

Unmet social needs



In this continuing series drawn from *The Social Mission Conference*, Dr Tan Chi Chiu, board member of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation and chairman of its study on “Unmet Social Needs in Singapore” summarises approaches to identifying social needs and the findings of the study.

The social sector exists to foster the well-being of society. An essential condition is that people’s needs are met. When needs are not met, they can lead to socially recognisable suffering or societal disorder.

What, then, are society’s unmet needs? The answer is a function of time, place, and circumstances, and relative to the perspective of the party responding to the question.

In general, the social sector has largely been identifying and seeking solutions to unmet social needs from the ground up. Macro approaches to identifying these needs are few and far between. The United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals represent the most coherent global strategy, thus far, for tackling worldwide poverty.

Looking holistically at global human needs through history, we can identify two broad levels of needs.

The first are the traditional basic needs of food, water, and health. Sadly, despite centuries of civilisation, these needs are still dire, especially in poorer countries. These basic needs are intertwined with the causes and consequences of poverty, and constitute a vicious cycle.

The second are higher-order needs, those that affect human prosperity and well-being. These are principally modern-day needs arising from human displacement (migrants, refugees and internally displaced people), environmental challenges (climate change and natural disasters), and the problems of developed societies (income disparities, ageing population, mental health and breakdown of the family structure).

In looking at social needs in Singapore, our study found that going by human development statistics (infant mortality, literacy, home ownership, etc), Singapore has done well in meeting basic needs. Although the State has provided systemic structures to address education, health and housing needs, there is still a dire need to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised communities who do not all have the same sense of belonging in a society bent on economic excellence.

The study identified six vulnerable groups that still struggle with basic needs (see section on Singapore’s Vulnerable Communities).

To meet the needs of the vulnerable communities, it is important to assess the criteria to give them a sustainable leg up to the next level. Social policies need to emphasise empowerment as outcomes without becoming overly conditional on providing assistance. These individuals need to be seen as social investments with long-term benefits.

The current social system operates more from a welfare perspective rather than a rights-based standpoint. In line with regional and global emphasis on rights-based frameworks, Singapore should review and revise the definition of social protection from a rights-based approach.

Overall, Singapore’s social policies need to emphasise integration, encourage greater spaces for civil society involvement, and enhance human development.



Foreign workers are among the vulnerable in Singapore because they generally have limited access to work-oriented protection schemes or aid schemes.

Singapore’s Vulnerable Communities

Charity & Justice
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- **The disabled.** Estimated at three per cent of the population, those with physical, mental, intellectual, developmental or sensory impairment have difficulties participating as equal members of the community. Current social policies are geared towards preventive work that does not take a life-course approach for the individual.
- **The mentally ill.** It is estimated that 16 per cent of people in Singapore suffer from minor mental disorders. More attention has been given to the mentally ill in the last decade. There is an emphasis on prevention, but there is a need for greater job security of those suffering from mental illness and long-term security for their care-givers.
- **Single-person-headed households.** These are men and women, aged between 40 and 60, who own or rent HDB flats and who manage care-giving single-handedly. They are usually lower-income singles who care for their parents, siblings or children. They tend to stand at the back of the queue because policies on shelters and jobs tend not to favour single persons who are sole breadwinners.
- **The borderline cases.** These are mainly those in the lower income, sometimes even lower-middle income groups, and they include contract workers, students and women, who do not fulfil the criteria to access housing and medical needs in a non-emergency manner.
- **Foreign workers.** There are around 850,000 lower-skilled or semi-skilled foreign workers, of whom 180,000 are foreign domestic workers. They generally have limited access to work-oriented protection schemes or aid schemes.
- **The new communities.** A significant part of Singapore’s population growth in recent years has been fuelled by immigration and foreign labour import. Today, there are 0.5 million Permanent Residents and 1.3 million other foreigners out of a population of 5.08 million. These migrant communities will have an impact on the existent Singapore community and vice-versa. A deeper look into social connectedness is needed to build bonds across communities.

“The Church in Singapore will not change unless we look out for the marginalised in Singapore. So far, we have shied away from the culture of the marginalised.”

Father Patrick Goh
Chairperson, Panel on “The Marginalised”

“Those with mental illness and their care-givers face great challenges: stigma, financial and social support, employability, housing difficulties, crisis intervention and high rate of relapses. CLARITY Singapore is a new Catholic charity that will seek to provide rehabilitation, support and essential training to help people from low- to middle-income families recover from and manage their psychiatric illnesses, so that they can find sustainable and meaningful livelihood.”

Denise Pang
Vice-Chairperson, CLARITY Singapore

“HIV infections in Singapore are rising. To-date, there are more than 4,400 cases. Yet, many more cases go undetected and unreported. 90 per cent arise from sexual contact (61 per cent heterosexual). People with HIV/AIDS face difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment – much needed for expensive lifelong medication and living dignified lives. They suffer alone, in fear and silence from societal stigma/discrimination.

CARE operates the only HIV/AIDS shelter in Singapore so that destitute sufferers can regain their human dignity and rebuild their lives because behind each statistic is a real person made in the image of God.”

Anthony Soo
Vice-President, Catholic AIDS Response Effort

“The convicted penal population has been rising slowly; it is now at over 11,000. Living behind bars deprives convicts of personal freedom and privacy, causes a loss of dignity, and they face further punishments which include caning and solitary confinement. They face even greater challenges when they are out, reintegrating into society. Many have no home, no money, no jobs and are disconnected from their families. Recidivism (returning to crime) can be high without proper rehabilitation. This is why we must give them that ‘second chance’.”

Kevin Yap
Chairman, Roman Catholic Prison Ministry