



*ALittleChange (ALC)'s
submission to the:*

ACTIVE YOUTH CITIZENRY

Development
Education

PARIS PEACE FORUM

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18

Abstract

ALittleChange (ALC) is a non-profit organization that aims to create community-driven change by empowering youths to develop social innovation skills by engaging underprivileged groups in Singapore

This Proposal serves to highlight three key problems:

- 1) Insularity of social circles amongst youths that entrench class divide
- 2) Inexperience of youths in dealing with complex social relations and asset identification
- 3) Chronic implementation of stop-gap measures that emphasize external dependency in the youth volunteer curriculum

Guided by the belief that active youth citizenry is a necessary condition to cultivate social change, this Proposal presents an educational curriculum in national education to promote active youth citizenry and implementation of sustainable community initiatives. This change framework encompasses three key measures to tackle the aforementioned issues:

- 1) Enabling youths to discover and participate in a diverse array of interactions with the community, especially the underprivileged community
- 2) Nurturing associational life/relationships by leveraging on relationships beyond the confines of one's own affinity group
- 3) Identifying key resources and assets of youths to capitalize on the strengths of the addressed community

This change framework, in collaboration with the National Youth Council and Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth in Singapore, was created with the hope of cultivating active citizenry amongst youths to take initiative in fostering community change by embracing a collaborative ideal to tackle the pertinent problem of class divide and income inequality.

A Tale of a Teddy Bear

It was a stroll along one of Singapore's most densely populated residential estates – Buona Vista. We were a group of volunteers, armed with goodies and gifts, ready to spread the joy of the Christmas season. All was well and good until we stumbled upon a little girl near a local rubbish centre, stacking piles of cardboard behind her mother. Passers-by walked along, attitudes ranging from nonchalant to judgemental at the lady trying to sell tissue paper. This little girl, no more than 10 years old, had already seen a side of life we had never experienced in our own sheltered years. We were amazed by her perseverance. However, it was unsettling that no one came to help the child. We walked up to the lady and her child, and attempted to give them our Christmas gifts. The little girl looked at us with suspicion and it was easy to understand why. Her mother coaxed her into opening up and with joy on her face, she received our care package. Unexpectedly, she even offered one of her teddy bears in exchange.

This is not a commonly associated narrative of Singapore, the “Jewel of Southeast Asia”.¹ Yet, the city bustle and glistening skyscrapers belie a growing class divide. The disparity is clear. The divide that exists between two communities, a reflection of inequality across the island state. The streets that burgeon with office workers cover the wheelchair bound buskers making a living. People who go up to others for a simple meal brushed aside by those who can afford. This is a country that has seen

¹ *A Tribute to the Lion City: The Jewel of Southeast Asia* is a compilation of the writings of Daisaku Ikeda, President of Soka Gakkai International, on his thoughts and interactions with Singapore, her leaders and people over the course of his three visits to Singapore in 1988, 1995 and 2000. The author's writings reflect his genuine respect and deep admiration for Singapore and her people.

unprecedented growth for the past 53 years, racing past a minority that has been left behind.

Fault lines have emerged. Not against the backdrop of racial or religious tensions, but rather a growing calcification of class. Income inequality has ignited countless debates in Singapore, and continues to do so today. From ground-up conversations to parliamentary sessions, ideas are being challenged and scrutinized to tackle this pervasive problem.

Why Education?

As globalization influences the employment market in Singapore, resilience and community spirit have to be inculcated. The looming presence of artificial intelligence (A.I.) and disruptive innovation threatens to take over menial tasks and jobs, and will exacerbate growing unemployment fears². A sound education system allows workers to cope under these economic pressures through technical training. More importantly, education is the first time a child is placed in a foreign environment filled with strangers. It is where they foster and demonstrate social competencies. The ideals of the education system, however, are undermined by a pervasive culture of competition.

The scarcity mindset fuels competition in the education system in order to jostle for high-paying jobs in an already highly-pressurizing environment (OECD, 2017)³. As students are ranked according to academic merit for jobs, it produces an unconducive environment for collaboration and entrenches feelings of resentment against those doing well. The notion of “losing out” generates a sense of uncertainty that compels citizens to project their worries and concerns onto the people deemed “responsible”, thus exacerbating class stratification. Many symptoms of the inequality problem can be traced back to the education system.

