

Community Centers in Singapore

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Community centers were primarily designed to promote grassroots participation in Singapore. Through time their role has expanded to include information dissemination, all done to promote the idea of nation-building, development, and communal harmony. In July 1960, the Singapore government formed a statutory board known as the People's Association to establish control over some two dozen existing community centers in the place. The Association organized varied types of activities for the centers like recreational, vocational, cultural, educational, etc. The centers' main conviction is to involve the people not only as mere participants but also as shapers of the centers. Management committees whose membership is open to every adult citizen were thus formed to assist in the centers' operation. Evaluating the success of the centers may be difficult since promoting nation-building and communal harmony is not done by them solely. But one has only to see through the extent of involvement of the people themselves with the center, the fact that poorer citizens are served just as well and the actualization of popular involvement at grassroots level, to adjudge these community centers as successes.

Introduction

The idea of a community center in the neighborhood was first mooted in London shortly after World War II as part of an effort to promote community development in all British colonies. Among the reasons cited for the move were the desire to promote positive grassroots participation and a greater sense of commitment to the overall welfare of the community. The disruptions and dislocations of the Second World War made it all the more necessary to bring about some form of positive commitment to the rebuilding of the war-torn societies. However, when the program was implemented, the efforts were rather modest. Only a few centers were built and partly because of the dislocations of the war, they were used also for a multitude of other purposes such as conversion into temporary feeding centers for the poor.

A government bureau, the Department of Social Welfare, was responsible for the running of the centers. A few centers were also initiated by members of the community themselves and by the 1950s, many of these centers had their own management committees subject to nominal control of the Department of Social Welfare.

In a sense, the community centers were not given sufficient emphasis until after the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power in 1959. The PAP leaders realized the potential contributions of the centers to positive community mobilization and support. Apart from demonstrating that the government was committed to uplifting the welfare and interest of the bulk of the poorer people (an approach which would fit in with the government's democratic socialist beliefs), the community centers could be used to promote better two-way communication between the people and the government. The activities which the centers could promote would also

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benefit the participants while in the long-run, the centers could be the foci of community identification.

However, the government had to reorganize the centers. As mentioned, the Department of Social Welfare had nominal control over them. Also, there were little policy guidelines provided the management committees on how these centers should be run, and many members of these committees were also political activists whose ideological inclinations were different from those of the ruling PAP. The government's first step was thus to establish control over these centers, which numbered about two dozens. These centers were effectively controlled by the Department of Social Welfare. However, in some centers, the process of establishing control was made difficult partly because of the protests by the management committees which accused the government of trying to settle old political scores or trying to exercise total political control. These voluntary committees were finally dissolved and the government then passed an Act in the Legislative Assembly for the setting up of a statutory board. Known as the People's Association, this statutory board, was formed in July 1960 for the purpose of (a) organizing and promoting group participation in social, cultural, educational, and athletic activities for the people of Singapore "in order that they realize that they belong to a multi-racial community, the interests of which transcend sectional loyalties;" (b) establishing institutions which may promote leadership training in order to instill a sense of multi-racial community; and (c) carrying out any other activities which would enable the People's Association to achieve the above two objectives.

The People's Association was run by a Board of Management which was comprised mainly of government nominees. The chairman of the board was the prime minister. Some of the members of the Management Board were elected from various corporate members representing diverse social services in Singapore. The day to day running of the People's Association was left to a full-time executive, first labelled as Director and in more recent years, retitled as Chief Executive Director.

In a sense the organization of the People's Association revealed the thinking of the government on the roles which the community centers were to assume in Singapore. Maximum contribution and support by other social organizations whose activities were not incompatible with those of the government was to be encouraged and by making them members of the Board of Corporation of the People's Association, these social organizations could be counted upon to give support or endorsement to the activities of the People's Association. At the same time, the government would like to ensure that its control over the People's Association would not be compromised since the majority of the policy making body, the Board of Management, would be nominees of the government. The Board of Management incidentally was empowered to include or exclude any social organization from the Board of Corporation — a further safeguard to ensure that these corporate members would remain useful in the attainment of the objectives of the People's Association.

