

Name of Project - **Creating Community Connectivity and Connections: A project case study by Beyond Social Services<sup>1</sup> in Singapore**

*Key themes from the IACD International Standards this case study material relate to*

*Theme 2: Engaging with communities*

*Theme 3: Ensuring participatory planning*

*Theme 4: Organising for change*

*Theme 5: Learning for change*

**Overall Synopsis – Bridging the Digital Divide**

In September 2019, community members in a low-income neighbourhood had gotten together to envision their dream neighbourhood unbeknownst that in only a few months the world would be turned on its head. Amid the upheaval and distress exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic, the community got to realise a part of their dream sooner than they thought.

300 households in their neighbourhood received free internet connectivity from a Wi-Fi hotspot that was installed at the ground floor of an apartment block. Corporations and individuals stepped up to fund the set-up and ongoing subscription fees, after having received blessings from the Housing and Development Board who is the land-owner, the town council that manages the estate and the residents' Member of Parliament (MP)<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this facility that is vital for digital inclusion in a post-COVID-19 world would not have materialised if not for those living there voicing what their dream neighbourhood should look like during a community conversation.

**Background**

The process within the locality that led to the community conversation and visualization started almost a year before that. Wanting to gain a deeper appreciation of the neighbourhood, community workers mobilised tertiary students to conduct a community mapping exercise in October 2018. After engaging with some 40 residents and 10 organisations over 6 months, a picture of aspirations and concerns emerged.

The process also identified several individuals who demonstrated a strong sense of belonging, care and connectedness with their neighbours and the place. They assisted older persons with their grocery shopping, kept an eye on children at the playground and welcomed friends who needed a place to rest into their homes. They also had opinions about what was lacking in their neighbourhood and the improvements needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond Social Services is a non-profit organisation that works with low-income communities within the locality in Singapore. They adopt an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, regarding people as experts of their own lives and encouraging their "voice", which is distinct from the typical deficit approach where outside professionals and other experts create and deliver solutions to meet the needs of clients.

<sup>2</sup> MPs act as a bridge between the community and the government by ensuring that the concerns of their constituents are heard in Parliament.

This picture of kindness, generosity, and cooperation gave community workers the belief that given the right resources and some encouragement, residents would take an active interest in their collective well-being and self-organise to bring about change. It was an opportunity for community workers to hold the space for residents to visualise the changes they wanted in their neighbourhood, and to create a relationship among people that enabled them to achieve something they could not do on their own.

## **The Project**

### *Engaging with Communities*

This effort began with our community workers informing residents what the tertiary students had uncovered about their community. This was initially done by planned “incidental” conversations in common spaces near their homes. They also presented the findings to the locality’s MP who then expressed an interest to hear more from his constituents. Immediately, we offered to organise a community conversation on his behalf.

We recruited volunteers and drew up a programme to facilitate meaningful participation was drawn up. It included activities to keep children occupied while their parents were engaged, facilitators for Chinese and Malay speaking residents and a sumptuous meal as gracious hospitality often enhanced the quality of the conversation.

### *Ensuring Participatory Planning*

Armed with a leaflet providing details of the event, we set off to invite residents, beginning with those who had previously spoken to the student volunteers. 46 families agreed to come but on the actual day, 28 families turned up.

As the children were occupied with balloon sculpting, sand painting and paper airplanes, their caregivers put down what they wished for their neighbourhood on little heart-shaped papers. These hearts then adorned a wall entitled “My Dream Neighbourhood”.

Another participatory activity that residents took seriously was to indicate the neighbours they regarded as friends. On a grid that listed every unit in the 2 blocks that the meeting was dedicated to, residents marked out their household and then drew a line to other households where their friends lived. It was a useful exercise in visualising the social ties, the level of neighbourliness and community connectedness. This exercise also got people curious about each other’s friends and triggered small talk among them.

