IPS Institute of
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Social Service Research Network 2015: Mobilising Assets to Meet Social Needs

By Justin Lee, *IPS Research Fellow* and
Zhang Jiayi, *IPS Research Assistant*

There is increasing recognition that different individuals and groups can come together to address the social needs of Singaporeans. Beyond voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) that provide services directly to needy communities, academics, designers, community artists, game developers, faith-based organisations, corporate social responsibility units of large companies and other community or professional groups can also play a part. These different "asset classes" can bring distinctive skill sets, expertise and value in addressing complex social problems that cannot be solved by any single provider. Mobilising these assets to meet the needs of the community will help to complement formal social services provided by organisations.

The Social Service Research Network 2015 meeting, co-organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) on 27 March 2015, considered how these different assets could be mobilised. The session started with an introduction of a new NCSS Research Portal, which consolidates research papers written by Singapore-based VWOs and researchers, making it easier for service providers to access completed research projects.

This was followed by a panel presentation by five speakers. The speakers — representatives from academic institutions, research centres, community arts and VWOs — asked a series of questions: What are the various assets that are already contributing to the community? What asset classes have great potential that can be brought into the fold? What are their interests and strengths? What challenges do they face in working with social service agencies?

Panel Presentation and Discussion

Mr Gerard Ee, Executive Director of Beyond Social Services, shared how his organisation engages the community they work with. He said he believed that the main ingredient for any social programme to succeed is that its intended participants must have a genuine stake in its success. Through a Participatory Action Research process, the community is rallied around a common issue they face and they are empowered to address the needs that they have identified. This is done by providing support to the community to develop an action plan, making use of research to generate informed solutions, and linking them with necessary resources.

Dr Ijlal Naqvi, Assistant Professor of sociology from the Singapore Management University, characterised the nature of community engagement in Singapore. Although there are platforms for participation in Singapore, he pointed out that the mode of engagement is not really deliberative because decision-making power still rests with bureaucrats and not the community. While this increases the efficiency of arriving at solutions, it diminishes the sense of ownership participants feel over the decisions made. Therefore it is important to balance both efficiency and ownership.

Associate Professor David Ip from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University spoke extensively about how youth are important community assets whose voices are often ignored and marginalised, thereby becoming apathetic because their views are not considered for making policy decisions. The new generation of youth who are Internet-savvy are already self-mobilised, as evident from the recent Umbrella movement in Hong Kong. He suggested that young people could be empowered, respected and trusted as legitimate actors in the socio-political sphere.

Ms Victoria Gerrard, Executive Director of O-Lab from the Singapore University of Technology and Design spoke about the four principles of community engagement used by her design lab to help social service providers generate solutions. The four principles are: (1) acknowledge that people have good intentions when proposing their ideas; (2) encourage questions because they are useful to help the group collectively shape and negotiate their beliefs; (3) keep plans flexible because things may change; and (4) find work-arounds when projects get stuck.

Ms Ko Siew Huey, Co-Founder of ArtsWok — an intermediary organisation that helps empower community artists to work in the social service sector — shared how arts can be an important force and medium for social change. Ms Ko stressed the importance of understanding the complex interests and relationships present in any community, and the foundation for social change requires the restoration of broken relationships. This principle underlies the projects that they undertake, including an experiential project called "Both Sides Now" that seeks to educate the community on the significance of making end-of-life choices. Despite the stigma attached to talk about dying, she explained how authentic community engagement can be achieved through the use of art forms such as puppet shows, forum theatre, videos and other art installations.

Breakout Session and Discussion

The participants were then divided into four separate groups for policy-makers, VWOs and other participants to discuss how they might better utilise and mobilise other alternative community assets to address social problems faced in their subsector. The groups included seniors; persons with disabilities; mental well-being; and children and youth.

The discussions in these groups will be documented and published in a future IPS Exchange Series publication.

Justin Lee and Zhang Jiayi are respectively a Research Fellow and a Research Assistant with the Society and Identity cluster at IPS.

NCSS and the following IPS Research Assistants contributed to the report: Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer, Wong Fung Shing and Ng Yan Hao.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg

Lee Kuan Yew
School *of* Public Policy
National University of Singapore