

Social Welfare in Singapore: Rediscovering Poverty, Reshaping Policy

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Abstract:

After three decades of spectacular economic growth, poverty was thought to have disappeared by the 1990s in Singapore. However, in the last decade, increasing inequality and stagnation of wages of bottom earners have resulted in an expansion of social welfare policies. This article discusses the evolution of social welfare policies in Singapore in light of its socio-economic trends, its welfare philosophy and structure, and the role of social work.

Keywords: poverty, inequality, Singapore, social welfare, social work

Introduction

Income inequality in Singapore is wide and widening. Singapore's Gini Index reported in the World Development Report 2009 was the second highest among developed countries. This was a worrying statistic, especially in light of the fact that inequality has never been low in Singapore and has been on an upward trend in the last three decades (Ng, 2010a). At its lowest in the late 1970s, the Gini Index was above .36. In 2010, it has reached .48 (Department of Statistics, 2011).

In the 2010 budget, the government launched a campaign of inclusive growth. Where in the past it was criticized for achieving high growth at the cost of leaving its own citizens behind (Lim, 2009), it was determined to tackle inequality and low-income issues (Ministry of Finance, 2010). Part of the inclusive growth strategy included a productivity drive combined with increased levies on hiring foreign workers. In recent years, the social safety net for bottom earners was also expanded.

This article will analyse social welfare policies in Singapore from three perspectives. First, they are discussed with respect to local and global socio-economic trends. Second, they are considered in light of the philosophical underpinnings of social welfare and structural characteristics of social services in Singapore. Third, they are viewed through the social work lens, as the role of the social work profession in social welfare programmes is considered.

Local and Global Socio-economic Trends

There is no official measure of poverty in Singapore. An indicative level might be household monthly income of S\$1,500 per month, which is the criterion level for most financial assistance programmes. Comparing \$1,500 to the household income distribution reported in the Income Trends Reports by the Department of Statistics places the percentage of households deemed sufficiently poor to qualify for government financial assistance at about 10%, although the official government position is that financial assistance is targeted at the bottom 20% of households.

Another measure of poverty often used is half of median income. This is made difficult by the reporting of income distribution in deciles in Singapore. Making an assumption that mean

incomes reported for each decile is at the midpoint of each decile, about 20% of households in Singapore are poor by this measure. The percentage might be creeping up. Table 1 shows this possible trend. It gives my computed mean incomes of households at half the median and at the 20th percentile. These means were computed by taking the mean of reported incomes of adjacent deciles in the Income Trends Report. For example, the mean 20th percentile income is the mean of the reported value in the 11th to 20th decile and the 21st to 30th decile. Taking the ratio of half the median (column 1) to 20th percentile (column 2) shows that the ratio is on an upward trend from below 1 to above 1. The differences are however very small.

Table 1. Estimated Household Incomes at Half of Median and 20th Percentile

Year	(1) Half of median income	(2) Income at 20th percentile	(3)=(1)/(2)
2000	2226	2416	0.92
2001	2296	2376	0.97
2002	2228	2288	0.97
2003	2269	2293	0.99
2004	2288	2370	0.97
2005	2428	2447	0.99
2006	2493	2507	0.99
2007	2697	2639	1.02
2008	3047	2952	1.03
2009	2988	2966	1.01
2010	3226	3219	1.00

Notes: Authors' computations from Department of Statistics (2011a).

The creep up in the percentage of households falling below half of median income is consistent with the trend of widening inequality. It also resonates with general sentiments as reflected in the print and online media. In 2001, Mahbubahni wrote that "there are no homeless, destitute or starving people in Singapore. Poverty has been eradicated". However, in recent years, newspaper headlines on the "underclass" (Othman, 2010) and "homeless" (Leong, 2010) have surfaced. In the past two years, Singapore has also started three temporary shelters for homeless people.

