

Report on the IPS Forum on Sustainability and Liveability Changemaker Series — Reimagining Singapore 2030

By Eddie CHOO

Key Takeaways

Ongoing and emerging trends:

- The climate crisis that will become more severe in the coming years will affect different people unequally.
- Recognition of social diversity in public policy will secure greater support from the people and community.
- Entrepreneurial young people working in the region could also drive environmental sustainability.
- Citizen engagement is deepening in Singapore and can be an opportunity to boost well-being.
- Social capital and environmental capital will become more valuable than other forms of capital.

On changemaking:

- Be aware of the national agenda through the various plans that have already been rolled out by the government.
- Have a “thick skin” and celebrate small successes.
- Framing change as “innovation” might soften resistance to it.
- Be clear about the change, the stakeholders, and the process, to find areas that are distinctive and/or other points of leverage.
- Be aware of the interconnections among policy issues.
- Engagement spaces need to be inclusive; reach out to more groups by using different languages and dialects.
- Changemakers should pay attention to their own mental well-being.

Event Summary

On 17 August 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted an online forum on “Sustainability and Liveability”, the second of three in its Changemaker Forum Series. The session was streamed on Facebook Live.

This series is part of the larger [Reimagining Singapore 2030 project](#), a scenario-planning exercise that explores how we can achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation in 2030 and beyond, through consultation with global and local thought-leaders, and members of the public.

The session's panellists were Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid, Co-Founder, Singapore Youth for Climate Action; Mr Irsyad Ramthan, Co-Founder, Young Sustainable Impact Southeast Asia; Mr Cai Yinzhou, Director, Citizen Adventures; and, Mr Larry Yeung, Executive Director, Participate in Design. The session was moderated by Dr Natalie Pang, Senior Lecturer, Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore.

During the session, the panellists discussed their experiences of working in the domains of environmental sustainability, conservation of physical and cultural heritage, and participatory design in the built environment. They also shared their thoughts about being changemakers.



Dr Pang, Senior Lecturer at NUS, opens the forum on Sustainability and Liveability

Significant Changes, and the Organisation's Role

Dr Pang asked the panellists about the areas they worked in, any changes that have occurred over the past few years, and how they or their organisations have been part of that change.

Climate Action

Ms Nor Lastrina outlined the work of Singapore Youth for Climate Action, and how that was formed to build climate awareness among youths through talks and community outreach events. She reminded the audience about the urgency of the climate emergency through some quotes from a report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from the United Nations.

She also talked about how the Singapore government had submitted an enhanced Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) as part of the country's commitment to the Paris Agreement, and in February 2021, announced the Singapore Green Plan 2030. Through these commitments, there was greater focus on sustainable development along with raised pressure on companies to respond more forcefully to climate change.

Sustainable Impact in Southeast Asia

Mr Irsyad introduced the work of Young Sustainable Impact Southeast Asia (YSI). YSI brings participants through a programme where, for four-and-a-half months, teams work remotely or locally to develop their projects around the promotion of sustainable development. They are brought to Singapore for half a month to pitch their plans to investors and corporate representatives.

Mr Irsyad and his team understood the need for activism around several issues, but also recognised the need for other platforms for young people to make an impact through the private sector. While they initially had a broad focus on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they switched to focus on just three areas: agriculture, clean energy, and the circular economy.

Stewarding Social and Economic Resources

Mr Cai shared about how he first encountered the concept of “sustainable development”, that is, stewarding resources for present and future generations, when he was studying tourism at university. That education prompted him to look at the community he lived in — Geylang, to examine the social ecosystems there regarding migrant workers. The pandemic has highlighted the interdependent relationship Singaporeans have with migrant workers. This is also why Singaporeans should better appreciate the latter, and work to develop and uphold their employment rights and welfare, he said.

