

‘Society’s collective decision vital for inclusiveness’

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SINGAPORE — Amid public attention on the Government’s shift to the left in its social policies in recent years, Acting Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung said government policies cannot be the silver bullet to achieving inclusiveness in society.

Rather, much depends on how various stakeholders in a society collectively decide to evolve — whether in terms of managing poverty, charting the direction of the education landscape, or hiring older workers, among other things.

“We don’t move left for the sake of moving left. We don’t move right for the sake of moving right. We decide on what policies will best serve the welfare of our people ... Ultimately, such choices are moral ones, political ones, and they require collective decision,” said Mr Ong.

He said this in a speech titled Inclusive Growth? at the Institute of Policy Studies’ annual Singapore Perspectives conference yesterday, before joining a panel discussion where he illustrated his point that individuals, businesses and society also have to take ownership of problems to overcome them.

For instance, when former GIC chief economist Yeoh Lam Keong, a fellow panellist, asked if the Government can commit to “decisively abolishing absolute poverty” as a long-term target, Mr Ong said who is more in need of help is a relative question.

Would someone earning S\$2,000 a month to support six children be better off than a single who draws S\$1,500, he mused. “Who is poorer, who is lower income? You need to take into account the burden (each person bears) ... So how do you judge who needs more?”

How much help is rendered to the lower-income, he added, is also dependent on the individual’s desire to stand on his or her own two feet.

Reiterating the Government’s belief in education and training as key drivers of progress, Mr Ong said various initiatives and institutions are in place for Singaporeans to deepen their skills, but these must be complemented with resilience on the individual’s part.

“Until we all find our specialty, and invest and dedicate effort — sometimes throughout our whole life, to develop our specialty, then we become excellent (and) have mastery — that is when we become competitive. There is no short cut. You have to spend your whole life working in one area and then become really good at it,” he said.

In terms of small and medium enterprises’ (SMEs) struggles with improving productivity and coping with competition, Mr Ong said the sustainable solution lies in bottom-up innovation, rather than relying solely on government agencies to point the way. The Government must refrain from earmarking specific sectors as “growing” and not others, he cautioned.

“At some point, in our economy, we must be able to allow bottom-up innovation and bottom-up discovery of our strengths, rather than top-down, agencies declaring (specific) sectors to invest in ... If we have a more bottom-up-driven economic growth, I think that bodes well for SMEs,” he said.

Singapore’s diverse economy also still gives SMEs here an edge over other those in “single-dimensional” economies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, he added.

Mr Ong also cited being inclusive towards older workers as another area where the ball lies in the court of non-Government stakeholders — in this case, the business community.

With Singapore’s population ageing, it is vital that younger and older generations of workers learn to work with one another, he said.

“Older (employees) are like stored value cards. The value is there, but you must have the right interface to tap it. That requires a new form of human resource practice,” said Mr Ong. “At the very start, never sort applications by age ... Interview the person (to) know what the person’s strength is and hire on that basis. Until we reach that, the Government is unable to solve the problem.”

Inclusiveness and growth are not mutually exclusive, said Mr Ong, but the bottomline is that the move towards inclusive growth is not straightforward. “Gradually, we are bringing everybody together and we must have a common agenda. There will always be more left policies, more right policies that will always need to be surfaced and debated ... Ultimately, people of Singapore will decide,” he said.

“Whatever our choice is, we must live with it, be satisfied with it, and even be contented with it. Because with contentment, then you can have happiness. And with happiness, comes progress and prosperity for our nation.” KELLY NG