

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

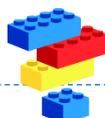
Singapore's Report on Human Rights was discussed at the 24th Session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group Meeting in Geneva on 27 Jan 2016. Ambassador-at-Large Professor Chan Heng Chee's opening statement¹ articulated the heart of the Singapore story of finding the right political, economic and social strategies for the broad uplift of all communities and groups and how a nation is forged out of this heterogeneity.

Singapore's population consists of people of so many different languages, religions and cultures that even a PEW study found Singapore to be the world's most religiously diverse nation. It is a nation that has similar elements to some other new states which have resulted in them being pulled apart by deep primordial racial and religious differences.

Our social harmony did not happen by chance, but by deliberate choices and policies. Preserving the common space was a priority. Each community did not insist on the primacy of its race, religion, language or culture, but was prepared to live together and accommodate others in the context of a multi-racial and multi-religious society.

There were times when the Government had to intervene for the common good and take steps that were unpopular with a section of the community. Because we lacked resources and space, we had to be pragmatic and innovative in order to survive. Building our economy and keeping it competitive went hand in hand with our social approach.

The Economic & Social Approach to Development



In the first three decades of our nationhood, we focused on the basics: security, fair opportunities for good education, stable jobs and home ownership. There was a broad-based social uplift of our people in one generation. The economic approach was twinned with a social approach. We created a culture of self-reliance, and also of mutual support. We provided equal opportunities for all Singaporeans to succeed regardless of their starting points in life and encouraged those who had succeeded to give back to society. We invested in improving the quality of education, healthcare and housing. These not only enabled people to seize opportunities but also assured them that their basic needs were met.

At the core of keeping the dignity of people who are able bodied and able to, is work and job creation. We have an approach and strategy that seeks to create better jobs, skills and careers as the best form of welfare for workers in Singapore. We must back businesses to create jobs. Job creation is not just about jobs of today, but also about the upgrading of skills and careers. We now have SkillsFuture to support and promote lifelong learning to meet the challenges of globalisation. Work is – and always will be – one of the best routes out of poverty to a better standard of living. But work is also about looking out for those who cannot help themselves and need help to get back on their feet. We should support people who fall ill, so that they can stay in work and aren't just consigned to a life stuck on assistance. We help those with work potential and those who want to work to be trained to reach their potential. We are also among the few countries worldwide which have made childcare of *quality*, both accessible and affordable through subsidies. We have introduced shared parental leave so families can be there for one another at the most stressful and joyful time – the birth of a child.

¹ United Nations. (2016, Jan 27). *Singapore Review – 24th Session of Universal Periodic Review*. Retrieved from <http://webtv.un.org/search/singapore-review-24th-session-of-universal-periodic-review/4725866340001?term=singapore>

It is useful for us to reflect on how we have not adopted the left or right approach but found our own way of addressing the needs of the disadvantaged in our society. There are 2 schools of thought that have traditionally defined most countries' approach. One is the leftist or statist view built around increased welfare provision and high government intervention in terms of pushing people's incomes which tend to treat symptoms and less the causes of personal social problems. This view risks trapping some people in dependency. Some would even push for a poverty line which can create a cliff effect where those outside the line gets nothing.

Another school of thought is a more free market one – the idea that a rising tide will lift all boats. While some would argue that the rising tide sometimes do not lift all boats, the free market that allows choice and opportunities, has by far generated economic growth and improved the general living standards. In most free market economy however, there are some people who get left behind, even as the market transforms economies and societies.

What we have done was to equip people to make the most of the opportunities presented to them and to close the gap, be it in education, training, skills upgrading and financial means, as much as possible. This is where the social sector plays its part in closing the gap, ensuring that it doesn't widen with globalisation and the technological revolution. The social sector can do so by helping individuals and families to access opportunities through sorting out personal and familial impediments that may be in their way.

In doing so, we should continue to hold on to our belief in self-reliance and personal responsibility while at the same time recognising that this alone is not enough. We need to continuously pay attention to ensuring life chances by twinning the giving of outright assistance with social support, be it advice or counselling, social work intervention, supplementary support or remedial and rehabilitative services.



Research informing services in the social sector

So what has securing human rights got to do with the current step up in the development of the social sector? The main focus and mission of the social sector is about ensuring the human right to basic safety and security where everyone as much as possible has a place called home and a family that provides a source for encouragement, support and comfort.

Our emphasis on housing and jobs have placed most families in a secure position. Every child who has had a difficult start has a good chance of a brighter future. With rising living standards and improvements in terms of people's incomes, health, employment, education and child mortality rates, our challenge is sustaining the gains. The challenge can be magnified in the midst of a widening income gap due to globalisation, the technological revolution and the vision that no one gets left behind.

