

Report on the IPS Forum on Well-Being & Belonging Changemaker Series — Reimagining Singapore 2030

By Ysien LAU

Key Takeaways

Ongoing and emerging trends:

- Intersectionality, or the way that different forms of identity of a person combine to attract discrimination or create privilege, will be an increasingly important way to understand and effectively address the challenges to social inclusion and mobility that disadvantaged Singaporeans face.
- Given that Singapore's population is ageing rapidly, it is imperative to consider who will provide the care that is needed and how these carers can be trained at scale.
- A more competitive landscape for migrant labour is likely to arise because the sending countries in the region will experience growth and their citizens will have less reason to work overseas.
- Mindsets are changing, where younger Singaporeans are more conscious about social inequality and willing to speak up and act on the issue; and ageing is seen not as a burden but for the opportunities that arise from this "longevity".

On changemaking, our panellists said:

- Change takes time, so be patient.
- Be conscious of the power dynamics involved in any setting and design engagement processes to take this into account.
- Take good note of the changes that arise, big and small, as this can help to boost team morale and ensure the long-term sustainability of the organisation or initiative.
- Legislative changes can be ineffective if the public does not understand and support them.
- Seek out allies where you can and be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they are presented.
- Co-creation is key. When trying to create change for a particular group, make sure that they are represented in the design and decision-making process. They are the best advocates for their interests.
- Change can start with the actions of one individual. If you identify a problem, exercise your democratic voice to raise your concerns to your parliamentary representative.

Event Summary

On 3 August 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted an IPS Online Forum on Well-Being and Belonging, the first of three in its Changemakers series. It was streamed on Facebook Live.

The series is part of the [Reimagining Singapore 2030 project](#), a scenario-planning exercise around the question: “How can we achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation in 2030 and beyond?”

The session’s panellists, in speaking order, were Mr Farid Abdul Hamid, Diversity Facilitator, Ithaca Pte Ltd; Professor Chong Yap Seng, Dean and Lien Ying Chow Professor in Medicine at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore; Ms Susana Concorde Harding, Senior Director at the International Longevity Centre Singapore, Tsao Foundation; and Mr John Gee, former President of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). The session was moderated by Mr Shamil Zainuddin, Research Associate at IPS.

The speakers discussed changes that have occurred in their respective domains of cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion in Singapore, health policy, ageing, and the welfare of migrant workers here. They also discussed emerging trends in these areas and what it takes to be a changemaker.



Mr Shamil Zainuddin (top left), Research Associate at IPS, opens the forum on Well-being and Belonging

What has been achieved, what has changed

To kick-off, Mr Shamil invited each panellist to talk about the work they been doing and the changes they have observed in their respective fields of work.

Cross-Cultural Understanding and Social Cohesion

Mr Farid stated that even from his early days as a diversity facilitator, a topic that has come up time and again is that of “intersectionality”. This means that when it comes to understanding

the challenges faced by the marginalised, it is not just that these stem from questions of race or religion, but they are usually also about age, gender, nationality, and other forms of identity.

Mr Farid described how as a diversity facilitator, he has found how important it is to create a safe space for people to feel comfortable being vulnerable and sharing what they are really experiencing. Peer facilitation has also become increasingly popular, with more community development councils, schools and OnePeople.sg providing the platforms for these.

What he has found is that personal sharing tends to bring emotional release. These conversations are not sanitised, and participants have to feel engaged cognitively and affectively. He has facilitated sessions where students from different schools interact with each other have deepened their appreciation of the other's life experiences and concerns for instance.

Academic Research

Professor Chong shared his experiences with creating policy change through academic research. He said that when trying to make change, it is important to seize opportunities to engage with policymakers, share stories, and convince them with data, evidence and research. He outlined findings from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) study, which focused on mothers, early childhood, and human potential, and how this work helped to shape local policies.

To illustrate, he cited the case of research on the prevalence of gestational diabetes (GDM) in Singaporean women, which found that only those considered to be of high-risk were being screened, which meant that about 50 per cent of cases were missed. After sharing this information with the Ministry of Health (MOH), a universal screening policy for GDM was implemented for all pregnant women. Later research also found that GDM is associated with higher risk of type 2 diabetes later in life, so there is work currently being done to plan lifelong follow-up and support for such patients.

Another case he cited was the research on pre-natal depression. The study found a correlation between the mental well-being of mothers during pregnancy, and their children's physical development and learning ability later. Professor Chong shared how a whole-of-government ecosystem approach is required to tackle this problem: the Ministry of Health could manage screenings for mental health, while other ministries and non-governmental agencies would need to focus on work arrangements for parents, family resources and support. For that reason and others, an inter-agency task force, of which Professor Chong is a member, has been created to develop policies and comprehensive support for mothers and early childhood.

