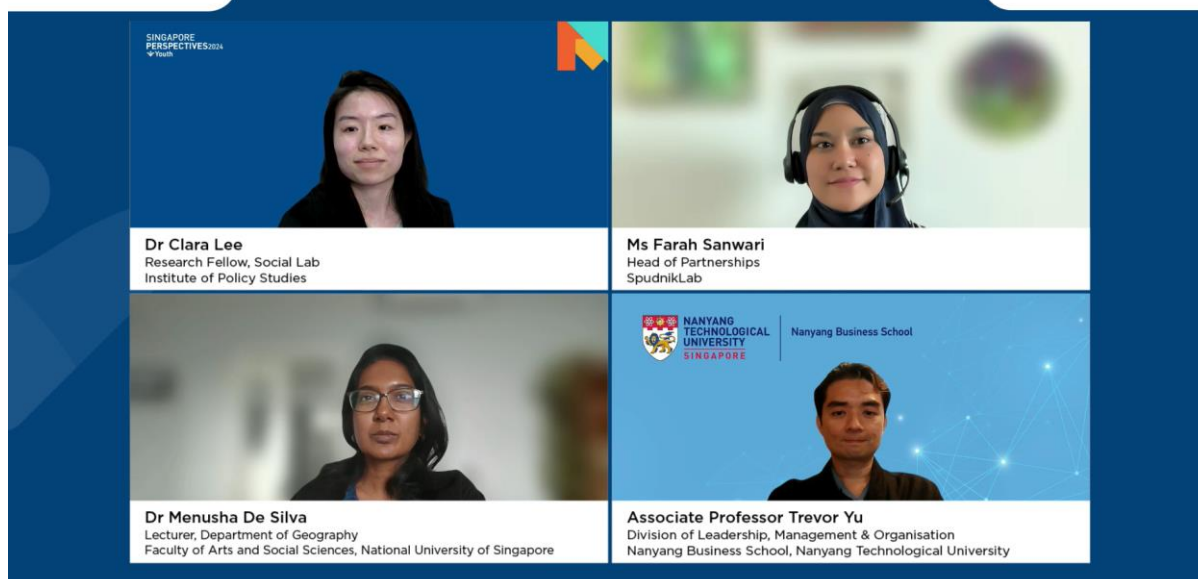


Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth The Terrain Ahead

By Wynn Tan

The Singapore Perspectives conference seeks to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme of this year's conference is "Youth", with discussions focusing on how today's young are coming of age at a time of unprecedented change on numerous fronts — socio-economic, technological, demographic, and even the "nuclear family".

In addressing the impact of some of these changes, this panel, titled "The Terrain Ahead", featured Ms Farah Sanwari, Head of Partnerships at SpudnikLab; Dr Menusha De Silva, Lecturer at the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore; and Dr Trevor Yu, Associate Professor in the Division of Leadership, Management and Organisation at the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University. They shared insights about the terrain that Singapore youths will inherit in the future and examined topics on climate advocacy, retirement, and caregiving, as well as the future of work. This session was facilitated and moderated by Dr Clara Lee, Research Fellow at the Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).



Caption for photo: Discussion among Dr Clara Lee (top, left), Ms Farah Sanwari (top, right), Dr Menusha De Silva (bottom, left), and Associate Professor Trevor Yu (bottom, right) during Panel 2 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2024 Conference.

Key Shifts in the Climate and Environmental Space

Ms Farah Sanwari, Head of Partnerships at SpudnikLab, kickstarted the panel by speaking about key shifts in the past decade affecting the environment and youth advocacy, its associated developments in recent years and the terrain ahead in the climate space for youths.

In the last decade, three key shifts have marked significant change in the climate and environmental space. First, in 2015, the Paris Agreement adopted at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP21, marked a significant event where countries agreed to substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions with the goal to limit the increase in global temperatures and financially support developing nations to help them mitigate climate change and enhance their resilience.

