Abstract

Over the years, Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks have emerged as the residency norm for ordinary Singaporeans, with over 80 percent of Singaporeans living in them. As part of the government drive for more close-knit neighbourhoods, Residents' committees (RCs) were started in 1977 for residents to become more actively involved in bridging and building bonds among one another (Liu, 2014). Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a concept that aims to build on a community’s strengths, and empower its people to bring about community change. This concept is not new in Singapore – it was pioneered by grassroots adviser, Dr. Mohamad Maliki bin Osman, who termed each HDB block a “micro-community”. In targeting an archetypal 3-room/4-room block (i.e., Block 464 situated in Jurong Spring Zone B Residents’ Committee (RC) Zonal), our research aims to map out the aspirations, assets, needs and community relations in the block by interacting with the residents and grassroots leaders in the area. Our results point to a strong interdependence between residents' aspirations and needs. In addition, the substantial untapped assets of the residents have also motivated us to propose ways in which we can maximise their potential.

Background

Background on locality

There are 18 blocks of flats in Jurong Spring Zone B RC Zonal, which are divided into three precincts of six HDB blocks each. Precinct 1 consists of blocks 456 to 461, Precinct 2 consists of Blocks 462 to 467, and Precinct 3 consists of Blocks 468 to 473 (see Figure 1). The block selected for our research was Block 464 (see Figure 2). Block 464 is served by two lifts. However, the lift landings for the two lifts are non-contiguous for each floor, with the exception of the sixth and eleventh floors. On each floor, six units of flats are clustered around Lift A’s landing, and four units of flats are clustered around Lift B. The block has undergone the Lift Upgrading Programme (LUP) and the lifts serve all levels.
In terms of location with respect to amenities, Precinct 2 blocks, including Block 464, are situated further away from Jurong Spring Community Club (CC) and nearer to Jurong Green Community Club (see Figure 3). As measured by the darker line, the walking distance from Block 464 to Jurong Spring Community Club is 500 metres. In comparison, the distance from Block 464 to Jurong Green Community Club, marked by the lighter line, is 290 metres.
Information on Jurong Spring Zone B RC

Jurong Spring Zone B RC comprises grassroots leaders and members who are very active in the constituency, leading to many residents showing a keen interest in participating. As a result, although the committee size was originally capped at 30 members, its numbers have now increased to the current 40. The RC operates within and out of the RC centre, which has been in the neighbourhood for more than 20 years, and has gone through several upgrades and extensions. The RC centre is used for courses and activities, and has also awarded the Little Learners Playgroup to conduct Playgroup Programme for the residents.

Monthly house visits to blocks

Jurong Spring Zone B RC members, together with police officers, conduct monthly house visits to update residents about security matters in the estate and to gather feedback from the residents. They record the feedback that they receive, which often involves estate management feedback such as lighting and/or electrical issues that would be referred to the town council, or other relevant agencies, for their follow-up. For more complicated cases, the RC will refer them to a special team of grassroots leaders ‘V8’ to look into them and support the residents.

Activities organized by RC

Past events held in 2015 include a barbeque event in Precinct 1 that sold 550 tickets, and the National Day celebration in Precinct 2 which also had a similar turnout. In the latter part of 2015, the Lantern Festival in Precinct 3 was set to target 1000 residents. Apart from

Figure 3. Distances to Jurong Spring Community Club and Jurong Green Community Club
(Source: onemap.sg)
these major events, other events that are held annually include Children’s Day celebrations, block parties, family events, and festive celebrations such as Deepavali.

Nonetheless, the RC often faces difficulty in convincing residents to go downstairs for such community events, as residents prefer to stay at home because they feel that going downstairs is too much of a hassle.

**Weekly interest groups**

Various interest groups conduct regular activities in the Zone B vicinity: taichi, fun-walking, qigong, yoga, and morning exercises. Jurong Spring Community Club does organize its own slate of interest groups and classes such as cooking. However, based on the RCs’ feedback, residents often find Jurong Spring Community Club too far away.

**Perceived assets in Zone B**

In terms of basic amenities, there are various coffee-shops (see Figure 4) and markets in Zone B. The RC shared that it has a good relationship with the merchants in Block 456 such as Shing Hup Furniture and The Tarik Coffeeshop who sponsor the RC annually for its Mid-Autumn Festival celebration. For health and fitness enthusiasts, there is an exercise corner, a basketball court (see Figure 5), and playgrounds (see Figure 6). The close proximity to schools such as Shuqun Primary School and Yuhua Secondary School is also a qualified strength of Zone B. Schools at the next immediate locality such as Rulang Primary School, Hua Yi Secondary School and Jurong Junior College can be potential assets to Zone B too, especially since some of its residents are attending or have attended these schools. Therefore, in terms of convenience and accessibility, Zone B seems to be in good stead.
Figure 4. Coffee-shop

Figure 5. Basketball court
Introduction

ABCD is about building on community assets to provide sustainable solutions to community issues; it challenges the traditional notion of solving community issues by service providers using a needs-based approach (Green & Goetting, 2010).