Healthy Ageing

Ms Harding described her experiences working on ageing at the Tsao Foundation's International Longevity Centre (ILF). The latter works on effecting mindset and systemic change through community-based elderly care, training and education, policy change, and research and advocacy.

She cited three key changes in the domain over recent years. The first arose from how the Tsao Foundation grabbed an opportunity with the City for All Ages (CFAA) initiative to pilot

age-in-place schemes in Whampoa. They worked to build an integrated health and social care system, promote an intergenerational care and community, and engage with grassroots leaders and other social service agencies to serve the elderly there. With the help of other community stakeholders, they successfully embedded themselves into the community.

The second change was the shift in the mindset from viewing ageing as a burden to seeing it as “longevity” with its wealth of opportunities for meaningful ageing. She described how then Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, who attended the Tsao Foundation’s 20th anniversary lecture in 2015 with international scholars on the future of ageing, later launched an action plan for successful ageing — to help Singaporeans age with confidence.

The third change was the adoption of a community development approach to building confidence in the elderly through community service and peer support, empowering them to make contributions to society.

Migrant Workers

Mr Gee shared about his experience working at TWC2, which attends to the welfare of migrant workers by providing services, conducting research and public engagement.

He remarked that while there had been progress in promoting migrant workers’ rights, change still takes a lot of time. He gave the example of one of his earliest projects with the organisation, a background paper focusing on rest days for domestic workers and improving their access to resources. A few years later, the Ministry of Manpower declared a mandatory day off for domestic workers, which while not enforced, was stated as a right. Recently, there has been an announcement that in the future, there will be a compulsory day-off every month. While this is a move in the right direction, he hopes that domestic workers will be able to have a day off once a week.

Another area in which there has been progress is that of the transportation of migrant workers. While TWC2 would prefer if they were transported in fully enclosed vehicles, he acknowledged the progress from the days when there were no safety regulations and provisions when they were transported in the back of pick-up trucks.

He also described how 10 years ago, there was a lack of pay documentation, which caused problems when pay disputes arose. TWC2 pushed for workers to be informed, in writing, what pay they should receive before they start a job, and for them to receive electronic payslips. These ideas have now become part of government policy.

One change that took longer to implement was having workers’ salaries paid directly into bank accounts. In the past, while the government recognised this was a good idea and had advised employers to help set up bank accounts for their workers, it was not enforced. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic necessitating contactless payments, this policy was hurried along and recently implemented.

Finally, Mr Gee observed that there have been changes in public mood and attitudes towards migrant workers. Generally, legislative changes can be ineffectual if they lack credibility and acceptance among the public. Recently, younger Singaporeans seem to be more sensitive to migrant worker conditions and are willing to speak up when they believe practices and laws

are unfair. Therefore, TWC2 has been focusing on advocacy, and tries to work with the media to increase awareness about these issues.

Hopes for Singapore in 2030

Thinking about the broader Reimagining Singapore 2030 project, Mr Shamil asked the panellists to share some key trends in their respective areas of work, their hopes for Singapore in 2030, and how we might work towards them.

Mr Farid reiterated the importance of the concept of intersectionality. Diversity is more than just about the “five Fs” — festivals, food, fashion, flags and faces. It is also much more than just about race, which leads to simplistic conclusions about each other. He also said that there must be a greater engagement of diversity and identity in the workplace in ways that promote a deeper understanding of people who are not homogeneous around fixed and simplistic categories of identity. To illustrate the point, two people who struggle with mental health issues do not have the same experience. Therefore, more must be done to foster deep, authentic relationships at both the individual interpersonal level and at the community level too.

Professor Chong spoke about three trends. First, he noted that in Singapore and all around the world, we are seeing fast-ageing populations. Demographics are shifting quickly, and this is something to be concerned about. Second, as 2021 is the Year of Celebrating SG Women, it is a year to recognise, reflect on and reshape attitudes towards women in society, and make Singapore a better place for families. Women now face expectations to work and at home and it is important to examine how these demands should be addressed. Third, COVID-19 has accelerated change. The concept of doing things remotely in the past was interesting, but it is now essential. Rapid changes such as working from home have shown us what is possible.

Ms Harding described one key trend: by 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be 65 or older, but more of them will live longer and stay healthy for longer. Her hope is to see a greater measure of representation of seniors at the grassroots community and all the way to Parliament. They should be fully involved in research, programme development and policy planning. They can also be involved in developing entrepreneurial projects that are sustainable, socially responsible and impactful.

Mr Gee hopes that there will be more channels that allow for the views of migrant workers to be heard directly. He also expressed a desire for migrant workers to be protected from being victimised, since many face coercive conditions where employers can threaten to send the foreign workforce home, and for workers to be able to change employers more easily.

