

Young Singaporeans Conference 2018: Disruptions

By Nadzirah Samsudin, Drew Shih and Dr Natalie Pang

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

– Margaret Mead

Over one-and-a-half days in November 2018, 80 Singaporean youths gathered at the Hilton Singapore to participate in the [Young Singaporeans Conference](#), a biennial flagship event of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). The theme for the conference was “Disruptions”.

Six weeks before the conference, participants were encouraged to take part in two pre-conference engagements. They were invited to submit a creative work that documented their thinking and reflections on the conference theme, and a total of 41 creative submissions were received. Participants were also asked to take part in a three-week mobile diary study, which invited them to communicate their thoughts, ideas and aspirations on a variety of subjects through a series of prompts sent through a Telegram channel. Nearly half of the participants took part in keeping a mobile diary, and their reflections were then analysed and synthesised into several themes such as “Rights and Obligations”, “#Goals”, and “What is Family”.

These themes were illustrated in an artwork by graphic recording company Sketch Post which, along with other thematic poster boards, served as focal points for participants throughout the conference.



The artwork by Sketch Post, which organised participants' inputs from the mobile diary into themes. Together with other poster boards, they served as focal points for participants throughout the conference. Photo credit: Ki Visuals for Institute of Policy Studies

During the conference on 27 and 28 November, participants formed 10 groups of eight, to align with the principle of team-based discussion and small groups. Each group was given the task of collectively identifying an issue, and formulating ideas and solution concepts to address it.

To guide the groups in their discussion were mentors — A'shua Imran, Artistic Director of [Mural Lingo](#); Cai Yinzhou, Founder of [Geylang Adventures](#); and Filzah Sumartono, Projects Manager at [AWARE](#) — and IPS research staff who served as facilitators.

In her opening remarks on the second day, conference convenor Dr Natalie Pang, Senior Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab, expressed her hope that participants would see the conference as a sandbox to “create something special”. Such work begins with conversations, and it was the intent of the conference to bring people from different backgrounds to discuss issues of common interest.

In this regard, Dr Pang shared an inspirational quote by the American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt the ability of a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens to change the world”.

Disruptions in work, family and culture

The conference featured a panel of three distinguished speakers: Chng Kai Fong, Managing Director of Economic Development Board; Dr Ad Maulod, Research Fellow at Centre for Ageing Research and Education; and Dr Crystal Abidin, Lecturer at Deakin University and Postdoctoral Fellow at Jönköping University.

Each panellist injected depth and shared insights in three specific areas of disruption: work, family and culture.

Mr Chng reminded participants of Singapore's relationship with our neighbours, imploring participants to explore opportunities in ASEAN instead of turning towards the West. Given that ASEAN is one of the fastest growing regions, Singapore should aspire to be a "gateway" between ASEAN and the world.

Dr Ad highlighted the need to rehumanise ageing by "dismantling age-defined boundaries" and providing citizens with resources to lead dignified and meaningful lives.

Dr Crystal, on the other hand, spoke about how the Internet has disrupted traditional discourses of sociality, self-presentation and identity. This is reflected in the rise of a new and elite group of Internet celebrities, or influencers, who have pushed forth different ideas, identities, relations and pattern of consumptions.

During the Q&A session, a participant asked how Singaporeans could build relationships with ASEAN members, given the economic differences between Singapore and ASEAN. Mr Chng replied that Singaporeans would have to be the bridge between ASEAN and the world, and to be empathetic towards the different cultures and identities in the region.

Another participant asked how Singaporeans could live a meaningful life. Dr Ad replied that this would only happen when the right to define how they want to live is respected and recognised.

When asked if a person's citizenship would matter online. Dr Crystal answered both "yes" and "no". While the online community is quick to shame someone who is not Singaporean for their derogatory remarks online, they are also quick to turn on their fellow citizens, such as those who might hold contrarian political views.

Dinner dialogue

The conference ended with a dinner and a dialogue with guest of honour Pocket Sun, a venture capitalist and Founding Partner of SoGal Ventures. Ms Sun spoke about the challenges she faced and the opportunities she seized to set up SoGal Ventures. She encouraged participants to think about what is important to them, how they could build their own legacy, and what they could do to shape the world they want.

One question from a participant revolved on how to balance serving the world and one's nation. Ms Sun said that it is not mutually exclusive, as any country needs an "injection of global thinking". There are also many lessons to be learned from a different market, which could then be transferred to help solve local problems.



Ms Pocket Sun, Founding Partner of SoGal Ventures and guest of honour (left), and Dr Crystal Abidin, Lecturer at Deakin University (right), during a dialogue with conference participants. Photo credit: Ki Visuals for Institute of Policy Studies

Solutions

As part of the conference activity, participants identified issues related to disruption and how to solve them. Some of these issues included how to encourage civic and civil conversations amongst citizens, steps that could be taken to address income inequality, and suggestions to disrupt the education system.

Solutions that participants ideated included apps to facilitate and encourage conversations on topics such as the rights of LGBTQs, and community mapping in specific neighbourhoods (e.g., Dakota Crescent) for a ground-up approach to identify residents' concerns and needs.

In closing, Dr Pang thanked participants for their openness in communicating their opinions and views. She appreciated the ideas that were formed and expressed at the conference, and hoped that the conversations had would be the beginning of many more to come.

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