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Understanding Societal Leadership: Strategy and Impact

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Abstract

This study focuses on the construct and discusses the characteristics and factors affecting the phenomenon of societal leadership. Reference is made to many worthy examples of social catalysts, innovators and leaders that the Institute for Societal Leadership (ISL) has encountered in each of the Southeast Asian countries and efforts are made to delineate the strategies that are used by societal leaders to create social impact. The study also discusses the various forms of societal leadership and ways in which effective societal leaders or social impact organisations collaborate across sectors to achieve their goals.
About Institute for Societal Leadership

The Institute for Societal Leadership (ISL) was established by Singapore Management University (SMU) in 2014. ISL aims to tangibly improve the lives of Southeast Asia’s citizens by acting as a focal point for cross-sector collaboration between current leaders from government, business, civil society, academia and the media. The Institute also conducts research concerning social issues in Southeast Asia and designs its own suite of leadership training programmes, each of which seeks to foster the development of a new generation of Asian leaders dedicated to serving society.

About the editor

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Co-author Molly Delaney is a second-year student of Chinese Studies at Oxford University. She has just completed a year of study at Peking University, Beijing, and hopes to further her studies in the field of Social Policy in the future.
Acknowledgements

This study is based on insights that the Institute for Societal Leadership (ISL) has drawn from various meetings and conversations held with senior societal leaders, social entrepreneurs, government officials, NGO leaders and business leaders in each of the Southeast Asian countries. All the individuals and social impact organisations referred to are known personally to ISL. We wish to put on record our thanks to each and every one of them for sharing their stories, experiences and motivation for their work. They have all been an inspiration to us as they seek to empower the disenfranchised and make their communities a better place. A number of their stories have been published in our electronic journal, Catalyst Asia found at https://catalystasia.wordpress.com/. Special thanks goes to Ms. Serene Chen who worked hard to put together many of the stories in Catalyst Asia.

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Introduction

From an individual standpoint, societal leadership is the practice of creating sustainable value and impact for the betterment of society, within one’s sphere of influence. At the macro level, it is about wielding influence across sectors to make societies better. The aim of this paper is to provide information on the context affecting the phenomenon of societal leadership and the strategies that are used by societal leaders. It also aims to amplify the current work of societal leaders and social impact organizations (SIOs) in Southeast Asia, a region where there are more and more societal leaders at work in communities. The paper will discuss the characteristics of the work of social impact organizations, the manifestation of societal leadership through social impact organizations, and societal leadership and the importance of cross-sector collaboration in their work.

Social impact organizations can be found in different sectors. They can take the form of individual social entrepreneurs, businesses that have a social mission, NGOs (non-governmental organisations), foundations, charitable organisations, corporate organisations focused on social responsibility, or government departments or commissions that are set up for social outreach. How these different categories of social impact organisations work together to create an effective system will also be discussed, in order to ascertain where cross-sector collaboration can be found, how it takes place, and what collaborators get out of it.

The study highlights social impact organizations that have made an impact in the communities they work in. This impact is, in some instances, measured by the extent of their influence in the community, the number of people they have benefited, and the depth of influence within the community. It has been gratifying to see that even when an SIO’s impact is confined to a specific concern or geographic area, it can still make a remarkable change in the lives of the people.
Characteristics of Societal Leadership and Social Impact Organizations

The best way to define the characteristics of societal leadership is to examine how societal leaders and social impact organizations (SIO) behave. Based on our conversations with over 200 SIOs in the Southeast Asian countries and interviews with more than 80 senior societal leaders, social catalysts and social innovators, the Institute has observed a few trends in the behaviour of SIOs, which can help us define societal leadership.

1. Societal leaders engage with people in communities they work in with a ‘by the people, for the people’ approach.

One of the key features of a SIO is the ‘by the people, for the people’ attitude that they have. From the very beginning, this kind of leadership is established from the grassroots, and getting local people involved in their work from the outset. SIOs are focused on making their work meaningful for the people of the region, and not allowing it to become dominated by foreign or outside leadership. As such, SIOs engage actively with the spaces that people live in. They have a lot of direct contact with communities face-to-face, talking to people, and finding out what the needs and concerns are. This helps the organizations to keep these concerns at the forefront of their work and stop it from becoming simply a system imposed on communities from afar, such as by faceless aid workers.

An example of direct engagement with local communities is the Tea Talk Café in Hanoi. Established by Singaporean Michael Ong in 2012, Tea Talk is a café with a difference. Tea Talk serves as a place where people from the local community can come to talk about their problems freely and without judgement. Ong’s mission is to break down the stigma around mental illness in Vietnam by creating a safe place for people to share their issues and seek advice. While Ong himself is Singaporean, the people who work in the café are people from the local community, trained by Ong to act as informal counsellors for customers looking to talk. Ong has also established an NGO working alongside the café, Centre for Counseling, Research and Empowering Community (CoRE), which trains people on counselling and provides formal counselling services to the rest of the community.

Originally set up as part of Yale University’s Cambodian Genocide Program, founder of Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) Youk Chhang researched into the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to bring the truth of the period to light and those responsible to justice. Chhang and his team spent years travelling to villages across Cambodia to interview victims and perpetrators on their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. However, when engaging with people directly, they realized that most Cambodians were searching for a way to come to terms with what they had been through, and to move on from it. Speaking to the people from DC-Cam and simply having them listen to their stories was a huge step in the healing process. The accounts of Cambodians recorded by DC-Cam were later used as evidence in the United Nations Khmer Rouge Tribunal and helped bring high-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge to justice. The information has also been used to create textbooks to educate students on the period, helping to continue the healing process of a nation.

