LIEN FOUNDATION: PHILANTHROPY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Swee-Sum Lam, Achsah Ang and Gabriel Henry Jacob wrote this case solely for the purposes of class discussion. It is not intended as an illustration of either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial or administrative situation. The writer may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

This case is suitable for a course on how philanthropy can be used as a tool for social innovation.

It focuses on:
1. Strategic philanthropy as an effectual process; and as a result,
2. How strategic philanthropy can be innovative and contributes to the social sector beyond pecuniary terms.

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LIEN FOUNDATION: PHILANTHROPY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

*Philanthropy is a process of finding great people, then giving them the resources, the space and the courage to do great things.*

– Lee Poh Wah

Lee Poh Wah, who is the Chief Executive Officer of Lien Foundation, sat at his office which overlooks Singapore’s Orchard Road. Incongruent with the constant flux of retail seasons that defines the vicinity, Lien Foundation has made mid- to long-term commitments to tackle the root of societal issues through philanthropy. Since Poh Wah joined as the first professional executive of the Foundation in 2005, Lien Foundation began to focus its philanthropic funding and activities in the key issues of water and sanitation, eldercare and early childhood education. Poh Wah looks at the dashboard of projects he maintains – a simple excel worksheet with a ‘traffic light’ system indicating each project’s status. As he did a visual scan down the list of projects, a ‘green light’ project named ‘Gym Tonic’ caught his eye. It was October 2015 and the project has performed well in reaching its intended outcomes. As the project approaches its target of setting up 14 gyms in eldercare facilities by the end of 2015, it faces stakeholders’ interests to expand Gym Tonic to other communities. Poh Wah is confident that Lien Foundation is creating value through its philanthropic activities.

PHILANTHROPY IN ASIA

Asia has experienced fundamental changes over the last few decades. On one hand, there is rising wealth and a positive trend in this region. In 2015, private wealth in Asia-Pacific region, excluding Japan, grew by 14.9% (to $33.0 trillion) compared to 5.6% (to $50.8 trillion) in North America and 6.6% (to $39.7 trillion) in Europe. Notably, 60% of the increase in wealth growth in the Asia-Pacific region was from new wealth (i.e. GDP growth and savings rate) rather than existing assets (i.e. returns from equity, bond and cash and deposit) (Beardsley et al., 2015).

On the other hand, the majority of the region’s population lives in countries with rising inequality. Of the 28 Asian economies studied by the Asian Development Bank in the period of 1990s and 2000s, 12 experienced rising inequality. Those 12 economies, which included China, India and Indonesia, represented more than 80% of the developing Asia’s population in 2010. More critically, the increase in the share of wealth held by the top 20% of the population by per capita expenditure suggested that rising inequality has been driven by the rich getting richer much faster than the poor (Zhuang, Kanbur, & Rhee, 2014). The paradox of wealth and poverty existing in the same region presents a gap that must be closed before the chasm becomes a permanent feature of society.

Interestingly, the solution could possibly be the age-old mechanism of wealth re-distribution called philanthropy. Perspectives from both the giving and receiving end of philanthropy suggest that there is a new importance placed on making sustainable social impacts that do not merely placate a situation, but genuinely improve it (Springer, 2014). With such awareness
and discernment from those who are involved in the philanthropic scene in Asia, and coupled with the availability of private funds to tackle the social issues in the region, Asia presents itself to be a powerful intersection for the role of private philanthropy.

Although there are precious lessons to be learnt from the western understanding of philanthropy, the practice of giving in Asia offers its distinctive experience. Firstly, many of the philanthropic activities are driven by family-owned businesses. From 2013 to 2014, philanthropic involvement in Asian family offices\(^1\) grew by 10% to 77% of the total number in the region (Wilkinson, 2015). In Singapore, almost 50% of family offices are currently engaged in philanthropy with an average endowment of 2% of asset under management, or US$6 million to US$7 million per annum (Wong, 2015). Moreover, the family business seems to remain an important source of funds, with 22% of the families surveyed in 2011\(^2\) reporting company profits as the funds for their philanthropy, which is the single largest identifiable source of funding (Mahmood & Santos, 2011).