Second, there has been notable acceleration in renewable energy technology, making it cheaper to produce and deploy. In response to a global energy crisis, policymakers actively sought alternatives to imported fossil fuels, of which solar photovoltaic technology emerged as a favoured option, particularly in residential and commercial systems due to its rapid installation capabilities.

Third, the rise of youth-led climate activism, exemplified by Greta Thunberg's School Strike for Climate, has become a significant social movement. Thunberg's simple yet powerful message urged politicians to take urgent and meaningful action to address climate change and reduce carbon emissions. Her activism sparked a global response, with not only the youth but also world leaders acknowledging the need for change in response to the climate crisis.

In Singapore, there are notable efforts to align with global environmental shifts. Singapore is transitioning to a green economy and focusing on preparing the workforce for emerging jobs in sustainable industries. Emphasis is placed on businesses complying with Environmental, Social, and Governance standards to reduce carbon footprints across the value chain. This aligns with the Singapore Green Plan 2030, a multi-ministerial effort to ensure a comprehensive national transition.

Environmental Advocacy by Youths

According to a 2022 youth survey by *Todayonline*, when asked about how they felt when thinking about the impact of climate change, 45 per cent of youths feel fearful, 31 per cent felt sad, and only 24 per cent felt hopeful. Addressing such a bleak outlook, youths have led environmental advocacy and awareness initiatives on social media platforms, which provide opportunities for collaboration and learning on this topic. One example would be Qiyun Woo, an environmental communicator who founded an Instagram page @theweirdandwild to raise awareness and inspire action. In addition, events like the SG Climate Rally have raised awareness about environmental issues, including the inequities caused by climate change in hopes of sparking change.

Beyond individual advocacy efforts, Singapore actively supports youth engagement through national initiatives such as the National Youth Dialogues and National Youth Council Youth Panels. These platforms allow youths to share their views on future-oriented issues and co-create policies with ministries and government agencies. Furthermore, the Singapore Futures Youth Competition led by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, provided a platform for diverse youth backgrounds to discuss and envision the future.

On a global level, youths have participated in notable international events including the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and COP28, enabling them to not only comprehend Singapore's plans but to also communicate them globally.

The Terrain Ahead in the Climate Space

In concluding her presentation, Ms Sanwari highlighted the importance of preparing for the challenges posed by climate change, including food insecurity, heat stress and flash floods. Strategies like Singapore's "30 by 30" aim to address food security concerns, while considerations for indoor job opportunities are suggested in response to increasing temperatures.

As our youth contemplate the future, they will inevitably grapple with existential questions. These inquiries span a range of topics, including the meaning of a green and healthy economy, the significance of work, and the definition of family. Albeit profound, these questions are pivotal, stressed Ms Sanwari, in enabling youths to challenge their boundaries and contribute to a better future.

The Future of Retirement and Eldercare in Singapore

The second panellist, Dr Menusha De Silva, Lecturer at the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore, spoke about the future of retirement and eldercare in

Singapore, as well as the impact of migration on retirement and later life care, issues that are especially pertinent to Singapore's ageing population.

Dr De Silva highlighted two prominent trends crucial for contemplating future later-life care arrangements. The first is a noticeable increase in the rate of singlehood among younger Singaporeans and the other is about growing independence among older Singaporeans, with the vast majority preferring to live alone or just with their spouses, in their own homes. Together, these could mean that future elderly may lack adult children to care for them or prefer not to depend on children for care. While family is currently the primary line of defence for eldercare, Dr De Silva suggested the possibility of having to explore alternatives that align with the contemporary focus of ageing in place.

One such alternative is co-living with non-family members, a concept popular in the United States and European countries. This could involve renting out a room to a stranger with an implicit understanding that they will keep an eye on the older person, especially in emergencies, and perhaps accompany them for doctor's visits. The private sector is increasingly involved in creating independent living projects with senior housing that is integrated with care services. Despite rising housing prices, such arrangements are gaining popularity in Singapore as an alternative to nursing care.