SIOs engage with communities and people with a ‘partnership’ attitude. Their focus is giving people ‘hands up, not hand-outs.’ These organizations meet communities where they are at, rather than treating them as charity cases. SIOs desire to see real change in communities, and not just give a band-aid-charity work, which though it might help people in the short term, does not ultimately solve the deeper social issues within the community. The Organization for Building Community Resources (OBCR) in Cambodia “focuses on capacity building and empowerment for rural community” by implementing “rural community development programmes for the poor at provincial,
district, and commune levels.” OBCR is based in Samrong Tong district and works with people from the area to improve their socio-economic situation. All of their work is community-based and they encourage locals to get involved. One of their key projects is the English Training Project Centre for Children (ETPC), a school that teaches English to poor children in the district “to create an opportunity for Cambodian children to widen their knowledge.” This school not only helps children in the short-term by providing them with education, but it also works towards solving the issue of poverty in the community by giving the children the opportunity to stay in education a while longer, find a paying job, and give money back to their communities.

Another initiative, the XSProject in Jakarta, Indonesia, works in a similar way. This NGO, run by Retno Hapsari, provides a creative solution to getting rid of the garbage dumpsites that the city’s trash pickers live in. Most trash pickers have fled from poorer regions of the country, without any identification or means of supporting themselves, and have found a niche by filling in the gaps of a dysfunctional waste collection system in Jakarta. These dumpsites are managed by lapak, families who are able to build huts on the site, who then allow poorer families to live on the site in harsh and unhygienic conditions in return for collecting any recyclable waste from the city. XSProject works to solve this problem by buying reusable waste materials from the trash collectors at the Cirendeu dump and then “up-cycle” them into laptop or book covers, cosmetic bags, and storage boxes. The proceeds from these products are then put back into the community. Five per cent of all product sales goes to a scholarship fund to help the children living in the Cirendeu dump go to school. By gaining the trust of the lapak, Hapsari has also been able to set up a makeshift pre-school on the dumpsite in order to make sure children from the site are better prepared for school. Some residents of the site have also gained employment working at the XSProject up cycling workshop. While the XSProject deals with ridding the large dumpsites of Jakarta, they also deal with the wider issues of poverty, and lack of education, helping the families living on these sites to overcome wider social issues in their community.

SIOS affirm the dignity of the people in the communities they work with by providing them with more choices, and autonomy than they would normally receive from charities or aid organizations. Their communities are given the choice in terms of how they want to be helped and the form that the help takes. This strategy gives the members of a community a stake in the work being done, involving them in the process, and thus making it likelier that they will want to continue the work themselves in the future.

Epic Homes, set up by John-Son Oei, is an organization that builds houses for the 12,000 indigenous Orang Asli families in Peninsula Malaysia. While Epic Homes aims to build more than houses, they also work to build communities, and bring people together for societal good. People are hired to build houses together with the Orang Asli communities, and in return for a house, the recipient helps Epic Homes build at least three other houses for others in their community. Furthermore, the houses have been designed modularly. This means that they are both quick to build and allow the recipients a certain amount of customizability to the layout of the house to suit their needs. This strategy doubly allows people to invest in building their own house, as well as making it their own home.

2. The attitude of societal leaders that make an impact is a long-term commitment to a specific place with the aim to equip locals to be their own societal leaders.

Another way to identify the characteristics of SIOs is to examine the strategy they have chosen for their work in communities. Effective SIOs make sure they engage with and utilize the local culture of the specific community they are working in to overcome the social issues they are struggling with. They are focused on what would work best for that community based on their specific set of cultural and environmental factors. What is key to this idea is not simply taking a foreign model and forcing it on the problem. SIOs take global models and work to adapt them into local models, aimed at a specific community. This aspect is becoming increasingly important given the suspicion that many people in Southeast Asian countries have towards international NGOs. Proximity Designs puts this model of sustainability at the heart of their work. A social enterprise based in Yangon, Myanmar, Proximity Designs saw an opportunity to adapt a pre-existing product to fill a gap in the market to help Myanmar farmers increase their profits. Co-founder Debbie Aung Din saw that foot pumps used in India had the potential to have a huge impact in aiding irrigation methods in rural Myanmar. Many farmers struggled to find effective ways to irrigate, as the pumps available to them were either too expensive or not really suited to their needs. However the Indian foot pumps needed to be adapted to fit the particular needs and environment of the Myanmar farmers. Proximity Designs worked very closely with farmers during the design process, always asking for their feedback, taking onboard their advice, and keeping the user at the forefront of their design. Aung Din sums up their approach: “We didn’t want to treat people as charity recipients, or aid beneficiaries. When you treat people as customers and sell things, it’s
really a matter of giving them a choice and affirming their dignity. They decide whether what you’re providing is valuable or not, so they hold you accountable. Societal leaders are sensitive to the environment and needs of the community they are working in, and they base their leadership on this knowledge as it works best in the long run.

