IPS Community Forum 2018:
Here Comes Everybody, And All Can Contribute!

By Andrew Lim

> "We have a lot of talk about "independence" in this country. But if you think about it, is anyone of us really so independent? Actually, a lot of us get by because we have friends."
>
> – Gerard Ee, Executive Director of Beyond Social Services

What does "community" really mean and how can we create it? Is it as an asset or something to be managed? What are some community-driven initiatives out there? These were guiding questions for attendees of the inaugural Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Community Forum that was held on 19 June 2018, at the National University of Singapore. The event brought together over 200 individuals working in the voluntary and non-profit sector.

Delivering the opening, the host of the Forum, IPS Research Fellow Dr Justin Lee described how voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) tend to cultivate vertical relationships with the government and funders, and have not fully exploited opportunities from productive horizontal ties with one another.

"There are a lot of diverse community assets with untapped potential, and we hardly know anything about them. They don't know anything about one another, much less interact or collaborate with one another. Many, especially the smaller ones, lack formal association or tend to operate in their own circuits."

Sharing that technology has made communication, association, and complex and serious work possible without the need for formal organisation, he expressed the hope of a voluntary sector that builds community assets, mutual help and community solidarity.

Defining "Community"

Keynote speaker Mr Gerard Ee, Executive Director of [Beyond Social Services](#), talked about his experiences with community building in public rental housing estates in Singapore. For him, community is not just a sense of belonging, but a *way* of belonging that adopts a posture of caring. That is, when people come together for a common purpose, and actively provide and receive support, they can create something together that they cannot create alone.

At its best, a strong community recognises that instead of needs, all its members have gifts, and the ability and desire to use them to the benefit of others. It is hospitable and inclusive to those different from the group, and regards them as having new gifts and ideas in turn.

Mr Ee explained that the ethos of a community is different from a consumer society, where "if I want something I [just] buy something. In a community, if I want something, how do I create it with the people around me?…we are so used to consuming, we don't try to act on our own anymore."

For communities to thrive, it is important to be invested in *people* rather than programmes that claim to serve them. One should work within existing networks of support, discovering and re-organising resources in the community to achieve co-created aims. Instead of focusing on deficits, both "expert" and "client" should work together as peers to honour a community's possibilities, abundance and wisdom.

While focusing on community self-reliance might cause one to ignore the role of structural constraints, Mr Ee acknowledged that it was difficult to influence structures without being in the government. Helping the community to take charge of its own issues may also lead social services to feel threatened, as it reduces reliance on paid social services. However, he felt that a community that abdicates its responsibility to others also surrenders its identity, values and potential.

Community Initiatives Showcase

Cassia Resettlement Team

Cassia Resettlement Team (CRT) is a team of volunteers that sprang up in response to the announced redevelopment of Dakota Crescent in July 2014. Co-founder Mr Lim Jingzhou talked about CRT's experience in easing residents—many of whom are elderly and low-

income—through the resettlement process and helping residents move their life's possessions into new homes at Cassia Crescent.

CRT also looked into how residents *experienced* the relocation process, an important but often unasked question. They found that many residents felt a deep loss of home and neighbourly bonds, while others were concerned about disruptions to everyday routines and changes in service providers. These fears were only unearthed through empathy and trust built over time.

Mr Lim related how, for one resident, a simple comment such as "I don't need to go to the [dental] clinic," masked the anxiety over the cost of dental consultation. The resident was also worried about going to the clinic without accompaniment because of poor mobility; he simply did not wish to burden others.

Listening to residents about what they need and would like to have, has been a guiding principle of CRT's support to residents—be it escorting them to medical appointments, bridging them to new service providers or organising potluck lunches between old Dakota Crescent residents. This principle has also influenced how CRT support programmes are run; they can be stopped and created based on residents' changing needs.

Taiwan's Civic Technology Movement

"Technological solutions have brought efficiency and convenient access to information, but have failed to solve many of the social problems we are facing," observed independent researcher Dr Wong Shiau Ching. Casting a spotlight eastwards, Dr Wong presented her research on how civic technology has been used in Taiwan as a means of community action and sustainable civic engagement. Civic technology is the use of technology towards civic outcomes, and projects range from improving data access transparency and citizen engagement, to peer-to-peer sharing, crowdsourcing and community organisation.

Dr Wong talked about civic hackers in Taiwan, who use public data, code and technology to create open-source solutions to challenges. One such group, g0v (pronounced "gov zero") came to prominence during the 2014 Sunflower Movement for its use of technology to facilitate free flows of information, such as using Hackpad to integrate disparate sources of information and Google Maps to inform movement supporters on key locations and facilities. Other instances of civic technology include Random Hacks of Kindness in Australia, DataKind SG in Singapore, and vTaiwan—an online deliberation platform in Taiwan that uses the surveying tool pol.is to engage the public on digital issues and policies.