At the personal social service level, the challenge remains in tackling generational unemployment, addiction or poor mental health. Today, it is less about material poverty but about how to enable more to access opportunities. On the bright side, we don't have to grapple with the perennial issue of the child's life being affected significantly due to the resources and risks in the neighbourhood where he/ she was born, which is something that many other countries face.

But the social sector will have a stepped up role in addressing human rights in the dimension of inequality. This includes tackling the social causes of poverty, the reasons why people get stuck in the cycle of poverty and how they become isolated.

Examples of the kinds of persons who require social work interventions and social support include someone who is a single parent in need of financial help and suffers from chronic depression; someone who has to work, care for her children and ailing parents; someone who has to provide and access services for a person with disability or frail older person and someone who is trying to overcome previous abuse or trying to live through or get out of a dysfunctional or violent relationship. For many of these individuals and families, their daily concerns are about their immediate familial struggles to get care organised, getting services to work in their interest and maintaining a balance in a life that is always in disequilibrium. For such persons, the help of social service professionals and volunteers can ease their load.

As the social sector steps up, it should draw on research and evaluation which help us to understand why some children from poor or dysfunctional families can climb right up to a situation of stability and sufficiency while others seemed to be stuck almost from birth in a life of struggle and stress.

So what are some of these insights that now must increasingly inform our strategies, services and programmes?

First, brain research or neuroscience² now shows clearly the importance of the first few years of life in determining the adults we become. With this, we now make a determined effort to intervene in the early years and wherever possible, intervene early to improve family life without undermining the foundation that a family provides.

Second, we know the importance of developing character and resilience even while acquiring knowledge in education. We need to draw on research that helps to design measures and efforts that build resilience and help people to bounce back after facing disappointments, failures and rejection.

Third, the research is also now clear that social connections³ and experiences are vitally important in helping people get on. These connections that help the better off in society to excel and spur on are often lacking among the poor. Measures and efforts must therefore help to increase and expand the social connections for those who have less resources in order to level the playing field with opportunities for everyone. Where it is possible, the focus should be the family as it is after all almost a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one for the individual. The research is clear that children in families that break apart are more than twice as likely to experience poverty as those whose families stay together. That's why strengthening families is a priority at both the national and programme level.

Fourth, we will need to try to offer the appropriate support to those who have specific, treatable problems such as various types of addictions, poor mental health and non-communicable diseases. We will promote a culture where seeking help is strength, and where facing up to problems, seeking treatment and aiming for recovery is a personal responsibility.

Development in the social service sector



In order to do and achieve more, the social service sector needs to grow both in the number of professionals and volunteers and in competency in skills and the delivery system. Much of this depends on attracting and recruiting good people, training and inducting them, deploying them to a best-fit area of service, and ensuring good supervision and career progression.

² Shonkoff, J. (2012). The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 129(1), 232 - 248. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-2663

³ Putnam, R. D. (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Various measures are beginning to see results as we see an increase in those studying social work or related degrees/ diplomas in recent years, a greater recognition of professionals and volunteers in the sector, and a better understanding among every one of the collaborative role of professionals, volunteers and communities.

A current major preoccupation is with how to reach a level of sustainable manpower in the sector that will match the growing needs as the shifting social demographics starts to add care giving and nurturing demands on individuals, families and local communities? There are a range of workable solutions that need to be pursued in tandem. These include support for undergraduate and mid-career students, professionals, volunteers and local communities.

In the area of volunteering, we can boost skills-based volunteering, leveraging the expertise of skills-based volunteers in serving the community. As Tim Oei⁴ suggested, NPOs would need to develop more robust programmes to train and equip volunteers, and engage them in meaningful roles in serving the community. There is also a need to build teams of professionals from diverse disciplines to develop a coordinated care plan for people in need. At times, a multi-agency approach involving government agencies and NPOs is required to ensure seamless delivery of holistic care in the community. So as we plan and galvanise professionals and volunteers, we recognise the rich range of people with training, experience and skills which include the following: educators in early childhood and special needs, allied health professionals (such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists), psychologists, counsellors and those in administrative roles such as programme managing, human resources, finance and general administration.

Local communities, where people spend much of their time, play a significant role in enabling both contributors, care givers and care receivers to be more efficient and effective in how they go about their work. How our neighbourhoods are designed and organised and how physical design facilitates the fostering of relationships that can potentially become mutual support and help are equally important.

The social sector is ready to step up to the challenges and opportunities. It will continue to play a crucial role in blending the economic and social approach in the next phase of our social development. Not unlike other developed economies faced with globalisation and the technological revolution, we need to find our own balance in addressing the needs of individuals, families and communities with the help of new enablers such as mobile communications technology and a more generous drive in people to want to do more and give back to society.

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23 Feb 2016

⁴ Oei, T. (2016, Feb 5). Tacking Social Service Sector's Manpower Needs. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/tackling-social-service-sectors-manpower-needs>