

**ADDRESS BY MR HSIEH FU HUA, PRESIDENT
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE
AT NCSS MEMBERS CONFERENCE AND AGM 2015
ON THURSDAY, 6 AUGUST 2015**

Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, Patron of NCSS

Mr Seah Kian Peng, Deputy Speaker

Ms Chia Yong Yong, Nominated Member of Parliament

Mr Chan Heng Kee, Permanent Secretary, MSF

Dr Noeleen Heyzer, Keynote Speaker

Members, ladies and gentlemen

Reimagining the social service sector

1 Welcome to the Members Conference.

Back to the kampong spirit

2 This artwork you see here on the screens is entitled 'Love'. You would have seen this on the cover of our Annual Report this year. It is the work of Isaac Liang, who, despite a hearing impairment, is active in our circle of local artists.

3 We chose this artwork for our annual report because it illustrates a community of mutual understanding and

cooperation, people supporting one another, and most importantly one that is full of life. In short, what in times past is called the 'kampong spirit'. The kampong spirit was the bond that kept people within the kampong together; it was how the community came together to take care of its own.

4 I saw this kampong spirit recently when I was visiting one of our members, Club Heal. Club Heal aims to assist and empower persons with mental illness. Thanks to its staff and volunteers, Club Heal's premises have been decorated so that anyone who enters feels like they are visiting a comfortable home. The staff treats everyone like neighbours, and volunteers make it a point to drop by frequently to offer any assistance. The sense of community is palpable.

5 Our Minister here shared recently with us on his first visit to SSI that people in our communities should be personally involved and emotionally connected to the work in social services. Club Heal is such an example, where the community serves those in need.

A successful social service sector today

6 Unfortunately, the kampong is no longer the norm in today's setting. In our urban society today, everyone is busy with their own lives and work. Inevitably, community-based self-help today is much weaker than it used to be. Thus the government and many charities have stepped in to supplement the community's well-being. Is this sufficient in its current form?

7 We at NCSS are questioning this as we face the increasingly complex social problems that threaten the strong roots of society and families.

a) Local context – fit-to-purpose

8 Too often we have many groups mouthing platitudes of “world class” and “first world”. The terms actually mean little, if that does not lead to addressing the core needs of our community. Instead of aspiring to be “first world”, more important, I feel, is the need to customise our model of service so that it is fit-to-purpose.

9 Let's take the example of public housing, where our country in the 1950s and 60s faced a critical shortage of

affordable homes. HDB was then formed to provide a high-rise and low-cost housing solution for this fledging nation with little land. Today, public housing accommodates over 80% of the population, which is without precedence elsewhere.

10 Furthermore, as DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam ¹ explained, the unique part of our public housing policy lies in the way we infused social policies with our urban planning and architecture. The ethnic limit and the mix of income groups in each apartment block means that Singaporeans are living in multi-ethnic, multi-income neighborhoods. People in that community go to the same food centres and parks, the children attend the schools nearby their homes, all living and playing together and this helps to forge a common Singaporean culture; a society that binds.

11 Can we apply any lesson from the HDB to our social needs? The HDB solution is a uniquely Singaporean model that required fresh thinking and created a fit-to-purpose model. As we go forward to address our social service sector, let us not copy wholesale, including the Scandinavian system, which is widely perceived as ideal.

¹ <http://www.gailfosler.com/singapores-lessons-an-interview-with-tharman-shanmugaratnam>, accessed 30 July 2015

b) 21st century mindset and skills in a digital world

12 Even as we customize solutions for local needs, the social service sector has to be equipped with the 21st century mindset and skills that is relevant to a digital future. Each of us will have to constantly learn, unlearn and relearn, and use creative ways to think critically and problem-solve.

New Ideas

13 We have to begin with fresh ideas. Let me share a few: The Lien Foundation² understands the value of fresh thinking very well, and believes that ‘A better tomorrow begins by being radical today’. An example of this is their project on bringing gym equipment to nursing homes and eldercare centres. Contrary to common belief that seniors should avoid vigorous exertions for safety, the Lien Foundation saw the health benefits that could come with stronger exercise, if the right technology was used. 2,000 seniors now have a chance to lead a more active lifestyle.

14 What about the concept of volunteer time banking? In Japan³, volunteers can bank hours spent on volunteer work. These hours can then be drawn upon in later life when they

² “About Us” (n.d.), <http://www.lienfoundation.org/about-us>, accessed 29 July 2015

³ “Inspiring Healthcare: Fureai Kippu” (11 April 2014), <http://www.innovationunit.org/blog/201404/inspiring-healthcare-fureai-kippu>, accessed 29 July 2015

might be less mobile and need assistance. Could this concept flourish in Singapore?

