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Tracing Singapore's Social Sector

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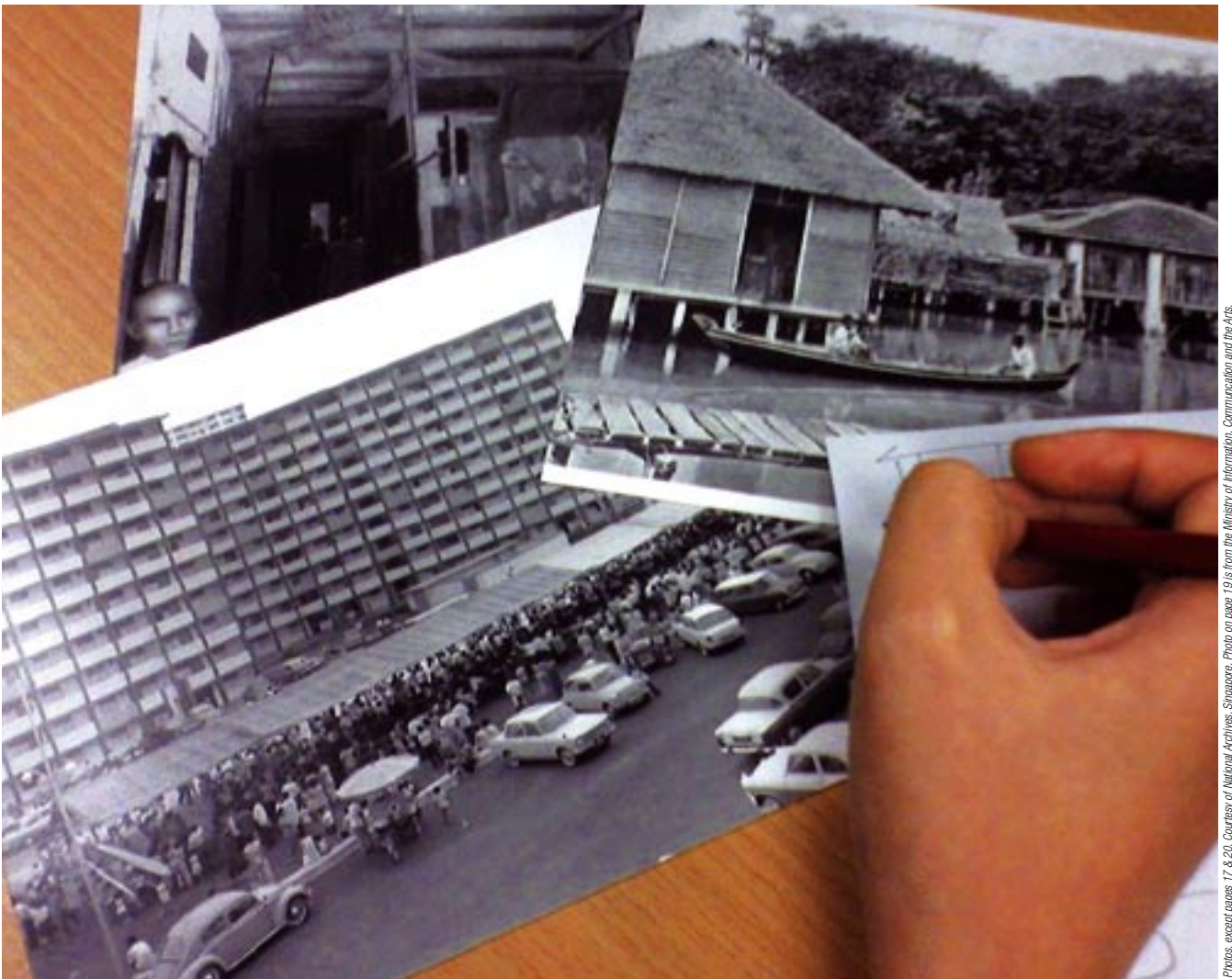
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TRACING SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL SECTOR

How has the face of Singapore's social sector changed through the shifting landscape of state provision? Sharifah Maisharah looks at the evolution of the social sector pastiche starting from colonial rule in 1819.



