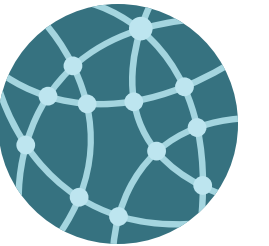




# Innovation in Social Services

## Dear Social Service Practitioners,

We live in an unpredictable world with a volatile economy as well as shifting social demographics, trends and cultural practices. In Singapore, some trends we see are an ageing population, a greater number of blended families and the rise of the “gig economy”. All these changes have an impact on the focus and effectiveness of our social policies, programmes and interventions. Innovation is therefore key to ensure we remain relevant and impactful in protecting and enhancing the wellbeing of those we serve.



## What is Innovation?



Innovation may seem like a big word and a tall order. However, it is less about conjuring up that “big idea”, but more about having a spirit of curiosity and creativity, taking the initiative to question the status quo, thinking out of the box and building upon or enhancing existing ideas. Simply put, innovation is a new way of doing things. Innovation can even come about through re-arranging processes and the smart application of technologies to meet unarticulated needs.

## Where Innovation Comes From

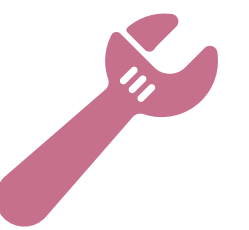
Innovation comes from the spirit of seeking opportunity in the face of challenges and adversity.

This was the spirit of our founding fathers when we came out of colonial rule in the early years of Singapore’s independence. We faced many challenges such as racial tensions, high unemployment and housing shortages. It seemed almost “impossible” then to survive as a nation. Yet the pioneer generation looked beyond those limitations, worked with the strengths within them and within the nation and turned the constraints and adversities into opportunities to build the Singapore we know today.




For example, the early government tackled the challenge of insufficient housing and the lack of rootedness of the people by introducing the Home Ownership for the People Scheme. This scheme helped foster a sense of loyalty and commitment in Singapore by giving a largely migrant population a stake in the country.

One way we can seek opportunity in the face of adversity is to look not only at what we lack, but at what we have and create solutions from them. SkillsFuture, for example, is a national movement that builds upon what we have - our human capital - to be ready for the challenges of the future. It aims to equip Singaporeans with new and deeper skills that will help them continue to perform their jobs well even as the nature of work evolves. It also cultivates a spirit of lifelong learning among our citizens. With upgrading of skills and redesigning of jobs, we can ensure that our people have the means to maintain employment and financial stability amidst an ever changing environment.



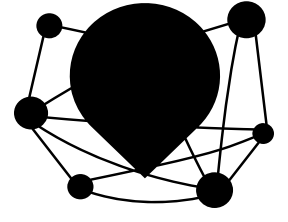
In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, we know that the social issues that we face are not just complicated, but increasingly complex. When things are complicated, we know how to fix them – they just require more time, effort and good know how. Complex issues, however, are not so easy to resolve and usually require a collective effort, a lot of creativity and an innovative mindset. As such, tackling the problems of the future calls us to have a mindset shift not to be defeated by adversity but to keep seeing every challenge as an opportunity to innovate.

Innovation comes from knowing the people – by seeing things from their perspective. 

As policy makers and programme designers both in government and non-government settings, it is important to know what goes on in our communities. At times, we may attempt to solve problems by applying our own approaches. However, knowing our people helps to broaden our perspective and to ensure that we adopt a more user-centric lens in designing our policies or programmes. Knowing our people does not mean that we cater to their every want, but it means that we ensure that our policies, programmes and services are designed in such a way that is able to meet a need or close a gap.

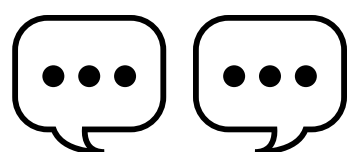


This is what we aspire towards in our Social Service Offices (SSOs). From 2013 to 2015, we set up a network of 24 SSOs across Singapore, to provide more accessible and coordinated social assistance to Singaporeans in need. Our starting point was the client, which is why SSOs were intentionally situated close to major transport nodes and residents. Today, 95% of SSO beneficiaries live or work within 2 kilometres of an SSO. We also applied a design thinking approach in shaping the physical layout of SSOs.



But “knowing the ground” goes beyond tracing people’s physical journeys. It is also important to understand their needs, pain points and psyches. That is why alongside providing financial assistance, the SSOs also get to know their communities well through community profiling as well as numerous engagements with residents and community partners. This was how we realised that families with certain complex needs were often receiving piecemeal help, having to approach multiple agencies for help and recounting their circumstances and challenges several times. Such experiences could be demoralising and could diminish their will to follow through with their action plans while receiving financial assistance.

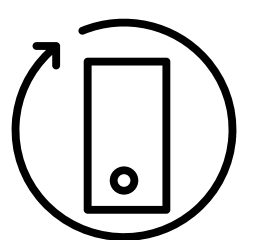
This thus led to the piloting of two “Integrated SSOs”, where clients receive assistance in three areas of need that we found overlap very frequently – finances, employment, and family services – all at a single touchpoint. Besides simplifying the client journey, such service integration also simplifies the service provider journey, as it allows for a more holistic assessment of the client. So rather than just creating more schemes and policies, it is also looking at how to coordinate and implement existing systems so that they become more effective.



At the Committee of Supply debates this year, MSF also introduced plans to improve social service delivery for individuals and families in need. These include the integration of service delivery through video-conferencing and the co-location of services (e.g Silver Generation Office with SSOs), and the sharing of information and assessments so that clients do not need to repeat their circumstance and to submit the same documentation multiple times when applying for help schemes or services. These are examples of incremental innovations that can be made to better our services to those in need.

Innovation comes from changing the status quo.

As I mentioned earlier, we live in an ever changing environment which means that the context in which our policies sit in do not always remain the same. Furthermore, research continue to emerge which may challenge our conventional wisdom. As such, we need to be our own skeptics and to keep asking ourselves if the current design of our policies and programmes are the best way of doing things. This often requires us to challenge the assumptions we have made because they tend to shape the quality of our solutions. When we do so, we begin to identify new and better ways of doing things which can complement our current efforts.



An example of changing the status quo is shifting the focus of the care of our vulnerable children from residential homes towards family-based care in recent years. Recognising that family-based care such as fostering is the best form of care for most children, MSF has moved to focus our resources on growing family-based care options and increasing the ratio of children in family-based care. Furthermore, riding on the advent of social media, the ministry has complemented the traditional publicity methods such as through word-of-mouth to non-traditional methods such as roadshows, radio talkshows, media publicity including social media, in order to raise public awareness on fostering and to recruit more families to open up their hearts and homes to care for vulnerable children.

Change is often uncomfortable as we are stepping into the unknown. However, as policy and programme designers, we have to be careful of the status quo bias which is a preference for things to remain the same. Instead, we should not be afraid to change the status quo when necessary, and to continue to think of new and innovative ways to improve the way we do things.

## Innovation in a Complex Environment

As we move forward, there will increasingly be no easy or fixed solutions to solve the multiple, interacting problems that we see in our cases or society. With every challenge we face, we need to take it as an opportunity to challenge the status quo, to think of new and creative solutions, to advocate for our clients and to improve our policies, programmes and systems. Being innovative is an important means of ensuring that people are served in the best way we know how, within the limitations and challenges we face today. This is something that we need to strive for whether in the government or in the community.

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