



IPS Social Inclusion Policy Network Inaugural Meeting

By Drew Shih, Dhevarajan Devadas and Lutfi Othman

On 26 September 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the inaugural meeting of its Social Inclusion Policy Network. It began with a plenary session and was followed by breakout sessions organised around the three working-level tracks of the network—Economy and Workplace; Education; and Urban Planning: Housing and Liveability. The meeting was attended by 30 academics, leaders from the voluntary welfare sector, public servants and IPS researchers.

Plenary Session

Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) at IPS began by stating that the key objectives of network were to strengthen the knowledge base on social inequality and its effects in Singapore, and to find new ways of addressing these that were grounded in the Singaporean context. The policy network should be evidence-driven, action-oriented and collaborative, so as to provide optimal solutions.

In terms of input to the policy network, she invited participants to share research data, comparative experiences and best practices relating to dealing with social inequality, social mixing and social capital, bearing in mind how these could be applied to the Singaporean context.

In the terms of output, there are many issues that the network could address—social mobility, social mixing, subjective well-being, dignity and empowerment, national identity and sense of belonging of Singaporeans. While some participants might wish to contribute at the level of philosophical frameworks for understanding and addressing inequality, far more effort should probably be focused on creating empirical research, piloting practical interventions and providing recommendations to scale those pilots up if they are successful.

These suggestions should include considerations of who the most appropriate change agents might be, and they could be diverse in terms of timeline—some proposals could be targeted at immediate and short-term action, while others, ambitious multi-year projects. Members could work together to identify the specific issues they wish to take on, find the resources and mobilise social capital to pilot interventions, and follow them through. With rigorous evaluation, the policy network would build its store of knowledge about what is effective in addressing inequality.

Economy and Workplace

This breakout session was chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Faizal Yahya, convener of the Economy and Workplace track. It began with a presentation by Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari, IPS Research Fellow, who discussed how to enhance the employment and employability specifically of members of the Malay-Muslim community (MMC).

Dr Shamsuri highlighted a special opportunity facing the MMC—it is relatively young with a median age of 31.4 years compared to the national median age of 37.4 years. Also, 20 per cent of Malays are younger than 15 years old, making up 19 per cent of that age group in the national population. This means that there would be a larger proportion of Malays entering the labour pool over the next few years compared to members of other communities, a potential demographic dividend to take advantage of.

Dr Shamsuri added that while Malays are closing the divide in terms of attaining vocational qualifications, Malay workers comprise only 28 per cent of in the professional, managerial, executive and technical (PMET) segment, and just 6 per cent of PMETs nationally. Malays have also not utilised skills upgrading schemes as much as they should, making up just 8.4 per cent of SkillsFuture credit users in 2016. The lack of Malay mentors at the tertiary level, types of university courses studied, religious aversion to taking up jobs in some sectors (e.g., banking) and discriminatory attitudes by employers were also contributing factors. There is a lot of headroom for further progress of the MMC and the group discussed how to do that.



Dr Faizal Yahya, convener of the Economy and Workplace track, facilitating the discussion after Dr Shamsuri's presentation.

Amidst the ideas discussed was the broad point that there should be better coordination to enhance the job-matching process, connecting training and educational institutions directly to industries especially where there are a large number of vacancies to be filled. It is also important to investigate and remove any barriers there might be to job-seeking. Participants cited their research findings regarding these barriers and felt that more research should be conducted into the level of diversity found in the workplace, especially in senior professional positions. The MMC would benefit from evidence of progress in these areas—where social mobility and success could be celebrated as the norm, rather than the case of exceptional talent at play.

Also discussed was how to ensure accurate representation of the barriers to progress especially among low-income and low-skilled Malays. It is important to have leaders and organisations that can engage the MMC as well as the government on such issues. Participants expressed the hope that stakeholders would have a more ambitious vision of achieving equitable outcomes for all than equality of opportunities, when contemplating the social change that lies ahead.

Education

This breakout session was chaired by the convenor of the Education track, Dr Mathews Mathew, Senior Research Fellow at IPS.

Dr Mathew commenced by presenting the findings of a nationally representative survey he conducted with Mr Leonard Lim, Research Associate at IPS. The study explored the attitudes and choices towards education among 1,500 parents of primary school children. Based on the types of primary schools that the parent and child went to, analyses showed a fair chance of social mobility, but also that parents with greater financial resources were able to give their children an advantage over others by sending them to “premium preschools” and tuition, or what was termed “parentocratic desires”. This perpetuated the transmission of privilege, and thus inequality, from one generation to the next.

