

ACTIVATING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

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Background of Beyond Social Services

Historical Influences

On 26 May 1961, the blaze that was described as the Hari Raya Haji Inferno devastated 60 acres of squatter settlement resulting in 7000 homeless people. The government quickly provided emergency housing units but the squatter settlement soon re-emerged. On 24 November 1968, near the same spot where the 1961 fire began, the homes of 3000 people went up in flames.

It was in such a climate that religious groups and concerned citizens got together to form the Bukit Ho Swee Community Service Project with the aim of helping residents solve problems associated with poverty and crowded living conditions. Buddhist Monks, Catholic Missionaries, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran Pastors and Service Clubs pooled their resources to provide free medical treatment and food rations. Community workers were employed and they encouraged self-help and thrift by helping residents organise themselves into the Bukit Ho Swee Residents' Multi-Purpose Co-operative Society Ltd. The Co-operative helped residents save on essential household items and 2nd hand school books. It also secured home-based jobs from factories for residents.

Over the next 40 years, Beyond Social Services, as it was renamed in 2001, employed an increasing number of professionals to serve the evolving needs of the community we found ourselves in; such as piloting the Family Service Centre, the Streetwise programme, the Men-in-recovery programme, the Healthy Start programme, the Restorative Justice service, and Babes. We carved out a niche, specialising in youth work.

In 2004, with the proliferation of new problem definitions and services continuing unabated across the sector, we took a step back to reflect on our identity as a Voluntary Welfare Organisation and how we could best contribute to the issues facing society. We began to notice the structural limitations of service provision:

1. Service provision is primarily deficit-focussed and administered based on specific issues or criteria. Traditionally, with most of the resources targeting isolated issues of the most needy or the most deserving, there is a lack of developmental approaches to facilitate growth of this still-vulnerable demographic beyond their circumstances.
2. Service provision is time-limited. Many of the schemes available follow a process of assessment, administering the treatment or service, then closing the case. We observed the same families, with complex challenges, returning multiple times, unable to access the kind of sustained help needed for them to break out of their cycle of problems.
3. Service provision places the ownership of solving social problems at the feet of the government and social service professionals. It comprises of solutions done *to* families based on the assumption that external professionals have the expertise necessary to solve

problems. As consumers of services there is no incentive (or in some cases, an artificial incentive) for clients to be co-creators of solutions. An unintended effect of this is that many lower-income individuals come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a suppliant client.

From our starting point of serving children and youth we have taken to heart the adage “It takes a village to raise a child”. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the communities children experience have an indelible effect on them, for good or for ill. It takes a village to come together and provide the environment in which children of all abilities and circumstances can develop a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. It takes a village to inspire hope and appreciate the contributions of its children in all forms.

What’s at stake? Studies show that children and youth from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to offend in the eyes of the law. Their families face complex and multiple challenges and share a long history of poverty associated ills that can last generations. We wish for young people to respect the law, not just fear it. We wish for them to contribute to society, not just take from it. By developing communities that are empowered and families that are well-supported, children and youth are then able to grow in an environment that best provides them the opportunity to refuse a lifestyle of delinquency and welfare dependency.

Influences from the international social work discourse

With this goal in mind, we searched for alternative approaches in the international social work discourse that could be adapted to our experiences in Singapore. Alternatives that complement the existing social work infrastructure, and resonate with our belief that communities and wider society can do a lot more in creating a future for their children.

From the writings of Jurgen Habermas to Michael Sandel, we were made aware of the sociological impacts of technical rationality on the lifeworld of the disadvantaged, and how institutional or market-based norms marginalised them.

From the observations of Robert Putnam and Richard Sennett we gained a greater appreciation of the power of social capital and the need for cooperation and collaboration.

From the practise of John McKnight and Howard Zehr, we adopted the approaches and principles that bring people together and build on their capacities to contribute towards a more restorative and cohesive community.

