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FINDING THE HUMAN IN SOCIETY

Interview with Vincent Wijesingha



Vincent Wijesingha received his PhD in social policy from Sheffield University. He is a trained social worker and has worked in the field both in the UK and Singapore. He is presently the executive director of Transient Workers Count Too, a non-governmental organisation advocating the rights of low-waged migrant workers. He also lectures and has published academic papers. In 2010, he joined the Singapore Democratic Party where he serves in the Central Executive Committee as assistant treasurer. He led the team that drew up the alternative *Shadow Budget 2011: Empowering the nation*. He contested the 2011 General Elections. He is currently involved in the party's outreach work as coordinator of its Community Service Subcommittee.

Prior to the Singaporean General Elections in May 2011, not many had heard of **Vincent Wijesingha**, executive director of TWC2. By the time he'd stood, and lost, as an opposition candidate, his profile had been firmly catapulted into the news and blogosphere. Wijesingha recently sat down with *Social Space* to talk about his concern for the plight of migrant workers, social justice and how Singapore needs to change.

Social Space (SS): Your work with TWC2 is less known. So let us start with your motivation in this particular non-profit space. How did you become engaged with the migrant cause in Singapore?

Vincent Wijesingha (VW): My awareness of migrant issues started when I was a teenager in the mid-1980s. That was when domestic workers were first brought in to Singapore in large numbers. It was a conscious policy-driven move by the government to release more Singaporean women, especially higher educated ones, into the workforce.

I remember as a child, taking a bus from my home in Seletar to Scotts Road to hang

out with my friends on Sundays. We would see foreign domestic workers hanging out at Lucky Plaza and the field opposite (what is now Ion Orchard). I used to think: this is difficult, living in a foreign country and not being integrated while the nature of their job prevented us from integrating with them. That kind of moved me.

Later, when I went abroad to study and worked in the UK, I stayed abreast of what was happening at home. I could see that the number of migrant workers was increasing. When I came back to Singapore in 2009, it was 900,000 plus, both men and women.

There were some policies designed to accommodate to migrants needs and to deal

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with social issues that came up, but they were nowhere near enough. I felt that I wanted to be involved in this because it is not a very well-known social need, but the need is clearly there. I decided to get involved even though it was not within my expertise in the UK, which was child protection. It is a huge learning curve and I am still learning.

SS: So you got involved because this issue strikes you at the heart.

VW: Well, the nature of the relationship troubles me. I mean, my family hired domestic workers back in the old days, but the relationship was different. There was a lot more dignity and respect. I remember my parents paying CPF and insurance, the hours and scope of work were clearly defined, while we, the children, had to do our own chores. And domestic workers became like members of the family; we celebrated each other's important events. I, for one, stayed over at our domestic worker's kampung during the holidays—it was the best time of my life.

SS: You mentioned that a lot has been done for the migrant workers in Singapore. What then are still the biggest issues and why?

VW: Yes, improvements have been made, one which is the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act in 1990. With that, conditions have improved and punishment for abuse of domestic workers, for example, is stiff. But many, many problems remain, and don't forget, we are dealing with 700,000 migrant workers outside the domestic work industry.

But I think the root of the problem is dealing with people as economic units. When we see workers as economic units to be deployed, we then forget they are human beings with needs, aspirations and rights. And then it becomes all right to talk about paying them \$2 an hour, because, after all, they would not have come if the wages are not at “market” rates. You have dehumanised them, turned them into items of the production process.

A big problem is the agency system. Agency placement fees can be as high as six to eleven months' salary of the domestic worker and between \$3,000 and \$12,000 for non-domestic workers in the services, manufacturing, construction and shipping. I have a Chinese worker who paid \$16,000 to his

agent only to be told when he arrived that there was no job available and, by the way, please pay your own airfare home. Mind you, to raise the money in the first place, migrant workers liquidate their assets, sell their livestock and their land. They even sell their family jewellery.

Another problem is illegal salary deductions. I have one worker who earns \$660 but has \$550 deducted off his salary by the employer, a good 76% deduction for the next two years.

SS: Isn't MOM (Ministry of Manpower) doing something about the agency problem?