Upon the inception of the People's Association, the first task was to accelerate the pace of physical construc-

Table 1. Number of Existing Community Centers
by Year, 1960-1979 (March)

Year	Number
pre 1960	24
1960	39
1961	52
1962	60
1963	161
1964	180
1965	181
1966	181
1967	183
1968	182
1969	186
1970	188
1971	189
1972	187
1973	178
1974	172
1975	167
1976/77	166
1977	166
1978	162
1979 (March)	161

Source: Table 2-1 of C.M. Seah, *Community Centers in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973) and *Peoples' Association Annual Reports*.

tion of the community centers. Unlike the two dozen odd centers, the People's Association decided that centers should be built as close to centers of population concentrations, and that their number should be sufficiently adequate if they were to make any impact at all on the people. The emphases on urgency and practicality led to the standardization of the construction designs and initially two designs were produced, viz., the "standard type" of brickstructure and the "rural type" which made extensive use of planks for construction. Presumably, the "standard type" was for the urban areas or more important population concentrations in the rural areas while the "rural type" was to be located in smaller villages. The number of centers

that were found in Singapore could be seen in Table 1.

Observations

There are four interesting observations to make. First, the pace of construction was considerably hastened between the period of 1961-1964. This coincided with the increased political instability in Singapore resulting from the power struggle between the ruling party and its breakaway faction, the *Barisan Sosialis*. The position of the ruling party was indeed precarious as most of its supporters, active cadres and branches switched loyalties and the ruling party had to depend on governmental channels such as the community centers to impress upon the

people the rational basis of its policies. In view of the fact that a sizeable segment of the people did not depend on the mass media for source of information, the role of the community centers in promoting greater governmental awareness of governmental policies was indeed indispensable. Secondly, Singapore was also caught in a rather important phase of political development. The proposal to merge with Malaysia, the subsequent political differences with the Malaysian leaders, and the external threat posed by Indonesia's confrontation policy meant that political communication was indeed crucial in the struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the people. Again, the community centers were important. This communication role was further enhanced after Singapore became an independent republic in 1965 when difficult policies such as National Service conscription had to be implemented.

Thirdly, while the communication role today would seem less important in view of rising literacy and affluence and access to mass media, the community centers are still useful as places where important social and political policies can be explained to the people. Many of the national campaigns — ranging from exhortations of courtesy to keeping the country green and clean — were initiated from the centers.

Fourth, while the pace of construction has slowed down, the capital outlay for physical development of these centers remained high. In the past, the costs of the centers were relatively cheap, the "standard type" costing about S \$40,000 while the "rural type" was about half the amount. With urban renewal and popu-

lation shifts, many of the earlier centers had to be resisted or removed while new ones had to be rebuilt. In view of the rising aspirations resulting from tangible improvements in living standards and affluence, the new centers had to have a sufficient range of activities to attract the participation of the people. Also, unlike the past in which standard designs were acceptable, there was the emphasis on distinct architectural designs to give a sense of identification and attachment. Many of the new generation centers cost more than a million dollars and presumably they are meant to last for a much longer period of time unlike those of the past. Thus, while the total number of centers has not increased (indeed, the number has even been reduced marginally), the capital investments continued to remain high.

Programs of the Centers

The community centers continue to be controlled centrally by the People's Association. The range of activities of the community centers has to be approved by the headquarters and while there is no attempt to impose rigid adherence, the activities found in the centers are almost quite similar except for minor changes to suit the peculiarities of the neighborhood. In Malay areas, for example, games such as *sepak takraw* would have greater appeal while basketball would be less emphasized.

The range of activities of the centers are summarized in Table 2. It should be stressed that as one of the main objectives is to promote nation-building and foster communal harmony among Singapore multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious groupings, the

Table 2. Range of Activities Found at Community Centers

Type	Activity
Recreational	Volleyball Basketball Table-tennis Carom Sepak takraw Badminton Weightlifting Chess Karate Tae-Kwan-do Squash Archery Tai-chi Meditation
Vocational	Sewing, home economics Handicraft Flower arrangement Radio servicing
Cultural	Lion Dance Dragon Dance Folk Dances, songs
Educational	Television, radio, newspapers facilities Kindergarten classes Language instruction
Ad hoc	National Day Celebrations Language Week Campaigns of national solidarity National Servicemen send-off Anti-spitting, anti-littering campaigns

