

Reflections on Social Service Practice

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

In recent months, there has been much discussion about the subject of inequality. Academics to political office holders have actively contributed to the discourse. Although there is great interest in the topic, inequality is not unique to any country – it is an issue which inevitably surfaces with the growth of an economy. As professionals committed to promoting social justice, social upliftment, and cohesion, it is crucial that we stay relevant to the ongoing discussions on inequality, and reflect on what we can do as practitioners to ensure that the vulnerable are cared for.

Ongoing Recalibration

In the early days of Singapore's independence, unemployment rates were high, the economy needed rapid development and the quality of education was relatively low. The primary aim of our policies back then was to ensure the progress of the nation and more importantly, our survival. In the pursuit of growth, we subscribed to the principle of meritocracy, and rewarded our people based on their merit. A strong emphasis was placed on education and personal responsibility, hard work and resilience. Through education and new jobs, coupled with the hard work of our people, all boats were lifted.

However, though boats were lifted, not all were lifted equally. The gap of the experiences between classes within our society has intensified over time with economic advancement. As both economic growth and social inequality are related, one way to mitigate the latter would be to consider the solutions to the problems that arise from advanced economic development, while addressing the present and more immediate issues. Inequality has an impact on the social fabric of our nation – it affects social cohesion, integration and social mobility. We should thus continue to examine the extent to which policies have contributed to such effects, and the changes that we need to make moving forward.

In the course of implementing changes, one would have to think twice before throwing the baby (our social policy system and the principles on which it is built upon) out with the bathwater. Our system has always sought to nurture the strengths of individuals, families, and communities. This is done via a combination of equipping them with resources alongside promoting a strong work ethic and self-determination, and maximising their respective potentials. Such intentions and efforts have safeguarded the well-being of both individuals and the society, and thus should continue to be embraced.

Among the discussions on inequality, there have been calls for change – for current systems and policies to emulate the qualities of a universal welfare model, as a solution to mitigate inequality. However, a good discussion on the feasibility of such change will need to consider the concrete forms which the model can assume in relation to our current context. These include the sustainability of, as well as the fiscal impact of implementing such a model. The matter of who pays, and for whom, will have to be deliberated. Our current provision which ensures state subsidy in primary healthcare, the ease of access to education, as well as housing and social intervention support has tremendously improved our society over the last three to four decades. Nevertheless, more can, and should be done so that the needs of the vulnerable are more actively met, in the complex and volatile environment that we live in today.

Along with other governmental efforts to ensure that the more vulnerable members of society are supported and included, we already see policies being recalibrated, readjustments made in implementation, a focus on the last mile of service delivery and a call for community participation. These will close up the differences resulting from social inequality.

The Important Role of Social Service Practitioners

Social service practitioners are inarguably the complements to effective social welfare policies for they implement and oversee their implementation at the local level. They play an indispensable role in our efforts to alleviate social inequality as they collaborate directly with individuals and families who are experiencing resource constraints. As active agents of social welfare policies and systems, they are crucial in providing support, empowering and journeying with vulnerable individuals and families in our society. Below, I list some roles that social workers take on in assisting and journeying with their clients through difficult circumstances.

As an Enabler in a Collaborative Partnership

Supportive partnerships are key in human services – they collectively serve as a medium through which change is facilitated. In such supportive relationships, practitioners must always bear in mind the importance of respecting the dignity and worth of each client regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances. Practitioners establish non-judgemental relationships with clients and nurture strong connections based on trust, such that they feel supported and empowered throughout the entire process.

Relationships are developed and strengthened gradually, through constant follow-ups and reconnections with clients instead of one-off meetings. Such client-worker relationships are collaborative partnerships, through which the decision-making process, actions, responsibilities and information are shared between the practitioners and the client. Clients are better able to provide information with regards to their circumstances, and/or that of their families, while practitioners are “experts” in their respective disciplines. The two should always try to sync up to formulate practical action plans, which can generate better results, than if each party were to work and plan independently.

As a Leader, Communicator and Change Agent

The collaborative partnership that is mentioned above is necessary, but not sufficient in itself to ensure change. This is because commitment, on the part of families and individuals to the pre-agreed plans that have been drawn up together with their practitioners remains the determining factor. By solely relying on the provision of financial resources or the support of their practitioners, clients would not be able to develop their ability to better their circumstances, or cope with their situations in the long term. Thus, social service practitioners must take on the role of the leader, motivating clients to take on opportunities through which they are able to nurture skills and strengths that will empower them in the long run. This includes motivating them to upgrade their skills, and applying for suitable jobs within their field of interest. When conveying such information to clients, it is important to ensure that they are clear about what should be done, by whom, under what circumstances, and with what objectives and goals in mind.

Apart from propelling action, practitioners must educate clients on the relevant information to manage their life, such as managing finances. For instance, some clients go into arrears not appreciating the full impact of what up-front-interest free instalments of purchases mean, and end up with spiralling hefty interests that compound their debts.

Social service practitioners also play a key role as evaluative leaders. Many of these vulnerable individuals and families experience inter and intrapersonal issues. Thus, a good bio-psycho-social assessment by social workers, or other helping professionals is required. If deemed necessary after the initial assessment, practitioners have to guide and assist clients in navigating through the systems when different agencies are involved. This is especially applicable, for practitioners of clients with multiple and complex needs.

As a Voice: an Advocate for Clients

Systemic barriers should not hinder the vulnerable from receiving the help they require. As practitioners, and especially as social workers, this is where advocacy becomes an important task.

While doing casework, a practitioner may come across clients who experience situations that reveal the need for systems to be more responsive, for programmes or services to be adjusted or made more accessible. For example, there may be times during which clients are unable to utilise a particular form of service as they just missed the criteria, or have difficulty accessing it. Such situations call for practitioners to play the role of the advocate through dialogue and feedback on policy or programme design, to ensure that policies and processes targeted at uplifting the vulnerable are well-designed, fairly accessible and kept relevant. To ensure effective advocacy and collaboration, good communication between ground workers and policy makers is key. A healthy and functional feedback system would ensure that people who are served by these policies and programmes are kept in focus, and at the centre of the design.

Everyone has a Part to Play

Everyone - the government, citizens, corporations and service providers - has a part to play in mitigating inequality, and in ensuring that those struggling to keep pace with the rest of society are not left behind. While government agencies continue to review policies and step up efforts to foster a more inclusive society, the key to mitigating inequality lies with the rest of society. The work of alleviating inequality is ultimately a collective effort determined by individual choices, a willingness to interact with and understand the lives of those beyond our social circles, as well as how we choose to view others from other walks of life. Each of us play an important role in narrowing the gap. To do this, we should continue to treat each other with dignity and respect, be aware of differing perspectives that exist among us, as well as learn to empathise with and care for those who may be experiencing circumstances that are different from ours.

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