Another aim of societal leaders is enabling communities to exercise their own societal leadership. These people and organizations are working to meet the needs of a community, by getting the locals involved and helping them gain the tools to help themselves. The idea is to help communities become less dependent on aid or hand-outs, and instead become more independent. The micro-hydro power plant in the Aek Matio Jae village in North Sumatra is a case in point. The residents of this village struggled without adequate power for years, having to rely either on private generators that required costly fuel, or inefficient, government-funded solar panels. The opportunity for sustainable power access was definitely possible - the state-owned power company PT PLN had set up a micro-hydro power plant nearby, powered by the Aek Raisan River, generated by the forest surrounding Aek Matio Jae village. However, PT PLN and the local government deemed setting up a similar micro-hydro power plant for the village too expensive and risky. Help came from PETRA, a local NGO, which enabled the villagers to apply for a grant from Tropical Forest Conservation Action (TFCA)-Sumatera to implement a community-based forest management project. If a micro-hydro power plant were set up, it would not only provide the villagers with the electricity they desperately needed, but also act as an incentive for the community to protect the forest, which would then provide the power for their power plant. The villagers spent a year designing and constructing their micro power plant with the help of PETRA and TFCA-Sumatera, pulling together the rest of the money they needed from the wider community. The villagers also set up an official structure to manage the maintenance of the turbine. This innovative solution by PETRA gave the villagers of Aek Matio Jae the opportunity to exercise their own societal leadership by bringing the community together to invest in their future and ensuring the protection of the forest’s future.

Societal leaders usually have a long-term commitment to a place, often on a small-scale commitment, such as a single village or region. They do not necessarily scale up their operations too quickly, as they have a desire to see the betterment of that particular community all the way through to the solution of the problem. For example, Tea Talk Café is still a standalone café, but the work of Michael Ong and his team of councillors in that community has had a big impact in breaking down the stigma surrounding mental illness. Similarly, Jakarta’s XSProject works mainly with one dumpsite in the city, but has seen great success with its model and has opened the horizons of children living on the site. Due to this long-term commitment, there is often a need for corporations involved in social impact to continue investing in communities despite the economic risk involved, and the incremental progress made.

General Electric (GE) was the first American corporation to enter Myanmar after US sanctions against the country were suspended in 2012. Since then, the company and the GE Foundation has announced a US$7 million commitment to invest in the country across various areas, such as healthcare, energy infrastructure, aviation, and capacity building. GE is upgrading gas turbines to augment the country’s power output. It has begun a rural healthcare pilot project supplying training and technology to tackle maternal and infant mortality rates, and provided leadership training to Myanmar in senior public sector positions. They managed all of this, despite Myanmar being one of the most difficult places in Southeast Asia for corporations and social enterprises to work, due to a severe lack of infrastructure, incredibly high rent, and sometimes a lack of support from the government. However, unless corporations such as GE continue to work in the country, progress will be even slower and help will be even harder to find for people who need it. As Stuart Dean, CEO of GE ASEAN, said, “The risk of not going in early to help the country far outweighs what some would see as impediments to doing business in the country. The time to invest in this country is now, and it is for the long-term.”

3. Societal leaders often focus on a specific social issue in a community, targeting the most vulnerable people in society to leverage other social benefits.

A key aspect of societal leadership strategy is identifying a specific social issue in a community and working on a way to overcome it. These causal conditions can include a social need, an inequality, a social injustice, the failure of the state to provide a particular service, and natural or man-made threats. The work of SIOs is usually aimed at the most vulnerable people in society, such as those living in poverty, displaced people, women, children and young people, the mentally ill, and the disabled. Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT) helps underprivileged women in

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Singapore build their confidence in order to gain employment opportunities and become self-sufficient. Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) helps migrant workers in Singapore with advocacy, social work assistance, research, food programmes and a care fund, and the Transportation for All movement in Thailand uses the country’s legal system to ensure the government meets the needs of the disabled community. The work in overcoming these kinds of conditions is very small-scale and issues-based. The experienced SIOs do not attempt to burst into a community and try to overcome all the issues they face. Generally the approach is to do one thing very well, and see great improvements in that one particular area. Yangon Bakehouse, set up by Canadian epidemiologist Kelly McDonald trains women who are unemployed and at risk, to bake and serve up Western meals in a downtown cafe. Humana Child Aid Society Sabah was set up by a Danish schoolteacher who witnessed the plight of foreign children living in oil palm plantations where their parents worked, miles away from a school, which they would be unable to attend as they were non-Malaysian. Many of these children would become child workers, without prospect of escaping poverty. Humana Child Aid Society works to end this cycle of poverty by establishing schools in these plantations to provide the children with primary education. While the work of these organisations is targeted at a small group in the community, it is often multi-faceted and can have a knock-on effect in improving other issues the community faces. Increasing the employability of women helps keep the family intact, just as how educating children helps break the cycle of poverty in cities and villages of Southeast Asia.

When trying to solve a social issue faced by a particular community, SIOs try to get those ‘responsible’ for that particular issue, or at least related to the issue involved in the funding or organization of their work. More often than not, it is a government body in that particular social area, and only occasionally, a prominent business in the community. Humana Child Aid Society Sabah for instance, gets 70% of its funding from the large companies whose plantations the organization sets up schools in. This serves as an effective channel for the oil palm companies to help the children living on their plantations, and take responsibility for their lack of access to education, without having to set up the schools themselves.

4. Societal leaders’ engagement with other sectors, such as government and business, is characterised by their support of existing support systems and incentivising partners to provide better services and take responsibility for particular issues.

Strong SIOs engage with the systems already in place in communities, whether they are government institutions, or private businesses. They do not aim to replace the responsibilities of the government, but support the work that they do and fill in the gaps in areas where the governments have fallen short. As Weraong Prapha says, “the social enterprise movement won’t replace mass social welfare programmes,” but instead should be “viewed as flexible tools which can design and offer replicable solutions to fill in the gaps and complement government programmes.”

Many SIOs engage with state agencies to incentivize them to provide better quality services by supporting their pre-existing systems and helping them to have a bigger social impact in communities that need it. In Singapore, volunteers from the NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) organise periodic meetings with policy makers in order to raise awareness of policy gaps that are troubling foreign work permit holders in the country. SIOs also try to give businesses incentives to provide more support to communities in need by showing them that they could become social impact businesses.

