

Social Inclusion

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A year ago when I was travelling in Taipei, I was impressed by the Taipei Metro system. Of particular interest was how its excellent communication channels cater to the needs of commuters. These include stations providing vital information like train arrival times and destinations, the thoughtful location of toilets, as well as making breastfeeding stations available. I found it heartwarming when commuters (sometimes more than one) gave up their seats to me and my young daughter, and could not resist comparing the experience with our own mass rapid transit (MRT) system.

In Singapore, clocks are not always installed at stations. In some stations, the train arrival time display boards are few and far between at transfer points. Many of the toilets here are also located at inconspicuous spots, or far away from the MRT gantries. It is puzzling how we are so preoccupied with installing hardware, but are often lacking in the thoughtful planning of infrastructural 'software'. Friends of mine have remarked that Taiwanese society has nurtured strong civic power, and their government and businesses also take public opinion into serious consideration in order to cater to public needs.

The reason for bringing this up is not because of the recent MRT disruption saga. Rather, I had been inspired after attending the Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives 2012. The theme this year was "Singapore Inclusive: Bridging Divides". Issues discussed at the conference included social inequality and social mobility, with an emphasis on how to achieve an inclusive Singapore.

During the Q&A session, a speaker suggested that perhaps Singaporeans should learn to avoid referring to 'the government' when discussing issues, but instead, focus on how citizens can utilise and pool resources together to provide constructive criticisms on government policies, while showing maturity and civic awareness. If one of the reasons for the thoughtful design of the Taiwanese metro system is due to the strength of the Taiwanese civic community, it may be worthwhile for Singapore to take a good look at Taiwan's system, and emulate their strengths. Singaporeans have grown accustomed to over-reliance on the government to solve their problems, and the government has also excelled in making Singaporeans accept the 'hard truths'. But how can we solve our social problems with a new perspective in this changing and globalising society? The theory of social inclusion proposed by Fudan University professor Hu Shoujun may perhaps provide some food for thought.

Besides strengthening the trust between government and the people, the basic tenet of Professor Hu's concept of social inclusion is to promote participation in society building as a means of enhancing a sense of belonging. At the Singapore Perspectives conference, several speakers brought up the issue of Singapore's growing income gap, and questioned the ability of

the four pillars of education, housing, medical reform and workfare to bring about upward mobility of incomes and standards of living. Some EU countries and Australia have sought a new way of interpreting social inclusion by breaking away from trying to 'fix poverty', and instead envisioning the involvement of their people in participating in the process of building a society for all. The rationale is simple: If a person has to hold several jobs a day in order to cross the poverty line, it would exhaust his or her time and energy and hinder his or her ability to strengthen relationships with family and friends, much less participate in social and leisure activities. Eventually, this situation would inevitably increase both the emotional and physical distance between 'the poor' and the social and economic life of the rest of the community.

Similarly, taking the case of education in Singapore, some school administrations prefer to limit 'inclusion' to only the top academic achievers, and stream students into different classes based mainly on their academic results, reinforcing the divide between the groups. The process also reproduces ideologies that academically poor students must be lazy, unintelligent, and unable to excel, neglecting the inequalities inherent in family backgrounds, life chances, learning opportunities and language privileges. The objectives of social inclusion are, then, to ensure that everybody feels respected, and has equal opportunity to fully participate in community life. The focus is not solely on personal achievement as a gauge of social standing, but rather, on the types of relationships built between people, as well as between people and society.

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This article is an excerpt translated from the original in Chinese by IPS Research Assistant Zhou Rongchen.