

Competent Communities

A proposal for a volunteer-led, community building model to advance social integration in Singapore

Background

Singapore society is subject to global and national factors that widen the division between its people. These divisions affect who we mix with and how different groups relate to each other. The deepest lines of stratification surround issues of:

1) Class

- a. Before taking into account government transfers and taxes, Singapore's Gini coefficient rose rapidly from 0.43 in 2000 to 0.478 in 2012. In 2016, this figure dipped to its lowest in a decade at 0.458, down from 0.463 in 2015. It remains at a level which the UN-Habitat describes as "dangerously high".
- b. To many people the poorer performance of the lower class is often attributed to factors such as a lack of motivation

2) Race

- a. According to the Census of Population 2010: Statistical Release 2 – Households and Housing, the median income of Singaporean Malays, SGD 3,844 is well below the national average of SGD 5,000, and below that of Chinese and Indian Singaporeans, whose median incomes were SGD 7,432 and SGD 5,370 respectively
- b. The poorer performance of ethnic minorities is attributed to the poorer work ethic of ethnic minorities, while the majority group is seen as privileged in ways they do not acknowledge.

3) Nationality

- a. In order to grow economically and keep the cost of living from ballooning out of control, Singapore has adopted a planned expansion of the labour market through the introduction of more foreign workers. In recent years, this has also led to wage stagnation for the bottom rungs of the labour market – particularly in blue collar jobs such as production, craft, construction and operative occupations and recently extending towards white collar clerical, administrative and sales occupations
- b. Immigrants are perceived as "stealing jobs" without trying to integrate, while locals are seen as unwilling to do "dirty jobs"

Tensions arise between these fault lines due to the resentments and stereotypes formed by opposing groups. In order to avoid outright conflict, boundaries between these affiliations are seldom crossed and different groups pursue their own interests, often competing, without taking the time to appreciate the experiences and challenges of those that are seen as different from them.

A way forward

Space must be continually created where people from diverse backgrounds can transcend traditional boundaries of affiliation. In this space, *differences* are an opportunity to connect with others and build understanding. In this space, *problems* are an opportunity to cooperate for a common good.

By holding this space, we move closer to our vision of:

- 1) A compassionate society where diversity is valued and appreciated as strength
- 2) A more engaged citizenry where people can cooperate towards common goals
- 3) Singaporeans that are rooted with authentic relationships with those around them and have a stake in their communities

In our community building and bridging model, we engage with and bring together marginalized groups and wider society through a process of awareness building, shared understanding, cooperative action and joint ownership. **The core objectives of this model are:**

- 1) Residents experience a greater sense of well-being and belonging to the local community and wider society
- 2) Residents cooperate better with each other and with external partners to create a shared vision, build on assets and respond to needs in the community
- 3) The neighbourhood is safer and more conducive for all families, especially for the positive development of children and youth
- 4) A wide range of partners and volunteers become stakeholders who are invested in the community and develop meaningful relationships with residents
- 5) There is a positive shift in societal perception of low-income communities
- 6) Local residents and partners take up leadership and ownership of community building efforts, thereby ensuring sustainability of the work

Inspiration for the model

The community building and bridging model draws inspiration from approaches such as [Asset Based Community Development](#), [Community Life Competence Process](#), [Restorative Justice](#), [Civic Engagement](#). A central concept this model seeks to operationalise is that of building and bridging **social capital**, as described by social scientists such as Mark S. Granovetter (The strength of weak ties, 1973) and Robert D. Putnam (The Prosperous community: social capital and public life, 1993).