² With reference to the Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study 2017: Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa Trust, the report highlights how “Singapore respondents worry about losing their jobs due to immigrants who will work less for the same job (69 percent)” and the top 3 issues concerning the respondents are “immigration (64 percent), globalization (59 percent) and pace of innovation (57 percent).

³ In the PISA 2015 Results Students Well-being Volume 3 Overview, Singaporean students experience high levels of anxiety, higher than the average OECD country

A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS, 2017)⁴ highlights how a Singaporean student who attends an elite⁵ school has ties to an average of 2.7 people who come from a similar background and only 2.1 people who went to a non-elite school. In contrast, a non-elite school student has ties to an average of 3.9 people who went to a non-elite school and a dismal 0.4 people who went to an elite school. It is clear that the social environment and the networks built by non-elite students, even at a young age, is relatively homogenous. This insularity will exacerbate the class divide as lack of social mixing will increase the likelihood for stereotypes to perpetuate and entrench destructive pre-existing notions. Interestingly, elite students would know more non-elite students than vice-versa. The entrenched notion that academic achievements will determine future success is fertile breeding ground for envy and resentment as those who are unable to catch up academically may feel helpless in such a system. Whereas elite students who have a more balanced ratio of elite and non-elite relationships, may operate under the illusion that they occupy a normal position in society.

The dissonant perspectives held by the two groups of people can cause fissures in national confidence. The study also asserts that “[who] one associates with, whether one forges ties to a variety of social groups, has a significant role in how one feels about Singapore and the broader community”. which crucially illustrates the importance of cultivating a diverse social network. It is a necessary condition for strengthening a nation’s social fabric.

⁴ In reference to the Study of Social Capital in Singapore by the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. Supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (2017)

⁵ The “elite” and “non-elite” school background is based on the IPS respondents’ perception of the schools that the people they named had ever attended or are currently attending. Generally, these elite schools produce the country’s top civil servants and political leaders, and admissions are often determined by academic results

Youths – A Force for Good

Youths are the future of a nation's social fabric. It is critical to address both social biases and systematic pressures that can influence their developmental years. Youths, with their sense of exploration and energy, are most receptive to positive social narratives of collaboration. It is the planting of these seeds that allows greater inquiry of the pressing issues of our time.

Their willingness to fight for change cannot be denied. From the “Never Again” movement by Parkland survivors to the recent Bangladeshi student street protests to reduce traffic accidents, youths exemplify the idealism necessary to build a better world. Youth social movements are forces of change, more than a rallying cry of moral conviction, they are amplifications of individual strengths and talents as youths across various institutions contribute their talents to a common cause.

In Singapore, the topic of inequality has sparked parliamentary debate on how to best address this issue. Interestingly, due to regulations on protests, Singaporean youths have had to engage this particular topic in more subtle manners. Many types of engagement methods have evolved to cater to the different needs of low-income families such as healthy living, proper meals and academic support. There exists power from a bottom-up movement and an empowerment of youth potential.

It is in our collective interest that we tap on this potential to do good and allow youths to realize their potential.

Current Measures in Singapore

The identification of needs and gaps is a common approach endorsed by schools in when educating their students on how to address social issues. This can come in the form of volunteering, donation drives or starting an entirely new community project. The approach is commonly adopted due to its efficiency in establishing problem statements and a quick method of fulfilling a need. In most cases, students are provided resources by schools or national organizations to assist in the fulfillment of the need they have identified. The method of pinpointing a deficit is always present. The approach adopts an interventionist framework which unwittingly places a social imbalance where one is a ‘receiver’ and another as a ‘giver’. Over time, the reliance on an external authority or body will “weaken neighbor-neighbor relations” (Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993)⁶ where an expert authority is deemed necessary to alleviate their problems.