Social Collab SG

Dr Lee introduced Social Collab SG, a wiki platform aimed at open collaboration to understand social needs in Singapore. Supported by Trampolene Limited and the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, it gathers information on needs and gaps pertaining to social causes and community asset groups such as community artists, as well as ideas on potential solutions.

Knowledge on social needs is typically mapped out in accordance to the administrative jurisdictions of the government agencies and specialist organisations. However, this leads to a fragmented understanding of needs, and which have spurred claims of a lack of information in the sector.

Dr Lee hopes for Social Collab SG to be a live, dynamic platform of public knowledge on social needs and gaps. It would be owned by the community, and information gathered can be in multiple forms, and be debated and refined. This avoids monopoly over knowledge.

Dr Marissa Medjeral-Mills, Executive Director of the Disabled People's Association shared how the wiki page on Disability has been useful for the Disability Community Network to gather and represent the needs of the disability community.

Ms Jean Lor talked about how the End of Life page has been useful in consolidating inputs from end of life care stakeholders.

Mr Ho Han Peng, Programme Manager at the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, indicated the possibility of using the platform to gather information on Singapore's food security needs, as part of its study to understand food insecurity in Singapore.

Plans for Social Collab SG include sourcing for page facilitators and funding to improve the user interface and experience of the platform, and to explore the mapping of needs by locality.

serve.sg

A gamified volunteer matching platform, serve.sg aims to raise the rate of volunteerism by matching skilled volunteers with charities and non-profits. Mr Timothy Yip, an experienced volunteer himself and part of the serve.sg team, introduced the platform at the Forum.

Fully volunteer-run and free to use, serve.sg hopes to promote skill- and location-based volunteerism in Singapore. Volunteers can search for volunteer opportunities and create their own profile containing professional qualifications and skills that they wish to offer, while charities can create projects with prerequisites that can be matched to skilled volunteers.
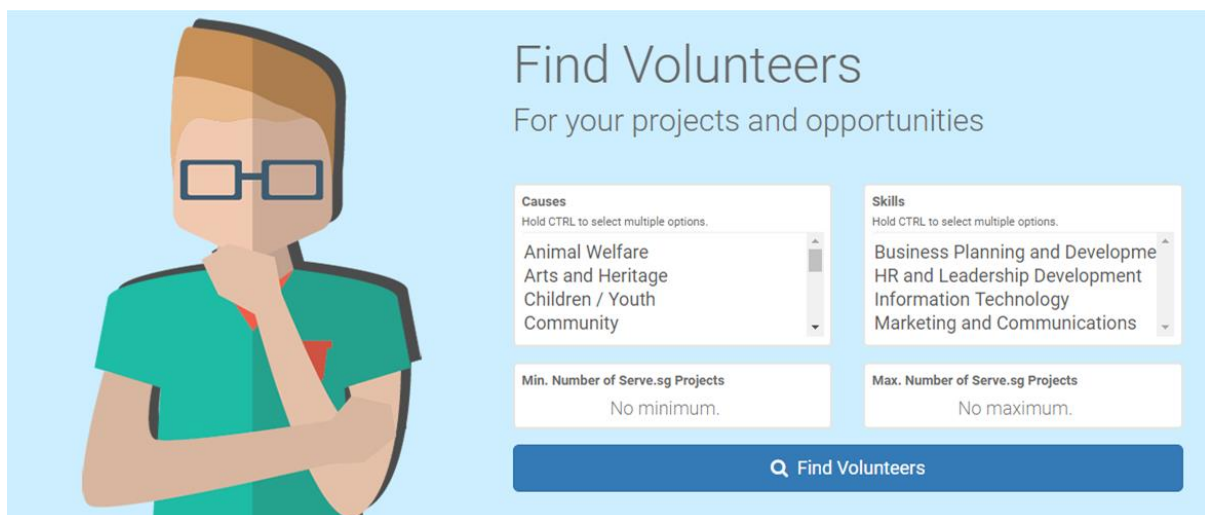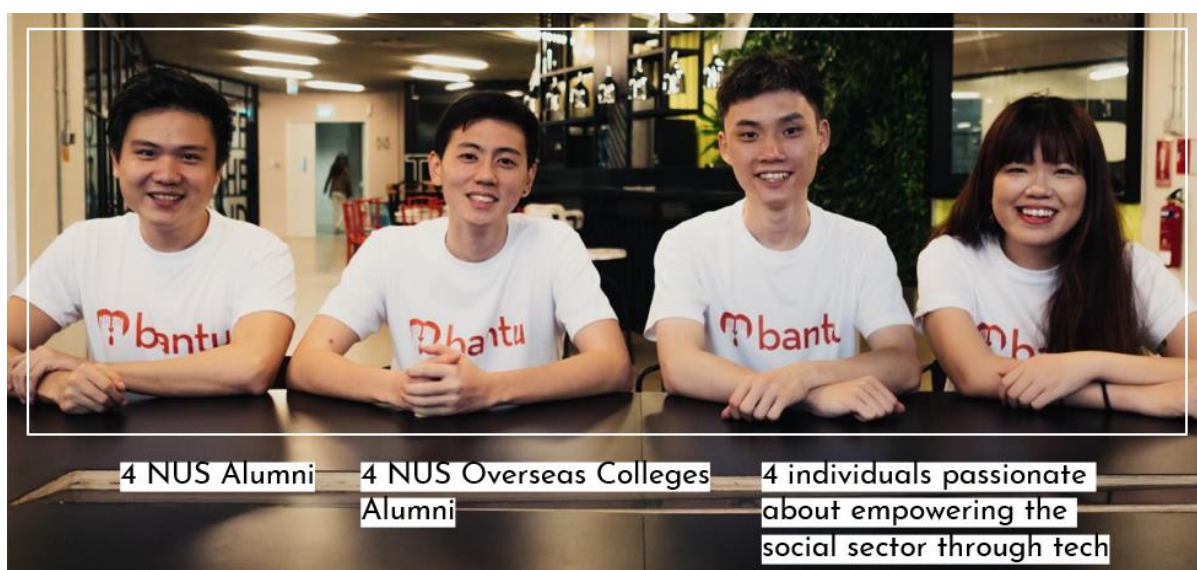

