

## **CMIO model should be constantly reviewed as multiculturalism becomes more complex: Edwin Tong**

**The Minister for Culture, Community and Youth also noted the framework's continued relevance in the way it achieves its key objectives, particularly in fostering social mixing through policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing.**

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SINGAPORE: The CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) model should constantly be reviewed to reflect Singapore's increasingly complex multicultural landscape, said Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong on Monday (Jan 20).

Responding to questions from the audience at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference on building stronger communities, Mr Tong acknowledged ongoing debate about whether the CMIO categorisation adequately represents Singapore's evolving identity.

The CMIO race model is an administrative tool for the government to manage policies around race.

He gave an example of someone in a mixed-race marriage.

“If you have a mixed marriage, (and it) is something that strongly identifies you, and to be pigeonholed into a (CMI) or O, I think doesn't quite do that justice,” he said.

“As to whether we should constantly be reviewing it and thinking about it, I think the answer is yes. The answer has to be yes, because it's something that is increasingly prevalent today.”

Still, Mr Tong said the CMIO framework continues to achieve its key objectives, particularly in fostering social mixing through policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing.

Under EIP, racial quotas are set on flat ownership within public housing blocks and neighbourhoods based on the ethnic make-up of Singapore.

“For the moment, I am not sure there is a better way to achieve the more important outcome, which is intentional social mixing,” he said.

### **NATURALISED AND LOCAL-BORN SINGAPOREANS**

Mr Tong also addressed the integration of naturalised Singaporeans with local-born citizens, describing it as an “existential question” for Singapore, considering the nation's low fertility rate.

Singapore's fertility rate [fell below 1.0](#) for the first time in 2023, dipping to a record low of 0.97.

Responding to a question on bridging divides between students from international and local schools, he emphasised that fostering intermixing is critical given Singapore's demographic challenges and reliance on immigration to sustain its workforce.

“And so, the more in which we can integrate local foreigners, the more in which we can integrate naturalised Singaporeans and local-born Singaporeans,” said Mr Tong. “And hopefully, over time, we will no longer see this as a gap or as a divide.”

While Singapore’s immigration policy seeks to maintain the racial proportions of the population, foreign-born Singaporeans may introduce different perspectives that require integration efforts.

“The question becomes a sharper one when you have practices from ... where our new citizens come from, and they import practices that we might not be so comfortable with,” he said.

To address this, Singapore has introduced programmes for potential citizens and permanent residents through the People’s Association, and integration and naturalisation champions (INCs). Companies also run programmes to familiarise newcomers with local norms.

But it takes two hands to clap, and local-born Singaporeans have a part to play, Mr Tong said.

“We’ve got to also see this as a process by which they become more Singaporean in their outlook, their beliefs, in their practices, and also in the way they speak,” he said.

“This is how we find middle ground to mediate the differences between the two.”

## **SOCIAL FABRIC**

In a speech before the question-and-answer session, Mr Tong stressed the importance of maintaining Singapore's social fabric while allowing diverse views, perspectives and aspirations to have a space to flourish.

“What has worked well for Singapore, since our independence – we must keep and preserve, and not, in the zeitgeist of change, throw out the baby with the bath water,” he said.

Citing examples like the [repeal of Section 377A](#) and [changes to tudung-wearing policies](#), Mr Tong said such societal shifts were not made lightly and were the result of extensive consultations.

While it may not always be possible to find common ground, the goal should always be “to foster deeper understanding and acceptance, and mediate a position that is acceptable to most”.

“This will help ensure that changes can strengthen rather than fray our social fabric,” he said.

## **PANEL DISCUSSIONS**

The conference also featured panel discussions, including one with National University of Singapore (NUS) associate professor of sociology Daniel Goh, Permanent Secretary for information and development at the Ministry of Digital Development and Information Chng Kai Fong, and Lepak Conversations founder Yulianna Frederika.

They discussed how society can strengthen ties among groups with differing value systems and perspectives on issues.

Assoc Prof Goh said that Singapore's approach to multiculturalism should evolve beyond the CMIO framework.

He also cited the example of the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) guidelines, which has shifted away from talking about “multiculturalism in the workplace”, and instead focuses on “diversity in the workplace”.

Singapore needs to "go beyond the politics of representation and recognition", said Assoc Prof Goh, who is also associate provost for undergraduate education and vice dean of special programmes at NUS College.

There is also a need to redefine who counts as Singapore citizens. Assoc Prof Goh said that simply being born and bred here is no longer representative of the population these days.

“Citizenship has a lot to do with emotions. We need to start thinking about citizenship as made up of a cluster of emotions, and how then do we think about and how to talk about these emotions?”

Other panellists highlighted challenges such as online echo chambers, with Mr Chng highlighting the growing concerns with misinformation and divisive content on social media.

He noted Meta's recent decision to back off from content moderation. Meta owns Facebook and Instagram.

“We are going to eventually see different platforms espouse different values, and the algorithms themselves would reinforce people who then subscribe to those values,” said Mr Chng, adding that Singapore, as an open society, will be exposed to such influences too.

In overseeing the government’s information and communications arm, Mr Chng said his goal is to “reach out to as many people as possible” as part of proactive efforts in the information landscape.

“What we need to do is to be able to update and have this shared social consensus on what we stand for, what our values are,” said Mr Chng.

Other panel discussions included one on “Community and the State”, with Dr Aaron Maniam, director of digital transformation education at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, Hong Kong Baptist University communications professor Cherian George, and Dr Joanne Yoong, founder of think tank Research for Impact.

A discussion on “Community and the Market” involved Stewardship Asia Centre chairman Arnoud De Meyer, Nanyang Technological University associate professor of sociology Teo You Yenn, and Ms Catherine Loh, CEO of Community Foundation of Singapore.