

Improving literacy in young children: How 4 volunteers got the support to start a reading programme

Volunteer-driven projects like this enable volunteers to perform better and feel more satisfied with their roles



Each week, a child from a low-income family attends an online reading session with a volunteer where stories are brought to life with engaging sound effects and lively expressions.

The programme, called SINDA Book Wizards, is the brainchild of four volunteers from the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA). The idea came about when Covid-19 restrictions were in force and the volunteers wanted to find a way to help young children cultivate a habit of reading and help them improve literacy skills before they entered primary school.

SINDA Book Wizards is one of five programmes initiated by the volunteers, says Mr Anbarasan Thuraimanikam, who leads the volunteer management team at SINDA.



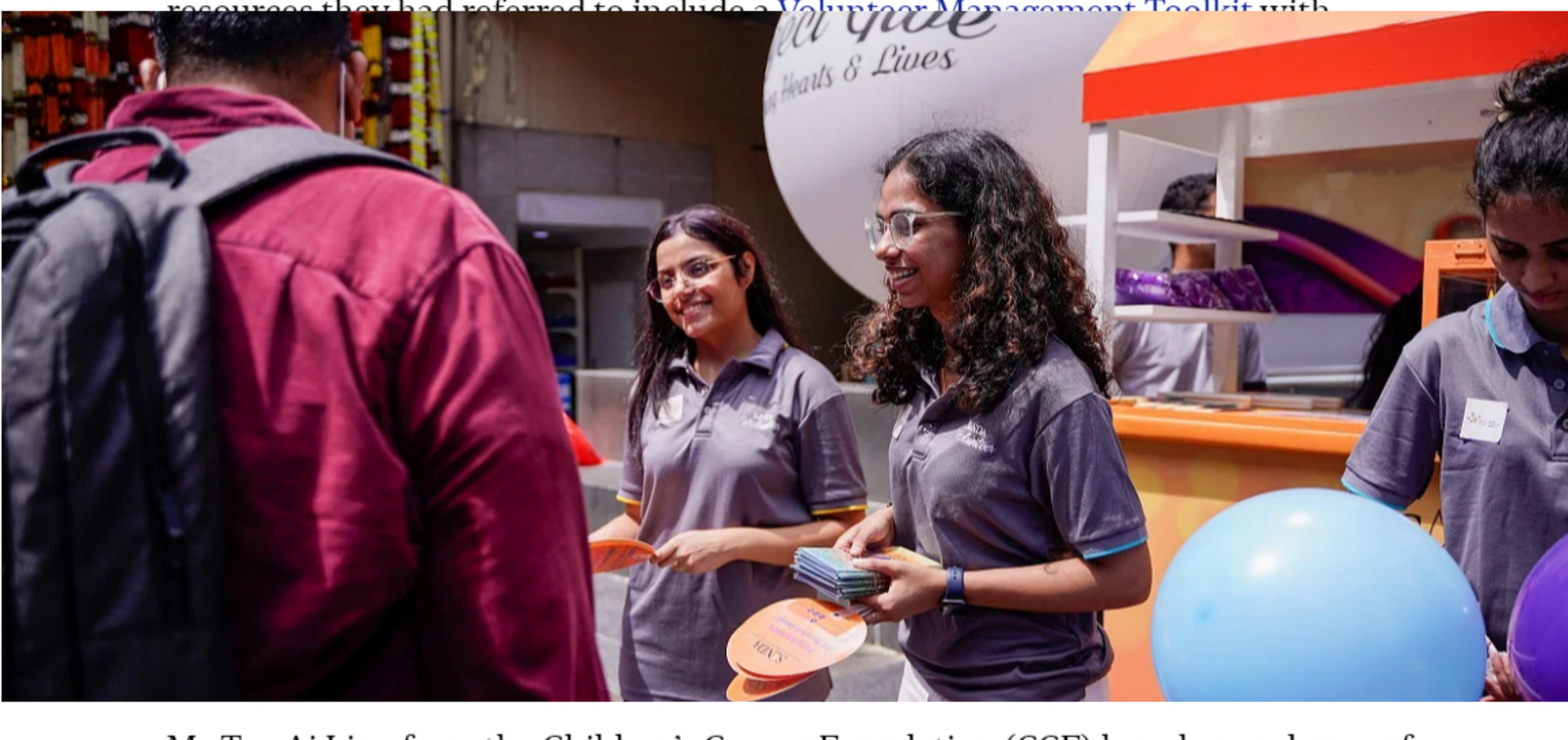
“We often come across volunteers who have great ideas to engage the community. As such, we developed the Volunteer Initiated Programme in 2020, a formal process where volunteers could propose ideas for community projects they would like to implement,” he adds.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

[Agent of change: How he mobilised over 10,000 people to distribute food to the needy](#)

The SINDA volunteer management team would then guide them and provide the funds, resources and any administrative support needed to make the projects come to fruition.

