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Roundtable on Reimagining the Social Service Sector

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"The history of the social services is the story of the recognition of social needs and the organization of society to meet them" (Bradshaw, 1972).

The roundtable on "Reimagining the Social Service Sector", held on 28 November 2016, convened senior management of charities, practitioners as well as policymakers to discuss the potential assets of the social service sector; how it is organised to meet social needs in Singapore; and how to evaluate its impact. The presentations were based on three papers produced by the IPS Society and Identity research cluster, where discussants were invited to share their views on the findings.

Presentation 1: Reimagining the Social Services

In his first presentation, "Reimagining the Social Services", Dr Justin Lee, IPS Research Fellow and moderator of the roundtable, looked at the diverse community assets that play a

role in the social services. Beyond voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs), he highlighted the slew of other assets that potentially benefit the social sector. These assets engage in direct provision of alternative interventions (e.g., through community arts instead of counselling; credit cooperatives instead of financial assistance) or perform complementary functions (e.g., research and consultancy; training and capability building; evaluation, etc.). He also pointed to the multitude of unincorporated groups and networks that have emerged to target a specific social cause or help a vulnerable group. Dr Lee argued that these diverse assets and under-the-radar groups already contribute in important ways and can play even more significant roles if existing players know who they are, what they do, and how to engage them.

Beyond the types of assets, there is also a question of what social causes, whose issues and types of needs are considered relevant, and how they should be prioritised. The social service sector in Singapore tends to serve the "basic needs" of the "vulnerable" and "disadvantaged". In Singapore, these "vulnerable groups" are often defined as the elderly, people with disabilities and mental health issues, neglected or abused children, youth at risk, and various forms of vulnerable families. Dr Lee argued that the causes and groups that are not included should become an important matter for consideration and public deliberation. What qualifies for support or funding is not a straightforward issue. For example, recreational activities for people with disabilities are typically considered to be "social services" because they contribute to social integration, but not recreational activities for youth in general (now under the purview of the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth/ National Youth Council). There is also the question of whether "active agers" should be served by this sector, since this segment could comprise middle class retirees who are financially independent and healthy.

The paper also examined the various approaches used to meet social needs and questioned whether VWOs should engage more seriously in community development or policy advocacy. The social service sector in Singapore has typically focused on interventions at an individual level, and has taken on the role of service providers instead of community development agencies. This has important implications for social work as a profession. Burnout of front-line social workers stems from the wielding of individual-level tools (e.g., casework and counselling) to solve structural problems (e.g., poverty, structural inequality). The solution devised to address this — the creation of sabbaticals, burn-out coping workshops, and mentorships — merely help the social worker cope with, but not resolve those structural problems.

Dr Lee argued that structural problems require structural solutions. Barring policy advocacy, community development is something that is at least within the control of social workers on the frontlines. Dr Lee suggested VWOs can play a larger role in this area because there may be a resurgence of interest in community development with the growth of more active citizenry. In fact, co-ops and Mutual Benefit Organisations (membership-based entities which provide relief on a mutual help basis to meet members' funeral expenses) are already communal solutions that seek to solve the collective problems of their members.

In terms of relationships, Dr Lee attempted to explore potentially useful ways of collaboration and how to facilitate productive interactions between diverse community assets. He argued that horizontal relations between VWOs to a wide diversity of asset classes matter. As Ronald Burt, the pioneer of network analysis puts it, "It's not how many people you know, it's how many kinds." Innovation in the social services requires connections to other types of groups and asset classes. It is consequently important to consider how the existing regulatory environment can facilitate or stifle the growth of these assets and activities. Because technology has enabled groupings without the need for formal management, it is now possible to facilitate wide open collaborations amongst different agencies and the public at large to better understand social needs without anyone being in charge

Presentation 2: Comparing Councils of Social Service

The second presentation examined the appropriate structure and function of charity associations that are relevant to the social service sector. Using case studies of equivalent councils of social service in Hong Kong, Australia, the UK and the US, the paper provided broad characterisations of the divergence in the governance structures, membership criteria, organisational functions, and scope of interest between different councils of social services. Dr Lee discussed how these councils differed in terms of governance, membership criteria, fundraising methods, resource allocation policies, and their advocacy approach.