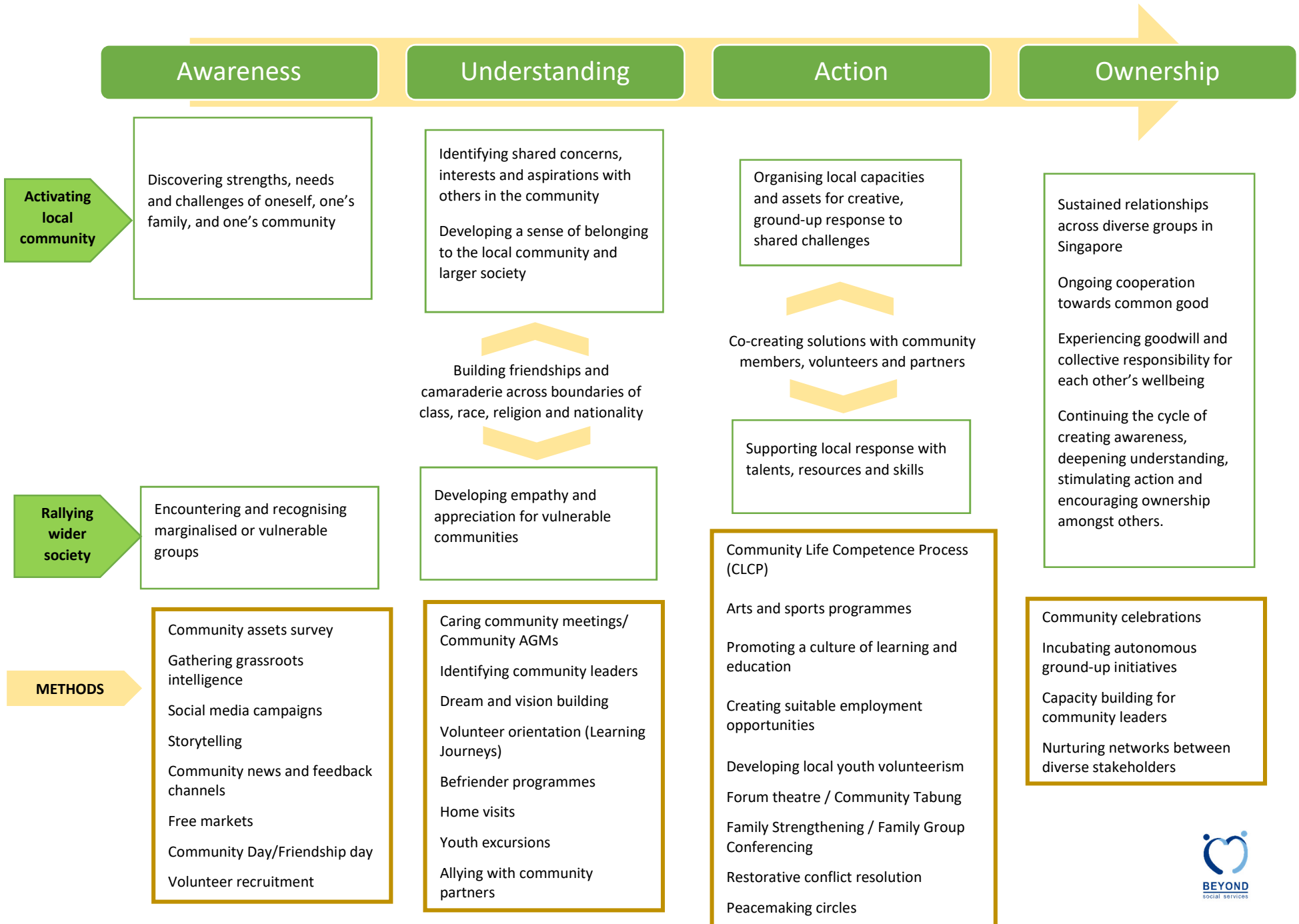
The current model employed at Beyond Social Services is one that has been developed over 6 years, through a process of (a) internally testing and contextualising what we have learnt from theory and praxis that has emerged from community building efforts around the world, as well through (b) local research, observations and work with low-income communities in Singapore over the last 30 years. Groundwork by BSS led to the understanding that delinquency amongst low-income youth was often a product of poorer educational outcomes, unstable family situations and negative peer pressure. Surveying the landscape of social services in Singapore, it appeared that there was a lack of focus in the areas of delinquency/crime prevention, as well as on producing sustainable outcomes. BSS's research also uncovered that what made an impact on youth who were part of various intervention programmes was the relationships and connections they built. A theory of change emerged as a response to these insights. First, we identified four preconditions to social mobility in Singapore: (1) crime free living, (2) educational and employment opportunities, (3) family stability, and (4) bonding and bridging social capital. To facilitate these preconditions, intermediate outcomes such as (a) Low-income families helping themselves, (b) mutual support amongst neighbours and (c) wider community support, are required.

