

# Solutions Beyond Our Paradigm

**Closing Reflections at TNPS 2022: Solutions that Help Us Help One Another**

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# Paradigms / Worldviews / Institutional Logics

- How do we see ‘problems’ in the non-profit sector? Who has problems and who has solutions? Who can legitimately solve these problems?
- The kind of solutions that we [can even] conceive of are informed by our worldview—a way of seeing and thinking about the world, often using cognitive shortcuts and institutionalised scripts, supported by no-longer-questioned assumptions.
- Here, we consider alternative paradigms that exist in parallel with one another.

# Dominant Paradigm: Service Provision

- Resourcing through state or philanthropic funding (alternative revenue sources and volunteers help defray cost)
- Centrally administered / managed
- Increasingly professionally delivered (expected to have specialized expertise informed by research and evidence)
- Preferably at scale
- Competition between providers helps improve quality and efficiency

→ The status quo paradigm is dominant for good reason – it *predominantly* works, so we should respect its merits

# Logic of Administration & Market

**“How do we make sure the most competent professionals/agencies deliver the right type of intervention or programme for the right problem, typically specialized, preferably at scale, so that the most impact is delivered with the greatest efficiency?”**

E.g. Disadvantaged Youths and school: Tutoring → grades.

- Start with a dimension that you can intervene on. Attractive because of its implementability and potential scalability, you might even hope it unravels some of the interconnected problems.
- Eventually this reveals itself to be a wicked problem; single functionally specialized interventions cannot address the problem as a whole.
- But we usually continue utilizing the same logic because something else is literally quite unthinkable: we create ‘holistic’ wrap around-care, better coordination between services.
- When all else fails, funders can blame agencies and professionals can blame the clients. After so much effort, the problem tends to be regarded as personal troubles, due to bad luck or moral failing. Better professional training and evaluation of programmes is prescribed.
- Actually no one is to blame; **these may be the natural limits of the paradigm.**

# Logic of Community Building

**“How do we unlock the unrecognized strengths, hidden potential and untapped capacities of communities facing systemic disadvantages so they can collectively figure out meaningful solutions (≈ respectful of their values/culture, understand unique circumstances and offer a chance to overcome structural disadvantages)?”**

E.g. Peer-to-Peer Learning

- What if we can tap into youths’ ability to learn and teach one another? What if slightly older youths teach younger kids, would this displace the need for private, expert tutors? (e.g. SINDA, Beyond Social Services etc.)
- Different answers to: Who or what is the problem? Who have the solutions?
- When your unit of analysis is the community at large, the problem is more clearly recognized to be systemic in nature: Unhealthy academic competition; a private tuition industry feeding off the anxieties of parents, teachers and students.
- The dominant paradigm imposes some real pushback / constraints to this: Put on a professional lens - what concerns would you have?

# Logic of Mutual Aid

**“How can regular people / ‘commoners’ help one another without the need for permission, professionals or philanthropy?”**

E.g. Instead of NPO or community workers, residents, neighbours, citizens organise their own peer learning circles

- Try to start Learning Circles in your neighbourhood - parents rotate hosting and care instead of send to After School Service.
- Few professionals see this as their role, and few service providers are set up or incentivized to focus on encouraging mutual aid.

# Logic of Commoning

**“How can we create, enlarge and safeguard common shared assets in a way that everyone can contribute jointly and benefit collectively from?”**

E.g. Learning Circles Knowledge Commons

- DIY-kits
- “A really bad business model” may be a really good commoning strategy or social model
- Free to access, easy to contribute to, adaptable to unique circumstances through “reuse and remix”, and through this, collective wealth of knowledge increases
- Open education resource movement – believe that it should be open and free for all to use

| Issue                                      | State                   | Market                             | Service Provision  | Community Building / Mutual Aid                    | Commons  |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>EDUCATION</b>                           | Public Schools          | Private Schools<br>Private Tuition | Subsidised or<br>Volunteer<br>Tutors   | Peer-to-Peer<br>Learning,<br>Democratic<br>Schools | Open Education<br>Resources                        |
| <b>INCOME /<br/>ECONOMIC<br/>INCLUSION</b> | Financial<br>Assistance | Economic<br>Growth                 | Job support,<br>coaching,<br>placement<br><br>Inclusive<br>Business<br>Incubator | Worker-owned<br>Co-ops                             | Community-<br>driven<br>Minimum<br>Income          |
| <b>FINANCE</b>                             | Public Banks            | Private Banks,<br>Moneylenders     | Microfinance,<br>Interest-Free<br>Loans using<br>Donor Funds                     | Credit Co-ops<br>pooling<br>community<br>resources | Community<br>Currencies,<br>Interest-Free<br>Money |

# Tentative Learning Points & Not-Always-Applicable Guiding Sensibilities

1. Lead with a solution
2. Plant a seed of structural change
3. Bring everyone along
4. Guard against co-optation
5. Practice commoning

How to find meaning (and hopefully traction)  
in typically depressing non-profit work

# 1. Lead with a Solution

- Its ok to start with problems, but don't *stay* on it more than you need
- Solution-talk is more energizing, hopeful, connective
- Mindsets are hard to change and paradigms hard to challenge; much better to win the argument through doing than through ideological debate?
- Concrete and near term - 'Realist Utopias'

## 2. Seed of Structural Change

Find or create solutions that have embedded within them, a seed for structural change. The following are small “local responses to global problems”, but what if they proliferate?

Examples:

- Interest-Free Loans → access to credit for poor; undermines predatory lending & extractive finance
- Peer-to-Peer Learning → unlock learning capacity of community; undermines unhealthy academic competition & profiteering from private billion-dollar tuition industry
- Worker-owned Cooperatives → creates economic inclusion & social mobility; challenges wealth concentration for few at expense of disadvantaged communities
- Abundant Community Initiative → poverty alleviation

# 3. Bring Everyone Along (Even Those That Don't Get Along)

- Diverse community assets bring new ideas (Socially Engaged Artists, Civic Tech, Games for Change)
- Diverse vantage points is an asset, if you know how to be an artful intermediary: broker across divergent, competing and even antagonistic groups and ideologies
- Try out social technologies, organisational innovations that help people interact better and arrive at collective decisions

# 4. Guard Against Unintended and Well-Meaning Co-optation

- Unintended diminishing of commons
- It took me a while to appreciate Baltimore Algebra Project: “All at once or nothing at all” (counterintuitive because dominant paradigm suggests “Let’s pick the low-hanging fruit first for quick wins”)
- If you choose to support a solution that sustains or contributes to the systemic problem, is it still worth doing? E.g. a worker coop that simply creates wealth for a new group while exploiting others to do so.
- Commonly shared assets or wealth is constantly under threat from commodification. How many of us, even if we want to, can overcome the obstacles of running a programme or agency based on a “really bad business model”?

# [4.5 Guard against our own cynicism]

It is quite easy to dismiss these ideas:

- Timebanks won't work here; see, we tried, and they failed
- Cooperatives don't work, it just takes too much time for people to agree on anything; much better to have a strong leader
- Building community from the ground-up? Singaporeans are just too practical and don't really care enough about one another

# 5. Practise Commoning

- Pooling resources
- Encourage common ownership and self-management by community, where even livelihoods can be significantly tied to these resources or assets
- Peer-to-peer efforts may work better with decentralised or distributed organisational forms (P2P works differently from 3P)
- Allows everyone to contribute, and find ways to let these contributions accumulate coherently; sharing even when it is still work-in-progress
- Small is beautiful; scale local responses to global problems through permissionless proliferation via “reuse and remix”

**Thank You**

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