

Singapore's Social Policies: Vision, Accomplishments, and Challenges

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong

Director, Institute Of Policy Studies

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Speech

The Centre for Social Development (Asia) Conference

Shaw Foundation Alumni House, NUS

8 June 2010

I am not a sociologist. In fact, I have limited experience dealing with social policy. What I am offering here is a general analysis of what I see happening and what the future portends for Singapore's social policy.

In my view, social policy encompasses a broad range of principles and interventions which are deemed necessary for the preservation and development of the state of human well-being. Social policy can be approached in vastly different ways depending on the ideological inclinations of the governing power. Ultimately, social policy reflects the values a society holds concerning its members' responsibility for themselves and its responsibility to provide assistance to individuals who are not able to help themselves. Very often, we focus on the basic needs of food, housing, job and personal safety to ascertain the adequacy of social policy, but other indicators such as education, healthcare, gender equality and income distribution, must be taken into account to get the full picture.

Adaptive and Continuous Vision

In the immediate post-Independence years, social policy in Singapore was very much determined by what the leaders of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) believed in. Their vision was that of a "robust and rugged society" where hard work and self-reliance were highly valued. The governing principle was meritocracy. The first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, had articulated that while not all are born equal, equal opportunities to education, employment, healthcare and housing would be open to all. He had often stressed that no one owed anyone a living and while the state heavily subsidised the early investments in social development, Singapore was not a welfare state where anyone was entitled to free services. Everyone had to play a part in paying something for services provided and all must pull their own weight to ensure progress for themselves and their families. In parallel, the leaders were also talking about family as the first line of support. There was much

emphasis on family responsibility and family members' responsibility towards one another.

When Singapore achieved a relatively high level of economic and social development in the 1990s, concern was expressed about the harsh edge of meritocracy and competitiveness. There was the widening distinction between the haves and have-nots. The gap between different segments of society had increased. It was also feared that there might be some who would be left behind and not achieve social mobility without extra help. Consequently, the second Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, ushered in the "gracious and compassionate society". This was translated into a number of government initiatives. For example, "levelling-up" those at the bottom through extra funding schemes for education, healthcare and retirement provisions. The "many helping hands" approach was adopted and self-help activities through community organisations would make up for what the government was less effective in delivering. The thinking was that caring for the needy and provision of social services would be best done by dedicated, passionate people in the community and in non-government organisations rather than by civil servants. Government would provide the necessary support to make "many helping hands" work.

In recent years, globalisation and the knowledge-based and technology-intensive economy has led to an increased influx of foreign talent and guest workers. There are growing concerns over the capacity of Singaporeans to compete and benefit from the prospering economy. In particular, older and less educated workers are struggling to keep up. There are also misgivings over the influences and negative impact the new arrivals would have on Singapore society and its value system. As such, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has moved proactively to foster an "inclusive society". He is tilting policies to give more help to the needy, especially those earning lower wages, the disabled and the elderly. Community organisations are accorded significant roles in helping to realise this vision. More resources are being allocated to these bodies and innovative schemes, such as Workfare (cash allowances and other forms of assistance for the low-income workers) and SPUR (Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience) have been implemented to reduce the perceived obstacles for advancement by those at the bottom. In his 2004 swearing-in speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said,

"Let us build a nation where every citizen has a place, where all can live in dignity and harmony, and where we all have the opportunity to raise our children and realise our dreams. Let us be a dynamic city that is open and inclusive, a meritocratic society that is compassionate and caring, and a confident people with clear minds and warm hearts."

In other words, the key guiding principles and philosophies of the earlier periods have been retained

and refined. There is continuity and consistency even as new challenges for social policy development are being recognised and tackled.

The commitment to human well-being in Singapore continues to revolve around the principle of “no unconditional state welfare” that is treated as an entitlement. The belief is that if citizens depend on state welfare and do not work to earn their own keep, the ideals of good governance would be undermined. With no sense of ownership, productivity levels would decline and Singapore would lose its competitive edge. Furthermore, if all of the country’s resources are spent on ensuring the well-being of its citizens, little would be left for other improvements to the socio-cultural landscape. Commenting on the issue of welfare seen outside of Singapore, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said in his book *From Third World to First*:

“Welfare undermined self-reliance... the hand-out became a way of life. The downward spiral was relentless as motivation and productivity went down. People lost the drive to achieve...they became dependent on the state for their basic needs.”

Through the adoption of meritocracy and the conviction that hard work reaps rewards, all Singaporeans are socialised to believe in fair treatment and personal achievement. “You get what you earn” and performance-based progression is the order of the day. Government policies are designed to bring out the best of Singaporeans in their career and contribution to society.