Implementing this concept is not new. It was pioneered in Singapore by grassroots adviser, Dr. Mohamad Maliki bin Osman, in his own constituency; he termed each HDB block a “micro-community” (Suhaimi, 2011, June 3). He used the “kepala” (Malay word for village chief) model in which one resident would be in charge of each block. This resident would be highly informed of the strengths and weaknesses in his block, and would also know how to utilise the resources that can be found in the block efficiently. Through the “kepala” and the resource-mapping of each block, the community can then find resources to tap on as potential solutions to community issues.

Prior to our research, Elvis Chong from Jurong Spring Youth Executive Committee has shared that it is difficult to determine residents’ needs within the constituency, and that there is little community involvement in the grassroots activities. Our research thus aims to understand these issues by mapping out the profile of a particular block in Jurong Spring, using the framework of aspirations, assets, needs (of individual household units in the block), and community relations (the interactions between household units in the block).
Through our block-mapping exercise, we hope to foster better relationships between the residents, and come up with a directory which can guide the community toward a better living environment. While Dr. Maliki mobilised volunteers to conduct door-to-door surveys so as to consolidate a community directory, we use an alternative approach which helps us connect more intimately with the residents, and gather deeper insights from each resident. Additionally, we aim to develop a qualitative plan to promote a more sustainable way of mapping different micro-communities.

**Literature Review**

There are a number of substantial reviews carried out on community development overseas, as compared to the lacunae in Singapore. This is possibly because of Singapore’s shorter history, which limits the scope of research that has been done on housing estates and communities thus far. Nonetheless, we bring together different concepts and theories, and evaluate them based on their applicability to the Singapore context.

In community development, there is a distinction between community categories such as locality and shared sentiments (i.e., ethnic and religious identities) (Rothman, Ehrlich & Tropman, 2001). Singapore’s ethnic integration policy, in which different ethnic groups coexist within each HDB block, means that there should ideally not be any segregation of any specific ethnic group in an area. Moreover, local communities in HDB neighbourhoods have opportunities to bond, in spite of their different ethnicities and religions (Osman, 2015).

Dr Maliki (Osman, 2015) defines a micro-community as the smallest unit in a housing estate, which is a HDB block. A micro-community thus focuses on the daily interactions of the residents within the block itself, and places emphasis on neighbourly relations. According to him, relationships are built more easily within smaller geographical communities like HDB blocks (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997).

One important community building concept, as argued by Gardner (1993), involves creating “positive patterns of individual and community behaviour via mutual responsibility and ownership”. As such, our research seeks to bring out this element by focusing on the individual resident and his/her community’s strengths. This is unlike the
usual house visits conducted by grassroots advisers, which often concentrate on the relationships between the advisers and the residents.

To bring out these “positive patterns” that are essential to our research, Joseph and Ogletree (1996) offer us a series of guidelines. Firstly, there is a need to identify local resources. To us, this means the local amenities and the specific residents’ strengths in the community. Secondly, the gathering of information on the community is another process that can be replicated in our research, by understanding the pre-existing dynamics of the community. Though Joseph and Ogletree (1996) assert that such ground-up research can contribute to the training of effective local leaders as reliable representatives of the community, our research chooses to focus on exposing current leaders to the vast data collected from the community and consequently convince them of the value in using the ABCD framework to understand the community better. Ultimately, we hope that our research can contribute to strengthening the network of various stakeholders, both within and outside the community.

**Methodology**

**Semi-structured interviews**

We conducted door-to-door visits in Block 464 to converse with the residents at their doorsteps or in their homes (if they invited us in). We introduced ourselves as student-volunteers working with Jurong Spring grassroots organisations, and shared with them our aim of wanting to find out more about the residents and their community, as well as build relations with them. Our conversations revolved around the themes of aspirations, assets, needs, and community, with no particular standardized questions. By doing so, we hoped that residents would be more inclined to share their thoughts and experiences with us. We used a qualitative research method, and most of the information we obtained varied from household to household.

