

**IPS Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Forum:  
Policy Panel on Migration and Integration in Singapore and Germany  
25 March 2014**

By Khamsya Khidzer  
*IPS Research Assistant*

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung co-organised a panel discussion on migration and integration on 25 March. The panel consisted of:

Prof. Dr Maria Böhmer, Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, Germany

Dr Wilhelm Hofmeister, Director, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Mr Zainudin Nordin, Chairman of OnePeople.sg and Member of Parliament, Republic of Singapore

Dr Lai Ah Eng, Adjunct Senior Fellow, University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore

The panel was chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh.

Dr Hofmeister started the panel discussion by informing that while migration is not a recent phenomenon, a confluence of factors has brought about increased mobility today. Countries such as Singapore and Germany for example, are seen as attractive locations for migrants because of economic opportunities. However, even in modern cosmopolitan locales, the presence of migrants brings about friction on the everyday level. Dr Hofmeister stated that dialogues like these are crucial because they allow participating countries to share their experiences on immigration and integration.

Next, Dr Böhmer outlined the demographic changes experienced by Germany in the past three decades. Currently, there are 15 million immigrants in Germany, with nine million holding German passports. More than a million immigrants arrived in Germany in 2012 alone, the highest number since 1995. In 2012, two-thirds of migrants arrived from countries in the European Union.

The German government is still trying to attract skilled migrants through an aggressive “Make it in Germany” campaign. At the same time, the government is attempting to reorient the attitudes of the German population towards a “culture of welcome”. Dr Böhmer explained the two steps taken to facilitate migration to Germany. The first is the National Action Plan for Integration. This involves the state, immigrant societies, sports associations, businesses, etc., with a view to encourage communication between stakeholders to smoothen the

process of migration and aid the development of a “culture of welcome”. Second is a new law Dr Böhmer introduced which facilitates the assessment of qualifications from other countries in order to match the standards of Germany.

Additionally, Dr Böhmer explained the importance of pre-integration for migrants. Even before migrants arrive in Germany, they will be taught the language, exposed to integration programmes and given advice on culture. These are some of the steps that the German government has taken in order to cultivate a diverse and vibrant society. However, she stressed that the government would continue to tweak the policies to respond to changes in society.

Mr Zainudin provided a candid assessment of the problems related to immigration in Singapore. He began by highlighting the historical challenges faced by Singapore’s multicultural society. Despite being an immigrant society, Singapore during the colonial and immediate post-colonial era was fraught with tension. Today, there are 1.55 million migrants in Singapore. They are seen as a crucial part of the labour force as the local population ages and continues to see declining fertility rates. The presence of migrants has brought about increasing discomfort for the local population. Crowdedness, different cultural practices, competition for jobs as well as the impact on Singapore values and identity are some of the factors contributing to this discomfort. Mr Zainudin said more has to be done in order to nurture interpersonal relations between Singaporeans and migrants and this will take time. He expressed that the government is only one of many key players involved in building ties with the foreign workers. The local and foreign community organisations as well as the workplace also act as touch points in helping migrant workers integrate. Among the efforts being undertaken are language proficiency programmes to aid communication between migrants and Singaporeans. The state is also looking at how young Singaporeans can be better prepared to accommodate a diverse social landscape.

Following up on Mr Zainudin’s concerns on discomfort, Dr Lai highlighted that the problems brought about by immigration were a result of poor planning and anticipation on the part of the Singapore government. Dr Lai had observed tremendous discomfort present on the ground and online and this has impacted the people’s perception of the government, despite it having made adjustments to the immigration policy quite recently. Dr Lai also pointed out that the media has shifted the focus of the problem away from the government, with the local population being labelled “anti-foreign” among other things. However, she believes the discrimination against locals to be quite real. She cited a recent report released by Aperian Global and the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices in arguing that multi-national businesses still prefer foreign talent and Singaporeans are often crowded out of leadership positions.

The Q&A session raised a number of questions on immigration policy and national identity in both Germany and Singapore. A member of the audience asked Mr Zainudin why there were more foreign academics than local ones in many of the university departments in Singapore. He also asked the German minister to reconcile her earlier claims of Germany wanting to attract talent with the fact that Germany holds one of the largest populations of refugees and asylum seekers. Mr Zainudin responded that Singapore does not have many local

academics, although he does hope that this will change in the future. Dr Böhmer responded that while Germany provides a safe haven for those displaced, the German government also hopes to attract more talented people in the future.

Subsequent questions raised the issue of German multiculturalism which Chancellor Angela Merkel had declared to be a failure. A member of the audience also asked if Singapore had stretched its claims as a multicultural society where it is in fact a country with a Chinese majority. Dr Böhmer responded that the Chancellor's remarks needed to be taken into context. When she made that declaration, Germany held a very laissez-faire attitude towards integration, believing that it would be an organic process. However, it was not the case and this explains why the German government has taken a more proactive stance in trying to integrate foreigners in the country. Mr Zainudin disagreed with the suggestion that Singapore is a country dominated by a Chinese majority, arguing that Singapore has always been a multicultural country. He repeated that the community organisations, comprising people from all cultures and walks of life participate in integration programmes for migrants. Dr Lai meanwhile conjectured that it was quite possible that rogue employment agents based in China for instance, might have sold the idea of Singapore as a "Chinese" country which is culturally similar in order to attract workers. The implication is that such workers would not feel a need to learn English in order to work in Singapore. She added that such agents do a disservice to the workers because they would struggle to fit in given how communicating in English is essential in Singapore.

Concluding the panel discussion, Dr Gillian Koh explained how migration policy continues to be tweaked in response to anticipated and unanticipated implications. In Singapore for example, the government has introduced the Fair Consideration Framework, which requires all companies operating here to consider Singaporeans for jobs based on merit rather than privileging foreign talent. Companies have to advertise their jobs on a national jobs bank which is administered by the Workforce Development Agency, Singapore. Dr Koh added that governments should not rest on their laurels and should continue to adapt to the changing social environment.

\*\*\*\*\*

*If you have comments or feedback, please email [ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg)*



© Copyright 2014 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.  
*You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.*