consider that Singaporeans are over reliant on authorities to solve problems rather than think of how they could help. He pointed out that, neighbours and communities have many strengths they can tap into to solve their own problems.

One participant raised the question of how the community can help people who have overdosed on drugs because that would require professionals like medical doctors. In response, Mr Ee asked, “Can’t you just care for a friend directly? Why don’t you consider that you yourself may be the expert to help?” He added that alternatives such as voluntary admission rehab clinics, should be considered.



Mr Gerard Ee, Executive Director of Beyond Social Services, speaking at the IPS-CSU workshop.

“It takes a village to raise a child—so we try to build that village, and see what’s going well and not well in that village,” Mr Ee explained.

Final reflections: more work to be done

To conclude the session, Dr Lee invited all the participants to share their reflections on what had struck them during the workshop. Mr Ee’s remarks, in particular, inspired many, with one participant remarking, “let’s look at what we can do and have the guts to do it.” Another participant from a halfway home, who had worked in the aftercare sector for more than 20 years, said that “after today, I feel like there I have a lot more work to do.”

Participants expressed gratitude towards those VWOs in the aftercare sector, noting that the work was truly tough but necessary. In return, Mr Karim thanked all the participants for the platform to discuss difficult topics respectfully. Dr Lee reported that he was enriched by the discussion, “It’s always, ‘what can the government do?’ But why can’t we do it?”

Click [here](#) to read the full report, “Community Approaches to the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Drug Offenders: The Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association”, as well as the two cases presented by the Case Studies Unit, in the Annex.

If you wish to contribute to the existing knowledge on ex-offenders or other issues in the Singapore's social sector, please email Dr Justin Lee justin.lee@nus.edu.sg to find out more about the [Wiki SocialCollab](#) initiative.

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