

Civil society's state of play

Much like mahjong kakis, civil society groups come to the table with different aims, a distinct voice and their own set of handicaps. But the goal is the same: To win over hearts and minds.

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The New Paper, 12 November 2013

Up to 300 activists and leaders discussed developments, trends and ideas for cultivating a vibrant civil society at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Conference on Civil Society 2013 yesterday. Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam was the guest of honour for the pow-wow held at the Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel.

Too many groups = less \$\$

Mention animal welfare and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) comes to mind.

But others have muscled in over the last few years.

Mr Ricky Yeo, president of Action for Singapore Dogs (ASD) estimated "there are at least 15 groups dedicated to (such) issues now".

Strength in numbers has diluted donations.

"Yes, there's more awareness and more animal welfare groups now. But what it also means is that there are more groups fighting for a slice of the donor pie," he said.

ASD's calendar sale, now in its ninth year, has been markedly slower, he said.

"Normally, three-quarters of calendars would be sold by this stage but we've only hit the halfway mark now."

Stereotypes hurt

Being gazette as a political association in 2010 has clipped the wings of human rights group Maruah.

It has been a struggle finding enough Singapore-based donations since then, said Maruah president Braema Mathi.

The former Nominated Member of Parliament said Maruah had zero money to show for its fundraising appeal in 2011.

She said funds are so tight she was only able to print her namecards this year, five years after the group formed.

"What surprised us was how deep-seated the aversion was when some (people) heard the term human rights," she said.

“For too long, we’ve been brought up to think it’s a bad term.”

She’s keen to do more public education but getting potential clients like schools to open doors and sign up for programmes is tough.

“We get a lot of goodwill but we can’t survive on that... The biggest sticking point is how long more can we continue to sustain ourselves?”

Break-ups, bust-ups

By the nature of their cause, civil society groups tend to draw passionate individuals with strong opinions.

When they do not see eye to eye, a hostile takeover bid can erupt, like the 2009 saga at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

Aware had previously survived the “Blueprinters” group’s opposition in the 1990s. “They had a blueprint of how a feminist organisation should run and wanted every member to attend a feminist course,” executive director Corinna Lim said. “But others disagreed and the Blueprinters (numbering four or five) eventually left.”

A splintering is inevitable when “those who have a shared purpose differ on shared values such as working with authorities”, said Singapore Management University associate law professor Eugene Tan.

But splintering can help groups raise their game, so they stay relevant.

Said Prof Tan, who is also a Nominated MP: “Those unable to find a niche, garner broad support or make a difference will eventually exit the scene or reintegrate with other groups.”

No more energy

It takes a lot of effort to sustain interest – and some online-based collectives become casualties of the daily grind.

Ms Braema Mathi cited the Singapore-based anti-hunger initiative Food for All as an example.

Formed by university students, it became well-known but has since quietened after the students started working.

A check of Facebook showed the last post was made in 2009.

“Look around and see which groups need resources,” she said.

“You don’t always have to start a new group (to get things done or) to help others.”

Strategies that work

Perhaps it's best to choose what works, rather than adopt a strident or softly-softly approach. National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "The bottom line, in my view, is not whether it should be soft or hard, but what is effective."

That means doing proper, through research and having a strong public backing.

Groups should also be willing to compromise, understand each other's perspectives, and give and take, he said.

There's room for all.

Calling the thinking that people should belong to one organisation "an old paradigm", Nominated MP Faizah Jamal said: "Singapore is small enough for everyone to know (one another) and support each other when need be, as seen in the engagement with the Land Transport Authority over the Cross Island Line."

For Aware's Ms Lim, it's important to support groups ranging from the hardcore to the mainstream, "so a range of voices can be heard and a middle voice can prevail".

Though the state of flux can be messy, it is okay.

Said Ms Braema Mathi: "We have to debate more to find the rhythm. It's like mahjong, you have to shuffle to see how it lands and (whether) it works."

Civil society pow-wow

If you want to fight the political cause, form a political party and do not take money from the Government, said Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam. He was replying to IPS adjunct senior research fellow Cherian George's query on whether more can be done to remove the fundraising barriers that civil society groups face, when some "were shackled by the Political Donations Act".

Mr Shanmugam said that the Government's job is to work with the entire society through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and such associations.

Just as it would not be right "for me to select you if your primary purpose is to advocate my political causes publicly", it would also not be right to support someone whose primary purpose is to work with those in the shadows to run down the Government, he said.

"You want to do that, form a political party, don't take money from the Government. Fight the political cause. Don't play puppet theatre."

The minister also said the Government is keen to tap on civil society groups' idealism and enthusiasm and work with them.