



Since the last issue of *Social Space* in 2008, the world economy has undergone enormous changes due to the American 'sub-prime' crisis, collapse of erstwhile reputable financial institutions, crash of stock markets, shrinkage of credit and general decline in business sentiment. It is hardly surprising that in *Social Space* 2009, many of the contributors are fixated on the global economic crisis and its multifarious impacts on the social sector. But despite our focus on this extraordinary pall cast by the economy, the reality is that this is but one of many major factors and worldwide trends that shape the needs of societies and the way these needs are addressed.

Unsurprisingly the social sector which has seen its support dwindle due to the financial crisis is calling for a complete rethink of what it means to do business in the for-profit sector. The nature of business itself is being questioned, such as the underlying assumption of modern capitalism that *lucrum* is everything. Many see it timely to change the mindsets of business leaders to accept that companies have, as one of their fundamental obligations, the good of the society they operate in. A new morality in business beyond mere 'Corporate Social Responsibility' is being advocated. Are we about to see a convergence of for- and non-profit enterprises in the next generation of businesses? But there is a serious question, of whether human nature can be fundamentally changed by the current, albeit seismic, crisis. Will Wall Street and its devotees quickly revert to their avaricious proclivities once the economy recovers? Whatever, the non-profit sector remains set to continue to deliver more and more critical services in the future.

What other trends and drivers should we look at so as not to be too distracted by the economy? Climate change has an enormous impact on societies, affecting livelihoods and accelerating rural-urban migrations towards megacities with all their problems. Maldistribution of food resources and scarcity of clean water remain the bane of developing societies. Natural disasters disproportionately wreak havoc on already poor and vulnerable communities where poor governance and infrastructure are inimical to disaster amelioration as well as long-term development. Whole populations remain economically suppressed by their own incompetent dictators, while ethnic discriminations and displacements are emergent issues because of economic plight, political repression or the sometimes 'own goal' of irredentist insurgency. Conflicts justified by 'war on terror' or 'liberation', but drag on interminably undermine the countries hosting these wars. Increasingly non-state combatants or terrorists using asymmetrical warfare strategies mire communities in endless conflict, destabilising societies, retarding social stability and economic



Dr Tan Chi Chiu is a gastroenterologist and board member of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, Sata CommHealth, Make-A-Wish Foundation Singapore and National Youth Achievement Awards. He is an elected member of the Singapore Medical Council & chairman of the Medical Ethics Committee. He is active in global humanitarian work through leading disaster relief missions overseas. He is the chief editor of *Social Space* 2009.

progress. Emergent healthcare issues continue to ravage societies, for example river blindness, malaria, tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS and now influenza A (H1N1). Health issues being inextricably linked to development and public health, solutions must address upstream issues such as governance, social stability, education and finance.

Better developed and economically successful societies grapple with issues that come with globalisation, beyond their obvious vulnerability to global markets as evidenced by the current meltdown. The Gini co-efficient is widening disproportionately affecting already marginalised groups such as the physically or mentally infirm, dysfunctional families, the elderly, unemployed, lowly educated and poor. Aging populations with increasing life spans place increasing demands on healthcare and social support structures. 'Diseases of civilisation' such as diabetes and cancer are on the rise. Migrant workers that prop up many emerging economies are a new social phenomenon to grapple with. Institutions of marriage and family are at risk in many countries and quality upbringing of the next generation is a challenge. This is exacerbated by a new and amoral social interaction order for youth mediated through the internet and other novel communication technologies. Even highly organised societies like Singapore face all these challenges and there remain unmet needs in the community yet to be fully studied, let alone properly dealt with.

Social Space 2009 does not aspire nor pretend to comprehensively address all of global societies' social needs arising from the diverse effects of economy, environment, climate, diseases, disasters, sociology, politics or technology. But it should provide a generous helping of thought-provoking, if not controversial ideas and opinions from a wide range of practitioners and thinkers in the social space, that hopefully will stimulate further discussions, dialogues and serious efforts to address some of the issues unearthed. ❖

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Lien Centre for Social Innovation @ SMU

Administration Building
81 Victoria Street
Singapore 188065
Tel: +65 6828 0821
Fax: +65 6828 0711
Email: liencentre@smu.edu.sg

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