LOCAL COMMUNITIES

HO KONG CHONG, WONG SHIAU CHING AND URBAN HERITAGE TEAM

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Informal Neighbourhood Partnerships: "With a Little Help from My Friends"

The fieldsite in Toa Payoh East at dusk. As resettlement nears its end, most of the residents have moved out of these two rental blocks.
Image: Ho Kong Chong

National University of Singapore's Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong and Wong Shiau Ching spotlight the everyday forms of care arising from informal neighbourhood partnerships in this curious case of rental block resettlement in Singapore.

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Public-Private Partnerships

Local governments realise that efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery increasingly require partnerships among sectors, groups and individuals. Such partnerships have acquired a variety of meanings. Perhaps the most common term is "public-private partnerships", which has been highlighted as a resource to foster urban economic development. Literacy and health programmes gain traction when government agencies partner with neighbourhood organisations. Partnerships create synergy, spread out and dilute potential risks, resulting in additional financial resources, more consensual working environments and reduced potential overload on government agencies. At the neighbourhood level, the proximity of residents could enforce local norms and reduce free rider problems. The vested interest of residents in having good living environments motivates them to cooperate with local government agencies.

Care Relations in the Neighbourhood

There are different types of partnerships operating in the Singapore neighbourhood. There are those which are initiated by the government, which tend to be more formal involving contractual obligations to cooperate. Such partnerships usually involve the flow of funds and other resources, cover multiple sites, and often require extended periods to fulfil specific objectives.

In contrast, our article focuses on informal partnerships at the neighbourhood level. These are more idiosyncratic and unique as compared to formal partnerships which are rule-bound and therefore more limited in terms of activity range. The flexible nature of informal partnerships allow for activities to grow and shrink according to need. Certainly, these arrangements should also be defined as partnerships because there is a clear reciprocity in the relationship. The exchange process

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may not be symmetrical but it does involve some mutuality in efforts. The sub-title of this essay, "With a little help from my friends", taken from a Beatles' song, captures the importance of timely help among friendly relations in everyday situations. This is all the more so among neighbours because cooperative informal partnerships are enhanced by proximity.

This article's focus on informal partnerships as the uncredited ingredient in neighbourhood care relations stems from a heritage class exercise on documenting residents' memories of place and experiences in their neighbourhood. When residents are socially active and already participating in various activities, informal partnerships grow organically and contribute to a city of care. Informal partnerships act as a lubricant, mobilising and organising the take-up of issues initially overlooked by government agencies, while at the same time allowing for other actors to provide additional support when needed.

Perhaps the most visible occurrence of informal partnerships in academic literature is the broken windows theory, a neighbourhood-based perspective on crime prevention. When neighbours cooperate, watch out for each other and actively maintain social order in their neighbourhood, lower crime results. Social capital becomes an attribute located at the neighbourhood level, entrenched in place because informal partnerships that flourish necessitate that neighbours look out for one another. It is an understanding that is evolved and sustained, capable of extending to other areas of need. It is unbounded by the rigidity of formal partnerships.

Everyday Forms of Care, Moving and Settling

Our case material for illustrating informal partnerships is based on the experience of elderly residents from two rental blocks—29 and 31 in Toa Payoh East Singapore—who had to undergo resettlement as their apartment blocks were being slated for demolition.

Providing insight into the minds of these residents was the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) Gerontology Student and Alumni Committee (GSAC), made up of current students and past graduates of the Singapore University of Social Sciences' Gerontology programme, who formed a volunteer group in December 2021 to help residents with the relocation. These 13 volunteers, which came from diverse professional backgrounds, sought to help residents through befriending, logistical and administrative support, repair works and handing over of care to the social service manager in the new location.

The two rental blocks, 29 and 31 in Toa Payoh East, which are slated to be demolished.
Image: Ho Kong Chong

Although this case seems like a routine issue of moving residents, it highlights a more serious problem of seniors living alone. One such volunteer, HP, noted in an interview on 8 December 2022:

> Somewhere in July or August 2021, when I was doing my weekly [meal delivery], …because I get to know the seniors for one over year, …they came to me and said "*Cham liao, cham liao, ai bwa chu liao, ai tiah liao*" ('Problem, problem, we need to move, our homes are going to be demolished' in Hokkien)… so this thing struck me…I was thinking to myself how to support [these residents]. And I also can foresee that this is not going to be a simple project, you will need more volunteers…So I said, "let's do a ground up."

Micron SGCSR volunteers helping Mdm Tan pack for her relocation in September 2022.
Image: Tang Ya Cheng, used by permission (Micron SGCSR)

These residents often live alone, which also means that they lack the family support to mobilise for a complicated move.

