

Tech is not all bad. Our COVID-19 experience shows this

The spotlight on tech needs to shift from spreading rumours and disinformation during this outbreak, says Carol Soon.

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The outbreak of COVID-19, has shown that Singaporeans are not afraid or reluctant to come forward to make a difference. And tech is quickly becoming the enabler for such collective efforts.

This is a far cry from the attention it has otherwise received in being a scourge that spreads and catalyses a pandemic of fear — DRUMS (Distortions, Rumours, Untruths, Misinformation and Smears).

Small deeds everywhere

From #braveheartsg, a movement that supports frontline medical staff, and Be Kind SG, a group that provides micro-volunteering opportunities to working adults, to the anonymous donors who left masks at lift lobbies, we see acts of compassion and generosity around us.

Better.sg, a volunteer-run non-profit group set up Mask Go Share, a website that connects people with extra masks and hand sanitisers to those who need them. The site also publishes maps of one-bedroom and two-bedroom HDB rental flats so that people who want to help needy households can provide targeted assistance.

On a regular day, there are many individuals who use digital technologies innovatively to help people solve problems they face in their daily lives.

Last year, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conducted a study on sharing initiatives in Singapore. We mapped initiatives that involved the sharing and re-distribution of different types of resources, such as spaces, products, time and skills. Many of those initiatives generate revenue for developers, but there is a growing number of ground-up initiatives that are not revenue-generating or profit-making.

Some of these initiatives facilitate the sharing and redistribution of daily items or those that come in handy during small emergencies - for example food swaps, book-sharing, umbrella-sharing and loan of household items.

Others bring people together to share intangible resources such as time and skills - for instance time-banking, repair services and cooperatives.

However, what underpins all of them is a belief in people's ability to work together to solve problems and help the less fortunate.

The founders of these initiatives see small and big acts of sharing as ways to pay it forward, build community resilience and promote a sustainable environment for all in the long run.

Looking to the future, more can be done to help them.

Support for ground-up initiatives

On Feb 12, the COVID-19 inter-ministry task force announced that the Government was setting up a centralised online platform for ground-up efforts. Preliminary details indicate that the platform will provide information on what is needed, ground-up groups and government initiatives.

This effort in consolidating information on various initiatives set-up to tackle COVID-19 is an important one. Users will be able to identify with ease and assurance how they can play a part; organisers can determine where the gaps in service provision are and the potential collaborators they can work with to upscale efforts.

However, more can be done for ground-up initiatives to become a permanent fixture in the Singapore way of life.

Our study found that organisers of ground-up initiatives face several challenges in upscaling their efforts.

For one, there is the problem of sustainability as organisers who are new to the space often face difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Although existing platforms such as giving.sg and volunteer.sg help to make these important connections, most of them link volunteers with registered charities and organisations and not unregistered ground-up initiatives.

A fellow researcher at IPS has just started Serve.sg, an open-source volunteer matching platform to connect those interested in giving their time with those who start ground-up initiatives and need support. More focus must be given to connecting organisers of such fledgling initiatives with those willing to share their time and energy.

Second, many initiatives are borne out of the founders' own pockets and such short-lived funding threatens the longevity of an initiative.

There is currently a slate of funding programmes to help non-profit organisations achieve their goals and several Community Development Councils have grants to support ground-up initiatives.

While efforts are made to simplify applications for support, organisers of ground-up initiatives, especially those who have less resources, may still find such processes intimidating. Early-stage consultation to help individuals think through their desired outcomes, target audiences and milestones will not only alleviate their burden but also nudge them to think what they want to achieve in the long-run and how they can get there.

Third, if we are serious about changing the tone of governance in Singapore, from government-led problem solving to a democracy of deeds — as described by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat in his dialogue last year on building Singapore together — the regulatory landscape which is work-in-progress must be developed together with people involved in the innovation space and ground-up community work.

This can be achieved through an engagement process such as the citizens' jury or workgroup that involves relevant stakeholders in rigorous and informed deliberation resulting in agreed solutions.

In Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen's Total Defence Day message delivered on Friday (Feb 14), he reminded Singaporeans of the sixth pillar of defence — digital defence — launched in 2019. His message, reminding citizens to be vigilant and do their part to protect society and communities from online harms, is timely.

The COVID-19 outbreak and small deeds on day to day basis have shown that technology is a positive and powerful tool for collective problem-solving and action.

Let us not be distracted by the bad eggs and focus on what can be done to bring out the latent capacity among people to help one another.

Carol Soon is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. She works with different agencies on citizens' panels and led the study on sharing initiatives in Singapore. The report can be found [here](#).