

Event Summary of**2nd Family Research Network (FRN) Forum: Empowering Vulnerable Families****25 February 2009****Civil Service College**

The FRN forum is part of a series of regular roundtable discussions that examine pertinent issues concerning family research in Singapore. The forum is currently managed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in its inaugural year. It is targeted at academics and post-graduate students from universities and affiliated research institutes, practitioners from VWOs, and policy-makers on family issues in Singapore. This is the second in the series and deals with the theme “empowering vulnerable families”. The closed-door forum offered four presentations centring on this theme.

In the first presentation, Miss Denise Low, Deputy Director (Social Assistance), ComCare and Social Support Division, Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports (MCYS) provided the official definition of vulnerable families and the four key principles Singapore’s social safety net was built on. She highlighted three specific policy challenges as a result of these parameters. Specifically, the need to strike a balance between assistance and not entrenching the entitlement mentality among recipients; maintaining a sustainable social service system while remaining a caring society; and creating an efficient delivery system that incorporated the “many helping hands” (MHH) approach.

To overcome the first challenge, programmes were designed that required recipients to fulfil conditions linked with the assistance rendered. For example, the Work Support programme provided short-term assistance on condition that recipients had to actively seek re-employment. The ComCare suite of programmes (ComCare SelfReliance, ComCare Grow, and ComCare Enable) and its delivery system (ComCare Local Networks, ComCare Database, and ComCare Call) were offered as an example with regard to how assistance programmes could remain self-sustainable while keeping with the MHH approach.

Mrs Khoo Soo Fern, Deputy General Manager (Social Assistance), Southeast Community Development Council (SE CDC) attributed the development of the social assistance sector to the availability of feedback mechanisms like the ComCare Local Network. Mrs Khoo provided a case study each with regard to the three categories of vulnerable families that came to the CDC for assistance. Mrs Khoo agreed that the CDCs were in a better position to respond to social assistance requests from the ground. However, she also pointed out that they were proactive in making available to these families preventive and educational information on coping. The other roles played by the CDC include fostering social cohesion and connecting with the community in general.

In order to better serve their clients when carrying out their social assistance role, the CDC had developed a case management framework SE CDC Social Services Assistance Methodology (SESAME) for which an overview was provided. It was created based on an in-house study on 150 of its own social assistance cases. The study identified seven contributing factors preventing families from becoming self-reliant. These include: financial,

health, children/elderly, employment, support, food, and shelter. In many instances, it was observed that once the primary factors were identified and dealt with, this would have a domino effect on the other factors that would lead to the collapsing of barriers and allowing families to achieve self-reliance.

In the third presentation Ms Angela Yak, Assistant Director, Service Development Division, National Council of Social Services (NCSS) offered the audience an overview of the social services programme management system Outcome Management (OM), which was adapted from United Way in the United States. The system is a results-based programme improvement tool that uses the financial independence of clients as an indicator of success of a programme. Clients here refer to the direct beneficiary of the VWO programmes. The system is not only able to determine how many persons were helped, but it is able to evaluate how their lives have improved on completing the programme. It provides programme administrators with the ability to reassess and re-scope the programme should the need arise. While the system offers a lot of promise, it has its critiques. However, Ms Yak argued that many of the issues raised could be addressed with training and dialogue sessions that seek to clarify misconceptions and disseminate information.

In the final presentation Prof Stella Quah, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore touched upon the main components of the family conflict process, the two high priority areas of family conflict and family policy research and ethics. She noted that family conflict generally arose as a result of stress. However, the family's ability to recover from stress was dependent on the type of stress and the type of community responses available. She also identified the two priority areas of family conflict namely "the needs of the dual-income couples" and "families under stress".

For families experiencing conflict, she recommended a total family approach. Thus, when family conflict occurs, attention should not be placed only on the individuals concerned but should encompass all in the family. Further, support services should integrate family units and assist them to be self-sufficient. The assistance rendered should span the duration until the problems were resolved. The confidentiality of clients and affordability of services are paramount. Ideological, religious or political affiliation should not be a pre-requisite for services offered by VWOs as such affiliations may deter or discriminate some groups from seeking help from these organisations.

Several pertinent points with regard to family policy research and research ethics were addressed by Prof Quah. She pointed out that all research should provide clear verification of the validity and reliability of measurement indicators. In evidence-based policy research, the sample population must be representative of the target population and speculation based on the results generated should be avoided. The research methodology should be tailored to the population and topic studied. It must not be based on the popularity or convenience of carrying out a particular methodology over another. Lastly, every study proposed involving human subjects must undergo an ethics review and funding should be allocated only to studies upon approval by the ethics review board or committee. More importantly, participants in these studies should be treated with dignity and respect.

The resultant "question and answer" sessions addressed several key issues. The issues addressed included the allocation of funds to assist vulnerable families; measures to improve on inter-agency collaborations when assisting these families; ensuring

confidentiality with regard to electronic case management systems and research practices; and the extent to which OM was embraced and adopted by VWOs.

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Notes taken by Kang Soon Hock, IPS Research Fellow and Chua Chun Ser, IPS Research Assistant.

