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Social Space Editorial

Chi Chiu Tan

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EDITORIAL

SOCIAL SPACE

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EDITORIAL TEAM

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Dr Tan Chi Chiu

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LIEN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

9th Floor,
SMU Administration Building
81 Victoria Street
Singapore 188065
Tel: +65 6828 0821
Email: liencentre@smu.edu.sg
Website: www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg

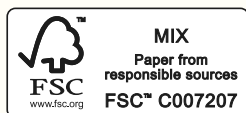
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At the National Day Rally on 18 August 2013, the Prime Minister of Singapore radically redesigned the compact between the people and the government. In a speech that was widely lauded as breathtaking and game-changing, PM Lee Hsien Loong articulated sweeping changes to policies on many aspects of life in Singapore, notably in the areas of education, health care and housing. Everything within the government's capability will be done to mitigate the effects of the widening income gap, level up and ensure the social mobility of all groups. In a country famous for hard-headed economic and social policies over its 48 years of nationhood, with its emphasis on meritocracy, self and community help rather than dependence on the state, the left-leaning and redistributive flavour of the government's new policies surprised many, but clearly warmed the hearts of those whose passion is for social equity.

PM Lee said: "We must now make a strategic shift in our approach to nation-building. ... Today, the situation has changed. If we rely too heavily on the individual, their efforts alone will not be enough, especially among the vulnerable like the low-income families, like the elderly. And there are some things which individuals cannot do on their own and there are other things which we can do much better together. **So we must shift the balance. The community and the Government will have to do more to support individuals. The community can and must take more initiative, organising and mobilising ourselves, solving problems, getting things done.**"

The Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI) is heartened by PM Lee's breadth of vision. The government, in pursuing hard-headed economic policies, previously believed (as did President John F. Kennedy, to whom this quote is most commonly attributed) that "a rising tide lifts all boats." However, a rising tide cannot lift the boats that have already sunk! The effort required to raise a sunken boat is clearly much greater than that to keep a leaky, but still viable boat above the water line. The government has a new emphasis on helping the categories of people who are pretty much scuttled in the old order, to lend a hand to prevent submergence. Social innovators and social service providers will in the new order have a less steep and arduous path towards successfully helping their constituents.

Traditionally, despite keeping state welfare provisions low, targeted and stringently applied, the government has not really encouraged the non-government sector to assume as large a role as it could. Where the government has worked through non-governmental organisations, these have been largely relegated to the role of “sub-contractor” in the harnessing of civic resources and delivering services. Indeed, the government has steadfastly refused to acknowledge the validity of “civil society,” preferring the construction of “civic society” which is much more docile. But in recent years, the government has admitted that it does not have all the answers and the people sector must help more. With the government’s new approach, we hope that the substrate on which we can foster collaborations and create solutions for social needs will be immensely fertilised. LCSi sees greater optimism in a new, more equitable, inclusive and vibrant society, in which addressing the needs of vulnerable communities is regarded as the responsibility of all. We believe engaged citizens, a strong civil society, a sensitised government and socially responsible corporations can together drive positive social change.

LCSi intends to ride this new wave in our work to encourage all parties to proactively and holistically identify, respond to and address needs by leveraging one another’s strengths. We believe in the power of a sincere, apolitical collaborative spirit to make social innovation not something arcane and esoteric, but something natural and part of the fabric of society.

Our specific contributions to society will centre on two core themes: We will foster socially innovative solutions by strengthening social sector organisations to become better advocates as well as effective partners with business and government. We will also labour at the intersection of the three sectors to catalyse social innovation through cross-sector collaboration.

“WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF A SINCERE, APOLITICAL COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT TO MAKE SOCIAL INNOVATION ... SOMETHING NATURAL AND PART OF THE FABRIC OF THE SOCIETY.”

Amongst our busy slate of programmes and projects, one key initiative in the coming years is the “Social Collaboratory” which is a process designed as a powerful facilitative pathway that will harness the insight, imagination and initiative of social sector collaborators with the active participation of government and business. By together asking the right questions in addressing social needs and conducting research that can inform potential solutions, we can craft prototypes that can be tested and determine the best solutions to be rolled out across society. The Collaboratory thus fits well into PM Lee’s vision of harnessing community initiatives to solve problems and getting things done.

This edition of *Social Space* has much in it to help LCSi and its partners everywhere to better understand the needs of society as well as to achieve collective impact through knowledge of methodologies at the cutting edge of social innovation. The contributions are incisive and insightful, with perspectives spanning veteran workers at the coalface to academics and practitioners in the myriad fields of social innovation. ■



Dr Tan Chi Chiu is a gastroenterologist and Managing Director of Gastroenterology & Medicine International. Besides his chairmanship of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, he is also vice-chairman of SATA CommHealth, and board member of the National Youth Achievement Awards. He is an elected council member and chairman of the Medical Ethics Committee of the Singapore Medical Council. He has won numerous Singaporean and international military and civilian awards for his global humanitarian, community, and youth development work.