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Report on Problem-Scoping Workshop for the Malay Muslim Community

On 4 December 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted a workshop on problem-scoping for the Malay-Muslim Community. The workshop was facilitated by Innovator Ltd. an innovation and entrepreneurship consultancy serving both public and private sector organisations.

The event was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and brought together social work practitioners, academics, members of voluntary organisations, educators, representatives of business organisations and policymakers to discuss and distil problems faced by Singapore's Malay-Muslim community. The workshop aims to attain collective consensus as to which of these issues are most relevant and pressing in the current social context. It also aimed to encourage participants from these diverse groups to share data, best practices and skills, as well as to discover opportunities for collaboration for future projects.

Methodology

The workshop was guided by the Design Thinking (DT) process so as to facilitate productive discussions of problems with the goal of achieving a shared view of the issues involved. Follow-up events such as forums and round table discussions will be organised where remedial strategies can be formulated. Based on the DT framework, collectively identifying problems with a diverse audience is helpful as it enables a process where participants' many concerns are filtered through a plethora of lens in order to better understand the issues involved. In addition, the sharing of data amongst a diverse audience eliminates the need for duplicated solutions across several organisations.

The initial stages of the discussion entailed personalising the problems through the use of personas¹. This was initiated so as to better appreciate the hopes and fears of the Malay-Muslim community as well as to build a common understanding among participants through the creation of personalised characters. These personas were formed after creating, structuring and refining issues and problems offered by participants based on their individual perspectives and experiences.

Personas were melded with particular age groups to represent problems that may be plaguing that particular demographic of the Malay Muslim community. The fears, hopes and obstacles

¹ Fictional characters that represent the problems plaguing the community

experienced by the personas thus represent the collective fears, hopes and obstacles experienced by the community. These include the desires of the community as well as individual and structural barriers to achieving these desires.



Participants of the discussion gather to discuss their personas.

Personified problems

In total, eight personas that were eventually agreed upon. They are as follows:

“At-risk youth”

Atan, 15 years old	Atan is the eldest of three siblings. His parents do not have full-time employment and Atan himself works on a part-time basis to help support his parents. He suffers from low school attendance, is not performing well academically and is at risk of becoming a juvenile delinquent.	
Fears		Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expulsion from school • Lack of knowledge on how to seek help • Being left behind by peers in the educational “arms race” • Shame as a result of his “defective” 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial assistance for his family • Appropriate treatment for his chronically-ill mother • A strong positive in-group identity to latch on to

<p>background and deficient ability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being socially marginalised • Potential to commit offences leading to incarceration • Lack of acceptance by peers • Abandonment by community and family • Uncertainty over his future/getting the right job • Ending up like his parents • Lack of knowledge on planning for his future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sustainable-living future and to eventually experience success (he wishes to get a diploma) • Better life for his siblings and for them to not follow his already gang-related path • Be seen as an equal regardless of race and religion • Have a positive role model and to receive affirmation from those around him • Get the attention and guidance he could not or did not get from his own parents
<p>In his way</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding, care and concern from his parents and siblings • Unstable family dynamics • Undetected learning difficulties • No positive role model • Inability to fit into the existing school system • Stereotypes and discrimination • Inability to access certain social services • Unstable financial situation • Low self-esteem • Gang membership (which gives him a sense of group identity and belonging) • Potential drug addiction and its associated problems 	
<p>Underlying reasons for the problem</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internalised racial stereotypes (“Malays are lazy, Malays can’t do math”, etc.) • No positive role models/stories → lack of motivation, low self-esteem • Financially unstable family life (parents not earning enough, not having enough time to be there for him) • Not finding a “fit” with the school system • Rejection of resources as a result of misplaced pride • Mum and dad’s lack of parenting skills 	

“Lost dreams”

<p>Shahidah, 25 years old</p>	<p>Shahidah is a receptionist who is employed on a contractual basis and earns approximately \$1,500 monthly. She has a fiancée who has yet to propose. She graduated with higher NITEC qualifications. She is family-oriented, has three siblings but lacks confidence and direction towards improving her life.</p> <p>Shahidah cannot/does not see her present state as a problem because she is contented with her current life and is ignorant that it can be better.</p>
<p>Fears</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That her fiancée would never propose to her • Being stuck with the same job 	<p>Hopes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eventually earn a stable income of \$5,000/mth with career progression • A happy family, own a BTO flat, to

