

**SPEECH BY MR TAN CHUAN-JIN, MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY  
DEVELOPMENT, AT THE NCSS MEMBERS CONFERENCE 2015,  
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Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning. This is my first time addressing the NCSS Members Conference. I am delighted to be able to meet so many dedicated leaders and professionals from the social service sector.

2 Before I became MSF Minister, I had the privilege of working with VWOs operating in my constituency. Together, we serve and support residents who need help. I also try to support the good work of VWOs in my own way. Such as working with the then-MCYS to develop a VWO Hub at Jalan Ubi to provide VWOs more space, and helping them raise funds through the publication of my photography books.

3 Now, as MSF Minister, I have gained a better appreciation of the importance of the work we do together, and the challenges we face individually and collectively. I have visited and held discussions with some of you over the last few months. I am still on my rounds visiting different services, so I am sure I will meet more of you. For now, let me just say a big “Thank You!” for the work you are doing to improve the lives of Singaporeans who need more support!

4 I believe strongly in the work we are doing. Our work is important at multiple levels. To those whom we are helping, we make a tangible difference. To those who serve and give, the work reconnects us to our sense of compassion and humanity. For the country, our work builds more caring communities and a better society.

Encouraging Progress

5 I have seen the progress which we are making. On the capacity front, we have significantly expanded services such as Family Service Centres, early intervention for children with special needs and social care facilities for the elderly.

We have also started specialised programmes to serve families with more complex issues, including those undergoing divorce and are in transnational marriages.

6 We are also doing more for our social service professionals. Efforts are being made to improve their career prospect through more competitive salaries, better recognition and many more development opportunities. Two months ago, I visited the Social Service Institute (SSI). Besides conducting training, the Institute now provides career advisory services, convenes communities of practice and run different manpower schemes.

7 Many of you here are directly contributing to these efforts. I fully intend to build on the good progress which we are making. I want to do even more to strengthen our social support system. Ensuring that our policies and laws remain relevant. Improving our services on the ground. Responding to emerging needs.

8 This key point comes back to today's conference theme, "Partnership for a Vibrant Social Service Sector", and I cannot underscore the importance of this enough. This work cannot be done, and should never be done by just the government. The moment we believe that everything is outsourced to professionals, I think we lose something very valuable. It is not just the VWOs; it is a partnership between the government and government agencies, everyone in the VWO sector, and also the community at large. As I alluded to earlier, there is a transformative effect on all society when we are involved and I think many of you here understand, because you are intimately involved in the lives of others and there is an emotional engagement.

9 This morning, allow me to share 3 areas where I believe we should and can take our partnerships to the next level. These are:

- Partnerships in Delivering More Effective Help
- Partnerships in Deepening Capabilities
- Partnerships in Galvanising the Larger Community

#### Partnership in Delivering More Effective Help

10 First, I think we can do a lot better in partnering to delivering more effective help.

11 The idea of technology runs through all three themes, which I mentioned earlier. However, technology is not a silver bullet. It is a means; ultimately it facilitates humans in our tasks. The inputs that go into whatever system that we set up comes from us. The outputs in terms of delivery will still be the people involved, but the key here is how we use technology to facilitate it.

12 In my work as an MP, I have come across families and individuals in very difficult circumstances. I often wonder where to begin in order to help them. Some of these families are supported by a range of programmes served by different agencies and VWOs. Different professionals try their best to work across programmes to make the process smoother.

13 While I'm encouraged by these efforts, I also often wonder whether some of the issues could have been avoided. What if we were able to spot problems and extend help earlier? Could we organise and link things up better at the programme design or service delivery stage? Can we share information across boundaries and use common tools and language so that we can serve Singaporeans better as a system? I think we can do all of these better across a variety of domains.

14 Take for example early intervention for children with special needs, which MSF is reviewing. Instead of focusing on discrete programmes, we are looking at how we can build a better "Early Intervention System". One in which different partners involved in diagnosis, referral, service delivery and outcome monitoring are linked. Within such a system, the children should be able to access a continuum of different programmes that serve a range of needs, rather than be locked into 1-2 rigid service models. Early intervention centres should also have stronger linkups with pre-schools and SPED schools so that the good work can be translated to these natural settings. Parents and caregivers too should be roped in as key partners.

