

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MR DESMOND LEE,
MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND
MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF SOCIAL SERVICES INTEGRATION
IPS-TOTE BOARD TRANSFORMING THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR CONFERENCE**

Mrs Mildred Tan, Chairperson of Tote Board

Mr Janadas Devan, Director of IPS

Mr Fong Yong Kian, Chief Executive of Tote Board

Partners and guests

Introduction

1. Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to the inaugural Conference on Transforming the Non-Profit Sector.

2. Our Non-Profit sector is active and diverse, contributing to the arts and culture, education, social services, sports and more. The sector continually learns, innovates and experiments with new ways to achieve social impact.
 - a. For example, I am glad to announce that SGEEnable, CaringSG, and IPS have come together to pilot **Community Circles**, under the Alliance for Action for Caregivers of Persons with Disability.
 - b. These caregivers devote much time and energy to caring for their loved ones with disabilities, but they themselves often face stress and loneliness.
 - c. The Community Circles pilot, inspired by a similar initiative in the UK, will create a safe space for volunteers to connect with these caregivers, understand their struggles, and discuss practical ways of providing support.
 - d. I hope that over the next two days, we can be inspired by efforts in the Non-Profit sector, and draw ideas from the private and public sector, to develop more innovative solutions to support different groups in society.

Tackling Inequality

3. Today, I'd like to share more about some of our efforts to tackle inequalities in our society and enhance social mobility.
4. Last week, at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Economic Roundtable, my colleague, Minister Lawrence Wong, talked about three curves that we need to flatten, to build an even more fair and just society.
5. One of these curves is the "inequality curve" – to give every Singaporean the assurance that life will become progressively better, and that nobody will be excluded from the benefits of growth.
6. We want every Singaporean to have the opportunity to succeed.
 - a. That is why we have invested heavily in education, creating many more pathways to success through our ITE, polytechnics and universities.
7. We want to encourage communities to contribute to those who need help.
 - a. And build a caring and inclusive society together.
8. At the same time, we've progressively stepped-up support for lower-income Singaporeans, through preschool subsidies, MOE financial assistance, ComCare, Medifund, GST vouchers, Workfare Income Supplement, Skillsfuture and many more schemes.
9. We've made good progress so far.
 - a. MOF's latest study found that among Singaporean children born between 1985 and 1989 to families in the lowest 20% by household income, 14% of these children reached the top 20% by household income among their cohorts by the time they were in their 30s.
 - b. This figure is higher than corresponding figures for other countries in Northern America and Europe.

10. But we will continue to press on, to identify gaps and opportunities, and do even more to improve social mobility.

- a. For instance, we've recently announced that we will extend the Progressive Wage Model to three new sectors.
- b. And we are creating more pathways for ITE students to succeed.

11. These policy enhancements are important. Putting in more resources is important. But what I want to focus on today are our efforts to transform the way we deliver these policies, programmes and social services.

- a. Because tackling inequality is not just about the government doing more through redistribution and schemes. It is importantly, about strengthening that spirit of mutual support and fellowship that is so vital for our society to thrive.
- b. That is why community involvement through the non-profit sector is so critical.
- c. This involves every one of us here, today. Whichever sector we come from, we are here because we all want to achieve maximum social impact.
- d. If you are from a Social Service Agency or a Non-Profit Organisation, or you work in a Government agency, you would have put in a lot of time and energy to run programmes and services to support vulnerable households. You may ask whether our collective efforts can be better coordinated, to reduce duplication and achieve better outcomes.
- e. If you represent a philanthropic foundation or the CSR arm of a company, you may wonder if your contributions and donations make a difference. Increasingly, you are asking for accountability - can the social impact that NPOs achieve be measured in some way?
- f. And if you are a volunteer or you lead a ground-up community group at the frontlines, you may be looking for clearer direction and signposting, on how you can contribute more effectively and meaningfully, by meeting the most pressing needs on the ground.

12. That is why conferences like these are so important.
 - a. Bringing partners across sectors to learn from one another, cross-pollinating ideas, and finding opportunities to collaborate.
 - b. And as this year's theme suggests, to use data, evidence and research, to maximise our collective impact.

Social Service Transformation

13. To make more effective use of our resources, better harness the collective contributions of all our partners, and more decisively tackle inequality, we are making significant changes to the way we deliver policies and programmes, and integrate social, health and community resources.

14. Because, despite the significant increases that we have made in social investment, some stubborn inequalities still persist, and some families still struggle.

15. Often, this is because they face a complex web of inter-locking challenges:
- a. Such as poor health which makes it hard to sustain employment;
 - b. Or children who lack parental supervision ending up in the wrong company and falling into crime or drug addiction.
 - c. Without effective intervention, the negative cycle may even get passed down the generations.

16. To cut away these anchors that hold down social mobility, we need to find a better way to integrate our efforts to tackle causes and symptoms holistically, drawing on the experience and wisdom of our social work professionals, our frontline officers, and community organisations working on the ground.

17. Instead of an agency or programme-centric approach, we need to put families at the centre, and organise support around their needs and challenges, while at the same time building on their own strengths and resources.

- a. This requires a long-term view, taking the time and effort to journey with these families to understand their needs and aspirations, as well as their assets and their strengths.
- b. This way, we can more effectively coordinate support across agencies and NPOs to address deep-seated challenges, and empower families to unlock their potential.
- c. The vanguard of this transformation effort – is Community Link, or ComLink for short.

