

Solidarity in an ageing society

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Themed “Together”, Singapore Perspectives 2018 on 22 January saw close to 10 speakers sharing their views on how Singapore could address its demographic transformations in an inclusive and integrated manner. Singapore Perspectives 2018 is the annual flagship event of Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKY School).

The full-day conference kicked off with a presentation by IPS Senior Research Fellow Mr Christopher Gee, who spoke about the benefits that Singapore stood to gain from its existing demographic trends — such as a populace that is more educated and living longer — as well as the attitudes of Singaporeans and permanent residents towards intergenerational solidarity.

A panel discussion questioning the assumption of increased competition for cultural, political and social space among the various population segments was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Deputy Director (Research).

The first speaker, Professor Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NUS Trustee, said that in Asia, culture, tradition and context played a role in shaping the acceptance of burdens and resource allocation. She noted that as Singaporeans lived longer, it is not only healthcare costs that could be a political issue; jobs and power decisions could cause conflicts and tensions as well.

Acknowledging that increased automation may eliminate some jobs, Prof Chan said, “The problem for us in Singapore, and in most societies, is to find the sweet spot — the jobs for seniors that have to be created now that some jobs are taken away.”

Prof Chan spoke of generational tensions in Asia as well as in other countries

Associate Professor Corinne Ghoh from NUS Social Work and Co-Director, Next Age Institute moderated the discussion on whether Singaporeans’ increased life expectancy was a boon or a bane.

Professor David Canning, LKY School Visiting Professor believed this was an asset for the country, but that labelling old people as dependents was a mistake. “If people save for retirement and have their own resources, there is no need to think of them as dependents,” he explained. In fact, retirement savings constitute an “incredibly important source of economic growth”.

Countries tended to view ageing populations as a problem, Prof Canning said, because it was inconsistent with current institutional arrangements. “To me, the very simple answer is that institutions have to change,” he said, referring to such entities as communities, employers, families and governments. He also advocated the adoption of an alternative measure comprising income, health and adjusted life expectancy, instead of GDP, as a yardstick for measuring human welfare.

Assoc Prof Ghoh (centre) moderated a panel discussion on whether Singaporeans living longer was an asset or a liability, with Prof Canning (left) and Dr Kanwaljit Soin, Practising Orthopaedic and Hand Surgeon as panellists

The lunch dialogue saw Mr Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security expounding on ageing with vigour. He said that although we were ageing more rapidly than most countries, Singapore is much better prepared, having put in place “resilient institutions” such as CPF LIFE, which offers lifelong pay-outs for future seniors and MediShield Life, a health insurance programme with lifelong coverage. “These national social risk pooling schemes mean that, to a larger extent than before, we are all helping one another to cope better together with the uncertainties associated with ageing,” said Mr Teo.

Mr Teo highlighted that communities and individuals must take ownership of ageing as well. “Only through a changed mindset and a concerted effort can we help make it possible for our seniors to remain in the workforce for as long as they are able and willing to do so,” he said.

Mr Teo said that national risk pooling schemes such as CPF LIFE and MediShield Life help one another to cope with ageing

The conference ended with a dialogue by Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat, moderated by Ms Debra Soon, Chief Customer Officer and Head, Family English Segment at Mediacorp. Mr Heng touched on three issues — demographic transition, technology advancement and the shifting of the global economic centre of gravity to Asia. The change in Singapore’s demographic pattern would have significant impact on issues such as employment, healthcare and transport, and Mr Heng stressed the importance of viewing these multiple issues jointly. Advancement of technology, he said, would require that Singapore make a determined effort to think about job redesign and indeed, the entire concept of retirement.

In closing, Mr Heng urged solidarity amidst increasingly rapid changes. “It means that it can be unsettling and all the more, it is critical that we stay together to tackle these changes and if we can put our hearts and minds together, I think we can do a lot more. So yes, our population is ageing but we can be an ageless society,” he said.

Held at Raffles City Convention Centre, the event was attended by more than 1,000 policy makers, academics, practitioners from non-governmental institutions, business leaders and students.