Interestingly, individuals aged between 65 to 74 years old, often referred to as the "young-old", find these arrangements to be less of an option. The potential challenge lies in the fact that as the older population becomes more frail in their 80s, community engagement becomes increasingly challenging. This underscores the importance of caregivers entering the household at an earlier stage, typically in individuals' 60s or 70s. Consequently, there is a need to foster connections within households, promoting ageing alongside individuals with whom a strong rapport already exists.

The changing trends, particularly the rise in singlehood, prompt a re-evaluation of who the present young may consider as family in their later years. This extends beyond legal definitions, raising questions about whether friends, co-workers, or even paid caregivers could become their closest family members. All in all, the evolving landscape challenges traditional notions, urging a broader and more flexible definition of family.

Impact of Migration on Retirement and Later-Life Care

Dr De Silva emphasised that migration is a crucial factor to consider when exploring the future of retirement for the youth. The diverse nature of Singaporean society, in part due to migration and formation of transnational families, adds complexity to understanding later-life care.

The prevalence of marriage migration in Singapore suggests that marriage migrants and their spouses may seek retirement in their home countries, presenting challenges in defining family connections and care arrangements. Another noteworthy trend involves grandparenting migrants arriving in Singapore to be caregivers for their grandchildren. The visa category for these grandparenting migrants limits their social interactions in Singapore, thus impacting their ageing experience in the country even though they have been here for an extended period.

The emergence of retirement migrants among Singaporeans bring attention to changing perspectives on such options, largely attributable to the younger population's global outlook.

The younger population is receptive to the ideas of retiring abroad, viewing them not as a disregard for filial piety or evident of limited options within Singapore, but rather, as an exciting opportunity to be explored.

Based on retired migration research, the appeal of relocating to another country is particularly strong in one's 60s or 70s when individuals are relatively healthy and seeking exciting cultural experiences. However, challenges often arise in later years, when one is above 80 years old and intense care needs emerge, leading to dissatisfaction, potential isolation, and communication difficulties with caregivers.

Comparisons with the European Union (EU) highlight the concept of senior citizenship, where retirees can move freely within the EU, accessing healthcare and transferring assets. As young Singaporeans contemplate moving beyond the region, the question arises: can Singapore's well-established senior citizen initiatives be expanded to a regional scale within ASEAN?

Worker and the Workplace: A Future Perspective

The final speaker, Dr Trevor Yu, Associate Professor in the Division of Leadership, Management and Organisation at the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University discussed the new reality of work and its challenges, as well as what our youth desire as they enter the workplace, and what they can expect future employers to provide.

Assoc Prof Yu asserted that the future of work will introduce a new reality for careers, continually influenced by technological advancements, digital transformation, demographic shifts, social changes and global competition. This evolving landscape is encapsulated by the acronym VUCA — denoting increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity — a challenge that organisations, employers and workers must collectively confront.

Two key questions were tackled in the session. First, what will it take to motivate and engage the future worker; second, what kind of workplace will future employers need to create in order to make working worthwhile?

In addressing the first question, four fundamental motivations (A-B-C-D) were identified by past research on motivation. *Acquire* involves seeking material and intangible gains such as respect, self-esteem, and social status, by emphasising work engagement over mere compensation. *Bond* emphasises the need for meaningful workplace connections. *Comprehend* focuses on curiosity satisfaction and job mastery. *Defend* entails the motivation to protect against external threats, highlighting the importance of fairness and transparency in treatment.

As for the second question, the key focus is on creating an engaging work environment as jobs themselves are recognised as powerful engagement tools. Empowerment is the critical factor, and it can be instilled through autonomy and clarity in job design. Empowerment leads to increased personalisation of the work experience, involving idiosyncratic deals and flexible arrangements that align with individual preferences and aspirations.

Employees are expected to demonstrate increased proactivity in job crafting; in other words, reshaping existing roles to align with personal aspirations or considering the impact of their work on others. The key message is that future jobs should facilitate a connection between individuals and their work, thereby fostering a sense of meaning and engagement.

