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ADDRESS BY MR LEE KHOON CHOY, DEPUTY CHAIRMAN, PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION AT THE THIRD CONFERENCE OF COMMUNITY CENTRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES 1978 AT 9.30 A.M. ON SATURDAY,
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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY CENTRES IN 1980S

It was a decade ago since the People's Association held its last seminar which dealt on "How community centres can help promote a healthy community". One decade is a long halt for a parent body dealing with the grassroot organisations to reflect on whether it is moving towards the right direction.

In view of the rapid social transformation that has taken place in the past decade, this seminar which is meant to reassess and re-evaluate the role and function of the PA and its 166 community centres can be considered long overdue. The PA was established in the early 1960s when uneducated children roamed the streets, public housing only a vague concept and industrialisation a vision. There were more urgent priorities of providing the basic requirements of free schooling, public housing and jobs than to worry over what the populace should do with their leisure hours.

When the people are not adequately provided with the basic human requirements of civilised living - food, education, clothing, housing and jobs - there could be little time to contemplate on graceful living on the qualities of life. It was during this period of uncertainty that PA inherited 28 community centres from the Social Welfare Department and five youth clubs with a fully paid skeleton staff and a simple organisation. The best PA could do then was to make the centres act as an information and recreation centre for those lucky enough to have time for leisure.

As Singapore makes headway in economic and industrial expansion, PA also gradually expanded to cope with the increasing demand for community centres. By the end of 1963, PA was running 103 community centres mainly through fully paid organising secretaries. The centre buildings all built

with government funds were either of the standard type costing between \$20,000 to \$30,000 or the rural type costing \$10,000. The facilities provided were very minimal - an office room, room for reading, chess games and spaces to play ping pong and basketball. There was no mass participation on such centres until 1964, when community centre management committees (MCs) were first introduced. This was the first landmark in the history of community development and since then the system of MC management became a way of life of community participation. By 1969, the number of CC has reached 186 which is still wholly financed by the Government but under the MC system of administration. As more than half of these centres were in rural areas and the vast majority of these catered for the lower income group, the composition of MC members comprise predominantly Chinese-educated traditional leaders of clan associations, trade and commercial guilds, with a sprinkling of Chinese school teachers and the self-employed professionals. Similarly, the organising secretaries of CCs were also predominantly Chinese-educated.

The significant contribution this category of traditional leaders have made to community development was their ability to raise funds and their spirit of sacrifice in terms of money, time and energy. Their public spiritedness and generosity made it possible for the Government to introduce in 1970 the concept of community joint venture in the construction of community centres with Government providing subsidies. This is the second landmark in community development. It is gratifying to note that from 1971 to 1977 the aggregate contribution by MCs towards community centres development and operational costs amounted to \$5,591,300 and \$13,388,900 respectively. These constituted 60.8 percent and 84 percent of the total development and operational expenditure respectively.

Meanwhile, in the past decade, rapid social transformation has taken place as a result of urban renewal and industrial expansion. Three factors in the social transformation have brought about major impacts and will continue to influence the trend and policy of the PA in regard to community development. They are, the mass shift of population, the rise in the standard of living and the swing towards English as the language of education.

POPULATION SHIFT

The mass transplantation of population of both city dwellers from demolished antiquated shop houses of old Singapore and the resettling of

rural farmers to mushrooming high-rise HDB flats has completely altered the pattern of social organisation and social cohesion.

Whereas previously the services and influence of clan association and their leaders were important, they are no more effective in new HDB surroundings where in most cases, clan or trade associations are non-existent. The breakdown of traditional community ties creates a vacuum in leadership at grassroot level who can effectively reflect the views of the respective HDB residents or represent their interest. Traditional leaders of the past are gradually becoming less relevant to the new situation and environment in HDB areas, although some of them can still be useful in certain areas.

Community centres affected by the circumstances I have just mentioned should therefore seriously review the composition of their MCs with a view to upgrading them to meet changing conditions. How do they go about talent scouting for effective residential new blood to replace the less effective deadwoods who are no more able to contribute their services either because of old age or loss of interest. This is the task of the workshop, dealing with mobilisation of community resources.

It is necessary to realistically and systematically map out a strategy to draw out localised talents of HDB dwellers, some of whom may be interested in community work. In a society where people have inherited insular habits, this task would not be easy. However, results of the recent experiments by a few constituencies in the formation of residents' committees have shown that given the proper approach and encouragement, Singaporeans, including the professionals, are not that insular and self centred. It is encouraging to see that after all, many are keen to spare some of their time and energy for the common good of the country.

