

Strengthening racial and religious cohesion through the Harmony Circles Refresh Workgroup



Singapore prides itself as a multi-racial and multi-religious society. In a recent multi-country survey, most Singaporean respondents asserted that “having people of different religions, ethnic groups and cultures makes Singapore a better place to live.”¹

The city-state boasts a long history of national initiatives to promote and maintain racial and religious harmony. Among these is the establishment of Racial and Religious Harmony Circles (“Harmony Circles”) to create platforms that foster interracial and interfaith understanding at the community level.²

This case study explores the refresh of the Harmony Circles led by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) to ensure that they remain relevant and effective amidst current and future challenges such as the rise of social media and shifts in social attitudes. Specifically, the case study focuses on the refresh workgroup and how the workgroup members were empowered to freely discuss difficult matters and co-create solutions.

Harmony Circles: Fostering racial and religious cohesion since 2002

Formerly known as Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs), Harmony Circles seek to be “networks of trust that unite people regardless of race or religion.”³ Acting as enablers, connectors and peacekeepers, they have been instrumental in strengthening social cohesion in the country.⁴

Harmony Circles have expanded in scale and reach since their establishment in 2002. In the span of two decades, the number of Harmony Circles in Singapore almost tripled – from 37 in 2002 to 93 in 2023. With a presence in every constituency in Singapore, the 93 Harmony Circles have more than 1,700 members made up of religious leaders, grassroots leaders and community partners. Since 2002, Harmony Circles have collectively engaged over 90% of all religious organisations in Singapore and have organised over 3,500 events, ranging from local interracial and interfaith dialogues, community celebrations and heritage trails, to racial and religious harmony campaigns on social media.⁵



1 William Miner, “In Singapore, religious diversity and tolerance go hand in hand”, Pew Research Center, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/06/in-singapore-religious-diversity-and-tolerance-go-hand-in-hand/>

2 MCCY, “Racial and Religious Harmony Circle”, 2023, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/sector/initiatives/racial-and-religious-harmony-circle>

3 Racial and Religious Harmony Circles, “Many Beliefs, One Future”, 2023, <https://www.harmonycircle.sg/#:~:text=The%20Racial%20and%20Religious%20Harmony,regardless%20of%20race%20or%20religion>

4 MCCY, “Racial and Religious Harmony Circle”, 2023.

5 MCCY, “Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh”, 2023.

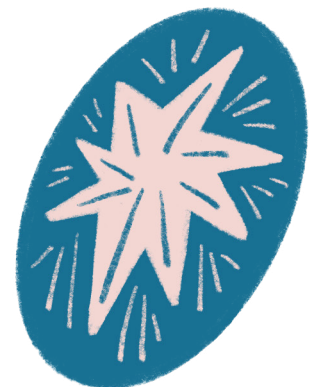
This case study was written by John Emmanuel Villanueva, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, with contributions from and interviews with Singapore’s Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth (MCCY). The case is sponsored by MCCY. The case does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organisation nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

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MCCY, through its Community Relations and Engagement Division (CRED), supports the work of Harmony Circles by providing secretariat and financial assistance.



Marymount Harmony Circle's Racial Harmony Frisbee Tournament in July 2023
Source: MCCY



The Harmony Circles refresh workgroup

MCCY initiated the refresh in 2021. It was through this process that IRCCs were renamed to what they are known now: Racial and Religious Harmony Circles or Harmony Circles.⁶

MCCY kickstarted the refresh process with a workshop with Harmony Circles leaders in November 2021.⁷ The leaders underscored gaps in the current operating model, pointing out that Harmony Circles should have (1) more regular and impactful programmes, (2) better diversity in membership that reflected the communities they served, (3) more structured training and capability development for members and (4) greater public visibility, offline and online, to better engage different communities.⁸



Harmony Circles leaders discussing during the Leaders' Workshop | Source: MCCY

6 Edwin Tong, "Refreshing our Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs)", transcript of opening address delivered at the IRCC 20th Anniversary Celebration, July 30, 2022, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/speeches/2022/aug/refreshing-our-inter-racial-and-religious-confidence-circles-irccs>

7 Carol Ho (MCCY-CRED), interview by John Emmanuel Villanueva, October 3, 2023.

8 MCCY, "Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh", 2023.

Following the workshop, the organising team at MCCY issued an open call for Harmony Circles leaders to join the refresh workgroup. They also looked beyond the Harmony Circles and invited influential community leaders and activists in the race and religion space to pave way for future collaborations between community partners and the Harmony Circles beyond the workgroup engagements. A total of 28 persons were eventually selected, of whom 19 were from the Harmony Circles. They were chosen based on their experience, affiliation, gender, age and commitment to participate in workgroup engagements, with an emphasis on diverse representation. The workgroup composition ensured there was familiarity with the current operating model of Harmony Circles as well as fresh perspectives, especially from women and youths.⁹



9 Ibid

10 MCCY, "Summary of Refresh Workgroup Engagement Session Discussions", 2023.

11 Joann Heng (MCCY-CRED), interview by John Emmanuel Villanueva, October 3, 2023.



Workgroup members discussing in one of the engagement sessions | Source: MCCY



The workgroup engagement sessions

From March to May 2022, the workgroup members met over six engagement sessions with the following goals: (1) to collectively envision what Harmony Circles would mean to them as community leaders, as well as to all Singaporean citizens in the near future; (2) to identify challenges in attaining their vision; and (3) to develop recommendations and implement action plans.

