Institute of Policy Studies

IPS Online Forum on Inclusion That Works: Evidence, Practice and Impact

By Amy Phua

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the online forum “Inclusion That Works: Evidence, Practice and Impact” on 30 October 2026. The forum examined how evidence-based interventions, digital initiatives and constructive dialogue can help address prejudice and strengthen social cohesion. This online forum is part of the IPS Thought Leadership Forum on Racial and Religious Harmony and is generously supported by funding from The Silent Foundation. Across three panels, international researchers and practitioners shared findings from programmes in schools, online spaces and communities, while considering how such initiatives can be designed, evaluated and sustained.

In his opening remarks, Dr Mathew Mathews, Programme Lead of IPS Programme on Race, Religion, and Intergroup Cohesion (RRIC) and Principal Research Fellow at IPS, emphasised the importance of evaluating diversity and inclusion initiatives rather than assuming that well-intentioned programmes are effective. IPS has translated years of research on race, religion and intergroup relations into practical interventions through RRIC, which has conducted 132 workshops reaching over 6,300 participants. While the evaluation of these workshops showed encouraging improvements in knowledge, confidence and behavioural intentions among participated, he noted the need for further evaluation to establish whether these improvements could be sustained over time and translated into everyday practice. He also called for sustained interventions to strengthen social cohesion.

The forum convened three thematic panel sessions featuring an international lineup of academic researchers and community practitioners.

The first panel, titled “Interventions in Schools and Youth Programmes”, featured Dr Matt Lowe, Assistant Professor at the Vancouver School of Economics, The University of British Columbia; Dr Wyman Tang, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Associate Professor Rachael Jacobs, Academic Lead of the Challenging Racism Project at Western Sydney University. The session was moderated by Dr Clara Lee, Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab.

The second panel, titled “Digital and Media-Based Interventions”, brought together Professor Kevin Dunn, Academic Lead of the Challenging Racism Project and Executive Dean at Western Sydney University; Dr Rajeshwari Majumdar, Assistant Professor in the School of

Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University; and Ms Lindawati Sumpena, Managing Director of Peace Generation Indonesia. The discussion was moderated by Dr Elvin Xing, Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab.

The third and final panel, titled “The Science and Practice of Reducing Bias”, featured independent researcher Dr Naufal Waliyuddin; Ms Nazhath Faheema, Founder of hash.peace, Singapore; Dr Sajid Amit, Executive Advisor at the Center for Enterprise and Society, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh; and Mr Jerald Joseph, Director of Pusat KOMAS, Malaysia. The session was moderated by Dr Mike Hou, Senior Research Fellow at IPS Social Lab.



Caption for photo: Dr Mathew Mathews giving his opening remarks

Panel One: Interventions in Schools and Youth Programmes

The first panel, moderated by Dr Clara Lee, examined how school-based programmes and youth activities can foster inclusive mindsets and meaningful relationships across social and cultural differences. Speakers discussed interventions involving sport, youth camps, school structures and the arts, highlighting the importance of purposeful design and sustained opportunities for interaction.

