



Breakout Session 2: Encouraging Research and Innovation in Philanthropic Work

By Lyn Cai

Background

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the inaugural International Conference on Societies of Opportunity on 29 and 30 April 2025. The conference is a platform for international policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to exchange ideas on creating access to opportunities and fostering social mobility.

This breakout session focused on research and innovation in philanthropic work, aiming to foster social innovation to enhance social mobility and community development.

The session's speakers were Ms. Joanne Ng, Head of Community Networks and Partnerships at Temasek Foundation, and Mr. David Thian, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Quantedge Foundation. Mr. Bruce Liew, Director of Capability Implementation and People Strategy at the National Council of Social Services, moderated the session.

Strategic Vision for Philanthropy

Ms. Ng began her presentation by emphasising Temasek Foundation's overarching mission to "inspire lives for every generation." The foundation is dedicated to driving systemic change aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in critical areas such as climate action, public health, community resilience, and education. The Foundation's flagship initiatives, includes the deployment of innovative technology-driven solutions to combat climate change, efforts to strengthen pandemic preparedness and response capabilities, and

programs designed to empower youth through education, skills training, and leadership development. The Foundation subscribes to a collaborative “4P partnerships” framework, which brings together diverse stakeholders across the dimensions of “People, Planet, Peace, and Progress”, to leverage expertise, resources, and networks to scale impact sustainably and effectively both within Singapore and throughout the broader region.

Temasek Foundation's Catalytic Approach

Ms. Ng shared Temasek Foundation's catalytic approach to creating social impact, which centred on deploying catalytic capital — philanthropic funds used as flexible risk capital to support innovative solutions that may not yet attract traditional investment. She described catalytic capital as funding intended to encourage experimentation, explore new ideas, and identify promising pathways. This approach allows the foundation to support initiatives addressing underserved or emerging needs, helping to reduce initial risks and build evidence for solutions that can be scaled to encourage other investors and stakeholders to participate later, increasing overall funding and impact.

Ms. Ng highlighted the Human Donor Milk Bank, Singapore's first and only milk bank, as a key example of catalytic funding driving innovation and scale. Established in partnership with KK Hospital in 2017, the Milk Bank provides safe donor milk to vulnerable infants and has since expanded to serve all hospitals across Singapore. Innovations such as refrigerated milk lockers have improved donor convenience and milk collection efficiency, enabling 24/7 access. By June 2023, the programme had benefited thousands of infants and demonstrated how strategic funding and community support can successfully scale impactful solutions.

Moreover, the foundation's catalytic approach involves leveraging innovative financing tools such as recoverable grants and pay-for-success models, ensuring the sustainability and scalability of their programmes. Ms. Ng emphasised the importance of engaging government and other stakeholders early in the development stages to ensure alignment on policies, regulations, and financial sustainability. This proactive engagement was critical in the Milk Bank's transition to mainstream support, with the Ministry of Health now funding milk for needy families. This transition exemplifies how initial catalytic funding can de-risk key players, bringing them along the journey to ensure sustained impact and systemic change.

The Milk Bank's success has garnered international attention, with interest from other countries keen to replicate the model. Ms. Ng mentioned that international leaders visited to learn more about the initiative, and a partnership has been established with Philippines to enhance their own milk bank systems, aiming to improve nutrition and lower infant mortality rates. These efforts illustrate Temasek Foundation's commitment to fostering sustainable projects that not only address immediate needs but also build capacity for long-term systemic change.

Ms. Ng shared another impactful initiative—the Project Silver Screen, a functional health screening programme for seniors, which leveraged partnerships with Temasek portfolio companies to rally support and validate its societal value. Project Silver Screen focused on age-related health conditions that can be managed or prevented through early detection and

intervention. Despite the availability of affordable screening programmes, uptake rates among seniors remained suboptimal, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. By building a network of place-based volunteers, Temasek Foundation aimed to enhance trust and social capital within communities, thereby improving participation in health promotion activities. The programme successfully brought together key partners, including public agencies and private companies, to facilitate comprehensive screenings and follow-up services. This initiative exemplifies Temasek Foundation's strategic efforts to create a stronger community ecosystem by engaging diverse stakeholders around common goals, ultimately ensuring that successful programmes can continue beyond initial funding phases.

Driving Social Mobility Forward

Mr. Thian from Quantedge Foundation shared the organisation's concentrated efforts in enhancing social mobility within Singapore. He elaborated on their strategic approach, which involves deploying philanthropic capital in targeted ways to catalyse change and uncover evidence-based insights, highlighting their efforts to define problems, catalyse innovations, and rally community support for long-term impact.

