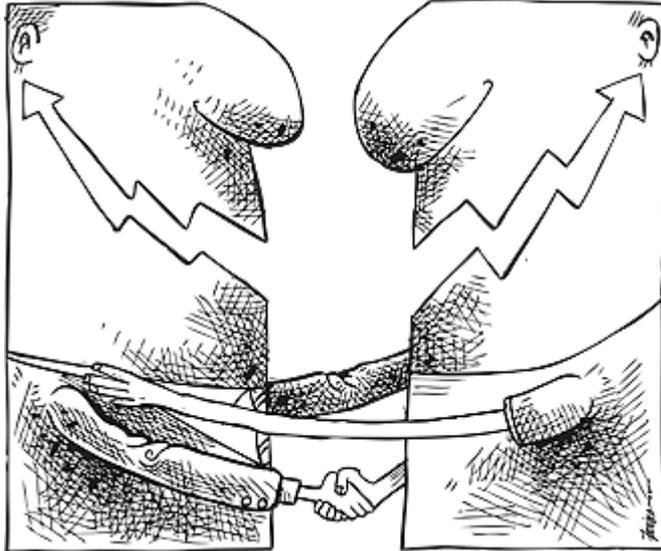


Inclusiveness not just about the economy

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THE concept of achieving 'sustained and inclusive growth' has been a policy ideal, from the time the Economic Strategies Committee in May 2009 identified it as a key thrust for Singapore.

The government-convened committee was given the task of looking for new ideas to strengthen the Singapore economy to meet future challenges in the aftermath of the latest global financial crisis.

The concept has gained such momentum that MP Josephine Teo moved a motion in Parliament last week exhorting the House to examine Singapore's current and future efforts in promoting inclusive economic growth. But the spirit of inclusiveness should not be confined to the economy.

An inclusive Singapore requires an understanding of the fundamental principle of 'what makes Singapore tick'.

Given our national history and social make-up, any such principle must be broad-based and all-embracing, so as to enable all Singaporeans - regardless of race, language, religion or country of birth - to flourish and succeed on the Little Red Dot.

We need to go back to basics. This is an urgent task requiring the active participation of all citizens, particularly as the pressures of a highly globalised world intensify on an open and diverse society such as Singapore, which does not enjoy what sociologists call 'mechanical solidarity', or social cohesion founded upon likeness and similarity among the individuals in the community.

What Singapore needs is 'organic solidarity', which is an understanding that the overall survival of a community rests upon the mutual dependence and reliance of its individual members.

Singapore has been called a rojak society, with the salad dish a metaphor for a number of diverse peoples thrown together by the accidents of history, and with no social glue between them.

However, any Singaporean food buff knows that the key ingredient binding the fried dough fritter, cucumber, pineapple and banana flower shavings together is the shrimp paste: It lets the distinct flavour of each ingredient hold its own, while enhancing the overall experience. This shrimp paste, or 'glue', is precisely what inclusiveness is about.

To be inclusive is to go beyond gross domestic product growth rates and financial transfers. Policies to ensure the future productive employability of workers are important.

To be inclusive, however, is to think our contributions through in terms of not just what we can do for ourselves, but also what we can do for those around us.

As the late Pakistani economist Mahbub ul-Haq put it: 'Building a compassionate society is not a technocratic exercise. It requires solid ethical and moral foundations. It requires an entirely new way of thinking of ourselves as a human family, not just a collection of nation states. It requires a new concept of human security that is founded on human dignity.'

There are three broad guidelines that may be useful in thinking about how to strengthen social bounds through the prism of an inclusive society.

First, inclusiveness cannot be just about tolerance. To tolerate your neighbour is to live with the uneasy knowledge that his existence and way of life could impinge upon your individual happiness and progress. Inclusiveness must be built upon a common understanding that communities confronting difficult issues need to talk about and reach a consensus on such issues, without simply waiting for the authorities to step in and play the role of sheriff.

Difficult issues may include topics like the potential conflict that may arise from increasing religiosity and the physical limits of our shared space, and the progress on ensuring equitable conditions and outcomes for all Singaporeans in education, employment and enterprise.

It is not just official agencies that can engage concerned citizens and civic groups to look for new ideas to improve policy frameworks. This could be an opportunity for people-to-people consultation and bottom-up initiatives. The maturing of the national polity ought to be recognised by those in the civil service bureaucracy, and a mutual exchange of relevant ideas is a positive way forward.

Promoting respectful conversations on difficult issues will promote deeper understanding of divergent points of view.

An inclusive Singapore cannot shy away from the debates such conversations may engender from time to time.

Debate and the passions associated with such activity may not be a bad thing - such passions are indicative of the personal investment and interests so essential to inculcating a sense of belonging among active participants.

Second, balance and diversity must be achieved for meaningful conversations to happen. Discussions cannot include solely those who are familiar with and make use of the various feedback and engagement channels available. This means going the extra mile to seek out views not commonly expressed for reasons of volition, apprehension or otherwise.

To speak of inclusiveness in terms broader than the economic sense is also to recognise the innate value each participant brings to the table, regardless of his or her position in society. An investment banker's opinions, though pertinent to the crafting of solutions to restructure the economy, cannot be more important than those of, say, a nature lover or heritage activist in determining a final policy decision affecting the entire community.

As members of a community, individuals must feel wanted and that they belong before reasonable contribution and engagement can be expected.

Third, inclusiveness is a long-term endeavour and commitment. This means opportunities for engagement and participation should be retained for all, even if some members of the community choose not to engage at a certain juncture.

Both the state and citizens alike must recognise that the most important component of inclusiveness is broad-based individual participation, which requires effort for citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-state engagement to work.

The principle of inclusiveness must be based on the recognition that Singaporeans are all in this together. It is up to Singaporeans to make this work and ensure everyone is engaged and has a stake in their collective future, not just in terms of jobs and livelihoods, but also the sense of ownership and ties to home.

The authors are researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). The IPS annual conference, Singapore Perspectives 2011, will be held today on the theme, Our Inclusive Society: Going Forward.