15 New ideas also give birth to innovations. These days, innovations go beyond improvement to producing a disruptive effect – a force that will change the entire industry. Google and eBay have reshaped our experience of seeking information and shopping. Similarly, the Uber car service – we have our local version GrabCar – has redefined the way we transport. As raised in the recent NCSS Board retreat, instead of matching cars to passengers, perhaps we could venture into an Uber of social service, matching services and volunteers to people who need help? This free-form structure might be useful considering that people have different needs at different times, that could be served by agencies and volunteers who have their own availabilities and strengths.

16 Just as Uber is disrupting the taxi markets, crowd funding is disrupting the way funds are raised. The options of funding sources have thus increased, opening up more windows of opportunities to advance social causes.

17 The examples are many but I will reiterate my point by borrowing the principle behind Uber, one that is always

evolving to provide a seamless connection and increasing accessibility for users.

Thus, in the digital future:

“Social Service is evolving the way **our society** moves. By seamlessly connecting **those in need with services and volunteers**, we make **our help** more accessible, opening up more possibilities ...**The widening outreach** continues to bring **people and their communities** closer.”

Productivity

17 I have just made reference to some ambitious ideas. Let me now turn to improvements that we can quite easily achieve. For instance, the use of robots is well-adopted by Denmark⁴ and Japan⁵ to address the labour shortage issue in the face of an ageing population. Machines have been designed to help clean floors and bathe the elderly, which frees the staff for more quality time with them. Singapore⁶ has learnt fast, with our hospitals welcoming robots to enhance productivity. What about our social service sector?

⁴“Denmark’s robotic helpers transform care for older people” (13 February 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2014/feb/13/denmark-robotic-helpers-transform-care-older-people>, accessed 29 July 2015

⁵“Japan Seeks Robotic Help in Caring for the Aged” (5 March 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/05/international/asia/05JAPA.html>, accessed 31 July 2015

⁶ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/hospitals-turn-to-cutting-edge-robots-and-technology-for-healthcare-assistance> accessed 29 July 2015

18 There are currently ideas proposed for central kitchens and automation to be used in various parts of the island, to boost productivity in the provision of food in homes. This also allows for the cooking to improve in consistency and taste. We are in an era where needs are no longer so basic; putting taste into food is a simple pleasure that can bring zest to the lives of the elderly in homes, who are used to the same type of food day after day.

19 A less obvious contributing factor to productivity is upstream work, which can save resources otherwise spent on downstream intervention. That is when we see the power of data as it can help us anticipate problems. Our Minister⁷ illustrated this point last week, making reference to data from other ministries to identify vulnerable children for early intervention. Indeed, intervening early could open up possibilities for these children.

20 The road to productivity has to be continuously paved. Today, we have our VWO development team at NCSS, which was set up to look at solutions to boost productivity for the sector and innovate. We are excited to do more in this area.

⁷ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/intervening-early-could-mean-a-world-of-difference> accessed 1 Aug 2015

Partnership – Role of for-profit organisations

21 Of course, to meet today's complex needs and recreate the community spirit in a digital world, we need the partnership of parties in the ecosystem, also the theme of the conference today. Social service organisations, government agencies, research institutes, the public and private sector – everyone has a civic responsibility to fulfill. No less important are the for-profit corporations and enterprises, which should place civic responsibility at the heart of their business. They need to recognize that their contributions could be both financial and non-financial, without having to change their business models. Most importantly, when everyone is committed to inclusivity, we would be successful as a community in taking care of all Singaporeans.

22 An example I can raise would be stepping up on disability-friendly places in public spaces and work. The current number of parking lots prescribed for persons with disabilities is minimal and could be increased. Work environments can be modified to create a more accommodating workplace for persons with disabilities. Here we must confess the NCSS building in Ghim Moh is not the most disability-friendly building. There is room for improvement.

Conclusion

23 Our vision of a successful social service sector will be one that is vital, dynamic and constantly reinventing. Staff though limited, will be highly skilled. Services have gone digital. Citizens are connected and resourceful. Help, when needed, is your next-door neighbour or if unavailable, a push of a button. The user experience is seamless. Needs are timely met. The society is tight-knit and self-sustainable, underpinned by the active support of social and business organisations, charities and the government.

24 We are on our way if we start today by thinking differently, leveraging on the 21st century mindset and skills with partnerships and resources in ways never before, to provide for our people in a uniquely Singaporean way.