What happened? Part of the problem originates from global forces, but the extent of the disparity--in Singapore and elsewhere--has also been attributed to government policies that have

favoured capital owners and wealthy individuals (Lim & Lee, 2010; Packer, 2011). All over the world, problems of rising inequality have been drawing media attention. For example, the viral spread of the occupy Wall Street demonstrations to other parts of the world such as Tokyo and Melbourne bear testament to the growing anger towards an unequal world. Commentators have supported the need to look deeper into the root of the protests, which were traced to government support of rouse financial and corporate moguls yet inactivity in helping the unemployed and the poor (e.g. Chanda, 2011).

Hence the global trends of widening inequality have been attributed in large part to globalization, where the reach of global markets and profits have been said to deepen the pockets of the super-rich whose net worths are multiple times of national coffers. At the other end, the easy relocation of low-skilled processes to cheaper destinations and labour mobility of low-skilled workers are depressing wages of low-earning jobs. International organizations have warned of the limitations of neo-liberal growth-centric policies at enriching the masses in such a globalized context (United Nations, 2010; Klasen, 2010).

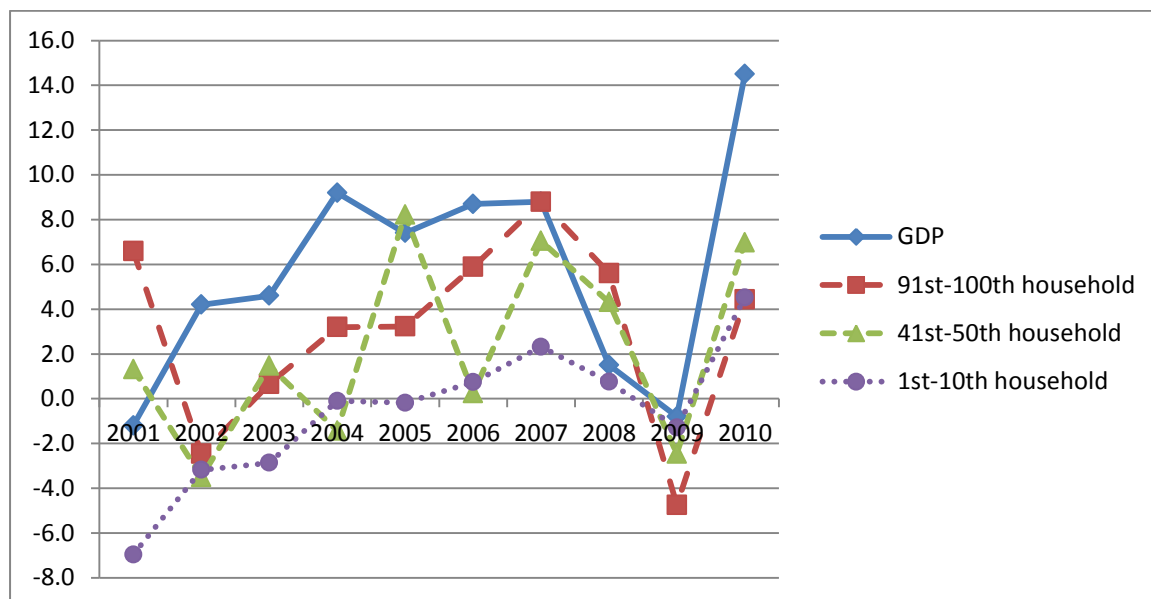
This seems to be the case in Singapore. Singapore's miracle development transformed a once small fishing village into a first world global city, where the fast pace of economic growth has put Singapore's GDP per capita among the top in the world. The miracle development was attributed to neo-liberal policies that went against the tide of protectionism in the 1970s. With government incentives for foreign investors, free trade policies, and heavy investments in physical and social infrastructure for a conducive business environment, trickle down effects of high growth uplifted the lives of the masses. GDP per capita multiplied from S\$1,580 in 1965 to S\$59,813 in 2010 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2011).