Regarding ongoing developments, he discussed how care-work for ageing populations is often managed by foreign domestic workers. He argued that there is a need for specialised training for these caregivers, with the recognition that not everyone is able to handle that sort of work.

It is important to keep in mind that the needs and expectations of the local and regional workforce will change. If Singapore’s population gets to a stable level, there will likely be a shrinking of the construction sector and an increase in the domestic sector. Meanwhile, countries in the region are likely to see economic revival after COVID-19, which might reduce the number of people willing to be migrant workers. Other countries, like Japan, have increasingly allowed in more migrant labour. In a more competitive landscape, Singapore

would need to think more deeply about addressing employment rights to attract its share of these migrant workers in the future.

Question-and-Answer Session

Challenges in working with target constituents

The speakers were asked if they had encountered challenges with promoting the sense of ownership for problem-solving among their target constituents.

Mr Gee pointed out that migrant workers do care about their status in society, but that they have more important priorities, especially ensuring their stable employment so that they can support their families back home. When TWC2 observed that accommodation was an issue, many workers simply saw it as the price they had to pay to work in Singapore. COVID-19 has caused them and many others to become more aware of how important their living conditions are. However, there is reluctance among migrant workers to engage on other questions as they already have enough on their plate to worry about.

Ms Harding said in relation to the elderly community in Whampoa, the approach was to get to know their target constituents well and provide a safe place for them to discuss and tackle issues for themselves. She said that it is important to train them as community advocates to take up issues that relate directly to them, and in the future, to enable them to concern themselves with issues related to other generations as well.

Mr Farid argued that a big challenge is the huge power differential in different communities. For example, migrant workers worry about keeping their jobs and would not voice their concerns and feelings if they thought this would put their jobs and position in Singapore in peril. Power dynamics affect different groups differently, and must be taken into account when engaging them.

Creating Safe Spaces

The speakers were asked by an audience member about how to create safe spaces for meaningful dialogue.

Mr Gee referred to his experience of facilitating dialogue sessions among migrant workers. He said it is important to let them be the larger group in the room, and as a facilitator, give them space to share without interference. It is also important to find a place that is not intimidating, like cafes, community centres and homes, to put participants at ease. Most crucially, moderators or hosts of these sessions must be good listeners.

Mr Farid re-iterated Mr Gee's point that physical environment matters. He shared how he found the lecture style or circle seating to be very empowering and levelling, and how during inter-religious dialogues he is careful to avoid having religious icons and symbols in the room in order to keep the space neutral. While he agreed that listening is important, he described the need to move beyond this and focus on forming authentic relationships between facilitators and participants, getting to know each other and having genuine interest in each other even before the start of a session. Finally, he stated how he always begins his sessions with a

discussion about the values, attitudes and behaviours that are important to promote a safe and respectful conversation.

The role of fathers in childcare

An audience member asked Professor Chong how fathers could play a role in childcare, and whether paternal leave would relieve the stress on mothers.

Professor Chong replied that fathers do have a very important role, especially in supporting the mothers through pregnancy. Much of the stress women face arises from feeling alone and unsupported, physically and emotionally. In the first week of life after a child is born, many women are stressed, feeling tired from delivery, breastfeeding and meeting visitors. So fathers could play a more active role to share the responsibility for childcare.

On the topic of paternity leave, Professor Chong commented that bringing up a child is not just about parental leave immediately after birth. The child will need support and guidance for the first 10 to 20 years of life. Both parents should have the ability to take time off and be involved in bringing up the child.

Inter-generational relations

Another question was about how to better manage intergenerational tensions.

Mr Farid argued that some people could have self-esteem issues arising from perceived differences, and that appearances and manners of speech can be markers of class or identity, which may stifle conversations. Therefore, it is important to talk openly about the diversity in the room and build trust. Dialogue sessions need to be conversational rather than being akin to a question-and-answer session where people who are more comfortable speaking end up dominating the space. No matter the topic of discussion, Mr Farid emphasised that it is critical to establish the human connection before diving into the substantive content at hand. The facilitator has the task of getting conversations going between participants rather than simply moderating back and forth.

Ms Harding said that intergenerational solidarity and bonding is a central issue to deal with. The Tsao Foundation created a programme that gave seniors in Whampoa a platform to share their personal histories with younger members of the community. This inter-generational interaction and collaboration resulted in a travelling exhibition called *Rumah Whampoa*.

Challenges to changemaking and advice

To round off the session, Mr Shamil asked the panellists to talk about the challenges they have encountered as changemakers and the lessons they can share.

Mr Gee suggested noting down achievements, large or small, to boost team morale and sustain the mission and organisation. Additionally, he said it is important to be patient as change takes time and urged changemakers to do diligent research. He said it is not enough to just critique something — we need to be able to develop alternatives that establish a stronger basis for dialogue, and eventually, progress.