What is unique about this model?

There are several core aspects of this model that set it apart from other community building efforts in Singapore. They are:

- a. To make change **with** vulnerable communities, rather than **to** or **for** them
- b. Transforming **crises** or challenges into **opportunities** to rally the community together
- c. A **strengths-based** or asset building approach, rather than a deficit or problem-solving approach
- d. Building **relationships** among people from different walks of life as a way to create inclusiveness

Community Building and Bridging Model





KEY

- Beyond's role
- Resources required

Timeline

Year 1

Outreach

Understanding the community's assets and needs, becoming familiar with neighbourhood characteristics, creating visibility of the team on the ground.

Identifying community leaders, on-boarding key partners and mobilising committed volunteers.



Year 2



Cooperation

Building mutual trust, support and cooperation amongst members of the community.

Facilitating strong relationships between the community and external agencies, partners & volunteers.

Co-creating a shared vision for the neighbourhood.

Year 3

Ownership and sustainability

Capacity building and supporting partners, volunteers and local community in creating independent, ground-up initiatives that promote well-being, inclusion and vibrancy within neighbourhoods and in wider society.



What can we see in year 1?

- Initial community conversations and community building events
- Setting up of new interest groups and programmes
- Partners and external volunteers actively engaged in the community
- Families have more exposure to cultures, people and assets outside the community

What can we see in year 2?

- Parent and youth volunteers from the local community help out actively with events and programmes
- Neighbours come together to have deeper conversations and take steps towards resolving difficult issues
- External volunteers, partner organisations and local community sustain programmes in the community, independent of Beyond staff
- A core group of residents cooperate to develop and implement new ideas for the betterment of the community

What can we see in year 3?

- Parent and youth volunteers from the local community lead interest groups, spearhead programmes and run events independently
- Families report stronger support systems within the community, and neighbours help each other out on a regular basis
- External volunteers, partner organisations and residents work together to engage more children and youth, bridge more families to resources and share the gifts and strengths of the local community with wider society.
- More children, youth and families are plugged into mainstream opportunities that boost their social mobility.

Beyond's Roles

1) Project and volunteer management

Beyond will be the project manager for the community development efforts in the new neighbourhoods (Ghim Moh, Woodlands and Kebun Bahru). This involves mobilising the necessary resources, coordinating the different stakeholders, building relationships with and between volunteers and partners, tracking and monitoring progress and deliverables, documenting outcomes and impact. Keeping the volunteers inspired and well-supported, creating opportunities for them to reflect on their work and learning, as well as to bond with each other, is a key function of this role.

2) Capacity building

Capacity building for local and external volunteers, volunteer leaders and partner agencies will be done through setting up a volunteer training curriculum with classroom and fieldwork components. The curriculum will include modules such as:

1. Introduction to Community Building and Bridging model
2. Strengths Based approach and SALT (SALT is an acronym for Stimulate, Appreciate, Link and Transfer)
3. Community Life Competence Process (CLCP)
4. Restorative Approach and Peace Circles

Following the training, ongoing support will be provided to volunteers through regular network meetings, peer support through a learning community and meetings.

3) Narrative building

Narrative-building is crucial in affecting (a) the way people see themselves, (b) the way vulnerable communities perceive their neighbourhood and (c) the way others in society see vulnerable communities.