Our interviews were also conducted without recording any information in front of the interviewees. This was to create more sincere conversations, thereby building up trust, and allowing us to glean more specific details. Our approach is different from the usual survey method on two levels:
Firstly, the survey method can often be very mechanical and may be viewed as lacking the human touch. Secondly, our more personalized way of conducting the interviews allowed us to better understand the specific stories behind each household, and go beyond the simplistic answers limited by the standardized survey questions.

After each interview, we recorded and reflected on the details that the resident had shared with us out of their sight and hearing. We then compiled and organised the data into sections titled “Aspirations”, “Assets”, “Needs”, “Community Relations” and “Others”. The “Others” section collated information that did not fit into the first four sections, but were still considered important information shared by the residents. This typology ensured that we maintained a holistic way of consolidating data.

We carried out our interviews from 6:00pm to 9.30pm on each visit; these visits took place on different weekday nights over a period of two months. In our records, we noted down who had been interviewed, who were not at home, who were too busy to be interviewed, who rejected the interviews, and whom we experienced language barriers with. After completing one round of interviews in the block, we staggered our schedules to re-visit those who were not at home or were not free to talk to us, to reach out to more residents.

**Results**

We interviewed a total of 64 households out of 110 households in Block 464, thus reaching out to 58.2 percent of the households in the block. Among the 46 households not interviewed, 17 households rejected the interviews, 6 households were not available, 21 households were not at home, and 2 households could not be interviewed due to language barriers. To observe the trends in the four different aspects of aspirations, assets, needs and community, we reorganized the data by coding the data according to categories that we felt would be useful for our analysis. Our findings are discussed in the following sections.

We decided to analyse the residents’ needs and aspirations together, because their needs generally overlapped with their aspirations. We believe that before people consider fulfilling their aspirations, they have to consider their needs first. After all, this HDB block is made up of 3-room and 4-room units, which are mainly occupied by families or individuals
whose current primary concern is to work and support themselves. We find that Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs framework is a good reference point for categorising the residents' aspirations and needs.

**Needs**

Needs assessment, as a community development approach, relies on external help to alleviate problems. This approach does not help to build community capacity and can create dependency (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). However, it is still essential for us to look into the needs of the community to gauge the potential and feasibility of mobilizing community assets to solve these issues.

As we know from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model (see Figure 7), meeting of physiological needs is integral before considering the higher-order needs in the pyramid.

Based on the interviews conducted, we categorise the residents' needs according to physical weaknesses, social disconnections and socio-economic constraints (see Table 1).

Physical weaknesses include health conditions that impede physical movements. For example, in our sample, we have encountered elderly residents who complain of leg injuries.
and fits. Physical weaknesses would come under the residents’ most basic needs (i.e., physiological needs) and would require most attention from the community.

Socio-economic constraints include financial and employment issues. For example, some families need more financial help to support their children, while one resident is waiting for his work permit.

Lastly, social disconnections include the lack of time and opportunities for social interactions. For example, a few residents feel isolated from their community and wish for company. This wish for company may stem from a desire to share similar interests among like-minded people. A particular example is a resident wishing to form a small community of people to share music with. These needs fall under “Love/belonging” and “Safety” and are more complex. Thus, these issues cannot be tackled by direct interventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Lift A landings (out of 42 households)</th>
<th>Lift B landings (out of 22 households)</th>
<th>Total (out of 64 households)</th>
<th>Decline to respond</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical weaknesses (physiological)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic constraints (safety)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lift A: 37</td>
<td>Lift A: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lift B: 11</td>
<td>Lift B: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social disconnections (safety + love/belonging)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Needs of residents

Social disconnections seem to be a relatively common issue raised by the residents, though not as significant as the socio-economic constraints issue. One reason is that residents may not be very connected to the outside community beyond the comfort of their own homes. This issue of social isolation can be attributed to a lack of work-life balance and community support, as indicated by the residents.
According to the data, not many needs are articulated by the residents. However, this can be attributed to how people tend to associate needs with the financial aspects of their lives. Even when they do seem to have financial constraints, they may attempt to be self-reliant and not want to seek help from others. There are some families who are just making ends meet; however, they maintain that they do not need any help, and would rather see help and resources get channelled to people who need them more.

Another possible reason for the dearth of articulated needs is the reluctance of the residents to share something so private during their first interaction with the interviewers, who are new to the neighbourhood. In particular, the interviewers may not have built up enough trust for the residents to reveal their real needs. Furthermore, as the interviewers are not there with the resources to help the residents, the residents may not see the point of sharing their needs with the interviewers.

