



## Building a Future from Ground Up with Tay Lai Hock

# Back to Kampung

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Images by Ground-Up Initiative

One of the most refreshing speakers at the 2014 Archifest Conference themed "Crowd" was not an architect in the traditional sense of building, but one of ideas and community. Tay Lai Hock, who founded non-profit organisation Ground-Up Initiative (GUI) in 2008, discussed the pains and gains of building GUI through collective intelligence. An agent of bottom-up change, Tay works the ground, in its various meanings. The urban farmer believes in ploughing and cultivating the earth for one's well-being and that of the environment. He also believes that a strong community is crucial as a vehicle for social change. His vision is a more sustainable and happier Singapore, called "5G", for gracious, green, giving, grounded, and grateful.

Since the initial 10 founding members and a few volunteers, GUI has touched more than 35,000 people of diverse ages and backgrounds. The flagship programme, Balik Kampung ("back to the village"), happens five days a week. Starting in the morning at its base in Yishun, volunteers work together on tasks like building new farming plots, painting a sign, cleaning the premises, repairing damaged facilities, and preparing a meal. Programmes catering to different age groups include Just One Earth (for kindergarten children), the 5G Leadership camp under educational arm WOW Kampung, and Kampung Play (for people to create, make, and play games), among others. GUI recently embarked on its most ambitious project yet to expand its home into a campus, Kampung Kampus, which broke ground in end 2014. Its development is still ongoing.

For more information: [www.groundupinitiative.org](http://www.groundupinitiative.org)

### **Can you elaborate more on the idea of culture as the power of community?**

From the start of GUI, it has always been about moving towards our vision through the power of community. I grow GUI through three wares: hardware is the physical space, software is the programme and activity, and heartware is the set of values that binds and guides us towards our vision. Through the process, we foster a sense of being more than a collection of individuals and a part of something beyond ourselves: a true community.

If you want to be a community builder, then knowing the importance of culture and its power is going to be crucial. Better still, you have to be able to nurture a culture that will define the spirit and ethos of your organisation and get everyone to buy and practise it. If not, the term "culture" remains an abstract concept. When newcomers or visitors step into your space and come into contact with your community members, do they feel wowed or do they walk away feeling lousy? This will define your community, and you have the power to enhance or break this impression.

### **Ground-up initiatives are the minority rather than norm in Singapore. Why do you think this is so?**

Well, the present government has taken care of its citizens so well that it has created a dependent mentality. The attitude that "the government knows best and will do something, so it is better not to do anything or you will 'kena' problem" has seen less people who are prepared to be self-initiated. Of course, the ground is changing, with technology, mass media, social media, and a younger generation who want a piece of the action in creating a society and future they would like. Some people have become more vocal using social media, but others are prepared to walk out of the social

media screen and face the public with their ideas. Whether it is sustainable, naïve, or misguided, we can't ignore their desire to be heard.

### **What role can GUI have in shaping the future of Singapore?**

I believe we can play a part in shaping the future of Singapore. If not, I won't name our organisation Ground-Up Initiative. The very act of asking volunteers to participate in building our base—the SL Kampung and now Kampung Kampus—has been magical for many people. Witnessing that one is able to contribute even without experience and seeing many people come together to collectively determine the destiny of GUI is very empowering.

It definitely has made many people less apathetic, created a sense of rootedness, and made our living environment more liveable. It has also enabled more people to learn to take risks and become more creative, which was one of the reasons that prompted me to want to start GUI. In the longer term, it has reminded many of our members not to take things for granted. GUI is also an inclusive community. 30 percent of our volunteers are foreigners living and working in Singapore. It helps for everyone to better appreciate one another.

### **How receptive are Singaporeans learning about your work for the first time?**

In the beginning, most people thought I was mad and asked if I had the money and if I were a professional architect and engineer to embark on such project. These days, the reactions encompass all of: "Wow, I have been searching for an organisation like yours", "Are you sure this is sustainable?", "I respect the things that you are doing", "I didn't realise that growing food is so difficult", and "I didn't know what is kampung spirit until I came here to experience this community".

### **What has been the biggest challenge in starting and expanding your organisation?**

Attracting the right kind of people to become core members and volunteers who see our work as more than a hobby or an item to add to their CV is a challenge. I have had to explain that GUI is more

than a farming club. Just because we farm does not mean that's all we do. We are also more than a green organisation, even though we talk about sustainable living. As more people joined the core team, I became labelled as a hippie creating a hippie village. Some have also claimed that I am poisoning the minds of the young and that I am anti-progress.

### **You visited some eco villages overseas in 2007. How have your travels influenced your attitudes towards kampung?**

My greatest discovery is that the link between Human and Nature must not be broken and that the disconnection from the land (our earth) has caused all sort of social ills. The way to a sustainable future is not just dependent on technology. You need a culture that can nurture people who value relationships, give selflessly, live creatively, and seek purpose and meaning in life.

GUI is cultivating the "21st Century Kampung Culture". This encompasses being down-to-earth, good neighbourly behaviours, and a strong kampung spirit, *plus* embracing technology, being comfortable yet not obsessed with social media, being open-minded and open-hearted, and having curiosity to explore solutions for the betterment of humanity.