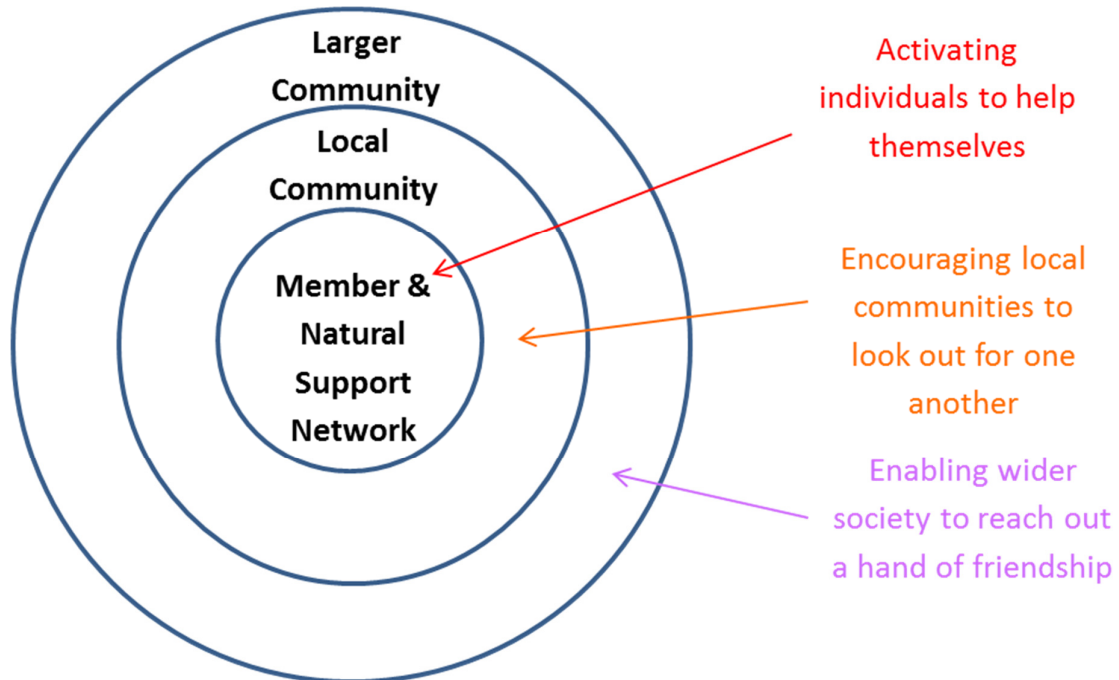
By applying these ideas to our Singaporean context, we turned full-circle to our roots as a volunteer run, community involved organisation; driven by the principles of **compassion, community and social justice**. In 2010, we prototyped a model of social work that could empower families, neighbourhoods and a society that cared for, and could accommodate marginalised children and youth.

Community development approach to social problems

To redress marginalisation, the Youth United (YU) Programme aims to foster greater social integration, inclusion and cohesion in families, neighbourhoods and wider society. **Social integration is not just about adjusting people to society, but rather to ensure that society is accepting of all people.** Hence, our vision is to create neighbourhoods where every individual, including children and youth, has an active role to play, and are able to cooperate with and support each other. We believe that when more residents begin looking out for each other, their efforts will contribute to creating an environment where children and youth are less marginalised and more resilient against negative influences.

The YU programme operates within the public rental scheme housing areas at 5 different localities – Bukit Ho Swee, Henderson/Redhill, Lengkok Bahru, Whampoa and Ang Mo Kio. Households in these blocks are living on SGD 1,500 a month or less.

At Beyond Social Services, the YU programme steps in at various levels of the ecosystem around the youth to provide an environment conducive for positive youth development. As a framework, we develop communities from the inside out, strengthening human resources to be better able to organise and act on the issues their children and youth face.



Target Group	Member & Natural Support Networks	Local Community	Larger Community
Focus	Strengthening of members mutual support networks with family, friends and volunteers	Creating platforms for associations to flourish and act in a restorative manner	Mobilisation of resources to help communities develop from the inside out

At present, the YU programme is designed to Invite, Inspire, Involve, Inform all 3 stakeholders to play a part in low-income community. These efforts revolve around the following goals for children and youth:

Goals for children and youth	Community efforts and activities:
Live crime-free lives	Foster belonging and responsibility
Pursue gainful employment and lifelong learning	Nurture talents and strengths
Enjoy family stability	Strengthen relationships and cooperation
Greater access to opportunities and resources	Building networks with friends and volunteers

The tangible and intangible value of this approach

Are resources limited or abundant?

For the most part, the social service sector mobilises limited national resource. These resources are entrusted by wider society through government redistribution and must be held accountable to creating a visible assurance of stability; and that society is taking care of its own. Structured schemes, services and programmes fulfil these criteria and are often governed by the principles of fairness as defined by consistency and due diligence in creating pre-determined outcomes.

