

IPS Research Featured in New Book on Social Issues

By Andrew Yeo
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Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) researchers contributed significantly to *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, a book launched on 30 April 2015 by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat. Singapore's ageing population, multiracial fabric, and issues of social justice are among the topics discussed in the book, edited by Professor David Chan, Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University.

In his preface, Professor Chan describes the book as focused on "the critical ideas underlying public debates of social issues and their policy and practical implications". More importantly, he expressed his hope that many of the unresolved and emerging policy questions brought forth in the book would be made known to readers and help in their understanding of Singapore society.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam penned the foreword to the book, and wrote that the values and aspirations of fairness and justice that Singaporeans embraced in 1965 are just as important today. "It is at its heart about achieving a stronger social compact for the future, where personal and collective responsibilities reinforce each other," he said.

Part I of the book — on "Population and Social Fundamentals" — explores issues of marriage and parenthood, urban planning, ageing, and the healthcare system in Singapore. Part II, titled "Inclusivity and Social Progress", deals with issues as diverse as social mobility in Singapore, social policies for the disabled, as well as civil society in Singapore. Part III, "Principles and Social Processes", focuses on social justice, altruism and social media and approaches to understanding social issues in Singapore.

Five chapters of the book are written by nine IPS researchers. Principal Research Fellow Yap Mui Teng and Research Fellow Christopher Gee discuss the policy implications of Singapore's ageing population. They consider recent changes to the Central Provident Fund, as well as other state policies on ageing such as lifelong employability, ageing in place, healthcare, and subjective wellbeing surveys.

Senior Research Fellow Mathew Mathews and Research Assistant Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer take a chronological approach to explaining Singapore's commitment to preserving racial and religious harmony, from the turbulent years of racial strife in the 1950s to the relatively peaceful and harmonious state of affairs today. Singapore should not strive to "merely preserve current levels of the state of racial and religious harmony", but also to

ignite “greater citizen involvement to develop a keen interest in understanding and appreciating diversity,” they conclude.

In his chapter on social mobility, Dr Tan Ern Ser, Head of the IPS Social Lab, uses the analogy of a game to describe the reality of social mobility. It is one where there are different winners and losers, and “players” receive resources and opportunities from the game, although familial and private resources also help one perform well. In the chapter, he outlines the concerns that middle and lower-class Singaporeans have, as higher costs of living and inequality of opportunity and income become more exacerbated. He concludes with policy recommendations to address these issues.

Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh and Research Associate Debbie Soon begin their chapter by discussing civil society in Singapore today, before looking back at the state of civil society in Singapore’s past. They identify four driving forces that they foresee as affecting the future of civil society: changes in communication technology, changing value orientations of the young, the distribution of socio-economic fruits and its impact on national solidarity, and the effect of these complex demands on governance. “Tolerance, civility and yet some measure of social order will ensure that the full-flowering of human potential is not too lofty a goal for Singapore, beyond her 50th birthday,” they propose.

Professor Tommy Koh, IPS Special Adviser, gives his take on whether or not Singapore is a socially-just society. Acknowledging the complexity behind the seemingly straightforward statement, Professor Koh argues that it is both just and unjust, listing various reasons for each perspective. While racial and religious equality, and basic human needs are met in Singapore, many still earn below a living wage and there are children growing up in poverty, he said. He attributed these social ills to an inequitable income distribution system, where the income distribution profile of Singapore resembles a pear rather than an olive. “How did our olive become a pear?” he concludes rhetorically.

In his essay, Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How explores the effect of social media on social issues in Singapore. Social media, he says, has changed how social issues are raised and discussed. Social media can exacerbate tensions, or serve as platforms for like-minded individuals to propose conciliatory approaches to social issues, he says. He also considers how citizens, civil society, and the government view social media use in the discussion or advocacy of social issues. For example, social media has put pressure on the government to be more accountable, and it has also accelerated the coming out of the gay community through the sharing of information.

At the book launch, Mr Heng said that it was timely to discuss these social issues as Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence. Not everyone would agree with all the views put forth in the book, he said, but the range of perspectives would be helpful in addressing these issues for the benefit of Singaporeans.

50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore is available for purchase [here](#).

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