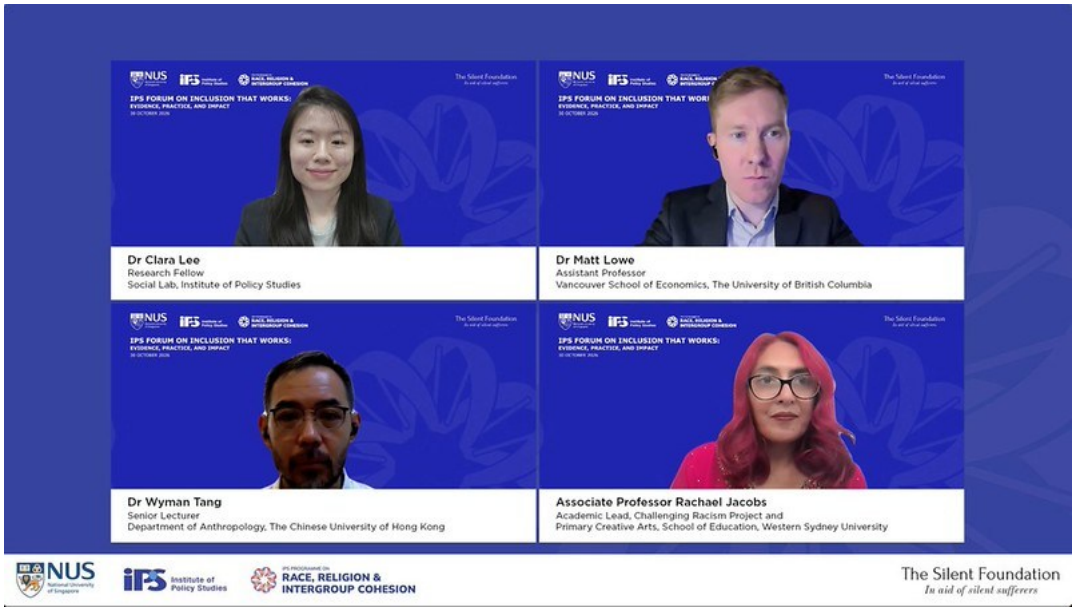
Dr Matt Lowe presented field experiments on intergroup contact in India. Mixed-caste cricket teams increased participants’ willingness to select teammates from other castes and to engage in cross-caste trade, although the intervention did not improve intergroup trust. Research on Hindu and Muslim boys at youth camps also found more cross-group friendships after participation. However, a school house-system intervention across 176 schools in Tamil Nadu did not significantly change caste or religious identities or friendship networks. These findings underscored that shared activities can encourage cooperation, but their effects depend on how interaction is structured.

Dr Wyman Tang described a Kabaddi programme designed to bring Chinese and South Asian students together. Mixed teams learnt the sport and developed strategies collaboratively, while participants and coaches adapted the rules to encourage cooperation and reduce conflict. The programme helped students recognise peers from different backgrounds as capable teammates. Dr Tang stressed that sport does not naturally promote inclusion; activities need to be deliberately structured to support equal participation and shared goals.

Associate Professor Rachael Jacobs shared some arts-based and educational approaches to addressing racism. Examples included Deep Harmony, which uses drama and dance to help students explore racism, privilege and disadvantage, and practise responding as allies. She highlighted the importance of co-designing activities, preventing self-segregation, creating safe but challenging spaces for dialogue, and embedding interventions in everyday learning. Engagement with teachers, parents and youth-service providers was also identified as important for sustaining change.

Panel discussion and Q&A

The discussion highlighted that bringing people together is not sufficient on its own: programmes should create opportunities for cooperation around shared goals and meaningful interaction. Panellists recommended rigorous evaluation, including behavioural measures alongside self-reported attitudes, and cautioned that short-term activities may not produce lasting change without follow-up and integration into everyday settings. They also emphasised the need to make programmes accessible, adaptable and responsive to participants, with young people and the wider school community involved in their design.



Caption for photo: Panel 1, Interventions in Schools and Youth Programmes

Panel Two: Digital and Media-Based Interventions

The second panel, moderated by Dr Elvin Xing, considered how digital platforms, social media and creative media can be used to counter racism, misinformation and online hate. Speakers discussed both the reach of digital interventions and the challenges of measuring their effects and maintaining engagement.