Unlike the zero-sum-gain narrative that arises from a context of limited resources, community resources are, when activated, limitless. By recognising the capacities of those who have been labelled mentally handicapped, disabled, lazy and criminal, or of those who are marginalised because they are too naughty, too poorly educated, or too deviant, resources are continually activated and appreciated. The truth, which is often hard to accept, is that each defective individual or household is replete with a vast, and often surprising, array of under-valued contributions, potential, talents and productive skills, few of which are being mobilised for community-building purposes. These provide a **sustainable** resource in the form of social capital which will continue to look after children and youth beyond the limitations of any structured programme. We believe that this long term engagement with children and youth will produce more of an impact in their development and resilience than time-limited interventions.

Furthermore, the main ingredient for any social programme to succeed is that the intended beneficiaries must have a genuine stake in its success. Doing *with* people rather than *to* or *for* them maximises the chance that resources will not go to waste, or run up against counter-productive resistance. By creating a base of mutual support amongst families and neighbours that will take **ownership** for the health of their community and be actively involved in matters pertaining to children and youth; this involvement enhances the efficacy of any existing programmes.

In fact, when we do introduce resources from wider society that the local community lacks, these external resources are much more effectively used and employed when the local community is itself fully invested and possesses a sense of responsibility for its own health.

Finally, community resources are **flexible**. Because it comes in the form of gifts through relationships, resources are allocated based on compassion, or perhaps even out of obligation or returning a favour. These are responses that can quickly, and with discretion, listen to and address the shifting needs of individuals or families within the community's ecosystem, enabling the community to be adaptable in times of complex challenges.

What is valuable?

The above discussion on resource optimisation warrants a follow-up discussion on outcomes. In our financially-driven world, this is usually defined as economic outcomes for the children and young people we serve. While it is vital that any approach, including the YU programme, endeavours to uplift the weaker members of our society, we need to pay special attention to expanding our notions of successful intervention to include human and social capital. This is because economic outcomes alone do not define quality of life.

If societal values revolve around economic success, there will always be winners and losers. Inequality, both income and capital, in Singapore has risen rapidly over the last 30 years and the government has acknowledged that greater support is needed. At present, efforts have been made to curb rising inequality, and social service offices and government grassroots organisations administer financial assistance to meet urgent as well as short to medium term needs. Those who are unable to work because of old age, illness or disability and have little or no family support are attended to for the longer term. These efforts are essential in helping the most disadvantaged meet their basic needs, but in an increasingly competitive education system and labour market, crossing income gaps remains a distant dream for many.

Feedback from our members who receive welfare include feeling disregarded and misunderstood, as well as blamed and belittled for their family situation and their lack of economic success. Apart from repeated means testing, they are urged to secure better paying jobs. For many low-wage earners, taking such steps may affect family stability. They continually struggle to juggle work and obligations to care for their dependents. Despite their best efforts, they are persistently perceived as burdens to the state and are considered examples of bad choices and bad parenting.

To change this narrative, focussing on improving income is not enough. We feel that there is a need for an approach that safeguards the spirit of self-reliance and that strengthens our social fabric at the same time -- by **creating and highlighting other values**. Over and above meeting of basic needs and the accumulation of material comforts, the factors that underpin quality of life can be found through relationships. To name a few, these values include: connecting and cooperating with diversity, the privilege of caring and receiving care, and having a stake by participating in one's community.

In the process of building relationships among people, social trust is nurtured. International research indicates that where social trust is high, crime rates are low. Social trust and civic engagement is also positively correlated with health and happiness, all of which contributes to an improved quality of life.

Our recent national budget has put forward that Singapore's future must be built around a spirit of partnership, recognising that everyone has a role in building a caring and resilient society. We would like to echo these sentiments and suggest that the act of partnership, mutual care and resiliency are intertwined; that the resiliency of our society to weather the fractures that divide us is strengthened by society itself taking an active role in cooperating and caring for each other.

Best practices and challenges

Working with our members

According to social interaction theorists, the problem of client resistance is this: *we forget to ask people what they want; we tell them what they need*. Practitioners that recognise the importance of the therapeutic alliance have demonstrated that people are more likely to cooperate towards positive change when those that are trying to help do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them.

Clarity in helping relationships applies to community work as much as it applies to individuals and it entails a firm commitment to appreciate the strengths in the community and look for opportunities to cooperate on shared problems.

At the outset, our door knocking and community outreach efforts have placed a focus on discovering the aspirations, resources, and concerns of individuals living in government subsidised 1 to 2 room rental flats. Our activities, for example, flea markets, interest groups and community celebrations, are then designed to invite residents to participate and build relationships with each other.

