



Singapore Perspectives 2011: A Personal Reflection

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The presentations and discussions at Singapore Perspectives 2011 (SP 2011) have raised the complex issue of building an inclusive society within the context of Singapore's concurrent aspirations of being a global city. Many interesting perspectives on these issues were discussed, thus broadening our understanding of them. But strikingly, few credible and workable solutions have emerged and this suggests that we have yet to reconcile our many national objectives.

I have not tried to be comprehensive in this summary. Instead, I have picked on a few key themes which I thought were of particular importance in terms of the implications for public policy going forward.

Rising costs of globalisation strategy

There were several excellent presentations at SP 2011. The first panel titled "Global City" and the third one titled "Singapore Spirit", were particularly engaging. These presentations highlighted the contradictions and tensions amongst Singapore's various national objectives. Singapore wants to – and indeed has to – remain globally competitive if it were to deliver the higher standards of living that its citizens desire. But besides that, Singapore also wishes to achieve many other objectives, as previously articulated by its leaders. Singapore wishes to be a liveable city and a socially harmonious society. It hopes to achieve a reasonably equitable distribution of income, while establishing a national identity and finding the Singapore Spirit.

Unfortunately, strategies in pursuit of globalisation have produced tensions in society. These tensions were also discussed at the conference.

Being an open economy, a natural area of competitive advantage for Singapore is to expand its role as a global city and become a major nodal point in the global network of economic engines. However, while globalisation has delivered substantial benefits to Singaporeans, it does not come without its costs. The discussions at SP2011 suggested that part of these costs have escalated in recent years, to a point where some are now uncomfortable with the overall strategy:

- First, if a critical mass is needed for a global city to be competitive, and if our population does not reach that size, this, coupled with a low fertility rate, would mean that Singapore's population is not growing fast enough to achieve its goal of being a global city. Large inward migration would thus be needed. However, it has been suggested that Singapore is a relatively young, multi-racial and multi-religious nation which has not quite fully established a national identity. Absorbing new migrants, in a large way, would thus make this nation-building project even more complex.
- Second, experience in Singapore and elsewhere suggests that there might be a link between globalisation and rising inequality.
- Third, some have blamed Singapore's rising congestion and living costs on an influx of immigrants.

As Mr Janadas Devan, the Review Editor of the Straits Times argued, there is a fundamental contradiction between leading a socially meaningful life, which has to be based on local communities, and being part of a global community which is not tied to any place.

Other aspects of recent national development are also of concern

These growing costs of globalisation become all the more worrying when they coincide with some other trends which were brought up during the discussion.

- First, as Dr Ori Sasson, a new Singapore citizen who was born in Israel pointed out, an evolving national character might help Singapore be nimble and make rapid changes as required by globalisation. But the current national character with its paradoxes might make for a less resilient society.

- Second, as several participants alluded to, some trends are regrettable. Where before there were local talents who could make a difference, these days there seems to be more interest in attracting foreign talent and implicitly downplaying local talent. Where before Singapore had a keen fighting spirit, it seems that a *kiasu-kiasi* spirit now prevails.
- Third, there is a particularly unsettling contradiction between the meritocratic society we wish to be and the inequality of opportunity that some argue is becoming more prevalent. The risk of class reproduction is growing and this might create a limited sense of social mobility.

Are we doing enough to build a caring society that would take care of these unfortunate developments?

The conference raised many examples of grassroots and non-governmental organisations that were engaged in charity and other acts of caring both in Singapore as well as abroad. The 2004 Aceh tsunami clearly saw thousands of Singaporeans spontaneously offering their time and money in aid of relief efforts. Similarly, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis saw grassroots leaders rising to the occasion with considerable effectiveness.

Nevertheless, there seemed to be residual concern over whether Singapore was doing enough to offset these trends:

- Concerns were expressed over whether there was enough spontaneous voluntarism outside major crises such as SARS and the Aceh tsunami. Perhaps Singaporeans are so rushed in getting about their ordinary lives in a global city that they do not offer to give of their time more frequently.
- Some argued that the special needs segments of the population remained under-served with too much burden placed on charities rather than on the broader society.
- Another argument was that unless civil society felt more empowered and understood itself better, there would not be an increase in spontaneous giving and volunteerism that would add to the Singapore Spirit.

Solutions would require more discussion

Minister Lim Boon Heng rightly noted that grassroots leaders needed to become social facilitators rather than event organisers in order to build a more cohesive Singapore society and address some of the issues that were raised in SP 2011. This would help promote the building of social capital. In some areas, Singapore has actually been quite successful. A local sense of belonging and a relatively healthy level of trust within the community were evident in the Housing Development Board's Sample Household Survey 2008, for instance. The Community 2015 Master Plan and Work Plan presented by Minister Lim highlighted the efforts that the People's Association would make to build this social capital.

Recalling what Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng announced about the new law that Singapore has reached in terms of its Total Fertility Rate, the policy dilemma that Singapore faces is real. Given Singapore's strong economic growth and full employment, the drop in the numbers of foreigners allowed to work in Singapore may create labour shortage. This may in turn lead to a rise in wages but also inflation. While productivity may increase as some businesses economise on labour, it may be painful for other businesses that are not able to secure the labour supply. What is the sweet spot between economic growth and social development?

In the discussion of forging an inclusive society, I sense that there are attempts to develop more comprehensive strategies that factor social costs into economic growth. It is good that these issues were raised but I left the conference feeling that we will need more dialogue among all concerned as some of the issues had yet to be explored in greater depth.

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