

## **Mendaki-IPS Policy Dialogue 2019 Progressing as a Community: Educating Malay/Muslim Youth for the Future**

By Amanina Hidayah

While Singapore is transitioning to a skills-based economy, qualifications still play a role today...So in the meantime we still need to [upgrade our qualifications and skills] that can put us on the map.

- Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Minister-of-State for National Development and Manpower and Deputy Chairman, Yayasan Mendaki

On 31 October 2019, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Mendaki hosted the inaugural Mendaki-IPS Policy Seminar. The event was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS.

The event brought together 70 participants from institutes of higher learning, think tanks and non-profit organisations to discuss policy issues that may impact Malay/Muslim youth in the future workforce and their contributions to society through community engagements. Community stakeholders shared their knowledge and ideas with one another on initiatives to develop the skills of Malay/Muslim youth.

The Guest-of-Honour was Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Minister of State for National Development and Manpower and Deputy Chairman of Mendaki. In his opening remarks, Mr Zaqy highlighted developmental gaps among Malay children due to unequal opportunities in early life stages. These gaps become discernible later in life when self-confidence, socialisation skills and achievements differ greatly between youth of various backgrounds. To prepare the generation for the skills-based economy, it is crucial to start from early childhood education.

Following Mr Zaqy's remarks, speakers on the panel comprising Mr Muhammad Faisal Aman, Senior Manager for Mendaki's Research and Planning Department; Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari, Research Fellow from IPS; and Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin, District Councillor of South East Community Development Council (CDC) made their presentations.



*Mr Zaqy Mohamad (second from the left) addressing the participants. (From left to right: Madam Rahayu Buang, Chief Executive of Mendaki, Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Mr Faisal Aman and Dr Shamsuri Juhari.)*

### **Reflexivity: Attending to Community, Education and Youth Issues Systematically**

Calling for the need to build a generation of Malay/Muslim youth that integrates character, competence and citizenry, Mr Faisal outlined key issues affecting them:

1. While there is collective improvement in meeting educational milestones, educational pathways and outlooks vary. For example, students from vocational streams have lower educational aspirations than students from express stream, thus venturing into non-academic fields.
2. Parents' education is a significant predictor of self-esteem among youth. Youth also depend on their social capital and networks, specifically immediate family members for future educational and career pathways.

Youth should strive to strengthen their community and national core, he added, by deepening their rootedness in the Malay community and contributing to national conversations. In addition, they should look to the periphery, such as building on language and cultural similarities across the ASEAN region.

To do so, they can utilise several platforms:

1. National and community platforms like the annual Pre-University Seminar and the Temasek Foundation-NTUC Workforce Programme are beneficial for developing ideas and aspirations allowing youth to explore ways of bringing ideas to fruition for the common good, and encouraging their participation in national conversations.
2. To acquire new skills and build confidence, youth can engage Malay/Muslim organisations such as 4PM and PERTAPIS, or to utilise the M<sup>3</sup> framework to participate in programmes, events and initiatives such as Pasar Belia (Youth Market) and the M<sup>3</sup> Youth Festival. Youth can also tap on seed funding under Mendaki's CLF Labs programme.

### **Turning Aspirations into Reality: The Way Forward for Singapore's Malay/Muslim Youth**

Dr Shamsuri spoke about the demographic imperative of the Malay/Muslim community. Projected statistics estimate that Malays will enter the labour market in optimum capacity in five years. He explained the importance of preparing them for the workforce so that they make valuable contributions to the economy.

Current trends mirror economic shocks in 1998 and 2009 that disproportionately affected Malays. Low take-up rate of SkillsFuture courses among Malay workers, the over-representation of Malays in the transport and food services industry, and increased participation in the gig economy could be causes for concern.

Recognising strengths among youth is important. Despite the underrepresentation of Malay/Muslim youth in universities, the rise of vocationally trained specialists (11.8%) between 2000 and 2015 is much higher than the national level (5.2%).<sup>1</sup> They tend to realise their aspirations after completing compulsory education, which explains the increase of Malay/Muslim youth attaining private qualifications and diplomas. Referring to this group as "late-bloomers", he remarked that they are working towards their aspirations, albeit at a slower pace than others.

With these in mind, he made three recommendations:

1. To look at various ways to allow for a more affirmative re-telling of the "Malay Narrative" which can have a welcomed improvement on the Malay psyche. One way is to source and publicise historical achievements of individuals from the community.
2. To initiate what the literature terms a "conscientisation process" among youth leaders, which develops their capacity to reinterpret and reevaluate their observations and experiences as members of the community. In turn, this motivates them to engage the community, and subsequently themselves, in better ways.

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<sup>1</sup> See Census of Population, Statistical Release 2: Education, Language and Religion and General Household Survey 2015. "Vocationally-trained specialists" refer to those with polytechnic qualification and other diploma and professional qualifications.

3. To encourage youth to look beyond Singapore for opportunities. Looking for career opportunities in ASEAN, for example, can foster regional, national and community engagements among youth.

### **Empowering Youth as Community Stakeholders**

Reflecting on her personal experience as a youth leader, Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin argued that community progress entails uplifting the community as well as empowering its champions.

In her candid presentation, she raised a number of issues:

1. Need for more success stories of Malay/Muslim youth featured in mainstream media to present community role models for others to look up to.
2. Community engagement should align with Malay/Muslim values. Referring to Malay/Muslim youth's preference towards volunteering within religious rather than secular circles, she invited community organisers to rethink how their events can attract this group of people. Additionally, opportunities should be marketed strategically to reach those who are not typically exposed to them.
3. Need to diversify youth voices in national conversations and policymaking by extending invitations to youth who are not affiliated with educational institutions. Also, it is critical to have conducive environments for honest and open dialogues. For example, the older generation should abstain from ridiculing or shooting down ideas and perceptions that youth have to offer.

### **Question & Answer**

A participant posed a question on how to encourage Malay youth to venture abroad for opportunities. Dr Shamsuri remarked that they have a desire to do so but are not achieving that aspiration. Qualitative data are needed to understand why youth aspirations to venture abroad are not becoming a reality. Mr Zaqy said that recognising skills that can add value to the market is critical to overcome protectionist barriers.

The panellists responded to queries regarding expanding youth's social and cultural capital beyond Malay/Muslim spaces. Reaffirming the significance of social capital as a factor that creates opportunities, Dr Shamsuri noted that youth stand to gain confidence from interacting with people across different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, such interactions may not occur organically and fostering such interactions can be challenging.

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