Mr. Thian stressed the importance of understanding social mobility as a complex issue that requires both factor-based and sector-based strategies. Factor-based approaches focus on elements like mentorship and early childhood interventions, aiming to bolster individual capabilities and upward mobility. He underscored the importance of integrating research into their strategy, engaging regularly with academics and ground practitioners to identify key drivers of social mobility. Mr. Thian acknowledged their admiration for keynote speaker Prof Raj Chetty's work, indicating that his research is both wide-ranging and collaborative.

Quantedge Foundation's sector-based approach involves building the sector's capacity to innovate and develop solutions. Mr. Thian pointed out the inherent challenges, such as finite resources, which necessitate maximising impact through strategic interventions. They aim to enable the sector to better define problems, identify gaps, and understand the landscape of social mobility, which is crucial for developing effective solutions.

One significant challenge Mr. Thian mentioned was measuring social mobility. Conventional methods, such as tracking generational income pairs, are insufficient for evaluating short-term programmes. Quantedge is in the midst of validating instruments that measure short-to-intermediate outcomes predictive of economic success. These metrics include self-control, aspiration, and peer relationships, which can correlate with later success. Establishing these metrics not only aids in programme evaluation but also helps in creating a common language across the sector.

Mr. Thian expressed the foundation's aspiration to adopt a life stage approach to study individuals' needs from childhood to adulthood, akin to Harvard's study on human happiness. This ambitious project aims to provide insights into the state of social mobility throughout the life course to better programmatic interventions. He acknowledged the challenges but stressed that such robust studies could yield invaluable data for shaping social policies.

Nurturing Innovation and Overcoming Barriers

Mr. Thian elaborated on Quantedge Foundation's commitment to nurturing innovation by providing resources and taking calculated risks, illustrating their willingness to support unproven concepts as a form of risk capital. He described their role as complementary within the ecosystem, where the foundation tests theories of change that appear plausible but have not yet been tried in Singapore.

Quantedge Foundation addresses barriers to innovation by supporting both existing organisations and startups. Mr. Thian shared details about their incubator-accelerator platform, the Philanthropy in Residence Program (PIR), designed to provide extensive support to social innovators. Emphasising their hands-on approach, he said that the foundation engages in strategy retreats with founders to align organisational goals, test assumptions, and refine strategies, effectively serving as venture capitalists within the philanthropic landscape.

Mr. Thian explained the importance of organisational development in enabling successful innovation. He noted that organisations founded with passion still require robust structures and processes to succeed. Through strategy consulting and organisational development support, Quantedge helps their partners build the necessary infrastructure to deliver impactful results. The foundation's approach to evaluating programmes includes funding research and capturing lessons learned. Mr. Thian emphasised that even when interventions do not yield expected outcomes, valuable insights are gained for the sector.

Mr. Thian highlighted the Astronauts Collective as a nonprofit organisation dedicated to helping youths explore and discover meaningful careers. The organisation provides mentorship and career support, and Quantedge Foundation has identified a strategic opportunity to enhance their impact within the IT sector. Recognising the sector's significance, Quantedge facilitated a partnership with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) to support IT students on the work-study diploma. This initiative was designed to boost social mobility by enabling students to secure placements in companies where they can earn a competitive income and enjoy fulfilling careers. Quantedge not only provides financial backing but also acts as a connector, linking the Astronauts Collective with ITE to create a collaborative framework that supports IT students. Mr. Thian expressed optimism that this partnership could eventually be scaled further, to catalyse widespread change and improve social mobility through strategic mentorships and career development initiatives.

Mr. Thian also shared on the Tak Takut Kids Club, an innovative initiative embedded within the Boon Lay rental flat community. This children's club was designed to provide a nurturing environment for children, particularly those from vulnerable families, by offering healthy adult role models and teaching life skills. Activities such as cooking lessons, lion dance clubs, and gardening are conducted, promoting both social-emotional development and practical skills. Mr. Thian emphasised the club's child-centric and community-based model, which Quantedge has refined and developed over the years. As Tak Takut Kids Club has grown from a single founder to include more volunteers, Quantedge has played a crucial role in scaling operations, supporting them in adapting their approach to cater to children with higher needs. The foundation is committed to documenting and capturing lessons learned to enable others to

adopt similar impactful models, demonstrating their dedication to sharing successful principles across the sector.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q1: What types of research do you think are underfunded in the social sector, and how can philanthropic capital help supplement these areas?

