

## The rise of S'pore's civil society

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It was unexpectedly fruitful. During the process of creating the nature poetry anthology *From Walden to Woodlands* —which I co-edited with Mr Muzakkir Samat — we found that our project fortuitously brought together members of civil society from three disparate areas: Environmentalism, inter-religious harmony and local literature.

Even on the day of our book launch in September 2015, we were thrilled that friends from the environmentalist and interfaith movements were having some of the most enriching conversations with the poets we knew.

It was especially apt that, for quite a number of poets attending our launch (which was held at the Harmony Centre @ An-Nahdhah), it was the first time they had ever stepped into a mosque. It was also a revelation to some of the nature advocates that their environmental concerns could be promoted through the medium of poetry.

The fascinating exchange of ideas and all the follow-up activities that developed from our project served to illustrate just how promising and rewarding such collaborative, multi-sector ventures could be.

I hope that our project will not be the last initiative of its kind. Rather, one key trend that could well be Singapore's Next Big Thing is the flourishing of strong and effective coalitions of civil-society organisations, which in turn have the potential to influence Singapore's socio-political landscape.

In the tradition of nature poetry, I feel obliged to use a botanical metaphor: The efforts of today's civil-society activists are sowing seeds for future bottom-up initiatives to take root, allowing for effective and creative collaborations to come to fruition. The resultant saplings of civil-society organisations are thus not just growing upwards (towards some overhanging canopy of authority), but branching outwards (forging an interconnected network with one another).

In effect, the dynamics between civil-society groups have evolved. As Dr Gillian Koh and Ms Debbie Soon from the Institute of Policy Studies argued in a 2012 paper, the traditionally vertical relationship between civil society and the state in Singapore (with activists mounting advocacy towards the Government) has shifted to an increasingly horizontal (that is, peer-to-peer) relationship developing between groups on a wide variety of issues. Such a horizontal relationship has strengthened, especially when groups are united by common interests.

For example, when Resorts World Sentosa declared its intention to import whale sharks into Singapore in 2008, the Animal Concerns Research & Education Society formed an alliance with six other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to launch an online petition.

With the combined efforts of all these groups, reinforced by feedback from members of the public, the plan to exhibit whale sharks was abandoned in 2009. Such victories may appear to be of minor significance, but they reveal the power of collaboration among civil-society groups in shaping discourse and influencing decision-making.

What is also heartening is that many of these NGOs look set to enjoy improved conditions for growth, given that the state has become less resistant towards the viewpoints of civil society. The Land Transport Authority, for instance, did make the effort to approach green groups for their views when planning to construct the Cross Island Line across parts of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.

The Ministry of National Development also accepted all 24 recommendations by the Animal Welfare Legislation Review Committee to strengthen legislation on animal welfare. Instead of clamping down on alternative voices, the government has demonstrated an increased willingness to engage in dialogue with civil-society groups.

It might be pointed out that some civil-society groups are more contentious than others, and the real test lies in whether groups championing sensitive causes will be able to defend their interests.

Certainly, there is a whole range of causes on the spectrum of political sensitivity: For instance, interracial and interreligious harmony at one end (strongly supported by the Government, even in terms of funding), human rights and legal/political reform at the other end (often viewed with suspicion for being supposedly adversarial towards the state). Others, such as environmental protection, are somewhere around the middle. Yet, even groups promoting controversial causes have made significant progress in recent years.

In 2015, five civil-society groups even went to Geneva in Switzerland to address representatives of United Nations (UN) member states on human rights in Singapore — a notable increase in representation compared with that in 2011, when only two NGOs (Maruah and Think Centre) went to Geneva.

The five groups' causes included hot-button issues such as migrant workers' rights, gender equality, income inequality, the death penalty and LGBT rights. Such collaboration indicates growing solidarity among civil-society groups, and a greater ability to speak out even on international platforms.

How, then, can civil society shape Singapore's future more effectively?

Commitment, PASSION AND VISION

Leadership will be key. Just as gardeners are crucial to ensuring that saplings mature and bear fruit, civil-society leaders are also critical in running their organisations in accordance with the best practices and highest management standards.

In a 2014 commentary in TODAY, then Singapore Environment Council chief Jose Raymond emphasised the importance of building the leadership capabilities of civil society, suggesting strategies such as seeking corporate mentorship or undertaking relevant master's degree programmes.

I would argue, however, that having a corporate mentor or a master's degree does not in itself confer the skills and attributes required for effective and sustainable leadership.

Instead, it is ultimately the leaders' own commitment, passion and vision that determine the direction and strength of their organisations. Programmes such as those by the Centre for

Non-Profit Leadership can serve an advisory role, aiding NGO leaders in specific areas such as talent management, youth empowerment, leadership succession and fund-raising.

Having passed SG50, Singapore today is at a critical juncture. The question is not merely whether we will be able to survive till SG100, but also thrive like a blooming garden.

It is not merely the public and private sectors, through their provision of power and money, respectively, that are vital in ensuring Singapore's continued success.

The people sector (that is, civil society) is also indispensable for offering ideas and networks through informed and critical discourse.

If the good work of NGOs over the past few years is anything to go by, we have reason to be hopeful and confident that civil society in Singapore will continue to blossom.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Ow Yeong Wai Kit is a teacher of English and Literature. In 2015, he co-edited *From Walden to Woodlands: An Anthology of Nature Poems*. This piece first appeared in *The Birthday Book 2016*, a book of essays by 51 different authors on Singapore's Next Big Thing. TODAY will be publishing other essays from the book in the coming weeks.