Not only is there an integration of the philanthropic activities with business, the affiliation with family-owned businesses also implies that the influence of family values is also significant in driving philanthropic activities. Family values, such as compassion, courage, and tolerance, play a large role in family succession planning and it impacts the mandate of the Asian philanthropists’ socially conscious activities as well (Wong, 2015). Additionally, one main consideration for engaging in philanthropy was in ensuring the continuity of family values or creating a lasting legacy, and even a family identity (Lee, 2010; Mahmood & Santos, 2011).

Secondly, there is a rising involvement of the younger generation of philanthropists, bringing together with them new tools and renewed passions towards philanthropy. Along with the new wealth that emerges in Asia, there is also a major intergenerational transfer of wealth occurring as many founders retire – as much as 80% of wealth is projected to be passed on to the next generation in the next decade or two (Wilkinson, 2015). More than the financial assets and family values, the younger generation of philanthropists offer a more structured and professional approach to philanthropy, tending to be more interested in measuring the impact of giving, as opposed to see giving as an end in itself as it was in the older generation. The younger generation of philanthropists also tends to be more open to new sectors, such as the arts, civil rights and the environment, and is increasingly geared to national and international causes (Mahmood & Santos, 2011). An interesting point of observation is that philanthropy in Asia has also begun to take on a more collaborative stance where peer-to-peer relationship building has become an important avenue for extending the good work that is being done. One recent initiative is the Asia Philanthropy Circle, which is a joint effort of several Asian philanthropists to build a platform fostering the exchange and coordination of

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1 Family offices are private wealth management advisory firms that serve ultra-high net worth investors.
2 The target respondents for the research published by UBS Philanthropy Services and INSEAD consisted of individuals, groups of individuals, families, philanthropic foundations and trusts and family-controlled businesses engaged in substantial philanthropic activities that are principally based in China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. 203 respondents in the target countries completed the formal survey, as well as more than 100 relevant individuals were interviewed between December 2010 and June 2011.
knowledge and ideas among Asian philanthropists and, particularly, their collaboration (Coutts Institute, 2015).

Another interesting point to note about Asian philanthropy is that there tends to be a culture of secrecy, or being quiet about, wealth and giving in some parts of Asia (Springer, 2014). On the contrary to the Western counterparts, Asian philanthropists seem to avoid the limelight (Wong, 2015). As a case in point, when Warren Buffett and Bill Gates went to promote The Giving Pledge in China, the reception they received was lukewarm. However, other notable and public giving by Hong Kong philanthropist Li Ka Shing, Chinese actor Jet Li and founder of India’s largest information technology company, Azim Premji, points to changes that are taking place as the region becomes more globalised (John, Tan, & Ito, 2013). It is, thus, within the context that is somewhat unique to Asia that Lien Foundation operates.

DR LIEN YING CHOW AND THE EARLY DAYS

Dr Lien Ying Chow, founder of Lien Foundation, was born in 1906 in the village of Dapu in China’s Guangdong province, where his grandfather was the village head. His father ran a textile business and taught young Lien the basics of business and a strong work ethic. However, after Lien lost both his parents within a span of 3 years and spending some years working in Hong Kong, he bought passage to Singapore in 1920. Arriving with only a singlet, a pair of short pants and a samfu outfit, he began to build his life in Singapore. His diligence and hard work helped him to rise among the ranks and accumulated enough savings to start his own business, which thrived and expanded to Malayan towns like Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh. By the late 1930s, Lien had become one of the most successful and prominent businessmen in Singapore (Chua, 2011).

In those days, Lien was both a business person as well as a community leader who set an example for his generation (“Leading the legacy,” 2012). Among his business pursuits, Lien is best known as the founder of Overseas Union Bank, which was one of Southeast Asia’s largest banks before it was acquired by United Overseas Bank in 2001. He also ranked among Singapore’s richest people, with a fortune estimated at S$1.1 billion in 2003. His achievements in the business world was recognised as he was named Businessman of the Year in 1988 (Chua, 2011).