Participatory Design

Mr Yeung described how community/citizen engagement was still a foreign concept back in 2013 when Participate in Design (PID) was established. He said the notion of government agencies “knowing it all” should be challenged. Through years of working with government agencies and grassroots organisations in citizen-centric approaches to design and urban planning, he felt that they have come to see how valuable this is. He noticed that government agencies had begun to see citizens as collaborators, with agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Housing and Development Board using more participatory approaches in planning. Through these efforts, the outcomes of the agencies have become more relatable to communities as well as socially sustainable.

Climate — More Talk Than Action?

Ms Nor Lastrina and Mr Irsyad responded to a question from the audience on whether there was more talk than action on climate change issues. Mr Irsyad recognised government efforts to promote environmental sustainability such as by driving innovation in clean-tech. He also observed that there were entrepreneurs in Singapore and Southeast Asia who were working

in the area of climate action. Nevertheless, he thought that there was still space for more people to try out different solutions.

Ms Nor Lastrina replied that Singapore's NDC in 2020 had been bolder than that of 2015, pledging to cut 50 per cent of emission intensity in 2020, an increase from 30 per cent from 2005. There had also been efforts on the education front, with the Geography curricula in the secondary and tertiary levels incorporating the Singapore Green Plan 2030. At the individual level, there were various promotional efforts on social media. Among them were Instagram users' "Earth to Dorcas" (@earthtodorcas) and the "The Weird and Wild" (@theweirdandwild) — the latter having done an Instagram Live session with Singapore Management University climate scientist Dr Winston Chow to discuss climate change.

Sustainability, Inequality and Minority Voices

The panellists responded to questions about sustainability, inequality, and minority voices. Mr Cai suggested that Singapore needed to shift economic priorities to be more equal, and for marginalised voices to be better represented in various conversations.

He noted through his tours, and during the pandemic, that people were increasingly able to recognise how various issues were interconnected; for instance, the situation of the migrant workers affected construction work, which affected people's access to new homes.

He also pointed out how work conditions will need to be improved for Singapore to remain an attractive destination for migrant workers. Mr Cai also referred to the history of migrant workers in Singapore who created clan associations that funded schools and hospitals. He contrasted this with the present where the platform and capacity for self-help among migrant workers was missing.

Mr Yeung emphasised the need for engagement sessions to be inclusive. He pointed out how PID's workshops in mature estates were conducted in different languages and dialects so that seniors could contribute their views effectively.

Ms Nor Lastrina also addressed the question of inequality and noted how different groups will have different capacities to respond to climate change.

Youths, SDGs and Older Adults

Dr Pang invited panellists to address questions about the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and specifically, on how best to convey them to older adults.

Ms Nor Lastrina described how the advocates she had worked with would rally the public around specific areas and not on all the 17 SDGs. She noted climate action was Goal 13 among the SDGs and how those working on mental health would fit with Goal 3 (health and well-being).

Mr Irsyad observed that young people seemed to be moving through stages of grief when talking about climate change. He said that older people, especially those in positions of influence, should consider how they could exercise leadership to facilitate an effective response to the issues. The real challenge is finding the will to act.

Mr Irsyad also discussed how both mitigation and adaptation strategies were needed for the climate challenge, and that mitigation strategies might be inclusive in bringing about change for more people. He suggested that entrepreneurs could try to create affordable solutions so that more people would be able to benefit from their products.

For Mr Cai, the question about older adults and sustainability led him to reflect on his past project on Dakota Crescent, where residents from a rental estate comprising low-income households, many of them elderly, had to be relocated. What does “sustainability” really mean, and how much representation do marginalised communities have in crafting a response? He added that the SDG framework was helpful as a common language and issue definition to facilitate comparative analysis on the issues at hand.

Mr Yeung said a participatory engagement and design process with older people would be important for their mental well-being because it would signal that they could still make valuable contributions to the community. A participatory process would also ensure that the final product would be usable and relatable to the end users, making the Singapore more liveable and lovable.

Waste Management

Ms Nor Lastrina and Mr Irsyad addressed a question on waste management. Mr Irsyad outlined how his organisation tried to minimise waste and other negative externalities that might arise from the projects they support. First, they ensured that projects did not contribute to carbon emissions in any way; second, they checked that they did not contribute to pollution even in microplastics or in the air that are harmful to health; and third, they tried to ensure that the initiatives continue to generate resources.