Interestingly, one frequently expressed need is the residents’ desire to upgrade their living environment. Upon further investigation, we realise that Lift A breaks down regularly and the residents are unhappy about it. The lift is a physical asset as it was part of the lift upgrading programme to serve residents on every floor. However, it has now turned into a physical liability.

Aspirations

Aspiration is the hope or ambition to achieve something. It is essential to understand the aspirations of a community as they reflect the community’s ideals and dreams. Aspirations give an individual certain goals to work towards, as well as hope in his/her life. The residents’ aspirations can be considered as the higher-order esteem and self-actualization needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

“Aspirations” is a less intrusive term for the residents as it has a more positive connotation than “needs”. Hence, people are more willing to open up and share their thoughts with us. Through their increased willingness to share, we can also identify some of the unspoken needs of the residents. While this is an indirect connection, the tying in of aspirations with needs is often subconsciously reflected in the numerous responses of the residents. This is especially so when it comes to working parents, who tend to prioritise
their family's well-being as their main aspiration. Specifically, families with socioeconomic needs tend to have similar aspirations; i.e., they hope to put their children through school successfully and ensure their children’s well-being. This interrelatedness between aspirations and needs is also reflected by the retirees, who indicate a lack of both needs and aspirations, and who tend to say that they take each day as it comes (in Chinese: 一天过一天).

We categorise residents’ aspirations as either family goals or individual goals (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>Lift A and B landings (out of 64 households)</th>
<th>No specific aspirations or aspirations not revealed (out of 64 households)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family goals</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual goals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both family and individual goals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Aspirations of residents*

We further categorise the goals into tangible and intangible goals (see Table 3). Tangible goals include financial success and sustenance, while intangible goals include emotional well-being, health and happiness. We can see that there is quite a balanced number of residents who have tangible and intangible aspirations. This finding reflects a diverse group of individuals who have different priorities in life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tangible goals</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intangible goals</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Tangible and intangible goals of residents*
We create another table by combining the two categories listed in Tables 2 and 3, to allow us to zero in on the specific aspirations of smaller groups of residents (see Table 4). This more in-depth analysis reveals that residents who are family-oriented tend to espouse more intangible aspirations, while residents who value individual goals tend to desire more tangible things. However, there is still a significant number of residents who do not specify any aspirations. For some of these residents, this could be due to our failure to convey the interview question clearly, or to the insufficient time given to them to think through the question. For the other residents, they share that they do not know what they hope to achieve in the future; specifically, some residents prefer to just live day-by-day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>Lift A and B landings (out of 64 households)</th>
<th>No specific aspirations or aspirations not revealed (out of 64 households)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family goals: tangible (<strong>financial success and sustenance</strong>)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family goals: intangible (<strong>emotional well-being and happiness</strong>)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family goals: both</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual goals: tangible</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual goals: intangible (<strong>emotional well-being, health and quality of life</strong>)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual goals: both</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Further breakdown of aspirations of residents

By comparing the data with the demographics, we can make a couple of meaningful observations. In general, younger working adults aspire to work hard and have a better quality of life; hence, they tend to have tangible goals. Some of them even have specific goals like “owning a condo”. By contrast, middle-aged working adults mostly aspire to have more time with family (by retiring early) and to have a slower paced life. They prioritize emotional well-being over tangible wealth. Similarly, many housemakers’ aspirations tend
to revolve around their children’s well-being, rather than focus on their personal individual goals.

Foreigners (i.e., contract workers) desire to work as long as possible in Singapore and to earn more money. Some of them also wish to obtain citizenship and settle down in Singapore. Their need to sustain themselves and their families overseas drives their aspirations and needs.

Older persons focus on intangibles like happiness. For example, one older person is a regular volunteer and wants to spread the spirit of volunteerism to others. In general, older persons want their families to have a peaceful and healthy life. Another common aspiration observed amongst older persons is their desire to establish a larger social circle by meeting up with more friends and having more company in the day. By contrast, students often claim that they are unsure of their aspirations.

