

PRESS RELEASE

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IPS COMMUNITY LEADERS INTEGRATION DIALOGUE & CONFERENCE

- demonstrates the commitment of immigrant associations to dialogue for greater integration

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore convened four closed-door dialogues between April and May 2013. This initiative was supported by the National Integration Council.

These sessions brought together leaders of immigrant and local community associations. Forty-three such organisations were represented at these dialogue sessions.

The goals of the sessions were to:

1. Foster a better understanding of the challenges of integration among community leaders from different immigrant groups and civic organisations.
2. Find ways for civic organisations to provide leadership in promoting integration

There are about 53 associations of varied sizes catering to new immigrants in Singapore. While some associations have been in existence before independence and continue to cater to new immigrants from particular localities, the bulk of associations were registered in the last two decades. There are nearly equal numbers of associations which cater to those from South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Most immigrant associations are dedicated to serving new immigrants from specific countries or provinces. Several associations are made up of immigrants from particular countries who were students in Singapore, alumni of particular universities in their home country or those who engage in a similar profession.

The dialogues allowed both local born community leaders and immigrant association leaders to clarify and share their concerns and interests with each other.

Dialogue Findings

The following were the main findings from the dialogue sessions.

1. Motivations to come to Singapore

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 multiculturalism, intercultural harmony and the possibility of achieving citizenship.

2. Initial surprises and concerns about the Singaporean way of life

Singapore was seen as more competitive and fast-paced, with a higher cost of living than where they came from.

The multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious way of living was new to immigrants from some regions.

New immigrants sometimes found Singaporeans distant and reserved, although they noted that when engaged, close relations could be formed.

Singapore was deemed as overly westernised by some immigrants. They perceived Singaporeans as placing comparatively less emphasis on individual cultures and history. Some immigrants were concerned about the dilution of their cultural heritage brought about by assimilating into Singaporean culture.

3. Integrating into Singapore

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

Some found it easier and less stressful to seek primordial ties for building up social capital in a new environment. They joined existing expatriate networks through their workplace, schools or communities based on nationalities.

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

4. Negotiating with Singaporean concerns

Immigrants were aware of some Singaporeans' discomfort about their presence which manifested in the perception of competition in the workplace, education and housing sectors.

Participants highlighted the diversity within the immigrant community in terms of income and choice of lifestyles which ran counter to some local perceptions of an immigrant being of a higher socio-economic status.

5. Norms and values

Dialogue participants highlighted the following four sets of social norms and values that were important for integration into Singapore society:

1. Interactional: Respect/Tolerance/Accept/Understanding
2. Behavioural: Orderliness/Law Abiding/Queuing
3. Societal structure: Honesty/Transparency/Integrity/Fairness/Sense of Justice
4. Cultural: Language identity/common language/Singlish

Most immigrants were appreciative of the diversity found in Singapore and the efforts towards inclusiveness and harmony in various aspects of life here. To maintain these efforts, there was consensus among the local born Singaporeans and immigrants that mutual acceptance was more important than tolerance.

As for orderliness as a Singaporean norm, both local and new immigrant participants agreed that social and legal rules allow for a more efficient and orderly society to develop here.

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

Newer immigrants tended to draw a closer link between their cultural heritage and language, while immigrants whose second or third generations were born here acknowledged the generational shift in the link between cultural and language identity. There was consensus that a common language should be spoken to facilitate communication and to forge ties.

6. Forging and maintaining social cohesion

Immigrant associations were involved in numerous activities where they could integrate within Singapore society.

There were a range of ideas and initiatives taking place, such as tie-ups with grassroots community clubs, partnering up for local festivals such as the Chingay parade, film screenings and involvement in community and charitable efforts.

Participants expressed their desire for more platforms for continued dialogue and joint initiatives to promote better integration of immigrants into Singapore.

Conference Programme

The Community Leaders Integration Conference brings together leaders from immigrant associations and local civic organisations. They will be joined by policy makers, academics and other interested parties.

There will be three sessions at this conference. The first will summarise the findings of the closed-door dialogues conducted. Panelists will discuss how immigrant associations can play a role in fostering good relations between local-born Singaporeans and new immigrants. Examples of such integration efforts will be showcased along with the challenges they encountered.

The second session will discuss the norms and values that civic organisation and immigrant group leaders believe are important for social cohesion. The panel will consider how Singaporean norms and values can be better communicated to new immigrants.

The final session will consider public concerns about the impact of new immigrants on Singapore's social fabric, what needs to be done for Singaporeans to be more comfortable with immigrants in their midst and how easy it is for new immigrants to be integrated into Singapore society and feel a sense of connectedness to this nation.

Conclusion

The dialogue sessions and conference affirm the commitment of local and immigrant community leaders to promote and deepen understanding and forge closer ties among local born Singaporeans and immigrants.

Further Information

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