

Don't dismiss civil society's contributions

Constance Singam

The Straits Times, 23 November 2013

At the recent Institute of Policy Studies' conference on civil society, Law Minister K. Shanmugam seemed to imply that civil society activism should focus on welfare and service provision ("S'pore more 'welfarist' than other nations: Shanmugam"; Nov 12).

This has been the Government's position since independence and the changes in society - more educated, more participatory citizenry - do not seem to have influenced the Government to take its citizens more seriously in their desire for more participation in the policymaking process.

For even as it promotes new outlets for public debate, such as the "national conversation", the Government continues to define the limits of civil society activities.

The World Bank defines civil society as a variety of "non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations". These include:

- Raising awareness of societal issues and challenges and advocating for change;
- Delivering services to meet societal needs such as health, education, food and security;
- Bringing knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy, and identifying and building solutions;
- Providing education, training and other capacity building;
- Giving power to the voice of the marginalised or under-represented;
- Encouraging citizen engagement and supporting the rights of citizens; and
- Promoting fundamental and universal values.

The Government cannot deny the significant contributions made by organisations such as the Association of Women for Action and Research, Caritas, the Association of Muslim Professionals, Maruah and the Nature Society (Singapore).

Their work has raised the level of public debate on issues of concern to our society, empowered citizens to act on their own behalf and enabled the Government to be more responsive to the needs of our country.

Mr Shanmugam is right - "Singapore cannot be governed without the active participation of people and civil society". Thus, the Government should not be dismissive of civil society's contributions.

Constance Singam (Mrs)