Scenes from Singapore's past.

Photos, except pages 17 & 20, Courtesy of National Archives, Singapore. Photo on page 19 is from the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts.

In early 2008, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew remarked that he would not be seeing a gracious Singapore society any time soon, at least not during his lifetime. Earlier, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong had voiced his concerns over 'The Three Cohesions' challenge that Singapore is facing in terms of income disparity, local-foreign detachment and the ageing population. Put together, our social sector in Singapore does not seem to figure too optimistically in the minds of our leaders. Has it always been this way?

The Lien Centre has embarked on a history exercise to better understand the state of the non-profit sector that we have in Singapore today. This article is based on the materials compiled by Lien Centre staff, and additional research done by Kevin Tan and Elsie Tan.

The table on page 21 provides key milestones in the evolution of the non-profit sector in Singapore since its independence. We can draw three main themes of development leading to the sector as it exists today:

- Ethnic, religious and individual-based benevolence
- Social welfare and civic activities
- Government and social advocacy

Theme 1: Ethnic, Religious And Individual-based Benevolence

Since Singapore's early colonial years, individual, ethnic and religious-based benevolence have been the mainstay of the country's social fabric. Due in part to the ethnic or dialect-based town plan¹ at the time and in part to the absence of state welfare, mutual self-help networks sprang up along dialect or ethnic lines. These cultural similarities generated a sense of friendship, mutual help and security. The newly-arrived immigrants eased into their new environment by living close to relatives and fellow immigrants from the same neighbourhood back in their home country. Single men from the same Chinese village would share the rent of a room or shophouse (also known as the 'kongsi house'), while the Baweanese from Java would group themselves in pondoks.² Some of the earliest voluntary organisations providing formal support network were the Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital (founded in 1910) which provided treatment for the chronically ill, and the Muslimin Trust Fund Society (Darul Ihsan) which offered miscellaneous services for Malays.³

Then there were religious-based institutions such as those created by European-led missionaries⁴, Arab families and spiritual orders that extended their services to the community at large, regardless

of ethnic belonging. The Christian missionaries, for instance, played a pivotal role in providing educational opportunities and building schools like the Singapore Institution (later renamed Raffles Institution), the Chinese Girls School, the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, the Anglo-Chinese School and the Tamil Boys' School.³ Arab families such as the Alsagoffs and Aljunieds built Islamic schools for the Malays both locally and regionally, while the Ramakrishna Mission provided education and charitable services.

Most of these organisations still exist today. In fact, since the 1980s, ethnic-based organisations have received state support from the government through a variety of self-help groups such as the Yayasan Mendaki, the Chinese Development Assistance Council, Singapore Indian Development Association and the Eurasian Association. These organisations generally focus on education assistance and support for the less well-off.

Social development was also supported on an individual level. Aware of the challenging living conditions that the poorer parts of the community were living under, a few wealthy individuals channelled their wealth to areas where basic necessities were lacking. Early philanthropists included Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kim Seng, Tan Lark Sye, Dato Lee Kong Chian, Mohammed Eunus Abdullah, Dr Charles Joseph Pembleton Paglar and P Govindasamy Pillai Kalyanamandabam.

Tan Tock Seng's example is worth singling out. When there was a lack of care for the destitute, Tan offered, in 1844, to provide the bulk of funds to build a hospital, cajoling the reluctant colonial administrators to provide medical services and a grant for operational costs.³ This form of giving exists to this day, mostly in the form of family foundations with children of some of the earlier philanthropists continuing their work.

Among the family foundations, the Lee Foundation founded by Dato Lee Kong Chian has been known for its largesse and size of its donations.

Theme 2: Social Welfare And Civic Activities

The years after the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) were a watershed in the development of Singapore's social welfare landscape. To begin, the British set up the Social Welfare Department, the first multi-service agency in welfare provision in Singapore.¹ The agency focused on providing emergency relief for war victims, settlement efforts for homeless persons, providing cheap food and worked to eradicate juvenile delinquency and prostitution.



Chinatown, Singapore.



View of a street in Chinatown in 1930.