<p>throughout her work life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support from future husband (also fears that he would not be able to manage their finances) • Lack of savings to purchase own HDB flat and to start a family • Inability to fulfil family obligations • Retrenchment from current job • Lack of supportive bosses at work 	<p>travel during holidays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further her studies and eventually get a diploma • Overcome her fears and attain a high level of confidence in her life • Find a circle of support to help navigate her life journey • Support her family and to continuously work
In her way	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress from multitasking as a result of multiple responsibilities • Time and financial constraints • Lack of support system, no mentor • Workplace challenges • Fiancée's expectations (e.g., for her to be a stay-at-home wife) • Unaware of resources available • Problems unique to the Malay community: pressure to get married 	
Underlying reasons for problem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being raised with gender biases: Males were expected to attain financial/educational success more than females → hence, her brothers received more educational resources than her → she lacked educational resources (hence she couldn't fare better educationally) • She was not exposed to Islamic education in her growing up years → limited understanding of Islam eg religion also requires its adherents to strive as best as he/she can for a better life. → emphasis on secular education at the expense of a religious one → limited understanding of Islam → downplaying her aspirations → easily contented and grateful with her situation • Perception of education as expensive → parents raised her to not desire higher education but instead primed her for the working world (and then getting married) 	

“At-risk PMET”

<p>Sham, 40 years old</p>	<p>Sham is a PMET who is at risk of being displaced. He is employed at supervisory/management level in a sector that faces uncertainty. He has a wife, two kids and elderly parents.</p> <p>Sham does not feel secure about his future because he has not been able to adjust or adapt to changes in the workforce.</p>
Fears	Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing ability to maintain his assets and falling into debt • Being deficient in skills and needing to re-learn and acquire new skills • Being stuck in sunrise industries • Marital and family problems as a result of financial woes and spending too much time at work • Inability to financially support his family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To stay healthy, debt-free and to sustain a happy retirement • For children to be successful in their education so that they will do better than him in the future • To have more time to himself • To perform the Haj • To be a good role model for his family • To have a “good” death

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient social network and contacts to break through racial “glass ceiling” • Social stigma if he loses his breadwinner status • Lack of access to social assistance as a result of his “middle-class” status • Being “sandwiched” between supporting two generations • Health scares 	
In his way	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-favourable employment practices • Availability of younger, cheaper manpower • The need to readjust lifestyle and mindset (e.g., embracing the new economy) • Financial constraints • Lack of knowledge of available resources • Challenges due to his race and religion • Bandwidth issues: balancing work, family and skills re-learning 	
Underlying reasons for problem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to handle changes around him and at work • Socialisation and internalisation of Malay “sayings”: <i>malas</i> (lazy), <i>takdir</i> (fate or destiny), <i>subahat</i> (to be complicit in someone's wrongdoing, e.g., being an enabler to one's negative drug habits), <i>redha</i> (acceptance and being at peace with of one's circumstances), <i>malu</i> (embarrassment or shame) → these sayings act as enablers to Sham's lack of motivation to upgrade or better his circumstances • Being family-centric as a priority above skills learning and relearning • Problems unique to the Malay community: reluctance of members of the Malay community to participate in the SkillsFuture programme (also a tendency to avoid training as it does not produce immediate results in terms of enhanced social mobility; and feelings of stigmatisation should he have to miss a few days of the course; tendency to be attracted towards only certain types of courses (e.g., baking, etc.) 	

“Single mum”

Sarah, 25 years old	<p>Sarah is an unwed single mother with two young children. She dropped out of secondary school and she works odd jobs earning a meagre income. She is currently in a relationship.</p> <p>Sarah feels “stuck” in her life but she cannot plan for herself and the children's future because she lacks resources, guidance and support.</p>
Fears	Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of childcare options if she were to seek better-paying, full-time employment • Lack of a male role model in the household for the children • Not knowing how to finance her kids' needs (e.g., fears inability to provide basic necessities like food and educational needs) • That her children may end up wayward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To get married for greater support and sustenance • For her children to be well-raised, be provided for adequately and to have a better future • To be independent, find a good job and upgrade herself • To get stable housing

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community’s negative perception of her family • That her new post-marriage family would not be stable 	
In her way	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of educational qualifications that leads to limited work options • Lack of support from family network, hence having to seek child-minders • Lack of experience and knowledge on parenting • Time and financial constraints • Government housing and financial aid policies that make it difficult for single mothers to secure housing/financial aid • Lack of religious mindset 	
Underlying reasons for problem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking help is a “difficult” process in Singapore (as seen in housing and financial policies) → demotivation to seek help → does not get all the benefits or help she could be reaping → trapped in a poverty cycle • Issues with parental support and negative perceptions of wider community on her family → lack of parenting advice and absence of knowledge transmission • Problems unique to the Malay community: desire for many children not aligned with appropriate parenting knowledge 	

“At-risk health”