In the future, fairness and transparency will be crucial in the workplace. Employers must be accountable for resource allocation, ensuring that workers understand the reasons behind decisions. The future workplace should also harness human potential for innovation, fostering a culture of learning, knowledge sharing, and psychological safety. Principles for psychological safety include acknowledging mistakes, avoiding punishment, normalising requests for help, and emphasising learning from errors. Mental health and well-being will play a prominent role, with employers expected to show empathy and emotional intelligence, and provide counselling and wellness programmes.

Key takeaways from this session are that the future workplace will continue to be shaped, now quickened by technological change, demographic and social change and increased global competition and cooperation. Similarly, we should also expect the future worker to have to adapt and evolve in response to these forces. Moreover, the psychology of workers provides employers with insights on how to engage the future workforce effectively by tapping into the underlying motivations encompassed by A-B-C-D.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: What do you think our youths will support and care, in a practical sense, about the environment, ageing policies, as well as about employment rights and roles in Singapore for our youths today?

A: Ms Sanwari reflected on the future of retirement, emphasising the need to understand the profiles of individuals approaching retirement and the current state of being in their positions today. Dr De Silva echoed the importance of examining present challenges faced by the older population to understand the younger generation's perspectives. Questions were raised about building lasting connections, embracing multicultural societies, and addressing evolving demographic trends in Singapore. Assoc Prof Yu highlighted the growing societal focus on social justice, noting its impact on the future workforce's considerations. The future generation is expected to prioritise corporate social responsibility in employer choices, hence considering an organisation's impact on the environment, community, and sustainability initiatives. The key question for youth will be the legacy they leave for the next generation and that in turn shapes the future of work.

Q: When it comes to climate change policies, how does the government balance the expectations of youths with its state governing responsibilities?

A: Ms Sanwari discussed the transformation of environmental issues into a global priority, emphasising the need for youth involvement in policymaking. She highlighted the collaborative approach to policymaking, citing an ongoing proposal related to the Good Samaritan Law for food donation. The evolving role of the state was noted, with a more collaborative governance approach allowing civil society to contribute. Dr De Silva shared insights on societal changes influencing state responses, especially in the context of care and retirement plans. Ideational changes on the ground often precede state interventions, with the state responding to emerging market needs and ensuring regulatory frameworks. The importance of societal initiatives creating pressure points for the state to respond was emphasised.

Assoc Prof Yu focused on the role of the government in facilitating and leading initiatives related to environmental sustainability and diversity in the workplace. The government's facilitative role involves providing frameworks to hold employers accountable, particularly in sustainability reporting requirements. The discussion highlighted the government's central role in addressing social concerns and incorporating holistic metrics beyond financial aspects in evaluating companies.

Q: How can we have integrated policies to better manage crises such as climate change or ageing population as well as the multifaceted challenges at the workplace?

A: Ms Sanwari highlighted the need to encourage youth to engage in critical thinking about societal issues rather than relying solely on the state. Through youth workshops and future thinking programmes, she emphasised the importance of providing a toolkit for deep thinking, empowering them to recognise their agency in shaping the future. Dr De Silva addressed the challenge of facing a bleak future and stressed the significance of intergenerational communication. Learning from how previous generations handled challenges and making

choices provides hope. Intergenerational and international communication can offer valuable insights into overcoming difficulties.

Assoc Prof Yu discussed the core issue of giving youth a voice and ensuring that they feel heard. Transparency, clear communication and structures encouraging participation are crucial. Multi-channel communication, including social media, is essential to connect with the younger generation creatively. The emphasis is on creating a sense of transparency and openness in societal policies and practices, fostering motivation and participation from diverse sections of society.

Q: Would you agree that the more immediate concern for Singapore youth is about how they are going to take care of the seniors in their families, such as the anxieties about being part of the sandwich generation, especially in a time of rising cost of living?

