

## Future-Ready Society Conference Series 2023: Peers, Places and Platforms – the Future of Empowered Communities

By Yu Yen King, Dolphie Bou and Flora Du Yuting

### Introduction

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series is part of a tripartite partnership between Tote Board, the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC), and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). Its flagship conference was held on 23 October 2023. Titled “Peers, Places and Platforms — the Future of Empowered Communities”, the conference brought together practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders to discuss these three Ps as different dimensions of community empowerment.

In light of the climate crisis, economic inequality and the ever-present threat of social fragmentation, this conference examines how communities can participate meaningfully to address issues that have deep structural roots and distal causes. Is social change the purview of only well-resourced governments and large organisations, or does the “community” have a critical role to play? Who makes up the community, and does it exist in Singapore? Are the actions of small groups — sometimes rooted in their neighbourhoods — destined to be insignificant, or can local action add up to greater social impact?



*Chief Executive of Tote Board Mr Tan Choon Shian giving the welcome remarks for the conference*

Mr Tan Choon Shian, Chief Executive of Tote Board, gave welcome remarks for this conference. He spoke about how the Future-Ready Society Impact Fund and Knowledge Partnership bring together partners from the people, private and public sectors to work towards a future-ready social ecosystem. The Impact Fund and the Knowledge Partnership have both research and evidence-based solutioning components to bridge knowledge and action. He shared that Tote Board, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC) will soon be implementing pilots relating to the theme on the Future of Civic Engagement, as everyone should have a say in shaping the future of Singapore.

### Overview of Conference Theme and Series of Events



*Professorial Research Fellow at LKYCIC Dr Harvey Neo giving an overview of the conference theme and series of events.*

Dr Harvey Neo, Professorial Research Fellow at LKYCIC, spoke about the progress and significance of the Future-Ready Society Programme, a novel initiative consisting of the Impact Fund and Knowledge Partnership, supported by Tote Board. He highlighted the programme's four key strategies: knowledge sharing, mutual learning, capacity building, and promoting the concept of "future". The conference, workshops, research projects and various learning initiatives, such as the study trip to Scotland, have been integral in achieving these goals. Dr Neo emphasised the importance of people and partnerships in the programme, urging active participation and collaboration to build future-ready communities through the dimensions of human relationships, environments and digitalisation, echoing the three motifs of "peer, places, and platforms".

## Ideas for Community Empowerment



*Head of IPS Policy Lab Dr Justin Lee introducing some ideas for empowerment from the conference events.*

Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Policy Lab at IPS, spoke about the need for a place-based community empowerment approach in Singapore. Drawing inspiration from his visit to Scottish community centres, Dr Lee highlighted the division between Singapore's community centres, which are seen as spaces of enjoyment, and its social service agencies, which are often associated with sadness and stigma. He proposed the development of integrated "Community Centre 2.0", where residents actively engage in and lead local initiatives or businesses that address community needs and are supported by Community Development Councils, professional social services and other enterprises. Dr Lee also suggested various means, such as social stock exchanges, community expos, participatory budgeting, and roving community innovation labs, to facilitate capacity-building and foster a stronger sense of ownership among community members.

## Panel 1: Power of Peer-to-Peer Approaches



*From left to right: Mr Santosh Kumar, Ms Lee Siew Yian, Ms Nanditha Das and Dr Justin Lee speaking on Panel 1 of the conference.*

Mr Santosh Kumar, Programme Coordinator of the pilot run of Community Circles Singapore and Founder of Soul Probe, shared how Community Circles faced difficulties in recruiting volunteers due to insufficient awareness of caregivers of persons with special needs in Singapore, and how he tried to advocate with the caregivers upon learning about the financial precarity and social alienation that they face.

Ms Lee Siew Yian, Senior Manager of Leaders Collective at the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, described how its Giving Circles volunteers found enrichment when they brought their own networks into the programme to do good.

Ms Nanditha Das, Assistant Director and Head of Corporate Governance and Research at the Singapore Indian Development Association, reflected on the importance of students taking ownership of their own learning when co-creating its student programme.

The Q&A session, led by Dr Justin Lee, explored the significance of having a facilitator to build connections in these peer-to-peer programmes, training volunteers to have the right mindset, and allowing the community to take charge of their problems.

## Panel 2: Placed-Based Approaches — Localities for Local Action



*From left to right: Dr Wong Sweet Fun, Dr Dennis Kwek, Ms Chloe Huang, Ms Teo Pek Wan and Associate Professor Chong Keng Hua speaking on Panel 2 of the conference*

Dr Wong Sweet Fun, Deputy Chairman of the Medical Board at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, shared valuable insights during her presentation on “Community-Led Health in Wellness Kampung: Activating and Coordinating Community Assets”, highlighting how Yishun’s Wellness Kampung serve as ordinary “bumping spaces” for seniors and residents to engage in health-enabling and self-empowering activities.

