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In Singapore's sweltering heat, is air-conditioning a mere luxury or an essential need?

At the SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium held on July 12, a social worker highlighted that it was not always possible to draw a clear distinction between needs and wants. For instance, air-conditioning may be a luxury for some families, but it is a necessity for those susceptible to skin conditions in the hot weather, which can in turn affect mental health.

In fact, 63.6 per cent of Singapore residents perceive air-conditioning as an essential need, according to the Singapore Management University (SMU) study on household needs presented at the symposium.

The study aimed to identify needs that are broadly seen as essential for a normal standard of living in Singapore, recognising that needs go beyond subsistence and should also encompass psychological safety and social inclusion. A complementary survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) revealed whom the public felt should provide for each of these needs – whether it was the Government, the community, the individuals themselves, their relatives or friends.

As societal needs evolve, the social support system can be fine-tuned by channelling community efforts in a systematic way to provide support that is both customised and more predictable in meeting identified needs. This is especially important given the limits of government support.

The findings from the SMU and IPS studies can help by identifying essential needs and clarifying roles for different parties.

SUPPORT SHOULD BE CUSTOMISED AND FLEXIBLE

The example of air-conditioning highlights that social support cannot be one-size-fits-all; there must be flexibility and discretion to customise support to individual needs. Such flexibility is provided for through the "many helping hands" approach, which has been a mainstay of Singapore's social support system for decades.

Under this approach, the Government partners the community or people sector to deliver social assistance and social services to needy or disadvantaged households.

This strategy mobilises the considerable reservoir of goodwill, resources and expertise within the community for social good, rather than have the Government displace the efforts of corporate, community and religious organisations.

A further advantage of decentralised support is that community organisations,

Air-con a need or a want? Evolving expectations require fine-tuning of social support

Community partners can bridge gaps in social support with help tailored to individual needs.



It is not always possible to draw a clear distinction between needs and wants, a social worker said at the SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium on July 12. Air-conditioning may be a luxury for some families, but it is a necessity for those susceptible to skin conditions in the hot weather, which can also affect mental health. ST FILE PHOTO

whether grassroots organisations or social service agencies, are well placed to ascertain needs within the local community.

Social workers who work closely with families can assess the additional, context-specific help they may need and match donors with beneficiaries.

LIMITATIONS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Currently, the state provides basic financial assistance through various Community Care (ComCare) schemes, along with a range of means-tested healthcare, housing and public transport subsidies.

However, there are in-built limits to the coverage and quantum of government support in the Singapore system.

First, government support has been positioned as a last resort, and not a first resort, and targeted at the most needy. This enables taxes to be kept low, while preserving the ethos of

self-reliance.

ComCare support is sized to help needy households with typical daily living expenses.

Although social service officers disbursing support may exercise some flexibility, ComCare does not provide for all living expenses that households with varying circumstances – such as chronic health conditions or disabilities – may face.

These may need to be addressed through other government schemes or sources of help.

Second, most taxpayer-funded schemes are for citizens or residents, and generally exclude foreigners who are not part of Singaporean families.

For instance, foreign former spouses of Singaporeans may not have access to the full suite of support if they find themselves in financial difficulty, compounded by the lack of social support networks in Singapore.

Third, the scope of support which the state provides may not cover certain needs, important as

they may be to the families concerned.

An example is help with clearing debt, which social workers have identified as a significant obstacle that makes it difficult for some families to turn their lives around. Some taxpayers may object to public monies being used to clear individuals' debt, whether on principle or due to concerns such as moral hazard.

It may be more appropriate for other donors such as private corporations to step in. This is being piloted under the new ComLink+ Progress Packages.

EFFORTS SHOULD BE SYSTEMATIC AND PREDICTABLE

The limits of state support mean that other helping hands must come alongside the Government to ensure adequacy of support and coverage for essential household needs.

Any shortfalls or gaps in social support could be plugged by a systematic channelling of

resources from community or corporate donors to recipient needs. Forward planning and visibility are critical.

If support could be made more predictable, it would give greater assurance to social service agencies and their beneficiaries, and also more confidence to donors that their efforts are making a difference, complementing rather than competing with government support.

For social support programmes whose efficacy has been established, it is important to secure a pipeline of funding to ensure scalability and sustainability. An example is AWW's family empowerment programme, which found through a recent study that unconditional cash assistance to needy families improved beneficiaries' job security and mental health.

Such support, which gives recipients greater autonomy than support that is tied to work or other conditions, is more

appropriately funded by private donors. The programme received an initial tranche of funding from Standard Chartered Bank and will now continue with further support from Temasek Trust.

COMPLEMENTING GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The IPS study provides some ideas for the respective roles of the Government, businesses and community partners by revealing public perceptions of who should provide for various needs.

Survey respondents generally felt that the Government should provide for basic needs such as healthcare, housing and public transport, while individuals should be responsible for emergency savings as well as leisure needs such as overseas vacations, dining out and outings with friends.

Many respondents felt that the community could fund participation in community activities, and the purchase of school books, stationery and school bags for children from needy families.

About a fifth of respondents also saw a role for businesses in providing for private transportation for medical or caregiving needs, as well as supporting digital connectivity for households.

There is a certain logic to these findings: The Government is better placed to provide services that require significant infrastructure such as public healthcare and transport, whereas personal needs and social activities – important for psychological well-being and social inclusion – may be more appropriately provided for by oneself, family or friends.

Sometimes, families have episodic needs that arise when household appliances break down or a family member falls ill; in such cases, community or corporate donations could supplement the baseline cash support from government schemes. This way, community help will not displace government help or vice versa.

The advantages of community involvement in social support are already evident: Beyond donations, corporate or community volunteers can lend professional expertise in areas such as education, financial management or legal counselling. More companies are eschewing one-off engagements with social service agencies in favour of longer-term partnerships where staff can better perceive the impact of their efforts on the lives of beneficiaries.

What could make a further difference is to overlay the many commendable efforts and ground-up initiatives with a systematic overview of how essential needs are being met – one that is informed by societal values and expectations.

This would also give contributors greater visibility of how their efforts are making a collective difference.

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