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Ng Kok Hoe from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the Cassia Resettlement Team (CRT) documented a similar issue of elderly resettlement in the book, *They Told Us to Move* (2019). Like Dakota-Cassia, the residents living in public assisted rental flats in Toa Payoh East, share a similar predicament. According to one volunteer's estimate, about 80% of the residents in Toa Payoh East are over 60 years old, many of whom have lived there for at least two decades. These residents often live alone, which also means that they lack the family support to

mobilise for a complicated move. Aside from the physical move, they also have to undertake a formal change of address, renovations and coordinate with authorities for activation of utilities.

Our analysis goes a step further from the Dakota-Cassia study by identifying, through interviews with residents and volunteers, how these ground up linkages work to mitigate the moving-related problems, and also to show the range of informal partnerships and general forms of support that exist within the neighbourhood (Figure 1).

Five Types of Neighbourhood-Level Support and Partnerships

Type 1: Between Residents	"He's the helper, very good. One day I not well...suddenly...cannot walk. Then I called him ['Malay Uncle Neighbour']...Brother I am not well...He [came] to see me...and called ambulance. When ambulance [came to take me away] he closed the door [for me] and [came] to see me [at the hospital]." **Mdm I, >25 years residence, 24 September 2022** "The neighbour is a Malay uncle...painted the place for her and then fixed the piping for her. There's another neighbour...helped her to move some of little stuff over so there's this camaraderie...the kampung spirit." **Resident whom Mdm I mentioned was recounted by HP, 8 December 2022**
Type 2: Between Residents and Agency	"[Social service agency] downstairs, they have treated me very well [and] helped me a lot...I am also a volunteer there...I used to help distribute food but no longer now because many residents have moved away or passed on...and help out at activities such as parties or when ITE students come [for volunteer work]...On Tuesday I [help out and] play bingo games and on Thursday there is karaoke, I would go downstairs to sing." **Mdm Y, 45 years residence, 24 September 2022**
Type 3: Support from Neighbourhood Businesses	"...that one good, but I don't like to go...that kopitiam...Ah Chye, I go and order tea...[he said] 'kia, gia kee jiak' ('go take and eat' in Hokkien), don't want to collect me money...That vegetarian that one, I go and order. He also 'na na na, na qu chi, bu yong gei wo gian' ('go and eat, don't give me money' in Mandarin) so I feel so malu...[the hawkers remember me] 'aiyoh, you so nice you take care of your father, you take care of your husband' ...They know lah, they remember me... 'you really take care of your father, ...everyday you bring him out...'" **Mdm R, 30 years residence, 24 September 2022**
Type 4: Multiple care links among Volunteers, Residents and Agencies	"There's this senior [who] came back with a urinary bag [from the hospital]....that was a Saturday and he's actually staying alone. I approached Madam Y, 'can you help to deliver food?' ...Madam Y said 'no worries' and got another resident...to check on him. And he will deliver the meal over the weekend. Then when [social service agency staff] came back to work on Monday, ...[they would] check on [the resident]." **HP, 8 December 2022** "We discovered [an elderly] who's been bathing [outside his flat] he's on wheelchair and he cannot get into the bathroom because of the curb...[Residents] told me he's been going [place to bathe]...so I went to see then he told me... 'I cannot apply'...I called HDB up and I told [social service agency] to contact the contractor for me...[Then] I bargained with [the contractor], I said 'we cannot get any fund and he can't pay because he is under welfare'... So I paid him [the discounted cost for the resident] lah." **Mdm H, community leader, 14 December 2022**
Type 5: Volunteers partnering with Businesses to deliver services to Residents	"I become a business development guy [in order to secure the help of companies]...M is big electronics company and they want to do some CSR...So I have to do a pitch to the...team [that] we're trying to get them (the residents) to move." **HP, 8 December 2022** "...there's bread [donated directly from a hotel or food rescue group collecting from bakeries] delivered at night...[Mr H] helps to bring over in the morning...and they would call me to help distribute to different residents [in neighbouring blocks]...Residents who know me would take." **Mdm A, 14 December 2022**

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Figure 1. Five types of neighbourhood-level support and partnerships. The interviews above were conducted by Urban Heritage Team, comprising of students from Yale-NUS who responded to A/Prof K.C. Ho's call to help residents recall memories of their neighbourhood. (Some of these quotes have been translated, as well as edited for brevity).
Source: Ho Kong Chong

Different actors can be incorporated into the support system, thereby enlarging the scope when needs arise.