In terms of governance, various case studies show that while voluntary councils typically have autonomy from the state while statutory councils like those in Hong Kong and Singapore have control over its member organisations. This raises questions of whether an

independent voluntary council can better serve the VWOs because they are more responsive and representative of their needs?

With regard to membership criteria, Dr Lee highlighted the trade-offs between having inclusive criteria that allows non-VWOs such as government departments, businesses and even individuals a voice and a vote versus more focused ones that only include only direct social service providers. In some of the councils that were examined, a more inclusive membership eligibility criterion and rights and rules of association can empower a wider diversity of actors to help contribute to the key policies and strategic direction of the council. In other words, the rules of association can be designed to engender deeper participatory governance. However, overly broad criteria can also dilute membership value, and there could also be interpretative problems with the eligibility criteria. For example, if "social enterprises" are to be included, there might be disputes on what kinds of for-profit companies and what they would have to do to qualify as a social enterprise.

Dr Lee proceeded to discuss the dilemmas created by federated fundraisers such as the Community Chest. One rationale for federated fundraising is that if a single fundraising organisation conducts fundraising drives and distribute the proceeds to local charities, those charities can forgo their own individual drives and focus on service delivery instead. However, the advent of federated financing also created the necessity of a method of determining criteria and standards on which to distribute the federated fund. Complex and important questions for social and community welfare planning need to be more carefully deliberated: Who gets what? Who gets to decide, and how is it decided? Should donors be empowered to invest as they wish, or should there be a "rational" system of needs assessment?

In terms of the advocacy approach of the councils, Dr Lee highlighted that some have favoured a "charity model" that focuses on the provision of material benefits to the poor for reasons of compassion and altruism. This paradigm was rarely accompanied by any analysis or criticism of the broader social conditions and structures that cause poverty, inequality and injustice. However, the Australian Council of Social Services, for instance, had made a shift from the charity model to a "social justice" model, which aims to improve the conditions of the poor via addressing the broader macro causes of poverty and inequality rather than only on the micro-issue of social security. These councils have also paid attention to international developments because of this concern with social justice. The National Council of Social Service (NCSS) arguably still operates on a "charity model" instead of a "social justice" one. The issues it focuses on are categorised by needs of key client groups — the elderly, vulnerable families, children and youth, and disability, instead of broader structural issues such as poverty, discrimination and human rights.

Presentation 3: Evaluating the Impact of the Social Service Sector

The third presentation gave an overview of the technical and moral aspects of evaluation, to deepen the dialogue on how performance management and evaluations should be done in the social service sector. It also explored who should conduct such evaluations so that they support learning as well as public accountability.

After laying out the basic technical aspects of evaluation, Dr Lee argued that only by spelling out an underlying causal model could one determine whether the aspirations are achievable. Evaluators have long acknowledged the importance of articulating the theories that spell out what sequence of changes they expect to see, and how specific programme activities can contribute to the desired change. When a programme is based on an unsound model, they are unlikely to bring about the intended outcomes, no matter how well they have been implemented. Therefore, it is critical to get this foundational set of assumptions right.

Dr Lee added that the theoretical assumptions underlying a programme is often neither made explicit nor tested in a particularly robust way. He suggested that there is an eagerness to jump to measurement. He noted that there are many existing efforts at constructing overarching indicators, but they such measures are like taking the "pulse": it gives a sense of how well the target population is doing, but cannot by itself provide the full diagnostic assessment of what has contributed to its well-being, or lack thereof. Measuring "quality of life", for instance, will give a pulse reading — for instance, perhaps seniors fare less well "emotionally", compared to single parents or ex-offenders — but it will not be able to diagnose the cause of those gaps. However, only when the programme model is well articulated can we then determine what kinds of measurements or indicators will be meaningful to use.