Mr Irsyad also encouraged people who were interested in waste management to look into the details of the lifecycle of the components they dispose of, to see if these can be improved. He realised that this framing might be difficult to apply to Singapore given its assumptions about a centralised waste management system — but he believed that there were still opportunities to make positive changes.

Ms Nor Lastrina pointed out that there was the Zero-Waste Masterplan to close the resource loops for food, electrical and electronic equipment packaging, and that there was also a National Environment Agency plan to reduce food waste. Reframing the issue, Ms Nor Lastrina directed the audience’s attention to the strategy of reducing consumption to begin with; we need to be more thoughtful to purchase and consume only what we really need.

Looking to 2030

Dr Pang asked the panellists to share their vision for their respective domains in year 2030 and what changes were needed to achieve that. Ms Nor Lastrina cited Singapore’s submissions on the NDC for the Paris Agreement, and the Industry Transformation Maps developed by the Ministry of Trade and Industry as state-led plans to achieve “peace and prosperity”; but she said she was not sure how to achieve “happiness”, which is part of the driving question in the Reimagining Singapore 2030 project. One factor that will affect that is

the level of inequality in Singapore and how that would lead to differences in the effects that climate change will have on people.

Mr Irsyad said he hoped that the younger generation could take ownership of their own development based on a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the various issues. It was necessary to grasp the technical aspects of the issues thoroughly in order to develop realistic solutions to them. Also, entrepreneurship could help them learn very quickly what works and what does not.

Mr Cai said that the participants on his tours were often struck by how seemingly different issues were interconnected. He hoped that everyone realised they were not just part of the problem but also the solution. He added that the small everyday things could also have an impact on making things better. Social and environmental capital will become more important for our future, he said.

Mr Yeung echoed the call to look beyond economic prosperity. It is important to have more platforms to talk about difficult issues such as inequality, racial or environmental issues. These should allow stakeholders from different sectors to meet one another, understand viewpoints, and create solutions together. In this regard, it was helpful that government agencies had started to view citizens as valuable assets who could contribute positively to the country's future.

Responses to Those Who Resist Change and Happiness

Dr Pang invited the panellists to respond to a question about how changemakers like them would work with those who resist change, and a second question on the various factors that could contribute to happiness based on their respective areas of work.

To the question on change, Mr Yeung said that resisting change was human nature and to be expected in the course of his work. He chose to focus on “individual successes”, for instance, while it might be difficult to change the mentality of a lot of people, it would be worth celebrating if even one person could be persuaded to change his or her mind. Advocates and changemakers needed to be thick-skinned and persevere in their efforts to bring change.

To the second question of happiness, Mr Yeung shared about a Design Singapore Council project about how people felt loved by a place when they had a role in shaping it.

Mr Cai thought that happiness could come from how much people found satisfaction from their work and joy from the workplace. He referred to a government mobile application that aimed to advise people on “performance indicators of life” and wondered if users of the app might feel contented about their life with the information and advice.

On the issue of resisting change, Ms Nor Lastrina mentioned the techniques of negotiation cited by Professor Tommy Koh, which included establishing common facts with the parties involved and understanding the cultural boxes people operated from, which would require emotional intelligence. Though it might sound clichéd, she believed that it was important to focus attention on achieving win-win solutions. On the issue of happiness, Ms Nor Lastrina referred to a website by Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania on “authentic

happiness”,¹ reminding the audience of its intangible quality and how this was found in the journey to achieve an outcome rather than in the outcome itself.

For Mr Irsyad, the climate picture looked bleak, but he pointed to how happiness could be found through the sense or exercise of agency. Responding to the question of resistance to change, he noted how the label of “innovation” might make it easier for people to accept change. He added that it was important to find leverage for his own organisation and for the people from his programme to address that resistance.

What Needs to Happen

Dr Pang closed the forum by asking the panellists what they thought needed to happen to bring about greater positive social change in Singapore.

