

Integrate, not assimilate

Integration would mean that immigrants are expected to respect and embrace Singapore's culture and values. -myp

Reico Wong and Gerrard Lai

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SINGAPORE - Singaporeans should expect immigrants who take up citizenship here to integrate, and not assimilate, into local society, going by the opinions of population and immigration experts.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), noted that while the two terms are often used interchangeably in the debate on foreigners in Singapore, not enough attention is paid to their different meanings.

He was speaking at a conference on integration organised by IPS.

The event looked into a range of topics relating to new immigrants here, including ways to help them better integrate at the workplace, in schools and in the heartland.

Dr Leong said that there is "no common understanding of what integration means here".

Pointing out the difference in meanings of the two terms, he said that integration would mean that immigrants are expected to respect and embrace Singapore's culture and values, without losing the right to retain their heritage and culture.

However, assimilation is different because it means immigrants would be expected to, in embracing Singapore, give up any affiliation and attachments they may have to the country they were originally from.

But Dr Leong did not directly address the question of how fair or realistic it would be to expect immigrants to assimilate into Singapore society.

Still, he was quick to point out that there is no standard model, or definitive indicators, for successful immigration outcomes. It differs from country to country, he said.

Dr Kang Soon Hock, another research fellow at IPS, noted that the Government's approach towards immigrants is one of integration and stretches back to 1988.

He said national-level initiatives to this end include the \$10-million Community Integration Fund, which co-funds projects that provide opportunities for new immigrants, foreigners and citizens to interact and communicate with one another.

"But policymakers also need to be on their guard and ensure that their initiatives do not favour certain groups over others, as it would inevitably push migrant groups to create their own separate and exclusive communities," he said.

"(Policymakers) need to look at effectively managing political and social tensions."

Dr Terence Chong, senior fellow of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said that to manage such tensions, the Government could address "widespread" anti-immigration sentiments that were highlighted in a recent IPS survey.

The survey had polled 1,001 Singapore-born citizens on integration issues.

When asked if new citizens are likely to use Singapore as a stepping stone to other countries, about six in 10 local-born Singaporeans agreed and strongly agreed.

Dr Chong suggested that this could validate a view of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who told The Straits Times in January 2008: "Some (immigrants) use us as a stepping stone, take courses at our university, then they go off to the US, where the streets are paved in gold, and some don't come back."

However, he suggested that more data would be needed for a fuller picture of anti-immigrant sentiments in Singapore.

For instance, more data showing the number of permanent residents and new citizens currently living overseas is needed, Dr Chong added.

Figures showing which ethnic groups or nationalities are most prone to leaving Singapore would also make the survey findings more conclusive.