He further discussed the moral aspects of evaluation. A programme is a "means" to achieving certain "ends", and the task of evaluation is to rationally determine the extent to which a programme achieves its goals through systematic data collection and analysis. Focusing on the "means" makes it open to critical examination through logical deliberation and empirical testing. However, the "ends" — values and goals of the programme — are often regarded to be the realm of morality or politics, and therefore outside the purview of the evaluator. Many evaluators prefer to adopt the values, goals and criteria articulated by a programme's stakeholders so that they can themselves take on a value-neutral position that has been the hallmark and aspiration of "objective" social science.

However, Dr Lee argued that avoiding such value-based decisions are untenable because the differences will surface as tensions and conflicts during programme implementation. This resistance to clarification, while it may avoid some conflicts and other difficulties, can contribute to uncoordinated and dysfunctional programme behaviour. For example, employment services for people with disabilities are typically evaluated in terms of the number of clients they place. However, these very sensible values of efficiency and effectiveness do not take into account other values that matter — whether clients had *knowledge* about their options and could *autonomously* decide what jobs they prefer. If number of jobs placed matter, then service providers may just place clients in low paying jobs where the entry barriers are lowest. Therefore it is important to consider systematically "how these different value positions would affect evaluative conclusions and subsequent policy choices." Rather than appearing to effectively adopt a stance of value neutrality, it is much better to make explicit and transparent such value commitments.

Question-and-answer session

Dr Lee moderated the Q&A sessions, where discussants and participants of the event highlighted some concerns and thoughts. The key themes that emerged during the session were:

"Needs-picking" and funding logic

Across all three working paper topics, a common sentiment was expressed by the participants — a deep-rooted concern about funding logic. One participant voiced her views on progressive planning and the prioritisation of certain needs over others. She believed that expanding the list of needs catered is important as there are several marginalised groups such as migrant workers or the LGBT community that might miss out on receiving adequate service provision as they are excluded on the current lists made by government bodies such as NCSS. However, limited funding creates a situation of "needs-picking".

Another participant stated that the onus lies on individuals or VWOs to push for a particular marginalised group's needs to be addressed through coming up with a detailed, polished pilot project. Trying to secure funding external to NCSS's fund provision for needs excluded by NCSS should be an individual's venture and one should not abandon their cause for the sole reason that it does not fit the funding criteria.

Dr Lee asked participants if they felt the decentralisation of the funding process would reduce the competition for funds and diversify the range of needs included. A participant said that a greater collaboration between organisations in the social service sector, including potential donors or funders, would mean a diversification of the channels through which

funding can be obtained. Through this greater collaboration, competition for funding would decline.

One participant addressed the possibility that this competitive nature when it comes to procuring funding, stems from meritocratic ideals and the *kiasu* mindset Singaporeans have been ingrained with since young. Dr Lee added that the high rates of competition were the result of structural concerns, where the strength of the vertical relationships (of VWO to NCSS or MSF) could potentially stifle the development of meaningful horizontal relationships (VWO to VWO).

Centralisation tendencies

The centralisation tendency of the social service sector was also discussed at length. One participant raised the possibility that centralisation crowds out innovation — that the current accountability structures create power differentials and a lack of understanding between funders and the ground. The nature of funding and accountability makes it harder to collaborate and innovate on the ground, especially since organisations could be competing for the same pool of resources. Others, however, disagreed that there was competition, but felt that it was purely a matter of bandwidth – that organisations are only able to do the things that they are funded for. Innovation is not accounted as part of the funding matrix and hence organisations have little incentive to do so.

Another participant raised a point that because it is necessary for services (e.g. Institutes of Public Character) to be secular, certain client profiles might not get the religious-sensitive services that they need. The fact they might not obtain optimum comfort in service delivery is not fully considered. In response, another participant suggested that if the decision-making process was not centralised, faith-based organisations might be accorded greater power to proselytise, which might be a threat to religious harmony.