VW: Yes, they have made some efforts to curb the agencies. Just this year, the Employment Agencies Act was amended, under which agencies can charge fees that are no more than one month of the worker's salary. What we understand happens is that agencies sidestep this by keeping the fees separate from other miscellaneous costs, which can be way out of proportion to the fees. Moreover, the statute only applies to the agents in Singapore, and most workers will have dealt with an agent in the home country too.

The government is clearly not doing enough. From my discussions with them, they say very openly they are employer-friendly.

If you turn that statement on its head, if you are employer-friendly, then you have to be worker-unfriendly because in a capitalist system, the interests of the employer and the worker are at odds. If you have a strong trade union movement, that is where that contest will be. But here, the trade union movement is subsumed within government, which means no independent contest takes place.

Migrant workers depend upon the Ministry of Manpower to deal with their problems. While the ministry is aware of the problems, since the NGOs keep feeding back our research to

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it, there is a general sense of disinterest and apathy towards workers' issues because it works in Singapore's favour. We have workers coming here at very cheap rates and if the agency system is a problem, well, it is not a problem that impacts us as a nation, but only the individual worker.

So when these issues are raised to them, they say that while true, they cannot work on this unilaterally. They have to work with governments in the sending countries who are often not keen to do anything because of the remittances from their workers overseas. Also, in some countries, officials are involved in the recruitment industry themselves. So it is in their interest to maintain the system as it is. There is a sense of outsourcing the problem, so as not to appear apathetic but nevertheless, a clear climate of apathy remains. However, sometimes when the press raises the profile of individual cases, then the government does tend to look at the problems.

The government may act because, as an institution, it is not monolithic. It is made up of people, and people have their own values. They operate at two levels, one is the institutional level and the other is the personal/moral level. And it is often when we do our work with the relevant officer at the personal/moral level that the most change is possible. At the higher level of directorates and working groups, the emphasis is on defending the ministry's position.

So, unfortunately, the general approach of the government is to leave the agency system and other abuses of migrant labour less than adequately investigated.

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SS: As you seem to say, the Singapore government cannot reach out across its borders and it has, at last, amended the Employment Agencies Act for those in Singapore. What more can it do?

VW: Well, it can do more to improve the regulations, tighten the obvious loopholes and enforce the law.

It can work better across government departments and agencies. Having an inter-ministry committee comprising the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Manpower will expedite the finding of solutions and get to the root of the issues, as well as dealing with inter-departmental problems.

As an example, it seems that MOM and the police don't talk to one another. As a result, there is a loophole that literally allows employers to order the kidnapping of their workers. According to current regulations, an employer can unilaterally cancel the work permit online. The errant employer will often do this at night or over the weekend when MOM is closed. And almost immediately, the employer will engage the repatriation company, which is a legally set up company by the way, to round up the worker and arrange to send them home on the earliest flight. This way, there is not enough time for the workers to seek recourse from MOM, and technically, it is not illegal.

Often, the police quibble over these legal matters, in this case over section 340 of the Penal Code on the wrongful confinement of individuals. At least, now the police acknowledge that it is illegal to lock up the workers, but back in 2005, 2006, it was not considered wrong by either the police or MOM. From the ministry's point of view, these repatriation companies provide a useful service; they contribute to population control and contribute to the economy. But it is not a humane service and it is an absolutely shocking indictment on the authorities' disregard for migrant workers.

SS: Does not the government of the day reflect the mood and will of the people? Can we not say that Singaporeans, in general, only grudgingly accept these migrant workers in our midst? Is Singapore ready as a society to fully welcome these migrant workers?

VW: Singapore society is ready. We are a society of migrant stock. We are an open society like London and New York where we are used to many different customs and ways of life.

The problem here is that Singaporeans have not been prepared for the huge inflow of foreign workers. I mean, we started with 20,000 domestic workers in 1987 and now we have about a million foreign workers, which is about 20% of

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the population. Compare this with the UK where only 6% are migrant workers. The fault is in the process. There is no dialogue and sharing on these changes.

