

REPORT

Working Together to Bring the Community Closer

Alvin Chua



The annual Chingay provides a platform for people of different social and economic backgrounds to interact.
Source: Chu Yut Shing, flickr

“[During the 2000s] I discovered that more than half of our Residents’ Committees (RCs) did not have minority members. They were supposed to engage the community. ... I [asked], ‘Have you made the effort?’ And if you have made the effort, you must continue making the effort because PA is about cross-sectional representation...”

— Tan Boon Huat, former Chief Executive Director, People’s Association

Never lose sight of the mission, and always keep an eye on the analytics. This was the message former Chief Executive Director of the People’s Association (PA) Tan Boon Huat, had for civil servants and potential leaders at a wide-ranging CLC lecture.

Tan, who headed the PA from 2002 to 2010 and was a Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs, also called for more inter-agency cooperation within the government. This would help avoid the “political pushback” that happened during the 2011 General Elections in Singapore, when the electorate expressed its unhappiness with various government policies.

“The Immigration & Checkpoints Authority dropped the ball, nobody was looking at immigration numbers properly. The Housing & Development Board had a backlog of housing, and in public transport, [there was] competition for limited space,” he said. “Nobody was watching the numbers. Watch changing demographics and circumstances. What you did in the past may not work now or in the future.”

Tan added that data analytics might have optimised train maintenance routines and reduced breakdowns, as well as help prevent recent reports of fraud in grant schemes. What would also help civil servants in their work is for government agencies to forge connections at the community level through the PA.



The PASSion card allowed the PA to use data analytics to better engage the community.
Source: TNP

In April 2005, PA introduced the PASSion Card to help give a sense of the PA’s outreach and effectiveness. The card gave insights about the people whom the grassroots and community clubs were engaging—demographics like age, ethnicity, their frequency of participation and their residential locations. It allowed the PA to use data analytics to remake itself and develop new means of engaging communities in line with social change.

“I would advocate that agencies engage with PA; go out and meet the people. Don’t forget there are always emerging generations—younger people plus new migrants, who don’t understand some of the basic tenets of why Singapore does what it does,” he said. Some examples Tan cited included co-payment health insurance schemes, and traffic management schemes such as Electronic Road Pricing and Certificates of Entitlement for motor vehicles.

“Before there is a crisis, engage the people and grassroots well in advance. So, in a crisis, you already have made the connection, the crisis resolution would be a lot easier.”

It is also important to stay focused on the mission. While the PA organises many activities to bring people together, interact and build social capital, there needs to be a clear end goal of national unity. Tan noted that some grassroots events offer little real engagement with the community and cultural performances are not well explained.

“There’s a difference between the means and the ends,” he said. “Sometimes we end up confusing the means with the ends. Sometimes [PA staff and grassroots leaders] just focus on organising a slick event. You want to organise something, think about the end you want, what you want the people experiencing it to go away with. [Sometimes] you lose the purpose, [which is] to understand differences and embrace differences.”

This goal of bringing different segments of Singapore society together through social, cultural, educational and athletic group activities has been the historical role of PA. Likening the organisation to a “ministry of national unity”, Tan said the PA is, and will continue to be, a key instrument of nation-building in Singapore.



Community centres provided space to conduct sewing classes for the community in the 1960s. Source: National Archives Singapore

“In Singapore, we’re not interested in becoming a melting pot. What ‘melting pot’ means is, we don’t worry about our past, we just become one kind of people for the future. But if you listen carefully, our government leaders always say: you preserve your cultural heritage, but you look at our common spaces and we build a national identity that way.”

While grassroots groups in the past were mobilised to build roads and other infrastructure in rural areas, today’s groups serve as emergency response teams and community patrols. The local community is also engaged in the management of community clubs, which is a key factor in their success.



Former PA Chief Executive Director Tan Boon Huat conducted an open, candid and interactive Question and Answer session with lecture attendees. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

“[The community clubs] could all be run by [the government], but the missing ingredient would be ownership by the community,” said Tan. “[With the SARS health crisis in 2003], because we involved the community so much, people felt confident that things were under control and would get better. If it was all done by the police or civil defence, there’s a different tenor to it.”

Beyond communal lines, a society can also be divided by economic, education and social divergences. In Singapore, this has hindered interaction between different social groups, says Tan, and is something PA should keep in mind going forward.

“PA strives to tell people of all walks of life: there are different social orbits, we know them, and PA will try to bring people of different orbits together,” he said. “To understand that there’s diversity but try to build up that common space.”

About the Speakers



SPEAKER

Tan Boon Huat

Former Chief Executive Director,
People's Association

Mr Tan Boon Huat was Chief Executive Director of the People's Association (PA) from 2002 to 2010. During his tenure, he introduced business analytics to improve customer service, which widened the community outreach of the PA and modernised operations. He was also Deputy Secretary in the Public Service Division, where he led the fundamental change of the Civil Service staff appraisal system and in transforming the Civil Service remuneration system. Tan Boon Huat was the returning officer for three parliamentary and two presidential elections from 1997 to 2006.



MODERATOR

Louisa-May Khoo

Senior Assistant Director,
Centre for Liveable Cities,
Ministry of National Development

Louisa-May Khoo previously served as an urban planner with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the Strategic Planning Division in the Ministry of National Development (MND). She was involved in crafting Concept Plan 2001 and Master Plan 2003 and oversaw reclamation, residential and industrial land-use policies in Singapore. Her research interests navigate the intersections of policy and governance, and urban social issues, with a focus on housing, diversity and encounters.

About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>