

COMMENTARY

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**Singapore:
A Democracy of
Deeds and
Problem-Solving**

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Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

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Contents

Editor's Introduction

- 5 - 10 Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving
Gillian Koh

Chapter One

- 11 - 20 Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"
Irene Ng

Chapter Two

- 21 - 28 Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good
Melissa Kwee

Chapter Three

- 29 - 37 Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy
Lee Poh Wah

Chapter Four

- 38 - 49 'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause
Chua Ai Lin

Chapter Five

- 50 - 53 Building an Enabling Environment for Successful Ageing
Susana Concorde Harding

Chapter Six

- 54 - 60 Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers
John Gee

Chapter Seven

- 61 - 68 Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare
Louis Ng

Chapter Eight

- 69 - 77 A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making
Veerappan Swaminathan

Chapter Nine

- 78 - 85 The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation
Kuik Shiao-Yin

Chapter Ten

- 86 - 92 Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design
Bernise Ang

Chapter Eleven

- 93 - 100 A Democracy of Words
Johannis Auri Bin Abdul Aziz

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Mission Statement

To foster a lifelong relationship with NUS and the wider graduate community

At NUSS, a lifelong relationship with NUS and the wider graduate community is achieved through two mutually reinforcing thrusts:

- promoting the interests of its members and NUS; and
- contributing positively to Singapore’s political and intellectual development and helping to cultivate a more gracious social and cultural environment.

As the foremost graduate society, NUSS strives to promote the interests of its stakeholders by providing appropriate platforms for all to socialise, build networks, improve connectivity and exchange ideas through a multitude of recreational, academic, political, social and cultural activities.

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Editor's Introduction

**Singapore:
A Democracy of
Deeds and
Problem-Solving**

Gillian Koh

Gillian Koh is Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute of Policy Studies which is part of the National University of Singapore (NUS) where the area of civil society and its development is one of her research interests. An NUS alumna herself, she is proud to be a member of NUSS.

Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

This edition of NUSS' Commentary trains the spotlight on Singapore's active citizens, with a theme that borrows a phrase used by the late former Deputy Prime Minister and one of independent Singapore's founding leaders, Mr S Rajaratnam. He had said that Singapore should be "a democracy of deeds, not of words".

Writing in the early years after Singapore's unexpected birth and in the midst of the difficult geopolitical conditions facing us, Mr Rajaratnam felt that Western norms of liberal democracy like having a confrontational opposition and adversarial politics would not bring us the effective long-term governance and the progress we desperately sought.

His plea was for the kind of democracy that would involve citizen participation at all levels of society; to "get people away from adversarial democracy" so that they would "solve practical problems in a practical way". The first chapter of Commentary 2016, written by the award-winning biographer of Mr Rajaratnam, Ms Irene Ng, provides a crisp background essay on what this meant and why it was important for a Singapore that was struggling for survival. It explains the theme of our journal this year.

Previous editions of this NUSS journal have provided excellent critical analyses of different aspects of public policy, with the most recent 2015 one set within the celebration of that

significant milestone — Singapore's 50th year of Independence. For that reason, we thought to shift the attention towards the extraordinary acts that ordinary citizens and community leaders have mounted to address the country's social and cultural needs. Oftentimes, those ground-up actions have led to change in public policy. The chapters in this edition of Commentary provide the NUSS community with an update on the life of civil society in Singapore.

Outside of government policy and programmes, or sometimes in addition to or opposition against government policy, many active citizens have worked tirelessly, quietly but effectively for a better Singapore. While there can always be discussion and dispute over what is defined as the 'common good' or the 'public good' for a community and country, these active citizens let their actions speak and allowed the fruit of their labour prove their intent. They also knew that the means by which they hoped to effect positive social change had to reinforce that social good. Or, as a Gandhi has often been quoted as saying, many of them have been cognisant that "the means are the ends in the making".

There are several key messages from the chapters of Commentary 2016. First, that even in the most obvious areas of need, there is still a lot of room for novelty, the spirit of insurgency and innovation to bring about positive social change.

Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

We have here, a record of how Singaporeans and local non-government organisations have invested themselves in articulating and addressing the needs of Singapore's social minorities – what the chapters by Melissa Kwee of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, Lee Poh Wah of the Lien Foundation as well as John Gee of Transient Workers Count Too, do.

They speak of the more novel individual and corporate acts we too can explore in addressing the daily needs of the poor and disadvantaged; the efforts to support children in their climb out of the effects of being from such backgrounds through innovative models of pre-school education; and the practical acts but also policy advocacy targeted at improving the welfare of Singapore's migrant workers, often the invisible part to what sustains life in our busy city-state.

Kwee highlights the ways that individuals and corporate citizens can find that are within their means to adopt, to make a difference in the lives of the needy. Lee on the other hand, represents the sector of philanthropic foundations that is always associated with out-sized financial resources. With a clarity of purpose and the freedom of manoeuvre, Lee discusses how the Lien Foundation has been able to develop innovative solutions to deal with the multiple challenges that the poor face in seeking a brighter future. As a relatively developed society, this space of intelligent and progressive

philanthropy that brings paradigm shifts in the practical levers of social change, should be a sunrise sector.

The second message therefore, is that while active citizens can sometimes feel daunted when they think the problem is larger than what any one person or even an organisation can address, they can still make a difference.

In addition to the three chapters referred to above, the interview with Louis Ng and the chapter by Veerappan Swaminathan speak of their journey to help Singaporeans become more aware of the larger, more complex ecological system that they must seek to understand, treasure, and act on.

Ng, a long-time activist against animal abuse and the illegal wildlife trade who founded the group called ACRES as an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS), shares, in an interview, how his work is not just about animals but about us humans - developing the Singapore soul that acts against unethical practices and injustice wherever we see it. He describes the process of multi-stakeholder engagement which culminated in the November 2014 changes to animal welfare legislation. It encourages us to find ways to develop allies in our fight for a fair and just world.

Swaminathan of the Sustainable Living Lab or SL2, a movement spawned while

Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

he was still studying at the NUS as well, is inspirational for his creative and practical approach to ecological sustainability; no action is too small or modest if we want to do our part for the health of Planet Earth. He introduced the Maker Movement in Singapore and created a programme where people can learn to repair their household items rather than dispose of them. After all, being conscious of our ecological impact is only being kind and fair to the generations that come after us and Swaminathan convinces us that we do not need to be stumped by the seeming enormity of that mission. Every small step, every little act adds up; each can speak volumes of what matters to us.

The third message which we see clear references to in Ng's interview, is that active citizens can and must find effective ways to foster collaboration with other stakeholders in the issue that they invested in.

The chapter by Chua Ai Lin is another that expresses this idea of preservation as well as collaboration. Through her work with the Singapore Heritage Society, she is focused on the mission of preserving our country's built heritage and collective memories. We have become more thoughtful about these because of the activism of folks like her. It is also through careful advocacy work by the organisation that the government too has come to accept the need for a more systematic basis on which to assess the

impact of its urban redevelopment plans on our historical sites and buildings; to take heed of these intangible but invaluable considerations of heritage and memories. It is integral to the cause that the state comes to institutionalise the practice of impact assessment – it signals to active citizens and academia that it is worth investing expertise in these areas so that decision-making is informed, robust and wise; it also ensures that what is of national and public concern need not be politicised in the sense that whether a heritage site is of value will not be caught in the whims, fancies or adversarial competition of politicians.

Working with the government and other voluntary welfare groups to bring about systemic social change is not easy, but Susana Concorde discusses how that has been a rewarding journey in the area of ageing. How we treat our seniors to ensure they can still access all the things that make life meaningful, how the genders age differently and therefore need to be supported differently, are forms of consciousness that have become mainstream because of her work and that of the Tsao Foundation. Concorde describes a special ageing-in-place programme in Whampoa which thrives because it has the cooperation of agencies in the government, the voluntary sector as well as academia.

The fourth message of the journal is that at the end of the day, active citizens whether young or old just have to take

Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

risks but also possess that priceless quality of being prepared to learn on the go.

The chapters in this volume give voice to young Singaporeans who have and continue to find new ways to bring about social change. They have a heart for the world around them, they are energetic, smart and do not wait for permission to try out new models of social action. Current Nominated Member of Parliament and founding member of The Thought Collective, Kuik Shiao-Yin expresses the courage, conviction and commitment that is needed to break new ground specifically in the area of education and citizenship training among youth in her chapter. She and her partners just went out there and did it, through success and failure, creating what is akin to Singapore's first social enterprise conglomerate today.

Bernise Ang is another outstanding young Singaporean whose chapter highlights the need for a more thoughtful planning process as we develop public programmes to improve the lives of our fellow citizens. The deeds we seek to perform have to be sensitively designed to take into account the behavioural inclinations, the culture and the outlook of those we wish to work with. These have to be married with the deep expertise on the problem area that we are addressing. The impact we should seek is one that empowers the people at the heart of it, not create greater need

and dependencies. The change must be sustained; it must generate self-reinforcing circles of virtuous outcomes. Even if we are risk-taking, active citizens can be wise and thoughtful in how they seek to intervene in the part of the social world that has caught their interest.

The fifth and final message is that sometimes, 'words' do make all the difference and so, it is too optimistic that Singapore need only be a "democracy of deeds".

In coming up with their solutions, it is most certain that our contributors will have been inspired by 'ideals', and conducted their advocacy with 'words' but the articles in this volume have privileged accounts of practical programmes of self-help, community action and enlightened philanthropic leadership. They demonstrate the active use of our contributors' sense of political rights, civic liberties and resources. However, not all problems can be solved merely by deeds.

'Words' and 'ideals' are integral to developing and expressing our identity – who we are; what we believe in. For that reason, Commentary 2016 ends with a chapter by young scholar, Johannis Abdul Aziz, who highlights areas in which civic discourse cannot but be the route to peace, happiness and progress for our nation. In the emerging values conflict around areas like gay rights; sanctity of life questions of euthanasia and the death

Singapore: A Democracy of Deeds and Problem-Solving

penalty; and religious accommodation in secular Singapore, it is the process and quality of our civic discourse that will determine if such issues will tear us apart, or allow us to accept and even transcend our differences of opinion and conviction.

What is the objective behind our theme and choice of articles? It is to reinforce within the NUSS community the idea that we have power in us to develop the engaged, compassionate, inclusive and progressive nation we want.

The NUSS community already does extraordinary things. We contribute to the NUS Alumni Bursary Fund to help needy NUS students. In the special SG50 year, a sum of almost \$2.8million was raised for this cause that ensures that many more young Singaporeans enjoy the social mobility that comes with a good university education. In 2014, we had already contributed about \$404,000 to the Fund.

NUSS members do not just give dollars but do deeds through our Groceries on Wheels (GOW) programme that has been running since 2010. Members deliver to the door, daily essentials to the poor and disadvantaged. Twelve thousand beneficiaries have been reached in this way over the years, and we should do more.

Our community is also committed to contributing positively to Singapore's political and intellectual development.

Who can forget the landmark pre-General Election dialogue with representatives of ten political parties held in August 2015 which was webcast, recorded and shared right across the country? We also have our regular Ministerial Dialogue sessions that help us keep abreast of policy developments. As the political landscape becomes more varied, NUSS should continue to provide a platform where we seek out the light that lies beyond the heat, sound and fury of policy and political debates.

We hope that the stories of social innovation and action in this edition of Commentary will motivate members further to be those problem-solvers in their spheres of influence that the country can benefit from. Get some tips on how to rally your peers and other stakeholders around that programme of improvement and change. Be spurred on to consider the importance of designing sensitive, suitable and sustainable solutions to the issues you care about. Most of all, be inspired to get those plans off the ground as many of the contributors to this volume already have.



Chapter One

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's “Democracy of Deeds”

Irene Ng

Irene Ng is Writer-in-Residence at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. She is the biographer of S Rajaratnam. She published the first volume *The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S Rajaratnam* in 2010 and is currently writing the second volume of the biography. She is a former Member of Parliament.

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

"What you have done may not get as much publicity as the utterances of professional oppositionists, but long after these have gone, what you have done will strengthen the democracy of deeds and not words."

~ S Rajaratnam (14 August 1971)

It has been 45 years since S Rajaratnam spoke those words to grassroots volunteers and coined the phrase "democracy of deeds". It encapsulates his views on one of his deepest political preoccupations: the sort of democracy and society that Singapore should strive for. More fundamentally, it animates Singapore's search for a model of governance that would safeguard the small country's survival and advance the welfare of its people in a harsh and unpredictable world.

Known as the ideologue among the first-generation Cabinet leaders, Rajaratnam advocated what he termed a "problem-solving democracy", oriented towards solving the problems of the people in practical ways — as opposed to a democracy of words, engaged in empty rhetoric and political confrontation. His was not a theoretical proposal. It was a call to action.

Those were the turbulent years when Singapore's survival as an independent country was far from assured. A small island without any natural resources, it

was confronted with existential challenges at every turn. It was surrounded by a dangerous regional environment and besieged by problems from multiple directions.

How should Singapore's leaders steer their newly independent nation? How should its people respond to the options available? These were the questions of the hour. They would shape the country's politics and its people's lives for decades.

To survive and succeed, the fledgling democracy had to build its own foundational pillars based on its objective conditions and needs, not on some preconceived model imported from Western liberal democracies. For Rajaratnam, an important pillar would be a democracy of deeds, not of words.

His phrase "democracy of deeds" has since been stamped onto the political lexicon. In recent years, several leaders have invoked it in their speeches, including Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong.

These recent iterations of Rajaratnam's principle throw a fresh spotlight on his views on the subject. This essay is divided into three parts: First, an examination of his concept of building a "democracy of deeds"; second, the context; third, some thoughts on its relevance today.

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

Origins of Concept

Philosophical, urbane and learned, Rajaratnam was an intellectual with encyclopedic knowledge of the theories of democracy and its practice in various parts of the world. However, as a political practitioner, like many other leaders of his generation, his views had been largely shaped by the realities of running a fragile country at a time of great upheaval and stress.

With the weight of the country's problems on their shoulders, the People's Action Party (PAP) leaders were more interested in practical solutions than power politics. They had observed warily how other newly-decolonised nations in the Third World experimented with democracy in moments of promise, yet failed their people so spectacularly. Demagogic and corrupt leaders had used populist tactics to win elections, only to be plunged into interminable power struggles while they squandered away the country's resources to stay in power.

The PAP leaders had also learnt how democratic dysfunction in some of these countries had brought about political paralysis and, in several cases, democratic collapse with military takeovers. Life for their people had in fact worsened since those states gained independence: more corrupt, more lawless, more violent. It worried Rajaratnam, in particular, how the process of decolonisation in many Third World countries, such as in Asia and

Africa, had been followed by internal conflicts based on race, language or religion. He became obsessed with ensuring that Singapore would avoid that fate.

Reinforcing their cautious stance towards the Western liberal democracy model was their own searing experience battling with pro-communists in the critical years which determined the fate of the country.

Indeed, since 1961 when the pro-communist members from within the PAP broke away and formed the left-wing opposition party, *Barisan Sosialis*, Singapore politics had been bitterly adversarial. After Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, *Barisan Sosialis* boycotted parliament in protest against what it termed as Singapore's "phoney independence". It took its fight to the streets with illegal strikes and protests in tandem with the communist revolutionary waves then sweeping the region. The boycott paved the way for the PAP to dominate parliament as it swept all the seats in the successive elections until 1981, when J B Jeyaretnam of the Workers' Party won a seat in a by-election.

For Rajaratnam, then Singapore's foreign minister as well as labour minister, the *Barisan* boycott was the biggest turning point in Singapore's political history. It allowed the government to focus on economic and social development, unobstructed by political roadblocks.

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

It also provided an unparalleled opportunity to shape the country's political culture for the long term.

In formulating policies and communicating them to the public, Rajaratnam worked closely with Singapore's then PM Lee Kuan Yew and the key cabinet members. Some policies, such as compulsory national service and the urban renewal programmes, proved highly controversial.

The lack of checks and balances in parliament drew criticism from some quarters in Singapore as well as abroad, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. They charged, among other things, that Singapore was undemocratic.

Rajaratnam took the issue by its horns, and seized the opportunity to expound on one of his favourite subjects: the fundamentals needed for Singapore's democracy. It is important to note here, however, that his core ideas on a problem-solving approach to governance predate the *Barisan* boycott, and can be discerned in his speeches and writings as far back as the early 1960s. The approach was based on his conviction that Singapore, despite its inherent vulnerabilities, could triumph against all odds by relying on what he touted as the only resources it had — human will, ingenuity and intelligence.

The primary purpose of many of his speeches then was to convince the citizens of the difficulties facing the country; to raise the Singaporean cause above parochialism, above division, and above history; and to unite the people with a sense of common destiny in words that inspired action. Using his gift for language and ideas, he sought to instill in the people a new spirit and a new attitude.

A manifestation of this effort can be glimpsed in his phrase "democracy of deeds" from his 14 August 1971 speech. However, what did he mean by it? While Rajaratnam did not specifically define the phrase, a close analysis of his various expositions on the subject reveals its key features: A democracy of deeds is based on public-spirited action in solving society's myriad problems, a sound understanding and appreciation of the country's external and internal realities, and a devotion to the welfare of the people.

In Rajaratnam's mind, this conception was an essential part of the "problem-solving" democracy that should be developed — involving the participation of as many citizens as possible in trying to solve "practical problems in practical ways". Indeed, real democracy, as he argued in another speech on 23 December 1971, is "one in which the various activities in a society are distributed as widely as possible among the people".

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

While some tasks requiring strategic planning and national coordination had to be performed by the Government, other tasks, such as solving local problems, should be carried out by the people. "The more participation there is by the people in the thousand and one activities of society, the greater the measure of democracy," he said.

Significantly, Rajaratnam often held up the efforts of grassroots volunteers in the community as evidence of democracy at work, and as strengthening the democracy of deeds that he envisaged. At constituency events, he highlighted their efforts to "solve practical problems in a practical way," such as helping residents affected by the urban renewal programme, raising funds to build a community centre, thereby helping to build a better society. Besides constituency grassroots organisations, he also encouraged citizens to join other grassroots groups such as trade unions and cultural groups to help solve the problems they faced. "Then you have real democracy. Not fighting, not confrontation, but it's when people get around to do some job to make life better for all," he said. Democracy did not mean opposing everything the government proposed, for then progress could not be achieved, he stressed. Rather, it meant that the people had a say in solving problems and making decisions at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, Rajaratnam believed that,

by getting the people involved in solving problems, they would better understand the constraints and challenges facing Singapore. Hence he hailed the government's move to empower people to run town councils in 1988, calling it an important stage of Singapore's democratic process. "This stage would be the most difficult because Singaporeans would have to learn to be responsible for their mistakes...They would also find that exercising authority would not mean popularity and total freedom," he said.

At the heart of his "problem-solving democracy" was his deep-rooted belief that good governance was about action and results. Hence, the issue was not whether parliament should be made up of one party or multiple parties. The important factor was the "quality and character of the parties concerned – whether in government or opposition". "An opposition party consisting of bums, opportunists, and morons", he argued, could endanger democracy and bring about chaos, disorder and violence, as had happened in many countries.

What concerned Rajaratnam was the kind of opposition politics that would take root and be entrenched in Singapore's political system – constructive and responsible, or destructive and obstructive. Given the high stakes and the combustible external climate then, he had grave misgivings about the kind of adversarial partisan approach that necessarily upholds opposition for the

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

sake of opposition. He said, "In my view, what we need are problem-solving parties. These will become effective opposition parties if the ruling party shows itself to be clearly incapable of solving real and vital problems affecting the nation. Only an opposition which can come out with better solutions to problems than those offered by the ruling party can become a genuine and meaningful opposition."

As for the critics of the day, Rajaratnam's main issue with them was over the quality of their criticisms. He fretted about the "persistent tendency for critics of Government policy to view its actions as though Singapore were an island cut off from the rest of the world". He approached armchair critics with the undertone of scepticism about the high principles they invoked, usually at high decibels. He relished cutting through their bombast to ask if they genuinely cared for the ordinary people, or were they opportunists just out to grandstand for popular applause and personal self-interest? However, he would welcome "meaningful, constructive criticisms as a problem-solving approach", as he said on another occasion in 1971, and expressed the hope that "criticism as a problem-solving approach may grow in the years to come".

Underlying Rajaratnam's problem-solving approach was his deep concern that, in indulging in gloomy navel-gazing, Singaporeans would lose sight of how

sensitive Singapore was to external developments and its need to be flexible and forward-looking. The general public had a limited understanding of the complex issues involved in policy-making and the challenges the government faced in addressing the new situations. This drove him to make repeated calls for Singaporeans to understand this hard truth: many of the country's domestic policies had to be modified to respond to external realities out of sheer necessity.

Context and Concerns

The external threats at that time presented one of the most dangerous periods in Singapore's history since independence: Britain's accelerated withdrawal of its troops from Singapore by the end of 1971, amidst a volatile geopolitical landscape. The pull-out posed serious threats to the country, already battered by the shock of separation from Malaysia. The British presence was the bulwark of defence for Singapore, curbing communist insurgency within the country and deterring potential aggressors.

The Singapore leadership's sense of crisis was compounded by the realisation that, in dealing with the new challenges, the country was on its own. A deep strategic thinker, Rajaratnam as Singapore's first foreign minister was only too aware of the country's vulnerable position, and of the new dangers arising from the dramatic

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

changes in the strategic environment.

The first major change was Britain's accelerated withdrawal of its military forces from East of Suez, announced in 1968, which marked its retreat from a global role. Meanwhile, the United States, demoralised by the long-drawn war in Vietnam and shaken by the Tet Offensive in 1968, signalled its plans to withdraw from the Indochina War, which was the centre of the Cold War in the region.

These shifts in the era of the Cold War turned the region into a focus of intense rivalry for ambitious powers such as China, the Soviet Union and Japan. Observing the moves in 1971, Rajaratnam described the region as "one in the throes of rapid and revolutionary changes", and added sombrely, "some of these changes portend trouble for Singapore."

To add to the gloom, the resurgence of armed communist activity in Malaysia in 1968 boded ill as the tide of revolutionary armed struggle swept across Southeast Asia. The war was expanding from Vietnam to Laos and Cambodia.

Rajaratnam feared that the withdrawal of the British and American troops from the region would give a fillip to the communists' efforts to subvert Malaysia and Singapore. In Singapore, the principal targets for communist subversion were radical left-wing parties, students in

Chinese-medium schools, and trade unions. Already, an increasing number of left-wing disturbances had been troubling the island.