As a result, there is this general feeling of resentment which the people can deal with in two ways. One is through dialogue and engagement with the government. The second and easier way is to take it out on the most vulnerable and weakest in the value chain—the migrant worker.

There are different levels of resentment. Starting with the policy level, some locals complain about the bringing in of foreign talent at the middle management level even though there are locals available who can do the job. Then, at the socio-personal level, we hear remarks about the smelly construction migrant worker on the train. Might not a Singaporean construction worker be smelly as well? It is just the physical nature of their job. There is other rhetoric as well, when people say that foreign workers steal our women, steal our jobs, steal our homes.

And a government such as ours is not entitled to claim that it is only reflecting the mood and will of the people. It has never ceased to modify society to specific ends. Furthermore, government is about leading, not following.

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SS: What can we do about it?

VW: We can use our ubiquitous social education campaigns to encourage Singaporeans to welcome foreign workers. We are good at using this social engineering tool so why are we not using it now? I suspect—though there is no direct evidence—that this lack of action is deliberate because the government does not want Singaporeans to be too comfortable with this group. At the end of the day, we want these workers to come, clock in their hours and go back when their period of engagement is up.

As long as the wages are kept low and there is GDP growth, it works well for the government. But as many economists would tell us, our GDP growth is primarily down to cheaper and cheaper labour, including local labour.

At the same time, spending on social amenities is kept low. Unless we have persistent social workers who stand their ground and insist on treatment for foreign workers in need, migrant workers who cannot afford it are generally deprived of medical attention if their employer refuses to pay.

Our infrastructure has not kept up with the presence of foreign workers in Singapore. When we look at the traffic congestion in Little India and the large numbers of workers who frequent it, we clearly haven't given much thought to where else they can go to spend their free time.

SS: TWC2 has been around for more than six years. Its main role had been advocacy for migrant workers. How do you view TWC2's performance so far and what are the challenges it faces?

VW: TWC2 has been doing public education campaigns both in the community and in schools. We also provide direct welfare services that impact the life of individual workers. But at the end of the day, the amount of work that is done needs to be measured in relation to the government's antipathy to improving the situation in any real way. As I have said, the government's standpoint is not surprising given that these workers are viewed as an economic resource for the short term.

Therein lies one of the challenges of social work. To describe it in Gandhi's words, it is akin to emptying the ocean with a teacup. It is going to be a slow, incremental process.

A very large part of our work requires building relations with many partners including the media and government, and truth be told, we are nowhere near what needs to be achieved.

On the other hand, had we—TWC2 and the other migrant labour NGOs—not been around, the workers would not have been helped as much at the individual level. At the same time, we need to also look at the bigger picture and see how the structural, legal and international factors play a part. So, if we are to take a historical view, we will understand that democratic change does not happen rapidly, that it involves a change in mindsets and values.

affluent, they can afford to send their disabled child to the specialist schools. So the disabled from the lower-income group is the other segment of the community that we should be concerned about.

SS: What do you suggest be done for these groups, from the perspective of society and government?

VW: From society's perspective, we need to have alternative organisations that are set up by and for people from these groups. For the first time, I was taught by a friend of mine who is deaf, the meaning of the word audism (discrimination against the deaf or hard of hearing by hearing people) and how organisations for the deaf are staffed and run by people who are not deaf and who, thus, impose their sense of hearing on you. I understand this is pervasive in several of our helping organisations.

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SS: We have talked about the migrant workers. What other vulnerable groups do you think should be high on our priority to help?

VW: You, of course, have the bottom 20%, who have become poorer and poorer compared to the rest of the population, especially as the elite have gotten richer.

The elderly poor is an especially vulnerable group. These are the people who used to be odd job labourers, daily-rated workers and hawkers when they were younger and who did not keep their money in savings because they did not trust the banks or it was not in their culture to do so. I live at Kelantan Lane, one of the older working class areas in Singapore, and I know a man in his 70s who has zero savings; so he continues to work.

Then there are some in the lower income group who have disabled children. I know of an 80-year old mother whose daughter is a paraplegic. These are people who are dependent on assistance and they number, as I understand it, some 3,000 households in Singapore.