The workgroup was guided by Advisers Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth Alvin Tan and Grassroots Adviser to Ang Mo Kio GRC Nadia Samdin, with the organising team facilitating all the engagement sessions. Except for the first session, all other engagement sessions were held in various places of worship, such as the An-Nahdhah Mosque and the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, to give workgroup members the chance to visit and get to know the place of worship of other faiths.



The organising team, workgroup members and advisers Minister of State Tan and Ms Samdin during Session 1 | Source: MCCY

In session one, the workgroup deliberated and agreed on their collective aspirations for racial and religious harmony in Singapore and the role of Harmony Circles in fulfilling such aspirations. To this end, the workgroup agreed that Harmony Circles needed government support to improve their effectiveness and expand their stakeholder reach.

Taking off from the consensus in session one, the workgroup divided themselves into seven subgroups in session two: Five subgroups focused on stakeholders that they believe Harmony Circles needed to engage better: youths (two subgroups); women; new citizens and clan associations; and minority religions and non-religious groups. These subgroups concentrated on the challenges of engaging their respective stakeholders through Harmony Circles programmes and activities; the other two subgroups focused on issues related to the general effectiveness of Harmony Circles, such as capability development for members and establishing a coordinating council. Each subgroup was supported by a facilitator from the organising team.

In sessions three to five, the seven subgroups zeroed in on crafting and refining their action plans, statements of objectives, pilot programmes and outcome measures. The subgroups presented their action plans to Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong in the last session.



Workgroup members presenting their action plans to Minister Tong | Source: MCCY

Action Plans by the Workgroup¹²

Of the various action plans, the Harmony Circle Coordinating Council and the Youth Taskforce garnered great interest and were successfully established to improve coordination and harness youth participation across the Harmony Circles.

¹² MCCY, "Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh", 2023.

Harmony Circle Coordinating Council

The council is tasked to set directions, promote closer coordination and foster sharing of good practices among the 93 Harmony Circles in Singapore. The council is also mandated to lead national-level programmes. The pioneer Chairperson and members of the council were officially appointed on 27 May 2023.



The Harmony Circle Coordinating Council, together with Minister Tong | Source: MCCY

Youth Taskforce

Comprising youths from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Harmony Circles, civic groups, Institutes of Higher Learning), the group is tasked to spearhead youth-centric initiatives at the grassroots level to promote interracial and interreligious unity. The taskforce also aims to attract more youth leaders to join Harmony Circles. On 19 November 2022, the taskforce organised “Youth Leaders UnConference on Developing Harmony Circles” to discuss the challenges and opportunities in bolstering youth leadership within Harmony Circles and beyond. The taskforce also held the inaugural “Youth Leadership Workshop” and “The Radical Shift: A Counter-Terrorism Seminar for Youths” between July and September 2023. The Youth Taskforce started out with just four members from one of the original youth subgroups of the refresh workgroup. After the training programmes, the membership significantly increased to a total of 30 members.¹³



Youth Leadership Workshop at Haw Par Villa in July 2023 | Source: MCCY



13 Muhd Izhar Mohd Roslan (MCCY-CRED), interview by John Emmanuel Villanueva, October 3, 2023.



Empowering the workgroup members

The organising team empowered the workgroup members in a variety of ways. In terms of the engagement design, elements and principles of citizens' jury and design thinking were incorporated to co-create objectives and recommendations.

Taking reference from citizens' juries, the workgroup met over six days in a three-month period to thoroughly deliberate the issues surrounding racial and religious harmony in Singapore and how Harmony Circles can improve. The workgroup acted as a 'jury' in issuing findings and final recommendations.¹⁴

The facilitators incorporated design thinking by adopting a problem-solving philosophy throughout the engagement sessions – one that revolved around empathy, encouraged an iterative process and championed human-centric solutions.¹⁵ Consistent with the key stages of design thinking, engagement sessions one to three focused on developing objectives and outcome measures, sessions four and five concentrated on ideation, while session six was devoted to prototyping and implementation.¹⁶

Workgroup members were also empowered to take collective ownership of the deliberation process. The organising team devolved the decision-making power to workgroup members to identify and prioritise issues and challenges. Individual members could also decide which of the seven subgroups to join. This approach allowed members to comfortably share novel ideas and suggestions (e.g. revamping Harmony Circles' internal structure; structured training for Harmony Circles members; and outreach activities).¹⁷