15 Whether this picture can become reality depends on the strengths of our partnerships – among VWOs involved who deliver different services within the system, and also government policy makers and planners who need to think partnerships upstream and dialogue closely with VWO partners as they design the system.

16 The same level of partnership is essential for services at the local HDB town level. Today, my Social Service Offices, or SSOs, are already beginning to bring together different partners to offer a system of support at the local level. At Jalan Kukoh, SSO@Kreta Ayer has identified unemployment as an issue facing those in need. To help address this, SSO@Kreta Ayer has activated local resources within the Jalan Kukoh community, and is working with local partners to build a local network of employers to offer simple and flexible jobs for those on social assistance.

17 I think there is a lot of benefit in further tightening local support. I have asked the SSOs to see how they can forge even closer partnerships at the local level, and bring on board other partners that can contribute.

### Partnership in Deepening Capabilities

18 Second, I believe we can further our partnerships in deepening capabilities.

19 Over the last few months, I have had the opportunity to interact with some of our *social service professionals* – social workers, psychologists, therapists and so on. I now better appreciate how challenging their roles can be – working with families in difficult circumstances, balancing the interests of different parties, mobilising resources, making difficult judgment calls. And sometimes, even coming under the public eye and criticism.

20 The ability to continue meaningful and impactful work in the long haul hinges on whether we can build capacity and depth, grow our organisations and expand opportunities for our social service professionals. Our professionals will have to

constantly develop themselves professionally to stay relevant. They will need supportive employers.

21 MSF and NCSS are committed to supporting our VWOs in this journey to build professional and organisational capabilities. But, beyond working at the level of individual organisations, there are far greater gains if we can partner one another to drive resource and capability building at a sector-wide level.

22 This is why we started the Sun Ray scheme, which serves as one avenue for developing leaders for the sector. A number of VWOs were intimately involved in designing the scheme together with MSF and NCSS before it was launched last year. They continue to help us in selecting and developing candidates. An increasing number of VWOs are opening up deployment opportunities within their organisations for these people recruited centrally by NCSS under the scheme.

23 Owing to these strong partnerships, the scheme has gotten off to an encouraging start. To date, there are 31 members on the Sun Ray scheme and 21 participating VWOs. About 70% of the members are new entrants or re-entrants to the sector, with some of the mid-career entrants occupying senior positions within the VWOs. This means that we have effectively increased the bench strength for our sector.

24 Another example of resource pooling is the setting up of professional hubs. We are starting a new Community Psychology Hub at SG Enable. The hub will deploy psychologists to complement the services at different social service organisations, starting with those who serve persons with disabilities. With a larger pool of psychologists, the hub will be better-placed to develop and manage their careers. I hope we can succeed. For the model to work, VWOs must be prepared not to hire small numbers of psychologists directly, which is hard for them to do. Instead, they should tap on the services from the Hub, which will offer better trained and supervised staff. Again, this requires close partnerships.

25 We will need more of such innovative ideas to attract and deploy our professionals and give them meaningful careers. This is especially critical against a backdrop of a tighter labour market, and bearing in mind that many VWOs are small and medium sized. The social service sector is one of the priority sectors under SkillsFuture. I seek your strong partnership as we work towards developing the sectoral manpower plans and leveraging various SkillsFuture initiatives.

#### Partnership in Galvanising the Larger Community

26 Third, I believe that we can be partners in galvanising the larger community.

27 One of the things I believe very strongly about, is that as we organise ourselves, it isn't just about at the tail-end where we provide the service delivery. Using the analogy of the social safety net, as we create the social safety net, and weave together a social safety net that will prevent people from falling through the gaps. We need to weave the nets to be tighter. But we also know that we have different needs, we don't believe in the mother of all nets, because when you have this large net, invariably, there will be natural gaps. So, it is about a series of different

social safety nets because there are different needs, different circumstances. Each of us working together to weave these nets and coordinate among ourselves, so that the nets overlap. At the same time, as we would want to bring some individuals back on their feet, do we continue to believe on the importance of dignity, and self-respect which I think is important? So you weave the nets that is tighter, you coordinate amongst yourselves to establish partnerships so that the nets overlap and importantly that you begin to go upstream. How often do we see cases where you wish it never happen in the first place?