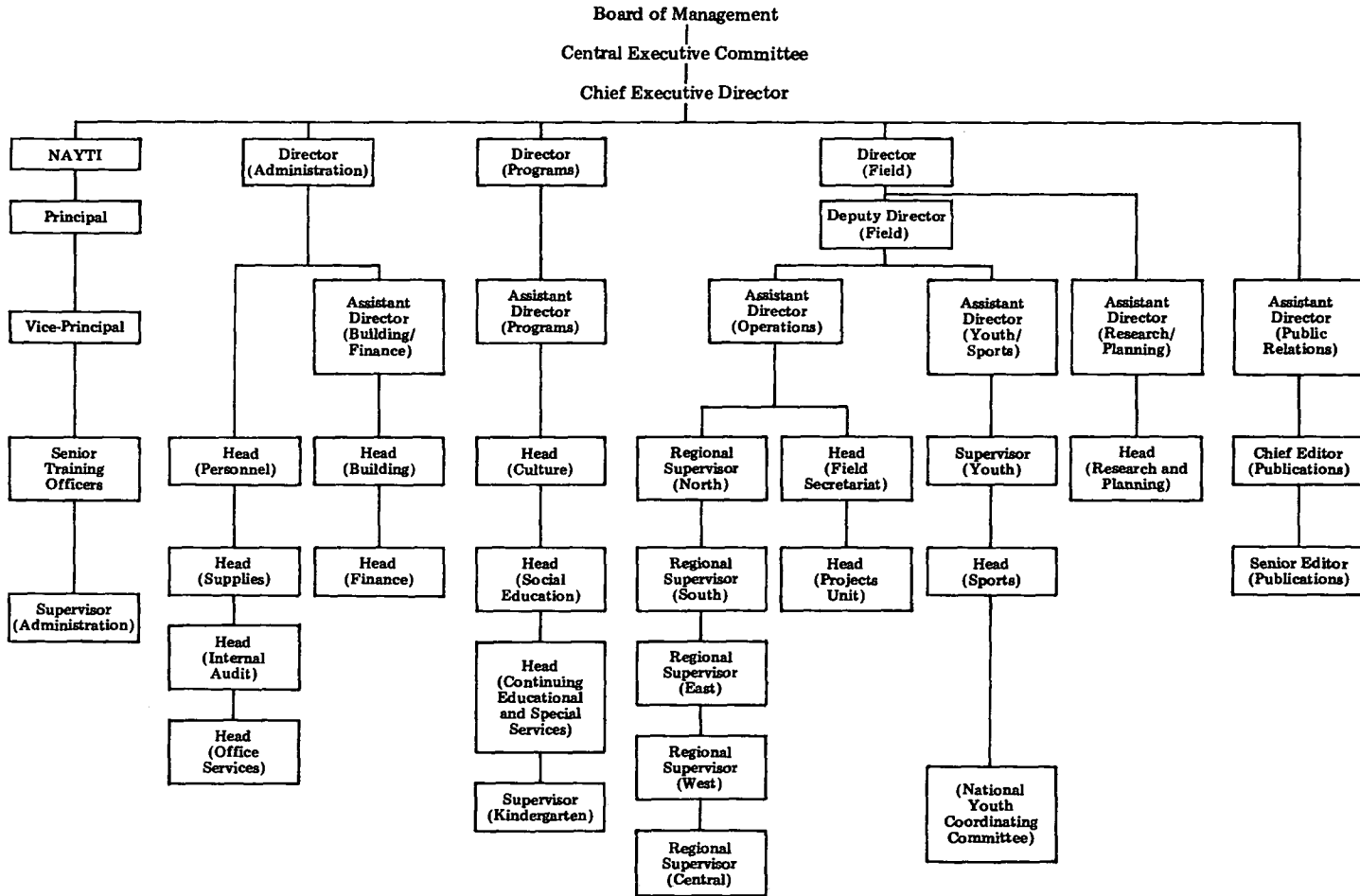
Source: Seah, *op. cit.* p. 41.

community centers do not discriminate participation from certain sections of the population. Indeed, the centers make conscious efforts to induce people, irrespective of religious, cultural or racial identification, to participate as one group. This probably explains why the centers do not promote recreational activities per se. Nation-

building and educational activities are similarly emphasized.

In a sense, the community centers will have to search for new ideas which would ensure that they would remain useful and meaningful to the people. On occasion, mass activities such as the Ching-gay festival, or certain select-

Figure 1. People's Association Organizational Chart, 1980



ed activities, such as the bag pipers group, the choir group and national dance troupe would be organized by the headquarters, namely, the People's Association. However, most of the other activities are left to the centers to initiate.

The tasks of organizing and coordinating these activities are left mainly to the professional personnel at People's Association. The organizational chart of the headquarters has become more complex over the years with additions of new functions. Functional specificity and geographical specialization are incorporated in the organizational profile. In its latest annual report (1978-1979), the organizational structure shows four main areas of specialization, viz., the youth leadership training school, programs, administration, and field functions. Each of these sections is headed by a person of director status and under him, further sub-division of tasks is effected. In the case of the field section, control over the community centers is facilitated by zoning the republic into five areas with each of these areas headed by a supervisor. Functional specificity is also incorporated into this section especially for activities which are deemed to be important, a good example, being the youth groups. The organizational chart is shown in Figure 1.