The organising team used activities such as "Story of Us" and "Gallery Walk" to facilitate group discussions. In the "Story of Us" activity, facilitators asked thematic questions and workgroup members had to respond with their personal stories, perspectives and experiences on the ground. The workgroup members were encouraged to speak freely and to listen intently to others. Meanwhile, the "Gallery Walk" allowed the subgroups to showcase their projects. This activity facilitated the gathering of suggestions and feedback from members.¹⁸

14 Victorian Local Governance Association, "Deliberative approaches 101", 2016, <https://www.vlga.org.au/sites/default/files/v4-Deliberative-approaches-101-handout.pdf>

15 Pritam Kumar Sinha, "Design Thinking: A Novel Approach to Shape Public Policy and Smart Governance", June 20, 2023, <https://medium.com/@pritamkumarsinha/design-thinking-a-novel-approach-to-shape-public-policy-and-smart-governance>

16 MCCY, "Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh", 2023.

17 Ibid

18 Nur Diyana Mohd Suhaimi (MCCY-CRED), interview by John Emmanuel Villanueva, October 3, 2023.



Asynchronous digital platforms proved to be very helpful. The organising team used *Howspace* to facilitate the workgroup discussions in all six sessions. Howspace¹⁹ is an online collaboration platform where workgroup members could provide their views on the topics being discussed, while the organising team could view their responses in real time. It also allowed the organising team and workgroup members to prioritise issues for discussion during later meetings.²⁰

Reflections from workgroup members

In their reflections, several workgroup members recognised the importance of the Harmony Circles Refresh workgroup in fostering shared responsibility between the government and citizens for racial and religious harmony in Singapore. In the words of workgroup member Liyana Rosli, the refresh workgroup provided “a space that allows for an open and honest discussion and offers constructive criticism to make improvement for IRCC (and) identify areas we can work collectively.”²¹

Most of the members enjoyed their experience in the workgroup. Despite initial challenges owing to differences in opinions, they moved forward by respecting each other’s ideas and creating solutions together. The process renewed old friendships and forged new ones – beyond the formalities of the workgroup engagements. Outside of the scheduled workgroup sessions, members found time to have coffee together. Since the final workgroup session in May 2022 coincided with Hari Raya Puasa, members initiated a celebration where everyone (including the organising team) dressed up in traditional attire.²²



19 Howspace is an online collaboration platform that enables organisations to bring people together to learn, collaborate and arrive at collective decisions to drive change. The platform “helps guide shared journeys, make sense of large-scale conversations, and ensure that everyone has a role in creating impact.” (Howspace, “About us”, no date, <https://fi.linkedin.com/company/howspace>)

20 MCCY, “Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh”, 2023.

21 MCCY, “Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh”, 2023.

22 Carol Ho, October 3, 2023.

23 Joann Heng, October 3, 2023.

Workgroup members expressed appreciation that MCCY provided an avenue for their voices to be heard. They explained that joining the workgroup gave them the opportunity to talk about the pain points they were facing, their proposed interventions and their ideas on how to make the Harmony Circles better and more relevant.²³



The workgroup members, together with Minister Tong and workgroup adviser Ms Samdin, attended session six in their traditional attire | Source: MCCY



Reflections from the organising team²⁴

The organising team shared the following takeaways about the refresh workgroup:

Selecting workgroup participants with high levels of commitment

Given the tight timeline of engagement, having participants with high levels of commitment proved critical to the success of the Harmony Circles Refresh. Workgroup members voluntarily held meetings beyond the dedicated workgroup sessions. Some of them even posted about their involvement with the refresh workgroup on their social media accounts.

Empowering workgroup participants to drive co-creation and delivery of solutions

Giving participants the autonomy to identify and prioritise their concerns allowed them to comfortably voice their suggestions and confidently implement their recommendations through pilot programmes, in coordination with MCCY and other stakeholders.

Involving workgroup advisers

Inviting advisers to attend the workgroup sessions allowed them to better understand the challenges faced. They were able to offer suggestions and provide support as well as better appreciate the progress of the discussions among the subgroups.



24 MCCY, "Racial & Religious Harmony Circle Refresh", 2023; details provided by CRED team during interview on October 3, 2023.



Minister Tong providing feedback to workgroup members' action plans during the final engagement session | Source: MCCY

What lies ahead

While the engagement sessions officially ended in May 2022, the organising team continued to keep in touch with the workgroup members. The team currently provides support to the seven subgroups in scaling up their respective pilot programmes. Beyond 2023, the Youth Taskforce aims to follow through their youth leadership blueprint that focuses on harnessing leadership capabilities, increasing membership and engaging youths through social cohesion programmes. The organising team looks forward to partnering with the Coordinating Council to better support the Harmony Circles in organising more meaningful activities and engagements.