However, the rapid economic and social development enjoyed in the early days has become less evenly distributed as other countries opened up their economies and global economic competition is forcing Singapore up the value chain into more high-tech industries. In addition, Lim & Lee (2010) suggested that "state-led" globalization in recent years have contributed to the

disparity. They gave as examples government investments in the life sciences, gambling casinos, and high-end financial and medical services which disproportionately benefited foreign companies and foreign skilled labour more than locals.

Therefore, Singapore’s widening inequality and wage stagnation especially in the last ten years is said to be driven by globalization, skills-biased development, and neo-liberal government policies. Figure 1 illustrates the lag in household earnings growth relative to GDP growth from 2001 to 2010. First, real GDP growth (solid line with diamond marker) has been above earnings growth except during the recession years of 2001 and 2008. In 2005, the earnings of households in the 41st to 50th percentile (triangle marker) soared above GDP growth, but it quickly dipped to .2% the next year. What the lag in earnings growth behind GDP growth indicates is that gains in economic growth have not gone to wage earners, but other components of GDP such as capital owners.

Figure 1. Percentage growth in Real GDP and Real Household Earnings Per Capita, 2001-2010

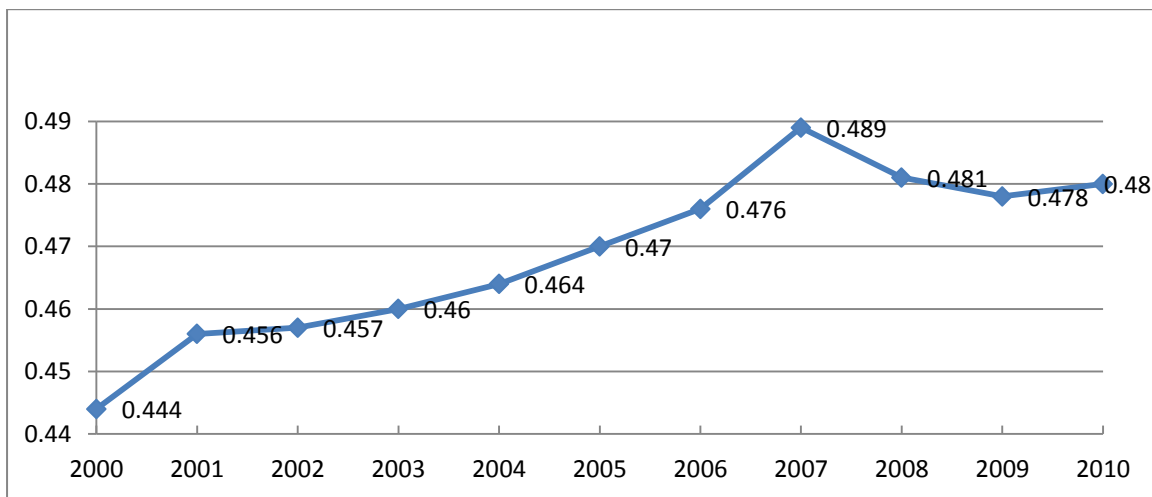


Source: Computed from Singapore Department of Statistics, various publications.
 Notes: Real GDP growth as reported by Department of Statistics Singapore. Real earnings computed by deflating household monthly earnings with Consumer Price Index.

Second, the disparity between bottom (round marker), middle, and top (square marker) earners is also evident. The earnings growth of middle households was the most volatile, at times at the top and at times at the bottom of the chart. It also looks to lag the performance of GDP growth

by a year, and with greater fluctuations. While the earnings growth of households at the top decile hovered at the top until 2008, that of bottom earning households remained the lowest. However, the growth in earnings of bottom earners has been on an upward trend, probably due to government intervention through workfare programmes (to be discussed in the next section). Therefore, besides wage earners in general reaping a smaller share of the fruits of economic growth, it is low-income earners who reap the least. This inequality is apparent in the positively sloped Gini Index chart in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Gini Coefficient in Singapore 2000-2010



Source: Department of Statistics Singapore, 2011a.

