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**SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
(EDUCATION), AT THE CONFERENCE ON "SOCIAL SERVICES:
THE NEXT LAP" AT THE NATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY BOARD (NPB)
AUDITORIUM ON FRIDAY, 21 JUNE 1991 AT 9.00 AM**

I am very pleased to be present at this Conference which will discuss social services in the next lap.

While I was working with the committee which prepared the chapter on "Many Helping Hands" in the Next Lap book, we did a study on the level of poverty in Singapore. We wanted to know what was the extent of poor families today.

The results are interesting. Poor families, defined as those whose total income is less than the Minimum Household Expenditure as determined by the Statistics Department, are on the decline. In 1978, 12 per cent or nearly one family in eight could be classified as a poor family. By 1990, the number had dropped to 3.5 per cent, or about one family in 30. In absolute numbers, this is about 22,000 families out of a total of 630,000 families. This level is quite low by any international standards.

I will not go into why these families are poor or what are the reasons or causes; these are well-known to social workers and sociologists and no doubt you will hear about them during your conference. The interesting question is why did the level drop by nearly four times, from 12 per cent to 3.5 per cent in the past 12 years? This fact itself is very encouraging and must offer hope to us and to others that poverty can be reduced.

The main reason for the dramatic decline in poverty in our case is our economic development and growth. Our growth has been real, without it being eaten up by inflation. Growth has removed unemployment and created many job opportunities. Real incomes have risen and almost anyone who wants a job can get one. This, I believe, is the main reason why poverty has been reduced.

During this period, the Government had special welfare schemes for the destitute and indigent, such as the public assistance scheme, homes for the aged and free medical treatment for the poor. These were necessary and provided much needed help for the poor and the needy. Such help will always be needed. But it is worth noting that the real solution to poverty is not welfare relief, but a vigorous economy which can provide good job opportunities which can help poor families raise their family incomes and lift them out of the poverty trap. The Government has, therefore, quite rightly set economic growth as one of its priorities in addressing our basic social needs.

However, despite our progress, we still have poor families. While every effort must be made to encourage them to help themselves by seeking employment, there will be conditions such as ill health, age or disability which will make it impossible for some of them to work. These are the situations where welfare relief is needed.

The question is how best can this be provided? The chapter on "Many Helping Hands" in the "Next Lap" analyses this issue and sets out two basic guidelines.

The first is that as far as possible, all aid and assistance should be temporary and should seek to help the recipient to find ways to help himself. The idea is that dependency is demoralising and that ultimately, the independence and self-sufficiency is better for the aid

recipient. It will also give him more dignity. This is the same idea contained in the proverb: "Give a man a fish and he will eat for one day; teach him to fish and he will eat for a long time".

The second guideline is that help is better provided by many sources than by one source. This is the "Many Helping Hands" principle. More hands make the work lighter. More importantly, many hands especially if they come from concerned volunteers, generate more warmth and are closer to the heart. In supporting this idea, the Government is not trying to shirk its responsibility. It will continue to play its role. It is aware that in welfare state or socialist countries where the bulk of welfare relief comes from state-run agencies, the results are less than satisfactory. The service tends to be impersonal or worse, bound by bureaucracy. Bureaucrats everywhere like to work to rules and they dislike exceptions to the rule. But welfare work is personal and cannot be ordered according to set rules. Here, voluntary and religious groups can do a better job. They have more commitment and more compassion. A second consequence if there is too much state involvement is that citizens tend to push all responsibility to the state and the voluntary spirit soon withers away.

The much healthier approach is to develop a cooperative partnership between government, voluntary groups, corporate citizens and religious organisations. In this way, many parties can have a role without over-taxing anyone. The recipients of the help are uplifted to know that many of their fellow citizens are interested in them.

The "Many Helping Hands" chapter does not try to spell out detailed programmes for the future. But it drew attention to one key point, which is that help where possible should be focussed on children who come from the poor families. They offer the best hopes for their families because if they

succeed, they will be able to lift their families out of their situation.

Your conference will discuss a wide range of social service topics. My challenge to you is to suggest practical projects which can help those in need while remembering the two guidelines that I have mentioned, namely,

- (a) how to help those in need in such a way that they can learn to help themselves.
- (b) how to create networks and schemes to involve a wide circle of helping hands.

You will need ingenuity and creativity to work out such schemes. And they can and have been done. Many such ideas were tried out last year when thousands of groups lent their hand in raising funds for the 25th Anniversary Charity Fund, which was itself a novel project.

We are becoming a more affluent society. Many of our citizens will have the means and the time to do something for those less fortunate than themselves. Will we become a more gracious and a more compassionate society? Or will we be remembered only as a money worshipping self-centred society? It all depends on us. We have the choice.

May I conclude by wishing all of you a stimulating and profitable conference.

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