On 17th May 2013, students from the NUS Business School and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy presented the highlights of their consulting assignments with socially-driven organizations (SDOs) in Singapore. Supervised by the faculty and staff of the Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship & Philanthropy (ACSEP), these assignments aimed to enhance social awareness amongst students whose areas of study were not traditionally associated with SDOs or the social sector. A total of six student teams participated in the event and presented their findings to a panel of judges (comprising the heads of several of the SDOs involved), as well as an audience of students, faculty and social sector professionals.

As newcomers to ACSEP, it was an eye-opener for us to be involved in this event. We found that the students had formed meaningful partnerships with ACSEP’s partner SDOs and contributed significantly
through their engagement. The presentations are summarized below in the order that they were presented:

**The Singapore Red Cross Society - Volunteerism**

The team conducted surveys and focus group discussions with the public and existing volunteers to understand the challenges and motivations of volunteering with the Singapore Red Cross Society (SRC). The team’s efforts revealed that individuals are motivated to volunteer when i) it fits with their schedule, ii) they are interested in the work, iii) they can develop new skills and iv) they can be involved with organizations that benefit society. Individuals who enjoy helping other people are also more likely to volunteer than others. However, survey respondents suggested that there could be more advanced notice of upcoming projects so that they could make the personal arrangements required to enable participation. The team suggested that SRC release the schedule of its projects to its volunteers as early as possible to allow them to make the necessary changes to their own schedules. In addition, the team also recommended that the society recognize the contributions and sacrifices of its active volunteers to encourage active volunteerism.

It was encouraging to hear during the Q&A session that a volunteer database was already in development in the SRC. This would allow better management of volunteers, including matching of volunteer availability with program timings. Therefore, the SRC can look forward to better volunteer management in the near future.

**Tsao Foundation**

The team was tasked with assessing the market potential of Indonesia and China as points of expansion for the Tsao Foundation’s Eldercare services. The Indonesian case presented during the event showed that issues of ageing population and rapid rural-urban migration in Indonesia had led to the elderly in rural areas being left to care for themselves. This put them in a precarious situation, especially in cases where urgent medical attention was required, as the rural areas are highly inaccessible. To overcome this difficulty, the team proposed several potential interventions, including the use of mobile medical vans to cater to the medical needs of these individuals.

It was inspiring to hear that the Tsao Foundation’s passion for helping the elderly goes beyond geographical boundaries. However, a question asked in the Q&A session raised an interesting point
concerning the cultural factors that have to be considered when contemplating its expansion into Indonesia. The group suggested that partnerships with local Indonesian organizations might help overcome this challenge. However, the question of which organization in particular it should target requires more research and evaluation.

**The Singapore Red Cross Society - Awareness**

The second SRC study focused on public attitudes and perceptions of the organization and hoped to highlight ways in which the SRC could better cater to the needs of the community. While many survey respondents characterized the SRC as “helpful” and “kind”, there was a sizeable number who could not articulate their impressions of the organization, indicating low visibility. For instance, 25% of the survey respondents were aware of SRC’s blood donation recruitment programs but only 8% knew about their food aid service. Hence, the team recommended that the SRC expand and calibrate the provision of their services to the Singaporean community, and also to increase visibility through public awareness and education campaigns.

A question was raised on how the education campaigns would take shape. While the group gave an example of a possible campaign narrative, they did not specifically mention a target group. We felt that schools would be a good place to initiate these education campaigns, as students are more likely to be receptive towards new information, and this would have long lasting impact.

**Society for the Physically Disabled**

The Society for the Physically Disabled’s (SPD) team was tasked to uncover the public sentiment of SPD, and recommend ways in which SPD could raise public awareness of its association. From the survey conducted, the team discovered that only 19.4% of respondents were aware of SPD. To overcome this low public recognition, the team suggested that SPD undertake several re-branding measures to create a new identity that better reflects the range of its work. After a study on the logos of other SDOs, the team concluded that the new SPD logo should include the acronym and full name of the organization.
This would be more effective in generating public recognition. Moreover, SPD could even consider renaming itself to better reflect the wider scope of services offered by the organization.

While the team’s recommendation of an Instagram campaign is a novel idea, tagging photos of objects associated with physical disability, as they recommended, may reinforce certain socially entrenched negative connotations. Perhaps the emphasis of the campaign could focus on encouraging quotes or pictures of inspirational people with physical disabilities. In this way, the Instagram campaign would be seen in a more positive light.

**World Toilet Organization**

How successful is the World Toilet Organization’s (WTO) advocacy and outreach program? This was the question that the students working with WTO attempted to answer through their project. Using analytical data of several internet and social media platforms such as Google, Factiva and Twitter, the students found that while the WTO has gained much “virtual” ground over recent years, the gap between pop culture and WTO online remains significant.

A central concern among the panel of judges was the issue of representation – how far do Tweets and Google searches represent the extent of WTO’s global impact in the improvement of sanitation standards? However, given the complexity of the interaction between social media and society, the team faced much difficulty in establishing a direct causal link. A better, but far more timing consuming and expensive method to measure WTO’s impact would have been to directly survey and interview the public or beneficiaries of WTO projects.
The last student team sought to expand, enhance and elevate the work of the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) by suggesting a revenue-generating business model which would integrate community engagement and work experience for beneficiaries, and could provide a platform for social media campaigns. The team launched their pilot project on 13th April 2013 with the People’s Association Community Arts and Culture Club in Hong Kah North with great success. The hourly revenue generated through the event was three times that of the previous record and public awareness of SAMH was increased (based on the number of ‘likes’ on SAMH’s Facebook page). Their initiative even drew praise from Dr. Amy Khor, Minister of State. Moving forward, the team recommended for more of such events to be organized.

The team’s effort in implementing their project is commendable and, as they suggested, scaling up this business model would be highly beneficial for SAMH and its beneficiaries. Instead of limiting the business model to the Southwest CDC as recommended, we believe that replicating it across the various Community Centers would yield a wider social impact. As geographically-based cultural differences in Singapore are largely absent, there is little reason to place physical boundaries on this business model that has proven to be a resounding success.

One of the issues that this team could possibly explore concerns their goal of integration. Even though the business model proposed represents great economic opportunities for the least advantaged, the integration has up till now been limited to the economic aspects. We feel that the issue of integration extends beyond economic acceptance. Integration concerns a shift in societal perspective, viewing the least advantaged as equals. A better way to gauge such integration could be a quick survey on the public opinion, to see how this event changed their perception of the least advantaged. Furthermore, they could also refer to the number of encouragement notes written by the public, as this provides a more holistic gauge of public receptivity of SAMH’s beneficiaries.

**Singapore Association for Mental Health**
Closing Thoughts

The pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim advocated “moral individualism” – the idea that a person can be both self-interested yet socially moral at same time. Similarly, SDOs can seek to add revenue-generating programs to their existing operations while continuing to serve the community. ACSEP hopes that this event showcased the congruence between business techniques and doing social good, and how these can be complementary and mutually beneficial. From the guest judges’ enthusiasm in wanting to know more about the different recommendations made by the students, it is clear that the presentations struck a chord with them. Undoubtedly, they had much to take away from this event. In all, the event was highly beneficial for all parties involved – guest judges, student presenters, organizations and members of the public. We hope that from their time with the SDOs, the students will be inspired and equipped for future work in the social sector.

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