Professor Chong returned to his interest in human potential and highlighted four characteristics that are needed to make positive change: curiosity, insight, engagement, and determination.

Ms Harding said changemakers need to walk the talk. While she is not herself a senior, she represented them through research and data. At the end of the day, the seniors themselves are the best people to represent their needs and interests. The ideal way to support them is to be humble and work *with* them rather than have the mindset of simply “helping them”.

Mr Farid observed that in the past, Singaporeans tended to be more comfortable with doing community service than advocacy work but this has shifted especially with younger people stepping up for different causes. He reminded the audience that issues are usually not binary; people are not necessarily good or bad. Therefore, changemakers should seek out allies where they can. Finally, he believed in the need and ability for citizens of a democracy to exercise their voice either directly or through our representatives in Parliament, which is what we should do on issues that matter to us.

Post-Forum Responses to Other Questions

Question: How do we better synergise efforts of NGOs and government agencies on mental health and other areas of good work they do, so that they do not cannibalise each other’s work and achieve more, without doing duplication?

John Gee: I think that we should distinguish between duplication and cannibalisation of work.

There is bound to be some overlap between the work of NGOs and government agencies when both are concerned with the same constituencies. It would be unrealistic to expect them to liaise so closely that this never happens. Also, the personnel responsible for providing services, in particular, may need to do similar work not only to deliver the services, but for the body concerned to learn and to generate data that can inform policy formation. Given that government and NGOs may have different perspectives (i.e., solution-seeking or management of a problem, primarily rights-based or otherwise), this is to be expected and is not a bad thing, provided there is not excessive duplication and a needless waste of resources.

Probably a greater concern should be whether government and NGOs are doing similar work while leaving some area of need uncovered or seriously neglected, which can happen especially when competitive rather than cooperative mindsets are predominant.

Cannibalisation is a rather different problem. It is clearly undesirable. In the early days of TWC2, we considered the idea of founding a shelter for domestic workers run by TWC2, but decided against it because one had been set up by the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME). I anticipated that potential funding for such a shelter would be limited, and if two NGOs sought to establish and run one each at the same time, it was quite possible that neither would succeed in establishing a viable shelter, which would be a disservice to the community we sought to assist. This was despite the fact that we were working with domestic workers and it would have been of value to have a shelter run by us to accommodate women in need of safety: we had to either refer such women to HOME or, in a small number of cases, rely on the generosity of supporters who were willing to offer hospitality in their own homes.

This is the sort of attitude that is necessary: government bodies and NGOs sometimes need to step back from a project or area of work and ask, “Why are we doing/thinking of doing this? Whose needs does it serve? Is there a need that would otherwise not be adequately met?” If someone else is doing work in the same field, it should be asked, “What differences in results might occur if we take this on too, and is this sufficient reason to proceed?”

My personal assessment of TWC2’s role is that its ability to undertake advocacy that is informed by practice is a strength and this differentiates it from other NGOs that focus on service provision alone as well as from government bodies (primarily the Ministry of Manpower) that deal with migrant workers.

Cannibalisation and needless duplication of effort can be countered by the concerned bodies conferring formally from time to time on overall policy and key problems, information sharing, and keeping open channels when it comes to daily practice. I have seen many a problem raised by workers with a specific body which then decided that the problem is best dealt with by someone else, and they make a referral; sometimes, several problems arise and they end up being dealt with cooperatively by two organisations. For example, there are male worker cases that HOME has handled, but the worker has been referred to our food programme, and at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in the dormitories, there was a good level of cooperation by and large between NGOs and government bodies over ensuring workers’ welfare, even though TWC2 could be pretty critical over broader issues of policy.

Question: What are the other steps that might be required for Singapore to work towards a more elderly-inclusive society?

Susana Concorde Harding: A few steps are needed to contribute towards making Singapore age-friendly and elder inclusive society.

First, we should include them by inviting them specifically and reaching out to them either directly (through the REACH platform) or through social service agencies whenever there is a national level discussion on any issue that will impact them.

Second, we should support the organising of elder-led clubs in every community/estate in Singapore (i.e., starting those which are already older estates) and support their formation into formal interest groups.

Third, we should support the inclusion of elders in existing groups. When people retire, their years of experience, knowledge and skills and attitudes can be leveraged by these organisations. Make representation a norm rather than an exception.

Fourth, we should regularly review existing schemes that are challenging the ability of our elders to “age well in the community” and to be contributing members of our society, especially those that affect their health and healthcare expenses, housing/living arrangements, long-term care, and caregiving.

[Ysien Lau](#) is a Research Assistant at IPS.

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