**Assets**

Assets are defined as the gifts, skills and capacities of individuals and associations in a community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). For this study, we focus on identifying the skills and interests of the residents in Block 464. We use the categorical terms, “skills” and “interests”, so that residents can relate to them easily, and would be more willing to share with us.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Lift A landings</th>
<th>Lift B landings</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Decline to respond</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical assets (e.g., sports, exercise)</td>
<td>12 / 42</td>
<td>5 / 22</td>
<td>17 / 64</td>
<td>Lift A: 4</td>
<td>Lift A: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic assets (e.g., watching dramas, cooking)</td>
<td>15 / 42</td>
<td>5 / 22</td>
<td>20 / 64</td>
<td>Lift B: 2</td>
<td>Lift B: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community assets (e.g., neighbours, volunteers)</td>
<td>12 / 42</td>
<td>6 / 22</td>
<td>18 / 64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills (e.g., photography, music production, engineering)</td>
<td>6 / 42</td>
<td>9 / 22</td>
<td>15 / 64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5. General assets of residents*
**General assets**

Table 5 shows some of the general trends that have emerged from asset-mapping in the block. The categories we use are physical assets, domestic/household assets, community-centric assets and technical skills. The numbers of residents with interests and skills in these categories are quite evenly balanced, and this reflects the diverse interests and skills within the block.

The domestic assets are the ones that emerge the most often as residents tend to be busy with work and school, and thus staying at home to pursue their interests is more convenient for them. Cooking and watching dramas are already part of their lifestyles, and hence these interests emerge in the conversations as the residents talk about their daily lives.

As for technical skills, they vary amongst the different residents, and these skills are often related to the residents’ occupations. Working personnel in general define their skills in terms of their occupations (e.g., teacher, chemical engineer). The youth talk about their hobbies, such as playing the guitar, producing music, and doing photography; they spend their leisure time practising and honing their skills while enjoying themselves.

Families with children tend to focus on physical activities like sports. Playing badminton, swimming and cycling are examples of sports highlighted by the residents. These sports are usually activities that residents can do together as a family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Lift A landings</th>
<th>Lift B landings</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercising</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to/mingling with people</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV/dramas</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6. Interests of residents*
**Interests**

As skillsets are quite diverse, the assets of the residents can be further narrowed down to a focus on the residents’ interests and hobbies (see Table 6). Table 6 details those interests and hobbies that are cited by the residents relatively frequently. Among these interests and hobbies, exercising, interacting with other people, and cooking are the most common activities engaged by the residents.

Sports and exercising are not just restricted to the younger residents. In fact, retirees do engage in exercises daily – some of them even join a self-organised group which does morning exercises in the community spaces near Block 464. There are a few residents who join interest groups affiliated with Jurong Green Community Club or the RC, while the others prefer to exercise alone.

Volunteering is something that the residents approve of. In fact, there are six residents who have volunteered in the past or are still volunteering currently. A few residents express interest in voluntary work in future when they are not so busy, and some want to join the RC.

In addition to some residents’ interest in volunteering, a number of residents also indicate that they like talking to or mingling with people. Such interest amongst residents to interact with neighbours and friends add to the community spirit in the block. In fact, there is evidence of strong community and neighbourly relations in the block, as some residents share that they help their neighbours.

**Locality assets**

In our interviews, we ask residents to identify what they like about their neighbourhood and community. For one, residents like the close proximity of Block 464 to Jurong Central constituency, as this allows them to take part in activities and classes organised by Jurong Green Community Club and Jurong Central Zone A RC. This means that they are able to take part in both Jurong Spring and Jurong Central activities.

Additionally, Block 464 is very near the wet market in Jurong Central, and residents have the option of going to the wet market in Jurong Spring or that in Jurong Central. Some residents even feel that the market located further away in Yuhua Village is accessible via
Furthermore, there is also a supermarket located near Jurong Green Community Club. Therefore, buying groceries is easy and highly convenient for the residents.

The residents of Block 464 have access to many coffee shops in the vicinity, and some older men hang out in the coffee-shops to drink and chat with their friends at night. Buying cooked food is convenient for the residents who do not cook, as the nearest coffee shop is a two minutes’ walk away. Residents also like the environment, and feel that the area in general is quiet and pleasant.

**Community relations**

The word “community” suggests connections between people with shared beliefs, circumstances or relationships (Chaskin, 1997). The community in this sense varies greatly, and could also consist of social connections that are not rooted in place. For the purpose of this research, we focus on the community in a neighbourhood. A neighbourhood suggests a geographical area which residents share. One definition is “a limited territory of within a large urban area where people inhabit dwellings and interact socially” (Hallman, 1984). In the urban context, the neighbourhood is seen as an area of actual or potential social cohesion (Golab, 1982).

As part of our research, we investigate the level of community relations within Block 464, and the residents’ community participation or involvement at the grassroots level. Beyond that, we also look at whether the residents have their own self-initiated community activities. These observations help us to understand neighbourhood relations at the micro-community level.
The pie chart in Figure 8 presents the range of community relations engaged by the residents who use the Lift A landings. The pie chart in Figure 9 presents the patterns of community relations engaged by the residents who use the Lift B landings.