Note: Based on earnings per household member.

A further story from the two Figures is the severity of inequality during boom years, not recessionary years. Recession creates job loss for all and bunches earnings closer together, whereas economic expansion when not evenly-distributed pulls GDP growth and earnings of high earners away from bottom earners. In such a scenario, the vulnerabilities of low-income earners might be inadequately addressed. During a recession, they have to compete for financial assistance with retrenched individuals who would not have needed help if not hit by the recession. During expansion years, their plight might not be sufficiently recognized as the rest of the economy ploughs ahead.

Social Welfare Policies and Philosophy

As the general population and especially bottom earners saw less of the economic growth distributed to them, measures have been taken to expand the social safety net. However, Singapore's social welfare system continues to emphasize reliance on self and not on government aid. The generous welfare systems in Europe are frowned upon as draining on fiscal resources, which a small city state with no natural resources could ill afford. Similarly, the lack of resources and therefore the importance of human resources meant that the disincentives toward work efforts of generous welfare and high tax rates had to be avoided.

Therefore, Singapore's social safety net has been anchored on social development to enable citizens to help themselves. While the government gives little in direct monetary aid, it invests heavily in high quality public education, health care and housing. These have become institutions much emulated by other countries around the world. The main source of social security for old age is compulsory savings through the Central Provident Fund (CPF). A portion of salaried workers' wages go into CPF, which can be used for housing, acute healthcare, and tertiary education besides post-retirement withdrawal. There are of course restrictions on the use of CPF for non-retirement needs in order to safeguard CPF as mainly a source of social security in old age.

For people who fall into hard times, such as losing one's job, the government avoids giving direct monetary assistance. It provides supportive services such as highly subsidized training and job placement services, but offers no unemployment benefits. The government also subsidizes social welfare services that are provided by voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs). While new types of financial assistance programmes have been introduced (these will be discussed later), the longstanding welfare aid given directly by the government, Public Assistance (PA), is provided for applicants who are not able to work and do not have social support. This confines recipients mainly to elderly and disabled people. Therefore, the government sees itself as a supportive partner to welfare services, so that assistance is provided through a "many helping hands" approach.

However, the above developmental investments and residual help were proving inadequate in Singapore's maturing and increasingly globalized economy. Therefore, in the mid 2000s, the government rolled out workfare-based schemes, which can be broadly defined as financial assistance conditional on work. While other countries have moved from welfare to workfare, Singapore has moved from non-welfare to workfare. The main workfare programme is the Workfare Income supplement (WIS), an earnings supplement introduced in 2006 for workers who are 35 years old and above, earn less than \$1,700 per month and stay in a property with an annual value of S\$10,000 and below (Central Provident Fund, 2011). WIS payment amount depends on the recipient's age and income. Older workers get higher payouts, first rising as one's monthly wage rises, then tapering off after a monthly wage of \$1,000, and reaching \$0 at a monthly age of \$1,700. As illustration, an employee who earns \$1,000 per month receives a full-year WIS amount of \$\$1,050 if he is 40 years old and \$2,800 if he is 60 years old (Central Provident Fund, n.d.). WIS is probably the most universal form of social protection given by the government. CPF is one's own money while financial assistance schemes require that individuals apply for them and undergo means-testing. For WIS, recipients get the supplement automatically through their CPF and bank accounts as long as their records show that they meet the above criteria.