Crucially, this impacts students by training them to view issues through the lens of only looking for fault lines. This preconceived notion will influence the action taken and most importantly, determine the resulting outcomes. This can be seen in the pre-dominant perception of the elderly in Singapore. The general stereotype among Singaporeans is that the elderly are frail and unable to meet their own needs. This has led to an increase in external intervention to provide for the elderly’s basic needs. Consequently, an overreliance on an external authority is perpetuated. However, contrary to the general stereotype, a study

⁶ Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J. (1993). Building communities from the inside out. Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications.

conducted by Sports Singapore in 2015 (MICA, 2016)⁷ revealed that 56% of senior citizens (persons aged above 60 years) are frequently and/or regularly participating in sports. This new perspective that the elderly do have the physical ability and desire to care for themselves opens a new range of ideas and potential to be explored, from communal morning workouts to mass Zumba. These initiatives encourage the elderly to take charge of their own physical fitness, rather than depend on an external authority to care for them.

It is necessary for youths to be able to adopt multiple perspective toolkits to be able to construct versatile solutions to complex social issues in an increasingly volatile world. However, equally important is the follow-up to the identified problem. The solution has to be sustainable. This is the current situation in Singapore, with chronic implementation of stop-gap measures that emphasize external dependency in the youth volunteer curriculum. In the current youth volunteering climate, there are many ideas that address a wide array of issues. However, due to the lack of commitment in establishing a sustainable framework that creates lasting change, the effects of such programmes and ideas dissipate. One key reason is the lack of relationship building, which allows stakeholders and the underprivileged community to invest in the idea and allow its growth. These then constitute the temporary stop-gap measures that are in place but do not fully realize their potential.

⁷ Reference to Sports Index Participation Trends 2015. Prepared by Market Insights & Consumer Analytics (2016)

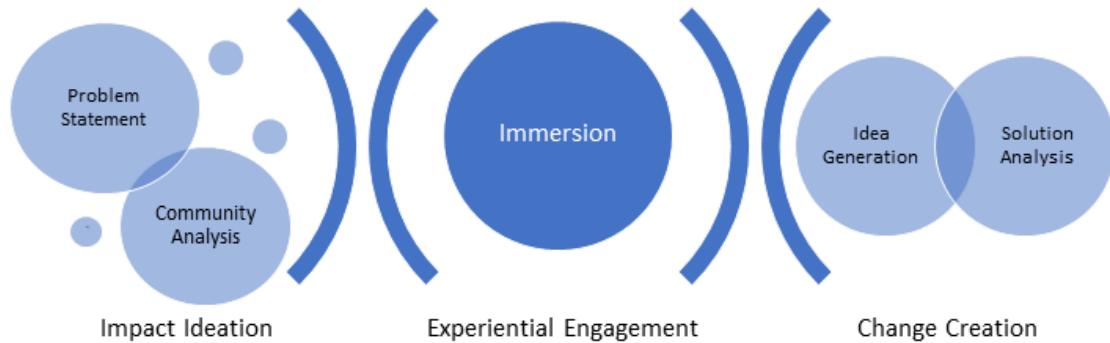
The Change Framework

The change framework is a proposed educational framework in national education to promote active youth citizenry and implementation of sustainable community initiatives. Building on the fundamentals of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), the change framework balances the time, talent, resources that individuals and stakeholders have to create resilient and dynamic communities. ALC believes in using in-depth relational analysis to study the community support that low-income families have within their own residential block, so as to understand the stories and narratives that shape their lived experience.

Following this, we believe youths need to be immersed in the challenges that they want to tackle. This is crucial in preventing the precarious gap between coloured expectations and authentic experiences, a gap that could worsen social divide.

Given these perimeters, ALC has worked with various educational institutions, ministries and national learning agencies to craft a curriculum that is able to finetune perceptions of social problems, provide the basics of community building and inculcate a spirit of active citizenry.

The graphic below features the framework that we use:



Experiential Engagement

The initial phase of the programme involves immersion with community partners that have in-depth knowledge in the fields that they are involved in. Primarily, these are the children, family and eldercare sectors. These immersion programmes include dedicated time to engage with directly affected parties as well as stakeholders involved. Guiding questions are assigned to provide a useful framework to focus the youths' learning (refer to Table 1).



Table 1

- What do you know about the affected community in Singapore?
 - How does the community live their daily lives?
 - Who else in society are serving the community? What can you learn from their experience?
- List the different needs of the community. Which of these are the most urgent or important? (Rank them accordingly!)
- List the strengths and interests of the eldercare community.
- What time, talent and resources do your team have to leverage on these assets?
- Who are the stakeholders involved?
 - What time, talent and resources do they have to leverage on these assets?