Both pie charts show that a significant percentage of residents do have amicable relations with their neighbours, with interactions ranging from simple greetings to more substantial interactions. It is also observed that residents who have been living in Block 464 for a very long time have better and closer relationships with one another. (Some residents
have been neighbours for over 20 years.) These strong bonds could reflect shared experiences (e.g., residents who are childhood friends).

However, the residents who are the most active, e.g., engaging in activities in nearby community clubs, tend to be older persons and foreigners. For the older persons who are active, participation in RC activities serves as an avenue for them to make friends and pass time. Older persons who do not participate in RC activities often have certain disabilities; nevertheless, they wish they could participate in such activities, and lament that the community clubs are inconvenient to travel to.

The foreigners who participate in RC activities do so as they want to get integrated/assimilated into Singapore culture and society. However, there are also foreigners who avoid such activities as they perceive cultural differences and language barriers to be present. Such non-participation suggests that these foreigners are not well assimilated. This is not unusual as it has been noted that increased international mobility leads to higher concentrations of heterogeneous populations within specific areas (Chaskin, 1997). Nonetheless, in terms of transportation and communication, the Block 464 residents are still well connected to the various locality assets, and there are no complaints of inaccessibility from the residents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of participation in grassroots or informal activities</th>
<th>Both Lift A and Lift B landings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong level (self-organise; take part in weekly activities)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal to moderate level (attend major community events; participate on ad hoc basis)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No involvement (no interest; no time)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not explored/shared</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7. Level of participation in community activities*
Table 7 presents a breakdown of the different levels of participation in community activities amongst the Block 464 residents. We observe that a significant number of residents are unwilling to participate extensively in organized events, often because of a lack of interest and/or insufficient time. This disinterest and inability to commit a certain amount of time to the community could possibly stem from the residents’ lack of personal investment in the community.

From our interviews, we observe that the residents who are more concerned with individual aspirations (i.e., career and children) tend to be more unwilling to make the effort to bridge ties with strangers. Additionally, some residents point out that most community activities do not suit them because these activities cater to the elderly. Incidentally, these residents are mostly working adults.

To increase the level of community involvement, future community activities could possibly be aligned with the residents’ interests, assets and aspirations. Such an approach would address two issues. First, residents could be engaged through community activities that are fulfilling for, but not taxing on, the residents. Second, community activities which appeal to more residents could build up a strong network of relations amongst the residents.

Nevertheless, many residents do participate in major community events. Such residents find these events appealing as not much commitment is required of them. While nearly half of the residents attend big community events, there is still room to improve community involvement. Attending major community events is very passive, and does not foster ownership amongst the residents. Passive participation turns community members into passive recipients of services, and discourages their involvement in community issue resolution (Vasoo, 2008).

**Limitations of Research**

While our research findings offer some interesting insights into the micro-community of residents who live in Block 464, our research has been constrained by a couple of limitations:
(a) **Lack of organization when conducting the first few interviews.** At the start, the interviewers did not prepare a set of focused guiding questions for the interviews with the residents. Consequently, the questions came across as vague to the residents, and some residents could not understand the questions and answer them clearly.

(b) **Lack of skills in engaging the residents.** Accurate data is dependent on the level of engagement and trust that the interviewers have with the residents. Owing to the interviewers’ lack of experience in engaging the residents and building up trust, it was possible that some of the answers obtained from the residents might not be totally honest and accurate.

(c) **Inability to interview all residents.** The interviewers only managed to interview 58% of the residents in the block. The uncontactable residents were typically not at home in the early evenings when the interviews were conducted. Consequently, the sample might not be representative.

(d) **Unrepresentativeness of Block 464.** In order to better understand the whole community, we need to map more blocks of flats to ensure better representativeness of the data collected. The experiences of the Block 464 residents may not be representative of the experiences of the general population of flat dwellers in Singapore.

(e) **Time constraint and lost information.** The data collected from the semi-structured interviews required a significant amount of time for the data to be organised, categorised and analysed. Unfortunately, the rigour of the research was constrained by the time window for the research project to be completed. Additionally, some data could have been lost for each interview, since the recording of data could only be done after the interview had been conducted.

**Recommendations**

**Harnessing and building community ties**

On the basis of our research findings, we propose the following recommendations to harness and build community ties:
(a) **Inter-family sports day.** Grassroots organisations could look into allocating time and space to organise inter-family sports and games such as frisbee or badminton in the community clubs. The emphasis on inter-family activities ensures that different families can come together to enjoy themselves and develop friendships. Currently, the community clubs do have cheap rental rates for spaces like badminton courts, but many of such community spaces tend to only encourage bonding within families or established social groups.

