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Preparing the Social Service Sector for Singapore's Future Needs

by Dr Justin Lee

RECOMMENDATION

Singapore is heading towards slower growth, an ageing society and higher structural unemployment. To limit rising public social spending, we urgently need to tap and develop our community resources. Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) need to take on new responsibilities of leadership and collective mobilisation that have been left to the government. Government should not take on tasks that the community can do for itself and should instead help to create opportunities for the people sector to do more. We should:

- I Review the multiple roles of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) to de-conflict its role as a representational membership body of VWOs and its other responsibilities as a watchdog, fundraiser, funder and service developer.
- II Support the establishment of issue-specific associations of VWOs so that the community can identify and solve problems with less reliance on government.

CONTEXT & ANALYSIS

1. Unabated centralisation risks suppressing sector development in the long run.

In the early years of nation-building, centralised social services, fundraising (i.e., ComChest) and training were useful because of limited resources and low capacity in the community.

The community has since developed a diverse range of assets that can be tapped to address social issues.

However, when the government continues to take on too many aspects of social welfare provision and sector development, it risks crowding out community ownership.

This could discourage individual voluntary efforts and lead to a kind of "learned helplessness" on the part of VWOs. (Some have become highly dependent and would

take on projects only where there is adequate government funding.)

We potentially face a vicious circle of increasing government involvement in the sector, which in turn maintains low VWO initiative. This disengages the public, which continue to regard social problems as the sole responsibility of the government.

As the key funder, the government may unintentionally inhibit collaborations and trust between VWOs that compete for funding. VWOs are incentivised to focus on cultivating “vertical” relationships with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and NCSS, and less on the “horizontal” ones with one another.

There are only a handful of associations that VWOs form on their own accord. There is no national body to represent non-profit organisations, and not enough issue-specific associations, such as a Disability Council, Eldercare Association or a Mental Health Alliance. Issue-based associations can help to connect diverse groups with common interests that may not otherwise meet.

2. Centrally controlled systems are less responsive to emerging challenges and tensions.

Government initiatives, backed by ample public funds and manpower, can be rapidly implemented to show results in the short run. However, they may not be the best solutions for the long term.

The social sector will face new and complex challenges that require nimbleness and adaptability. Given an ageing society and disruptive technologies that will deepen socio-economic fault-lines, we will face new “wicked problems” that cannot be resolved by any single agency.

The government’s centrally driven initiatives tend to suffer from institutional inertia because large bureaucratic structures—like large ships—take more effort to manoeuvre. Furthermore, the early success of these initiatives entrenches them as paradigms that are infrequently challenged, least of all by a statutory board tasked to implement them, or by VWOs who depend on them.

Examples:

Centralised fund-raising no longer achieves its *raison d’être*, and discourages community involvement. ComChest was established in 1983 to relieve social service organisations “of the burden of fund-raising so they can focus on their primary responsibility of caring for and serving the needy.”

However, funds raised are not sufficient because of growing social needs. Many VWOs still have to raise significant funds on their own to supplement what ComChest apportions to them, sometimes competing for the same funders. Furthermore, its “one-stop shop” approach may be a convenient service for corporate donors, but it does not meaningfully connect the community with causes.

The challenge, then, is likely to be defined as: “How do we equip ComChest to raise ever more funds to meet demand?” Instead, a more adaptive question might be: “How do we get donors to give to VWOs directly, so that ComChest can fulfil its mission without growing its own capacity?”

Centralised hiring of select staff creates allegiance issues. The Sun Ray programme, whereby NCSS hires and develops “high calibre leaders for the social

service sector”, deploying them to various VWOs, was started to counter labour shortage due to the inability of VWOs to attract talent. There are questions about the organisational allegiance of these employees, who straddle NCSS and VWO work.

VWOs prefer to retain these people, but some are reluctant to invest in their career development knowing that they will leave after their stint. The approach taken here is: “How can we hire and develop talent on behalf of VWOs?” instead of “How can we equip the VWOs so that they are able to hire and develop?”

3. Problematic centralisation initiatives continue unchecked because the main feedback mechanism is faulty.

NCSS’s status as a statutory board undermines its ability to fully understand VWO needs, yet it is mandated to represent VWOs and be their voice.