If these were allowed to escalate, the cocktail of agitations would poison Singapore's efforts to attract the foreign investments that the country so desperately needed to provide jobs and a better standard of living for its people. From the crucial years of 1968 to 1971, Rajaratnam took on a second portfolio as Minister for Labour to push through tough labour laws to restore stability in the country's economy. During this sensitive period, Rajaratnam adopted a firm hand in bending relations between the government, trade unions and employers toward the national imperative of social discipline and economic development.

At the same time, as foreign minister, Rajaratnam kept a shrewd eye on what he described as the "treacherous currents of international politics", cautious about how major powers had shown a readiness to pursue subversion and proxy wars in various countries if it suited their own national interests. He was alive to how great power rivalries were being fought out in some Third World countries with civil wars aided – clandestinely and openly – by the big powers and their proxies. The rise of covert operations by big powers in the newly-independent countries rang alarm bells especially for small nations. In his

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

speech at the United Nations in 1971, he said, "If the small nations are to prevent becoming expendable pawns in the big power game, they must first put their own houses in order. As long as we are internally weak, we are easy prey for big powers."

Hence, he was particularly wary of incidences in Singapore that appeared instigated by external forces under the cloak of concealment, and was anxious to strengthen Singapore's defences against such covert activities. Clearly, with its strategic importance, Singapore had become an important target of the major powers in their struggle for power and influence in the region. As he warned in May 1971, "The setting against which the drama of survival will be played out in future is bigger; there are more players involved; and they are more powerful and the plot more complicated. And black operations are part of this play." At stake in this unfolding drama were Singapore's sovereignty, and its independence to chart its own political course. Against this ominous backdrop that year, the government took action against a Chinese language daily, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, and two English-language dailies, *Singapore Herald* and the *Eastern Sun*.

The fear of external interference in domestic politics ran deep among the Singapore leaders, having witnessed its destabilising effects in other countries. Citing the wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as examples, Rajaratnam

warned that the major powers would not have the "slightest compunction" to sacrifice Singapore and its two million people if Cold War interests demanded it. His upshot was: "Nobody is going to look after our fate and fortunes except ourselves. Anything else is wishful thinking. It is the road to disaster."

To compound the pressures on Singapore, this period also witnessed high-wire drama with Malaysia and Indonesia. With memories of the fateful 1964 Malaysia-Singapore race riots still raw, there were anxious moments as Malaysia's racial troubles in 1969 to 1971 played out. Knowing how easily Singapore could be drawn into the fray across the Causeway, the Singapore government kept a tight lid on communal tensions on the island and reinforced its multiracial policy as expressed in the Singapore Pledge, which Rajaratnam drafted in 1966.

Coalescing with the troubles up north were rumblings from the south with Indonesia's anger at Singapore's execution of two Indonesian marines in 1968 for their role in the 1965 bombing of MacDonald House in Singapore. The Indonesians responded to the hanging with mob violence and attacks on Singapore's diplomatic mission in Jakarta. Foreshadowed by the experience of Indonesia's Confrontation [*Konfrontasi*], it was a tense period for Singapore as it stood up to a neighbour many times its size, and at a time when its own

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

defence sinews were puny. Fortunately, cool heads on both sides prevailed, but the incident was sufficient to trouble bilateral relations for the next five years.

Concluding Thoughts

Rajaratnam's vision of a problem-solving approach at all strata of Singapore – government, opposition, critics and individual citizens – was an idealistic, long-term goal. It set the broad strategic direction for achieving a national consensus on democratic governance in Singapore. The quest could hardly have begun in less favourable circumstances. Indeed, it could be argued that, in the difficult 1960s and 1970s, the conditions were not ripe for the realisation of this vision. As with several of his big ideas, such as building a Singaporean Singapore (1960s) or turning the country into the Global City (1972), he could be said to be ahead of his time.

Known for his curious combination of idealism and tough-mindedness, Rajaratnam could be doggedly pragmatic in short-term matters, something necessary given the external conditions under which he had to pursue Singapore's national interest. Without his flexible and realist approach to the world, he could never have navigated the shoals of one foreign policy crisis after another, helping Singapore to manage the transition from a colonial outpost to a stable democratic independent nation.

While Rajaratnam had progressive instincts, he believed that in tough, uncertain times — times like the 1960s and 1970s in Singapore — ensuring the nation's survival should constitute the highest morality. Everything else was secondary. As Rajaratnam himself said bluntly in 1971, "We are not prepared to loosen the reins until we are quite sure that the consequences of the British run-down have been effectively tackled. If the restraints and discipline are maintained, short of overwhelming disaster, the prospects for Singapore are good." Note that he said this in August — the same month he coined the phrase "democracy of deeds" that year.

Indeed, it may be argued that the largely interventionist and centralising practice of the government during those years had militated to a certain extent against the growth of the widespread civic participation in diverse areas. Given the political context then, it must have been a tough call at times for the government to decide on where to draw the line between legitimate debate and unacceptable incitement. In those anxious days, the government's preference was to err on the side of caution.

While this hard-headed approach was not without its controversies, few can deny that it has reaped remarkable results for Singapore. It overcame the challenges posed by the British pull-out and other severe problems, and turned

Revisiting S Rajaratnam's "Democracy of Deeds"

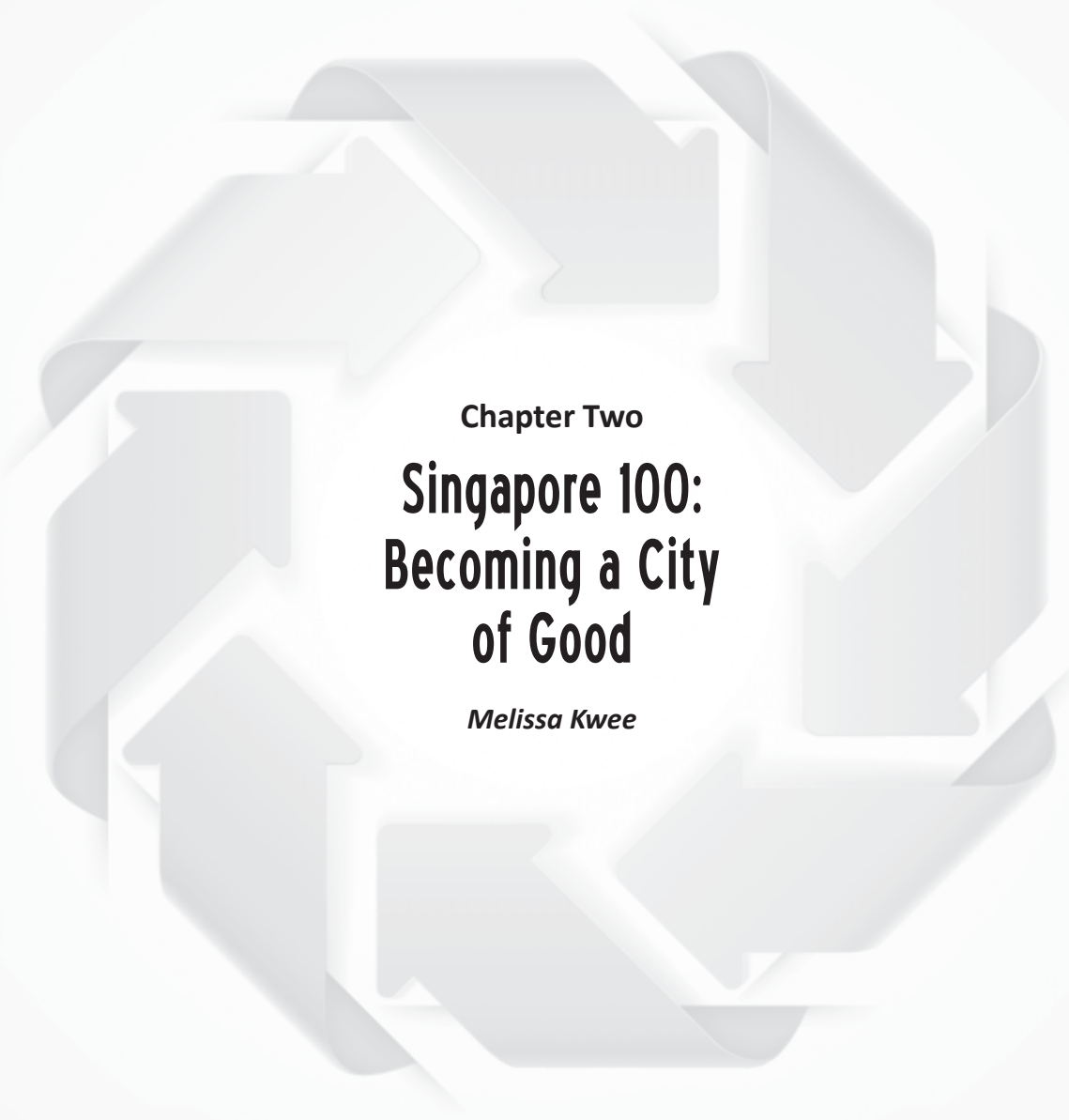
the country into a success story of grit, determination and imagination.

With a more stable and resilient nation today, it is timely to revisit Rajaratnam's concept of a democracy of deeds. Singaporeans are better-educated, more demanding and more vocal. In this age of social media and mobile technology, there are more opportunities for the public today to organise themselves and get involved in shaping society. However, it is still far from clear whether all these will translate into a democracy of deeds, and not of words.

Going forward, it is necessary to focus on the ways in which the state joins hands with citizens and institutions of civil society to help foster the constructive culture needed for such a problem-solving democracy to flourish – one based on meaningful action, a sound understanding and appreciation of the country's realities, and a devotion to the public good. The road towards that goal may be occasionally bumpy, but, as Rajaratnam convinces us, it is an ideal worth striving for. Ultimately, its progress depends on the political will of the citizens as a people and also of the national leaders.

There is reason to be optimistic for its development as PM Lee and his new generation of leaders advance Rajaratnam's vision within the framework of a more inclusive society. However, as Rajaratnam would have us remember,

never lose sight of the country's external realities. Singapore's inherent vulnerabilities remain. Without compromising the fundamentals, the current political culture is steadily evolving as it adapts to the modern challenges — a sign of hope to the coming generations.



Chapter Two

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

Melissa Kwee

Melissa Kwee is a life-long lover of humanity with a desire to connect people, ideas and opportunities to serve the greater good. Educated as an anthropologist, she has been applying the study of culture to understanding processes of social change and the role of personal agency. She serves on several community and corporate boards and has received the Singapore Youth Award, ASEAN Youth Awards and Fulbright Scholarship. She was educated at Harvard College (*AB magna cum laude*) and the National University of Singapore (EMBA). She is currently Chief Executive Officer of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) which established Giving.sg; a national giving platform that seeks to connect people to causes, to enable action, learning and community building. NVPC invites partners to contribute and reach out together.

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

“Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

~ Henry David Thoreau

“Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil.”

~ Gospel of Matthew 5:17

At the cusp of our next fifty years as an independent city-state, we stand in a Singapore challenged by rising economic pressures, shifting demographic trends and conflicting ideologies that keep both the policy circles and coffee shops buzzing with discussion about that future. However, Singapore has emerged from SG50 — code for Singapore at its 50 years of independence — stronger, clearer and more united about who we are and what kind of a country we want to build.

There is a new *zeitgeist* brewing, as seen in a rise in local pride around our built, natural and cultural heritage that has, in turn, made cookbooks, local hipster cafes and all manner of tourist paraphernalia rise in popularity. Local icons of culture are being celebrated, reinterpreted and revived. For the youth, it is suddenly ‘cool’ to be Singaporean. For our senior citizens who lived through the early years of

independence, we honoured them with accolades of leadership and hefty Pioneer Generation packages. The rest of us are mostly glad we live in a clean, safe and efficient country where the laws and other rules of governance are clear, recognised and enforced (even if there are too many of them).

During the Jubilee celebrations of 2015, we stopped all of our busyness and took note of those around us who are in greater social need, such as the elderly, people with disability, and the poor and disadvantaged families. We set aside our differences to be grateful about what we have and reflected on how we achieved that. Our differences did not disappear, the economic outlook did not become more favourable and manna did not descend from heaven, so to speak. However, I observed, that we had become a Singapore that was comfortable with candid conversations about what has worked and what has not in bringing about socio-economic progress. There was humility in that conversation. There was even a shift in certain perspectives about what it means to live the good life or indeed, what it means to be the ‘Singaporean of the Year’.

The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2015 awardee, the first ever, Ms Noriza Mansor, aged 50, was not a technopreneur, a business tycoon, or a President’s Scholar. Ms Mansor is a bedsheet promoter who works in

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

department stores selling various brands of mass-market linens. You would have forgotten about her if not for an action that the peer judges believed embodied what is best about being Singaporean.

Noriza was celebrated because she had washed and cared for an elderly man who had soiled himself in a public square as he ran an errand with his wife who was in a wheelchair. Why did the good Samaritan story trump the stories of personal bests that other potential awardees were feted for? What was it that spoke to her peers and judges?

I imagine it was that Ms Mansor, with her quiet and practical problem-resolution abilities, embodied what we do best: we do not make a lot of fuss when there is a problem. Instead, we get to the root of the issue and attempt to solve it as efficiently and effectively as possible. Except in this instance, this was not a business or policy concern; it was instead a human issue and was addressed in a way that restored human dignity.

Despite being technocratic and practical, Singaporeans intuitively know what is best about being Singaporean and about being human: giving and receiving, loving and being loved, being productive and enjoying meaningful fruits of our labour.

Looking ahead to SG100, it is timely to reflect on the meaning of 'success', to give thanks for the origins of that success and ask, for what purpose is it that we

have succeeded? Beyond reflecting on the transformation from slum to shimmering metropolis or the relevance of the 5Cs (condominium, credit card, car, cash and country club membership), fundamental questions about our collective purpose and identity as a nation, are percolating. Do we have a soul or are we simply highly functional pragmatists? Is Singapore a city of good? Do people define the good life as a grateful and giving life, or is it defined by just having many good things? This is a conversation that is just beginning.

Who are the people who are trying to make sense of this and are forging new practices and identities? What issues and circumstances have brought about these opportunities to develop those practices and identities? What patterns do we observe that can be strengthened to share the fruits of our success?

This essay seeks to explore five trends that define this new spirit of Singapore through the lens of civic action and community-building and concludes with some practical ideas to build on that.

Five trends that bode well for this new spirit of service will be discussed.

Skills-based Volunteering: Because We all have a Skill to Offer

Today, being a professional is more than just about doing a job. More millennials are interviewing companies to see if they

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

are the kind of company they want to work for. As uncomfortable as it may feel, this is a new reality — employees want more out of employment than just a job. For example, the pro-bono initiative of the Law Society of Singapore is driven by passionate young lawyers whose thirst for justice have not been met in their day jobs. Another example is how Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Australia and a number of the 'Big Four' accounting firms are seeking to institutionally support charities with pro bono hours and services. A third example is medical and nursing students who are seeking projects locally and regionally to exercise their skills and address real needs around us. A fourth example that comes to mind is an initiative by the School of Chemical and Life Sciences (CLS) Optometry department at Singapore Polytechnic that organises eye examinations in Cambodia on a regular basis. It also collects disused spectacles in Singapore, catalogues them and distributes them to villagers in Cambodia.

Beyond the traditional professions, we see hairdressers offering haircuts to the elderly poor or those who are bedridden. "I feel so humbled when I see people line up just so I can cut their hair," remarked a neighbourhood hairdresser aunty involved in such an initiative.

We all have skills and this is part of a more holistic 'SkillsFuture' programme, if it is possible to borrow the name of the

government skills development scheme. The programmes above allow for the honing of skills while there is also the creation of social value.

Skills volunteering is also changing youth volunteering. Most people volunteer in their youth but sustaining volunteering into their adult lives has been the challenge. Initiatives are now shifting to focus on meaning-making, empowering youth with skills to understand needs rather than simply robotically implementing programmes, and connecting them to communities of purpose and practice.

Modelled after the best of national youth initiatives, Youth Corps Singapore is raising the game at the national level. It is bringing the spirit of service to youth by offering them a way to serve, learn and develop life-long friendships in a fellowship built on a common commitment to serve. Perhaps over time, we will see more of the best and brightest use their talents to serve society. For instance, why not establish the equivalent of the 'Teach for America' model in Singapore which reaches people in the Southeast Asian region? Fundamental to effective youth volunteering is a service learning methodology where the youth adopt critical life skills which include needs assessment, reflection and meaning-making, and community collaboration that will also serve them well and keep them engaged in such work later in life.

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

Business for Good: Because Partnering Others Creates Greater Impact

An emerging trend is found in how businesses analyse, design and execute community initiatives. Corporate social responsibility, while not new in Singapore, is taking on new forms where leaders are not just doing their 'day of service' or presenting cheques, but creating platforms and mobilising others to multiply their impact.

IBM initiated one such effort amongst businesses in their neighbourhood at the Changi Business Park. Instead of being an exclusively IBM initiative, they organised 'Changi Business Park Gives' as a platform to engage businesses in the area and provide an opportunity to work with the South West Community Development Council on identifying neighbourhood needs that businesses could address with skilled volunteers, funds raised and meaningful collaboration. The result? An impressive 90,000 hours committed by employees and donations of over \$85,000. The benefit of size, an IBM leader told me, was to leverage it to serve others. She expressed great pride that their efforts enabled smaller businesses in the neighbourhood to get a taste of volunteering and community work by working with more experienced volunteers.

However, large multinationals are not the only ones organising platforms and coalitions to do good. Last year, local food

enterprise, Samsui Supplies & Services, the subsidiary of the Soup Restaurant Group, also wanted to do something to care for the nutrition of the elderly. For their 2014 #GivingTuesday, a national day of giving, Samsui pledged to serve 30,000 quality meals to the elderly in nursing homes, daycare centres and other community facilities. To fulfil this pledge, they partnered their suppliers to contribute ingredients, logistics support and donations.

Director of Samsui Supplies & Services, Ang Kian Peng was inspired by a mentor who believed that giving was part of doing good business. "He taught me that we should help others with what we do best. We are in the food business, so we want to help those who cannot afford decent meals on a daily basis," Ang said. Other than the impact on the elderly through the programme, Kian Peng's greatest satisfaction was in bringing together many people from different walks of life to form friendships that have been deeply fulfilling.

Family-based Giving: Because We Learn What We Live

As families get smaller and where there is more intentional parenting, we also see the initial seedlings of family-based giving emerge. This practice teaches values of gratitude and sharing, strengthens family ties, promotes a sense of self-efficacy and the belief that we can bring about positive change to the world around us.

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

At the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), we know that the small and simple ideas work best. Last year, during Chinese New Year, we seeded the idea of giving *hongbaos* to the poor by featuring a story of two brothers who decided to donate part of their *hongbao* money to a charity whose cause was meaningful to their family. Through a collaboration with the Singapore Kindness Movement and the dailies, the story generated a 73 percent year-on-year increase in donations to charities that month. Small idea - Big difference. Most of all, it changed families' approach to giving by inviting them to think about who to give to and the reason for it.

To share a more personal anecdote about this, my family has added a visit to a block of one-room flats to our Chinese New Year tradition. We host a dessert party for the children at their void deck. We also visit the elderly staying in the block with oranges and have conversations with them. We did these for the first time last year, and more friends and family joined in this year. At the end of it, my cousin even asked me whether we could go back regularly, outside of the Chinese New Year season.

Informal and Community-based Giving: Because Everyone Can Do Something

A challenge most agencies involved in volunteering grapple with is the misalignment between the service offered and the type of charity. This

includes the need to cater to after-office hours, bite-size projects; training requirements; training courses offered only a few times a year to get volunteers ready; and a misunderstanding of what precisely is needed by charities that want support from volunteers.

This difficulty in alignment has given rise to new outlets in community-based and informal giving where passionate neighbours have disintermediated charities by analysing issues at the ground level and creating their own solutions rather than doing these through existing charities.

To illustrate what I mean, let me cite the 'Learning Friends', 'Early Reader' and 'Keeping Hope Alive' programmes. Children whose parents are in jail are often disadvantaged. A group of friends created a training programme and deployed student and adult befrienders to visit the homes of such children to become their 'Learning Friends'. Their mission is to build the children's sense of self-confidence and worth.

'Early Reader' has been running for over a year and has developed both corporate and institutional partnerships with companies and tertiary students who are now trained, prepared and supported to read to their 'early reader friends'.

'Keeping Hope Alive' is an organically grown group based on a 'first responder' concept that organises volunteers to visit

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

elderly folks living alone and other one-room Housing & Development Board (HDB) residents. The volunteers assess and address the needs. They fix cupboards, buy new mattresses, cut nails, raise funds for surgery and help the residents get connected to the variety of services available which are not always accessible to them. The organiser invites volunteers to do this every Saturday morning. With more people, she says, they can go deeper and further to keep the sense of hope alive in the elderly and residents of one-room flats. What makes them different is their attitude — they feel blessed by the opportunity to serve. They are a new type of volunteer group that recognises that it is they who are beneficiaries, and those whom they serve are their teachers.

‘Sayang Kalimantan’ went further afield to make a difference. It sought to tackle the haze in Kalimantan. In the midst of us choking from the haze here in Singapore, the founders asked themselves what it must be like for those living at the source of the haze and decided to render help there. The protagonist was a videographer who went to Kalimantan to offer masks and commercial grade air purifiers which were crowdfunded online to residents there and to tell their story. He is now trying to adopt that particular village and offer more regular support by way of training to create ‘clean air safe houses’ which can be set up when the burning starts again. He is trying to develop

alternative livelihoods for the villagers. This might sound like just a drop in the ocean, but as a drop in that village, he is an ocean.

Imagining the Possibilities of Making a Difference

What do these initiatives and projects have in common? How can they be amplified?

They all begin with a certain imagination of what is possible. There is a story that provokes, captivates and mobilises the will to take action. We need to tell more stories about how this can happen.

However, stories and inspiration where no outlet exists to do good results in cruel frustration and exercise in what some may call ‘slacktivism’. We know that a simple ‘like’ or ‘tweet’ does not fundamentally change things or result in successful action. Anecdotes can describe a need but they cannot result in fundamental change. We need ground-level enquiry and patience to understand the real issues to make headway.