After the Japanese Occupation and surrender, Lien worked with the British Military Administration, advising on issues of economy, food supplies and relief work. As a respected community leader, Lien was also advocating Singapore citizenship rights for immigrants, and was one of the first to become a Singapore citizen in 1957. In the decade prior to Malaya’s independence from British rule, Lien often hosted meetings between political leaders, which included Malaysia’s future first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. Given his network among the political figures, he became High Commissioner to Malaysia in 1966 (Chua, 2011).

As a philanthropist, Lien was closely associated with education and the establishment of the Lien Foundation in 1980. Lien Foundation received 48% of the shares in Lien’s family holding company. In the early years, the foundation restricted its activities to making grants. This changed in 2005, after the passing of Lien.
Expectedly, the role of the family unit is important in embodying those beliefs that were held close to the heart of the founding philanthropist. Other than representatives from each of the three generations of Liens, the Board now has two independent governors, and hires its first professional manager (Lee, 2010), becoming the first grant-making organisation in Singapore to professionalise in 2005. Notably, the inclusion of family members from different generations institutes an intergenerational involvement, or perhaps even a legacy, in philanthropy.

In 2009, Lien’s grandson, Laurence Lien, became the Chairman of the family foundation and was noted for innovative philanthropy in the fields of education, eldercare and environmental causes. Reflecting on his family and the work and role of the rich in society, the younger Lien concluded,

“My father was certainly very socially conscious, and my grandfather was not just a business person but a community leader... in his day, a business leader was a community leader – he was not just one kind of person. We have lost that, and I’d like to bring that back. The wealth gap is pulling societies apart and causing unrest all over the world. The wealthy must do their part to foster social cohesion.”

(“Leading the legacy,” 2012)

By 2012, the foundation has further crystallised its mission statement to articulate its areas of focus in water and sanitation, eldercare and early childhood education (Lee, 2013). Those were the core steps taken towards a systematic approach to philanthropy. (See Exhibit 1 Vision and Mission of Lien Foundation).

PHILANTHROPY THROUGH LIEN FOUNDATION

The foundation hired its first professional staff – Lee Poh Wah – as a senior programme manager in 2015. Poh Wah was a go-getter who founded a technology start-up right after his MBA studies in 1999. Although the enterprise failed during the dotcom boom, it did not stop him, as a business development manager, from starting a social enterprise fund in 2002 through the then Ministry of Community Development. By the time Poh Wah came to take up the role in Lien Foundation, he was not unfamiliar with the nonprofit sector in Singapore. His brief in 2005 was to look at the foundation's three core interests

At the time when Poh Wah arrived at the foundation, the landscape of Singapore's philanthropy scene was different. In his words, Poh Wah felt that there was an “uninspiring monoculture philanthropy landscape in Singapore where publicity for philanthropy revolves around cheque-giving ceremonies” (John et al., 2013). Perhaps this observation is consistent with the way that philanthropists would traditionally give, which is tending to see giving as an end in itself. Fortunately, it was also the explicit intention of Laurence Lien that the foundation would not simply give in the traditional way as it was not good enough (Mahmood & Santos, 2011).

Particular to the experience in Lien Foundation, it receives some 300 unsolicited proposals for grants every year. The proposals are seldom aligned with the foundation's philanthropic
purpose and style. In addition, they often promote status quo or simply substitute for
government funds. Poh Wah began to see the futility of reactive grant-giving in producing
impact (John et al., 2013).

With a drive to change how philanthropy should be done and supported by the board, Poh
Wah led the Lien Foundation in setting up vehicles of implementation as a means to push the
foundation's agenda. It was a strategy to multiply impact by investing in scale. Just a couple of
years after Poh Wah joined the foundation, he set up the Lien Centre for Social Innovation as
well as Lien AID in 2006. In 2012, Lien Collaborative for Palliative Care was also established
(See Exhibit 2 Selected Affiliates of Lien Foundation). Taking the example of Lien AID, it was
established with the intent to plug the gap of having no non-governmental organisations with
the capability to deliver the aspirations of Lien Foundation in the area of water and sanitation.
Having done so, Lien AID focuses on learning and implementing solutions at the grassroots
level. As of June 2016 – Lien AID's 10th year of operation – it has reached out to 838,000 direct
beneficiaries. Currently, Lien AID is operationally active in Cambodia, China, Myanmar and
Vietnam.