### **What are some examples of unsustainable lifestyles in Singapore?**

People continue to use disposable wares, such as chopsticks, styrofoam boxes, and plastic utensils, especially in many food centres and during events. There is a wasteful culture of not finishing our food, and food wastage is at an alarming high of almost 800,000 tonnes last year, announced by *Channel NewsAsia* on 2 November 2014. Other examples are using large quantities of plastic bags, constantly upgrading electronic devices to the latest models, a habit of taking things for granted by not switching off the lights or saving water, and so on.

### **Rather than policy or education, why do you think that the solution lies in restoring a connection with the "land"?**

When your everyday life is so distanced from the land that supports



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1. Nurturing grounded leaders starts at a young age. Jadie (in orange and pointing) has been with GUI since she was 14. Now 17, she has grown to lead other children confidently.

2. Inculcating a sense of personal responsibility, such as cleaning after oneself, is an important part of GUI's sustainable living culture.

3. Volunteers made use of every available resource to build Kampung Kampus.

4, 5. At Balik Kampung, volunteers also have an active role in maintaining and cleaning the site.

6. After Balik Kampung, one of volunteers' favourite moments is wading through the stream at the backyard and then climbing up the slope to reflect under the trees.



7. Illustration and plan of the ongoing development of Kampung Kampus.

8. Tay Lai Hock and Minister K. Shanmugam plant a Kechapi tree, an endangered native species, at the groundbreaking ceremony of Kampung Kampus on 8 November 2014.

9. Appreciation of nature starts young at GUI with these volunteers joining in Balik Kampung.

10. Communal eating is a joy at the Kampung. Madam Khanim, the mother of two of GUI members, shared special family recipes adapted to the Kampung plant-based diet with the volunteers.



"You will become more grounded. Your emotional, mental, and spiritual health will be balanced, in addition to your physical health."

– Tay Lai Hock

your lifestyle, how can you appreciate the issues of global warming, food security, water crisis, saving energy, and taking care of your waste? The farmers are the ones who suffer the consequences of climate change directly because they depend on the stability of the weather to produce a good harvest of crops. When you become the one to clear your own waste on a daily basis, you will become conscious of the waste you are generating. The closer one gets to the land, not as an audience or a user, but as a direct participant of cultivating one's own food and keeping the land clean, the more one will become conscious of one's footprint on this earth.

### **This idea of farming the land—do we need to rethink traditional concepts of farming to suit city life?**

Definitely! Many young people and even older farmers are leaving their land and heading to cities to find "greener" pastures. Some have made it, but many more are "lost". Urban farming—as well as getting more urbanites, who are disconnected from the reality of producing food, to understand and appreciate farmers—will be among the challenges of the twenty-first century. The demand for more food, due to rising affluence, and at a lower cost will continue to motivate people to *not* stay in farming.

GUI initiated Balik Kampung in 2008 to involve urbanites every weekend in farming and, hopefully, sustain their enthusiasm to come and work on the land as often as possible and appreciate community living, even for a day. The programme is now extended to three more weekdays, which means that urbanites can get involved in farming up to five days a week.

### **You consider yourself to be a soul sculptor, not just an urban farmer. What are the benefits of working with nature to the soul?**

Your consciousness is definitely increased. You learn not to take many things for granted. You become aware of the interconnection and interdependence between many matters. You live with a sense of joy and gratitude at every moment. You learn to listen to your heart more than your head. You will become more grounded. Your emotional, mental, and spiritual health will be balanced, in addition to your physical health.

### **Many non-profits consider engaging youth volunteers to be a significant challenge. Do you have advice for others trying to recruit youth?**

From day one, I knew that in order for GUI to sustain and grow, nurturing more leaders to come on board was necessary and crucial. I spend lots of time training and mentoring these youths. I believe in empowering and in turn many current GUI leaders have been inspired to do likewise. Regardless of your seniority, age, and background, your ideas and ability to implement them count. Many volunteers are inspired by such a spirit. We constantly invite new volunteers to come on board, but we do it naturally and not forcefully.

Balik Kampung enables us to spot new talent and potential leaders. We invite them into our working groups and give them roles and responsibilities. They work with the senior members to develop new programmes or improve the existing activities. We believe that leadership matters in building the 5G communities. It inspires hopes and motivates many to work together for a greater good. We call this Grounded Leadership. A leader must be a thinker, warrior, and farmer.

### **There are big plans for Kampung Kampus, both in terms of size and programme. How far is GUI from achieving its vision at this point?**

We are definitely far but it is not impossible to achieve our vision. We are realistic and patient. As we fundraise, work with various professionals, and meet with the authorities to build Kampung Kampus, we realise that more people are coming forward and helping to move our building plan. This is not just our vision, and I am inviting many to step forward to be a part of this vision. It could take up to two years or more to complete the Kampus, but in the process, the space will be built and maintained by many people, as many as allowed. Through this process, it will be a Kampus for the community, by the community.

### **What are your plans for GUI in 2015?**

We will continue to raise the money to build Kampung Kampus, expand the team, nurture more leaders, grow the community, strengthen the GUI ethos, and increase our base of partners. 