As a small city state with virtually no natural resources, Singapore has become one of the most developed countries in Asia primarily due to its strong emphasis on developing human resources and for continuously making significant investments in its human capital. Human resource development has always been a core element in Singapore’s strategic economic plans. The government’s investment in human development is also evident in the encouragement of skills upgrading, the attainment of quality education and the increased interest in entrepreneurial and risk-taking activities. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it in his 2007 National Day Rally Speech:

“Singapore’s strength lies in our people, dedicated workers and capable leaders; not just individual stars or few top bodies, but a cohesive society and a strong Singapore team. Each person giving his best for the nation, doing things together that none of us could have achieved on our own. This is our greatest asset and this is the secret of our success.”

To be sure, Singapore has achieved unprecedented success. Increases in household income, low

unemployment rates, higher numbers of women in the workforce, a more educated population which has a higher life expectancy and the physical improvement in quality of life, are evidence of the transformation Singapore has undergone. Singaporeans have a clear understanding of the reasons why and what they work so hard for. The hope of achieving an even better life for themselves and the next generation, together with a clear vision of what the future holds, helps drive and incentivises citizens to strive for success. The government's endeavour to keep Singapore safe and harmonious can be seen in the integration of the population in housing estates, and the protection of common spaces in schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces, so that Singaporeans have ample opportunity to grow, live and play together.

Innovative Governance and Leadership

Adapting and innovating all the time to what is happening on the ground, the government has established the Community Development Council or CDC. Singapore's physical territory is divided into five districts, each under a CDC headed by a Mayor who is an elected Member of Parliament. The Mayor is assisted by citizens who volunteer their time serving on the various advisory committees in each of the CDCs. These Councils organise a wide variety of events and programmes targeted at all segments of the population. They have strengthened links with local partners such as the grassroots organisations and voluntary welfare organisations to deliver assistance to needy residents. In an economic downturn, like during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, the CDCs are instrumental in helping the affected citizens manage their economic hardship, including finding new employment. Such a hands-on and close-to-the-ground approach has brought about a more efficient distribution of resources to supplement the social safety net instituted by the government at the national level.

Innovative policy, however, is not enough. Leadership is also needed to put in place the necessary measures and implement them effectively. In this respect, how the citizens relate to their leaders and what the leadership is doing to gain the trust of the people are crucial questions.

From a Singaporean's perspective, several qualities of leadership are essential to secure the people's confidence and trust, and to move them to support what the government hopes to accomplish. First, the leadership must have a clear vision of what the national goals are and how to go about achieving them. Second, there must be good communication of the vision to the citizens. Third, there must be action and implementation of what has been planned and publicised. Fourth, the leaders have to actively listen to citizens' feedback and publicly show empathy. Fifth, there must be honesty and readiness to acknowledge changing circumstances and conditions so that national goals and priorities are reviewed and adjusted when necessary. Sixth, the leaders have to

set good example of exemplary behaviour, particularly to demonstrate that the government is clean, fair and effective.

In line with the value attached to clarity of vision, good communication and feedback from citizens, government agencies regularly carry out public consultation on new policy plans and implementation of policy measures. The process of developing the Singapore 21 Vision just before the year 2000 is one such example. About 6,000 Singaporeans were involved in this initiative. In one on-going exercise, the Urban Redevelopment Authority is carrying out an extensive survey of public opinion for the Singapore Concept Plan Review 2011. The government has also established the REACH portal to enable citizens to provide feedback and discuss current national issues. This portal has recently expanded onto social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

The President's Addendum on opening of Parliament, the Prime Minister's National Day Rally Speech and New Year Message, and the periodic Ministerial Dialogues at the national and constituency levels are decisive occasions to convey visionary moves and policy reviews, or to initiate national deliberations on issues of national interest. The annual Budget Speech and debates during the Committee of Supply proceedings in Parliament, as well as the routine Parliamentary meetings are additional examples of public communication and efforts to promote transparency and understanding of the national goals and rationale of processes adopted by the government.

Yet, one-way communication is not enough. The government needs to have personal contact with the citizens, be able to listen to them and address their concerns, and also allow for the citizens to take part in debates and discussions on topics which affect them personally. The leaders do so through weekly meet-the-people sessions in each electoral constituency and a conscientious political presence at community events, striving to ensure that relevant messages to the people are relayed sensitively and appropriately.

Such efforts in exerting leadership and engagement of Singaporeans in the search for good governance are important in understanding the parameters of social policy development and the possibilities of its reach. When should the government stop providing unlimited resources for the well-being of its citizens? Must the government do everything and support individuals from cradle to grave?

It is argued that becoming a nanny state would indicate that citizens cannot depend on themselves. If a hand-out mentality was to form, people would become reliant on the government and expectations on the government's role in providing for their well-being would skyrocket. Survival

instincts and the thirst for excellence would be adversely affected as there is no reason to compete and better one's self. That would undermine the future and viability of Singapore. At the same time, however, the open market economy and rapid pace of growth left some Singaporeans struggling to keep up. They need assistance of some kind or other from the government. The widening disparities have to be addressed.