Forms of Societal Leadership

The Individual as Societal Leader

Societal leadership manifests across a wide variety of sectors. SIOs are sometimes established in communities by people, from within the communities. These people are already deeply involved in the life of the community and fully aware of the local culture. In many cases, these individuals have a strong connection to the issue they are trying to overcome.

Youk Chhang was in his late teens when the Khmer Rouge came to power and genocide destroyed his country. As a survivor and witness of the period himself, Youk’s vision for the DC-Cam’s capacity to heal Cambodia was largely informed or formed by his own desire for healing and justice. Transportation for All movement was originally spearheaded by the late Topong Kulkhanchit, the former president of the Council of Disabled People of Thailand (DPIT) (now called the Disability Thailand Association). A wheelchair user himself, Kulkhanchit was angered that so much of Thailand’s transportation was not accessible for people with disabilities. Kulkhanchit and the current leaders of the Transportation for All movement used the legal system to advocate for the rest of the disabled community in Thailand.

There are cases where societal leaders work to solve issues in their communities that they may not have been personally affected by. Singaporean SIO HealthServe for instance, provides free medical advice to migrant workers in Geylang. They are not run by migrant workers, but people from the Singaporean medical community who have a desire to see the treatment of migrant workers improve in their country.

More often than not, SIOs in other parts of Southeast Asia, like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Yangon are established by community outsiders. When an outsider enters a community, they are naturally more sensitized to the issues that the community faces as they have not yet learnt to live with the problems. Moreover, community outsiders often have better access to contacts and funding (often from overseas) that can be utilized in solving the issue. These factors give community outsiders certain unique advantages when it comes to effective societal leadership. Mith Samlanh, an organization that branched off from Friends International (Phnom Penh) was founded in 1994 by three expatriates living in Cambodia, Sebastien Marot, Mark Turgeson, and Barbara Adams. After seeing the poverty of children living on the streets of Phnom Penh, the three started separately handing out food to the children. After meeting while handing out food, they realized that they were accidentally encouraging the children to remain living on the streets by providing them with at least six meals a day. The three decided a more constructive approach was required to make any real impact for these children. With the help of some Cambodian friends, they started going out and talking to the street children, identifying what they wanted and needed, and how they could help. They then opened a small center with dormitories, and a kitchen to house the children. The team learnt that in order to make their organization work, they needed to keep the children’s needs at the forefront. As Sebastien Marot says, “We adapted to them, instead of expecting them to adapt to us. We changed the system, developed our work on the streets, and accepted children only during the daytime, and encouraging them to return home by nightfall. Their numbers started growing fast.” The team at Mith Samlanh was then offered three years of funding from AusAid, the Australian government’s aid agency.

Government Sector Societal Leaders

One of the key differences between government social leaders and those from the business or social sector is that welfare and combating societal issues is generally seen as a basic mandate for most governments. Therefore much of the social impact that the government takes part in is in the form of state welfare systems, through healthcare systems, pensions, public education, and other similar initiatives that most citizens expect the state to provide. Admittedly, in the context
of South East Asia, many national governments are either unable or unwilling to provide such services, due to other priorities or a weak government capacity. For example, in countries such as Timor-Leste and Cambodia, where infrastructure and economies have been torn to shreds by years of political conflict and genocide, the governments simply do not have the means to provide public welfare effectively, often compounding existing poverty. In other countries, the government has failed to put the social welfare of its people before its political agenda, thus allowing for many gaps in the system.

Alongside the basic welfare mandate and expectation of the state, some governments have also set up government institutions and commissions to research, and work on specific societal issues. The Penang Institute, for example, is the public policy think-tank of the state government of Penang, originally established in 1997 as the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI). Their work includes undertaking research and analysis of public policies to aid strategic planning by the government of Penang, providing a platform for intellectual and professional exchanges on issues concerning Penang, maintaining a resource centre and producing publications and research findings in order to enrich public discourse in the areas of economics, socio-politics and sustainable development. The institute also actively engages with the people of Penang by holding conferences, lectures, workshops, and public seminars.7

Similarly, SG Enable is an agency set up by the Singaporean government in 2013 dedicated to enabling persons with disabilities. They aim to empower people with disabilities and their caregivers, enhance employment options for people with disabilities and engage with communities in engaging with disabled people as full members of the community.8 They do this through various schemes, such as employment-related funding like the Open Door Programme that offers financial support to persons with disabilities and employers to help the former gain employment and the SG Enable Internship Programme that helps disabled students enroll at Institutes of Higher Learning and find internships at inclusive companies. Their Early Intervention Programmes provide early childhood therapy and services and the Emergency SMS Helpline Services help people with hearing or speech impairment communicate with Singapore’s emergency services in the case of an emergency. They also provide subsidies for assistive equipment and home retrofits.

The Thai Social Enterprise Office (TSEO) was established by the Thai government in 2010 under the Thai Health Promotion Foundation Act, as the executive authority to deliver the Social Enterprises Master Plan (2010–14). The government also dedicated US$3.2 million worth of funding9 to it. TSEO’s priority is to stimulate cooperation among social enterprises and develop their networks in Thailand. In addition, TSEO was designed to be in touch with all possible entrepreneurs who have a particular interest in social and environmental issues, and to inspire social responsibility.10 These agencies and organisations are all government efforts at extending leadership beyond existing state provisions to support different sectors of the community who are in need.