Dr Dennis Kwek, Centre Director for the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education, discussed “Placed-Based Approach to Educational and Social Equity: The Value of Research-Practice Partnerships and Possibilities for Singapore” and delved into the benefits of research-practice partnership. He underscored the importance of university-family-school-community partnerships in redefining schools as integral community hubs and advocated for the capabilities approach in educational research to amplify the impact of place-based initiatives.

In their presentation, “Enabling Services Hub: A Regional Approach to Supporting People with Disabilities”, Director of Service Coordination and Advice at SG Enable Ms Chloe Huang and Director of Adult and Elderly Services at SPD Ms Teo Pek Wan emphasised the necessity of inclusive activities, providing skills training, and creating work opportunities for people with disabilities (PwDs). They also elaborated on the crucial role of community outreach and volunteer involvement in supporting PwDs and their caregivers.

The Q&A session, led by Associate Professor Chong Keng Hua from Singapore University of Technology and Design, concluded the panel, focusing on the significance of genuine interactions and organic development of places in creating effective and sustainable place-based solutions.

## Insights from Communities in Scotland



*From left to right: The discussion panel comprised Mr Benjamin Seow, Mr Charles Tan, Mr Chester Tan, Ms Lim Mui Ping, Ms Yeo Marie, Ms Tan Bee Keow and Dr Suhaila Zainal Shah.*

The panel members, comprising participants from the overseas study trip to Scotland in July 2023, shared valuable insights gleaned from their visit, where they learned from organisations outside of Singapore working to build stronger communities. Members discussed the pertinence of research-practice partnership in effectively grounding knowledge emerging out of academia in the locales of which research is meant to serve and benefit.

Furthermore, the panel members reflected on the lasting impressions they had from the trip, including alternative models of ownership such as community development trusts and community financing models such as community asset transfers. Exploring the application of these learning back to Singapore, the members outlined the potential impact that a short-term, results-driven approach could have on the longevity of community development programmes. They also explored how communities require not only a physical space to thrive but also a figurative one whereby they do not feel excessively pressured by the need to meet stringent key performance indicators upon which funding relies.

### Panel 3: Platforms for Exchange and Community Building



*From left to right on stage: On Panel 3 of the conference were Mr Johann Annuar, Ms Cynthia Chang, Ms Koh Lin-Net and Dr Laurel Teo.*

Future-Ready Society Action Fellow Mr Johann Annuar shared how his upcoming inclusive business incubator project seeks to help underserved and disadvantaged communities to develop viable and sustainable business models.

Ms Cynthia Chang, Ngee Ann Kongsi Community Fellow and Assistant Dean of the College of Interdisciplinary & Experiential Learning at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, spoke about her plans to build a campus-community matching platform for skills-based service-learning that is collectively owned by institutes of higher learning, to cut through the silos that the latter can operate in and encourage collaboration on complex social issues.

Ms Koh Lin-Net, Director of the Centre for Impact Investing and Practices at Temasek Trust, introduced the organisation's Social Stock Exchange and Brokerage for Impact, which seeks to help multiple stakeholders direct philanthropic capital into high-impact opportunities and viable businesses that can do good.

Facilitated by Dr Laurel Teo from IPS, the Q&A session delved into several critical facets, such as learning from failure, promoting collective ownership and accessibility of platforms, safeguarding against mission drift, integrating “phygital” (physical and digital) approaches to building trust and community, and reporting for accountability.

## Fireside Chat



*From left to right: Ms Dawn Yip, Mr Larry Yeung, Ms Melissa Kwee and Mr Lenard Pattiselanno speaking at the fireside chat*

The fireside chat covered salient issues relating to citizen empowerment, particularly among Singapore’s generally “permission-seeking” citizenry. The panel members discussed the pivotal role that collaborative governance plays in creating a space where citizens can take greater ownership of issues significant to them. Panel members also emphasised equipping people with relevant knowledge and capacity to enter into well-informed conversations that seek to develop common understanding rather than remain avoidant and in conflict with one another.

In addition, panel members explored how citizen empowerment inherently involves a re-negotiation of power relations between government and people, wherein both parties must be willing to take risks to build mutual trust. While the government must learn to shift its mindset closer towards “failing safely” rather than adamantly being “fail-safe”, citizens must also be reminded that they have agency in changing the society around them for the better, and that collaboration — either with government or other community groups — remains the only way to achieve those wider societal goals.

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*If you have comments or feedback, please email [futureready@sutd.edu.sg](mailto:futureready@sutd.edu.sg). Additionally, to stay updated on the latest development of our project, we invite you to visit our website at <https://futurereadysociety.sg/> and sign up for our mailing list.*





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