(b) **Morning/evening runs.** Grassroots organisations could facilitate and organise runs around the neighbourhood or in nearby parks for families and individuals alike. This is a simple, cost-free exercise which allows different residents to come together to keep fit and interact.

(c) **Interactive courses.** Grassroots organisations could offer more courses in the community clubs that involve the residents themselves as the trainers. E.g., housewives could teach beginners how to cook, and expert photographers could teach beginners the basics of photography. The focus is to get residents with such expertise or interests to share their skills with the community.

(d) **Community involvement projects.** Grassroots organisations could work with local social service organisations to organise regular community involvement activities for residents to visit and help the disadvantaged who live in the neighbourhood.

(e) **Leisure/game rooms.** Grassroots organisations could open up leisure/game rooms in the community clubs for free usage by the residents. Such rooms could offer tabletop board games and other fun activities for groups. These rooms could be targeted at youth, to allow them to build friendships and know their community better.

(f) **Informal hosting of neighbours.** Interested and willing residents could be encouraged to host block parties in their own homes or corridors. Such hosting activities create ownership amongst residents by making them take charge, and also normalise conversations between residents and their block neighbours. Furthermore, such activities can be effective in welcoming and integrating new residents into the
neighbourhood. Grassroots organisations could support such hosting activities by lending out tables and chairs for these activities.

**Increasing residents’ stake in decision-making processes**

At the macro level, the government has improved community participation by increasing the number of grassroots activities and expanding outreach through the creation of more grassroots entities. The creation of neighbourhood committees for private housing properties in 1998, and youth chapters in 2010, has yielded more space for residents to have a greater say in community efforts.

However, we propose that grassroots leaders allow residents to have a bigger stake in decision-making, thus encouraging them to be active creators and actors of community change. Such space for involvement can be created via the mobilisation of interest groups or task forces to address social issues in the neighbourhood (Vasoo, 2008). For example, estate management issues can be tackled by the residents themselves. Residents can take responsibility in solving some issues through their own shared assets, instead of relying on a bureaucratic organisation such as the town council.

In fact, our research has yielded some interesting ideas proposed by the residents to improve the community facilities (see Appendix B). One such suggestion is the building of exercise corners in the block’s void deck spaces, so that older persons can use these exercise corners instead of the outdoor facilities when it rains.

**Making outreach more efficient through technology**

This recommendation taps into the concept of connectors. Connectors are the more well-connected people in the community who enjoy bringing people together (McKnight, 2013).

Given that social media are now prevalent in our society, they could be effective platforms to expand the community outreach system. For instance, WhatsApp Messenger, a mobile application, could be used to bring together connectors within the block. Suitable and willing residents on every floor who are good connectors could be identified by grassroots leaders during house visits.
Grassroots leaders could then use social media to publicise community events amongst the connectors. The connectors could in turn publicise these events amongst the residents living on their respective floors. Such an outreach system would not only create a space for informal conversations amongst neighbours, but also encourage them to attend community events together.

Additionally, such an outreach system would allow the connectors to find out more about their neighbours and their assets. Grassroots leaders could regularly check in with the connectors to determine if the implementation of the outreach system is successful. In the long-term, a “kepala” (i.e., village chief) could take over the running of the outreach system. The residents would be able to initiate activities simply by asking their floor connectors to spread the message. This outreach system would help to alleviate the workload of the grassroots organisations, who would otherwise have to do door-to-door publicity in order to get residents to go down for a community event.

**Conclusion**

Using the ABCD framework, we have gained a more informed understanding of the residents of Block 464. The semi-structured interviews with the residents have given us a platform to connect with the residents and have meaningful conversations with them. These conversations have provided us with useful insights into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the residents.

With the narratives and data that we have gathered and consolidated, it would be worthwhile to scale up this research project. Covering every single block in a particular zone is a labour-intensive endeavour. However, this exercise would be manageable if a sizeable group of student volunteers who study in the neighbouring institutions could be mobilised to conduct the interviews with the residents.

Our research also suggests that a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach could be adopted, resulting in increased levels of residents’ interest and ownership in building social relationships (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, Maguire, 2003).
Building community while imbuing skills and values to younger generation

Student volunteers could first be trained in community mapping by a couple of experienced researchers or interviewers. Appendix A provides a list of guiding questions which the student volunteers could use to create conversations with the residents. Following the training, the student volunteers could be tasked to converse with residents in pairs, and then generate simple block directories for the whole neighbourhood. Such block directories would be a useful resource for the community. Furthermore, the student volunteers would also gain exposure to grassroots work. The engagement and interpersonal skills picked up by the student volunteers would enable them to engage in conversations emphatically.

