Institute of Policy Studies

Ground-Up Efforts at Community Development in Singapore

By Andrew Lim

> Community is not one of those things that we have to "do". Community is like a forest — you don't plant a forest. You safeguard it, and the forest grows on its own. You [have to] cultivate, protect, and safeguard the space.
>
> — A case study interview respondent

IPS organised a workshop to showcase findings from two case studies[1] conducted by IPS on organisations that adopt ground-up approaches to community building: Beyond Social Services and ArtsWok Collaborative.

The event took place on 29 March at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and was attended by nearly 80 participants from the public, private and non-profit sectors, including community workers, consultants and other professionals engaged in community work.

Four panellists were also invited to comment on and discuss the cases. They were:

1) Woo Peiyi, Assistant Director, The Social Lab, South Central Community Family Service Centre

2) Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director of Drama Box

3) Dr Ijlal Naqvi, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Singapore Management University; and

4) Letchumanan Narayanan, Director, Resilience and Engagement Division, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

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[1] The case studies were funded under the Tote Board Case Study Collaborator programme, and aim to build an appreciation of ground-up community development and engagement in Singapore. They highlight opportunities, challenges and dilemmas that non-profits face in doing community development.

Safeguarding the Community: Beyond Social Services

[Beyond Social Services](#) works with communities to help children and youths from less privileged backgrounds break away from the poverty cycle.

Doing this work requires adopting a systemic view of the problem. As Executive Director of Beyond Social Services Gerard Ee puts it, "If 'it takes a village to raise a child', then who is looking after the village? Our job is to nurture those villages, in public rental housing areas, so that kids have a decent childhood, avoid getting into trouble and ending up in prison."

The charity has reached out to over 10,000 rental units in Singapore, including Bukit Ho Swee, where it is itself physically located. Despite its years of experience, it continues to grapple with some dilemmas faced by community workers in Singapore's context.

Participants at the case study workshop, listening to the case presentation on Beyond Social Services by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Justin Lee.

Residents are used to relying on professionalised services provided by the town councils or voluntary organisations, while Beyond Social Services aspires to build community self-reliance in solving their own problems. As a result, staff are sometimes regarded by residents as social workers instead, and residents expect a transactional instead of communal relationship.

The organisation operates by focusing on assets and strengths instead of weaknesses, and works to avoid unnecessary professional or state intervention where community efforts may be more appropriate. According to Mr Ee, the success of community is more about whether people work at problems *together*, as opposed to being rid of social problems, which will always be present.

The Unique Value of the Arts in Community Development: ArtsWok Collaborative

The work of community development is complex, community-driven and necessitates reflexivity on part of community workers; to ArtsWok Collaborative, this work can also benefit from an arts-based approach.

"The arts creates an open space where we can create in a non-judgmental way, take risks and experiment," said Ngiam Su-Lin, ArtsWok's Executive Director.

Mr Kok remarked that the arts is useful in tapping on different knowledge systems and sensibilities, and to create an aesthetic space where people can think of themselves in different ways, and come together to solve social problems.

Talking about difficult issues through direct discussion can be challenging, and ArtsWok espouses arts-based approaches that can create safe spaces for communities to engage in dialogue. For example, public art installations in the *Both Sides, Now* frequently invite community residents to imagine the end-of-life musings of fellow residents, and pen private reflections of their own.

Dr Hana Alhadad (right), Senior Lecturer at the Singapore University of Social Sciences and co-principal investigator of the case studies, giving the case presentation for ArtsWok, with Ms Ngiam Su-Lin (left), Executive Director of ArtsWok Collaborative.

To do the work of arts-based community development, ArtsWok needs to act as an effective intermediary, building bridges and working with diverse stakeholders across the arts, community and other sectors to engage in projects meaningful to the community.

However, the importance of intermediary work is not always evident to funders and the public, and ArtsWok often needs to expend already-limited resources to build legitimacy for the field through extensive documentation, research and advocacy.

Summary of Q&A and Panel Discussion

How can we meaningfully measure community impact?

Speaking for Beyond Social Services, Mr Ee pointed out that it is possible to measure rental block presence, households covered, programme attendance numbers, and the number of people that the charity is connected to. However, KPIs really depend on "who is asking" and change based on how deep and complex initiatives are.

Designing meaningful and flexible KPIs is important to safeguard both artistic and community interests, said Ms Ngiam. A core component of ArtsWok's strategy is to engage and work with stakeholders who value of co-designing KPIs that are meaningful and which can respond to changing circumstances.

Ms Woo shared that it is a constant tension to have to report KPIs, against how long community takes to develop. She suggested for KPIs to be reported in a more interim manner, and in more diverse formats such as stories or reports.

How much participation and involvement from the actual community should there be?

Inviting members of the community to participate in expert discussions is important, said Ms Woo, though ample preparation is equally critical to ensure that the community feels a sense of achievement through being part of conversations about them.

A participant raised the possibility of incorporating artists, art forms and art expressions already native to the community, as part of community development processes, as opposed to engaging professional artists to work with the community. Ms Ngiam agreed, adding that the experience could be powerful and enriching for both community and professional artists.

Community development requires a powerful commitment to process, autonomy, and a free space, remarked Dr Ijlal — one that is both physical and conceptual, and that is voluntary and free from external control. Decision-making in this regard also needs to be empowering.[2]

What role is the government playing in community development?

Mr Letchumanan expressed the government's strategy in community development: working through and supporting community stakeholders and partners. He affirmed the importance of deeper partnerships between the people sector and the government in certain areas, to develop programmes, ideate solutions and to facilitate conversations and consensus. The public service also needs to change its customer-service provider ethos, which may not always be the best approach to develop civic capabilities, he said.

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[2] Dr Ijlal raised the concept of *empowered participatory governance*, which bridges community building and policy. It involves addressing practical problems through reasoned deliberation between ordinary people and officials with public-facing responsibilities in an empowered setting without domination and control. This is particularly helpful in dealing with wicked problems that no one party can solve on their own, he said.

Conclusion

In concluding the workshop, Mr Gerard Ee highlighted that the communities and networks people are part of contribute significantly to their well-being.

"As individuals, something we can all do to build a better community is to be more appreciative of the people around us."

Andrew Lim is Research Assistant (Society & Culture) at IPS.

Please visit the workshop event page for a more detailed summary as well as video highlights from the event.

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