Lien Foundation has created successful initiatives such as IngoT (IT stretching the capabilities
of NGOs) and Quality of Death Index since 2005. IngoT is part of a universally designed IT
system hosted on cloud, and empowered with mobile solutions. They have benefited
healthcare nonprofits and nursing homes respectively in increasing productivity and
transforming how healthcare can be better delivered.

As part of its efforts to advocate for the provision of palliative care, the Foundation
commissioned the Economist Intelligence Unit to construct the Quality of Death Index. The
inaugural Index in 2010 ranks 40 countries in their provision of end-of-life care. This was
expanded in 2015 to cover 80 countries using both quantitative and qualitative indicators in
areas such as quality and affordability of care. Notably, after the findings from Quality of
Death Index were published, the Ministry of Health in Singapore commissioned the
development of the National Strategy for Palliative Care, which was implemented since 2012
(Lien Foundation, 2015).

With a clear direction and belief of the needs of the sectors, Poh Wah sees the foundation
playing the role of identifying systemic gaps, and subsequently “assembling” the resources
and the people in order to work on potential solutions. The foundation focuses on doing the
“right thing” for the sector as it is relatively immune to the day-to-day grind of operating the
services. As such, the Lien Foundation can dedicate its organisational resources for the end
goal of challenging the status quo. To illustrate how philanthropy was effected at Lien
Foundation, we look at a recent initiative, Gym Tonic.

THE “ASSEMBLY” PROCESS OF GYM TONIC

Back in August 2013, Poh Wah was on a work trip in Finland to learn about its preschool
system. With the spirit to learn and to explore the frontiers of eldercare – one of the other
core missions of the Lien Foundation, Poh Wah twinned this with a visit to understand
Finland's eldercare experience. The latter was put together with Ken Tan, Managing Director
of PulseSync and also a long-time working partner who led the Foundation's earlier IT projects. Joining them was another long-time collaborator from the eldercare sector, Mdm. Low Mui Lang, Executive Director of The Salvation Army Peacehaven Nursing Home.

It was during that time when an exercise therapist introduced Poh Wah to the potential of exercise-as-medicine concept. Poh Wah witnessed a 97-year-old lady doing squats as she carried 10 kilograms of weights in the vest on her body. During this exercise routine, the 1.4 metres tall lady was joking and chatting with the therapist, demonstrating her mental lucidity. The point made was clear and Poh Wah was immediately convinced of the effectiveness of exercise towards improving not only the physical, but also the state of mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being.

Returning to Singapore Mui Lang piloted an exercise programme at Peacehaven Nursing Home using the Finland-made HUR equipment. The pilot project involved 15 residents from the Home from end November 2013 to February the following year (Simpson, 2015). According to Mui Lang, the results from the pilot test were remarkable,

“Gym Tonic has blown my mind. I still remember the day my resident threw away his walking stick and started walking. At a broader level, caring for elderly who are at risk of falling is costly and taxing for nursing homes. I’m now turning my focus to prevention through Gym Tonic.” – Low Mui Lang

Gym Tonic was part of Lien Foundation’s initiative to rejuvenate Singapore’s approach to eldercare by introducing exercise-as-medicine into sector (See Exhibit 3 Gym Tonic at a Glance). Basically, it was designed with the intention to tailor exercise to individuals, as if it were a medicine that would be prescribed optimally to different persons, based on their needs. The elderly on the programme were assessed using Finnish-developed protocols by Kokkola University and interRAI, an international healthcare assessment system. With the automated collection of the person's exercise data over time through the automated IT system connected to each exercise equipment (See Exhibit 4 Gym Tonic Exercise), one's progress is charted and tracked in detail. This is an important feature because the data collected will provide good information for the therapists to make the necessary adjustments to the exercise regime of the person. Ultimately, the end goal of Gym Tonic is to be able to calibrate exercise to individuals using evidence-based methods.