The workfare framework also includes heavily subsidized job placement programmes and training and upgrading courses. These have been in place as part of Singapore's employment support under the Ministry of Manpower. However, as the problems of employability and wage stagnation escalated, these programmes were brought under the workfare framework to enhance the assistance for low-wage earners. In the Government Budget 2010, which vowed inclusive growth, the training programmes were further enhanced with the Workfare Training Scheme (WTS), a productivity drive, and an increase in foreign workers' levy. It was important to implement the latter two in tandem. If employers were to replace cheap foreign workers with more expensive local workers, local workers must produce higher output per worker to justify their higher wages. From a position in the early 2000s that Singapore needed foreign workers to sustain growth, the language

has shifted to one that emphasizes that growth must be shared and that discrimination against locals need to be dismantled (Kor, 2011).

In 2005, a ComCare Fund was also established, through which programmes that support work and the development of children were added to the traditional support for those who were not able to work (MCYS, 2011a). Table 2 lists the three main groups of programmes under the ComCare Fund. Except for the Healthy Start Programme (HSP), which is provided by appointed VWOs, all the other ComCare programmes are disbursed through five Community Development Councils (CDCs) that serve designated neighbourhoods.

Table 2. ComCare Programmes

ComCare Enable	ComCare Self-Reliance	ComCare Grow
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Public Assistance 2. Assistive Technology Fund 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work Support Programme 2. ComCare Transitions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme 2. Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare 3. Student Care Fee Assistance 4. Healthy Start Programme

In ComCare Enable are two programmes for non-work-able recipients. This includes an Assistive Technology Fund, to provide grants for families to buy assistive devices for disabled family members, and the traditional PA. PA was expanded in 2007 and 2008, with quantum amounts raised in 2007 and 2011 and eligibility expanded in 2011 (Ministry of Finance, 2007 & 2011). Under ComCare Self-reliance are the Work Support Programme (WSP) and ComCare Transitions (CCT). WSP provides temporary financial assistance to individuals who are unemployment or have difficulty making ends meet, and CCT provides similar assistance to those who need medium-term assistance. Both WSP and CCT are available to households whose earnings are \$1,500 per month and meet other means-testing criteria (MCYS, 2011a).

Under ComCare Grow are four programmes focused on child development (MCYS, 2011b). That a range of programmes targeted at families with young children exist is indicative of the emphasis on the importance of early development in order to avoid the intergenerational transfer of

poverty. Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) subsidizes kindergarten fees, Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare (CFAC) and Student Care Fee Assistance (SCFA) provide subsidized child care to households with working parents (MCYS, 2011c). The monthly household income criteria are \$3,500 and below for KiFAS and CFAC, and \$2,500 and below for SCFA. These cut-offs had been gradually revised upward to make the assistances available to more low-income families (MCYS, 2011b). In the 2011 Government Budget, the revision upwards of the cut-off to \$3,500 for KiFAS and CFAC was slated to expand the help to the bottom 40% (Ministry of Finance, 2011). The two childcare assistances are also given only to working parents, emphasizing again the government's position that it will not help unless one is helping oneself. No free lunch.

The final ComCare Grow programme, the Healthy Start Programme (HSP), is a "holistic early intervention programme for children from 'at-risk' families as well as their children". Assistance include counseling, family support, and parenting skills programmes besides financial help in early education and childcare. To qualify for HSP, families are assessed by the participating agencies besides meeting the income criterion of \$1,500 per month (MCYS, 2011b).

In sum, in the last decade, Singapore's social welfare has experienced substantial transformation. Workfare and child-centric programmes were added to the main development pillars of education, housing, healthcare; the CPF; and limited social assistance programmes. Besides the programmes outlined in this section, there exist also other programmes such as discretionary funds to agencies for emergency assistance, and other targeted programmes. Given the newness of the programmes, it is still too early to tell how effective the expanded social welfare has been. However, there are early indications of some effectiveness. They have prevented real wage declines and decreased the earnings gap year on year (Ng, 2011a). However, they have not reversed the increasing trend of inequality. That is, government transfers have decreased the level but not the slope of income inequality.

