

**SPEECH BY MR MASAGOS ZULKIFLI, MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY
DEVELOPMENT AND SECOND MINISTER FOR HEALTH
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Social workers

Friends and colleagues

Introduction

1. A very good afternoon to all of you. It's my pleasure to join you today – as we celebrate Social Work Day 2021. My first, since I joined MSF.

2. I would first like to wish our social workers a Happy Social Work Day! Today, we have come together – to honour you, appreciate you, and celebrate the fraternity's contributions to making our society more resilient, caring and inclusive.

3. This year, we also celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Singapore Association of Social Workers. Congratulations. Through the decades, you have uplifted the profession. Raised standards. Developed competencies. Mentored generations of leaders. May the next 50 years continue to be one of even stronger partnerships. Advancing the profession to reach even greater heights.

Singapore's Social Compact

4. COVID-19 has plunged the world into one of the most urgent social crises. Not since the Great Depression, have we seen such scale of economic devastation. It revealed the fractures that were already widening in societies. Deepened divisions. Many felt left behind. Grew angry. National solidarity was weakened.

5. In Singapore, we are not immune. No society is. Especially in a crisis. Where people are anxious. Fearful about their livelihoods and future. We must never allow such divisions to take root. It is tough times like these, that will test the togetherness of our people. Being at the heart of our social systems – social workers, like yourself, have played and will continue

to play a key role. Enabling our nation to overcome the challenges brought about by this crisis of a generation. This is also our theme for this year's Social Work Day.

6. Singapore had faced a similar crisis before. Our independence. In 1965, we had barely \$1 billion in reserves. No natural resources and hinterland. Many more were jobless. The odds were stacked against us.

7. This did not deter our spirits. Our pioneers had set their focus on the immediate and urgent task of nation building. Our priority was to develop a competitive economy, build up a sizeable defence force, and provide basic education, housing and healthcare to all Singaporeans.

8. Social assistance was very basic. The newly established Ministry of Social Affairs, led by Minister Othman Wok, was barely two years old. Everyone took care of each other. Families, neighbours, each doing their part. The social service landscape was sparse, but started to grow, with the formation of Voluntary Welfare Organisations to meet different community needs. It was amid this context, that the SASW was set up in 1971. Alongside many key organisations. Growing the profession and sector to where it is today. That was our social compact.

9. This approach largely served us well for the first 50 years of independence. An entire generation leapt from third world to first. We did well in education, housing and healthcare, among the best in the world. Everyone moved up together. Incomes for those at the bottom and in the middle grew significantly in the past 20 years. Even after accounting for inflation. Society was also relatively fluid. Whether rich or poor, everyone had a good chance for upward social mobility. 14.3% of children born to families at the bottom 20% between 1978 to 1982, moved up to the top 20% of incomes as adults.

10. We achieved these good outcomes without having to heavily tax our population. In Singapore, we want workers to take home as much of their earnings, while achieving effective transfers for social equity. We want to pass down a healthy, debt-free social system which we have enjoyed and owe to future generations.

11. Today, our social compact continues to be one where the Government creates the conditions for growth and opportunities to flourish. Where individuals can be self-reliant to do the best for themselves and their families. Families continue to be the core of our society and first line of support. Strong families in turn support the building of resilient individuals.

The community plays an active role in helping those with less because we believe in a caring society.

12. Nevertheless, we will face a very different social landscape in the next 50 years. Our population will age further, and new challenges will emerge. While our socio-economic strategies have uplifted broad segments of society, our biggest task for the future will be to ensure that those at the bottom continue to progress upwards. Alongside everyone else on a moving escalator. Many of them face complex and multi-faceted needs. COVID-19 had only exacerbated this. The tried and tested solutions of before, may need revisiting. But we must do our best, no matter how hard it may be. To keep opportunities alive for all Singaporeans. Regardless of where they start off or are today.

13. I've gone into a fair bit of detail to share how we started, where we are today, and what are our future challenges. Because as social workers, you are at the core of our social systems. It is crucial for you to see the integral role that you play, as part of the bigger picture, in sustaining our social compact. Partnering us on our endeavour to keep opportunities and hope alive for all Singaporeans.

14. The past year has been a great testament of your pivotal role. Many clients were deeply impacted by the pandemic – unemployment, family violence, mental health issues and many more. You were there for them. At the frontlines within our community. Holding the forts. Enabling them to bounce back from the setbacks of COVID-19, with resilience. Finding new solutions and rallying the community together to support those in need. All this while having to adapt to many changes.

15. The effects of COVID-19 will stay with us for some time. At MSF, we will be doubling our efforts to strengthen our social compact. We will do so in a manner that revolves around enabling, uniting and caring for each other. MSF will increase upstream support to enable families through the Strengthening Families Programme@FSC, especially those at risk. We will also scale up ComLink nation-wide to support 14,000 families with children, living in rental flats. Uniting our community resources and those who have done well to give back. We will also future proof our SSAs through a new Community Capability Trust fund of up to \$480 million to strengthen their capabilities. Many of you will be involved in one way or another in these initiatives. We want to partner you in this journey to build a caring and resilient society.

16. As practitioners, you can also contribute to the fraternity in various ways. For experienced social workers, I encourage you to join our new Social Work Mentorship

Programme. Your rich experience would go a long way towards mentoring new mid-careerist social workers. Likewise, if you have just joined us from another sector, sign up today as a mentee.

17. In your daily work, continue to look out for your peers. Affirm them when the going gets tough. Encourage and support your leaders, as they steer our organisations to navigate through the storms of this crisis. Finally, find joy in your work. Remember your sense of purpose and your pivotal role in making Singapore a strong society. Keeping opportunities alive for all Singaporeans.

18. Let us continue to forge ahead to build a better future. We will emerge stronger together. Once again, a very Happy Social Work Day to all of you.

Thank you.