A: Dr De Silva acknowledged the challenge of providing care, especially during economic difficulties, noting the need for creative solutions beyond state initiatives. She mentioned scenarios in other countries, such as retirement migration where families migrate to provide cost-effective care. Dr De Silva also recognised the complexity for policymakers and suggested exploring various options, including migration and alternative forms of affordable care. She challenged assumptions about the expectation that the younger generation should provide 100 per cent of care for the elderly, highlighting an ideational change where elderly individuals often prefer not to depend entirely on their children. Moreover, Dr De Silva emphasised the importance of understanding the balance between emotional and practical aspects of care, urging a re-evaluation of cultural assumptions, and fostering intergenerational communication to redefine the concept of care.

Q: How can youth environmentalism strategies shift to ensure that they are sustainable and truly impactful, and are not just engaging in greenwashing practices?

A: Ms Sanwari highlighted that the younger generations, particularly Gen Z, are well-informed and engaged in environmental issues as they leverage online platforms for in-depth analyses. She elaborated that environmentalists are moving beyond simple concepts like recycling, delving into complex topics like sand procurement for construction. The emergence of environmentally focused university programmes in the past six to eight years has empowered individuals to explore and address environmental challenges comprehensively. While acknowledging some feelings of discouragement among the youth due to the enormity of problems, she sees this as an opportunity for long-term solutions, emphasising the significance of their voices in effecting positive change.

Q: In your opinion, is the current education system and structure preparing the current generation or the current younger youths well for the future workplace?

A: Assoc Prof Yu expressed that Singapore's education system is highly regarded, especially when viewed internationally. He acknowledged the continuous improvement needed but believes that Singapore is on the right path in preparing the next generation for the future workplace. He noted significant progress in providing diverse pathways for students to pursue their passions and learn specific skills. Assoc Prof Yu emphasised the shift from focusing on formalised degrees to skills acquisition, encouraging a continuous learning mindset beyond

traditional milestones like graduation. While recognising the positive steps taken, he acknowledged that more work needs to be done.

Q: As an individual employee, how can I contribute to shifting the culture in my organisation to adapt the principles mentioned in the presentation?

A: Assoc Prof Yu emphasised the importance of being adaptable and discerning in expressing one's voice in the workplace. Instead of advocating for a singular mindset, he encouraged individuals to act as keen observers and critically analyse the work environment. Assoc Prof Yu suggested that the effectiveness of voicing opinions depends on understanding the diversity among both workers and employers. Different organisational cultures may prefer varying approaches, such as open and challenging discussions or more private, one-on-one interactions. Being aware and sensitive to these cultural signals can contribute to ensuring that one's voice is heard and enhance participation within the organisation.

Q: How can we make the discussions on ageing, climate change and the workplace more productive in involving the voices of not only our youths, but also that of the older generation, as well as perhaps that managers and companies that are invested in climate advocacy?

A: Ms Sanwari acknowledged the challenging nature of the future due to global developments, suggesting that the arts can play a role in making critical issues more palatable for understanding and encouraging participation. Dr De Silva reframed challenges as opportunities, proposing a shift in approach to caregiving, turning it into a business opportunity with ethical considerations. Assoc Prof Yu emphasised accountability for using one's voice positively, advocated for increased engagement across underrepresented groups, and highlighted the need to strike a balance between empowering the next generation and maintaining decisive leadership.

Q: We all know that the terrain ahead is not one without challenges. Are there any last words or words of encouragement that you would like to leave with youths today, as they face the future?

A: Overall, the speakers encouraged hope, mutual understanding and collaborative approaches to address challenges of the future. Ms Sanwari spoke about the importance of collaborative efforts and adopting a positive outlook to overcome future challenges. Dr De Silva underscored the significance of effective communication, especially during challenging times, and advocated for fostering connections to create a support network. Assoc Prof Yu suggested having more empathy as, with it, the potential to establish common ground increases, paving the way for collaboration and great achievements.

[Wynn Tan](#) is a Research Assistant at IPS Social Lab.

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