IPS Institute of Policy Studies

Report on IPS Community Leaders Integration Conference
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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised the Community Leaders Integration Conference on 16 November 2013, following a series of four closed-door dialogues between April and May 2013. These sessions brought together leaders of immigrant and local community associations. Forty three such organisations were represented at the dialogue sessions and provided frank views about the state of integration in Singapore.

IPS Director Janadas Devan convened the conference, highlighting that even though the state has done admirably in managing a diverse population, the liberal immigration population policy in the past decade has seen the influx of migrants stretch the demand on infrastructure, drawing disgruntled voices from the populace. Singaporeans have also struggled to accommodate expatriates, transients and new citizens. Despite its relative nascence, there already seems to be a clear sense of what defines "Singaporean-ness". Mr Devan described the American and French examples as models that could be critically appraised and possibly emulated. Regardless of the model, he stressed that integration should not entail the suppression of one's language, cultural or religious practices. Ideally, integration should strive towards the enlargement of common spaces to develop a platform for interaction and cooperation.

IPS Research Fellow Dr Mathew Mathew's presentation discussed the data derived from previous closed-door dialogues with immigrant associations and local community leaders. He shared that migrants are very much aware of the discomfort Singaporeans are feeling. Even after becoming citizens, individuals have reported being subjected to xenophobic attitudes. The local community leaders present noted this, elaborating that such instances of xenophobia may lead to an "over-entitled" attitude, making young Singaporeans ineffective in the face of global competition. However, local representatives also stressed the importance of integration for the migrants, to go beyond the vision of Singapore as a "big office".

The first panel discussion featured representatives of migrant associations, who gave a brief introduction to their organisations and how their work relates to integration efforts. Overall, the role of the migrant associations in Singapore is to facilitate new migrants' transition into the locale and at the same time, reach out to the local community.

The question-and-answer session following the panel opened with a provocative question — how they would respond if a person asks them to "go back home". It was met with an equally provocative answer: Are Singaporeans really unhappy with immigrants or are they perhaps frustrated at the constraints to infrastructure and public services? Staying on the issue of prejudice, a participant asked what the migrant associations could do to reach out to the local community here and try to alter their perceptions of the migrant population. A comment by a participant insinuated that a cloistered mentality on the part of the immigrants, at times facilitated by the very nature of networks and associations, might just be the reason behind the distance between the migrants and locals. The panellists and participants agreed that both points were valid in explaining the tension and that these associations would need to be outward-looking in order to establish linkages with larger society.

The second presentation by IPS Research Fellow Dr Chiang Wai Fong focused on the values and norms that Singaporeans viewed as essential for integrating into society. Some values and norms perceived by the discussants to be essential to harmonious relations were identified. The discussants emphasised the importance of respecting diversity, of the need to be inclusive and the need to be receptive of other cultures. However, the process of inter-cultural understanding can be impeded by cliquish behaviour.

It was also found that many immigrants were appreciative of the high-level of fairness and transparency upheld in government sectors, the workplace and the social sphere. However, while the system here is perceived as fair, this conception of fairness is being challenged due to the changes in the socio-economic structure. There are locals who are dissatisfied with the influx of migrants particularly because they feel that these migrants threaten their jobs. This resonates with what was discussed in the first panel.

In the third panel session, it was highlighted that one of the main challenges when encouraging bonding events was to get local participants. A panellist explained that efforts to encourage interaction have often been criticised as being too contrived. When it comes to events that encourage the mixing of locals and international students, students prefer a ground-up, organic movement. Participants also questioned the effectiveness of such organised activities and if such grandiose celebrations actually served their purpose. It was agreed upon that most times, they are in fact driven by the "key performance indicator" culture. The impact of such activities remains to be seen.

The last panel session comprised new citizens and local-born citizens. The panellists shared their integration experiences in Singapore's diverse landscape. The panellists called for people to be more realistic with their expectations on integration. While those intending to set their roots here can be expected to integrate, the same expectation should not be held for transient workers. Instead, Singaporeans should also do their part in trying to understand and live with the transient workers and their idiosyncrasies. This point was affirmed by other panellists who expressed the need for Singapore to take stock of its place in the world and adopt a multidimensional, more inclusive approach to addressing problems in the future. Corollary to this, the panellists agreed that the concept of multiculturalism needs to be expanded to be more inclusive than that of the usual CMIO ("Chinese, Malay, Indian,

Others") categories. He added that Singapore needs to unlearn the "small city" mindset to become more open to appreciating people from other countries.

A participant asked if the migrants viewed Singapore as merely a workspace for the accumulation of wealth as explained in the first presentation. The panellists expressed that if that were the case, there was not much that could be done. What is certain is that there are those who care and make the effort to integrate and learn the culture and practices of Singaporeans. Integration may take years and generations, therefore patience needs to be exercised.

At the end of the discussion, Mr Devan concluded that there is no panacea for the conundrum that we are facing. Even the Scandinavian countries that Singapore often looks towards for solutions are struggling with immigration issues; the fastest growing political parties there are sadly, the fascist ones. As such, it is best that frank dialogue sessions such as these continue, so as to allow for the proliferation of different views that would contribute to the discourse on integration and hopefully, foster a more harmonious society in the long run.

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