At the community center level, the organizational chart is much more simple. There is an advisory management committee whose main role is to advise the activities of the center. The main person responsible for the day-to-day running of the center is the community development officer (CDO). He has to take directives from the People's Association as well and is

ultimately accountable to it. Under him would be the assistant community development officers, the kindergarten teachers, activity instructors (mainly part-time) and a caretaker. The actual composition of the personnel would depend on the relative importance of the centers, the more active centers would presumably be given more staff.

In carrying these activities, the professional staff at the centers are given prior training. Most of them are trained at the National Youth Leadership Training Institute (NAYTI) which was founded in 1964 by the People's Association. The instruction available for the professional staff is generally rigorous and comprehensive and is directed at improving their work performance. At the moment, the NAYTI is also responsible for conducting similar-type courses in leadership training (of varying durations) for other institutions such as the trade unions.

The various activities conducted at the community centers are thus deliberate efforts at involving the people. Table 3 indicates the number of classes and participants conducted by People's Association and the community centers during selected months. Since participation is voluntary and since there are also other organizations providing similar type activities, the extent of involvement as shown in the table could be said to be an indicator of the relative high degree of success and the acceptance by the people of the community centers' activities.

It is of course difficult to try to evaluate the extent to which the specific goals of the centers have been achieved. For example, to what extent has the nation-building role been attained by the community centers?

Table 3. Participation at Community Center, March 1976-March 1979

Activity	Classes				Participants			
	March 1976	March 1977	March 1978	March 1979	March 1976	March 1977	March 1978	March 1979
Continuing Education	343	328	378	405	7437	5818	7011	8770
Kindergarten	583	586	569	503	15850	15493	15044	13606
Cultural Activities	269	291	352	304	5759	6019	6492	5038
Sports	739	851	891	612	12244	14484	16740	12048
Youth Movement Members	—	—	—	—	18693	21473	28984	29124
NAYTI Courses	8	15	12	12	260	400	328	455

Source: *People's Association Annual Report, 1978-79*, pp. 54-59.

This and other related questions are not easy to answer since the centers do not have the monopoly in the fulfillment of those objectives. The community centers supplement other institutions such as the schools and voluntary organizations. They fulfill a badly-required need in Singapore where individuals may find individual and collective fulfillments. Thus, if a person were to be interested in any of the activities of the centers, all he needs to do is to enroll (although enrollment again is not compulsory in all the activities) and participate. He has very few obligations other than payment of fees which are relatively much lower than those charged by other institutions. The extent to which deviant activities such as gangsterism and secret societies has been reduced as a result of the positive role of the community centers is again a difficult question to answer, although like the other questions, the centers supplement the law enforcement aspects by providing healthy outlets for youths in their search for self-fulfillment.

People Involvement in Community Development

The idea of mass involvement and different degrees of involvement is

germane in the concept of community development. A stronger sense of commitment to the society would materialize if the people were given a greater positive role to play. In a sense, this principle is observed in the centers.

People involvement can be done at different levels. Initially, the main stress was to involve the people as participants in the various activities of the centers and to accept the centers as foci of the neighborhood. This was probably the more difficult task for if the centers were not identified and accepted as such, then much of the effort to promote strong two-way communication between the government and the people would end in failure. However, it was also realized that involvement by the people should also go beyond the mere fact of being passive participants. It is true that governmental control over the centers is crucial, but it is equally apparent that the people should be given opportunities to help shape the centers for only then would the centers be truly accepted as foci of local activities.

Thus, by 1964, management committees (MCs) were formed to help in the running of these centers. Each community center was to eventually

have a management committee whose members would be those recommended by the Member of Parliament to the People's Association. There are few disqualifications barring membership and, indeed, any adult person who has a keen interest in the affairs of the community may be invited to be a member. The management committees are subject to the control of the People's Association who would be responsible for their appointment, renewal, and continuation of membership.

The majority of the management committees in the earlier years came mainly from the Chinese-educated business group. This particular feature was not deliberate but the result of an existing self-selective process. Many Chinese-educated businessmen have been interested in the affairs of the community and they have in the past been involved in clan and other business organizations which *inter alia* had interests in the affairs of the community such as education and cultural promotion. These people too were generally recognized as spokesmen in the neighborhood and they were also in close and frequent contact with their local surroundings. As informal leaders, their appointment as management committee leaders was merely a reaffirmation of their roles which they had hitherto performed.