That understanding then has to be connected to possibilities and resources for action. People and groups will have to struggle to define the real needs and create platforms for themselves and others to act. We need to connect like-minded champions and resource partners so each can bring what they can offer to the table. Each has to ask: what are my

Singapore 100: Becoming a City of Good

gifts? What do I see as the world's greatest need? How can I face my doubts to take the first step towards doing something about it today?

Perhaps that is what Singaporeans have to do today: to pause and reflect on the gifts we already have to offer. In fact, who we are is in itself a precious and priceless gift. Who can we bless with our skills, resources and with our presence? No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. It can be time, money or talent that we offer in service of one another. Let our goal be not only to be best in the world in our endeavours, but to be the best for the world and for each other. If we succeed, we will not need a 'Singaporean of the Year' award to exemplify what it means to live the good life in Singapore.



Chapter Three

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

Lee Poh Wah

Lee Poh Wah, Chief Executive Officer of the Lien Foundation, joined the organisation as its first professional staff member in 2005. Prior to that, he worked in the Singapore Civil Service, where he established the Social Enterprise Fund. He has also held investment and business development positions in the private sector.

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

The preschool at the void deck of Block 52, Lengkok Bahru looks like any other in Singapore. Pint-sized furniture fills its classrooms, and song and chatter echo off cheerily adorned walls.

Watch closely however, and things start to look a little out of place.

Some children are tucking into pretend meals while one child lifts two fingers to his lips and starts puffing on a pretend cigarette. Another plays with a doll, but in a strange, sexualised way. In art class, a boy draws a wonderful, soaring eagle, because he wants to fly home “when daddy beats mommy”. Some children are formally enrolled, but attend classes only a handful of times a month or are habitually late, arriving hungry. When probed, the teachers reveal with stoicism and a hint of embarrassment, the verbal abuse they sometimes endure from parents.

In a neighbourhood where some of the nation’s priciest condominiums are located, 40 percent of the children in this preschool come from families with monthly household incomes that are less than \$1,000. Preschools such as these exist across Singapore, especially where Housing & Development Board (HDB) rental flats are located. Meritocratic Primary 1 has not even begun, and these children are already far behind.

Singapore needs to think differently about poverty, I thought to myself after

visiting that preschool in 2012. Poverty is not only about education and jobs —it is a disease; one that is invisible, infectious and often terminal. We have to find a vaccine, and I thought, the philanthropic foundation that I represent must find an answer.

Germ theory Philanthropy

Philanthropic foundations can be good vehicles for tackling such ill-defined problems. After all, foundations’ worldviews were historically shaped by germ theory. Conceived in the United States (US) at the turn of the 20th century, philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller sought to do for society what scientists did for diseases: to go beyond symptoms, isolate the pathogen, and design a remedy.

They had reason for their fanfaronade. Foundations were the centres of plutocratic power that wielded outsized resources. They were opaque, free to intervene for the public good, with little accountability for what that meant exactly. Moreover, like some universities, they possessed the powers of immortality - they were structured legally and financially to last in perpetuity. Foundations were considered ‘mutants’ and at conception, rejected by some as threats to democracy.

A century later, foundations have proliferated. In the United States alone, there were 86,000 foundations holding

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

US\$715 billion in assets as of 2012. The newest foundations are set up, not by white-haired tycoons, but by tech titans who speak of disruption, the same way they upended the world of business.

Yet, abundance and generosity have not been matched by clarity of purpose. Those running foundations tend to be tight-lipped about how they work and what they are attempting to accomplish. There is insufficient industry data and scrutiny by media and academia. In other words, this corner of the charity sector is shrouded in a mystery that rivals that of Wall Street. Little wonder that a century after their birth, foundations continue their struggle to attain legitimacy.

Yet, legitimacy is well within the mutants' reach. It rests ultimately on their ability to contribute to society in a way that is commensurate with their unique position. As Rob Reich, political science professor at Stanford University, pointed out in a 2013 Boston Review article, foundations should do more to leverage their freedom from the market and electoral accountability. As independent funders of diverse public goods, they provide alternative options to the solutions offered by the State, enlivening democracy and tempering government orthodoxy. Also, they possess the unfettered ability to engage in high-risk endeavours that impatient investors and fickle electorates shy away from.

In a "democracy of deeds" as espoused

by S Rajaratnam, the bias towards action plays squarely to the strengths of foundations. At the Lien Foundation (hereinafter referred to as "Foundation"), we have tried to step up to this challenge.

Established in 1980, the Foundation has narrowed its focus over the years. Today, we work in just three areas – early childhood education, eldercare, and water and sanitation – and within each area, on neuralgic and niche issues. We typically conceptualise our own projects with partners that we choose to work with. This essay shares some of our work in early childhood education and hopefully provides both a sense of our philosophical approach and our experience with project implementation.

Apartheid in Singapore

At Lengkok Bahru, we spent months hunkered down with the preschool team to understand the true nature of the problem. For these children, disruptive behavior was a manifestation of instability at home, caused by factors such as single parenthood, family violence, incarceration, substance addiction, unemployment and mental health problems. These conditions were breeding what Harvard professor Robert Putnam termed "incipient class apartheid" right here in Singapore.

In our view, the preschool is the best place for intervention because it is a naturalistic and controlled setting where

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

children spend hours daily. To be effective, however, it would require deploying specialists from other disciplines into the preschool to support the over-worked and demoralised teachers. It was a model that Care Corner, the non-profit organisation that ran the preschool, believed in, but was unable to execute because of government funding guidelines.

A grant from the Foundation provided the latitude to try something different. Named 'Circle Of Care' (COC), the new programme adopted an ecological approach, bringing educational therapists, social workers and preschool teachers, who typically work apart, together as a unique multi-disciplinary team around the child at the preschool. The teacher-child ratio was lowered, the level of parental engagement was raised and community resources such as artists, librarians and volunteers, were mobilised.

Not everything went smoothly. High staff turnover caused by the toxic school environment resulted in starts and stops in the work. Among the professionals in the newly-assembled multi-disciplinary team, childhood poverty became the proverbial elephant to the blind, as each interpreted its cause and remedy through different lens. Above all, it emerged, as we began work, that the needs faced by the children and families were more severe than what appeared on the surface.

Two years of perseverance brought encouraging results.

Participation in parent-teacher conferences (PTCs) crept up from a shocking zero to more than 50 percent as teachers waylaid parents on their way home for impromptu PTCs in the void decks. As social workers, who now represented the preschool, knocked on door after door to introduce themselves, school attendance for chronic absentees rose from 30% to 70%, even as their families continued battling challenges relating to health, finances, employment and housing.

Educational therapists introduced fresh techniques – such as talking puppets – into the school to kindle a love of learning among children from poor homes devoid of books.

To our surprise and relief, children who were mere months from the start of Primary One made leaps in numeracy and literacy skills. At night, they would show off their newly found reading, writing and counting skills at home, to the delight of their parents.

Multiplying Mutation

In 2015, halfway through the programme, we decided to scale it up. Our target: at least 15 new COC preschools within three years. Care Corner boldly relinquished its preschool operations to focus on turning COC from a project into a service offered

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

to other preschool operators. The knowledge, so painstakingly acquired on the ground, was institutionalised in a training programme to introduce this emerging approach to social workers, teachers and therapists. A longitudinal study was commissioned to track the children we have worked with till they are in Primary Three.

A key plank in the strategy is to involve primary schools in preserving the hard-won progress made by these children in their preschool years under COC. To do so requires skirting round the current lack of a formal system of information-sharing and collaboration between the preschool sector and primary schools.

Presently, at Primary One registration, many at-risk children can be identified through the required paperwork, but many others whose circumstances are not easily gleaned from formal documents fall through the cracks. These children miss out on services they need, such as pastoral care and counseling, even though they are available. Only later, at the end of Primary One or in Primary Two, are they identified through the emergence of chronic problems such as absenteeism and misbehavior. Precious time and opportunities will have been wasted, and the primary schools spend the next few years on the back foot, helping such children level up.

Our solution rests on the hypothesis that where we find a primary school with a

higher-than-average proportion of at-risk children, we will also find preschools with similar populations. In such locations, we plan to build a cluster of COC preschools that would feed an anchor COC primary school, via a structured, formalised system of information-sharing and joint care of the child between the primary school welfare personnel and COC social workers. Working with the Ministry Of Education machinery took patience, but two primary schools came on board.

Complicating the Narrative

Schools and the education system more broadly, are an important part of the solution, but cannot be depended on as the great equaliser in society. Our hope is that in time, COC will not only close a gap in our education system, but also change society's views towards poverty. Today's dominant narrative suggests that kids with tough childhoods do badly because of bad role models and bad choices. Studies reveal a more complex dynamic at play.

In the 1990s, the landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study completed by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego had already managed to quantify the long-term effect of abuse and neglect on children. Those who experienced at least four ACEs or forms of childhood trauma, out of a maximum of 10, were already twice as likely to be smokers, 12 times

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

more likely to have attempted suicide, seven times more likely to be alcoholic, and 10 times more likely to be drug abusers.

Another startling study by University of Wisconsin-Madison neuroscientist Seth Pollak found that children from poor families have smaller brains. Through magnetic resonance imaging scans, Dr Pollak discovered that the regional grey matter volumes in the brains of children below the US federal poverty level were eight to 10 percent below the developmental norm.

Yet another study by Victor Carrion, director of the Stanford Early Life Stress and Pediatric Anxiety Programme, found that chronic or unresolved trauma changes a child's levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, wrecking havoc on the developing hippocampus, pre-frontal cortex and amygdala, the parts of the brain that control memory, decision-making, and fear. Children with childhood trauma struggle with learning, managing gratification and taming impulsivity in their adulthood. Some are even misdiagnosed with special needs as a result.

Apart to a Part

Besides disabilities caused by poverty, the Foundation has an advocacy programme on disabilities caused by genetics. We noticed in Singapore that there is another silent sandwiched class that is squeezed

not between income levels, but between abilities. Children with severe special needs are on the radar of the government. However, children with mild special needs stay under the radar. Their conditions, although treatable, often go unidentified and deteriorate due to a lack of awareness and access to screening.

This was the reason why in 2009, the Foundation partnered with the KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the PAP Community Foundation on the "Mission: I'mPossible" (MIP) programme to provide screening and intervention for children with mild special needs. A simple factor differentiated it from existing services: Location.

Like COC, the screening and intervention of MIP was based within the naturalistic setting of preschools, instead of hospitals or clinics. A team comprising a paediatrician, a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and a learning support facilitator would provide therapy and train teachers. Senior teachers were appointed as Learning Support Educators and tasked with integrating therapy goals into classroom routines.

It also proved to be a cost-effective model. Kicking off with 25 preschools, the programme was eventually adopted by the government, renamed the "Development Support Programme", and scaled up to 400 preschools in 2015. An

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

additional 600 preschools are in the pipeline.

As a signatory to the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that commits our country to ensuring that such people enjoy full equality under the law, Singapore can do even better. Unlike the children in MIP, many children with moderate to severe special needs struggle to even find a preschool willing to accept them.

A handful of exclusive preschools do offer a high-quality inclusive experience, but at a hefty price. This is the reason why some parents opt for home-schooling. Others simply but erroneously treat intervention sessions as a form of preschool education. Like the children in COC, theirs is a ghettoised childhood, spent apart from peers.

To address the needs of this other segment, the Foundation partnered AWWA (formerly known as Asian Women's Welfare Association) and government agency, SG Enable, in 2014 to develop Kindle Garden, a preschool with an inclusive educational model. The school caters to 75 children; 70 percent of them will be typically-developing children and 30 percent will have special needs. It features open-concept classrooms, an outdoor treehouse accessible by wheelchair, and therapy equipment disguised as play-forms to eliminate both the physical need for therapy rooms and the invisible stigma

they create among adults and children.

Kindle Garden operates with a higher teacher-student ratio than the norm and counts specialists and health professionals on its staff. A specially designed curriculum enables learning across abilities. The hope is that it will be a place where special needs children can develop functional skills, independence and friendships while typically-developing children learn the values of respect, generosity and responsibility.

Kindle Garden was an instant draw for parents of special needs children: over 100 queued for a place after announcement of its launch. Marketing efforts were therefore directed at parents of typically-developing children, highlighting the 1,100 sq m space, double the size of a typical preschool in a HDB void deck that was designed by President's Design Award-winning architects. Its fees are pegged just slightly above the median industry fee of \$900.

To our surprise, the parents streamed in. As of February 2016, a month after opening, 55 of the 75 spaces have been taken. To keep to our planned ratio of typically-developing and special needs children, we will be able to take in more special needs children as typically-developing children enrol.

Internally, the team continues to grapple with tough questions, both philosophical and operational. With special needs

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

differing by category and severity, what would be an optimal mix for each class to be fair and effective to all? Is selecting children from the waitlist based on our idea of an optimal class mix instead of their queue position inherently un-inclusive? Are our teachers truly ready to effectively manage a class comprising, say, one child with Down's Syndrome and another with Autism, alongside other naturally boisterous children?

Whatever answers we arrive at, there are ultimately only so many inclusive preschools that Singapore can build. The sustainable solution will be a combination of more inclusive schools and an expanded Development Support Programme that offers on-site intervention for children with not only mild, but also moderate, special needs.

Advocate Adequately

In COC, MIP and Kindle Garden, the common thread is early intervention. Addressing achievement gaps early reaps dividends many times over in later years for individuals, families and the economy. That is because children from low-income families and special needs children are almost always haunted by life's early setbacks, long after their fleeting childhoods. Marriages break up; caregivers burn out. Support from donors and well-wishers wanes as toddlers become awkward teenagers and burly adults. Addiction to video games is emerging as a problem for such children

as it provides the illusion of an alternative universe where they can finally find mastery over their bodies and destinies.

Many such stories are untold, and many more exist.

That is why at the Foundation, we view advocacy as a cornerstone of philanthropy. Done effectively, it brings the weight of public opinion to bear on the challenge at hand, dispelling tendencies of complacency and mediocrity, and keeping the government's hot seat, hot.

An example of such advocacy was the Starting Well Index, the first global ranking of early childhood education that we commissioned the Economist Intelligence Unit to conduct. Out of 45 countries analysed, Singapore came in a dismal 29th place, behind the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong and debt-ridden Greece.

In a ranking-obsessed society such as ours, the distillation of a complex problem into a single number brought sudden clarity. How could a country with an airport, schools and quality of life ranked among the world's best, accept sub-par preschools? The thought itself was heart-rending.

After the release of the Index, we followed up quickly with two supporting reports: "Vital Voices" which featured the improvements suggested by 27 leaders

Foundations: The Mutants of Democracy

from Singapore's preschool sector, and a survey of parents that revealed a majority preference for greater government involvement in preschool education. The trio (the Index and the two reports) offered the impartiality of statistics and the diversity of views from a democratic collection of voices.

Some months later, a number of new government initiatives were announced to uplift the preschool sector. Many observers credited this to the Foundation, but to do so would be simplistic. To be fair, the government had studied the issue at length prior to the arrival of the Index, but perhaps the Index brought useful clarity, urgency and greased the wheels of change.

Radically Practical


At the Foundation, we favour contribution over attribution.

Philanthropy should, after all, be about liberating the receiver, and never about redeeming the giver. To liberate, we need to encourage and give courage to the people on the front line of social change who know the ground realities best, by assuring them that it is safe to fail with us. We encourage them to take risks and think the unthinkable. Our relationship is not coloured by a belief in the simplicity of cause and effect, but by the warmth and banter of an intuitive grant-making approach that is anchored in trust, transparency and chemistry. Internally,

we are proponents of social pedagogy, the discipline that draws on core theories from education, sociology, psychology, philosophy and others in tackling social problems. In this worldview, humanistic principles are not a luxury, but essential. It is the harder path to take, and the Foundation has had as many home runs as spectacular failures. We share our lessons freely, not as a choice, but as a duty for the status we occupy as a foundation in Singapore. Even mutants must mutate and unlearning is just as important as learning.

In the final analysis, no matter how hard we try, silver bullets do not exist.

Just as we were all geared up to scale the COC, we received sobering news. A child whose parent was in jail, but who was nonetheless holding up well and turning out to be one of the brightest in class, was discovered to have been molested by a neighbour. Once the poster child of the COC programme, she now undergoes counselling at the Institute of Mental Health.



Chapter Four

**‘Giving a Future to
our Past’ - Reflections
on Developing
the Heritage
Conservation Cause**

Chua Ai Lin

Chua Ai Lin has been the President of the Singapore Heritage Society since 2013, and a member of the Society since 1996. She holds a PhD in History from the University of Cambridge (UK) and was previously an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the National University of Singapore, specialising in the social and cultural history of colonial Singapore. Currently, she serves as a member of the National Library Advisory Committee, and in the past has been on the advisory board of the National Heritage Board and on the former Singapore Sub-Commission on Culture and Information for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation better known as UNESCO. In 2012, she was the first Singapore representative on the Cultural Heritage Preservation project of the International Visitor Leadership Programme organised by the United States of America’s State Department.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

In the year 2015, on the 50th anniversary of independence, Singapore saw its greatest celebration of history which was impressive because the past is often thought of as something that has held us back from charging towards a better future. The year of SG50 (shorthand for 'Singapore at 50 years of independence') saw the conclusion of the National Library Board's (NLB's) five-year Singapore Memory Project, which aimed to collect five million memories from ordinary citizens and which funded 74 community projects via the irememberSG fund.¹ 2015 was also the year in which the country's first World Heritage Site, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, was inscribed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). There are also 71 national monuments gazetted by the National Heritage Board (NHB) and over 7,200 buildings gazetted for conservation by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).² The picture for heritage at this point looks rosy, and very different from the context

in which the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) was founded in 1987.

At that time, a group of concerned citizens led by architect, William S W Lim, formed the Singapore Heritage Society to call for heritage conservation and to fill the gap in public discourse on heritage matters. This came soon after URA released its very first Conservation Master Plan for historic areas in 1986.³ Today, SHS's primary role continues to be that of an independent voice for heritage conservation in Singapore, articulating principles and disseminating knowledge based on research and international best practices. What are the issues at the forefront of the Society's concerns in the year 2016? What approaches can we take to achieve SHS's vision of 'Giving a Future to Our Past'?

SHS is guided by the organisation's definition of 'heritage' as 'the living presence of the past'. It is concerned with how history bears upon the contemporary present and the future.

¹ The Singapore Memory Project, <http://www.mci.gov.sg/web/department/libraries/community-and-outreach/the-singapore-memory-project>; '74 projects under the Singapore Memory Project to go on show in lead up to SG50', 18 Mar 2015, *Straits Times*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/74-projects-under-the-singapore-memory-project-to-go-on-show-in-lead-up-to-sg50>.

² 'Singapore Botanic Gardens declared UNESCO World Heritage Site', 15 July 2015, *Channel News Asia*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-botanic-gardens/1960028.html>; 'Fullerton Building officially gazetted as national monument', 7 Dec 2015, *Channel News Asia*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/fullerton-building/2326396.html>; 'Flats, social institutions among 75 buildings to be conserved', 7 Jun 2014, *Straits Times*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/flats-social-institutions-among-75-buildings-to-be-conserved>.

³ Lily Kong, *Conserving the Past, Creating the Future: Urban Heritage in Singapore*, Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, p.39-41; 'A Brief History of Conservation', <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/conservation/vision-and-principles/brief-history.aspx>.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

The key themes and concerns that SHS has championed over the last five years and continues to do so can be summarised as follows:

- advocating for the use of Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA) for better public policy outcome;
- rediscovering forgotten histories with a focus on Bukit Brown, a potential World Heritage Site, and Tanjong Malang, a 200-year-old historic landscape off Shenton Way;
- sustaining living heritage with a focus on Pulau Ubin, Singapore's last offshore island community;
- promoting cultural authenticity and vibrancy with a focus on Chinatown, a historic district facing modern challenges; and
- recommending coherence of processes and legislation for heritage protection across different agencies and ministries.

For the last three decades, the Society has spoken up on behalf of Singaporeans in response to government policies and actions (or the lack of). While we often address specific processes and proposals, what is also needed is a fundamental shift in mindset — a recognition of the critical role that heritage plays in our humanity, our self-identity and our sense of

connection to others. These create a society with 'soul', something that many find lacking in Singapore. I will first discuss some of our experiences and approaches in terms of government engagement, and then address the broader issue of changing mindsets.

Engagement with the Government

In 2011, SHS faced the two largest conservation issues the Society has encountered in its history, involving the potential destruction of two significant historical landscapes (not just individual buildings) — the former Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Railway and Bukit Brown cemetery. Apart from releasing position papers,⁴ the Society's first response in both cases was to recommend a thorough documentation of heritage to form the basis for informed decision-making. SHS was invited by URA to participate in the committees established to discuss each of these issues, called the Rail Corridor Consultation Group and the Advisory Committee on the Bukit Brown Documentation Project.

With funding from URA and NLB respectively, SHS completed a survey of heritage structures along the former KTM Railway, making the findings public in an

⁴ Singapore Heritage Society, *Bukit Brown Position Paper*, http://www.singaporeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/SHS_BB_Position_Paper.pdf; For the KTM Railway, SHS's views were incorporated into the Nature Society (Singapore)'s conservation proposal, *The Green Corridor - A Proposal to Keep the Railway Lands as a Continuous Green Corridor*, in the sections 'Preserving History' and 'Unesco World Heritage', p.22-23, <http://www.nss.org.sg/documents/TheGreenCorridor101103.pdf>.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

interactive online map,⁵ as well as 50 oral history interviews which are now accessible as part of NLB's Singapore Memory Project website.⁶ For Bukit Brown, SHS introduced qualified researchers for an official documentation project, a multidisciplinary effort led by anthropologist, Dr Hui Yew-Foong, and funded by URA, to document approximately 4,000 graves that would be affected by the construction of an eight-lane road cutting through the cemetery.⁷ While it was unprecedented for the government to fund a documentation project of this scale, the data was never intended to inform development plans. In both cases, the information recorded came too late. Many of the KTM Railway structures featured in the SHS interactive map have since been demolished as their conservation had not been factored into land transfer negotiations with the Malaysian authorities. The scope of the Bukit Brown documentation was limited to what would be directly affected by the construction works. However, it is research at Bukit Brown done after the road development plans were finalised, which has proven how significant the site is in different ways. This includes a unique Nanyang Chinese material culture expressed in sculpture and relief work,

decorative tiles, and tomb architecture; epigraphic evidence of Chinese migration networks across Southeast Asia; as well as its relevance to modern Singapore through the pioneers buried there – people whom well-known local places and institutions are named after, such as Chew Joo Chiat, Chew Boon Lay, Lim Chong Pang and Gan Eng Seng.

