

## Commentary - Workshop on Coordinating the Community Help EcoSystem (17 Sep)

by Suffyan Othman

Held on the 17 September 2012, the Learning Journey Workshop was the first in a series of workshops organised by the Community Leaders Forum (CLF) Secretariat. The workshop, conducted by Stanley Fong, General Manager of Southeast CDC, was attended by 20 participants from 13 various Malay/Muslim Organizations (MMOs), mosques, Community Development Council (CDC) and Malay Activity Executive Committee (MAEC). The purpose of the workshop was to examine the different needs and challenges within the community help eco-system, as well as the comparative strengths (and weaknesses) of various types of organisations, and to better understand how each partner could contribute more effectively towards an effective support structure for the beneficiaries. The first task was to increase the awareness of what each MMO does in helping the community. This is to better understand the interconnectedness of the work by individual partners. The participants highlighted the specific nature of their work, be it in terms of the target audience, the groups of people they assist, or the geographical boundaries of their work. From here, there were three pertinent questions asked, why do we help, to what outcomes and how have we done so far. These questions brought out an honest assessment of the capabilities and limitations of each organisation as well as a greater awareness of the need to work together.

For the CLF partners, a deeper understanding of shared goals needs to be revisited, so that greater emphasis can be placed in working collectively. While each of the partners face different challenges and have different objectives, which can lead to them working in isolation, collaboration is still possible. This can be done through case-specific collaborations or in a broader framework. This will sustain a network where individual strengths of a particular organisation can be leveraged on and that a community help eco-system can exist. The importance of the value proposition of the partners was highlighted, with their distinct roles and diversity of partners. From here, there can be an aggregation effect and this can bridge both micro and macro level needs for those seeking help.

The next point highlighted was the importance of the MMOs in Singapore. In terms of help-seeking behaviour, a cultural understanding of norms, language and a common imagination was explored. From here, clarity of purpose was then discussed, in terms of the organisation itself, vis-a-vis the Malay/Muslim community and the society at large.

Therefore purpose, outcomes and issues can be seen from both community and national perspectives. At the same time, it is also important to remember who we are doing it (providing help) for.

Building on this, it is pertinent to look at help at different levels. From the perspective of the organisation, there needs to be an understanding at the individual and systems level. For the individual level, it is important to focus on the needs of the consumer, the services provided and how this affects them. At the systems level, it is important to understand how the organisation will affect other organisations in a local context, and at the national level, how it affects other national agencies.

Looking at this from the individual level, the main question is whether a family is self-reliant. The criteria include health, finances, children and elderly, shelter, food, employment and support. Based on these criteria, help can be given accordingly. With MMOs providing a diverse range of support, as well as the other CLF partners, inter-linkages between them becomes more important. This is to be able to provide the best support possible without the need to duplicate help. These inter-linkages can be very complex and needs to be understood from the systems level. This can be seen from the perspective of issuesbased or on locality. At the national level, it is important to understand the expectations and demands placed upon these organisations.

Therefore, the main challenge is that of the connections, to coordinate help at the systems level. The value of social capital in this case is very important. The familiarity with those in other organisations will ease the difficulty in building up connections and trust and this will facilitate coordination in the ecosystem. Building up from this, at the national systems level, there are also other factors to consider, the resource-to-challenge ratio, which is the importance of prioritising scarce resources, capacity development as well as strategic planning. Ultimately, it is a question of how the CLF partners should organise themselves and these conversations has to continue in order to be more affective in the lives of those who require help.