People with a disability are another group. They don't come under the Compulsory Education Act and hence may not be exposed to early intervention through schools. For the

We need to bring people from this group into government policy forums so that they can provide their feedback.

From a government standpoint, we need to more substantively provide resources for these vulnerable groups.

SS: You support greater welfare for the poor. The government's view is that we are a meritocratic society and we should not encourage a hand-out mentality. Would not more welfare go against the grain of this?

VW: No, we don't have to move towards a handout society. Some people just need help the way they are, the paraplegic for example and those with certain physical shortcomings, cannot walk, cannot talk. They will be dependent whether we like it or not. But the vast majority of people who are needy, there is no sense that they are asking for handouts.

Take Bizlink for example, an organisation that trains people with disabilities so that they can be as self-reliant as possible. Alvin Lim and his team do an amazing job. Developing the skills of disabled people, building capacity, that is the model we want. In some parts of certain countries, you see welfare dependency across generations. We don't want that to happen here because people should be exploiting their skills and energy to the full.

We want a model that can build them up. I would be for channelling far more money to Bizlink. I would provide intervention for disabled children at a far earlier stage. Take autistic children for example. I've worked with several autistic children. One was nine, clearly autistic, but geography was his thing. He could remember every one of the 193 countries. And there have been so many highly talented people who were autistic such as Einstein and Mozart. It is possible to harness disabled people far more than what we are doing now.

At our day care centres, why don't we get our retired teachers, retired nurses who have caring skills in their repertoire to fill those positions? These are meaningful jobs that utilise their experience.

All these will not drain the budget. It is a matter of balancing the private and public spending. For instance, a large part of our savings is tied up in housing. If housing is not a profit-making activity, then housing is provided at cost and we have more disposable income to meet our other needs. In the UK for instance, they have shared housing ownership schemes. Government pays a proportion and the citizen pays the rest in mortgage, and when they are ready, they can take over. Or you can have several elderly couples sharing the costs of a house and they are linked up to various services. So there are many ways we can do this. The Ministry for Community Development, Youth and Sports was toying with the concept of a retirement village some time back, but it didn't take off. It may be time to revisit that model.

And finally, we must really examine very closely the assumption that meritocracy means we shouldn't help people. If I may say so, that is not only a fairly unpleasant statement of the equation, it is also wrong. Meritocracy is a question of resource allocation during your productive years, from school onwards. It is not a philosophical position that is opposed to helping our fellowmen. Yes, by all means, have a meritocratic system that brings out the best in people, that rewards intelligence, risk-taking and creativity, but let's not imagine that the flip side of this can be an uncaring society with each man for himself. That is precisely what I want to change in our society; it is probably one of the worst outcomes of the current regime.

SS: You recently entered politics. As a politician, you are supposed to campaign for the interests of the electorate i.e. Singaporeans. And to many Singaporeans, the surge in the number of foreign workers is a burning concern. In TWC2, you fight for the rights of the foreign workers. How do you balance the needs of one and the concerns of the other?

VW: There is a difference between an immigration policy and a human being. Now, I am opposed to the immigration policy as it currently stands. It is not reasoned, it is not sustainable, and it is based on the cheapest labour that you can get from the most vulnerable countries. That is not the way to manage

our economy. A lot of social problems are created stemming from the polarisation that is taking place between rich locals and rich migrants, between poor locals and poor migrants, between the rich and the poor in general. So I am against the immigration policy which is a function of a range of reasons, economic policy being central.

We may disagree with the policy, but it does not mean we can deny the migrant workers their rights while they are here. These are human beings we are talking about, with needs, aspirations, hopes and dreams. We must guarantee them access to the law and to equality of treatment. Partly, I believe, as I said earlier, that Singaporeans' general sense of powerlessness, the government's refusal to listen, has resulted in people focusing their resentment on the weakest, that is, the migrant workers themselves.

SS: You spoke about politics being the contest of values. But that contest of values does take place between civil society and the government. At the same time, we have been told that this is not the place for civil society and that such contest of ideas and policies should only take place if the persons join or set up a political party. On this basis, what in your view is the state of civil society in Singapore today and is there a place for them?