Going forward, some are pointing to the limitations of a continued neo-liberal regime with residual assistance. Low and Yeoh (2011) for example argued for consideration of universal social

protection and inclusive government expenditure, not merely inclusive growth. Even the traditional institutions of housing, education, and healthcare seem to be losing their ability as social levellers, and might even contribute to inequality (Ng, 2010b). Escalation in housing prices has triggered complaints of unaffordability of even public housing (Chia, 2010). There has been an increase in demand for rental flats by low-income families (Chin & Sudderuddin, 2011), and the rise in homelessness in Singapore has been attributed to households being evicted due to inability to service their mortgage (Au Yong, 2010).

The education system is also increasingly stratified as students of different abilities are placed on different tracks at primary school leaving and wealthier families are over-represented in more elite schools with larger budgets (Ng 2011b; Chang, 2011). Similar to education, basic healthcare is largely accessible. However, the healthcare sector is stratified with government restructured hospitals and private hospitals providing different levels of specialist care and different ward classes. That people generally have to pay for medical care out-of-pocket through the Medisave in the CPF or health insurance means that lower income earners with low amounts of CPF monies might not be able to afford treatments for chronic or acute illnesses.

Several years into workfare programmes, policy makers are also discovering that to truly uplift families out of poverty, more needs to be done than merely dishing out financial assistance and requiring that people work. In a complex globalized economy where one's main income source is employed work under rigid work conditions, temporary financial aid will not help recipients overcome the barriers that compromise their ability to perform at work. Besides the need for education and skills, low-income individuals often also face other challenges such as housing problems, a criminal record, a physical or mental health problem, another family member with a health problem, or children's behavioural or academic problems (Ng, 2011c). These are issues which create barriers to work but which cannot be resolved by temporary financial aid.

Welfare-to-work analysts are proposing that workfare programmes address these barriers to employment in order to achieve the impact of improving earnings and livelihoods (Danziger, 2010).

Currently, evaluations of welfare-to-work programmes in other countries show that the programmes have successfully decreased welfare numbers and increased employment rates. However, true impact in terms of sustained improvement in earnings has been uncertain (Hamilton, 2002; Tang, 2010; Department for Work and Pensions, 2008; Cancian & Ybarra, 2008; Michalopoulos, 2005).

A second generation of workfare programmes seems to be yielding some success. In the United States and the United Kingdom, Employment Retention and Advancement (ERAs) have been introduced that do not only mandate work, but help participants in post-employment issues and also encourage them to move to higher paying jobs. Randomized evaluations of ERAs indicated that the more successful programmes might be more intensive, with greater engagement between case officer and participant, and more help given in retention and advancement activities (Hendra et al., 2010; Greenberg & Morris, 2005).

In Singapore, efforts are underway to provide more integrated services. On October 20, 2011, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a whole-of-government approach to helping those who require assistance. The whole-of-government approach strives towards "no wrong door", so that regardless of which door applicants knock on, the required services and follow-ups will be provided even if they are not available at the agency that the individual first approached. More integration across programmes and ministries will assist recipients more holistically. It remains to be seen the extent of integration that this initiative will be able to achieve, for example to the extent of bringing several services into one programme such as in the case of ERAs.

Larger than programme-specific changes or inter-ministry collaborations, there have been increasing calls for rethinking of the fundamental principles of social welfare in Singapore. For example, Mathi & Mohamed (2011) suggested a review of the concept of self-reliance. Similarly, Baskaran, Ho, Low, Tan, Vadaketh & Yeoh (2012) suggested a new social compact that is more compatible with the current realities of inequality. To them, the new social compact would require a mindset change in rebalancing the role of the government and the market, and implementing more redistributive policies that place the well-being of citizens at the centre. As sentiments on the

ground shift in response to the new realities experienced by Singaporeans, there will be increasing political pressures on the government to also soften its anti-welfare rhetoric and provide a more expansive welfare response.