Such micro skills are essential in bridging gaps within the community, because good communication leads to greater understanding and more openness within the community. In turn, rapport-building amongst residents or stakeholders would generate support for the expansion of community programmes (Kirst-Ashman & Hull Jr., 2009).

Encouraging social participation

A core component of a healthy community is social participation. Social participation is defined by the community members’ stake in the growth of a socially healthy and competent community (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004). And community competence is determined by a community’s ability to solve its own problems (Fellin, 2001). Therefore, it is essential that social spaces and connections are created to foster good community spirit and support.

Changing mindsets and doing community work through small interactions

Ultimately, social participation should help to build rapport and open up more conversations amongst the residents. The idea here is to create and facilitate spaces for community participation, and to create more informal and ground-up interactions within each block of residents, so that there would be less asymmetric information. These increased social networks expand social capital, a precious value for the people in the community (Putnam, 2000).
Limitations of grassroots work

It is nonetheless important to note that even with regular visits by the grassroots adviser or the RC, it is still difficult to reach out to all the residents in the constituency. In fact, it usually takes the grassroots leaders around two years to cover all the blocks in the area, and even then, these interactions tend to be brief and not quite productive in terms of building community relations. Mobilising community resources such as students to bridge this gap and foster more community feedback may perhaps significantly alleviate this situation.

In Jurong Spring Zone B, there are active residents who have responded positively to community outreach events. Strategizing by the zone’s RC has ensured that big community events have been organised in a different precinct each time. The function of the zone’s RC seems similar to that of most other RCs, i.e., focusing on service delivery. Another approach that RCs could take is to allow for more residents-focused work, which was first broached in 1984 by Vasoo (1984).
References


McKnight, J. (2013). *A basic guide to ABCD community organizing*. Evanston, IL: Asset-Based Community Development Institute.


Appendix A: Guiding questions for future community mapping

Community (rapport builders)
1. How long have you lived here?
2. How well do you know your neighbours? Specify: Smile-greet or conversations or shared activities
3. What do you like about your community?
4. What do you not like about your community?
5. Do you participate in the activities organized by the grassroots (RC, CC)?
6. Tell me more about the kinds of activities that they organize?
7. Why (or why do you not) attend these activities?
8. What kind of activities do you hope the grassroots will organize?

Assets (positive aspects of self; rapport builders)
1. May you share with us what is your occupation?
2. What are your hobbies/interests?
3. Would you be willing to share your interests with like-minded people?
4. What do people say you are good at doing? OR what do people say are your strengths?
5. How do you think you can contribute to the community?

Aspirations (more personal reflections)
1. What are your wishes for yourself and for your family?
2. What are your future plans?
3. Where do you see yourself in 10 years time?

Needs (vulnerabilities) with strengths
1. Is there anything that you are unhappy with at the moment? In terms of the community, work, family issues?
2. What are some challenges you face and how do you cope with them?
3. Is there anything that you think the grassroots or government can help you with?
Appendix B: Residents’ feedback

Community assets/weaknesses/issues that are identified.

1. Proximity to markets, amenities/facilities like exercise corners/community centres
2. Likes the environment
3. Traffic congestion down small road along Shuqun Primary School
4. Lift breakdown especially for Lift A (serves 66 households vs 44 households for Lift B)
5. Dirty neighbourhood (Void deck, corridors), Littering issue, irregular cleaning
6. Upgrades are neglected or not prioritized in the area
7. Mosquitoes breeding due to rooftop water tanks not being closed
8. Birds feeding/Bird noises due to trees being close to flats
9. Increase in foreigners and lack of integration into the culture, associated with making the neighbourhood dirty (not really a weakness, but is an issue)

Suggestions from the residents.

1. Multi-purpose Hall
2. Zebra crossing across road to Shuqun Primary School
3. More awareness about community activities organized by the RC and the CC.
4. Upgrades of internal structures like pipes etc.
5. Wider footpath for people to move around in the community as population increases, older people need more spaces.
6. Shops should not encroach into the spaces of the pathways.
7. Exercise corner built indoors in void decks (while it can be hot, (maybe can add fans), at least elderly can use the facilities rain or shine, and do not need to wait for them to dry after the rain.
8. Increase involvement of youths in community, too much focus on elderly during community events.
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