In other words, there is a critical need for a better decision-making process. When it comes to urban planning, doing due diligence requires that all relevant factors be considered before decisions are made and this must include environmental and heritage considerations, in addition to housing, transport, and industrial needs. However, the internal process by which the URA draws up its 10-yearly Concept Plan (to set the broad urban redevelopment direction for 50 years) and the five-yearly Master Plan (for action within 10 to 15 years) is not clear. Which are the ministries and agencies that contribute directly to this process? The NHB only set up its Impact Assessment and Mitigation Unit in July 2013, "to incorporate heritage considerations into land use and housing plans; assess the impact of development works on heritage sites

⁵ Singapore Heritage Society, 'Singapore Railway Heritage Interactive Map', <http://singaporeheritage.org/railcorridor/>.

⁶ Singapore Memory Project, 'KTM Oral History Project series', <http://www.singaporememory.sg/collections/2?nextrecord=10&listtype=collectionMain&id=2>.

⁷ The documentation team's data and findings, including photographs of 4,153 graves which have since been exhumed, are available online at www.bukitbrown.info.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

and structures; and develop mitigation measures for affected sites and structures.”⁸ It was in May 2015 that NHB launched a nationwide survey of heritage buildings and sites “to develop an understanding of Singapore’s heritage landscape for long-term heritage planning”, to be completed in a 16-month period.⁹ This survey is an important first step in strengthening the capability of NHB as “the lead agency for heritage matters”¹⁰ but also brings into question how much data NHB has been able to channel into URA’s urban planning process in the past. While URA has a Conservation Department, its purview is buildings of architectural merit so sites like Bukit Brown do not fall under its remit. As for the former KTM Rail Corridor, it is managed by URA’s Physical Planning Group, which develops and executes land use plans, not the Conservation Department.

The internal government process is most crucial because there are limited opportunities for public input and once plans have been drawn up in detail, it

is difficult for substantive changes to be made. For the last Draft Master Plan in 2013, the public engagement that took place is described as follows by the URA: “Over the past five years, URA has received and actively sought feedback on our Plans from the public through various channels. Recently, we carried out consultation meetings with Members of Parliament and key grassroots leaders from various constituencies. We also conducted focus group discussions on topics such as greenery, cycling and the Woodlands Regional Centre.”¹¹ This seems to indicate an approach to consultation in which constituency political representatives are taken as the main channel for views from stakeholders on the ground and focus groups were limited to a small number of topics. As the Master Plan impacts the entire island, there is certainly room for including a more diverse range of ideas from different sectors and varying levels in a structured way. The opportunity for SHS to comment on the Draft Master Plan came only during the three-week public feedback window in

⁸ ‘New National Heritage Board unit plays mediator on heritage issues’, 26 Oct 2016, *Straits Times*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-national-heritage-board-unit-plays-mediator-on-heritage-issues>; National Heritage Board Annual Report 2013/2014, p.72, <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/lib/sites/default/files/paperpresented/pdf/2014/S.%20140%20of%202014.PDF>. Since May 2016, NHB’s Impact Assessment and Mitigation Unit has been renamed ‘Heritage Research and Assessment’.

⁹ ‘NHB to launch nationwide survey on heritage buildings sites’, 6 May 2015, *Channel News Asia*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/nhb-to-launch-nationwide/1828492.html>.

¹⁰ National Heritage Board Annual Report 2013/2014, p.72, <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/lib/sites/default/files/paperpresented/pdf/2014/S.%20140%20of%202014.PDF>.

¹¹ Urban Redevelopment Authority media release, ‘Our Future, Our Home. Draft Master Plan 2013 exhibition at URA’, 20 Nov 2013, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/media-room/news/2013/nov/pr13-75.aspx>.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

December 2013,¹² and at that point, feedback was only accepted with respect to developments that had not appeared in the previous Master Plan in 2008. An email reply to SHS for submitted feedback was received from the Ministry of National Development (MND) on 5 June 2014, just one day before the Master Plan was finalised and gazetted.¹³ The significant public dismay over development plans for Bukit Brown, Tanglin Halt, Dakota Crescent, Rochor Centre and Sungei Road flea market have also come too late to be fed into the planning process.

To address these problems, SHS advocates a greater and preferably mandatory use of Heritage Impact Assessments. Experts, interest groups, as well as stakeholders on the ground would then have a more structured, pre-decision manner in which to interact with government agencies with respect to redevelopment projects. In essence, HIA is a process that begins by identifying the important cultural, historical and heritage values of the site, both tangible and intangible. The second step is to

assess how proposed changes would impact these values, and thirdly, to recommend how these effects can be “avoided, reduced, rehabilitated or compensated”.¹⁴ A range of different options should be comparatively evaluated. HIA is a well-established process in countries such as Australia, the United States, and even to a some extent, in Hong Kong. Their experiences have shown that more often than not, HIAs do not stop development entirely, but result in revisions to the original proposal and measures to avoid or minimise impact to the heritage value of the site. In other words, this is a process to ensure that development decisions are made “by a conscious choice and not by chance or lack of awareness”.¹⁵ Impact assessment is a decision-making tool that is relevant across different domains. In Singapore, we do see Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) sometimes applied “selectively to projects that may most adversely impact our protected natural spaces as well as our coastal and maritime environments”¹⁶ and there are local experts and companies with the

¹² Singapore Heritage Society’s letter to MND on Draft Master Plan 2013, 18 Dec 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/singapore-heritage-society/singapore-heritage-societys-letter-to-mnd-on-draft-master-plan-2013-18-dec-2013/611710158876624>.

¹³ Urban Redevelopment Authority media release, ‘URA gazettes Master Plan 2014’, 6 June 2014, <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/media-room/news/2014/jun/pr14-33.aspx>.

¹⁴ ICOMOS, ‘Guidance on Heritage Impact Assessments for Cultural World Heritage Properties’, January 2011, http://www.icomos.org/world_heritage/HIA_20110201.pdf.

¹⁵ Trent Ng, ‘*Striking the balance between heritage conservation and urban renewal in Singapore: Advocating for a mandatory Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) regime*’, Policy Analysis Exercise Final Report, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 27 December 2015, p.44.

¹⁶ Tan Chuan-Jin, ‘Building Memories and Gardens Together’, Budget Debate 2013, Ministry of National Development, http://www.mnd.gov.sg/budgetdebate2013/speech_tcj.htm#speech.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

skills to conduct EIAs. In contrast, HIAs have not been carried out even for large projects, and there is also a paucity of trained professionals able to carry out HIAs in a competent manner within the Singapore context. There is no mandatory requirement for either HIA or EIA in Singapore.

As heritage and culture are location-specific and require deep background knowledge, local expertise is essential. In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong University has been running its Architectural Conservation Programme since year 2000, awarding undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, thus providing a substantial pool of qualified professionals "who then are capable of participating in any of the stages of HIA, whether in the position of commissioning, conducting, evaluating and or approving a HIA."¹⁷ There is currently no comparable programme offered in Singapore.

Two particular dimensions of HIA are worth highlighting here. Sometimes, assessments are scoped to focus only on the physical and architectural expressions of heritage, however the SHS recommends that intangible aspects such as social memories are

also analysed in order to produce a more meaningful report. Why does this matter? Many Singaporeans will remember how in 1999, the Old National Library in Stamford Road was proposed for demolition. It was pronounced by URA as being "not of great architectural merit" and had to make way for the Fort Canning Tunnel to address an increase in traffic flow as well as to allow a realignment of Stamford Road to provide Singapore Management University (SMU) with a better-sized plot of land.¹⁸ Diverse members of the public voiced their affection for the Old National Library and spoke out against its demolition. Seeing this, William Lim, then President of SHS, stated:

"Memories of the people cannot be quantified and assigned an exchange value. Cities have enormously complex communal histories and memories. . . . The inclusion of memories as an essential urban design criterion can be problematic for many policy makers. However, it is an essential condition of our existence. We must consciously elevate the value of visual memories in our urban environment beyond the criteria of commodification."¹⁹

¹⁷ Yeo Kang Shua & Chua Ai Lin, 'Heritage Impact Assessment: is Singapore ready?' in *State Policy and the Cultural Politics of Heritage-Making in East and Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin (eds), *Memories and the National Library: Between Forgetting and Remembering*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000), p.66.

¹⁹ Kwok Kian Woon, Ho Weng Hin, Tan Kar Lin (eds), *Memories and the National Library: Between Forgetting and Remembering*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000, p.8.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

The second important dimension in a HIA is careful stakeholder mapping to ensure that the responses of certain groups of users or stakeholders on the ground are not left out. In Singapore, we face unique challenges with this. It is not enough to issue a media call for the public to submit feedback through written and online channels if we want to do that well. The elderly, the less-educated, the non-English speaking, and those without access to online channels are unable, wary or afraid of proactively giving feedback in writing, even if a proposal might affect their own lives. The widespread feeling that government plans are cast in stone may also hold residents back from speaking to their local Members of Parliament (MP); “没有用啦!” (“*mei you yong la,*”) or “It’s no use lah” is a common refrain on the ground. When approached by grassroots leaders, residents can find their official status intimidating and it is natural that a resident’s first response may be to offer the politically correct answer rather than share their inner feelings.

Having lived through the early years of Singapore’s post-independence, the older generation have internalised an acquiescence to changes in the landscape as a necessary patriotic response. To create an atmosphere of trust and respect, and to ask the right questions that can gently coax people to express their true needs and

aspirations will require trained community workers and skilled facilitators. To learn how to accurately identify the full range of users and stakeholders beyond officially recognised organisations and educated, articulate citizens also requires practice.

The public service will have to overcome two major challenges in adopting deeper stakeholder consultation. The first is the emphasis on ‘efficiency’. Public consultation and policy co-creation take time and effort, and plans will have to go through several rounds of iterative feedback and revision. The process will inevitably be messy and complex, but it will result in a more robust solution that better meets actual needs, and will help to prevent a public outcry from arising at a late stage when it is difficult to alter plans. The second challenge is that heritage is a complex matter involving government departments across different ministries — integrated planning requires a level of cooperation and coherence that the public service is not accustomed to.

The government has recognised both these challenges and has taken concrete steps to address them. In 2010, the Ministry of Communications and Information developed a Public Consultation Toolkit which exhorts that “public consultation should be a first

‘Giving a Future to our Past’ - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

thought, rather than an afterthought, in the policy development process”²⁰ while the Civil Service College conducts several courses in public consultation skills. To overcome the silos that individual agencies function within and improve coordination, the Municipal Services Office was set up as a coordinating body under MND in August 2014, and after the 2015 General Elections, the Prime Minister appointed three Coordinating Ministers to Cabinet to ensure a whole-of-government approach. These new directions and the skills that must undergird them will take time to develop. Political will and masterful leadership at the ministerial level are vital to put in place a new *modus operandi* for the entire public service.

There are signs that these directions are seriously being tried out on the ground. In 2014, the Ministry of National Development (MND) set up the Friends of Ubin Network (FUN) under The Ubin Project initiative to “retain Ubin in its rustic state for as long as possible”.²¹ Spearheaded by Senior Minister of State (SMS) Desmond Lee, this is a co-creation approach to policy-shaping for Pulau Ubin that draws views from a range of concerned groups and individuals, educational institutions, as well as different government agencies – MND, National Parks Board (NParks), URA and

NHB. With a majority of FUN Network members representing the nature sector, the Singapore Heritage Society has played a key role in raising issues relating to the culture, community and living heritage on the island while making suggestions based on gaps observed in the existing initiatives. Our main recommendation was that a thorough ethnographic study of the current population on the island be conducted to provide a sound basis for policy-making. This resulted in a study commissioned by the NHB of which findings were recently presented to the Minister and the FUN Network in February 2016.²² The process of shaping plans for Pulau Ubin continues and the results of this more collaborative approach have been encouraging.

Around the time the FUN Project was launched, MND also set up a Bukit Brown working group to discuss ground level matters such as conservation of the main gates and salvaged artefacts from exhumed graves, as well as to gather suggestions on enhancing the visitor experience to as-yet unaffected parts of Bukit Brown. Several government agencies as well as SHS and the community group, All Things Bukit Brown, make up this working group. In March 2015, representatives from SHS were also invited by SMS Desmond Lee to join MND, URA and NHB officers on a

²⁰ *Public Consultation Toolkit*, Singapore: Ministry of Communications and Information, 2010, https://www.cscollge.gov.sg/data/CSC/9_Public_Consultation_Toolkit.pdf.

²¹ ‘Friends of Ubin’, Ministry of National Development, <http://ubin.mnd.gov.sg/MS/PulauUbin.aspx>.

²² ‘Living heritage’ study of Ubin wraps up’, 29 April 2016, *Straits Times*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/living-heritage-study-of-ubin-wraps-up>.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

study trip to Hong Kong, to learn from counterpart government departments about their experience with HIA and partnering non-profit organisations in heritage regeneration projects. Compared to issues such as Bukit Brown and the Cross Island MRT Line, Pulau Ubin is one where consensus is easier to achieve — the Friends of Ubin Network members and Singaporeans are broadly aligned with the goal of preserving the island's rustic charm, and as a government-initiated project, there are resources available and support of the necessary government agencies. This work provides the necessary foundational steps and real experiences that political leaders, public servants as well as civil society advocates need in order to learn how to trust and work with each other, laying the groundwork for grappling with more contested issues that might arise in the future.

Changing Mindsets, Getting in Touch with What is in our Hearts

The practical elements of changing the way heritage conservation works have been described above, but social change comes about from shifting not only minds, but also hearts. Through the years, SHS has held countless public talks, seminars, forums, exhibitions and published a long list of books. The audiences reached have often been those who are already heritage advocates and history enthusiasts. However, in my years of teaching at the National University of

Singapore, my experience has led me to realise that the greater challenge is getting people to understand why the past is important and to feel their own place in a long continuity from one generation to the next. I have also noticed how the Singapore psyche, shaped and ingrained over the last 50 years has made this difficult for many people. We have been raised on mantras of pragmatism, the knife-edged struggle for survival after separation from Malaysia, and the sacrifices necessary in land-scarce Singapore.

In Eng Yee Peng's documentary, *Diminishing Memories* (2008), she filmed her family and former neighbours recalling the government's acquisition of their Lim Chu Kang farms and the transition to apartments in a Housing & Development Board (HDB) estate. In the on-screen interviews, they almost all begin by affirming that their sacrifice was necessary for the development of the nation, but as the film progresses, their heartache starts bubbling to the surface, reflected in downturned lips and quiet tears. These were people who did eventually adjust to high-rise living, but they did so by deliberately pushing aside the pain of resettlement. Decades later, for this film, they revisited the past and found emotional wounds that had been suppressed rather than healed.

This is true on a nationwide scale, where paradoxically, we are still told by politicians that there is no room for

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

sentimentality in Singapore, even whilst the Singapore Memory Project and SG Heart Map (initiated by HDB) have sought to collect the memories of millions of citizens and map 50 places “where our endearing and special moments have taken place”.²³ Both of these projects echo the nostalgic theme of SG50 celebrations, but nostalgia is always rose-tinted — the brief statements that make up the bulk of submissions for both projects never provide enough breathing room for deeper, more complex emotions to emerge. When it comes to places that no longer exist, such as rural kampongs, or those which are drastically changed, such as the historic shophouse districts of Chinatown and Kampong Glam, these nostalgic memories have a flip side — the trauma of loss which is barely spoken of.

Inspired by the national focus on memory for SG50, SHS embarked on a project called ‘Picturing Chinatown’, which was funded by an irememberSG grant from the Singapore Memory Project.²⁴ While SG50 aimed to bond the nation together through shared memories, it seemed to us that merely collecting soundbites or old photographs and archiving them was a missed opportunity to deepen authentic bonds between people. We brought together a bilingual group of 12 community participants aged between 18 years to the late 70s, to participate in workshops and site visits over a period of four months. They were asked to

reflect upon their personal relationship with or responses to the historic district of Chinatown, and take photographs as a means of opening up themes for discussion. It was less about the past per se than their relationship to what remains of the past today. Through the process of sharing, listening with an open heart and mind and responding to each other, guided by thought-provoking questions from our team of facilitators, we aimed to have participants delve deeper into their own thoughts and feelings and learn to articulate them. They admitted that doing this was unfamiliar and difficult, but once they got the hang of it, their accounts during the workshops became powerful and very moving. At the end, one participant highlighted her most important takeaway: “I realised that I really do love this country.” It was not a blithe or contrived statement, but an authentic emotional response after contemplating the losses and gains of Chinatown’s dramatic changes over the last few decades.

If only every Singaporean could go through this facilitated experience to understand and articulate their own thoughts and feelings. Socialised to accept personal sacrifices for the sake of nation-building, expressing painful emotions would seem unpatriotic. Over time, Singaporeans have adopted a deliberate apathy to avoid feeling further pain, just as one might shy away from

²³ SG Heart Map, Frequently Asked Questions, www.heartmap.sg/faq.

²⁴ The project’s website is www.picturingchinatown.com.

'Giving a Future to our Past' - Reflections on Developing the Heritage Conservation Cause

romantic relationships after painful breakups in the past. Detached from its original context of the immediate post-1965 years, this national trait emerges in our young millennials as an inability to comprehend the vital role of social memories in our society. I have heard young people ask, "Why is it important to remember our parents' and grandparents' memories? We have our own memories," or even more starkly, "Why should we remember the Second World War? It was so long ago." If this becomes the norm, Singapore will most certainly lose its soul, and Singapore society will lose its humanity. We often hear of the fault lines in society caused by racial or socio-economic tensions, but we rarely discuss how society is strengthened by strong inter-generational bonds, and how these have been threatened by the decay of social memories and the loss of our vernacular heritage languages.

Roland Silva of the International Council of Monuments and Sites once said, "It is love and not laws that will save our monuments".²⁵ The real work of caring for our heritage lies in our sentiments, affection and feelings — dimensions of ourselves we are not usually asked to exercise, whether as students or as adults. As a result, we may feel awkward and at a loss with what to do with

these emotions. However, without understanding how deep our feelings run and what they mean to us as human beings, administrative best practices such as the HIA remain as mere technocratic tools, rather than pathways to meaning and community development.

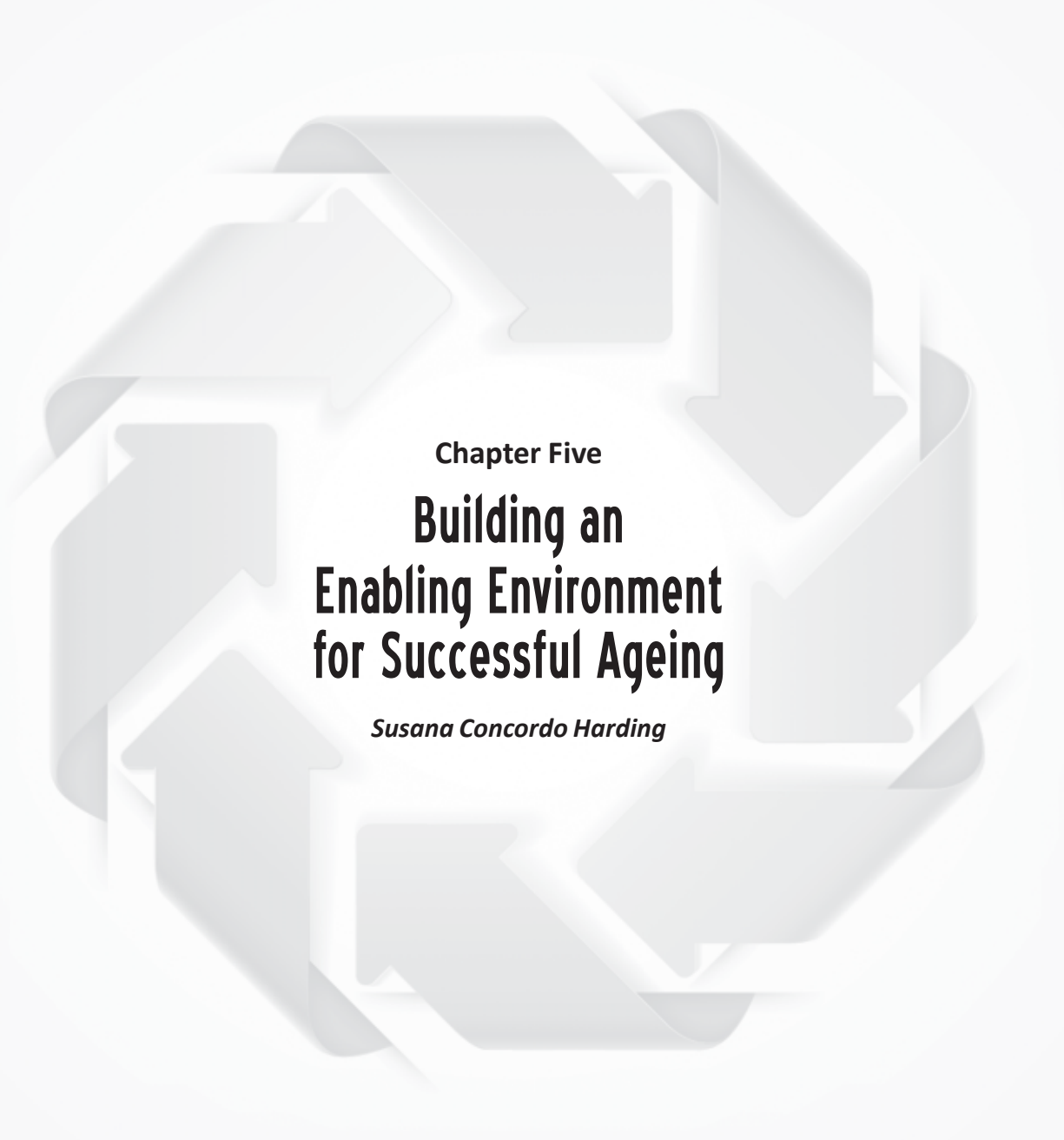
In closing, I would like to leave you with this insight from Professor Kwok Kian Woon, sociologist and past president of the SHS. In an essay entitled 'A Brief History of Idealism', he said:

"In Singapore, if you want to tell somebody off, you can say "You are an idealist! You are idealistic." ... We also tend to tell some young people, "You are not practical, you are too idealistic." What are we missing if there is no idealism in our society? What is the cost to a society if there is no idealism? Idealism is an important topic to us and can actually be a very practical issue, because if we cannot imagine a different future, how can we move towards a better future?... And you don't just imagine – you try to work towards that reality."²⁶

So the recipe for heritage advocacy is the same for all of civil society: having the heart to love, the idealism to imagine a better future, and I would add, the grit to keep going despite years of setbacks and disappointments.

