

## IPS Social Inclusion Policy Network (Second Meeting)

By Drew Shih, Dhevarajan Devadas and Damien Huang

ON 16 APRIL 2019, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the second meeting of its Social Inclusion Policy Network, which was hosted by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC). The meeting had two plenary sessions as well as breakout sessions organised around the three working-level tracks of the network: Economy and the Workplace; Education; and Urban Planning and Housing. Around 90 academics, leaders from the voluntary welfare sector, public servants and IPS researchers attended the meeting.

In her welcome remarks, Ms Melissa Kwee, Chief Executive Officer at NVPC, highlighted the need for the researchers and practitioners to both “think” and “do” to tackle the challenge of uplifting low income families effectively. She noted that the network provided an opportunity for participants to share and learn from one another, as well as develop practical ideas to improve social mobility in Singapore.

Reiterating Ms Kwee’s point, Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Deputy Director (Research), invited participants to discuss in detail the needs on the ground, suggest research that would be helpful and propose new interventions to be piloted.

### **PLENARY SESSION 1 — IMPROVING THE LIVES OF LOW-INCOME AND VULNERABLE IN SINGAPORE: GUIDING PHILOSOPHY, APPROACHES AND NEW INITIATIVES**

Mr John Lim, Second Deputy Secretary (Social and Family Development) and Senior Director of the Social Policy and Services Group at Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) spoke about the framework of social assistance policy in Singapore today.

He explained that the government’s approach has always consisted of three intertwined elements — the individual and family, community, and the government — although the emphasis given to the role of the elements has changed over the years. He acknowledged having different schemes that targeted different needs could create confusion for some, but simplifying the schemes could lead to some needs being neglected and hence there were trade-offs to be considered. Nonetheless, social assistance policy should be comprehensive, convenient and coordinated, he said. To that end, he explained how frontline offices across agencies were equipped to look beyond schemes offered by each agency, and would coordinate among all of them to serve the needs of users most effectively. He cited the SG Cares Community Network as one way of fostering community-based social assistance programmes.

Regarding inequality, Mr Lim said it was important to be conscious of the deeper issues behind it, such as concerns about social mobility and cohesion, dignity, and the sense of fairness. This would have a bearing on the kind of nation and society we wanted, rather than the issue of economic wealth, he added. Issues of dignity and fairness, for instance, were intangible aspects of social development in which we needed to invest.

In the discussion that followed, participants debated the usefulness of having an official poverty line. A participant said this would help measure the baseline status of the issue and later, the efficacy of the interventions developed to address poverty. This would incentivise further action by the social service sector, corporate and individual philanthropists and volunteers. Another participant said while this was important from a communications point of view, social assistance was now being afforded according to different thresholds of eligibility for different schemes, adapted to what beneficiaries really needed. In that sense, measures or systems of assistance that suggest a one-size-fits-all approach might be too rigid to be effective.



*Ms Melissa Kwee, CEO of NVPC, gave the welcome remarks for the meeting.*

## **PLENARY SESSION 2 – SENIOR VOLUNTEERISM**

The second plenary session discussed the prospects of enhancing senior volunteerism in Singapore. Some proposed using simpler or less onerous concepts such as “helping” rather than “volunteering” in order to encourage seniors to participate in such activity. This was because the latter had the connotation of heavy commitment, which was daunting to some. There was however disagreement about this approach. Another suggestion was to provide some financial remuneration or incentives for volunteering so that seniors would not be out-

of-pocket as a result of serving the community. In addition, perhaps proper and appropriate skills-training for seniors could help boost their confidence in their ability to volunteer.

Some participants suggested tapping on younger seniors who might be service users of social assistance to give back — empowering and encouraging them to volunteer or serve those older than themselves, for instance. Participants noted the need to create meaningful opportunities for volunteerism based on the seniors' strengths and that health conditions need not be a limiting factor. Some also suggested building community as a way to foster volunteerism as residents would willingly contribute if they cared about their community and were conscious they were doing it together as a community.

There was also discussion about the possible increase in senior volunteerism as succeeding generations of seniors would be better educated, have richer work experience and be in better health. Participants suggested that more research and analysis could be done on senior volunteerism to understand the differences between the various groups of seniors segmented by age, gender, ethnicity, education, for example.

## **ECONOMY AND WORKPLACE**

This breakout session was chaired by the convenor of the Economy and Workplace track, Dr Faizal Yahya, Senior Research Fellow, IPS. It began with presentations by Ms Phyllis Lim, Deputy Director of U Care Centre (UCC) at the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and Ms Ng Yan Li, Assistant Director of the Industrial Relations Department at the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM).

Ms Lim explained that the UCC helped low-wage workers through a three-pronged approach: advocating for better wages, welfare and work prospects. It was also involved in reviewing and expanding the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), and increasing the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) wage threshold. She highlighted research that showed that PWN has had some success in increasing wages for workers without a decrease in employment in the sectors where it was implemented, but noted continuing challenges such as low basic wages, high overtime hours, cheap outsourcing, and lack of rest areas faced by those in such sectors.

Ms Ng introduced the work of the TADM where she shared about the practices of non-payment of overtime and basic salaries, termination of employment upon return from medical leave, and unfair terms of contract amongst others. She shared examples of financial penalties and liquidated damages in employment contracts that were unfair, citing, for example, the case of an intern who was paid \$500 a month but would have had to pay \$5,000 should he or she leave the internship early. The exact circumstances under which the clause could be invoked were also ambiguous, which added to the unfairness of the contract as the employer could determine when to exercise the clause.

Furthermore, she noted the emergence of similar issues for delivery drivers, stemming from the imposition of task-completion reporting and monetary penalties for timeliness. She mentioned that TADM and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) were working on defining “unreasonable clauses” in reviews of employment contracts that could be found in the labour market today.