The quality time spent with the beneficiaries allows for volunteers to realize their target communities' daily problems and more crucially, the hidden strengths that beneficiaries themselves are not aware of. The example of ALittleChange's project (ALittleCamera) highlights this.

ALittleCamera as a project aims at bridging the communication gap between shift-working parents and school-going children in low-income families using cameras. These communication gaps arise when a shift-working parent completes his/her shift but is unable to spend time with their child due to schedule clashes. This is a cause of worry for parents as their child's development is their chief concern. Most importantly, it was only through our interactions with the children that their passion for photography could be discovered. Capitalizing on their interests to create a community-driven method to overcome their own difficulties created a participatory process, ensuring long-term involvement from both parents and children to work on their relationship. Fundamentally, external parties were only involved to kickstart a process that was largely driven by a communal relationship. An interesting development of a community-driven project is the organic evolution and rapid

adoption of an initiative. During the post-programme period, the children from these families used their phones to take photos and subsequently, sending them to their parents to update them regarding their activity. As their friends grew curious of this new ‘habit’, they too adopted this approach and the initial children participants of this programme took on a new role of ‘teachers’.



Impact Ideation

Moving from the immersion phase, youth volunteers are then provided the technical competencies to provide clarity and focus from the assets and needs that they have identified. They are then tasked with concisely defining their topic of focus and highlight 3 core ideas: **Who** are the parties involved? **How** does the initiative encourage social relations? **What** are the interim outcomes of the project that do not rely on external presence/intervention? Using these self-conceived questions as a framework to guide their social goals, youths will be tasked to analyze the community that they have engaged with. With their findings, they will be further categorised as **Characteristic Identification** and **Relational Analysis**.

Characteristic Identification

Having learned about their community's assets and needs, youths are then tasked to identify specific forms of limitations (i.e. physical mobility) and strengths (i.e. experience and knowledge) of the individual in the community that could shape their next course of action.

Relational Analysis

Relational analysis is performed by mapping out the individual community relationships - neighbours, external stakeholders and community partners that will assist in the development of an initiative that can capitalize the time, resources and ambitions of all these parties.



Using this framework, Project Imperium was established. During one of our conferences, the students were tasked to identify the characteristics and key relationships of mentally challenged children. The students noted that the children could easily learn new information when presented in a game format. One of the crucial problems they found out during the immersion programme was that these kids had trouble taking public transport on their own. This was critical in their development to be independent adults that can be integrated into society. The underlying issue was due to the complex information process that had to be broken down (i.e. processing time of arrival of the train, tapping an electronic card to access the gantry). By understanding that these children were more comfortable with their parents, the students proceeded to create a safe environment to conduct a game simulation of travelling via public transport in the given classroom space.

The simulation was simple: cardboard cards became props for electronic cards and they had to be placed on a device that would beep when tapped. The later stages would be more difficult as the children had to remember a packing list for their backpack and other simple procedures for a safe trip. The parents were brought down to assist the children when they get anxious or frustrated. This was important because the parents' presence allowed the children to feel safe and be more receptive to learning the key steps. The parents' presence would be slowly reduced as the children grew more comfortable.



This example showcases how our conference participants were able to link social relationships of their beneficiaries and their target communities' characteristics. This allowed for a structured and organic development of the beneficiary's growth.

Change Creation

Building on the previous components of Experiential Engagement and Impact Ideation, Change Creation allows youths to structure their ideas and findings into a coherent programme that can be effectively implemented to promote interdependence of the target family/group. These are ideated into the short- and long-term objectives that they plan for. More importantly, the questions of whether the initiative will inspire all the parties involved, including external communities as well as the consideration for continuity and sustainability have to be sufficiently addressed.



Crucially, the solutions they have derived will be assessed along the Impact-Effort Matrix⁸ which allows them to see the sustainability of their efforts. The analysis of their impact involved by the initiative is then linked back towards three questions posed in Impact Ideation.

Community-driven change is an ideal that even veteran change makers and established NGO leaders continuously grapple with. Yet, the fundamental basis for teaching youths this framework is that they are, at the very least, able to conceptualize an innovative method of tackling social issues that can leverage on individual strengths while allowing a stake for everyone involved.