²⁵ Thanks to Professor Johannes Widodo for sharing this quotation.

²⁶ Kwok Kian Woon, 'A Brief History of Idealism' in *Education-at-Large: Student Life and Activities in Singapore 1945–1965*, edited by Teng Siao See, Chan Cheow Thia Chan and Lee Huay Leng; Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2013, p.65-66.



Chapter Five

Building an Enabling Environment for Successful Ageing

Susana Concardo Harding

Susana Concardo Harding is an alumnus of the National University of Singapore, having completed her Master in Public Administration at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. She is the current Director of the International Longevity Centre Singapore, an initiative of the Tsao Foundation. From the Philippines, Susana's lived here long enough to consider Singapore her home.

Building an Enabling Environment for Successful Ageing

Our founder, Mrs Tsao Ng Yu Shun, established the Tsao Foundation in 1993 to empower our elders and help them enjoy the opportunities for maximising personal growth, well-being and sense of fulfilment that longevity offers. In the early 1990s, Singapore was a very different place and concepts such as successful ageing and ageing in place were unheard of. In those days, the idea of home and community-based care for elders was new and the demographic concept of an ageing population was a relatively low-key subject.

Mrs Tsao had a very clear vision for the Tsao Foundation — of elders being supported and taken care of in their own homes by their families and loved ones, so that they can feel secure, surrounded by their families and continue to be in control of their lives. This is also the vision of her granddaughter, Dr Mary Ann Tsao, who translated and operationalised the vision by developing pioneering models of community-based health and social programmes as well as services to enable ageing in place and successful ageing; to empower mature adults to master their own ageing journey over the life course in terms of self-care and self-practice; and to access the right services at the right time.

State and Civil Society on the Same Page on Ageing

By early 2000s, the landscape in Singapore had changed as it became a

highly developed society. However, the issue of an ageing population was still a low-key subject and most of the community support for our elders was provided by voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs). There was also low awareness of the differential impact of ageing between men and women. It was against this backdrop that Dr Tsao, then President of the Foundation brought me into her team to lead in the advocacy work on two issues: first, women and ageing, and second, the participation of older people in community affairs.

In 2002, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly met in Spain and more than 160 UN member states debated and adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). Being sent to Madrid to witness this momentous event and to meet renowned leaders and experts in the field of ageing, was an excellent way to immerse myself in this sector and to start a career that has been both empowering and challenging to say the least.

Most of the time, the Singapore government takes a cautious and prudent approach to signing and adopting international conventions and agreements. This, we understand is because it wishes to take its international commitments seriously and will only sign on to them if it is confident that it will benefit the Singaporean population and that it can implement commitments, policies and programmes effectively.

Building an Enabling Environment for Successful Ageing

MIPAA, to a certain extent, was an exception in that Singapore signed on to it readily. I believe it was primarily because, as early as 1999, the government had accepted the proposals by the first Inter-Ministerial Committee on Ageing (IMC, 1999). It is in this documented policy that the vision for the successful ageing for each and every Singaporean was stated and which the government had already committed to, even before the UN General Assembly Meeting in Madrid took place.

Creating a Senior-Friendly Community

Tsao Foundation continued to be the catalyst for creating change in the mindset of how people view and perceive ageing. The second decade of our work in the community focused on creating awareness of the differences between men and women as they grow older and how important it is to engage our elders and empower them so they can give their views and opinions on issues. We also had to ensure that we provide appropriate platforms so that they can participate in developing solutions for these issues.

It took the Foundation more than five years to demonstrate that older people can be engaged in the community through our 'Voices for Older People' programme; that our older adults can be volunteers and ambassadors of the various active ageing programmes that we conduct and implement within the

community; and that older people can learn about self-care through the Self-Care on Health of Older Persons in Singapore (SCOPE) programme and change their health-seeking behaviour.

By 2009, Tsao Foundation had conceptualised and developed a community-wide public health planning approach to building an enabling environment for successful and active ageing in our communities - Community for Successful Ageing (ComSA). ComSA aims to enhance and rebuild the three systems that are critical for supporting older residents in the community to age well and to age in place. These systems consist of the following: integrated and comprehensive care system comprising primary care, care management and care service network; community development system comprising self-care and interest group formation, with focus on enhancing intergenerational solidarity; and infrastructural development comprising housing or residential facility and transport. The ComSA initiative shares the vision of the City for All Ages (CFAA) which aims to build senior-friendly communities where seniors can live safely and confidently, stay healthy and active, and be fully integrated (MSF, 2014).

In 2012, at the invitation of CFAA, Tsao Foundation decided to go to Whampoa and pilot test ComSA. By 2013, in partnership with CFAA Whampoa, the Ageing Planning Office of the Ministry of

Building an Enabling Environment for Successful Ageing

Health, the National Healthcare Group, and the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, we started to build a care system in the community through our person-centred primary care clinic and care management as well as service network amongst all health and social care providers in Whampoa. By 2014, we started implementing community development to facilitate successful ageing by effecting community-wide change through intergenerational dialogue and increased social cohesion among community members.

ComSA is giving Tsao Foundation a good opportunity to continue to be a catalyst that facilitates solution-building in Whampoa. As we get to know the community better, it has helped us to identify other needs of the elders; provided us with ideas that we can work on together with our partners to effect change and impact how residents, especially our elders' experience of ageing in the community.

A Brighter Future

The way ahead, I believe, is going to be slightly easier — not because we know all that there is to know on ageing successfully and maximising the potential and opportunities that greater longevity presents to Singapore, but rather because the new policies announced recently by the government (Pioneer Generation Package and the \$3 billion Action Plan to Enable Singaporeans to

Age Successfully) will provide stronger support to VWOs and clearly signal that there is a strong commitment within the government to act upon shared goals.

For the Foundation, our catalytic and thought leadership roles will continue as our work in empowering our elders through ComSA has just begun. Exciting times are ahead indeed for our elders and for all of us working alongside with them within the community.



Chapter Six

**Transient Workers
Count Too's
Singaporean Way with
Advocacy on
Migrant Workers**

John Gee

John Gee has lived in Singapore since 1999 and has been an active member of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) since it was founded. He was President of the society from 2007 to 2011 and currently heads its research sub-committee.

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers

Change Through Words and Deeds

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) was formed by people who felt stirred to action by stories of the mistreatment of migrant workers they had heard of or read about, as well as by personally witnessing what one of our early members called 'the silent indignities' that these workers all too often faced. The group might have concentrated solely on providing material help to workers in distressing conditions, but, right from the outset, members thought that something more was needed.

We were determined to work for the elimination or alleviation, at its roots, of the host of problems that we saw. Advocacy, directed at changing policies and practices governing the status of migrant workers, was to be at the heart of our work. The logic is plain: it is similar to the distinction that can be made in the sphere of aid programmes between feeding hungry people and helping them to develop the capability to feed themselves. Advocacy focused on policies and practices can consume time and energy without producing visible results quickly, but it has the long-term potential to benefit far more individuals than emergency assistance programmes directed at addressing just the immediate needs of the migrant workers we wished to serve.

This did not mean ignoring the need to provide such direct assistance of course.

Indeed, what we called 'direct services' soon took up the lion's share of our resources and continues to do so. It did mean however ensuring that we kept advocacy firmly in view, and not allowing the pressures (and sometimes, satisfaction) of providing direct assistance to cause us to lose sight of the need for advocacy.

We defined TWC2's role as promoting the rights and well-being of migrant workers through advocacy (including public education), research and direct services. Rather than being three separate parallel areas of activity, we saw them as intertwined and mutually supportive. Our direct services work showed us the real problems that workers faced, including workers' own attitudes towards their kind. That, in turn, informed our research work and both the direct services and research underpinned our advocacy work.

Dealing with History – Dialogue and Trust-Building

TWC2 began in 2003 as The Working Committee Two, taking its name from an earlier civil society initiative. It was essentially planned as a nine-month campaign to promote better conditions and treatment for domestic workers. The group organised meetings and outreach efforts to the public, as well as actively engaged the media. We knew then we needed to communicate with the government, but wondered if the

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers

government would communicate with TWC2 in return?

It must be remembered that the 'Marxist Conspiracy' of 1987 had a dampening effect on civil society in Singapore especially with regard to advocacy related to migrant workers. At the turn of the millennium, supporters of various causes were still exploring the space for activism; cautiously testing its boundaries. Even in 2003, there were those who were worried that an open initiative that questioned policies towards foreign domestic workers, might encounter a strongly hostile official response, or maybe, simply be ignored.

In the event, we approached the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the chief government body that deals with migrant workers. This resulted in a meeting between TWC2 representatives and senior personnel of MOM in June 2003, followed by a fuller meeting in November the same year.

Those early meetings were valuable in starting a dialogue. There was wariness on both sides initially, but face-to-face conversations largely overcame that. These meetings set something of a pattern for dialogue in the years that followed.

When we wished to meet, we would set out what we wanted to discuss clearly in advance. This was to everyone's advantage since MOM's spokespeople

would be able to give more considered and informative responses to us, having had the opportunity to consult colleagues before the meeting and ensure that they were thoroughly informed of government thinking at the time.

One important element in our approach to advocacy has been our positivity. It was evident to us from early on that the MOM and other government agencies were particularly sensitive to criticism that appeared purely negative, and that appeared as accusations. Criticism was better received when it was, as MOM officials expressed it, "constructive", or, as we saw it, were associated with proposals for positive and realistic alternatives.

From our point of view, bringing forward such proposals was fine: it was just what we wanted to do. It has required a lot of work by us over the years. Some ideas for reform seem common sense, but normally, there are arguments for the status quo that have weight and which need a response. A proposal for a change in law or regulations has to be firstly underpinned by evidence that there is a problem that needs attention, and then, by a reasoned and factually-based argument that the alternative we propose is an improvement that is not only desirable, but workable.

Besides making proposals for individual reforms (such as for safe and decent transportation for male workers or

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers

itemised pay slips for all low-paid workers), we have prepared carefully reasoned proposals for the amendment of the major pieces of Singapore's legislation affecting migrant workers, including the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, Employment Act and Employment Agencies Act using the same approach.

This has been a rather Singaporean approach to working for change. Internationally, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) argue for reform on the basis of principles represented in human rights treaties and declarations, but this can seem abstract to many people and unpersuasive. Whether dealing with the government or public in Singapore, we have found that laying stress on practical proposals for change was much more fruitful. More people listened instead of switching off. It was not that we ignored human rights standards. We have instead referred to them and called for them to be observed. By giving practical form to individual human rights standards, we have made more progress than if we had simply reiterated demands for Singapore to sign this convention or that treaty.

Our most protracted campaign has been over the question of a weekly day off for domestic workers. The rights argument was clear to everyone from the outset — the MOM's position (not strongly expressed to the public) was that, in principle, it was in favour of domestic

workers having regular days off, but that there were significant practical obstacles in the way. In particular, it cited the needs of families that had children and elderly or disabled members who needed constant attention.

We argued that this did not seem to account for over half of all domestic workers, not having any days off and that, in any case, these workers who were called upon to provide constant care for family members were precisely the ones most in need of a break. In the recent past, we have come forward with ideas, including expanded social care, a more flexible system of domestic worker or care worker employment, as well as an adjustment of family arrangements and responsibilities to address the roadblocks facing the other half of domestic workers who seem to be so indispensable that a weekly day off would be regarded as an impossibility by their employers. If these other structures and programmes could be put in place, they could help employers overcome the final practical objections to all domestic workers having a weekly day off.

One problem for NGOs in dealing with a government body in any country is how to balance the public and private campaigning discussion which is definitely a problem in the Singapore context. Perhaps from the government's point of view, closed-door dialogues allow an exchange of views in which officials can take a more nuanced and less rigid

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers

stand on policy and regulation than they usually would in a public forum. They might also take such dialogues as venues for testing the waters: unveiling official thinking on a change or initiative that is still being discussed or refined. They do not want anything such as the latter to be brought to media and public attention before or unless they feel absolutely ready.

NGOs that engage in advocacy, by contrast, tend to have more of a culture of openness. They are usually quite comfortable with being challenged and publicly responding to what they believe and do. They would prefer to be able to air exchanges with the government on policies, regulations and their practical implementation fairly and freely. However, they have to face the challenge that dialogue with the government usually involves a certain level of non-disclosure to the public as a pre-requisite.

It is probably futile to seek a complete meeting of minds on this question, so the two parties will simply have to bump along and improvise, meeting by meeting, letter by letter. In practice, it is usually not a big problem. TWC2 has found that normally, the broader questions that it would wish to broach in a public context, including on its website, can be raised with reference to statements and documents that are already in the public domain, but anything that is strictly 'behind closed

doors' material has to remain that way. There have been frustrations on both sides. The MOM officials become irritated from time to time when articles are published on our website criticising its handling of a worker's case and they feel that either the criticism is unwarranted, or that TWC2 ought to have raised the matter directly with the Ministry and not aired it in public. From TWC2's point of view, such articles can highlight particular issues in order to raise public awareness of them whilst promoting long-term change. In any case, the question remains of how far a dynamic, 'newsy' website that supports the society's advocacy efforts should curtail the reports of a variety of writers with the stories real workers have told them — this is provided that due effort has been made to fact-check the circumstances related to the news item.

On the other hand, TWC2 has sometimes raised questions and received a non-response, a pretty uninformative statement that leaves us no wiser than before. Some of the questions raised on the website that have been a cause of irritation have, in fact, been raised in more general terms previously, without any significant progress being made towards resolving them.

What is important here is that there needs to be acceptance on both sides — relations between the government and NGOs that engage in advocacy are bound to be a bit rocky — but we can live with

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers

that. If there is a will to engage and strive to make progress, these differences will not stop that.

Activities that can positively influence public opinion have been important in TWC2's work. From the outset, we tried our best to be helpful to students, researchers and journalists who sought information. We have often provided speakers to schools, colleges and other institutions. We regularly issue media releases and write to the press. Our research is partially geared to putting sound information into the public domain and promoting a better understanding of migrant workers.

The interaction of a steady stream of citizens with migrant workers is a by-product of some of our programmes. These include: The Cuff Road Project, that provides food daily for destitute workers; Discover Singapore, which provides a day out to somewhere interesting for destitute workers awaiting settlement of their cases; and others where many volunteers engage with migrant workers for the first time in their lives, giving them a new personal outlook towards migrant workers in general. They take their experiences away with them into whatever walk of life they are in, wherever they are, influencing others as they go.

Overall, such initiatives have value in themselves and they also contribute towards our advocacy goals — after all,

a government considering possible changes in policy towards migrant workers has to take public opinion into account. Hence, if the public becomes more sympathetic towards these workers or concerned at particular violations of their rights, it can only work in favour of regulatory changes that we would regard as positive.

For new activists, advocacy work can seem quite frustrating, precisely because it rarely yields quick and visible results. When gains are made, they tend to be little by little and rarely result in an NGO winning 100 percent of what it set out to achieve. That has certainly been the case in Singapore: when we see progress, it is generally a small move here or an adjustment there that do not seem at all radical, but their cumulative impact can be considerable. Activists also have to reconcile themselves to the fact that government bodies in any country are not normally forthcoming about what did bring about a desired change — though it might be something that an NGO has devoted a lot of effort to achieving, it can feel, to the NGO's supporters that their efforts are unrecognised. While this can be frustrating, it is the bigger picture that counts: the change did happen!

Sustaining TWC2's Success

So, with that caveat, it is possible to look back on TWC2's years of advocacy, research and public education tied to our direct services, and see that there have

Transient Workers Count Too's Singaporean Way with Advocacy on Migrant Workers


been successes however incomplete some have been: a mandatory day off policy that has significantly increased the percentage of domestic workers having a rest day; raised standards of protection against accidents and the elements for workers travelling to and from worksites; raised safety standards for domestic workers employed in high-rise buildings; faster resolution of cases for workers with complaints against their employers; stiffer penalties in the Employment Act against the demands of kickbacks from workers; the impending introduction of itemised payslips for workers on low salaries; and an anti-trafficking act. These and more were goals for which TWC2 worked, and on which our views were presented to MOM and other governmental institutions.

In our earlier years, we used to meet NGO activists from other countries and hear about their activities. Some organised demonstrations and rallies, and they issued strong public declarations demanding action from their governments. We would explain that we were working in an environment where this was either not possible or was likely to be counter-productive. Then we would tell them how we operated. TWC2's efforts often seemed very tame alongside theirs — we wrote a letter; we published an article; we issued a report or we had a closed-door meeting. Yet, it has turned out that we could have an impact and the work that we have done has

gained respect.

At the same time, we must admit that our long-haul approach has not been without its difficulties. Early on, when our direct services work had only just started but when we were already engaging in advocacy, there were some who thought that TWC2 was 'all talk'. Volunteers have tended to be drawn towards work that they see as of direct assistance to workers in need. Their contributions have been of immense value and allowed us to do far more than would otherwise have been possible with our slender resources of paid staff and money.

However, we also need to maintain an organisation and sustain the other aspects of our work. We have had difficulties in building a core group of members to sustain our information services and advocacy. The main difference, in this respect, between our position in our earlier years and now, is that we can look back on a record of achievement that shows that our overall approach has worked. That ought to be persuasive enough in helping us to renew and revitalise the society in years to come — though not for too many years, as our ultimate goal is to be so successful that our work will no longer be necessary!



Chapter Seven

**Developing the
Singapore Soul:
ACRES and
Animal Welfare**

Louis Ng

Louis Ng is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES) and first-term Member of Parliament of Nee Soon GRC. Ng received his first degree in Biology from the National University of Singapore and a Master's degree in Primate Conservation from the Oxford Brooks University (United Kingdom).

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

ACRES was set up after a young Louis Ng was appalled to discover a baby chimpanzee bleeding after being punished for misbehaving during chimp photography sessions and spoke up about it. There were no organisations in Singapore willing to speak up against this cruelty at the time, so he started his own. Today, ACRES is an 18,000 member-strong organisation focused on eradicating illegal wildlife trade and raising awareness on animal cruelty. It rescues, treats, rehabilitates, and returns to the natural habitat where possible, injured native wild animals or animals that have been found to be part of an illegal trade. It runs a Rescue Centre that provides a permanent sanctuary to the animals that cannot be returned to their country of origin.

In this special interview, Ng tells us what motivated him to care about animal welfare and rights, and it turns out that it is not only for the sake of the creatures themselves but for the deeper mission to develop in Singaporeans the instinct to put right what has gone wrong.

Commentary: *Firstly, while many care about animal welfare, what transformed you from someone who was personally interested in animals into a change agent aiming to affect broader society in the area of animal welfare?*

Louis Ng [LN]: My interest in animals began when I was fourteen years old, but the turning point came after what I

witnessed at the Singapore Zoo. A chimpanzee named Ramba hugged me and she was checking whether lips were bleeding after she had been punched. I will always be ashamed to say that it took a second incident before I decided it was time to speak up.

I shared my concerns with many of the fellow volunteers at the zoo and everyone said, “Yes, it is wrong, but we cannot speak up, because this one involves the government, you know?”

Hearing that remark was disappointing as I felt that the biggest crime is to know something is happening, and yet do nothing about it.

Commentary: *Was this incident after university?*

LN: I was in the first year of university then. I realised that if I did not speak up, nothing would change. I approached the zoo management and said that we should put an end to chimp photography. I remember what the curator said — we are good friends now — “Louis, you are just a small boy; you will never win.”

With that, they took my badge and ‘fired me’ for speaking up. I approached a number of Singaporeans, non-government organisations and got the same response: “The Zoo is government, don’t speak up against it.”

Eventually, I got the support of World

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), a British group and IPPL (International Primate Protection League), an American group, to help me. The Straits Times (ST) also published a number of articles on the matter and we eventually won the campaign.

It seemed like I was this little boy trying to effect change in Singapore, but needed the help of Western groups — that again was embarrassing.

I decided that I would set up my own group and ACRES was born. The first board member was Eunice Lau, the ST reporter who covered the story. She stuck her neck out for this campaign and ST was amazing to have believed in the cause and me. They published a piece in prime news with a strong headline: ‘Zoo takes flak for chimp photography’.

Commentary: *So you had to be courageous and had to find partners at the same time?*

LN: Yes. When the zoo finally stopped chimp photography and released the chimps back to the rest of the troop, Ramba ran to her mother and they hugged in happy reunion. Eunice asked me for a quote and I told her that it was the best thing I had done in my life. I told her that if I had to spend three years just to help three chimps, I would devote my life to such work — which is why we started ACRES.

Commentary: *This is quite an unusual approach because in pragmatic Singapore, one would ask: ‘Why stick your neck out? And this is not even for people but animals’. Has it been just about animals for you or is there more to this?*

LN: Firstly, I did it for the three chimps. The other concern I had was that when I was taking the photos at the Zoo, only one couple ever asked, “So, where are their parents?” This is why ACRES focuses so much on raising public awareness — we need people to start asking questions. My mother, who is a civil servant, asked me if I really wanted to keep sticking my neck out like that. Another ST article got my parents very worried. The headline was “Who does Louis Ng think he is? The 500 dollars-a-month activist”.

Commentary: *However, you were not just sticking your head out in a local context, but broadening it with international reach?*

LN: I simply wrote to the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). My skin is very thick — that was how ACRES was set up as well. The first source of support, I will always remember, was from the Lee Foundation. I wrote to Mr Lee Seng Gee, who was the key decision-maker at the Foundation, saying I wanted to start a group to help animals. I asked, “can we get some money?” and he gave me eight thousand dollars, our first cheque. I will always salute Mr Lee

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

as I had no credentials and ACRES was zero back then, but he still supported us and it was a big encouragement to us. There were others who stepped forward to help too: NUSS member and then Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP), Mr Chandra Mohan helped, and so did Ms Braema Mathi when she was an NMP.

