

Transforming the Non-Profit Sector: Opening Seminar Outlines Functions and Challenges of Research for the Sector

By Ruby Thiagarajan

“Impact measurement can be a means to help our sector better understand what works. We want to continually ask ourselves how we can do better for our clients. How do we know if the current solutions offered to our clients are the best solutions to help them? It is not possible to answer this question unless we embark on a journey to measure the outcomes of our programme and the larger overall impact. This is part and parcel of fostering a culture of continuous improvement and learning within the organisation and the sector.”

- Mr Fong Yong Kian, Chief Executive of Tote Board

On 6 May 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) Policy Lab and Tote Board kick-started a year-long series of seminars and learning journeys as part of the Transforming the Non-Profit Sector (TNPS) project. This series will culminate in October 2021 in a flagship conference on “Using Research and Evidence for Social Impact”.

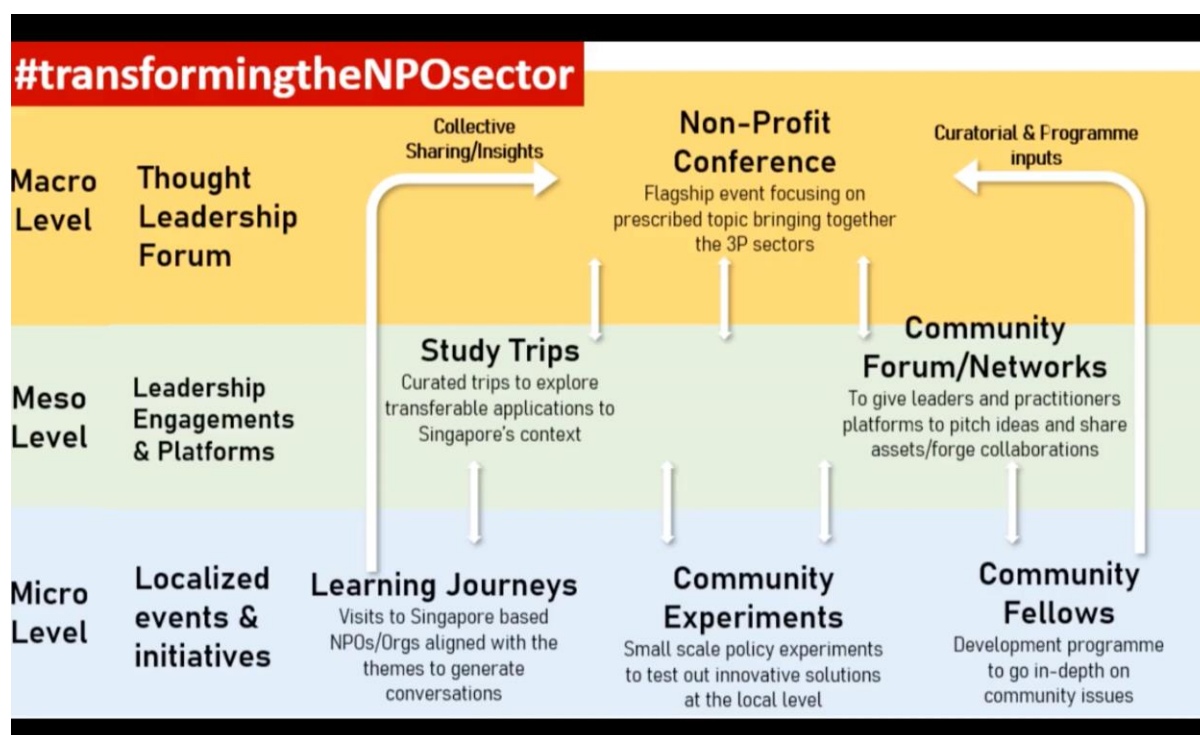
The opening seminar was held virtually, in keeping with the Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) in Singapore. It saw over 150 invited participants from the non-profit and public sectors discuss the existing and potential uses of research and evidence in their work.

Introducing Transforming the Non-Profit Sector

In his welcome address, Mr Fong Yong Kian, Chief Executive of Tote Board, underscored the importance of future proofing the non-profit sector, especially given the turbulent circumstances of COVID-19. The TNPS conference theme for 2021, “Using Research and Evidence for Social Impact”, aims to help the sector understand which solutions already work and why.

Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow at IPS, gave a briefing on the current landscape of research and evaluation in the non-profit sector. This was followed by breakout sessions that were divided into four key groups — grant makers, service providers, associations, and social

enterprises. These breakout sessions featured parallel conversations that allowed participants to discuss issues relevant to their work in more specificity. The meeting then reconvened to allow participants from the different groups to share their discussion points and findings.



Caption for photo: A diagram detailing the different initiatives under the Transforming the Non-Profit Sector umbrella, from Mr Fong Yong Kian's opening address.