PROBLEMS OF HIGH-RISE LIVING

Since the various workshops of this seminar will be discussing the challenges of the community centre in the 1980s, it is necessary to project the problems which the new style of high rise living will create for the dwellers. By 1980, 70 percent of our population will be housed in HDB flats. What are the stresses and strains high-rise living will have on the housewives, their children, the dropped-out youths from schools and the aged particularly those in the 1-2 room flats. Just to mention a few socio-psychological problems which are bound to emerge:-

a Who will look after the children in the high-rise flats as more and more mothers go to work as they become better educated and as employment opportunities increase. As industrialisation progresses, the chances of employing domestic servants become more and more scarce;

b What would be youths who are dropouts from schools do in high-rise surroundings? Will they loiter in the corridors, lifts, staircase and create problems for neighbours? What programmes can the MC organise with the help of RCs to attract the youths so as to prevent them from drifting into delinquent activities such as vandalism, theft or becoming drug addicts;

c With the success of our family planning programmes the proportion of the very young in our population will fall whilst the number of aged will grow. It is estimated that by 1988, about seven percent of our population will be above 60 years old. In what way can the centre make good use of the increasing number of "senior citizens" so that they would become useful citizens instead of lingering on with lonely unproductive retirement?

d There is also the question of bringing about a sense of social cohesiveness among high-rise dwellers, most of whom are strangers to one another and to the new environment. How can the MCs with the help of RCs help them to adapt to the new situation and become good neighbours with a common sense of belonging and cohesiveness.

These are some of the problems which the relevant workshops might want to find answers to and make their recommendations.

RISING EXPECTATIONS

Singapore's achievements in the field of trade and economic expansion and social transformation bring with it a rise in the standard of living. Our per capita income has quadrupled in the past 12 years. A continued increase in per capita income is expected. The earnings of the

average Singaporean have also increased and should continue to do so. With growing affluence, the expectations of our people are also rising.

The "rural" or "standard" types of old-fashioned community centres with minimum facilities can no more attract the new generation of youths. They want larger and better-equipped modern "key" centres with more sophisticated recreational facilities. Key centres such as those completed in Kg Glam, Tanglin and Havelock have set the pace if not to emulate for other constituencies. To meet the rising expectations, about 73 new key centres each costing more than half a million are planned for the next five years. This will involve Government subsidy of \$40 million. The emergence of this new crop of key centres ushers in a new phase in community development. It also brings in new problems and challenges:-

a Finance: Government's new policy of subsidy of \$350,000 for each key centre still requires the MCs to raise a minimum of \$100,000 to complete its basic requirements. In HDB centres, MCs will face a new challenge as the financial capacity of dwellers is limited. The workshop for mobilisation of common resources - fund raising - is expected to come out with more ingenious methods of raising funds particularly for HDB centres. They should also suggest rules to prevent fund raising from going out of hand.

b With growing affluence majority of HDB dwellers can afford the basic facilities such as newspapers, TV sets and they need not have to visit the CC unless the programmes organised are imaginative enough to attract them. MCs assisted by full-time staff will have to take on a more active role in reaching out for the dwellers to find out their needs and plan their programme accordingly.

Emphasis should be laid on the need for a more systematic approach and on service-oriented rather than recreational programmes. The workshop on programmes and organisation of CC activities in 1980 should be able to recommend constructive ideas.

LANGUAGE AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

The swing towards English as language of education in Singapore will have far-reaching repercussion in the future line-up of MCs and the qualification of organising secretaries. The large majority of organising secretaries recruited during the early 1960s, many of whom are still with us, were mainly Chinese-educated. Most of them do not lack the spirit of dedication and loyalty, although some have gone soft. The problem of language barrier between centre staff and the users who will be more and more English-speaking is a real one which has haunted the minds of PA administrators. A non-English speaking OS will find himself like a fish out of water in an increasingly growing English-speaking environment. The recruitment exercise of English if not bilingual OSs and middle management personnel has not been too fruitful. Various factors conspire to discourage the talents we want from joining the PA service:-

- a long and irregular hours of work, sometimes having to forego weekends;
- b having to serve too many masters; the PA senior officials, MCs and MPs. When clash of opinion and interest do take place, the OS finds himself sandwiched and sometimes become the victim;
- c the salary scale is not attractive enough to draw in promising and dynamic talents.

Unless PA can succeed in recruiting the qualified staff with the necessary language qualification plus the human quality of hard work and dedication, the implementation of our programme however well-intended would be hampered. To facilitate the difficult task of recruitment, it is necessary to re-examine our attitude towards our role and function, as well as the various aspects of human inter-relationship among MPs, MCs, centre staff and the participants. For instance, MCs should not treat organising secretaries in the same way as they treat their own employees, sometime making them run their personal errands. How can the MCs play a more active role in planning and participating in community projects and centre activities instead of only passively attending monthly meetings. Organising secretaries should also realise that they are not caretakers but organisers and must reach out for the residents. The workshop on the

relationship between MCs and centre staff and People's Association, I hope, will come up with valuable recommendations to improve this aspect of work which is vital to the growth and progress of our community task.

I have dealt at length the various aspects of the problems and tasks ahead of us in the 1980s. We have come to put our minds to hear to all these problems. When so many minds meet, something useful must come out of it. I assure you that all recommendations that are practical, realistic and constructive will receive serious attention and duly implemented.

Finally, I wish to thank all of you for your co-operation and effort in making this seminar a success.

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