Ms Nor Lastrina pointed to two works that she came across recently. She mentioned a piece by Belicia Teo on Academia.SG that argued that discussions on climate action must be driven by values.² The second piece was a report by Common Purpose, a UK not-for-profit organisation about “value-driven conversations”, in contrast to the usual “outcome-driven conversations” that people tended to have.³

Mr Irsyad said changemakers needed to understand that their issues did not exist in isolation and were often connected to other matters. He urged the youth to engage with people to bring about solutions they believed in, to try to drive change themselves, and for society to be supportive even when mistakes are made.

Mr Cai pointed to the importance of mental health and well-being of the changemakers themselves, given how tiring the process of advocacy and community work could be.

Mr Yeung emphasised the importance of embracing diversity as a way to address social sustainability and to be prepared for a level of “mess” and uncertainty as citizens become more empowered. He hoped that the various changes could take place so that Singapore becomes a happier society.

Post-Forum Interview on Changemaking (Edited Transcript)

Natalie Pang: My first question is — what event or person inspired you to take up the difficult work of being a changemaker?

Cai Yingzhou: For me, it's growing up in Geylang — how the neighbourhood is complex and being able to appreciate that from a young age. And that complexity also extends to many of the issues that we interact with on a day to day basis but may not realise is the case.

The moment in time, and perhaps this is the Geylang kind of experience — is the day that we were approached by the police for playing badminton in the back alley and how that really got

¹ See details here: <https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>

² See article here: <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/science-based-does-not-mean-value-neutral-making-the-case-for-broader-public-participation-in-climate-governance/>

³ See link here: <https://commonpurpose.org/media/8388/conversations-with-purpose-research.pdf>

me thinking about the perceptions about migrant workers, the group that I was playing with, and also the perception of social spaces like back alleys, like the one we were in, and how they were perceived as being dangerous or being intimidating in some way.

So that really got me thinking about the policies that were rolled out affecting migrant workers in Geylang and the rest of Singapore. That was the chain of events that got me thinking about what could I do. That was in 2013 and now, we are in 2021.

Nor Lastrina: For me, there are many people whom I have met in my journey who have inspired me in different ways. But if I were to highlight one person, it would be Tay Lai Hock, the founder of Ground-Up Initiative. This story is captured in my contribution to the *Birthday Book [2021]*.

A few years ago, we were at Ground-Up Initiative and this was Lastrina back in those days when she liked to organisation-hop, and Lai Hock said, “If you really want to see change, you have to see things through and stick to something for at least five years.” And I think that particular conversation made me more reflective and question myself: Should I sustain myself in this kind of work? How should I do it? And why do I want to do it?” Lai Hock was such an inspiration. I would say, he's a big contributing factor to why I want to be a changemaker.

Larry Yeung: Thanks, Lastrina, I think that is amazing. Lai Hock has been an inspiration to everyone, including myself when I was a student. What really inspired me to take up participatory design was an event which is actually, you know, when I was in NUS, in Year Four studio, when I met two amazing ladies — Mizah Rahman and Cho Im Sik.

Back then, participatory design was a very new idea, and nobody knew whether it would work. As students volunteering for them, looking at how they do meaningful community engagement, how Mizah started participatory design, the passion that they put into it — all this really got me thinking as an architecture student back then, what could I do to rethink [the approach to design] — that is the big question. I thought about that for two years before I decided that I wanted to walk the talk. And I think these two ladies definitely played a big role in my life.

Today, I'm really very happy that I am still in touch with Dr Cho. And although our co-founder Mizah has left us recently, due to cancer, she has left a legacy behind. I'm really interested in continuing in that spirit with the work that we do in PID — to continue designing *with* people and not just *for* them.

Natalie Pang: All of you are making me cry, including that story about playing badminton in the Geylang back alley with migrant workers. But anyway, on to my second question: Could you name one memorable challenge you have faced during your changemaking journey. How did you deal with it?

Yingzhou: Yeah, the decision to do this full time wasn't an easy decision to make because of the concerns of financial sustainability, and also how this career didn't really look like a typical career pathway to many, even those who were close to me, like my family.