From there, we explore what individuals are willing to do and how they can be organised to cooperate in providing a **local response** to the needs and concerns involving children. Our role is to be:

Advocates – rallying local communities around a concern or a need

Enablers – organise aspirations into a work plan

Motivators – linking resources to support the plan

Hence, by highlighting the strengths, efforts and contributions to the neighbourhood, we strengthen each community member's ability to demonstrate solidarity; and deal with their own concerns and the concerns of those around them. Over and above that, this approach allows our community members to change the negative perceptions of their neighbourhoods, and the narrative of their own lives and circumstances.

Participatory research

On top of traditional research, which attempts to produce conclusive findings and contribute to a generalised body of knowledge, we practice a form of participative research. In this form, research serves to intentionally engage stakeholders in mutual learning and co-creation of solutions to problems perceived on the ground. It is an ongoing process of learning with the community. Currently, this is initiated by practitioners but includes members of the community to clarify problem definitions, reflect on actions taken, interpret findings and decide on how to use/ act on these findings.

In 2016, we embarked on a series of community Annual General Meetings, striving to inform the community members of their own efforts taken in the past few years and realign our goals and efforts moving forward. We have found that the process leads to more creative insights and solutions. Furthermore, it incorporates new ideas, new people, and greater enthusiasm to ongoing situations; empowering community members to be more effective agents of change in their environment.

Volunteers

In our work, volunteers are invaluable. Not only are they the hands that make the work possible, but the hearts that extend friendship, compassion and solidarity to our members. We strive to make each experience meaningful for all parties, coloured with a sense of fellowship, connectedness and a greater appreciation for the similarities and differences between them.

This can be a challenge because volunteers come in all shapes and sizes. They enter with different motivations, skills, availability; and many come in groups that may be organised to a greater or lesser degree. We try to avoid managing them like assets in a corporation, for their value go beyond efficiency or end result. For a seemingly mechanical activity like food distribution, volunteer involvement can quickly devolve into an exercise of logistics if we do not emphasise or give time to shape the conversations that take place on every doorstep. Even if it comes at a cost, we have witnessed that the quality of involvement and the relationships built have far-reaching effects for our members and wider society.

Our role is to honour the identity of these volunteers and accept the gifts they bring. It is to create hospitable environments and inclusive opportunities, through training, briefing, and co-creating activities, where meaningful interactions can happen. It is to remain intentional about what good can be derived from each situation, while being sensitive to the changes and mindful of the dynamics that develop with volunteer involvement.

Community workplace

Before we begin to create community in local neighbourhoods, we found it necessary to build a workplace culture, within Beyond Social Services, that embodies the values we espouse.

We endeavour towards collaborative learning through our fortnightly Journey Beyond. Everybody takes turn to teach and learning emerges from the conversations and observations of each staff member.

We take time to be patient with each other, and are sensitive to the fact that colleagues are human, that we are all growing, and that relationships matter. We manage each other through trust and collective responsibility rather than through greed or fear. We seek to treat each other with generosity, kindness, cooperation, forgiveness, acceptance of the human condition and curiosity.

This experience of community within the organisation is indispensable in forming the collaborative attitudes we need to approach various stakeholders in our local neighbourhoods.

Reflections and recommendations

“Social issues are not just problems to be eradicated, but opportunities to rally community and society together.” – Beyond Social Services

Social work is not just about helping the less privileged, but everyone in Singapore as well. It is about empowering all of us to reconnect with each other, our sense of compassion and our shared humanity. Our focus on children and youth charges us with an added responsibility: by coming together to care for and develop the potential of each child towards his or her aspiration, we create a lasting legacy for what Singapore will look like 50 years from now. For whether we are there to witness it or not, children and youth grow up — they *are* our future.

In the past 5 years, we have had the privilege of being in communities that care deeply for their children and youth. We have witnessed the strength and resilience of people whose lives are filled with difficulties. At their own time, in surprising ways, these same people step up and respond to the needs of others.

Together, we need to relook at the culturally-ingrained way we distinguish between those that are different from us, have made different choices and live through different circumstances. Instead of treating them as problematic, we could choose to stand with them as people with different needs and strengths; and recognise that deep down, in many ways they are still similar to us — they deserve dignity. By creating a household, a HDB block, a street and a society that can understand, work around and accommodate these differences, we can avoid the dehumanisation that unintentionally occurs through institutionalisation and stigmatisation.

What we gain from walking with them is well worth the effort.

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