

## **ESM Goh calls for Panel to Review Social Policies; Coherent Framework that Pulls Together Different Components into a Social Compact Needed to Ensure Fair Society**

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**TODAY**, 8 April 2014

SINGAPORE — Much like how economic review committees recommend strategies for Singapore's economy, the Government or the People's Action Party (PAP) could consider setting up a social review committee that would recommend ways to improve the delivery of social services, said Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

Such a committee could involve the Government, key stakeholders and experts outside the Government and party, and complement the Government's efforts to study long-term social trends and challenges, Mr Goh said in an interview published in this month's issue of *Petir*, a magazine by the PAP.

The Government now takes social policy more seriously than in the past, when economic policy dominated, but what is needed is a coherent framework that pulls together different components into a social compact to ensure that Singapore remains a fair and equitable society, said Mr Goh, 72, who served as Prime Minister from 1990 to 2004.

More resources should also be devoted to social research as it is generally underfunded in Singapore. For example, Marine Parade GRC's efforts to provide facilities for the ageing population there could provide lessons for the Housing and Development Board as it plans new estates in Sengkang and Punggol, said Mr Goh, who has been a Member of Parliament (MP) for Marine Parade GRC since 1976.

Mr Goh also flagged the weakening of the extended family structure and the rise of transnational marriages — where older Singaporean men marry younger foreign wives — as social challenges.

Noting that he has seen more cases of older people seeking help at his Meet-The-People sessions as they have no children or are not able to turn to them for aid, Mr Goh said it was important to understand this phenomenon and take pre-emptive measures.

Meanwhile, challenges facing members of transnational families include wives who have difficulty integrating into Singapore society and how their children will perform here.

Marine Parade GRC MP Seah Kian Peng, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Social and Family Development, supported Mr Goh's suggestion of a social review committee. While the Government has always taken into consideration the social impact of policies, this needs to be given more weight, with Singapore's current stage of development, he said.

Sociologists TODAY spoke to also welcomed Mr Goh's suggestion of a committee to review social policies.

National University of Singapore (NUS) Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser said a social review committee reflects the need for a more holistic evaluation of social policy in Singapore.

The committee could include academics who work on social policy, civil society activists who work with disadvantaged groups and MPs from both the PAP and the Opposition who understand ground sentiments and can discuss how to provide welfare without inculcating a handout mentality and measures to ensure that no one falls through the cracks, he said.

NUS Assoc Prof Paulin Straughan said the committee would be able to study carefully the consequences of social interventions.

“To plan effective social policies, we should have a clear appreciation of the social dynamics at play, design comprehensive strategies to ease the disparities or situation and then pay careful attention to how these policies are communicated to stakeholders,” she said.