With proof that Gym Tonic worked for the local population, Poh Wah decided it was timely to scale up the project. 22 therapist from 10 participating eldercare organisations were sent to Finland for a week's training on how to conduct the assessments required for administering Gym Tonic. Apart from the technical know-how, the physiotherapists also begin to gain first-hand accounts from the Finnish colleagues and elderly of how the approach of exercise-as-medicine was feasible and effective. The Finnish experience allowed the local personnel to develop capacity and to buy into the exercise as medicine concept, giving them an initial boost of confidence that the new project could succeed at their respective workplaces. As a result,
the sector saw how an innovative community of practice among the therapists was beginning to develop.

The Lien Foundation provided funding to support the implementation of the Gym Tonic at 10 sites, which were expanded to 14 sites as a result of organisations using their internal resources to scale up. The funding was also matched by the government, which provided a dollar-for-dollar grant, to further the intent of Gym Tonic such as supporting complementary initiatives and sending more therapists for training. Keeping in mind the typically resource-strapped organisations in the social sector, the support given by Lien Foundation facilitated the adoption of Gym Tonic at the eldercare facilities. More importantly, the primary goal of providing solutions for the eldercare sector is achieved through these initiatives by Lien Foundation, despite financial and time constraints faced by any potential adopting organisation. Lien Foundation’s innovative approach to philanthropy has facilitated in introducing beneficial initiatives for the elderly in the local community.

The introduction of the exercise-as-medicine concept in Singapore have proceeded well thus far. By October 2015, Poh Wah knows for certain that the Gym Tonic project would be completely rolled out to the eldercare facilities by about the end of the year. This marked the completion of the first phase of introducing Gym Tonic to the local beneficiaries.

Moving forward, Poh Wah has plans to consider other channels to increase the number of beneficiaries of the Gym Tonic project. Since the successful launch, Gym Tonic has gone upstream in the eldercare delivery, targeting more ambulatory elderly in community settings such as senior activity centres. As Poh Wah considers the options of Lien Foundation’s involvement in Gym Tonic, he looks forward to see how the social value is delivered through the Lien Foundation.
Exhibit 1  
**Vision and Mission of Lien Foundation**

**VISION**

Clear perspective guides us and strong resolve propels us to:

**Lead:** We spearhead strategic partnerships and activities to deliver practical, sustainable solutions for society's benefit.

**Innovate:** We mobilise resources, and push boundaries for new ways of addressing urgent needs and critical gaps.

**Empower:** We enable society and individuals to operate at their maximum capacity. Where possible, we equip communities and their leaders with the know-how, initiating change from within.

**Network:** We are well-positioned to stimulate and spark high-impact idea exchange, high-intensity collaboration, and high-end value creation by leveraging on the people, private and public sectors.

**MISSION**

As a proponent of Radical Philanthropy, we tackle the root of problems. Within these key areas, we leverage technology and pioneer novel solutions to create capacity and strive towards:

**Exemplary early childhood education**

Quality early childhood education improves a child's chances in life as health, development and wellbeing profit from a caring and learner-friendly environment. An investment in early childhood today is a contribution to the welfare and productivity of tomorrow's world. We show the way to more positive child outcomes through thought leadership and innovative programmes and projects.

**Excellence in eldercare**

If ageing is a fact, eldercare is a duty: a pressing one. Demographics in developed economies show a rapidly ageing population, calling for an urgent need to ensure a better understanding of age-related diseases, and corresponding availability of good quality eldercare services and facilities. We support innovative models of eldercare, particularly in areas like end-of-life issues and dementia care as these have a great impact on the elderly and their families or caregivers.

**Effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation**

Access to clean and affordable water supplies, sanitation and hygiene is fundamental to human health, economic advancement and poverty eradication. Yet, almost a fifth of the world's population does not have safe drinking water and over 30 per cent lack basic sanitation. With an Asia-centric vantage, we focus on environmental sustainability in water and sanitation by working with governments and partners on facility design, installation, water management, knowledge transfer and capacity building.

**Source:**


9
Exhibit 2  Selected Affiliates of Lien Foundation

Lien Centre for Social Innovation

The Lien Centre for Social Innovation, a partnership between the Lien Foundation and Singapore Management University (SMU), was established in 2006 to advance the thinking and capability of the social sector.