⁸ Reference to Denver Peak Academy's Impact-Effort Matrix

The Journey So Far

Since its inception in 2016, ALittleChange has achieved massive success in the social and education sector in Singapore. We have worked with various educational institutions, ministries and national learning agencies to craft a curriculum that is able to finetune perceptions of social problems, provide the basics of community building and inculcate a spirit of active citizenry. We have reached out to more than 4,660 beneficiaries in addition to, incorporating and training 227 volunteers over the past 2 years.

In recognition of our efforts, ALittleChange has been mentioned by then Minister of Education Ng Chee Meng as an “example for the potential of youths” as the co-founder, himself started this when he was 17-years-old. Most notably, in commemoration of National Day, the National Gallery and Singapore Discovery Centre put up a 5-month feature of ALittleChange’s efforts and other change makers for their contributions in promoting active citizenry amongst Singaporeans.

Future prospects

ALittleChange is currently working with the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) on implementing this change framework in India where SIF is already conducting English lessons to underprivileged families and identify key areas of strength that can be capitalized upon.

On a more local level, works are in progress with National Youth Council and the Ministry of Education to revamp the current volunteering curriculum (Values-In-Action programme) to ensure a more holistic and immersive experience for students to better understand social nuances and create self-sustaining initiatives.

ALittleChange aims to work with other NGO leaders and governments to create a framework that is adaptable to the various socio-economic contexts of individual countries. Understanding the relationships between NGOS, government and schools is crucial to the development of a curriculum that emphasizes communal interdependence. Interestingly, in Singapore, NGOs have the greatest trust amongst citizens.⁹ Developing on this trust, social nuances in the relationships of geographical neighbourhoods and relationships between families can be better explored. From a macro-perspective, the development of relationships between families can also be improved through macro-relationships from an organizational viewpoint such as international NGO or governmental relations by exchange of resources and talent. Expansion of network allows for greater resources for beneficiaries to be able tap on such as social and financial capital that strengthens the framework for community building and active citizenry.

⁹ Further reference to the Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study 2017: Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa Trust, the report highlights how Singapore respondents in a climate of uncertainty “turn to NGOs as the most trusted institutions at 58 percent.”

Conclusion

The change framework proposed is not a sufficient condition to enable youths to actively participate in their national conversations and advocate for change. Yet, it is a necessary condition to provide a fundamental basis for youths to identify social issues with a versatile perspective toolkit. It with this given framework can social issues be better understood and allow the potential for innovative approaches to flourish.

The education system encompasses the foundation of a young person's development and it is essential that such a system has the capacity to build social awareness and engagement amongst youths.

Crucially, as the world continues to change, there will be volatility within every nation's social fabric. It is essential that governments ensure that youths are equipped with the skills to deal with complex social issues and realize not just their own strengths but capitalizing on the strengths of other communities as well.

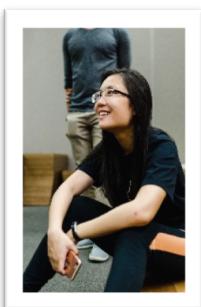
Any small action taken to reach out is good enough. At the end of the day, ALittleChange can make a big difference.

The Team



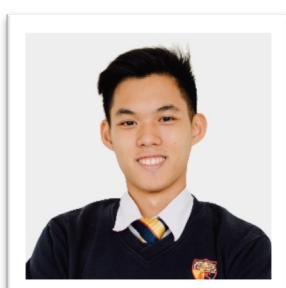
Nur Hazeem Bin Abdul Nasser, 19

Hazeem started ALittleChange at 17 as he believed that community change had to start with youths. Having had many stints in the public service, social service sectors and grassroots movement, Hazeem strongly sees the need for increased youth participation in social issues in Singapore



Frances Pek Sze Hwee, 19

A strong advocate for pressing social issues such as inequality, Frances actively sees herself in service roles such as reading books to low-income children and giving time to engage other youths in helping them create their own community initiatives



Ong Kah Yuan, Joel, 19

Joel volunteers actively, from giving gifts in Boys' Brigade to singing carols for the sick at local hospitals, Joel passionately believes in the spirit of giving and the need to spread this gift to other youths

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