

Community-Based Approaches to the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Drug Offenders

The Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association

Authors

Justin Lee and Fern Yu
Institute of Policy Studies
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Hawye Auyong and Stephanie Chok
Case Studies Unit
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Abstract

In contrast to Singapore's zero tolerance stance on drugs, some developed countries have begun legalising drug use, raising concerns for local authorities that this will create a more permissive attitude towards drug use. Drug users in Singapore have gotten younger, more affluent and also more highly educated.

Given these trends, the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) has revamped its preventive education strategy to target youth. Adopting a community-based approach meant modifying the content of the anti-drug message away from an 'enforcement' logic towards an 'engagement' one. Youth groups have also been equipped to conceptualise and implement drug awareness campaigns that reach out to their fellow schoolmates. SANA has also started to experiment with peer-led support groups so that ex-offenders themselves can contribute to the rehabilitation of others earlier in their recovery journey, allowing a community-centric approach to complement their professional casework.

These approaches make use of the strengths and untapped resources of clients themselves and broader community assets, inviting them to co-produce solutions. However, community empowerment approaches require investments in capability building, creating bridges across community assets, and establishing trust with community and clients—in other words, they depend more on social capital than financial capital.

Acknowledgements

The project is funded under the Tote Board Case Study Collaborator Grant with the intention of enhancing knowledge and learning amongst the non-profit sector by building up case studies on how non-profit organisations take advantage of opportunities and overcome challenges. It will also identify innovations or best practices that may have more general relevance for other non-profit organisations.

We are indebted to Abdul Karim and others at SANA for generously sharing their experiences with us.

Executive Summary

Legislative and Policy Context

- 1) About 70 per cent of inmates are those convicted of drug-related offences or admitted to Prisons' Drug Rehabilitation Centres.
- 2) The Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) was passed in 1973 and has gone through several amendments that mark a progressively punitive stance in Singapore's war on drugs.
- 3) The mandatory death penalty has been a key component of the MDA for deterring drug trafficking.
- 4) In 1998, the MDA was amended to impose longer prison sentences for repeat drug users, which led to a rapid expansion of the prison population.
- 5) To cope with the rising rate of admission, the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) began to focus more attention to the rehabilitation of offenders beyond its traditional custodial function. They relied on partnerships with corporations, community organisations and religious groups to develop a wide range of community-based rehabilitation to ease the transition of offenders back to regular life.
- 6) However, the effects of long-term incarceration undermined the financial capability, damaged the relationships of families involved, and also raised the spectre of inter-generational offending. This led to a shift from focusing only at the offender to increased support services for their families.
- 7) In more recent years, the authorities have become concerned with an increase in younger, more affluent and more educated profile of drug users—a trend attributed to new online platforms peddling drugs and a more liberal attitude possibly resulting from the legalisation of drugs in some developed countries.

Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association in Focus

- 8) The Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) has played a key role in national efforts at prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of drug offenders.
- 9) They were formed in 1972, one year after the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) was set up, to complement the enforcement role of the CNB by focusing on public education and aftercare services for recovering drug addicts.
- 10) Currently, SANA's programmes are clustered into three divisions: Preventive Drug Education (focusing on outreach), Aftercare (focusing on case management and rehabilitation), and the Step-Up Centre (focusing on reintegration efforts). Through these programmes, SANA broadly targets ex-offenders, family members of ex-offenders, and youths.
- 11) SANA receives a grant from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and payment from Singapore Prison Service for managing inmates emplaced on the community-based programme and the Yellow Ribbon Community Project. It works closely with government agencies in a sector that is highly coordinated. SANA is a part of the MHA Taskforce on Drugs Committee and a

member of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE) Network, set up by SPS to better coordinate efforts of various organisations in this sector.

- 12) Besides broad alignment with the national messaging about the zero tolerance approach to drugs, there is also close working relationships with the authorities. For example, the SPS might, upon request from SANA, make recommendations for candidates for their Board of Management. SANA also works closely with the CNB, including using their collaterals for drug education.

Community Approaches to Prevention and Public Education: Targeting the Youth

- 13) Given the efforts of CNB and the National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA), SANA has previously carved a niche in preventive drug education through their Badge Scheme, which was started in 1977 and targets secondary school students from the Uniform Groups (e.g. Scouts, Boys Brigade etc.) Students undergo a motivational workshop, learn about the consequences of drug usage and acquire badges for completion.

- 14) However, given the new trend of younger and more educated drug users, SANA has decided to shift gears and ramp up their youth engagement efforts.