A1: Mr. Thian addressed this question by acknowledging the challenge of securing funding for research, which often falls under the category of overheads that many funders are hesitant to support. He emphasised the necessity of finding "enlightened" funders who recognise the essential role research plays in informing effective social work and interventions. Mr. Thian suggested that one short-term solution is to identify and persuade individual donors or family offices who have a broader understanding of the impact that well-researched initiatives can have.

Ms. Ng added that while programme-related research might be supported more readily, foundational research often struggles to secure funding. She highlighted Temasek Foundation's approach of engaging stakeholders early in the development stages of their projects to ensure alignment on policies and expected outcomes, which helps in securing support for research components.

Mr. Liew underscored the role of collaborative efforts in overcoming funding challenges, suggesting that creating partnerships among funders can help build a stronger ecosystem that values and supports research. He proposed that sharing insights and data gathered from funded research could encourage more funders to recognize its importance and invest accordingly.

Q2: How do you balance being hands-on without stifling the innovative spirit of your grantees?

A2: Mr. Liew highlighted the importance of mutual respect and flexibility, noting that funders should encourage innovation while maintaining accountability. He suggested that funders should guide grantees without overly restricting their creative processes. Accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure money is spent appropriately but should not overshadow the innovative spirit that drives impactful projects.

Mr. Thian emphasised Quantedge Foundation's collaborative rather than controlling approach. He described their role as akin to venture capitalists, where they are deeply involved with their partners but allow them the autonomy to innovate. Mr. Thian explained the importance of figuring out the right organisational structure and plan. He emphasised that funds provided are viewed as a learning journey for both parties, focusing on shared goals and continuous improvement. While accountability is vital—checking on spending and ensuring alignment with strategic objectives—Mr. Thian assured that Quantedge respects the unique insights and expertise of their partners, fostering a space where innovation can thrive without being stifled by excessive oversight.

Q3: How can we address the inherent power imbalance between grantors and grantees?

A3: Ms. Ng acknowledged the inherent power imbalance between grantors and grantees, describing it as "always unequal." She shared her perspective that grantees who offer solutions that funders "cannot refuse" hold significant leverage. Ms. Ng emphasised that grantees possess valuable domain knowledge and ground experience, which is crucial for informing effective programmes. She highlighted the importance of building trust and fostering relationships, underscoring the human element in these interactions. By actively engaging with multiple stakeholders and aligning on outcomes, she said she believes it is possible to balance the power dynamics. Ms. Ng also shared her experience as a grantee within the Temasek ecosystem, where co-funding is essential for project approval, illustrating the dynamic nature of power in different contexts.

Q4: What role does research play in advocacy?

A4: Mr. Liew opened the floor for discussions on the topic, prompting participants to consider the interplay between research and advocacy. He also emphasised that robust research provides a foundation for advocacy by revealing the nuances of social issues, guiding effective interventions, and influencing policy. Ms. Ng elaborated on Temasek Foundation's strategy of aligning research with programme evaluation to elevate advocacy efforts, sharing how their projects are guided by research to validate and scale interventions effectively. This approach ensures that programmes achieve measurable outcomes that drive real change. Mr. Thian highlighted the importance of advocacy-focused research in identifying barriers and informing strategies for systemic change, acknowledging the need for funders to support such initiatives even without immediate quantifiable returns.

Q5: How can younger generations be involved in research and innovation?

A5: Mr. Liew encouraged students to participate in volunteering and join community groups, highlighting the value of grassroots-level work. Such participation allows young people to engage directly with societal issues, foster a deep understanding of the challenges they aim to address, which builds empathy and equips youth with practical insights that can inform future research and innovation efforts. Echoing this sentiment, Mr. Thian noted that understanding diverse societal challenges through hands-on involvement is crucial. He remarked that these experiences can inspire young people to drive change by providing firsthand insights into community needs, fostering a sense of responsibility toward societal improvement. Through active participation, the younger generation can innovatively develop solutions that address real-world problems, ultimately fostering a culture of research and innovation.

Ms. Ng shared examples from Temasek Foundation's support of student-led projects, which empower youth to take initiative within their communities. She spoke of groups which started with student volunteers teaching music to seniors and children in after-school care. This initiative grew from 100 to 300 volunteers, demonstrating how small efforts can create broader impact over time. Ms. Ng emphasised that young people can leverage their skills and interests in small groups to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

[Lyn Cai](#) is a Research Assistant at IPS.

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



© Copyright 2025 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.
You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.