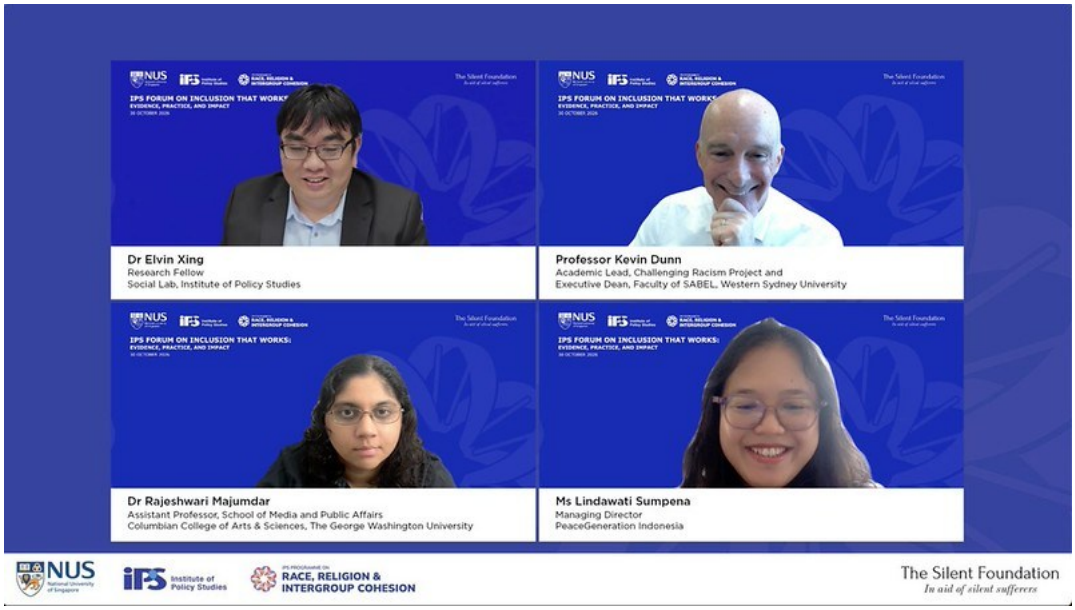
Professor Kevin Dunn shared research on digital anti-racism initiatives. The Everyday Racism App recorded more than 30,000 downloads, with users reporting greater awareness and willingness to intervene. A bystander video featuring a Muslim woman wearing a hijab reached 27 million people and reduced anti-Muslim sentiment among viewers in an experiment. He also discussed misinformation training that improved participants' ability to identify misleading claims. He cautioned that digital campaigns require careful content selection, moderation and sustained support beyond one-off interventions.

Dr Rajeshwari Majumdar presented a study in which 1,070 Hindu and Muslim participants took part in WhatsApp conversations over five days. The intervention improved Hindu participants' feelings towards Muslims, with effects persisting two weeks later. Non-political conversations, such as discussions about hobbies and travel, had a larger overall effect at reducing prejudice, while political discussions were more effective in reducing support for discriminatory and violent religious-nationalist views. The study demonstrated the potential of online conversations to facilitate intergroup contact, while also highlighting the difficulty of sustaining intensive engagement and shifting deeply entrenched attitudes.

Ms Lindawati Sumpena outlined the work of the SEAN-CSO Network, which supports civil society organisations in preventing and countering violent extremism through capacity-building, resources and grants. She highlighted emerging challenges such as election-related hate, disinformation targeting refugees and harmful content reaching young people through less-monitored platforms. She also stressed the importance of trusted community networks, early intervention and collaboration among civil society, government, parents and technology companies in creating safer online environments.

Panel discussion and Q&A

Panellists emphasised that evaluation should distinguish online reach and engagement from actual changes in attitudes, behaviour and relationships. Even modest effects may be valuable when an intervention reaches large audiences at low cost, but digital tools need ongoing maintenance and reinforcement. The discussion also highlighted the limits of online initiatives in addressing deeply entrenched extremist views, and the complementary roles of public education, regulation and institutional responses. Beneficiaries and community partners should be consulted, and pilot interventions and their effects assessed before scaling up programmes.



Caption for photo: Panel 2, Digital and Media Interventions

Panel Three: The Science and Practice of Reducing Bias

The third panel, moderated by Dr Mike Hou explored how dialogue, education and civil society initiatives can address prejudice and social divisions. Speakers from Indonesia, Singapore, Bangladesh and Malaysia shared approaches to building understanding across religious, racial and cultural differences, while considering the institutional conditions needed to support lasting change.

Dr Naufal Waliyuddin presented research on interfaith youth communities in Indonesia. Drawing on interviews with local participants, he argued that ceremonial encounters alone may do little to challenge stereotypes. More meaningful relationships developed when structured activities, such as peace camps and visits to places of worship, were complemented by everyday interactions such as sharing meals and socialising. He noted that these efforts must also address unequal power dynamics and be supported by stronger protections for religious minorities.