Business Sector Societal Leaders

There are many forms that societal leadership can take in the business sector. When it comes to social impact work, social enterprises tend to have the most impact in communities, and are at the forefront of societal leadership in Southeast Asia. Social enterprises are small businesses that aim to see real and lasting change in communities by working with a business approach to solve social problems. They tend to put social impact before profit.

While they might technically be businesses, many social enterprises are set up by a single individual seeking to see a change in a community by using a business approach. As such, the societal leaders who found social enterprises are individuals from civil society seeking social impact.

Dignity Kitchen, a social enterprise in Singapore that teaches physically and mentally disabled people to work in and run stalls in hawker centres, was established by Koh Seng Choon in 2010. Koh was inspired by a conversation he had with a disabled man who wanted to become a chef. Koh wanted to help him realize his dream but knew that even if he trained him up, it would be difficult for him to find a restaurant that would hire him. So he came up with the idea of using the hawker centre model to give disabled people the opportunity to work in the food and beverage industry, but on a manageable scale.11

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7 http://penanginstitute.org/v3/aboutus/about-penang-institute
9 ‘Thai social enterprises are booming thanks to strong government support,’ http://www.theguardian.com/social-enterprise-network/2012/sep/07/social-enterprise-thailand-strong-government
10 https://www.linkedin.com/company/thai-social-enterprise-office-tseo-
11 http://weare.sg/koh-seng-choon-project-dignity/
In a similar vein, the Eighteen Chefs restaurant chain in Singapore is a social enterprise set up by Benny Se Teo, an ex-convict who wanted to create a working environment where young people with a criminal history could be trained in cooking and regain the confidence they need to put their lives back on track. He was able to start his venture with funding from the NTUC Employment and Employability Institute’s (e2i) Inclusive Growth Programme.\(^\text{12}\)

Digital Divide Data Cambodia (DDD Cambodia) is a social enterprise set up by Jeremy Hockenstein in 2001. When travelling in Cambodia, Hockenstein was struck by the mixture of progress and poverty in the country. While there were already computer schools teaching students, there were no jobs in technology for these students to go on to. Hockenstein hit upon the idea of outsourcing digitization work to disadvantaged high school students in Cambodia, giving them the opportunity to improve their skills and gain money to fund their further education, giving them the chance at an overall brighter future. DDD calls this model ‘impact sourcing’\(^\text{13}\).

Another social enterprise, Opportunities Now, based in Yangon, is committed to minimising youth unemployment in the country. The entrepreneurship training school seeks to reduce poverty by providing business training and mentoring in various stages of business startup.\(^\text{14}\) Their programmes include ‘Startup,’ a three-month entrepreneurship training based around starting a new business, and ‘Scale,’ a training programme for existing business leaders to acquire the skills they need to take their business to the next level. This may include loans to help them along the way, and overseas internship programmes for overseas students to work with businesses in Myanmar.

Many larger businesses and multinational corporations follow the policy of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), embracing their corporations’ responsibility for their practices and responsibility to give back to society in some way. CSR often takes the form of a business that works according to traditional practice in order to stay competitive, but is at times linked to a foundation that works independently of the business targeted at social good. For example, AirAsia has established AirAsia Foundation, which focuses on providing funding for social enterprise in Southeast Asia. The projects they have worked on include providing Cambodia Living Arts with a grant of US$68,164.36 in 2012 to fund their Plae Pakaa Project to revive and conserve traditional Cambodian performing arts. AirAsia has also provided a grant of US$29,283 to the Tonibung Renewable Energy Fund in Malaysia, which works to provide marginalized, rural communities with affordable access to clean energy while stimulating local innovation and enterprise. In Vietnam, AirAsia’s contribution included a grant of US$17,143 to the Thien Chi Bamboo Bicycle Workshop, which provides full-time employment through a bamboo bicycle production workshop for dragon fruit farmers whose income is seasonal. They also fund healthcare and education programmes for the poor and ethnic minority groups in southeastern Vietnam.\(^\text{15}\)

VinaCapital has gone from setting up a company foundation to establishing an NGO that is linked to the company. VinaCapital Foundation is a separate not-for-profit organisation that draws on VinaCapital Group’s expertise while remaining free and independent to direct and implement its own development projects that address children’s social, economic, and environmental issues in Vietnam.\(^\text{16}\) Some of the programmes that they run are Heartbeat Vietnam, which provides life-saving heart operations to some of Vietnam’s poorest children along with grants for nutrition and transportation. Through an initiative called Instruments in Hand, they have donated over US $820,000 since 2007 to supply 3,506 pieces of medical equipment to hospitals in Vietnam. A Brighter Path, another of their programmes provide mentorship and support for disadvantaged ethnic minority girls through a seven-year scholarship.\(^\text{17}\)

There are also businesses that put social responsibility at the core of what they do. These businesses see supporting causes that concern them and their consumers as very important and make sure that their business practices are aligned to their cause. This can take the form of creating sustainable and environmentally friendly products, or sourcing their labour ethically. Unilever, which has a huge presence in Asia, builds its mission around sustainable living. They are aware of the new strains that the world is being put under due to issues such as climate change, the resulting issues of lack of food and natural disasters such as floods, and rising populations. Unilever believes that because so many people around the world use

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\(^{12}\) http://danielfooddiary.com/2013/10/31/eighteenchefs/

