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Addressing Singapore's unmet social needs: How to help vulnerable groups

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As Singapore's population demographics changes with the influx of foreigners, the current societal focus on race and racial differences of a Singaporean "can work against" the Republic, said Singapore Management University's (SMU) Lien Centre for Social Innovation (http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/) in a research report that outlined some of the country's most pressing social needs.

The 74-page 'Unmet Social Needs in Singapore: Singapore's social structures and policies, and their impact on six vulnerable communities' (http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/unmetsocialneeds.asp) report, which took three years to prepare, cited the new and growing communities of foreign workers, "both welcomed and frowned upon" by locals, as two of six groups that could use more help.

"There are also new vulnerabilities in terms of relationships between new immigrants and Singapore, and also amongst Singaporeans themselves… with regard to levels of acceptance between new immigrants who struggle to assimilate and Singaporeans who resent their presence," it noted.

This can emphasise the "foreign-ness" of non-Singaporeans through the "other-ing" of foreign workers by nationality, gender, class and type of work.

"Such constructed stratification is unhealthy for the well-being of society," said the lead authors, civil society activist and former Nominated Member of Parliament Braema Mathi and Lien Centre research manager Sharifah Mohamed.

Singapore's growing foreign workforce

Between 1970 and 2008, Singapore's population grew by 2.3 times, and with the foreign workforce multiplying by 64 times. In 2008, some 20,513 foreigners were accepted as new citizens while 79,167 were made Permanent Residents (PR).

Today, one in ten persons in Singapore is a PR while one in seven of the five-million-strong population is a foreigner.

This diversity has "made many Singaporeans examine their choices and value systems as to how they can cope with the foreigners in their midst". And while "prejudices prevail in all societies", it is important that these are addressed.

The report noted that "a good start has been made" with the government requiring foreigners who are more highly skilled to go through a naturalisation and integration process when they acquire Singapore citizenship.

For instance, the People's Association, a statutory board which leads efforts to promote racial harmony and social cohesion in Singapore, has worked with Citizens' Consultative Committees (the umbrella organisations of all grassroots organisations) to visit the new PRs to help them learn more about Singapore.

But it is still early days. "The challenge is in finding a common set of values that can transcend racial and cultural divides and that can anchor the Singaporean identity in this global city," the report said.

It also raised the red flag on the plight of unskilled foreign workers who work mostly in the construction industry or as domestic workers.

They tend to be the group of foreign workers that "can be more easily exploited and abused", said the report which cited how employers have been known to make deductions on wages, withhold prompt payment of wages or abuse the workers physically.

Submitting its recommendations for government policies, the report urged that "the legal process should not be too onerous for the workers to follow through" in order to protect them effectively. It also asked for all foreigners to be treated as workers with the right to days off, a standardised pay for the job done, and the provision of support when they have problems.

On the formation of new communities in Singapore, the centre said the groups "can be treated as more than just

human resources."

"They are human bridges to the global world and potential social capital. The first step is to start with common social values and be bold to challenge local society's status quo," it added.

Other vulnerable groups

The report started with an understanding of needs in general and how it can be dissected into four levels, that of relief(assistance to meet basic needs), security(contingency help such as insurance to tide over seasonal deficiencies), prevention(interventions such as jobs to reduce risks) and transformation(structural changes to remove external barriers such as discrimination).

Four other at-risk groups were identified in the report: the disabled, the mentally ill, low-income workers, and households led by singles.

It then reviewed support structures such as the national compulsory savings, housing system and the network of social organisations before addressing the specific needs of each of the six groups that have been identified.

The first challenge with the disabled community is Singapore's baseline definition of the disabled as a person "whose prospects of securing and retaining a place, and advancing in an education or training institution, in employment and recreation, as an equal member of the community, is substantially reduced as a result of a physical, mental, intellectual, developmental or sensory impairment."

The report argued that such a definition, while based on a medical criterion, does not address social and environmental limitations, and it may have the effect of "promoting the view of a disabled person as dependent and needing to be cured or cared for".

Additionally, outreach to this group "remains a kink in the system"; policymakers may not have a complete understanding of the scale of the issues as there is no central registry that captures the needs of disabled persons.

The report observed too, that there are no schemes that encourage family life for those whose disabilities are less limiting, nor is there any labour policy that protects this group by allowing them access to employment opportunities and independent living.

Singapore has an opportunity to be a global example on the inclusion of the disabled community, the report urged. It suggested that compulsory education be extended to children with disabilities, and that there be a mandate to include the disabled in all facets of life, from school to work, and to transportation.

For the mentally ill, the authors noted that the lack of public awareness and understanding will essentially hinder basic social protection functions such as relief and security. Support is also lacking for caregivers, in particular, those in the middle and lower income groups, who might face financial strains from healthcare bills.

It certainly does not help that mental health professionals are relatively rare in the country, with the current psychiatrist-to-population ratio standing at about 2.6 per 100,000. Compare this with other developed countries like the USA, which has 13.7 per 100,000, the UK, with 11 per 100,000, and Australia, with 14 per 100,000.

One reason that was cited for the lack of mental health support is social stigma. As such, the report recommended for greater outreach initiatives. It said investments in diagnosis are important, and more needs to be done to support families that cater for the mentally ill. There could also be incentives for employers to hire people with mental illnesses.

As for lower income workers, the report turned its spotlight on low-income and sandwiched middle-income families. Here, the report asserted that while there may be help at the policy level, there seems to be a 'disconnect' with on-the-ground interpretations. Challenges remain too, when it comes to disbursement. On this front, the authors suggested scaling up current government measures for economic security, so that workers who earn just enough for sustenance may better handle job market 'shocks'.

The sixth group highlighted within the report are households managed by singles or divorcees, residing in small public flats, earning a per capita income that falls below the subsistence level.

The report said that while "piecemeal relief schemes" are accessible to these households, certain relief and security packages such as temporary housing (with priority given to 'intact' families with children) are out of reach because the "pro-family" criterion in some of these schemes precludes families headed by singles and divorcees.

"The pro-marriage stand by government and society has its merits but it goes against common sense if these policies reduce further the ability of a single parent to care for his/her children amidst inevitable demographic and lifestyle changes," the authors wrote.

Finally, the report acknowledged that while the Singapore government "has done much for its people", and that life

has "dramatically improved" over the past 40 years, there is a need to emphasise integration, encourage greater space for civil society and enhance human development.

Policies have to be reviewed to take into account the changing dynamics at work and in society, they noted. So it is heartening that the government has stated that it will cultivate a more collaborative approach and acknowledged the need for inclusivity and social mobility in today's context.

"What is left to be seen is the sincere manifestation and material support of this will and for civil society and the private sector to also step up and rally society to tackle deep-seated social needs," they concluded.

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