There is also an increasingly vocal younger generation who want less government in private life. In their view, changing times demand more substantive adjustment and adaptation. This reminds us of the need for the leadership to be constantly engaged with its people, listening to their needs and feedback, and thereafter taking appropriate action. In today's highly connected and tech-savvy world, an 'I know best' attitude does not sit well with any populace.

Scoping the Way Forward

With constantly changing global situations, coupled with the impact of policies previously put in place, the challenges for the future are complex and not easily predictable. There seems no doubt that the basic approach is to keep Singapore open to the world and to pursue growth and competitiveness, while doing more to assist Singaporeans who are finding it difficult to cope with the fast pace of change. This means that the government and the citizens have to work together to manage the transformation upon the nation. In doing so, several guiding principles are germane.

Meritocracy must remain the bedrock of Singapore's future. At the same time, it is necessary to address the ugly side of such a policy, especially its social impact. More national approaches may be necessary instead of just relying on community-based self-help groups, which are narrowly focused and have limited resources.

Education has been identified as a levelling tool to help close the gap over time. With children guaranteed education regardless of family income, the potential of future success can then become a possibility. Without this, those from the lower rungs of society would have limited chance to succeed, even if they wanted to. Some Singaporeans have pointed out that education cannot always be viewed as a levelling tool. They feel that with recent changes to the education system and the introduction of the Integrated Programme as well as Specialised Schools, a sense of elitism amongst some in the younger generation has become apparent. With only the top of each cohort gaining admission into these prestigious schools, further segregation within the population is emerging. Some have suggested the intensification of enterprise development as another leveller. Indeed, promoting entrepreneurial capability and engaging Singaporeans in creative and innovative business activities serve both economic and social objectives.

As one of the fastest ageing populations in Asia, Singapore has to develop public policies which will accommodate its changing age structure appropriately. Financial security and healthcare for the growing number and proportion of the elderly in Singapore have to be addressed. The elderly are not a homogeneous group and will grow increasingly more diverse. Many of the current elderly have little or no education. However, this is going to change as more baby boomers become elderly. This necessitates the development of policies which cater to specific sub-groups of the elderly. Implementing uniform policies would not be effective and presents the possibility of not addressing specific needs accurately.

A more globalised Singapore with its dynamic economy has opened the country to more foreign talent and guest workers. The public debate on the benefits of being a citizen as compared to being a permanent resident has become intensive and emotional. Singaporeans want more differentiation between permanent residents and citizens. Indeed, integrating the new citizens of Singapore into our multiracial society is a priority. This undertaking cannot be merely the work of the government. Every citizen has to play a part, through a relevant organisation or an individual initiative.

With the opening of the two casinos within the Integrated Resorts at Sentosa and Marina Bay, concerns have been raised over the social ills of gambling and the implications they will have on society, especially the family unit. Traditional values are already perceived to be weakening in the wake of modernisation and openness. The strength of family ties has been loosened. More people are now looking at state intervention to maintain their dependents rather than relying on family support. This presents a dilemma for the policy-makers who are grappling with the clamour of less government in private life. A balance has to be struck but it will be a delicate task.

The proactiveness of the citizenry needs to be encouraged. As the government has done in the past, its vision and operating principles are likely to be adjusted and different emphases applied. More likely than not, the official response will revolve around more assertive policy to achieve inclusive growth without unduly undermining the economic competitiveness of Singapore. Incentives to promote volunteerism or altruism need not be purely monetary. Inculcating the value of giving will promote inclusiveness and ensure no one is left out. The non-governmental organisations and the civil society have been engaged through the “many helping hands” approach but more partnerships must be developed to reach out to those not helped yet.

Singapore’s leadership has consistently encouraged harmony and social cohesion amongst the populace. Involving Singaporeans in the shaping and building of their future for themselves and their children, and ensuring that all Singaporeans share the fruits of their prosperity, will sustain the

upward trajectory for Singapore. Singapore's social policies should reflect this and bold steps need to be taken to reshape and formulate policies to suit the changing times Singapore faces. For example, how can the harnessing of technology and new media makes it easier to assist the needy Singaporeans and overcome the constraint of manpower in the social service sector? Remaining nimble and addressing pertinent issues in a consultative and problem-solving manner are essential. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in his 2004 National Day Rally Speech,

“...ours should be a future of opportunity and promise. We should have a prospering economy, creating good jobs for all and having opportunities for our people to venture and to create new businesses and new openings and new possibilities for ourselves. We should have an honest and capable government with leaders whom Singaporeans trust and can rely on. We should have an open society which is welcoming of talent, which welcomes diverse views, is yet cohesive and has a sense of common purpose. And we should be a community where every citizen counts, where everyone can develop his human potential to the full and everyone participates in building and repairing and upgrading this shared home which is Singapore. So, we have a lot going for us. Let's all work together to realise our dreams and to make this bright future for our people and for Singapore”.

Thank you for your attention.
