Disability Community Network Roundtable I: Employment for Persons with Disabilities

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Effective communication at the workplace, an inclusive work environment, and caregivers' belief that their child with disability can succeed at work, were found to be important to job sustainability, said Vimallan Manokara of MINDS.

ON 11 MAY 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Disabled People's Association (DPA) hosted the first roundtable of the Disability Community Network (DCN). The theme for the roundtable was **Employment for Persons with Disabilities**. Attendees included individual advocates and members of diverse organisations, including SG Enable, Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS), SPD, Association for Persons with Special Needs (APSN), social enterprise Society Staples, and parent support group for children with special needs, Hope for the Journey.

The Disability Community Network: Surfacing Needs and Gaps from the Ground Up

Co-facilitator Dr Justin Lee commenced the session by articulating what the DCN aims to achieve. First mooted in October 2017, the DCN is a ground-up initiative, comprising voluntary welfare organisations, non-profit organisations, civil society groups and individuals, that aims to make sense of, represent and act on needs and gaps in the disability sector. The DCN also enables members to update one another on new developments and best practices.

"It will democratise knowledge production," said Dr Lee. "When we think of who has knowledge, we think of ministries or think tanks like IPS who have data, produce statistics and do research. In fact, everyone can do research—the information, experiences and vantage points you have are useful and relevant in building a more holistic understanding of the sector."

The DCN's vision, mission and objectives can be refined by members in response to changing requirements and circumstances. Its main aim is to bring like-minded people in the community together to tackle challenges, be it through jointly written position papers, service collaborations or sharing resources and knowledge. Members can come together to scope

projects and action plans while making offers and requests through the network. Dr Lee noted that where views differ, dissenting arguments could be documented; the goal is not to reflect total consensus, but collective deliberation.

To facilitate discussions and consolidate knowledge, Dr Lee introduced the SocialCollab Wiki, an online platform that would allow individuals to contribute information on needs and gaps pertaining to persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups, and community asset groups such as social workers and community artists.

Dr Justin Lee, Research Fellow at IPS and co-facilitator of the event (centre), demonstrating the SocialCollab Wiki platform.

Presentations

Parents from Hope for the Journey made an impassioned plea for the network to focus on bread and butter issues rather than broad policy ideas alone. They stressed the importance of:

1) Strengthening transition support for children with special needs upon graduation from Special Education (SPED) schools.

2) Attracting employers to provide more job opportunities.

3) For society to recognise the strengths of special needs children rather than focus on their weaknesses.

Next, Vimallan Manokara, Applied Research Fellow and Senior Psychologist at the Institute of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at MINDS, presented a study on factors that contribute to sustained open employment from the perspectives of persons with disabilities, caregivers and employers. The study found that effective communication at the workplace, an inclusive work environment, and caregivers' belief that their child with disability can succeed at work, were important to job sustainability.

Julyn Ng, Psychologist at APSN Delta Senior School, talked about the school's role in supporting more than 300 students with disabilities from the ages of 17 to 21. It establishes partnerships with employers in the hospitality, landscaping, retail as well as food and beverage industries in order to support students in transition to employment.

Looking at workplace accommodations, Ng Shixian, Senior Occupational Therapist at SPD, described how environmental modifications and assistive technologies (AT), such as powered wheelchairs, typing aids and braille keyboard labels, can enable employees with disabilities to function more effectively at accomplishing work tasks.

To illustrate how members can deliberate and vote on policy issues through the DCN, Dr Lee asked interested parties to study the feasibility of a quota system of hiring for persons with disabilities. Referring to [a study that he had worked on to examine models of employment for persons with disabilities in Singapore](#), Dr Lee proposed examining quota systems in other countries and to assess their plausibility for Singapore. Some participants felt that a quota system was tokenistic and diminished the efforts of persons with disabilities fighting for equal employment opportunities, while others regarded existing inducements such as the Open Door Programme as inadequate without legislative muscle.

One participant was apprehensive about the idea of a quota hiring system and asked where the government would draw the line in reserving job opportunities, be it for persons with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups such as the elderly, ex-offenders or persons in recovery from mental illness. Another felt that the business community would not be ready for a quota system, and would likely be resistant. Cassandra Chiu, Clinic Director and Psychotherapist at The Safe Harbour Counselling Centre, replied that it would be up to advocates for these groups to champion their own causes. It was also suggested that a hiring quota be studied for groups who are disproportionally excluded in the economy or labour force. Dr Lee pointed out that these views present knowledge gaps for investigation, which would in turn enrich the network's discussions.

IPS Research Assistant Andrew Lim and Intern Aw Pey Ling also sought inputs on a working report of needs and gaps in employment for persons with disabilities. This document would be uploaded on to the [SocialCollab Wiki page on Disability](#), which aims to be an up-to-date consolidation of needs and gaps in the disability sector. Attendees were invited to provide their inputs to the report, which would contain diverse perspectives rather than one consensus view.

General Questions and Responses

Many participants asked if the network's objectives, intended client groups and timelines could be more concretely defined. One participant asked if the network would prioritise advocacy

above other projects. Dr Lee explained that the network's primary objective was to bring the community together. Thus, what it achieves depends on what the members choose to propose and collaborate on. Consequent deliberations would affect the type of solution adopted, be it advocacy, resource or other collaborations.

To a question on whether mental disorders would come under the ambit of "disability", some participants opined that mental health agencies could be part of the DCN since there was a common interest in advocating against stigma and discriminatory employment.

One attendee expressed concern that the process of surfacing items through the DCN would be too long-drawn, such as writing a joint position paper. Others responded that members and member groups could be free to work on projects and action on their own. People should utilise the network when they find that there are benefits to engaging its diverse membership.

Finally, a question was asked if ministerial representatives could be invited to future discussions. In response, it was suggested that this decision depended on DCN members' agreement. Participating organisations were also encouraged to send their decision-makers to attend future roundtables, so that they can comment on issues and make decisions on behalf of their respective organisations. Dr Lee suggested that subsequent roundtables have a Main Meeting and a Planning Meeting. Policymakers and ministerial representatives could be invited to the former, while the latter is reserved for DCN members.

Closing Remarks

In conclusion, DPA thanked the attendees for coming together and hoped that they would use the DNC to step up collaboration within the sector, while Dr Lee called for participants to submit specific offers and requests to the DCN, to guide future meetings and spur conversations.

If you wish to find out more about the Disability Community Network or contribute to the [SocialCollab Wiki](#) initiative, please email Dr Justin Lee justin.lee@nus.edu.sg or Andrew Lim andrew.lim@nus.edu.sg.

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