\(^{13}\) http://www.digitaldividedata.com/impact

\(^{14}\) http://opportunitiesnow.org/about/

\(^{15}\) http://www.airasiafoundation.com/Projects/

\(^{16}\) http://vinacapitalfoundation.org/about-us/

\(^{17}\) http://vinacapitalfoundation.org/about-us/our-impact/
their products, they have the opportunity to create a new sustainable business model. This model includes ensuring that their products are made with raw materials from sustainable sources so that the environment can be safe guarded for future generations. In 2010 the company launched the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, which aims to double the size of the company while reducing their environmental footprint, and increasing their social impact.18

The Body Shop is known for having ethical consumerism at the heart of their business. They were one of the first cosmetic companies to ensure that none of the ingredients in their products were tested on animals. They were also one of the first to promote fair trade with third world economies. Similar to the business mission of Anita Roddick, founder of Body Shop, entrepreneur, Dylan Wilk, together with his Filipino wife, Anna Meloto set up Human Nature in the Philippines to create natural cosmetics produced from Filipino ingredients bought at a fair price. To support farmers, Human Nature works with community farming cooperatives and provides training, equipment and funds to produce high-value crops like lemongrass, citronella and virgin coconut oil. As the capacity of these cooperatives increases, they become sustainable community-based enterprises that are integrated directly into the Human Nature supply chain. The company also collaborates with community development organizations to provide additional support to the local cooperatives in the areas of education and health. Human Nature has partnered with seven community cooperatives and pays farmers a living wage for their work, superior to the market wage.

Civil Society Leaders

Various types of societal leaders can be found in the civil sector. Philanthropy often comes from wealthy business people who are looking to give back to society. Often they will donate large amounts of money to support the work of charities, or set up their own foundations to channel money into helping a particular cause. Indonesian business tycoons such as Ciputra and Mochtar Riady, for instance, have contributed immensely to a number of social causes including education. There are many Riady institutes and buildings in university campuses across Asia. The Universitas Ciputra in Indonesia caters to tens of thousands of students keen to develop business management and entrepreneurial skills in Surabaya. The Lee Foundation has also played a significant part in the education sector in Singapore. Their contributions include public institutions for education such as the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine at the Nanyang Technological University, the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University and the endowment of scholarships for the financially needy across many schools and tertiary institutions in Singapore.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) were the earliest to play a part in alleviating social problems at a national level. Usually set up by ordinary citizens, NGOs or NPOs may be funded by governments, foundations, businesses, or private persons.

Radion International is a humanitarian relief and development agency dedicated to serving the most vulnerable and marginalised communities in Chiang Mai and other remote parts of Thailand. It currently works amongst hill tribe communities spanning across 120 km in land distance. Set up by a former army officer, Eugene Wee, its international headquarters are in Singapore, supported by a country office in Chiang Mai and a field office in Phetchabun in Thailand. The organisation works to reach oppressed and needy communities through practical actions such as community development work and direct relief intervention.

Another NGO, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) was founded by Nelson Belo, a reporter who used to risk life and limb to cover the efforts of the Timorese guerillas in the hills who were fighting to liberate their country from the Indonesians. FM is the only Timorese Civil Society Organisation (CSO), which is mandated to provide monitoring, research and reporting on the Timor-Leste security sector. FM’s mission is to assist in increasing the legitimacy and capacity of the Timorese security sector through citizen participation in the development of relevant legislation, policies and procedures.

Patronized by the second wife of the Sultan of Brunei and run by former senior civil servant, Dato Alimin Wahab, Pusat Ehsan Al-Hajjah Mariam is the largest NGO in Brunei. Children with special needs, specifically, children with autism, are often seen as individuals that lack a formal education and care from the general Bruneian society. NGOs like Pusat Ehsan Al-Hajjah Mariam are making solid steps to give opportunities of education and vocational training, widening the activities to improve the children’s motor and soft skills. The NGO raises funds on its own through charity walks and golf, and channels these to providing education, rehabilitation and pre-vocational and vocational training programmes for individuals with special needs. Pusat Ehsan’s partners include private agencies such as La Vida, the first of its kind in Brunei to offer playgroup sessions that help children with special needs, with their early years development through games and activities as well as social interaction with other children. The children have to be accompanied by their parents and

18 http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/
they participate in the activities together. It is one of the objectives of La Vida to motivate and inspire parents to help and learn together with their special needs children, thereby strengthening their parent-child relationships.
Societal Leadership and Cross-sector Collaboration

One of the main factors that contribute to the success of SIOs is the collaboration between sectors when engaging in social impact work. Every impactful SIO works with partners who play a vital role in their supply chain or provide additional support and work for their beneficiaries. Tri-sector collaboration, in these instances happens when businesses, the social sector and/or government agencies play a part to resolve a complex problem. Increasingly, media and academia also have been found to play a significant role in resolving societal issues in such cross-sector collaboration.

The Red Whistle, founded by Niccolo Cosme, a Filipino photographer, seeks to empower and inspire communities to band together against HIV and AIDS. In 2011, together with advertising agency TBWA\SMP, The Red Whistle launched its “I am Living with HIV” awareness campaign, which tapped Niccolo’s contacts from the local arts, culture, show-business, and political scene, such as actors Gretchen Barretto, and Paulo Avelino; activist Carlos Celdran; musician Rico Blanco; politician Risa Hontiveros; and senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago. The organisation went on to launch a music festival, produced a short film directed by Cannes award-winning film director Brillante Mendoza, and kicked off its #SaveSexy campaign which emphasises the importance of being conscious of one’s health and HIV status, confident with one’s body enough to protect it, and comfortable talking about sex and HIV. In April 2015, the organisation held a competition for volunteers in Boracay, a beach destination where young people flock during Labour Day weekend. The event was promoted by its newest celebrity ambassadors Solenn Heussaff, Dominic Roque, and Tom Rodriguez, and has been heavily shared on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In the event dubbed as the #SaveSexy Lifeguards Laboracay Race, the volunteers educated people on HIV and AIDS. Using their smartphones, they approached beachgoers on the basics of HIV and urged them to get tested. In addition, the volunteers also encouraged people to post about the campaign on their Instagram accounts to amplify the reach of the campaign further. The event culminated in a march where about 300 people participated to raise awareness. To date, the campaign has reached millions of people online, as reported by social analytics platform Keyhole.co.