Creating awareness of the assets, talents and encouraging developments in the community, highlighting incidents that demonstrate community spirit, raising residents' consciousness of themselves, their families, neighbours and their

environment are examples of how positive, intentional narrative building can be built into community development. Narrative building is ongoing work, whether it is in the questions asked of residents during an baseline survey (are we focusing on strengths or struggles?), how community programmes are designed (do residents get to lead and contribute, or are they passive beneficiaries?), how conflict is approached (problems as an opportunity to build community or a reason to divide community?) and how efforts and achievements are reflected back to the community (through newsletters, call centres, etc).

Low-income neighbourhoods are often experienced by both residents and others as unsafe and uncondusive for children and youth to grow up in. Over-stressed and under-supported families may also feel alienated from their community. The air of despondency in the neighbourhood is dispelled when members are brought together for fun, interesting and affirming experiences. This gives them the chance to form positive memories associated with the neighbourhood and reshapes the narrative to one of optimism, safety and abundance.

Narrative building is fundamental to shaping volunteers' and partners' roles and experiences as they participate in community building. To build a relationship with residents as equals, in a posture of mutual respect, appreciation and support, volunteers and partners are supported in developing deeper understanding and empathy for the circumstances and strengths of the community. This work – which is done before, during and after a volunteering or partnership experience – facilitates a non-judgmental, inclusive attitude as they embark on a journey with the community.

Documenting and communicating authentic stories from vulnerable communities to the rest of Singapore society involves shifting the narrative of helplessness and failure to one of strength, agency and empowerment. Amplifying the voice of low-income families in expressing their concerns, aspirations and contributions to larger society enables them to be valued. When telling these stories, their dignity must always be preserved.

As an understanding of the circumstances and experience of poverty seeps into the consciousness of people from different walks of life, the poor are included in the social imagination of life in Singapore – not as an alien or deviant community, but as whole and multi-dimensional people with many similarities to others in Singapore society.

The narrative of sympathy or pity creates distance, while a narrative of empathy and connectedness brings us closer. It is easy to dismiss or reject the unknown, and therefore, it is important to make the lives and voices of the poor visible and

known. When we start to see the beauty and strength in diversity, rather than feel threatened or judgmental toward it, the fault lines of divisiveness are slowly healed.

Measuring impact

Outcomes after 1 year	Indicators	Measuring/tracking tools
Residents possess a greater sense of belonging to the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 500 residents are engaged • 1500 hours of involvement (volunteering and participation) • 50% of residents who attend activities show willingness to help neighbours in difficult situations • 50% of residents who attend activities show willingness to reach out for help in times of hardship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with residents • Dipstick survey at 6 month and 1 year mark • Attendance records
Residents experience an increased sense of well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% of residents who attend activities report that they have built friendships with others in the community through these experiences • 50% of residents who attend activities report that they are connected to volunteers, helping agencies and resources that are beneficial to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with residents • Dipstick survey at 6 month and 1 year mark • Attendance records
There is breadth and depth in volunteer/partner involvement in community building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% of volunteers contribute regularly (more than 30 hours a year) • Volunteers and partners report having a positive and meaningful experience • Stories of transformation and impact on both residents and volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner surveys/feedback forms • Volunteer surveys/feedback forms • Volunteers' reflections • Residents' accounts
There is a positive shift in the perception of marginalised/low-income communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers and partners' reflections demonstrate inclusive attitudes and greater empathy/understanding • Volunteers become advocates for the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner surveys/feedback forms • Volunteer surveys/feedback forms • Volunteers' reflections

Outcomes after 3 years	Possible indicators
There is a positive shift in neighbourhood characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents feel it is safe, vibrant and conducive for raising children and youth
Sustainability of initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are partners and volunteers who are invested in the community long-term • Ground-up initiatives by partners/external volunteers or residents start to spring up
Potential to scale-up or replicate in other communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of volunteers and volunteer leaders enrolled in and equipped by the training academy • Number of partners and volunteer groups we bring on board, and the amount of resources they can contribute