

Immigrants Move to S'pore for Economic, Multi-culturalism Reasons

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SINGAPORE: A series of dialogue sessions between the immigrant and local communities in Singapore has thrown up some findings on what motivates immigrants to come to Singapore.

These sessions were held by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of the Lee Kuan Yew School for Public Policy and supported by the National Integration Council.

Sharing the findings at a conference on Saturday, IPS said while the primary consideration for coming to Singapore was economic in nature, there were also other motivators.

They included the secular nature of Singapore's brand of multi-culturalism, intercultural harmony and the possibility of achieving citizenship.

But immigrants did have some initial surprises and concerns about the Singaporean way of life.

The dialogue findings revealed that Singapore was seen as more competitive and fast-paced, with a higher cost of living than where they had come from.

In addition, the multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious way of living was new to immigrants from some regions.

Dr Mathew Matthews, a research fellow with IPS, said: "Sometimes there's also the feeling that the Singaporean may not naturally accept some of their culture, where they come from, and that sometimes puts them in a position where they feel that they are made to feel inferior.

"The set of dialogues we have done were a wonderful opportunity for immigrant association leaders and the local community leaders to talk about some of the struggles and concerns which were difficult for immigrants when they came to Singapore.

"But the overall consensus is that as much as there are differences, there are a lot of attempts to work through and reconcile the differences."

New immigrants sometimes found Singaporeans distant and reserved. However, they noted that when engaged, for example through school and sports, close relations could be formed.

Dr V P Nair, president of the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin, said: "To begin with, we started what is known as the street-cricket.

"The first time we started, we had 18 teams from different ethnic groups and we told them each party must have not only the expatriate Indians, at least one third must be the locals, and it was a successful event."

Alain Vandendorpe, executive chairman and founder of the Singapore Diamond Exchange, said: "(We should) think of building at an early stage, bridges between schooling and the education system -- so as to allow more Singaporeans to have a choice of whether they want to place their children in an international school without asking for permission.

"That can start at the kindergarten -- to help our children to forge relationship, friendships between various communities so that when they grow up, the integration process becomes much much easier."

Immigrants sometimes also found it difficult to break into local social networks but recognised that personal initiative was needed to make this happen.

Many new immigrants who started a family in Singapore with young children noted the flexibility and ease with which their children seemed to fit in with the local environment.

The study also revealed that immigrants were aware of some Singaporeans' discomfort about their presence which manifested in the perception of competition in the workplace, education and housing sectors.

However, many immigrants were appreciative of the high level of fairness and transparency upheld by the Singapore government, their workplace and the social sphere, as well as the opportunities that were available to them due to a fair and just system.

IPS said there are about 53 associations catering to new immigrants in Singapore.