On a wider scale, United in Diversity (UID), a not-for-profit organisation in Indonesia works intimately with Indonesian leaders from business, government and civil society. Founded in 2003, UID has galvanised leaders, even from media and academic, to start a new dialogue of responsibility and agree on concrete actions to address the root causes of many of Indonesia’s social problems. Their international conference was launched against intense adversity in the backdrop of distrustful sentiments as well as international travel warnings a year after the 2002 Bali bombing. “Indonesia needed its diverse communities and the world to join hands, heads and hearts in healing and rebuilding in Bali and as a whole nation”, says Cherie Nursalim, one of the key drivers of UID19. Three heads of states, from then President Megawati to former President Gus Dur and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, participated in the UID Forum in Bali and voiced their aspirations toward an Indonesia reunited in diversity. MIT Sloan then Deans Lester Thurow, Alan White and faculty were present to show their commitment and support along with other global institutions such as the IMF, European Union, and renowned gurus such as Alvin Toffler, and Heidi Toffler. Leaders of diverse religions and faiths were also present at the Artists for a Night evening for joint prayers with 400 participating delegates.

During the Asian Tsunami in 2004, UID contributed to international relief efforts, and rebuilt a village for 300 families in Sirombu, in partnership with Prince Albert of the Monaco Asia Society, Indonesian YCAB Foundation, and the Nias community and local government. Their flagship nine-month executive programme, IDEAS, is dedicated to leadership grooming for emerging Indonesia leaders, and works in partnership with MIT’s Sloan School. Participants include representatives from

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19 United in Diversity: Ten Years of Building Trust for a Common Future. May 2014 newsletter.
diverse sectors, age group, cultures, religions, and even nationalities with the same hope of bettering Indonesia and society, who will have to present a social project they have collaborated with others on upon graduation.

In Laos, Population Services International (PSI) works with the National Tuberculosis Centre to improve the lives of the Lao people by bringing the private sector into already established national programmes. By integrating in this cross-sectorial way, existing private clinics are enlisted to expand tuberculosis (TB) services to even the most remote and vulnerable populations. Historically, these populations have poor access to care under the public health system and may turn to private care of dubious quality. In 2010, PSI launched a network of social franchise clinics called Sun Quality Health to initiate this expansion. As of now, over 50 private sector providers in 12 provinces have been trained and equipped by PSI to offer TB services in their communities. This model has dramatically increased the number of places where free, high quality TB diagnosis and treatment are available to patients. Thousands of patients have been screened for TB but are also able to receive other forms of care, including family planning and management of childhood illness, thus improving overall health.

Finally, Border Areas Development Association (BDA) in Yangon adopts a multi-sectorial approach to “uplift the socio-economic lives of people in border and rural areas”20. To raise the standard of living of indigenous races, BDA implements education, health, agriculture and income generation programmes drawing upon the resources of international NGOs such as UNICEF, UN-Habitat, ASEAN Health Taskforce, Oxfam, CARE Myanmar and AusAid. Since 2007, BDA has set up extended and continuous learning projects in Shan State, Mandalay and Magwe regions. They have established health clinics in the Kokant and Yangon regions and organized medical missions to border territories such as Mon State, Rakhine State and Ayarwaddy Region with the Rector of the Institute of Medicine, consultants, specialists and nurses on board, to treat thousands of patients. With the support of local governments, BDA has also successfully implemented projects such as the Rehabilitation and Restoration of Mangroves, as well as Emergency Preparedness and Response training to help victims of natural disasters. To quote, Chairman of BDA, U Maung Maung Soe Tint, a former senior education officer and diplomat, “this multi-sectorial approach adopted by BDA would not have been possible without the wide network of cross-sector partners that has been established over the years”.

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Some Deliberations

This study has delineated the following characteristics that differentiate societal leaders and SIOs that exercise societal leadership:

- Societal leaders engage with people in communities they work in with a ‘by the people, for the people’ approach.
- The attitude of societal leaders that make an impact is a long-term commitment to a specific place, with the aim to equip locals to be their own societal leaders.
- Societal leaders often focus on a specific social issue in a community, targeting the most vulnerable people in society to leverage other social benefits.
- Societal leaders’ engagement with other sectors, such as government and business, is characterised by their support of existing support systems, and incentivising partners to provide better services and take responsibility for particular issues.

The causal conditions that have led to the setting up of SIOs, no matter their form and types, include factors such as a social need, an inequality, a social injustice (and hence a desire to right the wrong or alleviate the suffering of those who have been victims of circumstances), a threat either natural or man-made (such as the haze or the need for conservation of natural resources) and in many instances in Southeast Asia, the failure of the state to provide the basic service expected of them.

SIOs work within their social contexts and the basis for the SIOs’ choice of strategies could be dependent on a few factors. Some countries are in a state of political transition and this necessitates work on security, social justice and equity (especially for women and minority races). Some SIOs are guided by the vision of the founders to attend to unmet social needs such as alleviating poverty, or providing for basic education and skills training for youth. Yet others work to reconcile communities with their past, as well as to themselves, so that peace and harmony can prevail to bring about social and economic progress. The varying influences on strategy as well as the business model adopted by SIOs include the amount of funding they have, the existing competences of their team, as well as the level of cross-sector support and partnerships available.

