

God doesn't make junk

The poor and needy are not as helpless as some of us think. When challenged and empowered, they can prove surprisingly resilient and able to help one another effectively.

DO less, not more, is a principle that a group of social workers working in one of Singapore's oldest and poorest public housing estates try to abide by. They want to do less for the poor they work with – yes, less, not more.

Their approach goes against the instincts of most good-hearted people who work or volunteer in the social service sector. Surely, society should be asking what more we can do for the poor, especially in a rich country like Singapore? What could justify doing less?

But these social workers' aim is to create opportunities and motivation for self-help and mutual help. They believe in a "strengths-based" approach to helping the poor, rather than a "needs-based" approach.

"The helping profession is about getting people to help themselves," said a spokesman for the group. "Ironically, the more 'professional' we appear to our service-users, the more unlikely it becomes for them to step forward to help themselves. The more we appear to know about problem-solving, the less help we get and the less people want to get involved. We must recognise this if we want people to be active participants in the creation of solutions. We must really be able to talk less and listen more."

A social worker said: "When we focus on the needs and deficits of the poor, we undermine and even inhibit their strengths. If we are not careful, we might end up keeping the poor poor."

Here are two examples of how helping a community organise itself around its strengths can lead to good outcomes.

A mother of five was pregnant with her sixth child. Her boyfriend was a non-Singaporean and had overstayed in the country. He had to move to Johor Bahru and she went there to spend time with him, leaving her two oldest children behind.

Neighbours stepped in to help care for the children – one family took in the boy, another took in the girl.

A number of elderly single people living alone in rental blocks were weighed down by their sense of isolation. Social workers encouraged them to gather every Saturday at the void deck for lunch. Only a handful showed up at first.

Then some of those who came offered to contribute food. One man brought his Chinese musical instrument, the er-hu, and performed for the rest. Others told stories. In this way, the social workers were able to help the old folks break out of their isolation. The "home-ground advantage" and room for self-determination made the old folks the "hosts" and the social workers and volunteers the "guests".

Once they started talking to each other, they were able to find ways to help each other as they knew a lot about their neighbours: if one person was ill, for example, the one living next door could remind him to take his medicine.

But what do these self-help efforts add up to in the end? Do they make a difference in a family's ability to climb out of poverty?

"It may not make them rich, but it starts



A number of elderly single people living alone were weighed down by isolation. After social workers encouraged them to meet weekly, they started talking to each other and soon were able to find ways to help each other. If one person was ill, for example, his neighbour would

with them feeling good about themselves, affirming their dignity and self-respect," said a social worker. "When they do, they will take charge of their lives. They will also widen their social network and then opportunities arise for them to help each other and manage issues in the community."

The strengths-based approach struck a chord with this social worker because it reminded her of something a priest had said at a retreat she had attended as a teenager: "God doesn't make junk." That sentence encapsulates a fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching – the principle of human dignity. The Church teaches that every person is of infinite dignity and has rights and duties by virtue of being human.

The Church also teaches the principle of subsidiarity: human beings are by nature social. When they come together to form groups, these natural groupings should be helped to flourish and not be disempowered

by having a higher-level body take over what these groups can do for themselves.

These principles are often forgotten or not taken into account by social service organisations, even Catholic ones. That is why these social workers want to raise awareness of an alternative way to help families in need.

"In Singapore, we tend to measure success materially. The poor are seen as not contributing and as problems; they don't contribute, yet they receive. The current social service framework is one in which the social worker says: 'I'm the expert, I tell you poor and uneducated what to do,'" said a social worker, describing a pitfall of over-professionalisation.

That approach can disempower those who receive aid.

Another social worker said: "We have this notion of deserving and undeserving poor. Social workers or social work assistants spend much of our time making assessments or doing means-testing to make sure the poor

The "strengths-based" approach in action

This is an example of how social workers have used the strengths-based approach.

Mr S Tan (not his real name) was a single father with five children, aged four to 11, living in a two-room rental flat in central Singapore. He would go to work early each morning, and was not able to supervise his children before they left for school.

The eldest child, 11, took on that role. When the baby of the family, who is four, overslept, the eldest stayed home. On days like that, all five children would end up skipping school. On other days, when the siblings had no food at home, they would go around the neighbourhood begging.

Social workers based in the area could have swooped in to fix this family's problems, but decided instead to tap on the community's strengths. They encouraged other families in the same rental block to think of ways to help Mr Tan and his children.

A small group of neighbours – three women and a man – got together to discuss the situation. They decided they would walk Mr Tan's children to school, and arrange for them to be enrolled in before-and-after school programmes. They would ask shopkeepers in the area to provide meals for the children on days when they ran out of food at home. One woman brought up Mr Tan's gambling problem and said they had to do something about it. That's when the man in the group spoke up. He felt they should not confront Mr Tan about his gambling right away. They should first offer Mr Tan their help, he said, and later, he would find a time to speak to Mr Tan "man-to-man" about the gambling.

That meeting was an eye-opener for the social worker present. It reaffirmed her belief that these families, often seen as needy or dysfunctional, knew how to use their resources to help each other. They may be financially poor but when they come together, they are rich in ideas, information and care and concern for one another.

"You must believe that they can and they will take charge. When you create a leadership vacuum, when the social worker does not take charge but facilitates, leaders spring from nowhere," said the social worker.

don't take advantage of help schemes. We unwittingly become the 'social chain' that protects and locks out the system rather than the catalyst that facilitates 'social change' against poverty. That is perhaps why people experience the system as uncompassionate despite the plethora of help schemes."

The strengths-based approach has been used to good effect in America, where the Family Independence Initiative (FII) has helped hundreds of families in low-income communities in cities like Oakland (California) and Boston (Massachusetts) reach goals they set for themselves. Although still small, its results have been so striking that the White House has taken notice.

FII creates a structure for families that encourages a sense of control, desire for self-determination, and mutual support. It encourages and rewards personal initiative instead of penalising – by reducing eligibility for aid – families who make progress.

It asks participating families to write down their goals, it gives each family a computer and enlists them to fill in a questionnaire each month that tracks changes in things like income, assets, debts, health, education, skills, social networks and civic engagement. It seeks not to implement change but to elicit them from others.

FII founder Maurice Lim Miller believes that the American social welfare system focuses too much on poor people's needs and deficits, while overlooking – and even inhibiting – their strengths. A safety net is crucial when people are in crisis, he told *The New York Times*. But most poor families are not in free fall. They don't need nets to catch them so much as they need springboards to jump higher.