

SOCIAL 'SERVICE- INNOVATION'

How can not-for-profit organisations move away from a traditional grant-seeking model to one that can catalyse and value-add the sector at large, beyond just meeting basic needs? Usha Menon thinks Youth for Causes might provide just that model.



The dilemma of moving non-profit organisations (NPOs) away from traditional grant-seeking models to a more dynamic and self-sustaining one is a vexing problem. But over the past five years, the Citibank-YMCA Youth for Causes – a social innovation that matches untapped resources with unmet needs – has shown that it might well have some of the answers.

Youth for Causes – a joint community initiative by Citibank and the YMCA of Singapore, and sponsored by the Citigroup Foundation – aims to cultivate a culture of social responsibility and community leadership and, in doing so, act as a catalyst in promoting responsible social entrepreneurship among youths in Singapore. The programme also functions as a ‘social venture capital fund’ to provide youth, aged 15 to 35 years of age, with seed funds of S\$1,600 and other resources to execute creative entrepreneurial ideas which will benefit and support NPOs of their choice.

The programme endeavours to build up volunteer resources for the community, encourage voluntary action among Singaporean youths and help develop their entrepreneurial passion and enterprise.

The mechanics are fairly simple. Over 100 four-member teams of aspiring community leaders are chosen from the entries. Each team is provided with S\$1,600 in seed-funding from Citigroup Foundation to benefit a chosen cause. A mentor either from Citibank or YMCA is assigned to each team to provide advice, creative inputs and project management supervision throughout the duration of the project (which typically lasts for about three to four months).

Upon completion of the projects, awards are given to outstanding teams in three different age categories in recognition of how they have leveraged their seed money and resources.

The Concept Development

Youth for Causes came about when I, a ‘social person’, met a ‘business person’ and a new value network emerged. At the end of a very stimulating discussion in March 2002 with Penny Shone, Vice-President for Citigroup’s Asia Pacific public and community affairs operations, we agreed that instead of a run-of-the mill grants application for a ‘good cause’, we would endeavour to bring about something that marries the common values and complementing qualities of a bank and an NPO.

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At the heart of Youth for Causes is a service that focuses on business skills such as how to maximise returns on investment, how to leverage, talent pool optimisation, compliance and creativity, while developing volunteer leadership, grassroots networking, youth mobilisation and assessing community impact. In other words, all the myriad elements that are the bread and butter of non-profit organisations.

The core characteristics of Youth for Causes are:

- Simple – get enterprising youth volunteers to leverage on the seed funds to raise and mobilise resources for a cause they want to champion.
- Collaborative – the partnering NPO assumes the role of a catalyst and implementing agency which, in turn, through the efforts of the youth, volunteers and other NPOs, impacts the social service sector as a whole.
- Adaptable – the Citigroup Foundation has committed to an initial period of three years. In this way, the concept has time to develop and be adapted as required.
- Broad-based – the concept does not focus on a specific programme of an NPO. Instead, its vision clearly focuses on a long-term and broad-based social change in the ways NPOs collaborate in Singapore.

Youth for Causes was developed on the basis that there is always a lament in the NPO community that the ‘fundraising-pie’ continues to shrink. It also explicitly recognises the tremendous potential for ‘baking a larger pie’ if only the NPO sector in Singapore could collaborate more effectively.

Seeking The ‘Adopter’

During my exploratory stage of finding an ‘adopter’ in a partnering NPO, some of the leaders in the NPO arena were concerned and distracted with “What’s in it for my NPO?” rather than focusing on the opportunity to collaborate across service sectors, the results of which would have a positive long-term impact on their NPO. My rationalisation of such a reaction is simple: those who value stability are not comfortable with the uncertain environment created by new ideas, while entrepreneurial leaders observe patterns and move to leverage it.

In the end, I did quickly find an NPO (YMCA Singapore) which had the following essential qualities to support the social service-innovations that Youth for Causes espoused:

- A vision for effective social change.
- Long-term commitment to that vision and a belief in being agents of change.
- Ability and willingness to collaborate across sectors and connect people with a shared passion for impacting the community at large.
- Tolerance of some degree of risk by the management and board.
- Being comfortable with possible unintended surprises, yet was willing to learn from its development. Dr Janice Stein calls this approach “smart failures”.¹

And so, Youth for Causes was finally born.

Results

In the six years since its launch in 2002, Youth for Causes has become a comprehensive programme that includes, among other things, a module on fundraising within the YMCA-NUS Business School Volunteer Service Management Programme Certificate course. What has never changed is its mission-driven commitment to youth leadership development.

As the table and graphs show, the programme has grown considerably and have had a significant impact. In terms of fundraising, it has raised over S\$2.1 million through the efforts of 45,000 youth volunteers who invested a total seed fund of S\$608,000. That’s a 254.7 percent return on investment over five years! More impactful is the fact that some of the income generation ideas that the youth initiated have gone on to become sustainable social enterprises in their own right for the NPO of their choice.