Within the constraints of available resources and the socio-political contexts they operate in, SIOs create impact in a variety of ways. They could be involved in starting mass movements or advocacy programmes. They could provide solutions through a social enterprise or charity, mount education and training programmes or generate awareness through journals or media (including social media) channels. Their efforts often lead to positive social outcomes such as skills enhancement, education provision, job creation, sustained efforts at environmental protection, improved healthcare, poverty alleviation, better infrastructural support for villages and communities as well as enhanced peace and security.

Societal leadership requires that SIOs create value and impact for the betterment of society. This has to be a sustained effort rather than a one-off solution. Among the many societal leaders that we have met, many are personally invested in their SIO. Many stay to run their organisation and own the operational responsibilities. While some focus on providing direct relief, others work towards systemic changes by focusing more on frameworks and a sustainable model.

Much less has been said in this study about governments and working with governments to achieve societal impact. This is because within the Southeast Asian contexts, NGOs, social enterprises, businesses, media and academia often have to navigate the governmental restrictions, corruption or bureaucracies to achieve their goals. The NGO laws in certain countries such as Lao PDR are intentionally designed to control and shape the activities of agencies outside of governmental oversight, especially international NGOs. Foreign agencies have also to tread carefully in socialist regimes such as Myanmar and Vietnam where the government still expects to exercise strong local control. The case of the Sultan of Brunei’s implementation of sharia law has also had a dampening
effect on international human rights groups. Just as we have showcased the SIOs that have succeeded in making an impact within their social setting, there would also have been many which have met with frustration and failure.

On a different note, with reference to forms of societal leaders, increasingly, there have been expectations on the part of universities and educational institutions in Southeast Asia to play a bigger role in engendering societal impact. As an extension of the social mission of the Singapore Management University, the Institute for Societal Leadership was set up to amplify the work of societal leaders and social catalysts, as well as for leadership capacity development. Universities in the developed world have long practised and established such institutes, which are often supported by foundations, with the objective of advancing thought leadership in social policies and improving communities. Universities have vast resources, research capabilities and extensive networks. They are well positioned to prepare students for the complex issues confronting society, and provide them with the knowledge, platforms and skills to further the public good. And it is only a matter of time before more universities throughout Southeast Asia take up a focus on establishing such programmes that strive to make a difference in society.

Lastly, an aspect of the work of SIOs that this paper has not dealt with is benchmarking. To measure the impact of a societal leader or the effectiveness of an SIO, one would necessarily have to come up with a matrix that will examine outcomes measured against goals, governance structures, and operational efficiencies, as well as the leadership of an SIO. The advantage of SIOs being able to perform well on such matrices lies in their added credibility with funders as well as with government agencies. Benchmarking would also result in the sharing of best practices and stronger accountability on the part of SIOs. Currently, there is no agreed upon matrix to measure the impact of SIOs, and thus it may be timely to develop one.
Conclusion

Southeast Asia is one of the fastest growing populations in the world. Many problems continue to plague countries in the region, such as poverty, poor governance on the part of ruling parties, poor physical infrastructure, low education levels, and unskilled labour, all of which impede economic growth. The persistent social challenges within Southeast Asia necessitates a new type of leadership which draws upon collaboration across different sectors, with varying degrees of vested interests within the community, in order to play a role in improving the livelihood of the community. Societal leadership is the term we are giving to this new type of leadership and societal leaders are those who are willing to step up, to own the change and make the difference.
Annex

List of Social Impact Organisations Mentioned (In Alphabetical Order):

1. Air Asia Foundation (Malaysia)
2. Body Shop (International)
3. Border Areas Development Association (Myanmar)
4. Centre for Counseling, Research and Empowering Community (Hanoi, Vietnam)
5. Daughters of Tomorrow (Singapore)
6. Digital Divide Data (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
7. Dignity Kitchen (Singapore)
8. Documentation Center of Cambodia (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
9. Eighteen Chefs (Singapore)
10. Epic Homes (Malaysia)
11. Friends International (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
12. Fundasaun Mahein (Dili, Timor Leste)
13. General Electric (Yangon, Myanmar)
14. HealthServe (Singapore)
15. Human Nature (Manila, Philippines)
16. Humana Child Aid Society Sabah (Malaysia)
17. Lee Foundation (Singapore)
18. La Vida (Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei)
19. Mochtar Riady Foundation (Indonesia)
20. Opportunities Now (Yangon, Myanmar)
21. Organization for Building Community Resources (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)
22. Penang Institute (Malaysia)
23. PETRA (North Sumatra, Indonesia)
24. Population Services International (Vientiane)
25. Proximity Designs (Yangon, Myanmar)
26. PT PLN (North Sumatra, Indonesia)
27. Pusat Ehsan (Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei)
28. Radion International (Chiang Mai, Thailand)
29. SG Enable (Singapore)
30. Tea Talk Café (Hanoi, Vietnam)
31. The Red Whistle (Philippines)
32. Thai Social Enterprise Office (Thailand)
33. Transportation for All (Thailand)
34. Transient Workers Count Too (Singapore)
35. Unilever (International)
36. Universitas Ciputra (Indonesia)
37. United in Diversity (Indonesia)
38. VinaCapital Foundation (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)
39. Yangon Bakehouse (Yangon, Myanmar)
40. YCAB (Jakarta, Indonesia)
41. XSProject (Jakarta, Indonesia)