Interviewer: *So you were still at university?*

LN: This was in 2001, my second year at university — ACRES was essentially born in National University of Singapore (NUS). I will always recall some professors telling me, “you cannot do both - mix science with activism.” I said in response that there must be a purpose to science — that if we can use it to change the world, why not? But you know, advocacy fifteen years ago was very different from what it is today. However, I had one professor, Professor Benito Tan. He taught me about bryophytes and he kept a keen, yet quiet watch on me. One day, he told me he nominated me for the HSBC NYAA Youth Environment Award — it was a big encouragement to me.

Commentary: *What happened after that?*

LN: When we were successful with our chimp campaign, a number of people at that point wrote me letters saying “nice”, or “good job”. That was when we started to mobilise people, moved into chat

rooms, ran other campaigns such as the one against consuming sharks fin. We gathered ten members and officially registered — ACRES’ first office was my bedroom.

Commentary: *It’s been quite a journey — what are ACRES key campaigns or milestones?*

LN: There were many. In 2004, we started working on a rescue centre because I realised that while I was going around rescuing animals, I would pass them to the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) and that they were eventually euthanised. AVA did that primarily because it did not have anywhere to house the animals nor extra resources to take care of them. A lot of gibbons which were confiscated from the wildlife trade, were eventually euthanised for instance. We decided to attempt to work with the government, get a piece of land for these rescued animals. The first response to this from a civil servant was, “Louis, if we can get this piece of land for you, pigs will fly. In such a land-scarce country, why would the government give you a piece of land for activities with no economic value?” That was a decade ago — we persevered. It took five years, but this explains why we have a model of a flying pig at the front of our Rescue Centre. Pigs can fly!

Commentary: *What was a clincher then?*

LN: You just keep fighting — we went to

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

the media. Member of Parliament (MP) Dr Amy Khor and NMP Geh Min helped. We pushed till AVA said to us one day in 2007, as if in passing, “And, by the way, you got the piece of land.” We were asked for a deposit which we did not have. Seven thousand, five hundred dollars was the monthly rent and we needed three months’ worth of rent in deposit. We asked ourselves if we should proceed, but the only way to find out whether you will drown, is to jump in and fight. My dad stepped forward to pay the deposit. We built the place, purely by going out there to beg for the money and raised about \$750,000 within half a year to get the whole place going.

Commentary: *What has been one of your greatest challenges?*

LN: I was pretty radical. In our first ‘Suffering, not Smiling’ dolphin campaign, I drove to Haw Par Corporation Limited’s office [the Corporation owns and operates Underwater World Singapore], parked near the car park entrance and had a chained dolphin model on top of my car. We entered the office to hand over our petition and had media coverage for the campaign.

However, I asked the team if we were helping to bring about fundamental change to policies, and we realised that we were not really getting anywhere.

So we decided to take a different approach, which was to collaborate with

other stakeholders and aim to amend legislation. We worked with government, MPs and ministers and got the first amendment to legislation — the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act in 2008. Through collaboration, we achieved a lot more.

The Rescue Centre is another example of collaboration. We realised that the police was not equipped to manage wild animals. There was the case of the policemen who ran over a python with their patrol car found at Singapore General Hospital because they did not know what else to do.

We could criticise the police and the police would probably back off as they might not want to work with someone who is so adversarial. Instead, we met the police and some office holders, and we said, “Look, actually, officers are not trained. This really is not a crime in progress, so why would you want to waste resources by sending a patrol car down? Why not outsource the work to ACRES?” We have since rescued an estimated 7,000 animals.

Commentary: *What happens to the animals you have rescued?*

LN: We rehabilitate them and release them back into the wild. We have a no-kill policy. Most important is that the arrangement was accepted because we adopted a win-win collaborative approach rather than name-and-shame.

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

The name-and-shame tactic works in Western advocacy. Activists go out, protest on the streets, make people look bad; you barricade the entrance or chain yourself to the gate till things change — this might backfire in an Asian setting.

Commentary: *You have run several different campaigns — the dolphin campaign seemed more strident and the one on sharks fin, more soft sell. Is it different strategies for different issues?*

LN: The key thing is that people need to know that you mean business. So through those early eight years of adopting a confrontational approach, people came to understand that we really mean business. If I say we want to work together, I mean it, but I can be their best friend or worst enemy — it is their choice.

With the dolphins at Resorts World, we engaged them right from the start to persuade them not to hold such wild creatures in captivity, but the turning point came when we realised through media reports that they went ahead to buy the dolphins. We did not find out from them. Even then, I hoped we could still work together. However, when we learnt from the media reports that two dolphins they were preparing to bring to Singapore died in Langkawi, we issued an ultimatum, but they decided to proceed. That was when we started our advocacy against the dolphin park at Resorts World.

We are still trying to strike a more positive

tone by reminding the public that there is an alternative — that there are dolphins in the wild, off Singapore waters, and that we are studying them.

Commentary: *As for working with the government, how would you describe that experience?*

LN: In advocacy, I think that when we go into negotiation, activists tend to always be very one-sided. We say, “this is what we want and this is the only thing we will accept.” However, if we start to negotiate a bit and strive to find that win-win solution, then I think we can get somewhere.

We did that with Minister of Home Affairs and Law, MP for Nee Soon East, K Shanmugam. When he was asked why he was involved in the animal welfare space, he said it was because I contacted him and asked him for help. We must approach and ask to move things along. So with the Chong Pang ‘Love Cats’ programme, we know that the government has been culling cats. We conducted a survey among Chong Pang residents and over 90 percent said they were against culling cats and were okay with having them in the neighbourhood if they were sterilised and managed. We shared this with the Mr Shanmugum who was MP of the area. We didn’t say, “I don’t care, it is inhumane to kill cats so you have to stop the killing.” If we go with anger, any MP will take a step back at such an

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

approach and ask, “Who is this and why are you attacking me?” But if you go with an ‘open arms’ approach and say, “Look, I have taken the initiative and I have taken the survey — the residents are supportive so let us trial this for two years. If it works, it works. If it doesn’t, scrap it. But, give it a chance.” This way of speaking is very different.

We presented the Minister with the proposal in a closed-door setting and let him agree to it before letting the media know. Often, advocates will jump the gun — they will go to the media first *after which*, they alert the authorities. Then, it becomes slightly more adversarial.

Commentary: *The larger issue is regarding the review of the Animal Welfare Bill and dealing with pets, which resulted in the tightening of the regulation in November 2014 — how did that evolve?*

LN: It started with a Chong Pang Public Forum on Animal Welfare Policies held in June 2011 when Minister Shanmugam was in attendance. At that first forum, the mood was negative as the people who attended it felt that more needed to be done in this area of animal welfare. We took in all the feedback, worked with the AVA and Ministry of National Development (MND) to show people that if the feedback was constructive, we acted on it. Subsequently, at the second forum,

the mood in the room was much better and people offered feedback that was more constructive.

That was when we realised that a lot of people were seeking legislative change. We announced the establishment of the Animal Welfare Legislative Review Committee shortly after that.

That for me, has been the best committee I have ever been part of because people from different sectors with different interests joined together to draft legislation. So you had representatives of several animal welfare groups, the MPs, town council, grassroots organisations and even the Pet Enterprise and Traders Association — the latter, people who do not usually see eye-to-eye with the animal advocates. We did an amazing amount of public consultation and came to a compromise — a win-win solution. Former MP Yeo Guat Kwang chaired the committee and managed to bring everyone together rather well.

Commentary: *How did you convince your strongest opponents — the traders — as changes would have represented an increase in business costs to them?*

LN: With many of them, they realised it made long-term business sense to promote animal welfare. If their business is viewed as being progressive, they get further business. It is not easy — to send all their staff members for training now — as the new law would require that and

Developing the Singapore Soul: ACRES and Animal Welfare

it is business cost. However, we managed to push the changes through. That bill took two years to pass. It was a Private Member's Bill, which is rare but is still represented as a ground-up initiative. I really liked the process and that is why I said that in order to move forward in our society, we need to form more of such committees. The AVA was a Secretariat with their officers at the meetings — it was really a discussion with the people on the ground and MPs.

Commentary: *What are the present and future directions now?*

LN: I am moving from doing all the hands-on work to the task of mobilising people. I see that as my biggest role now — to get as many people on board as possible. I told the ACRES team that we are not here to rescue animals and that if by the time I die, we still have the ACRES Wildlife Rescue Centre, we would have failed. I do not want us to announce that this year we have rescued a thousand animals and next year, a thousand and two — that extra two hundred means that we have failed two hundred times.

Instead, I want the mindset that we are not running an organisation, but that we are running a movement. And, to get a movement going, we have to change mindsets. We need to mobilise people. We need to stop addressing just the symptoms of the problem and try to address the root of it. So with the wildlife crimes, it is not about rescuing a star

tortoise, one at a time. We have to work with India to see how we can increase the enforcement on anti-poaching rules. We must convince individuals not to buy them. Our border checkpoints have to be strengthened too. This way, we will solve it so that one day, we will have zero star tortoises at the Rescue Centre. That is our ultimate goal.

Commentary: *What precisely is this mindset change that is your end goal?*

LN: We are not trying to develop a nation of animal lovers. However, we must develop a nation of people who have a sense of injustice when they see wrongdoing and take action. That is the biggest hurdle we need to cross next. It is not just to call the AVA or having the government do something about a problem — we need to move away from this “government has to do everything” mindset. It is easier and more instinctive to say: “the government should run our rescue centre so why should we bear the cost of doing that?”; “the government should rescue the python, why should I do that?” If we continue to have this attitude, we will get nowhere. We have to find ways for both to happen — government taking the necessary action and members of the public finding that they too have a part to play. Only then I think, we can progress far more quickly.



Chapter Eight

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

Veerappan Swaminathan

Veerappan Swaminathan is the Co-Founder of Sustainable Living Lab (SL2), which is a social innovation lab that harnesses the energy of the Maker Movement to build a sustainable future. SL2 won the youth category of the President's Challenge Social Enterprise Award in 2015. He is concurrently the Chief Executive Officer of OneMaker Group (OMG), which brings together Makers, Designers and Entrepreneurs from all over Asia and amplifies their collective brilliance through educational programmes, prototyping services and organising maker events.

He graduated from the National University of Singapore (Class of 2011), majoring in Mechanical Engineering. He participated in the NUS Overseas Colleges Program (Silicon Valley) and was a member of the University Scholars Programme (USP).

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

Ensuring the sustainability of our society and species is perhaps the biggest challenge of our times. The science about the adverse impact of mankind’s activities on the environment has been clear since the seventies. Yet no significant action, beyond numerous ineffective global meetings, has been taken to mitigate, much less reverse the decline.

Today, we can see clear evidence of the environmental effects — fast receding polar ice caps, declining fish stocks and erratic weather patterns which are leading to socio-economic issues such as lack of access to clean water, worsening land and air pollution, and increasing rural-urban income inequality.

Having been born into the generation that will likely bear the brunt of these effects, the options before me as I thought about it while I was at university, was either to be a driver of change or be a passenger of fate.

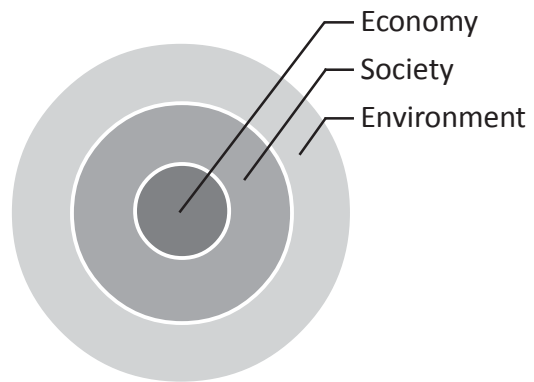
Three Pillars of Sustainability

It was in response to these global challenges that a group of my course mates at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and I founded the Sustainable Living Lab (SL2) with the vision of building a sustainable future through practical action.

We started out as a student club at NUS in 2009 and then transitioned into a

social enterprise in 2011.

Sustainability is often viewed within the scope of the environment, but we took a broader view as we felt that a sustainable future can only be achieved if we considered the interconnectedness of the environment, society and the economy - commonly referred to as the ‘Three Pillars Model of Sustainability’ by experts and practitioners in this field.



In this model, the environment represents a finite boundary within which human society and the economy exist. The economy is viewed as a subset of society with the reasoning that it is derived from society or created by it to efficiently exchange value within most, although not with all elements of society. Those that create social value without going through the market are, for example, stay-at-home mums and other caregivers.

However, the reality is that we tend to give outsized attention and dedicate immense resources to the economy, with society being deemed as being of

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

secondary importance and the environment; often, relegated to an occasional concern.

Building a sustainable future means taking into consideration all three pillars - environmental, social and economic sustainability - because they are interconnected and cannot be meaningfully separated.

Ultimately, a sustainable future is one in which we can continue to thrive as a species without negatively impacting the opportunities for our future generations to flourish.

Coming Home to Roost

In Singapore, our national leaders have, since Independence, prioritised the attainment of economic sustainability as the primary strategy for achieving national progress. They were careful to incorporate positive environmental practices such as banning or regulating polluting industries, enforcing the installation of catalytic converters in motorcars and embarking on a national tree planting programme. These practices ensured that Singapore itself remained liveable as we made rapid economic progress. However, we have to recognise this has still come at a cost which we may soon have to pay.

On the environmental front, our extensive land reclamation policies have resulted in sand export bans

from Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam with accusations of environmental degradation coming from Cambodia- and Myanmar-based environmental organisations. The financing and growth of the palm oil and paper pulp industry by Singapore-linked companies, that some evidence suggests, are culpable through their supply chains for forest fires, massive deforestation and habitat loss for indigenous animal species in Indonesia. The yearly transboundary haze serves as an annual reminder of our complicity in the environmental degradation of our neighbours.

On the social front, we have an increasing income divide, leading to reduced social mobility which threatens the belief in meritocracy as a key organising principle in our governance system.

On the economic front, our continuing heavy reliance on the oil refining industry for jobs and economic growth also makes it difficult to truly commit to a shift towards renewable energy. While what was primarily an 'economy-first' strategy may have worked for Singapore in its early years, it is clear that if we are to look forward to continued progress as a nation, environmental and social concerns will have to take on greater prominence.

We recognise though, that the sustainability challenge has every feature of a classic 'wicked problem', with multiple interconnected causes

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

that interact with each other. To make matters even more challenging, the transboundary nature of sustainability issues puts any solution out of reach of any single state actor. Any nation choosing to take unilateral action rightfully fears that if others do not follow their lead, their actions will be pointless or worse still, may end up backfiring if their country becomes side-lined in the community of nations. For a country such as Singapore, which is heavily dependent on other nations but also relatively small in its ability to significantly change any situation, taking unilateral action is understandably viewed as a non-option. Pragmatic thinking suggests that we are and will remain a 'price-taker' and not a 'price-setter' at the international stage in so many respects. Judging by how the international community has actually been 'setting the price' over the last few decades, it will be unwise to expect any major global reform regarding sustainability in the near term.

Interestingly, this is not the first time in our national history that we have encountered similarly bleak circumstances which seemed beyond our control. At the birth of our nation in 1965, in response to the hostile neighbourhood we found ourselves in, our leaders used every ounce of ingenuity they could muster to engage in a dual policy of shoring up our defence capabilities (by instituting National Service for instance,) and engaging in intense diplomacy to allow Singapore to

punch above its weight on the world stage. This would not have been possible if our society then had not possessed the never-say-die attitude and gumption to tackle challenges head-on.

The Maker Mindset

Similar doggedness, resolve and creativity are required by all of us today. At SL2, we feel that sustainability challenges are among the issues that are beyond the scope and capacity of national governments to address. In an era where the influence of multinational corporations is growing, with the economic value they generate sometimes even surpassing that of nation-states, a strategy of addressing sustainability challenges through socially-driven enterprises could offer better dividends. Setting up social enterprises only solves one part of the problem; that is, providing an engine to drive us towards sustainability. As a society, we also need to internalise the interconnectedness of our environmental, social and economic systems and develop a global culture of sharing and collaboration.

The Maker Movement came into prominence globally in 2006 as result of several intersecting driving forces — widespread Internet access; low-cost Chinese manufacturing; popularity of open source hardware designs; expiry of key technology patents; a trend towards self-actualisation amongst young people; and a yearning for tactile

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

experiences by a generation who are great at using technology but very poor in understanding how it is made.

While the Maker Movement is often associated with technological advances, what is far less obvious is that it promotes a unique mindset - the Maker Mindset - which indicates a common set of behaviours observed amongst Makers. Allow me to explain.

Makers come in all shapes and sizes with some being hobbyists and others operating as professionals, but all of them utilising technology and ingenuity, in equal parts, to engage in developing new products and services. Makers, regardless of where they hail from, tend to possess a 'growth mindset', practice craftsmanship values and believe in 'open sharing'. The 'growth mindset', a concept popularised by Carol Dweck, refers to the personal belief that intelligence is not fixed and that one can learn any new subject matter. As you can imagine, this is a particularly empowering belief system and explains why Makers are so comfortable working with ambiguity as they explore new technologies and methods.

Any skilled person has to go through years of careful practice to improve their craft and that is the same with Makers. Bear in mind that in Singapore, at the time of writing, there is no diploma offered for being a Maker, so the process of attaining mastery

depends less on formal training, more on peer-sharing and the heavy investment of one's time and effort. Makers put in that effort due to the intrinsic motivation of wanting to produce one's best work independent of any reward or praise. That is not all. If the acquisition of mastery is not tempered with humility and grace, it can easily result in pride. The practice of 'open sharing' in the Maker community grounds the Maker and reflects a realisation that humanity stands taller on the shoulder of giants — that ideas multiply and not diminish through sharing.

Given the complex nature of sustainability issues, seeking and assimilating knowledge in cooperation with many others is par for the course to make any sort of dent. In our opinion, these traits exhibited by Makers are exactly the sort we need people to develop if society is to successfully address and overcome complex sustainability challenges.

Purposeful Making

As an organisation, we adopted the ethos of the Maker Movement and focused our work on inspiring and directing the creative energy of Makers towards building a sustainable future.

Our work involves generating positive social capital through friendships and peer-sharing, protecting the natural

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

environment and creating economic activity that is conducive for sustainable human development. We call this 'Purposeful Making'.

Let me illustrate what I have said by sharing with you several projects that SL2 has engaged in and the impact that has resulted from these.

Social Sustainability

In our view, the first order of business in tackling the complex issues of sustainability is to identify like-minded individuals, develop their potential and build a community of practice around them. Every community needs a physical space to do that in, hence we pioneered the development of 'makerspaces' in Singapore, starting the first such facility in 2011 at the former Bottle Tree Park in Yishun.

Makerspaces are zones of self-directed learning, which are equipped with the latest in technology, other resources and creative tools such as 3D printers, laser cutters, computerised milling machines, sewing stations and circuit board printers, along with the educational resources for users of the space to gain familiarity with the various tools.

They serve as a node or a magnet (depending on how you look at it) for a community of Makers to gather around a common intent (in our case, addressing sustainability challenges) to foster a

highly collaborative, action-biased dynamic through a culture of mutual peer support, advice and assistance.

In our case, this conducive environment was our first step in giving the public a platform to engage in purposeful making and it allowed the team to develop other programmes and products such as 'Future Fridays', 'Repair Kopitiam' and the invention of the 'iBam', all of which I elaborate upon later.

In 2014, we were also fortunate to be part of a consortium that successfully won the bid to develop a Prototyping Centre - a Makerspace to promote tinkering and hardware entrepreneurship - at the National Design Centre. Having learned from our experience which we have shared widely in the mass media and through hosting numerous local and foreign visitors, many educational institutions and private makerspaces have subsequently been set up in Singapore and the region by other parties.

Interestingly, many Southeast Asian makerspaces have subsequently been organised around the aim of addressing local social issues or sustainability challenges which is very unlike the makerspaces that can be found in the United States or Europe. We would like to think that we had a hand in influencing that change!

However, having a physical facility alone

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

is not enough. A shift towards sustainable thinking is only possible when people are interested in thinking and acting for the long term, so the next order of business, it was clear to us, was to create a mindset change around sustainability. It was with that intention that we initiated 'Future Fridays'.

The premise of Future Fridays is simple: it is to equip working professionals with the knowledge and practice of futures-thinking tools, so that they can influence change towards sustainable practices within their own organisations.

These sessions which take place regularly on Friday evenings focus on a wide range of topics - from the Future of Work to the Future of Transport and even the Future of Food in an effort to demonstrate the interconnectedness of nearly any issue with the larger issue of sustainability. The sessions help participants to think systematically of scenarios of the future around the selected topic. The sessions end with participants manifesting their ideas for a preferred sustainable future in the form of physical artefacts that they create. These artefacts are exhibited at the makerspace or other prominent locations to activate public conversations around the issue of sustainability.

It is heartening to note that we have had many corporate partners and civil society organisations get involved in thinking through their current strategies in the context of long-term trends that might

affect their sectors. For example, several local food sustainability groups collaborated after participating in a Future Fridays session. They organised a huge 'meetup' of the different players in the food ecosystem to address the sustainability of food supply in Singapore.

Seeding change in mindset around sustainability takes time, but we believe it is already paying dividends as we see the nature of strategic conversations change to accommodate long-term thinking on the issue even among smaller organisations.

Environmental Sustainability

Where the first two initiatives - Makerspaces and Future Fridays - dealt primarily with the development of positive social capital as well as a mindset change around sustainability, the 'Repair Kopitiam' project dealt with the widespread environmental issue of waste generation in Singapore.

Despite decades of awareness-building and educational efforts, the amount of waste that is generated keeps increasing largely due to the 'buy-and-throw-away' culture - an outcome of consumer affluence in Singapore.

Inspired by the Repair Cafes of Europe, we devised the Repair Kopitiam programme as an effort to tackle this buy-and-throw-away culture in a way that seeks to prevent waste in the first place

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

and revolves around practical action. First, we teach volunteers how to repair electrical home appliances, furniture and fabrics. We then have our newly-minted ‘Repair Coaches’ conduct public repair programmes at high traffic void decks of public housing flats to teach members of the public how to repair their own broken items. These public sessions, which attract up to 300 members of the public each time, are conducted every last Sunday of the month through our roster of over 60 repair coaches. We estimate that our participants now repair about 60 percent of all items that are broken and are therefore saved from the trash heap. At the sessions, participants or those who are just gawking often just mingle around with their neighbours and enjoy a cup of coffee on us — hence we call it Repair Kopitiam.

