

Majority of S'pore residents feel environment should be prioritised over economic growth, jobs: IPS study

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SINGAPORE - A majority of Singapore residents feel that protecting the environment should be prioritised even if this results in slower economic growth and some loss of jobs, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed on Wednesday (Feb 2).

Three in five of those surveyed from November 2019 to March 2020 expressed this view, as opposed to the rest who said that economic growth and creating jobs should be the top priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.

This is up from 30.8 per cent and 43.3 per cent who supported protecting the environment in 2002 and 2012 respectively.

The study, *Our Singaporean Values*, presents findings from the World Values Survey (WVS), which has been conducted three times in Singapore since 2002. The latest one involved a nationally representative sample of 2,012 Singapore residents.

The WVS research project monitors and investigates people's values and beliefs globally, how they change over time and what social and political impact they have. It is conducted in 80 countries.

The previous two surveys in Singapore were done in 2002 and 2012, with about 1,500 respondents and nearly 2,000 respondents respectively.

The recent one found that Singapore's views on environment protection and the economy are similar to those in Malaysia, Taiwan and Britain.

Fewer people in the United States and Hong Kong agreed that environment protection was more important than the economy, with only about half of them saying so. Conversely, respondents in China, Switzerland and Sweden were more environmentally conscious, with at least seven in 10 agreeing that protecting the environment should be prioritised.

Those in Singapore who were younger, more educated and earned higher incomes were more likely to agree that protecting the environment should be given priority.

"It is likely that (the lower-income) were more concerned about their own livelihoods and therefore, chose to protect jobs and the economy," said the research team, which comprised Dr Mathew Mathews, Dr Teo Kay Key, Mr Melvin Tay and Ms Alicia Wang of the IPS Social Lab.

Individual efforts versus depending on govt support

More Singapore respondents continued to agree that their individual efforts should be incentivised, as opposed to the statement that income should be distributed more equally, the survey found.

However, they are now more likely - compared with 2002 and 2012 - to say that the Government should ensure that all are provided for, instead of taking the view that the onus should be on people to provide for themselves.

"Singaporeans want competition and meritocracy, but at the same time, they are also expecting a more compassionate way to address our socio-economic needs," IPS research associate Melvin Tay said at a media briefing on Wednesday.

This shift could likely be due to greater awareness, especially in the last two to three years, of groups in the bottom 20 per cent of the income spectrum who are struggling financially, added Dr Mathews, head of the IPS Social Lab.

This nuanced picture strikes a balance between a strong belief in capitalism and minimal taxation, while ensuring that there is government assistance for those in need, he said.

This also means that careful deliberation on the part of the Government is needed when it comes to policy measures on social support, he added.

The study also found that Singapore respondents are far more likely to feel that greater incentives should be provided for individual effort.

Out of 12 similar countries and regions, only Taiwan was more likely than Singapore to feel this way, while Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Korea, China, the US and Britain were among those that felt that there should be more income equality.

Japan felt more strongly than Singapore that it was the government who should support the needs of all, while Malaysia, China, Korea, Britain and the US were among those who were more likely than Singapore to say that people should take more responsibility to fend for themselves.

Those in Singapore with university degrees and who live in private property are also less likely to see socialist principles such as people having equal incomes, and the provision of unemployment benefits by the state as being key markers of democracy.

"Such response trends might probably be an indication of personal circumstances, where those who are better off may be adversely affected if societies push for greater egalitarianism," said the study.

Work and immigration

More than two-thirds of Singapore respondents agreed that work is a duty to society - a proportion that is among the highest globally. But they were much less likely than their counterparts in other Asian countries to feel that work comes first, even at the expense of free time.

Close to 40 per cent in Singapore said they agreed that work should come first, as compared with between 47 per cent and 81 per cent in Korea, Malaysia, Hong Kong, China and Thailand. An outlier is Japan, which had only 10.4 per cent who agreed with this view.

The importance of work, as compared with other priorities such as family, friends and leisure time, has also dropped for Singaporeans, the survey found.

While work was ranked as the second most important priority in 2002, after family, it dropped to being the fifth priority in 2020, with family, friends, wealth and leisure time taking precedence.

On immigration, about four in five Singapore respondents said the government should give priority to citizens over immigrants when jobs are scarce. In comparison, 69.5 per cent agreed with the statement in 2012. The figure was 87.4 per cent in 2002.

Similarly, over 70 per cent of respondents from Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan agreed that employers should prioritise locals over immigrants when jobs are scarce.

Groups that were most likely to strongly agree with the statement were the unemployed, followed by the self-employed. Those earning between \$1,500 and \$4,999 were also more likely to strongly agree with the statement compared with their peers who earned less, as well as those who earned more.

"One possible reason for this trend could be these 'sandwiched' groups are among the most likely to face competition for jobs from foreigners or immigrants in Singapore's labour context," said the researchers.

These groups usually compete for jobs that are also sought by immigrants with S Passes, which allow mid-level skilled staff to work in the Republic.

A majority of naturalised citizens and permanent residents in Singapore - 66.2 per cent - also agreed with this view, compared with 82.3 per cent of Singapore-born citizens who did so.