VW: Absolutely. The argument that one has to join a political party to contest values and policies is a fallacious one. There is no logic to it and is self-serving of the PAP. All considerations in society are political. The root word of

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“political” is “city.” It is not an esoteric word. If I say it upsets me that a worker is paid \$4 an hour, that’s political. Politics permeates all levels of society. To say that they are separate is not true and can never be true.

If you look at the history of the PAP, its genesis was based on the backing of trade unions, Chinese schools and educated workers’ leaders. So it used those civil society groups as well—before turning on them.

The current civil space is increasing rather than contracting. A lot of improvements that have taken place over the years occurred because of inputs from civil society.

Hence, the line between civil society and political parties must become blurred as we move along. Even the PAP, a political party, has been very happy to blur the border with the People’s Association, a government statutory board, to serve its political ends over the years.

I would strongly caution anyone from taking the PAP’s—or any political party for that matter—socio-political utterances at face value and certainly not to use them to structure one’s own belief system.

SS: As an opposition member, do you feel obliged to criticise the government for all and sundry? What do you think the ruling party has done right, for example?

VW: We are talking about two PAPs here: PAP at the start from 1959 to 1980, and PAP from then onwards. The founding members of PAP were highly credible men and carried out their duties admirably. You can’t fault their convictions or their zeal, though you can fault individual policies, for example, the streaming policy under Goh Keng Swee. And you have to acknowledge the constraints of the time.

But from 1980s onwards, Lee Kuan Yew started sidelining his old guard colleagues, starting with Devan Nair, then Goh Keng Swee, Rajaratnam, Lee Kim San and Barker who all later left or were asked to go.

By 1990, when Lee Kuan Yew was no longer Prime Minister, there was an entirely new group and this group came in through the patronage system. They didn’t come in through the expertise route. It gradually came to a point when, in 2004, Lee Hsien Loong became Prime Minister, there was no creative opposition within the PAP. It has gradually become a closed loop intellectually. No one had the moral authority or the intellectual expertise to behave like Goh Keng Swee with Lee Kuan Yew, telling the latter upfront when he was wrong. We have now this patronage system where many people in government have backgrounds in the civil service,

the military, and NTUC. They owe their political longevity to their political masters.

SS: Is it fair to say they come in solely through the patronage system? Given that they have the expertise, technocrats perhaps, but they do have the expertise.

VW: Well, I would question the meaning of “expertise” here. We talked earlier about politics being the contest of values and the many ways of doing things.

The “expertise” definition that the PAP speaks of seems to imply that there is only one way of doing things and that the technocrat’s job is to implement it well. That is what the technocrat is all about, whether we should increase your Public Assistance by \$1 or not. But that’s not what we want in our political leaders. We want to locate the values behind our public welfare and the human being in the policies. We need visionaries who can face our problems and then decide on direction, on values, on priorities. Then you bring in the technocrats to work out the details. But in our administration, the reverse is the case: Technocrats’ right to the very top, with little sense of a vision.

SS: Based on the current trajectory, give us your thoughts on Singapore’s future. How do you think Singapore, as a country, will evolve from here on?

VW: We will be seeing a more plural system of governance. The old hatchet style of politics is gone; I mean, who would have thought Lee Kuan Yew would eventually leave the cabinet while he is alive? No, there will be a conversational form of politics; the age of lawsuits has hopefully departed.

The younger generation is moving beyond the material. For example, I know of a lawyer who quit her fast-paced, high-pressured work and is running a small shop. We will see a more creative Singapore that is able to step out of the box, and share ideas, use the social media more creatively. In short, we will begin to grow up.

SS: Give us your thoughts about your future. Where are you going from here? What would you be doing next five, ten years?

VW: Certainly, within three years, I would refresh myself and move beyond TWC2. I may return to academia—that is, if I don’t help to form the next government! I am looking forward to the next election. I would also like to spend some time thinking through how to make public departments more responsive to needs. I hope to finish writing my novel, it’s about a third of the way through. And I would love to record Singapore’s history, from the standpoint of the ordinary person, not the Great Man, Great Event narrative.