VWOs are less likely to speak their minds when they are talking to a funder that monitors their performance, or share their challenges on the ground because revealing organisational shortcomings might jeopardise their funding.

NCSS has to balance multiple critical roles, and its ability to deliver on MSF priorities may be challenged. In 2013, MSF reclaimed the function of administering social services from NCSS. With Family Service Centres (FSCs) under MSF’s close supervision, and the creation of Social Service Offices (SSOs) and Social Service Net (SSNet, a national case management IT system), MSF is able to get administrative data directly from the ground, and work directly with VWOs, bypassing NCSS.

As a result, NCSS has sought to retain its relevance by trying on ill-fitting roles beyond service administration, such as running social enterprises and the following initiatives:

Advocacy was undertaken as a new core function in 2013. It makes sense to engage in advocacy when you are a voluntary organisation independent of the government, not when you are a statutory body under a Ministry.

As a result, NCSS mainly engages in campaigns where messages are directed at the public, such as The Purple Parade (disability) or International Day of Older Persons. Even then, it selects social issues that already have political and mainstream support, defeating the purpose of advocacy.

Sector Planning. NCSS’s recent five-year road map, the “Social Service Sector Strategic Thrusts (4ST)”, was a large-scale endeavour helmed by a 21-member committee that consulted broadly with the community, government and business sectors. However, it is a confused document because it tries to be too many things to too many parties.

It wants to be a government masterplan that makes hard choices between different initiatives, but also wants to comprehensively incorporate the views of its VWO membership. It wants to be an implementable and centrally driven plan, but also hopes to leave implementation to VWOs’ own initiative. It wants to provide a list of forward-looking initiatives, but also act as a report card touting existing initiatives as already doing good work.

As a result, it neither has the mandate of a government masterplan, nor does it authentically represent what VWOs value.

Ultimately, NCSS's attempts to fulfil too many divergent roles have diluted their ability to fully satisfy their two key stakeholders—VWOs and MSF.

CONCLUSION

The government is at risk of becoming a victim of its own success as it continues to centrally coordinate the social service sector. Instead, a more engaged and self-sufficient voluntary sector can better solve more of its own problems, while government resources can be better spent on providing guidance, governance and support.

Just as the government has found it beneficial to privatise certain public functions to achieve market efficiencies, there are areas where it would be beneficial to “communitise” certain public assets so that community control can create greater involvement and ownership.

High-level committees made up of political, civil service and community leaders can conduct periodic strategic reviews on who should fulfil key social service functions, and allow the government to adjust its portfolio so as to avoid taking on responsibilities better left to the community.

I NCSS should begin to de-conflict its roles.

NCSS should gradually relinquish its role as a representational membership body of VWOs because it conflicts with its other roles as watchdog, fundraiser, funder and service developer. To illustrate: NCSS's chairman is appointed by the Minister and the CEO drawn from the public service; their performance appraisal depends on satisfying a broader set of requirements

instead of primarily focusing on the needs of the more than 400 member VWOs.

It can then strengthen its oversight functions and focus on implementing MSF's policies. It can become a “Registry of VWOs”—similar to the Registry of Co-operatives—that will focus on “organisations that provide as a primary function a bona fide direct social service”, consistent with the NCSS Act. It can continue to provide shared services to VWOs, help them to access government grants and provide oversight of government-funded programmes. It need not worry about playing a leadership role to a wide range of VWOs with diverse interests that cut across multiple social causes.

II Support the setting up of voluntary associations that can better represent VWO and client needs.

Issue-specific associations can better convey the needs of members, represent their interests, and advocate policies to various parts of government. As MSF's statutory board, NCSS is incentivised to focus mostly on issues under MSF's purview and not other concerns VWOs may have for their clients.

Such associations expand the government's ability to understand and respond to emerging needs. For example, MSF does an Enabling Masterplan for the disability sector every five years. If there were a council of disability organisations, it could empower the disability sector to always be studying and deliberating on key policy issues, even submitting an annual landscape report that alerts the government to emerging problems early.

Such VWO associations can be set up first, and supported so that they will gradually be

able to take on functions best performed by the voluntary sector.

A voluntary sector that can draw out diverse groups and untapped community resources will be stronger and more responsive to our growing social needs.

Such ground-up efforts will also contribute to the building of community solidarity and a culture of mutual help in Singapore.

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