Community Link

18. In 2019, we piloted ComLink, to uplift families with children living in rental housing. We want to achieve three long-term outcomes for the families:
 - a. First, we want to help families achieve **Stability**, where the family's basic needs are met.
 - b. Then, we move on to **Self-reliance**, where the family builds resources and capabilities to support themselves.
 - c. And finally, **Social mobility**, where they can seize opportunities, improve their circumstances, and move out of rental housing.

19. How do we achieve this?
 - a. We will proactively reach out to families to understand their needs, instead of waiting for them to come to us.
 - i. Because we know from experience that it is always better to treat issues upstream.
 - ii. Rather than when their challenges have multiplied and become more complex.
 - b. With the families' consent, we will pool information across agencies to get a more comprehensive understanding of the families' needs and their strengths.
 - c. And work with them to draw up their roadmap to progress.
 - d. We will reduce the burden on these families, who have to apply to different places for assistance and repeatedly undergo means-testing, by

streamlining our schemes and protocols and improving back-end systems.

- e. We will provide close case support to the families through a befriender, who journeys with the family and works backend with the Social Service Offices to coordinate support across different programmes for the family.
 - i. Because integrated and family-centric support enables the family to focus their energies to resolve their difficulties and achieve their goals.
 - f. We will also bring in community partners, to provide customised support and programmes for the families based on actual needs.
 - i. Because uplifting these families is a whole-of-society effort, we must join hands to support and empower them.
20. We've had initial success with the pilot.
- a. We have drawn lessons, taken in feedback from our partners, and refined the model further.
 - b. And our work to scale up ComLink nation-wide over the next three years, to support some 14,000 families, is well underway.
21. ComLink is a multi-year and multi-generational endeavour. The outcomes that we want to help our families to achieve cannot happen within a few months.
22. So how do we know that we are on the right track?
- a. At the family level, we will closely follow the families' progress, using short and medium-term progress indicators to make sure that families are on a positive trajectory.
 - i. Like whether the children are attending school, and the parents are sustaining employment.
 - b. At the town level, the respective ComLink Alliances will gather frequently to discuss cases, determine the suite of programmes, evaluate whether these meet the needs of the families, and to invite community partners and donors to join our ComLink families on this journey.
 - c. At the macro level, we will be embarking on a longitudinal study to track the pathways and outcomes of a representative sample of these families

across various domains, including their employment and finances, family relationships, and young children's development.

23. With a robust evaluation framework, we can work with our partners to refine our programmes and processes, to ensure that they have the greatest impact for our ComLink families.
- a. Not just in terms of outcomes, but also the impact of the sum total of our support on their motivations and attitudes.
 - b. This will also give our partners the confidence that by contributing to ComLink, they are making a meaningful impact to the lives of these families.

Other programmes with the DNA of integration

24. Beyond ComLink, we are also weaving the DNA of social-health-community integration into many other key social interventions. These include:
- a. The **PEERS Network**, where MSF and HDB partner community groups closely to reach out to homeless people to help them find Safe Sound Sleep, work through their challenges, and address their housing difficulties.
 - b. The **Vulnerable-in-Community (VIC) Network**, where MSF partners community groups to engage tissue sellers and cardboard collectors, and bring those who need help into our social support system.
 - c. **KidSTART**, where we work with partners to implement upstream programmes and galvanise corporates, donors and volunteers to support children from low-income families to have a good start in life.
 - d. And the **Charity Food Workgroup**, which brings together food charities and volunteer groups to tackle food insecurity more effectively, reduce the significant wastage we see today, and ensure that benefiting households receive the right type and amount of food.

Conclusion: Call to Action

25. This is only the beginning of an exciting journey of transformation and change in our social-health and community landscape, as we seek to marshal communities and resources to tackle complex challenges more effectively.

- a. We are designing solutions to suit Singapore's context, without precedents from elsewhere to follow.
- b. There are many opportunities for us to learn together and continually improve along the way.
- c. And if we can do these well, we will not only make a difference to the families that we serve, but also provide a model for others to consider.

26. I am therefore glad that the National Council of Social Services (NCSS) has developed a **Sector Evaluation Framework**, which we will roll out in the coming months.

- a. This Framework will provide organisations and funders with a common language to frame and evaluate outcomes.
- b. And gives us confidence that the time and resources that we invest will yield the desired social impact.

27. I hope that my sharing will encourage you to consider what we need to do as organisations within the Non-Profit sector, to play our part in this ambitious transformation, as we seek to tackle the inequality curve more robustly. Join us in ComLink, PEERS Network, KidSTART, the VIC Network or our SGCares Community Networks.

28. If you have good ideas that you'd like to test out, you can gather like-minded partners and reach out to us. Perhaps these could be tackled through an Alliance for Action, or AfA.

- a. AfAs are people sector or private sector-led initiatives, supported by the government, that tackle a broad range of complex challenges that Singapore faces – from taking care of youth mental well-being, to uplifting lower-wage workers.

29. In these ways, we bring the Singapore Together movement to life –

- a. By galvanising Singaporeans from all walks of life, not just to discuss issues, but also to take real action to bring Singapore forward.

30. I hope you will join us to nurture and build lives together. Have a good conference ahead. Thank you.