Role of Social Work

Social Work too needs to rethink its role in social welfare. The origin of Social Work is often traced to the Elizabethan Poor Laws in England. Early developments of the profession also included the Charity Organization Societies (COSs) which organized ways to assess needs for more effective delivery of aid and settlement houses that served community children and women in poverty. While the COS focused on individual case work and the settlement houses focused on addressing structural factors, the main population served in these two movements were economically poor individuals (Farley, Smith & Boyle, 2006). Working with poor individuals is therefore at the heart of social work. It is time that the social work profession returns to poverty alleviation as its core work.

As Singapore has rediscovered poverty, Social Workers are already in the centre of the interventions. In the medical sector, Social Workers are involved in the assessment and provision of Medifund, given to applicants who show eligibility for their inability to afford medical treatment. In community-based social services, Family Service Centres (FSCs) are one-stop centres for all kinds of family needs, and most of the services are carried out by Social Workers. Hence, a main work of Social Workers in FSCs is counselling, casework and referral to other services for low-income families. Referral is two-way, where Community Development Councils (CDCs), which disburse the government financial assistances, refer clients to FSCs for counselling and case work, and FSCs refer them to the CDCs for financial assistance.

The FSCs and other specialized VWOs (e.g. youth agencies) also implement some financial assistance programmes themselves or handle the social aspect of a social assistance programme. An example of the former is the School Pocket Money Fund (SPMF) started by the local main newspaper the Straits Times. The Fund has generated generous donations from other parties, and is managed

by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) (Han, Rothwell & Lin, 2011). It provides a monthly allowance to low-income families that are to be used for children's school expenses such as textbooks and transport. An example of FSCs handling the social aspect of a social assistance programme is the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE). This is a targeted programme that supports low-income families to invest in their future with financial incentives to keep their families small, grants towards housing payments, and supplements to education expenses for themselves and their children. There is also a mentoring component to the programme which is carried out by FSCs (MCYS, 2011d).

From the examples above, it is clear that a large portion of Social Work in Singapore is with low-income individuals and families. Social Workers form the main pool of foot soldiers providing the much needed financial and case services for low-income individuals and their families. Moving ahead, as the socioeconomic trends of global economic restructuring and an ageing population increase the complexity of working with bottom earners, Social Workers should be at the forefront of these challenges; they can and should play an active role in the the planning, implementation and evaluation of social welfare policies and programmes. Currently, social workers are the frontline staff providing the care and assistance. However, they are under-represented in three key areas.

First, Social Work is under-represented in the main social welfare programmes. While many of the clients of Social Workers are low-income, the main social assistance programmes are staffed by case officers who do not need to have Social Work training. Neither do Social Workers involve in job placement or training services. This dichotomy where Social Workers manage the social issues and other professionals handle the financial issues is creating a gap where each side works only on part of the problem that ultimately falls short. Economic assistance staff do not take into consideration the wider life situations of clients and so are not able to address these other barriers that prevent them from taking up training, completing training if registered, and then starting and keeping jobs. Social Workers on the other hand are often confined to counselling of family issues without adequately addressing the financial or work troubles that often might be the root of the

problem. In fact, as a partner in the ComCare Local Network that also disburses some of the financial assistance programmes, Social Workers act as gatekeepers of national resources rather than advocates on behalf of needy clients. There have been incidents of advocacy on a case-by-case basis, but under the current structure, Social Workers' roles are to provide the assistance, not advocacy.

With the direction towards more integrated services, Social Workers' roles can expand. Case management in welfare work has been observed to be mainly monitoring for compliance towards an action plan (Doolittle & Riccio, 1992). It lacks the supportive element in Social Work. McDonald & Chenoweth (2006) highlighted the ambiguous and contradictory role of Social Work case management in the advent of workfare in Australia. They gave examples where case managers were constrained to enforce work outcomes with limited discretion to address social challenges confronting clients.