Mr Anbarasan and his team had made use of resources provided by the [National Council of Social Service \(NCSS\)](#) to come up with the volunteer management strategy to plan and manage activities for over 1,000 volunteers. The NCSS resources they had referred to include a [Volunteer Management Toolkit](#) with



Ms Teo Ai Ling from the Children’s Cancer Foundation (CCF) has also made use of NCSS’ resources when she joined the social service sector in September 2020.

Ms Priscilla Gan, director, volunteer resource optimisation, NCSS, explained: “Volunteers are pivotal to the growth and transformation of social service agencies. With this in mind, NCSS developed the VMM Matrix to help social service agencies understand their strengths and gaps in their volunteer management practices, as well as to provide recommendations of resources (such as [Volunteer Role Redesign Guide](#)) for agencies to adopt to better engage volunteers. When agencies invest in building stronger volunteer management capabilities, it will undoubtedly lead to stronger and more sustained volunteerism for their organisation to take Singapore and Singaporeans forward.”

Ms Teo found the VMM Matrix useful in evaluating the agency’s volunteer management practices. From there, she developed a volunteer management framework that prioritised the recruitment of corporate volunteers – in line with one of CCF’s priorities last year to create more sustainable partnerships with corporate organisations.



A corporate volunteer from Xylem facilitating classes on water filtration with CCF beneficiaries as part of the PALS Active Learning programme. Working with corporate volunteers allows the social service agency to leverage different capabilities from the community to enhance their programmes. PHOTO: CHILDREN’S CANCER FOUNDATION

Last year, Ms Teo was able to recruit 25 corporate partners – including private companies and education institutions – and their employees took part as corporate volunteers in PALS Active Learning as well as social group outings for CCF beneficiaries.

This year, she and her team are focusing on scaling up volunteer recruitment and training for CCF’s Play Personnel programme, which has resumed with the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. Held at CCF’s Family Resource Centre at KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital and National University Hospital, the programme allows volunteers to engage children and teens with cancer in structured recreational activities.



CCF works with skill-based volunteers, such as those with professional hosting skills, for its advocacy campaign Hair for Hope. PHOTO: CHILDREN’S CANCER FOUNDATION

Ms Teo shares that CCF is reviewing its processes to simplify them so that volunteers will continue to have a welcoming experience with the social service agency.

Developing volunteers’ roles and competencies

At SINDA, Mr Anbarasan and his team have redesigned the agency’s volunteer training to be more competency based. Volunteers who wish to mentor youths are trained on how to communicate with them, while befrienders for seniors are trained specially on how to engage with the elderly.

“We design and conduct training so that they can perform their roles much better,” he says. “This way, we develop the roles and the person. And when people can see their competencies being developed, it’s more impactful for them and for us.”

Take SINDA Book Wizards as an example. Started by four volunteers all of whom have experience in early childhood education and curriculum planning, it is now entirely run by 50 volunteers. Around 86 children have benefited from it since 2020.

The efforts of these social service agencies to better engage volunteers are reflected in the numbers. Mr Anbarasan reports that SINDA’s 2022 volunteer retention rate is 84 per cent, while 87 per cent of volunteers are satisfied with their role.

And the most rewarding part of his job is seeing volunteers return and even recruiting others.

“Success for us is when a volunteer goes through the programme and wants to recruit his family or friends,” he says. “We’ve also had a former beneficiary who received financial assistance when he was a kid and is now back with us as a volunteer.”

Find out more about the [NCSS Volunteer Management Maturity Matrix](#) at <https://go.gov.sg/ncss-vm-maturity-matrix>.

Social service agencies can also visit the [NCSS Volunteer Resource Hub](#) at <http://go.gov.sg/ncssvolunteerresourcehub> for more information to develop their volunteer management practices.

Brought to you by



In support of



- Join [ST’s Telegram channel](#) and get the latest breaking news delivered to you.