These management committees operated on regulations laid down by the People's Association. They were responsible for the range of activities of the centers, subject to the overall approval of the People's Association. They too were to raise funds to cover any additional expenditure for which there were no provisions made. Since the money given by the People's Association was seldom sufficient, the

Management Committees had to raise the necessary funds. This has since become a major function when decisions to rebuild the centers were made. For example, in 1978-1979, three new centers were built at a cost of S\$2.9 million of which S\$1.8 million was contributed by the people (mainly through the efforts of the Management Committees and other local informal leaders). In addition, two other centers were extended while construction of another three centers was initiated. These five projects were to cost S\$2.8 million, of which S\$1.3 million were again raised by the informal leaders.

Thus, for the recurrent and capital expenditure, the role of the Management Committees is indispensable. They are able to raise funds, too, mainly because of their own generous contributions and also because of their extensive contacts in the community. They also work very closely with other grassroots organizations such as the Citizens Consultative Committee and indeed multiple institutional membership exists. For example, the office-bearers in the management committees are very likely to be members of the Citizens Consultative Committees and other social, business, or professional organizations. Through such membership, the centers are readily acceptable to the people as "their" organizations.

The Management Committees' other main role (which is also played by the citizens consultative committees) is to promote a two-way communication flow. They also help to mediate differences among the people although this function is mainly of an advisory nature.

Unfortunately, with the passage of years and partly as a result of con-

tinuing years of loyal service the composition of the Management Committees has shown to be relatively static in the sense that there is very little infusion of "new talents" while the existing members have "aged." Most of the people in the committees are in the upper middle-aged and elderly brackets while the number of younger professionals serving in these committees remains small. This feature could be unhealthy in the long run, and it is the main reason prompting the government to try to accelerate the pace of replacement. Many of the older serving members in the committees have been honored in their various capacities and while they could be called upon to continue serving, it is felt that they should be elevated to the role of patrons or given honorary positions thus allowing the younger and perhaps better educated Singaporeans to serve in these committees. The process of substitution is not completed and is likely to be an on-going process.

In the meanwhile, other sub-committees have been established to cater to the specific interests of certain sectors in Singapore. The Youth and Women sub-committees were established in most centers to plan activities pertaining to these two groups. The People's Association is directly responsible for these two groups. Indeed, it is credited as being the only organization responsible for establishing a national youth movement.

With the establishment of these committees, more opportunities are thus created for participation. This is a healthy activity since other than the prospect of self-fulfillment, it can also help generate a stronger sense of active commitment to the country. The government, through the People's Asso-

ciation and indirectly through the members of parliament, also monitors and regulates these committees' performance. Their effective functioning has helped the members of parliament since they are involved in grievance handling and are also assisting in disseminating governmental policies. The common people are more willing to accept such policies when explained by informal leaders whom they have readily identified.

Prospects

The community centers, thus, are an important grassroots organization in Singapore. Their role and emphasis would vary with the passage of time. In the beginning, the stress was on acceptance and dissemination of governmental information. They also provided much-needed recreational outlets in heavily congested urban areas or facilities-deprived rural areas. Today, with growing affluence this emphasis is less stressed but the centers still remain important. Indeed, the emphasis on the activities found in these centers has also changed. In recreational sports, the trend is towards games such as tennis and squash, for which no provision was made in the earlier years. Today, most of the new generation centers have tried to incorporate such facilities.

The public has generally accepted the centers. There remains differences in view whether the centers' facilities have been optimally used. Negative responses would tend to argue that the centers are under-used and perhaps could become "white elephants" in terms of maintenance. This view is persuasive when the newer centers tend to be more elaborate in design

and more costly to build and keep up. Yet, it is not possible to adopt a purely cost-effective approach. The efforts and results of the centers are not always measurable. What is important is that the facilities are there whenever the people would like to have access to them; it is also important that these facilities are usually close to their homes and open to all the people irrespective of race, religion, and socioeconomic status. The centers, thus, do prevent rigid class stratification by

allowing poorer people to have access to recreational, vocational, and other activities which might have otherwise become the preserve of an exclusive few. This is probably one of the greater successes of the centers in promoting an integrated society in Singapore. Its other achievements — such as popular involvement in decision-making at grassroots level — are equally laudable and could augur well in terms of promoting social and political stability in the country.