Centralisation also entails tedious processes of data collection and evaluation as a result of standardised Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) introduced across the sector to objectively measure success and routes of future funding. Such rigorous KPIs might increase the burden experienced by social workers.

Another disadvantage of centralisation, as raised by both Dr Lee and a handful of participants, includes the reduced responsiveness of centralised bureaucracies. This might adversely impact marginalised groups, when pressing issues encountered in their everyday lives are not being addressed with a sense of urgency. Dr Lee believed that VWOs are more responsive to needs on the ground and should be better tapped to understand emerging needs.

Vertical and Horizontal Relationships

A common sentiment among the participants was that it is important to clarify the role of NCSS. A participant suggested that he was unsure of the role of NCSS and felt that the intermediary role between government and VWOs is now lacking. Another participant suggested that with the many agencies serving competing functions, sometimes VWOs do not know who to approach.

The need to improve relationships between private sectors and VWOs was echoed by participants as well, with one participant suggesting the possibility of a tripartite relationship between VWOs, corporations and the government. They added that governmental presence might legitimise the promises made by corporations to VWOs. Another participant added that corporations are eager to improve relationships with VWOs as they are interested in advocacy work and possess a desire to "wake the slow process of bureaucracy".

Amidst the discussion of what the role of the council of social services should entail, a participant suggested it might be a little too late to broach the topic. The organisational logic and bureaucratic inertia will make government bodies difficult or impossible to change. She suggested that we instead focus on greater collaboration and to attempt to step out of conventional lines. The government, or NCSS, may not completely comprehend all the issues and needs, and this is where smaller organisations can step in to fill knowledge gaps, provide established information and to propel their causes further.

Increasing public participation

To Dr Lee's point on how deduction of payrolls for charity is potentially problematic and generates disconnect between the donor and cause, several participants concurred and stated that corporations these days feel increasingly alienated from the cause because they are only solicited for monetary donations. However, there exists a budding group of philanthropists that are passionate about advocacy even within these corporations.

In addition, many expressed that the social service sector should emphasise community development and engagement, and that it is important to encourage active, on-ground participation from citizens. It is important for VWOs to reach out to residents, inform them on current schemes and programmes, and retrieve feedback or generate new ideas from them. Many expressed the need to build better relationships between charities and government, as well as among VWOs themselves.

Evaluation

A poignant point raised by several participants pertained to the limitations of external evaluators, as observed through inaccurate data interpretation, a lack of knowledge of the programme and a seeming lack of trust between evaluators and practitioners. However, getting internal staff to conduct evaluation is not without its issues. Having the evaluations done internally would mean that the practitioners have a much clearer understanding of programmes, but developing the expertise internally takes time and resources. Further, funders might feel that internal evaluations might be biased.

Another participant expressed that this dilemma could be resolved if there were more academics who would either specialise in the evaluation of social service programmes, or have more practitioners who have some form of academic training. This could possibly include researchers from social work departments in institutes of higher learning (IHL). Such academics are invaluable as they would both simultaneously be an external body and possess expertise knowledge on various segments across the social work realm. Another participant, who works at an IHL, expressed that while she plans to increase collaboration between these academics and social service organisations, the lack of funding poses a threat to the blossoming of future collaborations.

When questioned about the crafting of evaluative criteria and values, one participant questioned the feasibility of having diverse interpretations of values and measurements. Subjectivity of value judgments may prove challenging, and including the voices of all the stakeholders (including beneficiaries) could potentially drown out proper measurement techniques and expert knowledge.

The overall consensus generated from the session was that a shift towards greater collaboration and information sharing would be desirable. The session concluded with Dr Lee welcoming organisations to step forward to participate in an open-collaboration for needs assessment in the social sector.

REFERENCES

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