Ms Nazhath Faheema related her experience in facilitating dialogue through ground-up initiatives, including conversations on religious identity, Singaporean identity, immigration and migrant workers. She described how facilitated conversations can surface assumptions and grievances, encourage empathy and help participants recognise common experiences. She also noted the challenges of maintaining safe spaces while balancing collaboration with government and civil society independence.

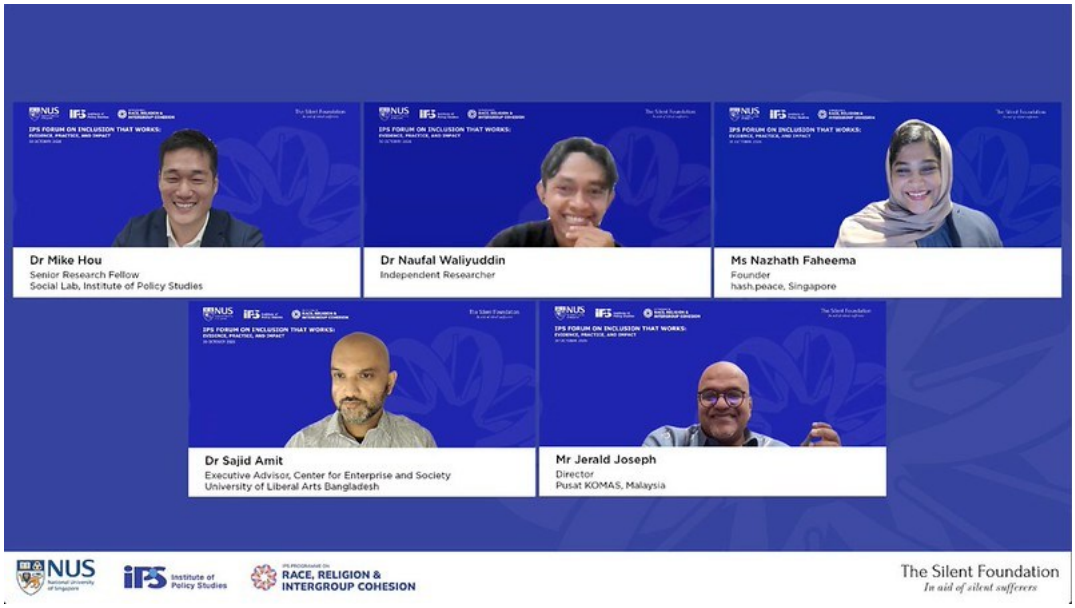
Dr Sajid Amit shared findings from research on online radicalisation and educational interventions aimed at promoting pluralism and reducing prejudice among young people. His research highlighted how exposure to extremist narratives online could reinforce stereotypes and social divisions, underscoring the importance of digital literacy and critical thinking. He discussed interventions combining online learning with face-to-face dialogue to encourage

students to question assumptions, consider alternative perspectives and engage in respectful disagreement. While these programmes reached a large number of participants and received positive feedback, Dr Amit emphasised the need for rigorous evaluation to establish behavioural change, alongside sustained engagement and institutional support to achieve lasting reductions in prejudice.

Mr Jerald Joseph described community education and advocacy to address racial discrimination. He highlighted the organisation's Bangsa Malaysia workshops, which encourage young people to examine racial categories, stereotypes and ideas of national identity. Conducted across vocational colleges, the workshops use discussion and interactive exercises to challenge prejudice and distinguish facts from myths and propaganda. He also called for stronger institutional responses to discrimination, including an independent National Harmony Commission, and political leadership that actively challenges divisive narratives.

Panel discussion and Q&A

The discussion considered how dialogue can translate into sustained change at individual, relational and structural levels. Panellists stressed the value of repeated intergroup contact, honest conversations about discrimination, safe spaces for disagreement and critical thinking. They also discussed the distinction between peaceful coexistence and substantive equality. Reaching beyond audiences already receptive to social cohesion initiatives will require wider outreach, attention to young people's perspectives and trusted facilitators. Overall, the panel underscored that reducing prejudice requires sustained community engagement alongside broader institutional and political change.



Caption for photo: Panel 3, The Science and Practice of Reducing Bias

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