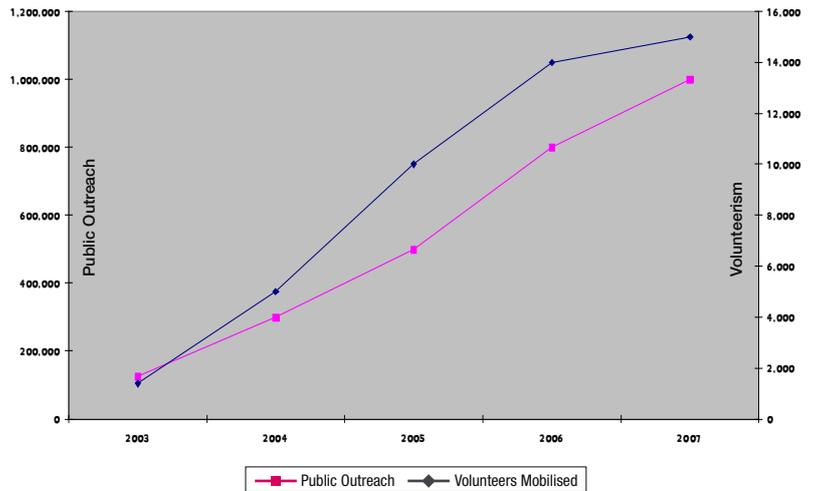
We can gather three critical lessons from the experience of Youth for Causes.

1. Visionary: Youth for Causes proved that NPOs

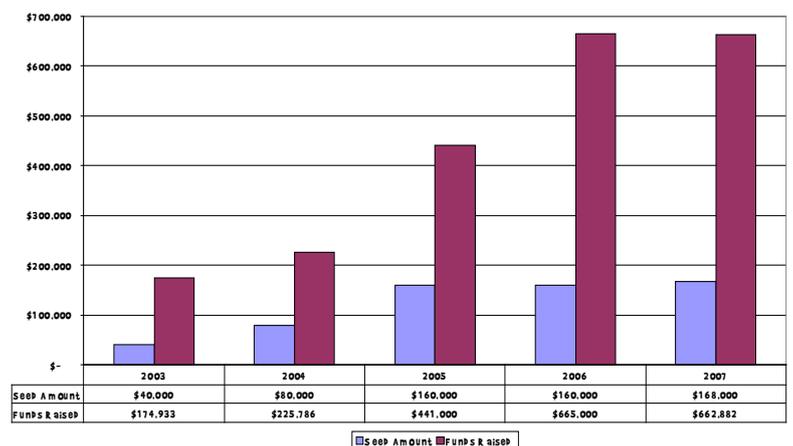
Citibank YMCA Youth for Causes

	2002/2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of proposal submissions	31	108	259	182	228
Number of groups with an average of 4 participants per group	25	50	100	100	105
Total seed funds given	S\$40,000	S\$80,000	S\$160,000	S\$160,000	S\$168,000
Funds raised	S\$174,933	S\$225,786	S\$441,000	S\$665,000	\$650,000
Public outreach	125,000	300,000	500,000	800,000	1,000,000
Volunteers mobilised	1,400	5,000	10,000	14,000	15,000
Number of Non-Profit Organisations supported	20	31	65	46	52
Adult mentors involved	25	50	100	100	105

Volunteerism & Public Outreach



Return on Capital



With over 1,500 youth volunteers directly involved in developing innovative ideas and over 45,000 others involved in the implementation of these ideas, my hope is for them to be impacted by this experience and become significant change makers of the future.

Youth For Causes: The Process

Interested participants submit a two-page proposal outlining:

- Aims and benefits of the project.
- The name of the VWO the team has chosen to support.
- The proposed method for leveraging the seed funding and other resources to address the need (specific targets need to be stated).
- The project budget.
- The expected biggest challenge.
- How this challenge will be overcome.

Recognition Categories

Based on how they best leverage their seed-money and resources, the top three winning teams from the respective age groups are chosen. Winning teams are rewarded for their efforts in fundraising, public outreach; and volunteer management.

Evaluation Criteria

1. Project implementation (50%)
 - Planning and organisation
 - Quality of project
 - Timeliness of report updates
 - Innovation, enterprise and resourcefulness
2. Public outreach (10%)
 - Public education programme of VWO
 - Estimated audience reached
3. Volunteer management (10%)
 - Recruitment of volunteers
 - Retention of volunteers and their interests
 - Recognition of volunteers
4. Funds management (20%)
 - Actual funds raised
 - Accounting (proper statement submission with records)
 - Handling of funds
5. Assessment (10%)
 - Assessment by mentor

can play a catalytic role in enhancing the collaborative nature of the social service sector. It provides a framework for bringing people and institutions together – to learn, to address needs and inspire one another. Thus, youth with vague aspirations are moved towards significant action and there is every possibility, in the future, that they will, in turn, become agents of change.

2. Broader definition of funding support: More corporate sector sponsors, foundations and social investors can provide NPOs with funding support that, in the interest of long-term social change, encourages experimentation, testing of new ideas, refining and marketing of social service innovations. Funding made possible the mass mobilisation of the youth grassroots to fulfil unmet needs in the community.
3. A formative experience: Research has revealed that almost all social entrepreneurs have life-changing experiences during their formative youth years. These experiences are often the motivation for future action. With over 1,500 youth volunteers directly involved in developing innovative ideas and over 45,000 others involved in the implementation of these ideas, my hope is for them to be impacted by this experience and become significant change makers of the future.

If built upon, I think these lessons can, and will, help create a more vibrant social service innovation scene in Singapore and beyond. ☐

¹ Dr Janice Gross Stein is the Founding Director of the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. She is author of over 100 books, book chapters and articles, including *Networks of Knowledge: Collaborative Innovation in International Learning*. She defines 'smart failure' as a project where the risks are understood and the organisation decides to proceed regardless.



Usha Menon's passion for developing domestic resource mobilisation led her to volunteer to conceptualise Youth for Causes with Citigroup. She is currently the director for Habitat for Humanity International's Asia-Pacific Resource Development & Regional Program.