Laying the Groundwork

In order to frame the discussion for the “collective learning journey”, Dr Justin Lee gave an introductory presentation on the theme of research and evidence. The presentation focused on three main components:

1. Defining Research and Evidence
2. Challenges in Creating and Using Evidence for the Non-Profit Sector
3. Action Steps

Defining Research

Dr Lee spoke about the different types of research, beyond just the research carried out in university departments by academics. While there is a common belief that good research is governed by scientific rigour, this has been disputed within the research community to allow for a more expansive view of research. This might include forms of research that are ad-hoc or creative. Research is part of an “evidence-production ecosystem” which is made up of different players — those who produce and those who consume research. There is a constant negotiation of power and resources between these players as they might have differing goals.

In the breakout sessions, various key groups within the non-profit sector spoke about their differing approaches towards research utilisation.

Meanwhile, participants in the grant-makers group raised the importance of research in giving them an overview of the sector. Given that funds are limited and social causes are plenty, research can help grant-makers make informed decisions about what to invest in.

Those in the remaining breakout groups — service providers, social enterprises, and associations — arrived at a different but shared conclusion. Research allows them to produce evidence that their work has value and demonstrable impact. It also allows them to monitor the progress of programmes and initiatives and to intervene at relevant junctures. However, a common worry was that there might be a gap between optimal research findings for funders and for non-profit groups delivering the services. A participant in the social enterprise group mentioned that, in their experience, funders tended to prefer quantitative data. However, a focus on quantitative data tends to obscure nuances in evaluation and forces a neoliberal perspective on programmes. Participants agreed that a paradigm shift in measuring social impact was welcome and might lead to a more holistic approach to programme evaluation.

This question was also addressed separately in the grant-makers group, with participants asking one another how qualitative aspects of analyses would factor into their investment decisions. There was an understanding that qualitative data could provide better insights into the effectiveness of grants, but that there were still questions over what was meaningful to collect during the research process.

Challenges to Conducting Research

A common thread that came up in the discussions was that research is expensive, time-consuming, and may take a while to produce results. Many social work practitioners shared that they had been working on the ground for many years. They freely shared observations from their rich ground experiences gained from working with the communities that they serve. Many participants recognised the need to conduct research and have research findings guide interventions and solutions on the ground. Some pointed out the competing demands on a limited pool of funds and resources as challenges for social service agencies, which do not have dedicated funding sources ring-fenced for research purposes. Some participants felt that over-reliance on quantitative research neglected qualitative findings that could provide a more holistic evaluation of a programme's effectiveness in addressing a gap.

Executives in associations highlighted the practical considerations in getting their practitioners to conduct programme evaluation; some practitioners were concerned about losing funding if the outcomes were not satisfactory to the funders. This was also a sentiment echoed by participants in the social enterprise breakout group. In some participants' experiences, funders' required key performance indicators tended to be too general to accurately capture programme outcomes. This mismatch runs the risk of research that satisfies funders but does not provide meaningful data on how programmes can improve to be more effective.

Another area of discussion centred on finding researchers capable of supporting the non-profit sector's work. Participants from smaller organisations with limited resources shared that

limited funding constrains their ability to train researchers and build research and evaluation techniques. Questions were raised about how membership organisations could support research; whether more funding should be given to individual groups to improve their capabilities or whether funding could be provided to develop a body of knowledge for the sector.

Some social service agencies expressed interest in collaborating with research institutes but shared that it had been difficult to find partners and to compete for limited research grants. Social service agencies with limited resources also have to understand how they can work with institutes of higher learning that may involve clearing research scope with the institutional review board's ethics review. This discussion prompted many participants to raise clarifying questions about the definitions and types of research, such as whether implementation science or practice research instead of pure academic research makes more sense for practitioners.

Right-Sizing Research

Many participants concurred that it was important to ask the right research questions to address their issues of concern. Getting the research questions right at the start ensured that the type of and granularity of data collected are appropriate for the research questions. Some practitioners shared how there were times when they realised the data that they had collected was not helpful for their research only after going through the long processes of designing and conducting surveys and collecting a lot of data.

Grant-makers also raised the importance of calibrating expectations for each research project. When organisations are innovating, rigorous evaluation may not be necessary. Instead, research goals could be better served by simple indicators, with an eye on the desired social impact outcome or big picture.

Some participants highlighted the need for more creative approaches to research and to select the right methodology for the right project. For example, research on arts therapy for degenerative disease is underdeveloped in Singapore because they are excluded from dominant understandings about therapy. Participants acknowledged that there is interesting research done by various non-profit organisations, such as the work of ground-up arts organisations, but these may not be known to other organisations in the non-profit sector.

Conclusion

In wrapping up the discussions for the seminar, Dr Lee thanked participants for their time and shared that the points raised during this seminar would be used to frame the focus of subsequent TNPS events. These will be held from July to October 2021.

Ruby Thiagarajan is a Research Assistant at IPS.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2021 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes but please cite the source when doing so.