Our vision is to be a thought leader and catalyst for positive social change in Singapore and beyond. Our mission is to catalyse innovative responses to social needs through applied research and capacity building in collaboration with the public, private and social sectors. To see our organisational brochure, please click here.

The Lien Centre contributes to a more equitable, inclusive and vibrant society by addressing social needs through innovative approaches. We drive socially innovative solutions by strengthening social sector organisations so that they become influential and effective partners with business and government. We also work at the intersection of the public, private and social sectors to catalyse social innovation

Lien AID

Despite great strides in development in Asia in the past decade, millions of rural poor still have to depend on polluted water for their daily needs.

Lien AID is an international non-profit committed to enabling sustainable access to clean water and sanitation for Asia’s rural poor. Founded in 2006, Lien AID focuses on community-based approaches in the delivery of multi-year WASH programmes. Through partnerships with local governments, civil society organisations and private businesses, we hope to provide the impetus for better water governance and a future where clean water access is available to everyone.

Lien Collaborative for Palliative Care

The Lien Collaborative for Palliative Care draws on philanthropy, tertiary educational institutions, palliative care service providers and individuals to collaborate on a project designed to strengthen Palliative Care leadership and capacity. This initiative has been co-developed by the Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care Network (APHN) and the Lien Foundation. It aims to help build the palliative care capacity in the region, focus on countries with little or no services, and integrate mainstream government health system.

To date, the Collaborative is operating in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where volunteer faculty members have helped to train master trainers in these countries, start palliative care services in public hospitals, and improve accessibility, availability and affordability of pain medications.

Sources:


Exhibit 3  Gym Tonic at a Glance

**About Us**

Gym Tonic is a partnership between organisations from Singapore and Finland that will introduce the concept of exercise-as-medicine into 12 eldercare facilities in Singapore.

**Convenor and Funder**

Lien Foundation

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<th>Project Lead</th>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Research</th>
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**Community Care Facilities**

- AWWA Health & Senior Care
- St. Luke's ElderCare (Clementi)
- St. Luke's Hospital
- NTUC Health
- St. Luke's ElderCare (Tampines)
- The Salvation Army – Peacehaven Bedok Multi-Service Centre

**Residential Care Facilities**

- Apex Harmony Lodge
- Man Fut Tong Nursing Home
- St. Joseph's Home
- Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital
- St. Andrew's Nursing Home
- The Salvation Army – Peacehaven Nursing Home

**Estimated Number of Users**

More than 2,000

Source:

Pre-Assessment

Therapists conduct objective (WELMED) and subjective (interRAI) assessment to evaluate the elderly’s current health and physical function status.

These include physical measurements and functional tests on their gait, sitting and balance, and questions on the elderly’s wellbeing (e.g. presence of pain).

Measurement

Using specialised equipment like the Body Composition Analyser, Balance Platform, and Performance Recorder, the elderly are assessed for their isometric muscle strength, balance, metabolic rate, and fat and muscle composition. The Gym Tonic system will present a preliminary assessment report to show where they stand as compared to other elderly in their age group, their potential, and exercise recommendations tailored to suit their health and physical function conditions.

Exercise and Intervention

Before they start their workout, the elderly’s vital signs are taken to ensure their fitness. They then sign into Gym Tonic with their personal RFID wristband. The gentle pneumatic gym machines have their recommended routine pre-programmed in the system which then guides the elderly to complete the exercise repetitions and circuit. It also allows their strength training resistance to be raised progressively.

Their exercise performance is automatically captured and tracked in the IT system (e.g. achieved, underperformed, overperformed).

The workouts improve their strength and balance, helping them to walk more confidently, prevent falls and even improve continence.
Follow Up Assessment

The therapists will reassess the health and physical function status of the elderly every three or six months, or when necessary (e.g. significant change in medical condition). They will then discuss the progress with the elderly and possibly, their caregivers.

The therapist also makes the recommended changes and finetunes the elderly’s exercise regime or intervention, and motivates them to gradually step up their exercises.

Analysis

Through the Gym Tonic system, all assessment and measurement data are made anonymous, and captured in a repository for evidence-based research.

The research team at the University of Kokkola will analyse the data and provide their findings to help the Gym Tonic team finetune the programme and also derive more effective interventions.

Source:
