

Capturing the changing reality of Singapore



By *Janadas Devan*

As the Institute of Policy Studies celebrates its 25th anniversary, its challenge is to build on the achievements of the past so as to position itself for the future. IPS' achievement lies in having made itself an integral part of the study of public policy issues and good governance in Singapore. As a think-tank within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, the Institute combines a multi-disciplinary approach and a long-term view in its research. IPS engages its stakeholders through conferences and seminars, closed-door discussions, publications, and surveys of public perceptions.

In this context, I think that the most interesting experiment which IPS has conducted in recent years was Prism – the “mass” or “popular” scenario planning exercise we carried out on the question: How will we govern ourselves in 2022, two election cycles from 2011. The exercise began with sectoral workshops consisting of people from various segments of society (youth, civil society, the civil service, business, intellectuals, new citizens, and the arts and media) meeting separately. Then we gathered them together. The scenarios they came up with collectively subsequently became the subject of a curated exhibition at the National Library, complete with an interactive theatrical representation of the scenarios, or forum theatre. It was the first time that scenario planning had been brought to such a large audience in Singapore.

The challenge facing IPS, and indeed Singapore, is the need to get a finer grained understanding of our changing society. We have become more diverse, and yet we are still using the vocabulary of decades ago to describe ourselves. We need new ways to capture the changing idiom of Singapore life, the opinions and perceptions of its citizens and residents, and the trajectory of popular expectations and aspirations.

Capturing this evolving reality is the purpose behind the establishment of IPS Social Lab. It is perhaps the most important venture that we are about to embark on. IPS Social Lab will be dedicated to the conduct of surveys and the collection of data. It will design surveys, conduct them, and analyse the data collected.

Further down the road, IPS will be publishing Singapore Chronicles, a collection of 50 books to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence in 2015. Grounded in history but also looking ahead, the series of primers, each no more than 100 pages long, will cover a wide range of subjects – from Separation to the Constitution, the economy to politics, from food to sports. Anything and everything to do with Singapore will find a place in the series.

These are but some of the ways in which IPS intends to weave itself more firmly into the fabric of public-policy thinking in Singapore in the next 25 years.