The Social Work approach can and should be adopted in the case management of financial assistance programmes. Ideally, the programmes can be stipulated to be provided by Social Workers. However, manpower shortage prevents this ideal state. A second-best alternative might be to provide Social Work case management training to welfare staff. In addition, programmes can be modified where Social Workers play a larger role in informing the other parts of the programme. In Singapore, workfare programmes can take a leaf from the disability sector, where Social Workers act as the main co-ordinator of the clients' progress, through rehabilitation, training, job placement, and post-job placement (Chung, A., personal interview, October 21, 2011).

Secondly, then, Social Work is not only under-represented in social welfare programmes; it insufficiently addresses the economic dimensions of clients' troubles. If Social Workers are to play a larger role in holistically helping clients with job issues, Social Workers should also be trained in skills to handle economic aspects of client work. It seems that Social Work curricula especially in developed countries have moved away from poverty content in favour of content on non-poor interventions such as psychosocial counselling and family therapy. The latter are vital domains which Social Work has made important contributions to. However, while Social Work has developed well in

its contributions to psychological functioning, it should not neglect its roots, which had started as a profession responding to the needs of people in poverty. Curriculum on occupational or industrial social work and on the economic aspects of social policy and interventions should be emphasized in light of the current economic realities faced by poor households.

Third, Social Work is under-represented in macro-practice such as advocacy and policy. Many have observed the increasing micro-intervention focus of Social Work as it developed as a profession (Poppo & Leighninger, 2004). In Singapore, two factors might make the muted role of Social Work in advocacy and policy more entrenched. First, a strong government under a dominant one-party rule might have diminished the need and ability of Social Workers to voice out. Second, a hierarchical and structured social service sector puts Social Workers at frontline implementation, farthest from the policy-making that is at the top of the hierarchy. Combined, the two factors create a situation where Social Workers are pre-occupied with service delivery, with limited job scope for advocacy or planning. The typical career paths for Social Work graduates become also geared towards these implementation roles, and not in policy work.

However, as problems of inequality and wage stagnation loom larger, Social Workers must step up in voicing out on behalf of the disadvantaged poor. Social Work values make it imperative that Social Workers voice out. Social Workers have direct intimate knowledge of the day-to-day struggles of families living at the bottom of society. This knowledge needs to be included in policy and planning, because the structural nature of poverty today means that much of the solution is at the policy level.

While individual Social Workers should find ways to advocate through various channels despite the service delivery orientation of their job scope, expansion of Social Work's contribution to the macro-level would require changes in Social Work education, social service delivery models, and the development of career paths. Social Workers can be better educated on policy analysis, job scopes can be less narrowly defined in terms of only casework and referral, and career paths beyond micro-practice can be more strongly recognized as Social Work. Such changes will require

commitment by and close co-operation between employers, educational institutions, the social work professional body, and the government ministry or department that has oversight of social services.

In Singapore, there is increasing recognition of a more concerted professional response to poverty. In March 2012, the Singapore Association of Social Workers organized a poverty symposium as part of the Social Workers' Day celebrations, where speakers shared about anti-poverty programmes and structural factors to poverty (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2012). In September 2012, the Department of Social Work in the National University of Singapore organized a symposium focused on the symbiosis between practice and education. At the symposium, speakers spoke about the increasing role that social workers should play in advocacy and policy (Department of Social Work, 2012). These are good initial steps, but more will have to be done to change these organizational aspects of increasing advocacy and policy work by Social Workers.

Conclusion

At the time of writing of this article, the Singapore government and the social service sector are gearing themselves for an impending recession (Tai, 2011). The poverty and inequality issues highlighted in this article are unfortunately structural and beyond recessionary cycles. While the pre-emptive measures being prepared are vital to help victims of the coming recession tide over, more systemic changes are needed to uplift those who are poor regardless of economic trends. Such changes go beyond expanding financial assistance, and might require a mindset change towards social welfare in Singapore. This includes Social Workers, who should reclaim its leading role in tackling poverty and inequality.

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