The nature of parentocratic desires was discussed and it was suggested that apart from the conventional explanation of parents wanting their children to attend a good school, parentocratic desires also had to do with parents’ concern about the nature of a child’s academic peers, and the social capital and networks that such peers could lead to, when thinking about the educational choices of their children.

It was reiterated that the intent of the network was to discuss ways to keep social mobility healthy through education, even if there seemed to be little that could be done to prevent parentocracy from happening. In terms of research, two areas could change parents’ yearning to supplement education with tuition and their chase to have their kids in elite schools: First, whether there were indeed differences between the educational processes and outcomes of elite and non-elite schools, and second, which education model fostered a more holistic notion to education and learning; in other words, these might tame parentocracy.

The group also agreed that far more research was needed to properly establish the effect of the socioeconomic realities of a child's life and prospects for social mobility, than just the quality of the school-based educational experience alone.

Participants who worked with underprivileged families explained how this broader setting mattered: A parent who had to care for a younger child would not be able to send another child to his school if this meant they had to travel a long distance. Lower-income parents who had multiple jobs or faced financial hardship did not have the “bandwidth” to strategise around their children's educational future. A child living in a one-bedroom rental flat would have little space to study especially if there was more than one child. If the television was on with the volume turned up, it would be difficult for the child to concentrate on his studies.

These lived experiences need to be taken into account when designing interventions in the education space to keep social mobility healthy for such families.



Dr Mathews Mathew, convener of the Education track, presented his research on the attitudes and choices on education among parents of primary school children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, to kick off the discussion on social mobility and education.

Urban Planning: Housing and Liveability

This breakout session was chaired by the convener of the track, Urban Planning: Housing and Liveability, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Senior Research Fellow at IPS and Head of IPS Social Lab. It began with a presentation by Dr Ng Kok Hoe, Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, who drew on a study he conducted on rental housing to make four key points about how housing and social inequality were related in Singapore.

First, not all inequality in the housing domain originated from housing itself; income inequality translated into housing inequality. Second, within the housing domain, to meet the aspirations of Singaporeans, the government had, over the years, made a wider range of purchased flats available. This translated into a wider range in terms of the value of their housing and ultimately, financial assets. At the other end of the spectrum, Dr Ng said that a policy decision in 1982 to stop building rental flats led to a sharp decline in the number of rental flats, with the flats remaining being older and smaller, until a policy change to introduce new ones in 2006.

Third, on some specific policies to do with rental housing, he explained that rental agreements with the Housing Development Board (HDB) were typically renewed every two years, and even though HDB almost never evicted residents even after the expiry of the contract, the relatively short tenure was a source of anxiety for residents. Also, HDB would raise the rent in accordance with the rise in residents' income. Although such hikes were to encourage residents to move out and purchase their own flat, it led some residents to decline the marginal rises in salaries if it led to such hikes in the rent. Such decisions could mean, depending on the net effects between income and rent, that potential income gains were not realised, hindering upward mobility and the attainment of a purchased flat. In addition, because retirement income security and housing were interlocked, retirement income security could become a problem for those who did not manage to achieve home ownership.

Finally, Dr Ng explained that the spatial constraints of rental flats resulted in a less than conducive environment for children to study at home, which impeded their educational attainment and social mobility.

During the discussion, it was suggested that two pieces of research should be conducted: First, a comparison between the educational attainment of children in rental flats and those in households with similar income but who lived in three-room flats, and second, between the educational attainment of children in rental flats and those from households with similar incomes but who lived in a purchased two-room flat. This would raise the empirically-based understanding of the effect of rental housing on the educational attainment of the children living in them.

Another issue participants raised was the social mixing of residents from rental housing with those from other flats. Noting that HDB has in recent times tried to embed rental units within the blocks of owned units, participants mentioned that research is needed to guide the design of programmes to improve the mixing among diverse groups of residents.

Thinking more creatively, the group also wondered if, to alleviate the issues of space, quality and social mixing among rental flat residents, raising the income ceiling of rental flats might reduce the concentration of only very poor residents within the rental housing space. Another solution might be to allow for some slightly larger flats returned to HDB under the Lease Buyback Scheme in the future to be converted into rental flats.

Lastly, in order to reduce anxiety stemming from the short rental agreements, it was proposed that HDB could provide assured tenancy for families with young children up to a certain age of their youngest child, which would aid in these families' long-term planning. Of course, it was

likely that families that made steady progress in income generation would prefer to purchase their own flats instead of living in rental housing permanently.



Dr Leong Chan-Hoong (left) is the convener of the Urban Planning: Housing and Liveability track. Dr Ng Kok Hoe (right) presented on “Public Housing and Inequality” during the breakout session.

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