- 15) Their youth engagement strategy involves innovations in content but also medium.

- a) Content: SANA adopts an engagement strategy as opposed to the more 'enforcement' approach of the CNB. This means that they will address instead of ignore or dismiss issues that challenge the national narrative that youths may raise. This may include a more liberal attitude towards drugs, or being well-informed of the arguments for the legalisation of drugs elsewhere.

- b) Medium: SANA has developed an online platform that allows live chats with counsellors, an e-learning portal designed to be attractive to digital natives, and a stronger social media presence. They also went through a rebranding exercise that refashioned their corporate logo to the acronym 'SANA', removing an explicit reference to drugs in its name and therefore reducing any associated stigma that might come with it.

- 16) For a more targeted approach to at-risk students, SANA has piloted a decision-making programme in early 2018. Pitching it as a 'decision-making' programme made it more attractive to schools there is a wide range of enrichment programmes offered by diverse providers, instead of a specific anti-drug programme.

- 17) In order to empower students to be part of the solution, SANA has started to leverage on their SANA Badge programme and provide support to youths so that they can act as anti-drug ambassadors to their peers. These students are empowered to organise drug education programmes so that the anti-drug awareness can reach a wider population in the schools and even the community.

Community Approaches to Rehabilitation & Reintegration

- 18) A mainstay of SANA's core work is case management. In 2015, SANA stopped offering voluntary case management because of challenges in retaining clients with no obligation to attend. They restructured the programme into mandatory case management that takes clients based on Prison referrals. Given that casework uses individual or interpersonal level tools to

address a deeply structural issue, it is no surprise that caseworkers face burnout from their work. An adaptive strategy SANA uses is to provide their caseworkers with a portfolio of work beyond just seeing clients as a means to manage burnout.

- 19) The Step-Up Centre was launched in 2016 as a walk-in hub for ex-offenders, current drug abusers and their families. This centre created a community space that allowed clients to drop in for support groups or activities even after casework has ended.
- 20) SANA has also developed a peer leadership development programme where role model ex-offenders are empowered to lead support group of their peers to provide mentorship and guidance. Ex-offenders who have made significant progress are groomed as role models and ambassadors, inspiring recovering addicts in the early stages of post-incarceration. Such sessions are co-facilitated with a SANA counsellor.
- 21) Re-integration requires a three pronged approach:
 - a) Employment is perhaps one of the most developed aspects of reintegration due to the efforts of the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE), a statutory board under the Ministry of Home Affairs in charge of prison industry, employment and skills training for inmates. Without jobs that provide financial security, the minor problems of the ex-offender can quickly become unmanageable. SANA has established apprenticeship schemes in industries and areas of work that are not covered by SCORE, providing additional choice to their clients.
 - b) The family has also increasingly attracted the focus of aftercare programmes because they are an important source of support for the ex-offender, and they themselves are often silent victims of incarceration. Children have developmental and emotional needs that are not met because of missing parental guidance; and are thus at risk of inter-generational offending. SANA helps to run a family enrichment programme as part of the Yellow Ribbon Community Project, reaching out to offenders' families while being incarcerated. They also run a tele-visit facility to help families maintain contact with inmates.
 - c) One area that is critical to address in the reintegration of ex-offenders is peer group influence, though this is admittedly more difficult to develop interventions for. There is a criminogenic effect of negative peer group influence: old friends may tempt ex-offenders into drug relapse and crime.

Case Lessons

- 22) There is a power imbalance in the relationship between aftercare staff and client where services are developed by the former for the latter. In order to create a more participatory community-based approach, it is necessary to empower clients (e.g. peer leadership development programme) and other parts of the community (e.g. Uniform groups of schools) to design and make decisions about plausible solutions.
- 23) Despite the promise of co-producing solutions, community-based approaches are challenging in various ways:
 - a) They cannot be a once-off intervention but requires continuous effort. Often rapport and trust has to be built before the client or community partner is motivated to participate in the solution.

- b) They require an investment in capability building before any work can be done. Student groups may not know the best ways to bring a message across to other youths, and role model ex-offenders may not have the facilitative or mentoring skills required to lead a support group.
 - c) Community approaches may be less reliable than professionally delivered ones as there is no employment contract to regulate their behaviour. There is no assurance that once-equipped, these volunteers will continue to deliver services to the community. E.g. volunteer para-counsellors and peer leaders may drop out of their relatively informal roles more easily than employed staff.
- 24) In other words, community-based approaches require social capital for their success, and depends on the organisations ability to establish bridges, build capability and create trust with clients and communities.