

Commentary - Case Study Sharing Session (9 Oct)

by Humairah Zainal

1) CLF LABS

2) Greater Understanding of Social Enterprises in Singapore

The case study sharing session held at Wisma MENDAKI on 9th October 2012 was the third in a series of four sessions conducted in conjunction with the Community Leaders Forum (CLF) Learning Journey. The objective of the session was to involve CLF partners in the review process on important aspects of CLF and the myriad of programmes that come under the purview of CLF. Two speakers were invited to present their case studies. The first speaker, Mr Muhd Nadim Adam, Research and Policy Officer at Yayasan Mendaki, provided an inaugural review of CLF labs since it was officially launched in 2011. The CLF labs is an initiative that has emerged out of the current CLF partnership structure and that aims to carve out an avenue for young people from youth-led organisations to translate fresh ideas into reality through the implementation of projects. The second speaker, Ms Shenaz Poonawala, Head of Employability Network at MENDAKI SENSE probed a model that could possibly be developed for budding Social Enterprises (SEs) in Singapore. Both speakers highlighted the current challenges as well as key recommendations that could be considered in order to ensure more desirable outcomes for their respective initiatives. The session was moderated by Dr AlBakri Ahmad, Dean of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) Academy.

In gauging the receptiveness of the Malay/Muslim community towards CLF labs as a tool for realising ideas that will benefit the community, Mr Muhd Nadim first identified gaps within the present operation of CLF Labs in order for them to be re-evaluated and ideally, rectified. Responses on CLF labs were garnered from members of the Steering Committee, the CLF Secretariat, individuals or groups who had previously sought funding from CLF labs, as well as Malay/Muslim youths, including those who are studying in tertiary institutions. Based on the responses gathered through interviews with these research participants, Mr Muhd Nadim highlighted two main challenges that impede the possible operationalisation of ideas that youths may already have for the community: (i) The need to increase the level of commitment by youths to CLF labs, and (ii) To promulgate the philosophy of CLF labs in a more palatable form.

Having recognised these challenges, Mr Muhd Nadim posited that a more intensive publicity drive may have to be carried out in order to galvanise youths into further action. One way to do this is to engage youths in issues that the community faces, through public education. It is hoped that

only when youths are able to internalise the social consciousness of the environment they are living in through comprehending the issues of today will a critical effect in the number of project proposals submitted to CLF Labs be observed.

In addition to increasing awareness and participation amongst youths, the current framework for CLF Labs needs to be revisited in order for it to be more palatable to youths. This includes reducing the jargons used in the current proposal guidelines in order to create initiatives for more proposals to be turned in. More relevant information on CLF Labs, including its mission and vision, also has to be made available on such social media as the CLF Labs website. Moreover, CLF Labs should also seek potential collaborations with national agencies. A more intensified outreach effort between the CLF Labs Secretariat and the Youth Development Network is one area where such collaborations could be made possible. In relation to this, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim affairs and Chairman of the CLF Steering Committee, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim put forth the idea of establishing partnerships with schools in order to create opportunities for school-going children to utilise the funds. Students who are involved in Community Involvement Programmes (CIP) may realise the potential of some of the CIP activities they are engaged in to be translated into sustainable projects. Such partnerships would help to promote a multiplier effect that would enable more youths to tap on the CLF labs platform and to ensure its sustainability.

Nonetheless, despite all the existing gaps within CLF Labs, many positive elements have emerged out of the projects that have been approved by CLF Labs thus far. Mr Saktiandi Supaat, Chairman of the CLF Labs Steering Committee, noted that successful projects were mostly those that have established partnerships with other organisations. A case in point would be a project executed in 2011 by a youth group called Windows on Work Factor (W.O.W). W.O.W conducted a full two-day programme at United World College of Southeast Asia (UWCSEA), which aims to provide post-secondary students an insight into corporate life and to equip them with project management skills. Through effective collaboration with Young AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals), W.O.W has scaled up its efforts and programme design to various institutes of higher learning. The CLF labs has also enabled some youths to tap into larger pools of youth groups upon successful implementation of their projects. The above are just some examples in which youths are able to utilise CLF Labs to realise

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their ideas into sustainable projects. Thus, these elements indicate a promising future for CLF labs in terms of its relevance and viability.