Street in modern Singapore.

The seed was also planted for the evolutionary growth of a social structure based on locality rather than ethnicity.

The seed was also planted for the evolutionary growth of a social structure based on locality rather than ethnicity. For instance, after the Second World War and through to the late 1950s, many children of school age went hungry, and roamed the streets. At the time, one feeding centre catered to this particular group. Staff and volunteers worked together to provide not only meals, but also activities for the children. The Social Welfare Department extended the centre's work to form Children's Clubs which, in turn, developed into Children's Social Centres. Eventually, these became community centres that catered to people of different age groups. By 1959, 16 such community centres, albeit loosely administered, had been set up across the island.¹ It was only after the People's Action Party had come into power that an additional hundred community centres more were built for dedicated purposes of education and recreation.⁵

The post-war years saw increasingly effective and efficient state coordination of social services being put into place. Initially, the mushrooming of volunteer welfare organisations came under a volunteer-led Singapore Social Service Council headed by Dato Lee Kong Chian. With the increasing role of the state in civic activities, the council was converted to the National Council of Social Service in 1992 with government funding and key appointments made by the government. It has served as a useful interface between civic society and the government's own welfare-based activities by focusing on preventive and developmental work⁶ in tandem with the work of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), formerly the Ministry of Welfare.

The social service sector has come a long way in promoting volunteerism, pioneering new services and establishing the Community Chest. Nowadays, the National Council of Social Service is paying more attention to quality management and capacity development, taking on the role of facilitator and enabler, a role it assumed in 1992. Additional guidelines and checks also serve to enhance the professional standards of service delivery, cultivating an open system where the public can exercise their shared responsibility in ensuring that voluntary organisations execute their social obligation.

Theme 3: Government & Social Advocacy

In 1959, Singapore achieved self-government. Full independence came in 1965. Those early years of nation-building saw different political parties jostling for the right to interpret the philosophical and policy direction for the newborn nation. The social sector that had, till then, been predominantly based on social service delivery, was imbued with a form of social advocacy.

In particular, several Chinese clan associations that had previously functioned as social service providers began to exert an important influence in the political sphere through open or behind-the-scenes support for political parties.⁷

At the same time, the new government led by the People's Action Party built on the basic infrastructure left behind by the colonial government and strengthened selected areas of welfare provision – education, health and public housing – all the while cultivating the grassroots and social networks for political support. Pitted against the more streetwise communist group, the government needed to counter any disconnect with the ground.⁸ It instituted the People's Association to oversee the network of community centres that had mushroomed since 1960, as well as the Citizen Consultative Committees⁹ and Resident Committees.¹⁰ Besides providing social programmes in the respective localities, community centres were used to spread the government's political message. Increasingly, the social and political spheres overlapped and boundaries blurred. And this was to the detriment of the growing advocacy mission of the people sector.

Various tools were used to limit the operating space of civil advocacy. The government drew up a framework of industrial relations that was in line with state objectives to manage the early activist tendencies of the trade unions and incorporated the Internal Security Act, a feature of the colonial government, into the new governing structure. Trade unions were effectively depoliticised, while the more vocal and active clan associations grew weaker.¹¹ The use of the Internal Security Act, in 1987, to deal with the alleged Marxist conspiracy may have curtailed the growth of civil society for a long time.¹² The long-term imperative of economic growth was deemed more important



The helpers distribute tit-bits and drinks to the children during the opening of Siglap Social Centre.

than the pluralism of social views, a stand that was generally accepted by the pragmatic-minded population.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed economic growth and a growing middle class. Well-educated and with unrestricted access to alternative thoughts and ideas, especially the internet, this group began to bring back the question of social ownership and alternative viewpoints. For many, the long-term interest of economic growth was no longer a sufficient reason to ignore this importance. The government reciprocated with then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's style of consultative governance which introduced new means of participatory citizenship via the Feedback Unit, the Speaker's Corner and the Community Development Councils¹³, though the efficacy of the first two as a platform for alternative discourse is yet to be proven.