In the discussion, participants said that some of the issues in the low-wage sectors were structural, thus piecemeal action against individual firms may not be effective. In addition, participants identified that the emergence of unfair contracts reflected the uneven balance of power among low-wage workers, their life conditions and constraints on one hand, and the employers on the other.

Nonetheless, participants felt that it was important to get the word out about what unfair employment terms looked like for employees to protect themselves, and who to turn to if they faced unfair action. They also suggested ways to promote fair employment contracts and conditions especially among the smaller businesses. For employees, some suggested methods of outreach were posting leaflets with information on fair employment terms at various community and commercial touch-points. For employers, suggestions included providing basic information and samples of fair employment contracts, as well as engaging, and then naming and shaming errant employers before taking legal action against them. Another participant said that there were those who set up businesses without even the basic resources to pay salaries in a timely fashion or were even ready to be outright exploitive of labour. While Singapore is vaunted as a place where one could do business with great ease, perhaps it should not be at such a cost, and something should be done to curb such abuse of labour.



*Ms Phyllis Lim, Deputy Director of U Care Centre introduced the work of the centre in helping low-wage workers.*

## EDUCATION

This breakout session was chaired by the convenor of the Education track, Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow at IPS. It began with presentations by Ms Azlinah Arif, Assistant Director at Yayasan MENDAKI, and Mr Shamil Zainuddin, Research Associate at IPS.

Ms Azlinah's presentation focused on the "Maju Minda Matematika" or Tiga M programme, which focused on tackling weak numeracy skills among Malay pre-schoolers. Although more Malay students required learning support programmes (LSP) upon starting primary school, about eight in 10 children who attended Tiga M sessions did not require LSP in Primary One. She also brought up the KelasMateMatika@CC (KMM) pilot programme that sought to enable parents in low-income Malay families to take a more active role in their children's learning. Evaluating these programmes, Ms Azlinah stressed the crucial role played by the many partners in planning and funding the programmes as well as reaching out to potential beneficiaries.

Mr Shamil gave a presentation on the Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru (KLB) initiative which he started. It aimed to boost the social capital of its beneficiaries, their education and employment opportunities, and aspirations. He shared that KLB launched the "In the Interim" project in September 2014 for youths residing in rental blocks to capture their lived experiences through film cameras given to them.

The project culminated in a photography exhibition at SCAPE as well as sharing sessions at the Artistry Café, Anglican High and Yale-NUS College. Mr Shamil highlighted that the photographs were celebrated by professional photographers and in the media which was especially significant as the youths came from an environment where they were constantly regarded as being inferior. He also pointed out that these events gave the youths an important boost in self-confidence as they were given a voice to speak and be heard, especially as these were held at "elite" institutions.

In addition, KLB exposed the youths to alternative ways of expressing themselves, for instance, through drama and ballet classes, which Mr Shamil said served to lift their aspirations.

In the discussion, participants agreed that confidence-building through such schemes were important not just for the children, but also for the parents so they could assist and encourage their children in the learning process. They also concurred that the KLB project would instil confidence and motivate the youths to achieve more. They noted that this would align with policy changes by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to enable students to learn at their own pace in a nurturing, non-judgemental environment. Thus, they proposed enhancing the confidence-building component of community-focused initiatives.

Participants also discussed how the long-term sustainability of such initiatives often required an extraordinary amount of effort, thus it was important to monitor participation and outcomes closely, and ensure that outreach efforts were well-targeted and properly resourced.



*Photo taken by one of the beneficiaries of the Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru initiative, and was exhibited at the “In the Interim” exhibition. Credit: Kopitiam Lengkok Bahru*

## **URBAN PLANNING AND HOUSING**

This breakout session was chaired by the convenor of the Urban Planning and Housing track, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Senior Research Fellow of IPS, who gave a presentation on the between- and within-neighbourhood effects of diversity, as well as the impact of the built and social environment on neighbourhoods.

He illustrated that despite policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) and the placing of rental flats within estates of purchased flats, there were some areas with a greater concentration of certain ethnic groups, and areas with a concentration of rental flats. He also pointed out that the ethnic profile of a neighbourhood strongly correlated with the per-square-foot resale price of the flats there. Furthermore, neighbourhoods with a concentration of housing blocks that had reached the ethnic quota for Chinese residents, and neighbourhoods with a larger proportion of condominiums and landed housing tended to overlap with neighbourhoods where the top 30 primary and secondary schools were located in. This reinforced what participants knew — that the location of good schools seemed to correlate with the socioeconomic status of the residents.

Regarding the built and social environment of neighbourhoods, Dr Leong presented findings on its effect on social trust, perceived quality of life, emotional well-being and perception of economic difficulties of residents.

In the discussion, participants wondered if certain built environment features would attract particular segments of the population to the neighbourhood. They also proposed examining the availability of socially inclusive facilities, one of which was the location of long-term care

services and whether it affected the likelihood of patients taking up long-term care. Furthermore, there were suggestions to investigate if specific low-income communities were able to attain high social trust due to contextual factors including the presence of particular built environment features.

Regarding the government's decision to place rental and purchased flats within the same apartment block in new estates, participants suggested further research on possible built environment features that would allow for better social mixing between the residents.

Participants also discussed the relationship between the location of "good schools" and concentration of Chinese residents. They agreed that many parents moved to housing close to "good schools" in order to have preferential enrolment, but noted that many of these schools were Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools that catered to Chinese students. There was a suggestion to move some of the top primary schools to neighbourhoods in the fringe areas in order to help disperse the concentration of Chinese residents in the central areas.

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