The second case study was presented by Ms Shenaz Poonawala. The key thrust of her case study lay in extrapolating the factors that have enabled successful SEs in Singapore to thrive and the drawbacks that they have faced. Ms Poonawala first outlined SEs as an innovative alternative way of looking at social needs. Justifying Singapore as her area of inquiry, she affirmed that unlike in developing and developed countries around the world, SEs are a new phenomenon in Singapore. Therefore, this should pave a way for research on an SE model that is unique to Singapore and that will enable budding SEs to emulate and succeed. Ms Poonawala also discussed four SE models that are currently used in Singapore and abroad. They are: (i) The 'Plough Back Profit' model; (ii) 'Subsidised Services'; (iii) 'Work Integration' and (iv) 'Social Needs'. Each of these four models has been designed for various purposes. The 'Plough Back Profit' model generates profits to fund the social programmes of their affiliated or parent charities. This helps VWOs or charities reduce their reliance on donations and enhance their financial sustainability. On the other hand, the 'Subsidised Services' model provides services to the needy and/or disadvantaged clients and charge commercial rates to mainstream customers. This ensures that the people who could not usually afford certain services have access to such services to improve their quality of life. The 'Work Integration' model provides skills training and/or employment opportunities to the needy and disadvantaged. This includes those who have higher than usual barriers to employment, such as ex-offenders. The skills training acquired should provide a means to reintegrate them into society and encourage them to be self-reliant. It also provides opportunities to people who may not find employment on the open market. Last but not least, the 'Social Needs' model is designed to address certain social issues and serve society's social needs, which may include community bonding, family bonding and racial harmony. While still at its infancy stage, there has been a lot of government support and commitment for SEs in Singapore. From the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS) SE fund to the setting up of SE Association, SEs are encouraged by the government such that more grants are now made available for SEs to thrive.

Ms Poonawala also shared some of the key findings from the SE Committee Report in 2007, which was

based on the SE Committee formed in 2006. She quoted a 2007 study by the Lien Foundation Centre for Social Innovation (LFCIS) on SEs in Singapore, which estimated the existence of about 150 SEs in Singapore, with two-thirds of these founded by Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) or Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). The remaining one-third were founded from the private sector, which is a positive and encouraging sign, though there can be more participation from the private sector to run SEs. The study also concluded that low-income individuals were the most common beneficiaries, with 32 out of the 94 identified SEs benefiting this group. Also, of all the SEs, 23 offer employment services while others provide skills training. Hence, there is a lot of room for SEs to thrive in Singapore. Key recommendations that emerged out of the Committee Report include the need to bring in more private sectors into SEs in order to encourage the growth of SEs, to build a pro-SE environment and to create a culture of social entrepreneurship.

Following that, in order to interrogate the model that could be emulated by budding SEs in Singapore, Ms Poonawala shared her ongoing research, which entailed in-depth interviews with four successful SEs. These SEs are namely MENDAKI SENSE, Dialogue in the Dark, Dignity Kitchen and Laksania. The aim of the research is to explore the top 10 key factors that are deemed important by the SEs. Four factors have been identified by three of the SEs as contributing to their success: (i) Access to finance and funding, with the ability to manage cash flow regarded as critical (ii) Building teams with shared values and right skills, as strong human capital is needed to run programmes (iii) Commitment to continuous improvement, with innovative measures to run business, and (iv) Sustainability and scalability. Ms Poonawala hoped that through this research, one common model that has been tried and tested could be developed through the share of best practices. Additionally, she hoped that the model could provide mosques and Malay Muslim Organisations (MMOs) the possibility to rethink, restructure and transform its SEs for long-term sustainability.

The two case studies have invited a number of responses and suggestions from the audience during the question and answer session. For instance, Mr Izzuddin Taherally, President of the Malay Youth Literary Association or 4PM emphasised the need to improve the level of commitment and perception of youths towards CLF Labs. At the end of the session, both presenters expressed their appreciation to all CLF partners for their insights and hoped to garner more positive feedback for their respective initiatives.