Possibly as a result of the more open climate, new non-governmental organisations that sought to address environmental, gender and human rights issues extending beyond traditional welfare provision were formed. Amidst the government's cautious discourse on the topic of widening social space, citing its preference for civic society, there were active discussions on the need to provide an autonomous space for individuals or groups to pursue their ideas, social thoughts and the growth of civil society.¹⁴ There was, in 1998 to 1999, a collective endeavor by the different advocacy and non-profit groups in Singapore to cultivate a more collaborative synergy amongst themselves

towards a more effective civil society action. The Working Committee (TWC), as it was called, did not achieve its ideal working model but it paved the way for other collaborative networks and initiatives, one of them being the Think Centre.¹⁵

This brings us to the new millennium in Singapore. In 2004, the then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (and current Prime Minister) gave a speech to Harvard alumni that signalled a greater openness for many helping hands and voices in the community. In 2002, the Remaking Singapore Committee was set up to lead a nationwide exercise to review the country's social strategies. Prior to this, Singapore 21, a nationwide exercise in the late 1990s that aimed to foster participatory citizenry, resulted in initiatives such as the formation of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre.

The government may be inviting a more engaged citizenry, but the "politics of apprehension" may be holding Singaporean society back from providing an organised and systematic critique of existing social policies. But this has not stopped non-profit organisations from trying, using what Kenneth Paul Tan, Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore, calls "clever games with the state". He outlines three strategies: first, leaving politics to the state and concentrating on the civic issues; secondly, through small steps by stealthily addressing political issues in non-confrontational private activities; and thirdly, by engaging the state behind closed doors or on the state's terms.¹⁶

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Non-government organisations (NGOs) are very likely to continue on one of these paths to address society's ongoing stride towards the greater good, the first option being the most popular and safest. Organisations such as the Nature Society and Transient Workers Count Too have found some success in advocating change in their respective social space.

The Social Sector Today

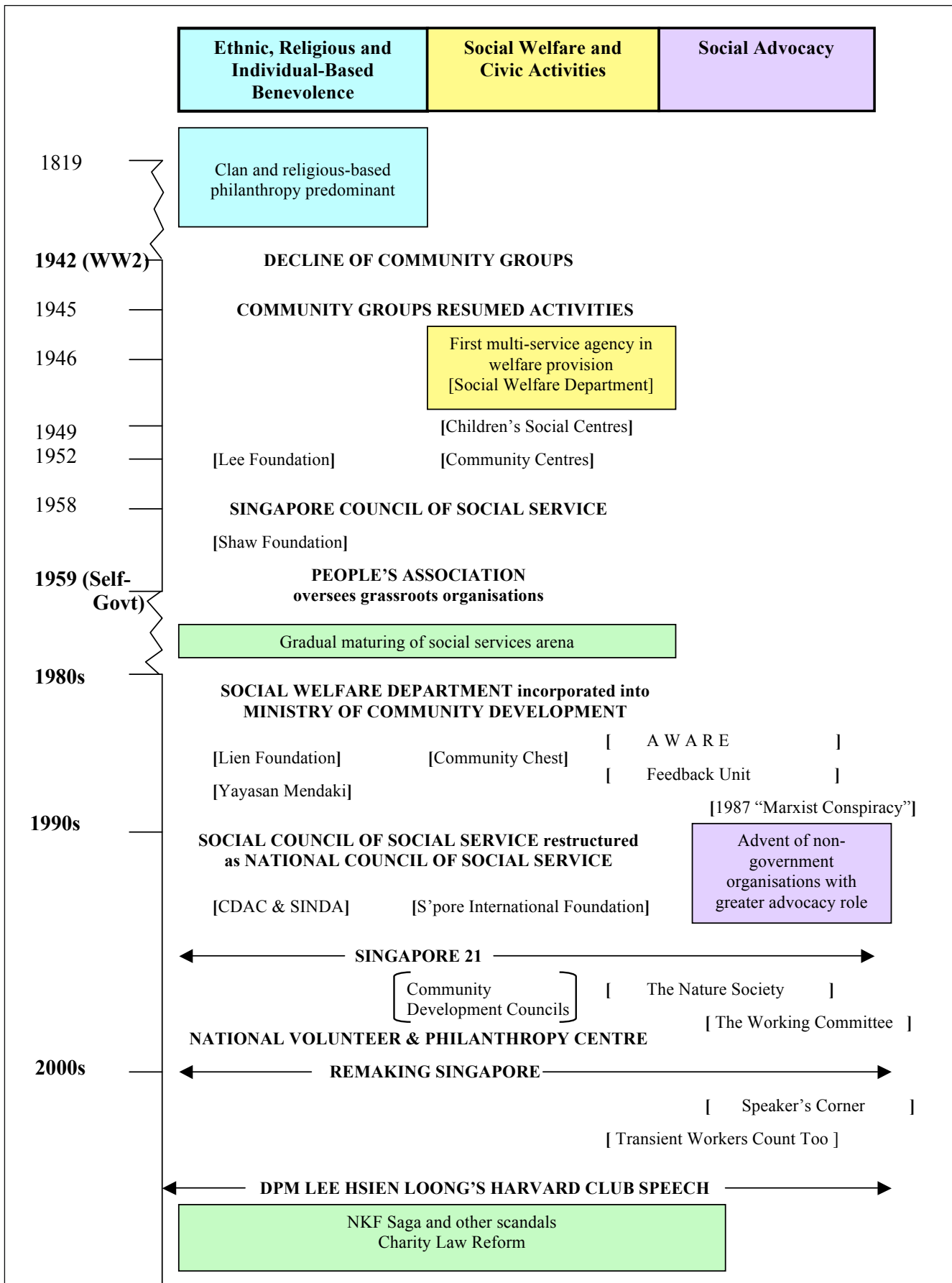
At this point, it is worthwhile noting that an Institute of Policy Studies survey, conducted in 2002, of 109 civil society organisations suggests that there is not enough of the “right quality of communication for a useful working relationship with the government”; that while more than half saw their existing relationship with the government as a collaborative one, there was an interest in seeing “more extensive engagement” between the parties with “greater recognition, respect, and understanding of their contribution to society and participation in governance”.¹⁷