Participants, most of whom are below 20 years of age and above 40, often share that they were attracted to the Repair Kopitiam sessions not because of environmental reasons but because it seemed like a fun and social way to spend a Sunday morning. This concept of ‘incidental environmentalism’ is something that we seek to manifest in all our programmes as we want to reach an audience that is traditionally indifferent to environmental messaging. Oftentimes, it is not necessary for people to be fully aware that they are engaging in an environmental practice. What is more important is that they actually practise

environmentally-friendly habits - never mind what their primary intention was.

Today, many corporate and educational institutions have started to adopt repair activities into their basket of environmental corporate social responsibility programmes alongside the usual recycling programmes and litter-picking activities.

We have also expanded the Repair Kopitiam programme to include performing repair activities at several voluntary welfare organisations that typically have many wheelchairs and geriatric equipment that require maintenance but might otherwise be set aside for the waste dump due to the lack of professional repair services. Our ultimate aim is for people to always consider if an item can be repaired and restored before sending it off to the trash.

Economic Sustainability

The final pillar of sustainability has to do with building an economy that is conducive for, and not at the expense of, human development. When it comes to addressing sustainability issues, many companies view it from a compliance perspective or from a corporate social responsibility perspective. We feel that there is a third way — sustainability can be seen as an impetus for innovation; a way to unlock or create new economic value.

A Sustainable Future through Purposeful Making

When we created our popular bamboo sound amplifiers for iPhones and the like - called iBam - we took great care to ensure that the process of harvesting, manufacturing and packaging was done in a manner that reduced harm on the environment and created opportunities for vulnerable communities to remain employed. Traditional craftsmen from the declining *angklung* (a traditional Indonesian musical instrument) sector were re-employed to use their specialist skills in manufacturing the iBams and the packaging was stitched from raw unbleached cotton by stay-at-home single mothers in Singapore.

When it comes to traditional economic activity, much of it operates on a linear model which starts from raw material extraction and at the end of its useful shelf-life, ends up in the dump. Today, new models of sharing spare capacity have greatly impacted the hotel industry (AirBnB), transport industry (Uber, Grab, GoGoVan etc.) and the commercial property sector in the form of shared co-working offices.

All of these trends are part of a move towards an economy that is more circular in nature - a product can be shared as a service, be easily repaired, remanufactured as good as new or is extremely easy to separate so as to recover valuable constituent materials. In fact it could be said that the 'circular economy' is perhaps the new model of an economy that can take-off in the

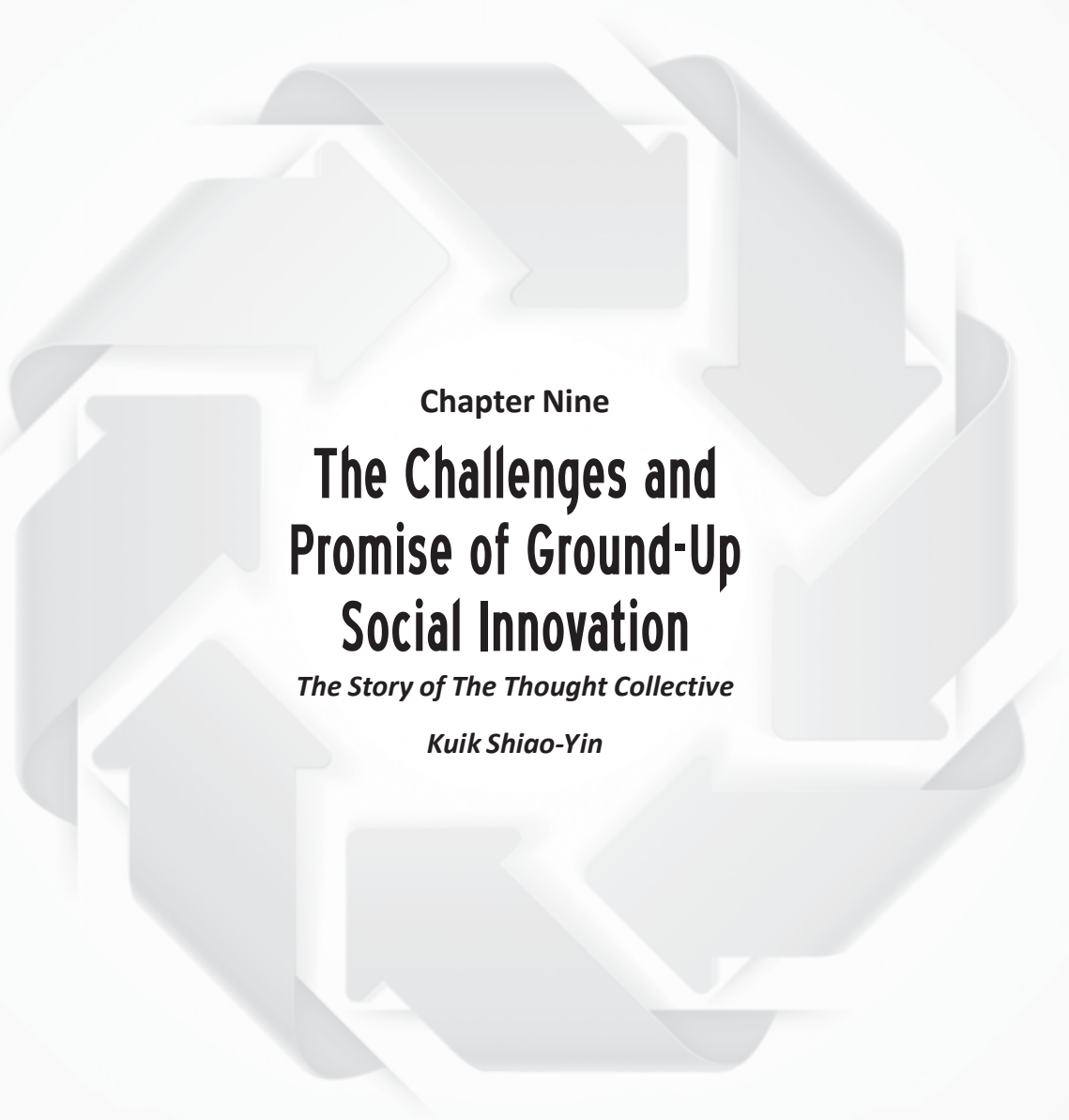
context of the massive sustainability challenges we are facing.

Conclusion

The initiatives of SL2 that have been mentioned are just some of the ways we manifest the concept of purposeful making in daily practice.

Clearly much more work is needed on all levels of society if we are to be able to overcome the tough times ahead for our society and even Planet Earth. There are positive signs and reasons for optimism out there though. I am continually surprised at how much young people know about sustainability issues and by their efforts to engage in meaningful work in this area. I have also been encouraged by the actions taken by some prominent 'mainstream' organisations to fundamentally change the way they have been going about their business and operating in ways that more in tune with the resource-constrained world we are a part of.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed".



Chapter Nine

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

The Story of The Thought Collective

Kuik Shiao-Yin

Kuik Shiao-Yin is Co-founder and Director of The Thought Collective. Together with her founding partner/directors Tong Yee and Elizabeth Kon, Shiao-Yin runs this group of social businesses whose mission is to build up the social and emotional capital of Singapore. They work with sector partners to design strategic civic-oriented media, events and programmes that explore new possibilities for helping communities become braver, stronger and kinder. Outside the Collective, she served as a Nominated Member of Parliament in the 12th Parliament of Singapore, continues to do so in the 13th Parliament, and is a member of the Founder's Memorial Committee. She also serves on the boards of OnePeople.sg and SCAPE.

*The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation***2002 to 2007: How It All Began**

In 2002, I was a 25-year-old creative director at a digital design studio start-up when an old friend asked if I would help him develop an idea to bridge a social gap as well as a market gap he had identified.

As a rookie General Paper (GP) tutor, he was excited about the great potential in the subject to help broaden the perspectives of youths. However, he noticed a concurrent social problem: many young Singaporeans were graduating from the education system generally well-read but surprisingly self-centred and apathetic. Many believed the whole point of their education was to prepare them for individual success but it had nothing to do with enabling them to help others in the community find success collectively.

He also observed that GP tuition was not widely offered by the market. It was certainly not for lack of demand: good GP grades are a prerequisite for university admission so students have vested interest to be as good as they can at it. The market gap was largely due to two factors. First, a common assumption among youths that GP was 'unteachable', too thick with knowledge to learn so attending tuition seemed pointless; second, commercial tuition centres were disinterested in offering GP tuition in a big way because it was difficult to guarantee one's ability to ace it. They

preferred to focus on offering tuition aimed at a more 'teachable' younger customer bracket (Primary and Secondary School) where a scalable 'repeat-rinse-drill' style of teaching could still generate decent results.

He pitched an intriguing proposal my way: Could we deal with both problems through one solution? What if we started an experimental tuition group that developed innovative new approaches to teaching GP not just for the short-term purpose of conquering an exam but for the longer and larger purpose of conquering societal apathy?

It was the sort of ridiculously senseless suggestion that makes most sense when you are young and idealistic. I bought in.

We began with 20 students but by the end of the first year of the venture, we managed to raise that number to a 100. That was sufficient feedback for us to put \$40,000 down to officially start the School of Thought.

2007 - 2012: Our Formulative Years — Too Fast, Too Furious?

Between 2003 to 2007, we were tutoring 200-300 youths a year. We were a moderate success but there was still something dissatisfying about what we were doing.

When people asked, "What do you do?" they would be perplexed when I said our

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

goals were — “broadening perspectives” and “creating empathy”. So the answer I eventually settled on was, “We are something like a tuition centre - but not really.” It was frustrating not having the right words to describe the fullness of our intentions.

The turning point in how I saw our work came from my involvement in the 2004 “Creating our Future” youth consultation exercise that was launched when Mr Lee Hsien Loong became Prime Minister. Taken by his call for all youths to step forward to contribute their views on Singapore, I signed up to be in the National Identity workgroup and for the first time, I got to hear the views of a range of citizens of different ages and backgrounds.

What struck me most was the number of people who ended their grouses about youth apathy with that complaint that “education is not doing its job”. They spoke with a mood of apathy; resigned that there was no solution. I shared my take on the situation, saying that there were possibilities of moving forward from the ground up, citing our budding work at the School of Thought. The older adults listened politely but did not take me seriously nor did I feel insulted: our work definitely still sounded more like a charming ideal than practical reality. Still, what I took home was a deeper conviction that our work to address youth apathy was needed because few wanted to do anything significant about it.

In 2007, with equal parts of calculated instinct and youthful bravado again, we launched two experimental platforms for public education.

First, we started publishing *Broader Perspectives*, a current affairs magazine pitched at 17-to 30-year-olds. This was a response to another market gap. *Time* and *Newsweek* were popular magazines that students subscribed to but were usually left unread for three reasons: the weekly magazines were issued too often to digest; they were too oriented towards Western issues; and they were not immediately relevant to the exams. *Broader Perspectives’* addressed those concerns by being monthly, it discussed both national and global current affairs and it made a clearer connection with students’ exam needs.

Second, we started up a socially conscious cafe called *Food For Thought*. The experiment was about creating a safe, neutral space for the general public to get a taste of what broadening perspectives and empathising with others looked like in community. The restaurants provided three simple entry-points for the public to ‘do good’: first, we served tap water for free but requested that customers voluntarily donate to a fund to build wells so that someone else could enjoy the same luxury; second, every dollar spent at our restaurants helped us contribute towards poverty alleviation projects across Asia; third and most significantly, the restaurants ran free empathy-

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

building community events open for anyone to attend. These events ranged from those requiring low vulnerability topics (for example, 'Connect with others on Cellphone-Free Tuesday!') to high vulnerability one (for example, 'Tonight, hear a couple share about surviving adultery') from participants.

Both ventures were huge risks - especially the restaurant. Given that there is a 80-90 percent failure rate in the Food and Beverage (F & B) industry, we were - and still are - putting ourselves at great financial risk. Whether this will turn out to be a wise or unwise move on our part, is still up for debate. Also, we were - and still are - a small, young and inexperienced team relative to our outsized ambitions so going into very different industries is a serious stretch of our abilities and resources.

However, if we had just stayed as a tuition school for youths, no matter how successful we became, we would always be pigeon-holed. We would never gain the breadth of experience to become a game-changer in shaping social conscience and societal attitudes at a broader level. Diversifying our experiences and offerings would help us diversify our insights and gain relevance with a broader range of stakeholders too.

Between 2007 to 2012, both bets did appear to have paid off. The magazines provided a decent alternative pipeline of income. As for the restaurants, we got a

consistent pipeline of publicity simply because at that time, alternative brunch cafes were not the norm. We were still considered a first mover in a growing cafe scene and were thus newsworthy for a period. Till this date, Food For Thought still has the highest brand recognition among all our other companies.

We grew rapidly. We went from six employees in 2008 to 64 in 2011. At the peak, we added 44 people to our staff within a year. From one magazine, we went to three. From one 30-seater cafe, we went on to three restaurants: an 80-seater at 8Q Art Museum, a 250-seater at Singapore Botanic Gardens and a 150-seater at National Museum of Singapore. That amount of growth and public profile translated into some level of 'street cred' especially when we had to engage in discussions with far larger private and public organisations later.

2012 to 2016: Our Years of Reckoning and Refinement

My father had a piece of folk business wisdom: entrepreneurs will always encounter trouble just before Years 1, 3, 5, 10, 15 and 20. Any business that can survive Year 20 will have a chance at a long legacy.

It was in 2012, our 10th year mark in business, when we received two serious wake-up calls.

The first blow was the sinking realisation

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

that running a 250-seater restaurant was a completely different ball-game from a 30 or 80-seater. Our outlet at Singapore Botanic Gardens was taking too long to gain traction and every month that went by, burnt five-figure holes in the accounts. We had neither the deep pockets of money, resources nor experience to win at the big restaurant game.

The second fist in the face was to have two of our leaders - one a founding partner - in our secondary school department leave with a significant number of our secondary school student cohort to set up their own commercial tuition centre. They left because they felt fundamentally misaligned with where our organisation was going. Managing the fallout from angry parents, confused students and earnest teachers torn between loyalties was rough. Having to arrange a sufficiently generous buyout of the exiting partner and fill the huge financial hole they left behind was a lesson in emotional resilience.

Perhaps the best achievement of that season for us was that no relational bitterness was allowed to take root. Through everything, we focused on solutions instead of 'blame-shifting'. Till today, there might be some sorrow but we bear no resentment towards our friends. We may disagree with their actions but we empathise that they believed that those were right choices for them.

By 2013, we had become a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) of 90 employees. Honestly, that took some time to sink in. We, the three founders were consumed with just staying on top of a never-ending stream of daily demands. Mistakes happened because we had not set aside time to consider together what was really happening beneath the appearance of growth.

Still, alongside all the unhappy developments, something oddly positive was brewing.

The pain of 2012 forced us to ask hard questions: If we were going to go through so much suffering, what were we suffering for?

From 2012 onwards, we began the slow work of refocusing our mission, refining our strategy and rebuilding our house.

We started to identify ourselves more as The Thought Collective - an ecosystem of social businesses that found innovative ways to build up the social and emotional capital of Singapore. Our three core businesses were repositioned as the three specific strategies for making that happen. School of Thought concentrated on creating and delivering innovative civic education, and developing thought leadership among youths. Think Tank Studios went beyond publishing to become a creative agency helping organisations communicate complex issues through thoughtful content

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

curation and sense-making design. Food For Thought provided safe and attractive public spaces to test-bed community outreach events, exploring potentially thorny social issues.

As a result of our own peculiar journey, The Thought Collective itself also began to develop a unique capacity to train and advise private, public and people sector partners on how to design media, events and programmes for greater social and emotional impact with the communities they wanted to reach.

Whether we are engaged by a youth development organisation to re-strategise their corporate story-telling or run a bespoke training programme for a public healthcare corporation to address growing cynicism within the ranks, we are able to design with empathy because we are not just trainers or consultants working from a playbook of other people's reported experiences. We come alongside as fellow practitioners and partners who have been there, done that and are still trying.

2016 and beyond: Reflections on future challenges and opportunities

In the midst of our short-term troubles in 2014, I read Bo Burlingham's *Finish Big*. It helped me see the biggest long-term challenge ahead for us.

A longtime editor of *Inc.* magazine, Burlingham was struck by how

entrepreneurs are so focused on building their business that they often avoid thinking about exiting their company until market disruptions, hostile takeovers, health issues of their leaders force them to. *Finish Big* was his attempt to fill "an enormous gap in business literature", collecting principles gleaned from stories of 'good' and 'bad' exits. It is a sobering reminder to anybody who wants the legacy of their creations to be about pride rather than regret.

The problem for organisations that sit at the grey intersections of government, business or charity is: which stakeholder is going to help you sustain, scale and exit? And why would they do so?

Unlike profit-centric entrepreneurs whose aim is to create 'built to flip' organisations, the socially-oriented leader in the public, private or people sector aims to build 'built to last' organisations. The former thinks about how to exit early, selling out at the highest price possible at the peak of their promise rather than the valley of their reality. The latter thinks about how to exit well, handing over their organisation and mission to a new generation.

We did not create The Thought Collective out of any desire to start 'a social enterprise'. That phrase did not even exist in popular parlance back then. We were just a group of young adults who wanted to fix a social problem and find a way to get paid to do so as a full-time

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

occupation, not a hobby. Yet, since social motivations mattered more to us than profit-maximisation, we charged accessible mid-market prices. In the case of the School Of Thought, we even provided subsidies to ensure underprivileged students had access to our programmes.

For the longest time, we were proud to be independents who bootstrapped our own way forward. We did not take in any public funding or private investments and relied on a combination of revenue and loans to cope. That allowed us to move with speed and flexibility. If we took external money tied to external agendas at the early stages, we may not have evolved as dynamically or innovatively.

Currently, we do not have a great answer for how to find investment to scale or exit sustainably. Traditional business investors would not want to buy us out nor would we want to sell to them either because our social motivation stymies profit-maximisation. Social impact investors are a possibility but many are primarily interested in investing in what they perceive as far more urgent issues such as global poverty and climate change. Our work is also still centred in Singapore (though I foresee future cross-cultural applications) which puts off some impact investors who would rather invest in less developed economies. We joke that given our mission, our best impact investor might actually well be the Singapore

government itself, but if that bizarre scenario actually happened, would we be able to maintain independence of agenda and agility to evolve?

In some ways, we have become a victim of our own 'success'. We also joke about how another exit strategy is to work ourselves out of a job. We might get what we asked for. Back in 2002, nobody offered GP tuition because many believed it was unteachable. In 2007, nobody offered local current affairs magazines to youths because many believed Time and Newsweek were enough. Also, there were few casual brunch cafes with interesting events because F&B entrepreneurship was not trendy then. Today, all that has changed. In some instances, we may have even inspired our own copy-cat competition. We recognise it in similarly named products and services, in similarly pitched proposals and even in similarly named social enterprises. It is both a good and bad thing.

Ultimately, we are willing to help grow the social innovation space and mentor start-ups on the scene. From a mindset of scarcity, that is career suicide. From a mindset of abundance, it is just doing what needs to be done. We are happy to inspire, and see meaningful work take root everywhere. Our end-goal is not personal success but the collective success of Singapore even at the cost of shrinking our market share when the competitors we help, prosper. We also

The Challenges and Promise of Ground-Up Social Innovation

face the usual SME woes of rising manpower and real estate costs, social enterprise or not.

I choose to close this essay with hope.

To me, Singapore is the bootstrapping start-up nation that startled the world. Her founders left behind a cultural legacy of innovation even in scarcity. They set a historical precedent of courageously and creatively tackling of societal problems which is worth living up to.

My ambition is to see Singapore positioned as a leader in the global social innovation scene. My hope is that someday, more Singaporeans will become known internationally for their thought leadership in solving the world's most complex, intractable problems through a combination of not just intelligence and grit - but empathy too.

It is a crazy dream, but we will do what we can to help her get there.



Chapter Ten

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

Bernise Ang

Bernise Ang is Principal and Methodology Lead at Zeroth Labs, an experimental lab which brings together behavioural insights and systems analysis, and applies them to social policy issues, creating new forms of services, products, and innovating new business models.

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

In the past five years, there have been a number of developments across the world in the public sector space, particularly with regard to innovation. In Singapore, public policy-making and services have traditionally been the domain of a small number of elite technocrats. As with many other countries, the greater the strategic import, the smaller that number of technocrats involved. However, as digital and social media become ubiquitous in Singapore, the nature of information treatment — in particular the consumption, creation, and dissemination of information — inadvertently creates a shift in the social contract as we know it.

With a small group of like-minded colleagues, I have been working in the area of public sector innovation, related to the urbanisation process in developing countries as well as public sector issues in the urban context. This experience has been a varied one: from re-imagining municipal public service models in Bangladesh and informing Bhutan's employment policy, to healthcare and hospital design in Singapore. Along the way, we have learnt many lessons about public policy, public services and the nature of public sector innovation. One of these is the challenge of silos among government bodies; the tension between politics and administration as well as conservative cultures that may not support the change and accompanying risk-taking needed to meet stated

objectives; and the trade-offs between desired outcomes and the resources allocated for them.

As we look to the future, the interesting developments and trends that are emerging lead us to a number of hunches about the future of public sector innovation in Singapore. These hunches are also implicitly questions about the future of cities and populations, the potential of technology, and the nature of the human condition.

Hunch #1: Behavioural Insights will be Increasingly Important in Designing Policy for Citizens

As populations become more varied and textured, it becomes more difficult to create policy in a number of domains that are premised on generalisations or assumptions we might have of the various groups these policies seek to serve. This, of course, applies more to policy for targeted groups, or groups on the margins, rather than policy for the mainstream population.

In a project we conducted on urban poverty and neighbourhood transformation in Singapore, one of the relevant demographic groups which surfaced through field research was single mothers. Many of them were experiencing financial difficulty and struggled to provide healthy food for their children as whole, fresh foods cost more than processed foods. We saw single

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

mothers forgoing jobs and employment income, prioritising being at home with their children so as to keep them away from what they alluded to as negative influences in the neighbourhood. To emphasise again, the mothers did this even at nutritional cost. This tells us the importance of understanding the behaviours behind how one need is prioritised over another: that getting low-income mothers to take up regular jobs by offering incentives for successful job placements may not have nearly been as effective as, for example, a programme seeking to enable mums to work independently, at home, from laptops or in their kitchens.