It is important to state that everyday forms of partnerships are important because these can be mobilised for needs such as resettlement, as in the case of Type 1 relationships. These types of support and partnerships share the following characteristics:

Agency of residents and role of resident leaders—As in the case of Dakota-Cassia, many residents depend on support services. However, many are also far from being helpless. For example, residents like Mdm A and Mdm Y are active volunteers and trusted members of their communities, whom volunteers like HP depend upon to bridge relationships with residents. Relationships of care (Type 1) between residents work to support residents who are frail and in ill health. Because they live in close proximity, they are in a position to observe changing circumstances and are proactive in informing volunteers or community workers of specific individuals' needs. The role of resident leader was clearly expressed by HP (8 December 2022) as he sought to build inroads to the residents as a precursor to attempts at service delivery:

> So we started [and]…we want to be the voice of the seniors. So we started befriending…,

without getting to know the senior you will not have the moral right to say I want to go in and support (them)…similar like in the army, …in every platoon or company, there is one guy that actually…commands certain respect. Similarly Block 29 there is this [Mdm A who is] like a… village chief…and also [Block] 31 there's another guy [Mr H]… there's actually another lady [Mdm Y]…So we work closely with these [residents] because these are the people [who] have been there for years.

Neighbourhood businesses are important partners—In highlighting company contributions, we often gravitate to larger companies because of their larger financial and human resources, which can be deployed for social service. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies of such companies (Figure 1. See the example of M under Type 5) can certainly be harnessed for social good. However, what seems to be missing in the CSR literature is the role of the local micro businesses like hawkers, bakeries and neighbourhood eateries which also play an important role at this micro-scale. Such micro businesses operating at the local level also maintain regular face-to-face contact with residents and must be considered a critical element in

building a community of care. The example provided by Mdm R (Figure 1. Type 3) is a case in point of how micro businesses have some capacity to support residents at the local neighbourhood level.

The flexibility and multiplexity of informal partnerships—Different actors can be incorporated into the support system, thereby enlarging the scope when needs arise. Social service agency Thye Hua Kwan, for example, helps needy residents with weekday food support. This agency also works with other community partners to deliver other services for the elderly (Figure 1. Type 4). In the same way, company CSR efforts can also be cultivated to empower residents to also be conveyors of social support, rather than just receivers. The flexibility and multiplexity of these ground partnerships give it the appearance of rhizomatic informal support networks which could expand to areas where there are unmet needs and contract when these needs are met.

Weaving an Ecosystem of Partnerships

They Told Us to Move contains detailed accounts of residents facing resettlement. There is a sense of emotional loss that comes from the disruption to decades-long relationships. Everyday cherished neighbourhood routines are lost and need rebuilding. Even the shedding and discarding of possessions linked with the old house can have a profound impact upon residents.

In our case study, this sense of displacement is a lingering one. Even after moving to a nearby location for over two months, Mdm A inadvertently continues to alight at the bus stop of her former place. She remarked, "My husband chided me and said my brain is still there" (interviewed 14 December 2022). Indeed, her sense of self and identity continues to be rooted in the old neighbourhood as she returns daily to help residents clear unwanted items and distribute bread from food rescue efforts.

Care exists within an ecosystem of partnerships where the constituent parts work with each other. There are different informal partnerships and linkages with agencies; some are task-specific while others last for a longer duration. We argue that while formal partnerships stemming from agency involvement may create a certainty and allow for resource flows, informal partnerships also have a valuable part to play in covering some of the gaps in the neighbourhood-based care environment.

Informal partnerships may not work in all neighbourhoods. The wealthier neighbourhoods have less need to depend on help from neighbours as they have the financial resources to pay for the necessary service. At the opposite end of the income spectrum, the poorest neighbourhoods may consist of more transient residents, who are disorganised and lacking in the more stable neighbourhood ties that form the bedrock of informal partnerships.

Can informal partnerships be encouraged by policy? The answer is both yes and no. It may not work if the transient neighbourhood works against stable neighbourly relations and its associated support, or if residents turn to extended kin for help and support, though that in itself is a good thing. There is, however, a role that formal neighbourhood agencies can play in creating informal partnerships of support among the residents (Figure 1. Type 4 and 5). This is an important consequence of outreach that should not be discounted, as we have seen that recipients who have received assistance often return this help to other residents who require services that formal agencies cannot provide.

It is advantageous to incorporate the help of clients of policy programmes because they have a grounded understanding as recipients, and can contribute to better delivery. The task of urban policy, therefore, is not to ignore these seemingly humble and inconspicuous relationships. Because they fade into the background of everyday life, urban solutions which arise from such relations often surprise policymakers. When mobilised, however, these relations work to ensure a more complete environment of care among residents who need it most. 🔍

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