This view is not only limited to socio-political advocacy groups. Academics like David Seth Jones

have gone so far as to argue that additional government controls and guidelines on voluntary welfare organisations risk eroding welfare professionals' personal motivation and commitment.¹⁸ The tension between NGO actors who crave for greater ownership of society's issues, and a government which is still hesitant to relinquish power over stability is just one paradox in the development of the social sector.

The other paradox involves developing the spirit of volunteerism and giving within Singapore's model of economic pragmatism and the Singapore Inc. mentality. Based on data from a 1990 census, Ho and Chua concluded that at 7.5 percent, the overall national participation rate in voluntary activities is “rather low compared to other developed nations”.¹⁹ Couple this with the findings of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre's survey in 2007 that cites donor fatigue, donor restrictions on funds, as well as limited resources and know-how for fund-raising. Within such a context, there have been calls to develop more innovative models of sustainability for voluntary organisations that address these limitations. Social entrepreneurship,





based on enterprises whose business is centred on social goals, is one such model.

In 2003, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development observed that where the non-profit sector is well-established, “it is becoming more entrepreneurial, less dependent on public funding and therefore experimenting innovative ways of raising fund”.²⁰ Coincidentally, in the same year, the MCYS established a Social Enterprise Fund to support social enterprises in Singapore. However, social entrepreneurship remains a nascent industry in Singapore due to the lack of business expertise and public recognition.²¹ Developing this sector nevertheless remains a continuous endeavour that is supported by the state, while being continually explored by interested groups.

In 2005, the well-known National Kidney Foundation saga exploded with a civil court case between its CEO and the Singapore Press Holdings. This and other ensuing scandals led to major changes in the regulatory environment for charities in Singapore. A full-time Charity Commissioner under the aegis of the Ministry of Community Youth and Sports, new charity regulations and a new Charity Council, as well as a more aware and informed public have placed greater burdens of governance and accountability on those involved in the charity sector.

