

Structural and mindset changes needed to improve wages and living conditions of foreign workers, say analysts

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SINGAPORE - Improving the wages and living conditions of foreign workers in Singapore requires a whole-of-society effort. Not only must the Government take the lead in making structural changes, but Singaporeans, too, must change their us-versus-them mindset, said analysts.

Dr Jeremy Lim, co-director of global health at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said on Wednesday (May 6) the Government's framing of Covid-19 as two separate outbreaks - one in foreign worker dormitories and the other in the community - was a "defensible" one from a public health perspective.

That is because different strategies were used to tackle each outbreak, he added.

Dr Lim was speaking at an online forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on the topic of "Migrant workers: Policy responses and lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic".

He noted that as infection numbers spiked in the dorms and overwhelmed the ability of their operators as well as employers to contain the disease, the Government intervened swiftly.

It brought in the army and police, and set up community care and recovery facilities for workers with mild symptoms.

SHIFT IN MINDSET NEEDED

But a whole-of-society mindset change is needed for the support to be sustained, said Dr Lim. "The mental model we have traditionally taken is that foreign workers are part of the community but separate; we accept that there should be different standards (for them).

"This goes beyond healthcare, and is driven by the mental model that citizens have different rights and privileges.

"But it is clear now that the previous paradigm, of relying on the employers and dorm operators alone, cannot work in a crisis of this scale and complexity. "

While many Singaporeans would agree that it is important to treat foreign workers well, they object to these workers living among them, citing health and safety concerns, said Professor Paulin Straughan, dean of students at Singapore Management University's (SMU) School of Social Sciences.

Public memory is short-lived, noted Mr Bernard Menon, executive director of Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC).

He pointed out that despite a surge in public discourse after the SMRT bus drivers' strike in 2012 and the Little India riot a year later, progress has "lagged behind expectations".

"In every crisis, it's always been my hope that these conversations continue," he said. "We need a platform where activists, non-governmental organisations, Singaporeans, dorm operators, employers and the Government can openly and honestly examine our conscience."

SMU's Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan said Singaporeans want to enjoy the benefits of cheap and transient foreign labour, but are not prepared to bear the cost.

"There has been too much focus on the value these workers bring to the Singapore economy, and not on the values that make up the kind of Singapore we want our children to grow up in."

STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Nominated MP Walter Theseira said Singapore's economy has become significantly more dependent on foreign labour over time.

Today, the non-resident labour force comprises 38 per cent of the total workforce, up from around 7 per cent in the 1970s, he noted.

It is "easier to buy rather than make", especially when the domestic labour force is more skilled and grows very slowly, he added. Without cheap labour from foreign workers, the cost of goods and services here could rise sharply.

But with many more such workers waiting in the wings back home, those who are here know it is easy to replace them. Hence, they do not have much bargaining power to improve their lot, said Associate Professor Theseira, an economist at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

And if the Government steps in to implement more generous minimum wages and living conditions, some types of migrant labour and industries could become economically non-viable in Singapore.

Agreeing, Mr Leonard Lim, country director at political consultancy Vriens & Partners, said low business costs remain a strong reason for companies to locate here.

There are consequences in rethinking the social and economic impact on which Singapore is built, and relying less on foreign labour, he added. "Public transport and housing infrastructure will take longer time to build - HDB flats and MRT lines could take longer to come onstream."

Dr Jeremy Lim said it is unrealistic to expect the private sector to do more, given that its primary concern is profit and loss. The Government should take the lead in making the necessary structural changes, he said.

"The workers are so far removed from the end-buyer, and the issues are so complex, that this is one instance where the Government has to show moral leadership and, either directly or through government-linked companies, lead the way."

Prof Theseira argued that the process is about collective responsibility and must also reflect the popular will.

"The reason change doesn't happen is because it's in Singaporeans' economic self-interest not to - there is a large group who benefit from low-cost labour."

But there is reason to be hopeful, he added, as new developments owing to Covid-19 - like remote working - are rapidly eroding the benefits of having large numbers of foreign workers.

"If one can get away with more remote working, why do expatriates need to be sent to Singapore, as this is more expensive? So the need to have so many foreign workers serving the population comes into question," he said.

"Plus, some industries may be suppressed for some time (due to the pandemic), so there is an opportunity to restructure."

Ultimately, said MWC's Mr Menon, it takes two hands to clap and society must be more accepting. "We have tried to rally the migrant workers to interact and hopefully integrate with Singaporeans, but learned quite a painful lesson over time that integration is a two-way street.

"If we don't have an equal number of Singaporeans willing to welcome and accept them, it's very difficult."