

Looking for the Singapore in Singaporeans



From left: Dr Mathew Mathews, Prof. Kwok Kian Woon, Mr Zulkifli Baharudin, Mr Gerald Singham, Assoc Prof. Eugene Tan and Mr Viswa Sadasivan answering questions from the audience during the IPS Forum on Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony held in September 2013.

By *Dr Mathew Mathews*

Since Independence, public policies in Singapore have sought to promote a meritocratic society while recognising and maintaining its multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious characteristics. In a population of substantial diversity, created not only because of different ancestry but also by the forces of globalisation and generational and income divides, policies have facilitated harmonious interactions in everyday living, as well as enhancing social cohesion and inclusion for national development.

The Society and Identity cluster focuses on understanding the dynamism in identity formation among Singaporeans and the forces that lead to societal well-being. While the issues of race, religion, language and immigrant integration are primary in its consideration, the cluster also looks at issues ranging from ageing to poverty, or other areas which have a bearing on local identity and social stability.

The cluster recently completed a large-scale survey, the first of its kind, simultaneously examining how race, religion and language define Singaporeans' identity. Results from the survey will be featured in a forthcoming conference. This conference will also feature local academic papers deliberating the broader theme of how the management of race, religion and language can function towards a goal of a more inclusive rather than an exclusive society.



The Community Leaders Integration Dialogue, aimed at promoting better relationships between the local-born and new immigrants, attracted a strong turn-out.

Portions of the survey, especially questions pertaining to race and a limited number of those on religion, were used to develop the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony. Together with OnePeople.sg, a ground-up initiative championing race and religious relations, the cluster gauged Singaporeans' attitudes, experience and behaviour on ten dimensions of multiculturalism. The study was shared on several platforms engaging civil servants and community leaders. It culminated in a forum which was well attended and brought many issues related to the management of race and religious harmony to the forefront of local debate. The indicators of harmony received much media attention, with several commentaries, editorials and documentaries discussing the survey findings.

A series of dialogues between local community leaders and those from immigrant associations, named the Community Leaders Integration Dialogue, was an important contribution of the cluster to foster better relationships between the local-born and new immigrants. The dialogues allowed for frank and constructive discussion and deepened understanding about the aspirations and challenges faced by different immigrant and local communities. An upcoming conference and publication will encapsulate the learning points from these dialogues and show how immigrant and local associations can further work in both communicating and better integrating new immigrants into the Singaporean social and cultural landscape.

The cluster is also completing two monographs and an edited volume.

The first monograph examines the work of the 1978 Education Study Team, which was responsible for major educational reforms, including those pertaining to language. The book, which required in-depth interviews with the participants of the team and analysis of documents produced during this endeavour, serves to record the processes that went into developing policy in that era of Singapore's nation-building.

The second book uses data from the survey on race, religion and language to provide a comprehensive picture of race and religious relations in Singapore. The edited volume brings together the work of a number of scholars who document the diversity found in Singapore and how public policy and programmes aid in this management.

Together with the National Council of Social Services, the cluster will soon run the Social Service Research Network. This series of forums will bring together social service professionals, civil servants and academics to discuss concerns in the social service sector and chart out manageable research projects for the sector.