With these new challenges, renewed interest in social advocacy and new social models, the social sector is in for interesting times ahead. □

¹ Cited in Ann Wee, “Where We are Coming From: The Evolution of Social Services and Social Work in Singapore” in *Social Work in Context: A Reader* edited by Kalyani K Mehta & Ann Wee, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), pp. 34-77, 39-40. The town plan was based on the population’s ethnic and dialect group whereby the British need not spend much on dealing with the immigrant problems such as overcrowding and quality living since the respective ‘chiefs’ would have direct control of his group. Similarly, the Sultan and Temenggong were responsible for their Malay followers in their designated areas in Kampong Glam and Telok Blangah.

² Ibid, pp. 42. See also Yen Ching-hwang, “Early Chinese Clan Organizations in Singapore and Malaya 1819-1911” in *Community and Politics: The Chinese in Colonial Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), pp. 33-71

³ National Council of Social Service, *Heart @ Work: Social Services in Singapore through the Years* (Singapore: NCSS, 2001). See also Paul P.L Cheung, “The Development of Private Philanthropy in Singapore” in *The Nonprofit Sector in the Global Community* edited by Kathleen D. McCarthy et al (San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers, 1992)

⁴ Ebert, Reginald Victor, “The Growth of the Voluntary Social Services in Singapore” (Academic Exercise, University of Malaya, 1959). Refers to the European merchant class and officials as well as their wives.

⁵ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions Pte. Ltd, 1998)

⁶ Thung Syn Neo, “Overview of Voluntary Social Service in Singapore”, Plenary Session 2

⁷ Yayoi Tanaka, “Singapore: Subtle NGO Control by a Developmentalist Welfare State” in *The State and NGOs: Perspective from Asia* edited by Shinichi Sigetomi (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 200-221

⁸ Bilveer Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore* (Singapore: McGraw Hill, 2007), pp. 63-76

⁹ A Citizens’ Consultative Committee provides a link between the government and local residents, and through them the government explains its various policies, state-initiated campaigns, and community planning for each precinct.

¹⁰ Residents Councils maintain local security, organise sports and recreational activities, promote volunteer activities and mediate between the government and the town councils.

¹¹ These groups were seen as hotbeds of communism and ethnocentric symbols at odd with nation building. See Paul Cheung, pp. 461

¹² Lydia Lim & Li Xueying, “The Legacy of 1987”, *The Straits Times*, 7 July 2007.

¹³ Launched in 1996, a Community Development Council is headed by a mayor and other members including the members of parliament. It is meant as a platform for Singaporeans to be more responsible and maximise their contribution at the community and constituency level.

¹⁴ As contemplated by Simon Tay, Kwok Kian Woon, Constance Singam and Yang Razali Kassim at AMP “Future of Civil Society” seminar, 1990. See also Think Centre.com, an online, independent political research initiative set up in 1999.

¹⁵ Constance Singam et al (eds), *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee’s Initiative in Civil Society Activism* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2002)

¹⁶ Kenneth Paul Tan, *Renaissance Singapore: Economy, Culture, and Politics* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007)

¹⁷ Gillian Koh & Ooi Giok Ling, “Relationship between State and Civil Society in Singapore: Clarifying the Concepts, Assessing the Ground” in *Civil Society in Southeast Asia* edited by Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: ISEAS 2004), pp. 178-179

¹⁸ David Seth Jones, “Welfare and Public Management in Singapore: A Study of State and Voluntary Sector Partnership”, *Asian Journal of Public Administration* Vol. 24 (June 2005), pp. 57-85

¹⁹ Ho Kong Chong & Chua Beng Huat, *Census Monograph on Cultural, Social and Leisure Activities* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1995). The authors had cautioned that it may be the case that the total welfare needs of Singapore itself are far less than those of developed nations.

²⁰ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *The Non-Profit in a Changing Economy* (Paris: OECD), pp. 12

²¹ “Fledgling Social Enterprise Sector in Singapore Needs Some ‘Smart Money’; Social Enterprise Scenes in Hong Kong Taipei and Singapore deserve more Public Recognition and Support”, *NUS Business School Press Release*, 31 March 2007 <<http://www.bs.school.nus.edu/Media/PR20070331.htm>>



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