Siti, 46 years old	Siti is a diabetic at risk of contracting further chronic health issues. She has early signs of kidney problems.	
	Siti cannot change her medical condition but she can improve the quality of her life.	
Fears	Hopes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of income due to illness • Inability to fund medical bills • Being a burden to her family • Not fulfilling her role as “mother” and “wife” to her family as a result of her illness • An early death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To live to see her grandchildren • To seek better medical care • To attend the Haj 	
In her way		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No insurance policy and the lack of proper coverage • Time and financial constraints • Lacking awareness of chronic illness management • Low energy levels • Stigma (i.e., perceived as being culturally deficient) 		
Underlying reasons for problem		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current health policy → lack of awareness of chronic illness management and inadequate insurance coverage • Representation of diabetes as a “Malay problem” → stigmatisation, internalisation of stereotypes and lack of health-seeking behaviour seen as a norm 		

- Lack of cultural, social and economic capital → poor working conditions and pay → lack of conducive environment to acquire knowledge and new skill sets to remedy her situation → stuck in a poverty cycle → lacks resources such as time, money and energy
- Problems unique to the Malay community: ill health stereotyped to be a result of a “deficient Malay culture”, something many Malay-Muslim people dangerously internalise and accept as a norm for members of the community

“Ageing alone”

Dollah, 70 years old	Dollah is an elderly man who is ageing alone physically. He is of a low socioeconomic status and has suicidal thoughts as a result of his isolation and health issues.	
	Dollah is socially isolated and this makes him feel hopeless and helpless.	
Fears		Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dying alone • Not being able to care for himself • Lack of funding for medical expenses • Declining health • Loneliness 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For someone to proactively reach out to him to help • To seek companionship and die with someone by his side • To reconnect with his family • For someone to fulfil his final rites
In his way		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of hopelessness and regret • Inability to communicate through technology • Lack of knowledge on where to seek help • Low self-esteem • Physical weakness and disability • Lack of a social support system 		
Underlying reasons for problem		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of being judged as a result of past incarceration and perceived negative societal expectations → Lack of religious support-seeking behaviour • Gender bias: high male ego → denial of mental health issues, hesitation to come forward and seek help (as seen in underutilisation of senior activity centres by Malay Muslim males) • Inherited behaviour/copied fathering role model (results in the lack of emotional investment into their family by younger Malay males, which translates into social isolation in the future) • While Malays are today more connected to the community, increasing elderly isolation could challenge this 		

“Did okay in primary school but not so well in secondary school”

Daniel, 13 years old	Daniel is currently not performing well in secondary school, despite doing okay in primary school. While his father wants him to do well, his family does not appreciate the value of education.
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Daniel has the potential to do well in secondary school but is distracted with problems at home.	
Fears	Hopes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not doing well • Not being accepted by his peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To perform well academically
In his way	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of emotional instability • A complicated familial situation: divorced parents, where father remarried, and his parents share joint custody; Daniel previously lived with his mother is now living with his father and has a poor relationship with his step-mother 	

“Ex-offender”

Zul, 35 years old	Zul is an ex-offender with three-time drug charges and has recently been released from prison. He has three kids from his marriage but is currently going through a divorce. He has managed to secure a blue-collar job in logistics.	
Fears	Hopes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society stigmatising ex-offenders • His children not acknowledging his role as their father • Lack of stable employment, lack of proper housing • Falling back into drug addiction and getting incarcerated again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reconnect with his family, reconcile with his wife and reinforce his role as a father • To land a better-paying job • To maintain his freedom 	
In his way		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unhealthy coping mechanisms • Lack of technology literacy and an outdated skillset • Employer bias (towards ex-offenders) and limited work options for ex-offenders • Restrictions on getting security licenses for ex-offenders that makes seeking employment difficult • No family support and limited social circles 		

Key issues

The groups described, commented on and contextualised the eight personas that they have agreed upon. This was achieved through the sharing of personal narratives and experiences as well as the application of their individual industry expertise on to the various problems faced by the created personas.

To conclude the session, participants converged to rank the personas according to the urgency of their associated issues. The top two personas chosen were “Daniel” and “Atan”. According to a participant from the Ministry of Education, these personas represent the group of educational underachievers that make up a large proportion of youths from the Malay-Muslim community. Many are the products of unstable family situations which could further lead to personal struggles with motivation and a potential lapse into delinquency. These two personas thus frame

the most pressing issues facing the community by virtue of their long-term cumulative impacts. Moreover, the consensus among participants is that tackling problems relating to educational underachievement among Malay-Muslim youth will have a 'knock-off' effect on other issues, thus potentially raising the status quo of the community. As such, resolving the issues faced by these two personas will be made priority when organising subsequent solution-seeking activities by the Network. The focus after which will then be on problems faced by the other personas.

Follow-up

The sequel to this event will be a series of Design Thinking closed-door workshops that entails coming up with concrete and specific solutions to tackle the issues faced by the eight personas. The first of these workshops will be held sometime early next year. Following these workshops Action Committees may be formed to advice on how these steps are to be implemented.