Photo credit.

Upcoming features include allowing volunteers to work in teams and to pitch new projects that can be co-created with charities. The serve.sg development team also plans to look closer into features such mutual reviews between charities and volunteers, achievement badges for regular volunteers and perks for charities willing to share certain kinds of information. For now, serve.sg is in beta phase, and the team will continue to collate and assimilate feedback before a formal launch in September 2018. Feedback and suggestions are welcome at http://tiny.cc/servesg.

bantu Workspace

CEO and Co-Founder of social enterprise bantu Mr Nicholas Ooi introduced bantu Workspace, an intelligent volunteer management and engagement platform that aims to help organisations reduce administrative tasks, centralise operations, and build relationships towards greater volunteer retention. Its features include a dashboard to oversee volunteer projects, a volunteer-matching and approval system as well as scheduled automated reminders and thank you emails to volunteers.

To date, the bantu team has sought feedback from 30 volunteer managers and partnered 20 non-profits, including AMKFSC Community Services. Feedback is welcome at hello@bantu.life, and a free demo can be scheduled at https://workspace.bantu.life/demo.

Mr Nicholas Ooi (second from right) with the bantu team. Photo credit: Nicholas Ooi.

Just Cause Asia: Openly accessible data on non-profits

Ms Emily Perkin, Managing Director of non-profit consultancy Just Cause Asia, introduced a prototype of a publicly accessible database on non-profit organisations in Asia. It contains charity reports detailing information about an organisation's programmes, staff turnover, financials and board composition.

"(It's about) getting real information out there and using it to influence donors to make better decisions about how they support organisations and causes," Ms Perkin explained.

The database also allows organisations to benchmark themselves against others on data collected (e.g., staff turnover). As organisations are tagged and grouped by country, target group and service area, each would also be able to identify partners and potential collaborators.

Challenges include achieving critical mass and maintaining data currency. Ideally, organisations would voluntarily contribute information (e.g., once a year); information is currently consolidated by volunteers. There is also the possibility of making it an open-source database, so that anyone can analyse existing data and share their findings.

Feedback on whether the platform would be useful for organisations, the data variables to be included, and if annual updates are a realistic goal, are all welcome at emily@justcauseasia.org.

Open Call for Offers and Requests

Participants were invited to make offers on what they could provide to the community, and to request for support in turn. Three community groups made requests:

1. PatientsEngage, a patient- and caregiver-focused online platform for supporting the management of chronic diseases, called for new sign-ups as well as collaborators working in the space of chronic disease, disability, family caregivers, mental health and invisible autoimmune diseases. Interested parties can contact Aparna at aparna.mittal@patients.engage.com

2. SG Food Rescue, an initiative to reduce food waste, is looking for avenues and partners in the social sector to receive rescued food.

3. Willing Hearts operates a soup kitchen providing food to the needy, and is looking for drivers to perform home deliveries.

Closing Remarks

Dr Lee invited interested parties to join the forum planning committee as facilitators. Facilitators can provide support by leading different tracks exploring different issues (e.g., policy advocacy, faith-based organisations), help in agenda setting, speaker engagement or by simply contributing an appropriate venue.

For more information on the Community Forum or to join the planning committee, please email Dr Justin Lee justin.lee@nus.edu.sg. Queries on the Social Collab Wiki can be sent to Andrew Lim andrew.lim@nus.edu.sg.

Please visit the Community Forum 2018 page here for event videos, and slides used by each presenter.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email [*ips.update@nus.edu.sg*](mailto:ips.update@nus.edu.sg)