28 NCSS and VWOs play an important role in raising awareness of social needs and galvanising the public to play a bigger part. I believe there is potential to have more people come forward as volunteers. Volunteers cannot take the place of professionals, but they can complement professionals and contribute in meaningful ways.

29 Volunteering does not just touch the hearts of those who are served. It nourishes the souls of those who serve. To put it in another way, we have the privilege to not only change the lives of those we help, but also to transform the lives of those that we bring in to help.

30 I have met many well-meaning people looking to give back. Some have a sense of inertia and trepidation when it comes to volunteering because they feel ill-equipped. How can we enable volunteers, partners and VWOs, and create the conditions for a strong volunteering ecosystem? How can we better shape the volunteering experience, so that it is meaningful, taps on strengths of corporates and volunteers in a sustainable way?

31 This is about how we must now begin to think about changing the texture of volunteerism. It is not about iconic projects, it is not about going in and out once a year, it is about investment in time. When we begin to get more people, corporates and schools to actually step forward, how do we sustain their involvement. Many would want to continue, so I urge many VWOS to see volunteers as not just additional hands and legs, but do provide volunteers with positive engagement experience that they want to come back, so we can lay a foundation that we have people who want to help, want to give and want to contribute.

32 I have asked NCSS to see how it can work with NVPC to enable better matching of volunteers to opportunities, and build volunteer management capacity in social sector VWOs. NCSS will be consulting widely in this process. I hope you give NCSS your fullest support in this endeavour.

33 Corporate partners also have a strong role to play. They have useful expertise, resources and skills; they are also a natural platform to mobilise Singaporeans as volunteers. For example, IBM has set up an online portal for employee volunteering since 2003. The portal holds a repository of kits and solutions to help their employees and retirees expand their volunteering efforts. This includes tool kits to run skills based volunteer activities, like Internet Safety Coaching. The portal also provides an avenue for VWOs to register their volunteer needs and reach out to the pool of skilled volunteers in IBM. Over the years, IBM volunteers have tapped on this resource to work with VWOs and serve various

causes that they are passionate about. For example, I understand that skilled volunteers from IBM will be working with Simei Care Centre to provide one on one tutoring in basic computing to beneficiaries with psychiatric disabilities.

34 Corporate Social Responsibility is not just a corporate value. It is a powerful platform because corporates and organisations can organise and how do we organise ourselves to deliver the work with VWOs in partnership. Today, the work that our volunteers do free up our trained staff to do the heavy-lifting social work. But importantly in the process, not only do they make a difference to the individual, it reinforce the social safety net that we are weaving, which is not just government, not just VWOs, but people being part of the net, but at the same time it is transforming our society.

35 I do not know of any other way in which we can infuse values in society. This is the platform that you can reconnect the compassion and your humanity. And as we celebrate our SG50, we need to ask ourselves what is going to keep Singapore sustainable. I think that as we become a people who actively care for one another, where we are not just naval glazing and looking at ourselves, and where we actively reach out with compassion and empathy, that is a different society, and this is a great nation.

36 I hope that NCSS and VWOs will continue to galvanise and mobilise the larger community to be our partners in supporting those who need our help.

### Conclusion

37 Ladies and Gentlemen, some of you have asked me how I feel about being appointed the new MSF Minister. I see my appointment in MSF, during this Golden Jubilee year, a privilege and an opportunity. I am inspired by the work we do, and I intend to build upon the progress which we are already making.

38 I have set for myself the goal of doing my part to nurture stronger families and to build a more inclusive and caring Singapore. I know that you too share this goal. Through closer and strong partnerships, I am confident we can achieve this goal together. I look forward to journeying with you in the years ahead.

39 On that note, let me wish all of you a fruitful conference ahead. Thank you.

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