When the conversations began, people recalled their happy moments living in the area as well as their concerns. They also expressed improvements they would like to see and eventually formed themselves into 3 groups to explore how they may bring about a children’s playground with a space for ball games, a cosy corner at the void deck<sup>3</sup> where residents can mingle and a more organised resident-led volunteer group to redistribute donated food.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “void deck” is a uniquely Singaporean one, referring to the ground floor of HDB blocks that has been left open as sheltered space, where residents can gather to meet friends or where our children can run

## *Organising and Learning for Change*

Each of these groups then got down to work immediately as they articulated their requests to their MP who had been observing the meeting unobtrusively.

A month later, some residents provided an update of their discussion to their MP. They prepared a PowerPoint presentation and brought drawings from children who wanted a say on what their playground should look like. There should be a fire truck, garden swing and most importantly, monkey bars. As for the cosy corner, they proposed free Wi-Fi access as a way of bringing residents out of their homes and mingling with each other.

It was a new experience for residents. While, many have met their MP before, this time it was not for assistance with personal issues but about how they could help improve the collective well-being of their neighbourhood. A significant change in the community has occurred. They have begun transiting from constituents passively receiving services to active citizens in the service of their constituency.

### **Core Values**

#### *Encouraging Community Choice and Voice*

By harnessing the inherent aspirations, concerns and goodwill to facilitate participation and ownership among residents, community was developed from the “inside-out”. This early success would have likely fizzled out if visible changes were not forthcoming. Hence, community workers sought the permission of the MP to rally resources from volunteers and corporate partners to provide the resources and expertise to set up the Wi-Fi connection promptly.

The need for Wi-Fi became an opportunity to secure resources from wider community and that bridged the digital divide experienced by low-income families in a small practical way. Moreover, by doing so, a visible project with broad stakeholder support was created. It was also envisaged that by keeping stakeholders interested and involved for the longer run, significant encounters between the residents and the wider community can be created which will be small steps toward closing the social divide as well.

### **What Worked Well**

From the get-go, community workers were clear that residents’ effort to self-organise and to speak for themselves were more likely to succeed with the support of their local leaders with formal designations as well as resources from the wider Singapore community. They were also mindful that residents who demonstrated informal leadership were the foundation on which a community from the “inside-out” was built on.

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around, whether rain or shine. (Taken from Singapore National Heritage Board’s E-Books Collection entitled “Community Heritage Series III: Void Decks”)

As a team, community workers nurtured working relationships with the MP, local leaders, corporations, and volunteers. These relationships were a treasure-trove of goodwill that enabled community workers to create a “community” around the provision of connectivity.

The project gained traction and factors that contributed to its achievements were:

- a. An appreciation of the operating landscape and carving out a space for residents to self-organise in cooperation with the local government.
- b. Framing community development as work that is always in progress and to adapt to developments in a manner that celebrates small achievements that build momentum.
- c. Community workers embracing relationship building and resource mobilising as roles integral to their profession identity.

In sum, by being realistic about existing limitations and resources, an opportunity that enabled people to be a part of decisions that affected them was created. This resulted in their aspiration for internet connectivity being fulfilled by well-wishers. In the light of the digital divide exposed by COVID-19, the effort was commended in an editorial of Singapore’s main daily and to the neutral observer, it seemed like a community rallied together to make a difference.

## **Challenges**

However, this is a fragile notion of community held together by community workers who supported residents to experience success on their very first attempt at self-organising. The visible change was brought about by their resource mobilising skills and their ability to harness social capital to come together as a loosely knit community for the specific purpose of establishing internet connectivity.

Nonetheless, as community development is an ongoing work in progress, there is optimism for deepening the inter-personal connectivity among all involved. The challenge will be to create significant encounters among people where they experience positive feelings that hold a symbolic or socio-emotional meaning. These encounters are likely to be repeated if people feel that their lives have been enhanced as a result.

## **Learning and Future Plans**

COVID-19 has hastened the bridging of digital divide in this community. Paradoxically, having to maintain physical distance has also bridged the emotional distance with each other. As this is being written, some youthful residents with the support of volunteers from the wider community have begun reaching out to older persons living in their block and showing them the benefits of being connected to the internet and taking advantage of the free Wi-Fi below their flats.

It appears that residents are assuming the identity of an active citizen and the community development practitioner would do well to mindfully remain a supportive and resourceful accompaniment as residents endeavour to self-organise for the collective good of their community.

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