So it's actually quite hard to understand the idea of social entrepreneurship, and even to explain the purpose that I had found earlier on. That crossroads in life, you know, graduating

from school, having done this for about a year already, but figuring out whether it was something that I wanted to continue and try to venture into, full time. That was a really difficult struggle.

At some point, I realised it was not about convincing people around me anymore, but it was really about finding that fulfilment and proving to myself how this could work out. At the end of the day, the stakes were high for myself, but that was kind of the path that I continue forging.

So, call it stubbornness, or stupidity or recklessness, I think that there were elements that was required. Many have come before us only to pave the way for us to make this happen and the likes of those who have left us, the ones who have inspired us greatly, and those are really testimonies of sustainability — where we consider the future generations ahead of us and how they could benefit from our work and how our work could be left to those after us, passing them the baton to carry on.

Natalie Pang: Yingzhou, you are definitely a trailblazer. Thank you so much for sharing that. I think that would resonate with a lot of young people who are at the point of deciding if they take the plunge or go for the well-trodden paths.

Lastrina or Larry, so the question is what is one memorable challenge you faced during your changemaking journey, and how did you deal with?

Larry: I remember mine was — we were asked to conduct a workshop for some civil servants in one of our projects. I remember being disheartened because I could tell that many of the participants were there just for the sake of being there. They didn't really believe in the process. I even overheard things like, "Yeah, I'm here because my boss wants me to be here."

But as I shared in the forum earlier, sometimes as changemakers, we need to be thick-skinned, so I did not let that bother me. With enthusiasm, I tried to get him interested but to be honest, at the end of the day, I don't think they looked very inspired. I think they still had the mentality that engagement is a waste of time, there's no need to do it.

However, two years down the road just very recently, I received an email from one of our ex-participants. She had changed her portfolio. She said that after the workshop, she kept questioning herself — what exactly is citizen engagement? She decided to try something new. On email, she asked "You know, I planned this new project that is citizen-driven, and I would really like to talk more about it with you."

That was a very happy moment for me. Even though I had a class of 20-30 persons. I may not have been able to change everybody's mindset but, you know, for that one person she was the most attentive person, I am very heartened to hear that. So, even though it was a challenge, but I think it turned into an opportunity, and it is something that really keeps me going — to be able to share the kind of knowledge and experience that we have about citizen engagement, and keeping people going.

Natalie Pang: I love that story. I think, Larry, that was very inspirational as well. You can't control how people want to feel, how people feel about the process. But the one thing you can control is how much effort you put in; what you do. So that was very inspirational.

Nor Lastrina: Thanks, Yingzhou, Larry, for sharing your challenge. Hearing about Yingzhou going into this full-time, my challenge was quite the opposite. I think for me, it was about keeping SYCA as a volunteer organisation which may be partly due to my stubbornness.

When we started this, it was with a group of friends. Subsequently, we wanted to grow into a community so there were conversations — why don't we register SYCA as a society, or maybe even as a company and see if we can employ someone so that we can dedicate time and energy into this and run things full-scale.

But I would like to believe that people are intrinsically good. They want to volunteer to address certain social problems. And if SYCA can continue to be that platform where people volunteer their time and energy, then why not keep it as that.

So in a way, it's still a challenge that we're trying to manage at this point because we're trying to restructure and be more strategic to achieve better outcomes.

Also, at the end of the day, there's always this idea that people are good and they can do things without payment, you know, monetary payment. And if we can do this with SYCA then it can be done with other organisations, and if you can inculcate such a good approach among your group of friends, why not continue doing it?

And I think something that also I picked up from both of you — SYCA currently works as a volunteer group because of the community, the people, because of the core members who are driving this. So it's not just me being the co-founder, but also you know, I have a strong team that's working on this, like Swati, Jintao, Cheryl, Jeremy, and so many others. So I'm quite thankful that even though there's a challenge right here, it's something that we can tackle as a group of friends.

Natalie Pang: Awesome, thank you.

[Eddie Choo](#) is a Research Associate at IPS.

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