Hunch #2: Blending Disciplines and Methods for Public Policy is Powerful, but the Blending will Increasingly Require People who can Serve as Translators

In the urban poverty project mentioned above, we applied three different approaches to understanding urban poverty at the neighbourhood level: Ethnography (a method from anthropology) which involved interviews and observation; data analysis of aggregated case file data of social assistance recipients; and a basic form of system dynamics mapping (for example, how the environment that a family might find itself in can impact educational attainment, and in turn, employability, income, health outcomes, et cetera).

It was through the ethnography that we gained a deeper understanding of how, on an employment-related problem, many blue-collar workers found it challenging to find employment after an injury. We found this was because their existing financial situation made it difficult for them to receive the appropriate treatment and recover fully to be fit for work.

On the quantitative end, by running the data, we were able to uncover an interesting correlation between employment status and incidence of domestic violence: social workers had previously shared their understanding that, for cases of families in crisis many of which involved domestic violence, what mattered in bringing them out of the situation was not the amount of financial assistance they were offered, but the consistency of it. In the data set, there were four types of employment status: full-time, part-time, contract work, and unemployed. If this hypothesis were to hold, we should have seen a statistically significant inverse correlation between employment and domestic violence for both full-time and part-time employment; however, it proved to be significant only for full-time employment. This led to new lines of inquiry which had not been uncovered previously.

Conversely, system dynamics mapping surfaced a very different type of insight: that within the factors relating to family environment, it was parental attitudes

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

towards a child's education that had the largest impact on his or her success at school.

These stories have come about from highly different research methods. The next step, however, is this: how do we piece them together to form a fuller understanding of the problem area? "Translators" who understand enough from anthropology, for example, could say that a certain finding – such as the choice of single mothers to prioritise being physically present with their young children over working to increase their financial resources – is a signal to dig deeper in that line of inquiry; or that we should use an urban planner's lens to look into a geospatial mapping to explore spatial connections to the problem, such as the access to services or jobs by low-income households, or access to public transport by frail elderly.

Hunch #3: Complexity Means we Need to Allow for 'Emergence'

If we accept the complexity of the socio-economic issues we face, this tells us we cannot be sure that A causes B. It may be happening as a function of the millions of events that take place at any given time; or the interaction of several factors at the same time; or that different factors can enter the system and become relevant at different times. As such, it is not possible to create a 100 percent accurate model of how a particular system functions. In the case of the urban

(or urbanising) context, cities or emerging cities are perfect examples of a "complex adaptive system". As none of these examples represent a closed system, it is difficult to ensure certainty of all the variables we may want to map out. So how can we create a model like so many consultants do?

Well, beyond the fact that we would need to develop many, many assumptions, it also means that the solutions that are generated be evidence-based, as opposed to using data mainly during the research phase. Quantitative data is but one form of evidence. It does, however, require suspending one's reliance on frameworks or models – as uncomfortable as that may be – to simply allow multiple data points out there, quantitative and otherwise, to surface a pattern. We say then that such properties – whatever form they may take – are *emergent*. To use an anecdote to illustrate what I mean, it has been said that a university in California, in its first year of infrastructural planning did not put concrete footpaths in its campus. Instead, administrators laid out grass all across the campus and had students and faculty walk however they wished to, to get to where they wanted. By the end of the year, trails had been formed by the natural paths used, which were also known as *desire lines*. It was over these desire lines – the emergent property from use and desire – that the concrete footpaths were laid.

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design



Image source: <http://www.welshgeek.com/tag/desire-line/>

Hunch #4: Public Service Design May Become More Experimental — and Risk-taking

As the world becomes more complex and we start to deal with more diversity in our population on different fronts, there are more competing needs and interests than before. Resources, on the other hand, remain finite. As I commented while presenting at a United Nations conference on Urban Asian Futures: How can one even design policy for massive groups of people anymore?

We can go back to empirical evidence. We can design policy based on evidence of what works. We can conduct experiments or pilot programmes. These can be ‘quick and dirty’, such as prototyping in Lean Startup Method (LSM) which has become de rigeur with Silicon Valley startups. LSM takes an

approach of quickly developing simple hypotheses — about the ‘customer’ or ‘user’, on what the problem or need is, and what the solution might be. These are then tested in the field with real ‘potential customers’ in small, rapid cycles in succession, helping the solution provider or startup founder(s) understand better what their target customer needs and what solution they should build. On the other end of the spectrum, there are the more rigorous (and typically more resource-intensive) randomised control trials (RCTs), which form the basis of many study findings in psychology and behavioural economics. Once the domain of pharmacology and psychology labs in universities, RCTs are now a powerful way to understand the effect of policy or service intervention with a sample group of people by contrasting the condition of a similar group of people who did not receive the

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

intervention with a group that did, before a decision to roll-out that intervention on a larger scale is made, based on the evidence of efficacy.

These approaches come from two very different worlds, but we have a(nother) hunch: what if we combined these? Before we implement any sort of programme in a full-scale manner, we conduct an LSM experiment to get the biggest kinks out of the way, that is, we deal with the riskiest assumptions by either validating or invalidating them through it. With a clearer idea on the parameters that are most relevant, we then conduct a more refined version of it through an RCT to look at the size of effect we are hoping to achieve; to understand the conditions under which that effect can be achieved. In deciding to go on to this second stage with the RCT, we would have had to examine the resource availability relative to the stakes involved in the decision, specifically the sort of impact we are hoping to achieve in the proposed policy, programme or service.

In Singapore, we used LSM in a very small way, in the final component of the above-mentioned urban poverty project: a hackathon. In most social hackathons in Singapore, you would typically see 20- and 30-something hipsters gathering in swanky downtown offices and locations to build something for users they have never met. In contrast, our project not only sited the hackathon in the void decks

of the very blocks of flats where the residents we spoke with lived, we also ended up having even more residents than hipsters participate in the project. This made it possible for all participants to exercise a key principle of LSM: testing your 'product' with your user. During this process, many residents were able to point out early flaws in the product or service idea, enabling teams to quickly iterate to something much more effective and more importantly, ensure that we were addressing an actual need.

Hunch #5: Problem Definition will be Increasingly Key to Avoid Chasing Down the Wrong Problem

As Einstein was memorably quoted as saying, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions." The clarity and sensibility of this quote seems obvious once articulated — which is why it was ironic for us to realise that, as a team of behavioural researchers, data geeks and designers, this wisdom is not as widely applied in practice as it could or indeed should be.

Let me use a fictitious scenario: You are a leader of an emerging neighbourhood in a future, expanded Singapore, called Ekatmatara. You are trying to tackle an 'urban ghetto' area that is expanding in Ekatmatara, which has seen better days but is now struggling with drug-related crimes, primary school delinquency,

Five Hunches about the Future of Public Policy Design

access to affordable healthcare in a [hospital] bed crunch, and a whole slew of other issues. And let us say, there were five-year (even 10-year) plans created, at the group representation constituency level, that were not realised after multiple election cycles. Previous leaders have tried and failed at addressing the problems as they were ‘so difficult’ and ‘complicated’. You are embattled by competing priorities set against very finite resources — and worse, the civil servants and your other local grassroots leaders are getting disillusioned. Perhaps the first thought you have is, “Let’s set up a job creation programme.” Completely valid. But, perhaps, what you really needed to know and to do first is to get a hold of the gang crime that is fueled by drugs and which has its clutches on the local residents, in order to create the stability needed for people living there to even imagine wanting or being able to take on full-time employment. Without in-depth investigation of the community, how would you have known that? You may even have taken a completely different path to try to solve it.

For problems with such complexity, where does one begin? Perhaps one should look at data and pick out strange correlations that you examine deeply. But these are just data points. Alternatively, one should also see actual realities on the ground, and take a leaf from anthropology and conduct some ethnography on the streets. These may

possibly uncover some behavioural insights that might be key to the problem and ultimately, the solution. But how would one articulate and scope the issue at hand? Maybe the field of design could offer a way to frame the challenge, and could even guide these innovation efforts on when to ‘diverge’ and when to ‘converge’. And of course, because these issues are inherently operating at a systems level, perhaps you build a system dynamics map (which could end up looking like a very messy spider web).

In closing: problem definition is key. Good problem definition guides public servants so they do not plan, execute and evaluate the wrong solutions. It helps avoid the situation of youth engagement programmes — perhaps like in the case of our fictional Ekatmatara — inadvertently enabling delinquent youth to meet other at-risk youth and build their own distributed drug networks. Finally, it enables the creation of things that can continue to be built upon by locals, with local materials — and most importantly, to serve the citizens they are meant for in the first place.



Chapter Eleven

A Democracy of Words

Johannis Auri Bin Abdul Aziz

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A Democracy of Words

Since the birth of our nation in 1965, Singapore and its leaders have thought very seriously about how to design and articulate the kind of political society we desire or should have. It is one thing for the Constitution of Singapore to provide for democratic institutions; it is quite another entirely to fill in the content of the sort of political culture this fledgeling democracy was to have.

Leaders such as the late former Deputy Prime Minister, S Rajaratnam, were against copying Western norms of liberal democracy. Rajaratnam felt that it was vital that the People's Action Party (PAP) government should be allowed to concentrate on the difficult task of implementing economic and social development policies without the distraction of non-constructive adversarial politics aimed at scoring political points and empty of substance. Singapore at that time faced many practical challenges that required a clear-eyed pursuit of practical solutions. Additionally, he believed that a public-spirited pursuit of the common good would also help build a common sense of purpose to unite a country still divided by race and religion.

Nevertheless, political landscapes change and these changes make new demands on the polity. In the 1980s, the PAP government responded to the aspirations of a new generation of cosmopolitan Singaporeans by tempering its top-down utilitarian governance. Fast-forward to

2016, I will attempt to show that Singaporeans and the society we live in have sufficiently changed again for us to consider a way of re-conceiving our democracy.

The Evolution of the Singapore Polity

After the Second World War, the spread of mass democracies throughout the non-Western world raised questions about the ability of these post-colonial countries, with their so-called non-democratic cultures, to build and stabilise their own democratic systems. The 'aggregative' model was often promoted as the answer. In this model, governmental decisions are made primarily by aggregating the preferences of the masses. In Singapore, the PAP government took its one-party parliamentary dominance as a mandate to rule according to what it believed was the objective common good.

Nevertheless, this was an era when cultural and religious sensitivities were still considered potentially explosive. Add to this the unstable post-colonial politics of the region and Singapore was experiencing existential threats from both within and without. The PAP recognised the need for a strong hand to navigate the country through those circumstances and used its parliamentary dominance to develop a form of democracy that entrenched a 'monological', that is to say, top-down form of government.

A Democracy of Words

That model of democracy promoted stability and order at the expense of citizen participation. Apart from voting and localised grassroots activities, few citizens took an active part in governance. As a consequence, even as socio-economic development took place, and harmony and peace reigned in the face of multicultural, multiracial and multireligious pluralism, politics came to be viewed from an exclusively instrumentalist standpoint. Thus, the era of pragmatic and technocratic rule in Singapore was established.

The 1980s and 1990s however, saw the rise of opposition parties as well as a perceived increase in the general unhappiness of citizens with the PAP's top-down governance. As the PAP saw an erosion of its popular vote in the general elections and at one point (after the 1991 general election) had to concede four seats in parliament to the opposition parties, it also began to recognise the evolving needs of the Singaporean populace. Where once the population was happy enough to be led without much questioning, as long as concrete material progress was being made, this was starting to change. As the population became better-educated and better-travelled, it became more cosmopolitan and adopted the middle-class aspirations of their counterparts in other developed countries. These changes, however, were not limited to cultural and social needs and wants. The newly cosmopolitan populace also demanded a bigger say in

the way the country was governed.

The PAP government subsequently attempted a cautious transition to deliberative democracy. The government focused on establishing a democratic consensus through public consultation, albeit within formal institutions. A good example of this was the formation of the Feedback Unit in 1985, which allowed ordinary citizens to voice their concerns over government policies. In a similar vein, the Institute of Policy Studies was formed in 1988 to provide, at arm's length, direct research on the material effects of and public opinion on government policy. It was during this period of softening its top-down rule that this new deliberative model, characterised by 'dialogical' or two-way communication between the state and citizens, was initiated. The objective common good was no longer to be decided solely from the top, but by having some amount of formal consultation with citizens.

This era culminated in the formation of the Singapore 21 Committee in 1997. Over the next two years, the Singapore 21 Committee and its five sub-committees would consult with some 6000 Singaporeans from all walks of life in search of a new vision for Singapore in the 21st Century.

Hence, one can already see a progression in Singaporean politics, away from bread and butter issues and towards

A Democracy of Words

post-materialist issues regarding self-fulfilment, civic participation and identity. This is not to say, of course, that Singapore did not have identity politics from the start. The nation's racial and religious cleavages in the 1950s and 1960s are well documented. However, an obliging populace, a heavy-handed administration and well-regulated mainstream media made it possible to effectively suppress the antagonistic pluralism of early identity politics. None of the above-mentioned three factors, however, are still operative today. We have already seen how we, as Singaporeans, have grown in the direction of post-materialist values, and have become more politicised and assertive of our views as well — this trend continues today.

The second factor, the 'heavy hand' of the state, has been operating with a lighter touch since Goh Chok Tong became Prime Minister (PM) and has continued in that regard with Singapore's third and current PM, Mr Lee Hsien Loong. Of particular note was a 2007 parliamentary speech by PM Lee commenting on a bill calling for the repeal of Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code that outlaws sexual acts between consenting adult men. PM Lee noted, "When it comes to issues such as the economy, technology, education, we better stay ahead of the game, watch where people are moving and adapt faster than others, ahead of the curve, leading the pack." However, on issues concerning moral values, he said,

"We will let others take the lead, we will stay one step behind the front line of change; watch how things work out elsewhere before we make any irrevocable moves". This speech has since often been taken by social commentators and activists alike as de facto permission for interested parties to expand their public advocacy for cultural and moral causes.

Finally, as for the third factor, the well-regulated mainstream media is no longer the gatekeeper of public information it used to be and is therefore less effective in controlling public speech and tempering the political heat that may result from public controversies. With the advent of social media platforms since the early 2000s, Singaporeans can publish their views on matters of public interest, bypassing traditional media as well as mobilise mass groups of the like-minded with diminishingly low marginal transaction costs.

Consequently, since the turn of the new millennium, Singaporeans have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of political phenomena in their public space. Civic groups are now bolder than they have been in decades at lobbying the public and politicians. Perhaps the most prominent controversial events have been the public conflicts surrounding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights after the failed 2007 bid to repeal Section 377A. In March 2009, the traditionally liberal women's

A Democracy of Words

rights group, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) witnessed an attempted takeover of its leadership by people affiliated with a Christian church community, the Church of Our Saviour. Another prominent public controversy happened in June 2014, when Pink Dot SG, an annual event held at Hong Lim Park in support of the local LGBT community, raised the ire of some in the Muslim and Christian communities. In opposition, the Wear White movement was started by a local Muslim religious teacher, Ustaz Noor Deros, to reaffirm Islamic family values on what happened also to be the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan that same year. The LoveSingapore Network, a coalition of a large number of Christian churches followed suit with their Wear White initiative. However, a TOUCH Family Services Centre application to hold a pro-family event at the Padang on the same day was controversially rejected by the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

The LGBT rights issue is, however, not the only prominent public conflict seen in the past fifteen years. Religious accommodation has always been an issue in multireligious Singapore, but while advocacy for accommodations had largely been kept behind closed doors in previous years between community leaders and politicians, more recently, they have involved lobbying the general public. After 2002's spirited public debate about the hijab (a veil worn by Muslim

women) in schools, the issue cropped up again in September 2013 — some members of the Muslim community questioned the ban on Muslims from wearing it in certain professions, notably in nursing. This time, there was an online petition and a Facebook group created in order to share and mobilise public opinion. Notably, the situation was inflamed when there was abusive treatment of both the current and former Mufti (the highest ranking authority on Islam in Singapore) by online commentators supporting the movement. A similar case surrounded the public debate and an online petition over the reinstatement of Thaipusam as a public holiday as well as a call to lift the ban on music played during processions.

Generally, what is new about this new era of Singaporean politics is not only that there has been an upsurge in citizen and civic group participation in national cultural and moral issues, but also that the prominence of the public conflicts they have brought about has been unprecedented.

This is, at least, in part the result of the advent of social media. The anonymity, speed and ubiquity of social media have provided a conflictual backdrop of anonymous supporters who are full of invectives and are quick to vilify. Social media has also provided the focus around which like-minded individuals with strong views on all sides of the arguments can very easily and quickly find each other.

A Democracy of Words

This exacerbates a public polarisation in speed and numbers that Singapore's society has not seen before. Mainstream media observers such as journalists Lydia Lim and Tham Yuen-C, have expressed worry about a possible 'culture war'. This terminology underlines a fear that American-style political antagonism and even violence are not far from our shores.

Living with the 'Paradox of Democracy'

Whatever it is that one might be tempted to say about PM Lee's speech referred to earlier, the distinction it made between material and value issues cannot be ignored. The problem with addressing 'culture war' issues with current deliberative democracy models is that they tend to bring out the inherent tension in democratic theory — what political theorist Chantal Mouffe has called "the Paradox of Democracy". On the one hand, the democratic tradition defends the ideals of popular sovereignty (i.e. majoritarian rule), and equality. On the other hand, many democratic ideals come from the classical liberal tradition that defend the values of individual liberty and human rights. Thus, democracy attempts to protect majorities and minorities simultaneously. Hence, would a proposed solution to a "culture war" issue be the right one to take because it protects, for example, a certain group's equal access to education, even if the majority of the people voted against it? What if the majority votes for a certain policy solution but it can be

argued, for example, that the policy impinges on a certain group's freedom of religious practice or is an affront to its religious beliefs?

In an attempt to square the circle, deliberative democracy theorists have attempted to reconcile these opposing thoughts by creating neutral procedures of deliberation that they hope will foster a rational consensus even on controversial value laden issues. Clearly, that seems impossible to do without stripping away the most subjective parts of our social identities: social and power relations, non-rational emotional attachments, linguistic and cultural practices and so on. However, the problem is that the plurality of these things is really part of what makes up our individual identities. Hence, while the deliberative democracy model is extremely useful for debates on material issues, it is less effective for issues that represent fundamentally opposing moral views or identities, both of which make these conflicts hopelessly subjective under its rubric.

Unfortunately, as discussed above, these sorts of issues are increasingly common in Singapore and attempting to relegate value pluralism and its passions to a non-public domain is increasingly impossible in the age of social media. At best, value pluralism is suppressed only to re-erupt at a later date. Trying to channel that in more benign ways is a better alternative. However, in order to give value plurality

A Democracy of Words

its political due, it will require us to view democratic citizenship in a very different way.

Firstly, if we are to take our pluralism seriously in the political context, then we have to give up the idea of a true rational consensus and accept the salience of passions in the democratic process. Moreover, because our political agreements will not be based then on pure rational consensus, they should always be seen as provisional democratic outcomes. Even the smoothest agreements, with the largest of majorities, will have to remain potentially open to reasonable disagreements and dissent. This gives hope to claimant groups that their participation in democratic governance matters, even if things do not go their way at this time. While it is only fair that issue majorities get their way in policy decisions, the danger is that perennial issue minorities, should they develop, might feel sufficiently alienated enough from the system to either attempt to press their agenda in non-democratic ways or to leave the country altogether. Neither is a healthy outcome for a democratic polity that calls itself 'a nation'.

For us to be a true nation, for this country to be for all of us not just some of us, we must allow all issue minorities to be heard and given the opportunity to convince others through legitimate public discussion. This does not guarantee any group favourable outcomes, but it shows

respect for real differences and allows everyone to take part and feel that they have a stake in the process of governance.

At the end of the day, as citizens, we have to learn how to bargain, compromise, agree to disagree, and be ready to do it all over again when the time comes. Accustomed to the finality of a heavy-handed top-down government, we will have to learn how to live with the ambiguity of what political theorist James Tully termed a "stable irresolution" in this new age.

Secondly, if we are to take our pluralism seriously in the political context, we must also commit ourselves to dealing with different social identities in their full form. This means accepting that relations of power and the antagonism which they create cannot be eradicated from politics. Subsequently, coming to terms with that implies relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realisation of perfect harmony. One of the limitations of 'a democracy of deeds' therefore is that it insists on consensus in the face of irreducible pluralism and asymmetrical relations of power. For the sake of certainty or efficiency, it tends to gloss over the fact that reasonable people can reasonably disagree about policy.

The central question for democratic politics then is not how to create consensus without exclusion, but how to create unity in the context of diversity.

A Democracy of Words

For both Tully and Mouffe, the answer is in creating a new and shared identity for democratic citizenship, based on a set of democratic values compatible with pluralism such as ‘democratic provisionality’ covered above.

This new democratic identity allows groups to construct their opponents as ‘adversaries’, who have a right to be listened to rather than as ‘enemies’ who must be annihilated. Hopefully, this reconstruction will help transmute antagonism (hostility) into agonism (legitimate contest). All of this does not mean, of course, that antagonism is entirely eradicated; there will always be potential for hostility, but it does mean that by and large, our public space will be reserved for civil contestation.

There is much to be lamented about the confrontational and adversarial nature of Western liberal democratic politics. S Rajaratnam’s call for a ‘democracy of deeds’ resonates with a culture that values action and result over words. Nevertheless, the price of democracy is that everyone has the right to be heard. Moreover, in an increasingly diverse society, this means more words than ever.

As Singaporeans grow more independent-minded, more politicised and more concerned with post-material issues, it is time that the national conversation over our future becomes more multilogical; that it allows us to

speak and discuss directly with all sides of any policy issue.

Having a dialogue with the government alone no longer spares you the burden of convincing your fellow Singaporeans on an issue. It is the burden of each claimant group to speak to the masses, as well as opponent groups, in order to change minds and institute new policies.

This agonistic pluralist politics will certainly be messier than we are used to; it will certainly be louder than we are comfortable with right now. However, it will also bring with it hope, that in all our diversity, there is indeed a way to unite us all.



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