ICCS INTER-SESSIONAL EVENT

INSPIRING COHESIVE AND RESILIENT SOCIETIES

Event Report
24 - 26 September 2024

RSiS | S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

Event Report

24 - 26 September 2024
PARKROYAL on Beach Road, Singapore

Report on the Event organised by
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), Singapore

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The International Conference on Cohesive Societies Inter-sessional Event Overview

The ICCS Inter-Sessional Event, titled 'Inspiring Cohesive and Resilient Societies,' was designed to maintain momentum between the larger International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS). This gathering, held on 24 to 26 September 2024, brought together 100 religious and community practitioners, academics, researchers, and policymakers from around the world. The Inter-Sessional Event aimed to deepen our understanding of social cohesion challenges, share best practices, and develop potential solutions. Delegates participated in a series of lectures, panel discussions, skills workshops, breakout sessions, and networking and community engagement opportunities. In particular, the community engagement component of the Inter-Sessional Event showcased different aspects of the social cohesion ecosystem in Singapore.

The event was organised thematically with the first day providing the broad contextual issues impacting social cohesion. The second day aimed to help delegates understand the social cohesion landscape from various perspectives by exploring the different causes of societal division. Delegates also worked in breakout groups to identify emerging issues that may impact community dynamics. While the second day focused on the concept of 'divide,' the third day emphasised 'unity.' The last day was dedicated to generating actionable solutions for social cohesion issues. The event concluded with a reflective session, inviting delegates to contribute ideas for the upcoming ICCS Conference in 2025.

This event report is organised as follows: First, a summary of the main plenary segments for each day is presented. Then, an overview of the skills workshops and summaries of the discussions conducted during the breakout sessions are presented.

Opening Address: Connecting with Cultural 'Others' in an Uncertain World *by Dr Leong Chan-Hoong*

WELCOME ADDRESS

ICCS / THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
INTERSESSIONAL EVENT

SOUTHEAST ASIA HAS THE MOST CULTURALLY DIVERSE COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD!

INDONESIA ALONE HAS 800 LANGUAGES!

DIFFERENT FOODS ADD COLOUR AND EXCITEMENT to our DAILY LIVES...

JUST AS DIVERSITY ADDS TO OUR SOCIETY!

DIVERSITY as STRENGTH

WE NEED AN UNDERSTANDING OF EACH OTHER'S CULTURES AS WELL AS GLOBAL TRENDS!

SPEAKER

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong
Senior Fellow and Head
Social Cohesion Research Programme
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University (NTU)

In his opening speech, Dr Leong offered all guests and delegates a warm welcome. He highlighted the participants' diversity as half of them came from overseas. This composite mirrored the cultural diversity of Southeast Asia, a region with a rich tapestry of heritage, home to a population of over 650 million, and has a thousand native languages. Nation censuses from this region also reveal more than a dozen official religious classifications and denominations, and where most people speak more than one language. Apart from this, the region is also enriched by a large number of immigrants, expatriates and long-term residents from beyond.

Dr Leong emphasised that the diversity in both Singapore and the region does not necessarily mean that there would be chaos or a lack of unity; indeed, it could be a strength to be harnessed. An example of a common interest in Singapore is food; it brings people together regardless of their backgrounds. Diversity can make societies more resilient, but it can also increase vulnerabilities, especially if people are unaware of cultural sensitivities. The fact that societies are more digitally connected and economically interdependent necessitates that people address the different types and levels of tension both within

and between different tribal communities. Given that identity tribalism is on the rise, there is a need to address the different levels of tension so they do not become conflicts.

In order to do this, societies have to, first and foremost, understand the challenges within their own and other communities. This includes rituals, values and practices. Secondly, societies have to understand emerging trends both in the region and globally. Last but not least, it is also important to understand how we can connect with others who are different; how we can negotiate and expand common spaces; and how we can resolve differences peacefully and amicably. Our goal is to build a more cohesive society and to live together even if people do not always share the same opinions.

Dr Leong then shared more about the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) and the ICCS Inter-sessional Event. He reminded delegates that they were gathered to share best practices and to develop potential solutions. Such opportunities are important because having a cohesive society serves as the foundation for peace and development, particularly in troubled times. Fostering cohesion is vital in mitigating tensions on the ground, particularly relating to religious and racial divides.

ICCS is a global platform that promotes interfaith and multicultural dialogue with the aim to deepen common ground and identify actionable activities. The Inter-sessional Event is a prelude to the larger ICCS, similar to the Young Leaders' Chat, Channel and Champion (YLCha[3]) Programme organised in August 2024 by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth of Singapore. YLCha[3] gathered like-minded youths from Singapore and the region to share ideas and collaborate on topics related to social cohesion. As Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, President of Singapore, pointed out in a speech delivered during Pope Francis' visit, ICCS helps "strengthen interactions between different ethnic and religious groups, and actively weaken the ground for forces that seek to pull communities apart."

Dr Leong also gave delegates a preview of what they could expect at the ICCS Inter-sessional Event over the next two and a half days. He shared that the Inter-sessional Event was designed not just as a one-way dialogue with only presentations; rather, it was designed with a view that delegates would develop skills that they could then apply within their respective communities. Apart from presentations by esteemed scholars, there were two skills workshops — the first is an introduction to futures thinking and the other on conflict resolution. Both workshops were designed to equip participants with some basic knowledge and tools that could be relevant to their work. Additionally, two breakout sessions would create opportunities for participants to share their visions of collaboration. It was hoped that some actionable proposals, projects or programmes would emerge from these discussions. Over the next three days, the Event would be supported with opportunities for networking and community engagement. Google Singapore will show case how technology firms review and moderate divisive online content. This is followed by a visit to the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a ground-up initiative from the community to counter extremist Islamic ideologies.

Dr Leong highlighted that the feedback, friendships and networks built at this Event would shape the format and content of the larger ICCS. Delegates could contribute by letting the organisers know what mattered to them and their communities, and the conference themes that would be made relevant to

them, and help inform the individuals that the organisers should reach out to in ICCS. Dr Leong hoped that the friendships forged would inspire delegates to collaborate in doing good together with other like-minded individuals, organisations and policymakers.

Dr Leong ended his speech by giving an overview of the Social Cohesion Research Programme (SCRP) at RSIS, and his appreciation to all the speakers, facilitators as well as partners at the Singapore Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth for supporting the Event. He also thanked delegates for their active participation and wished all a fruitful time at the Event.
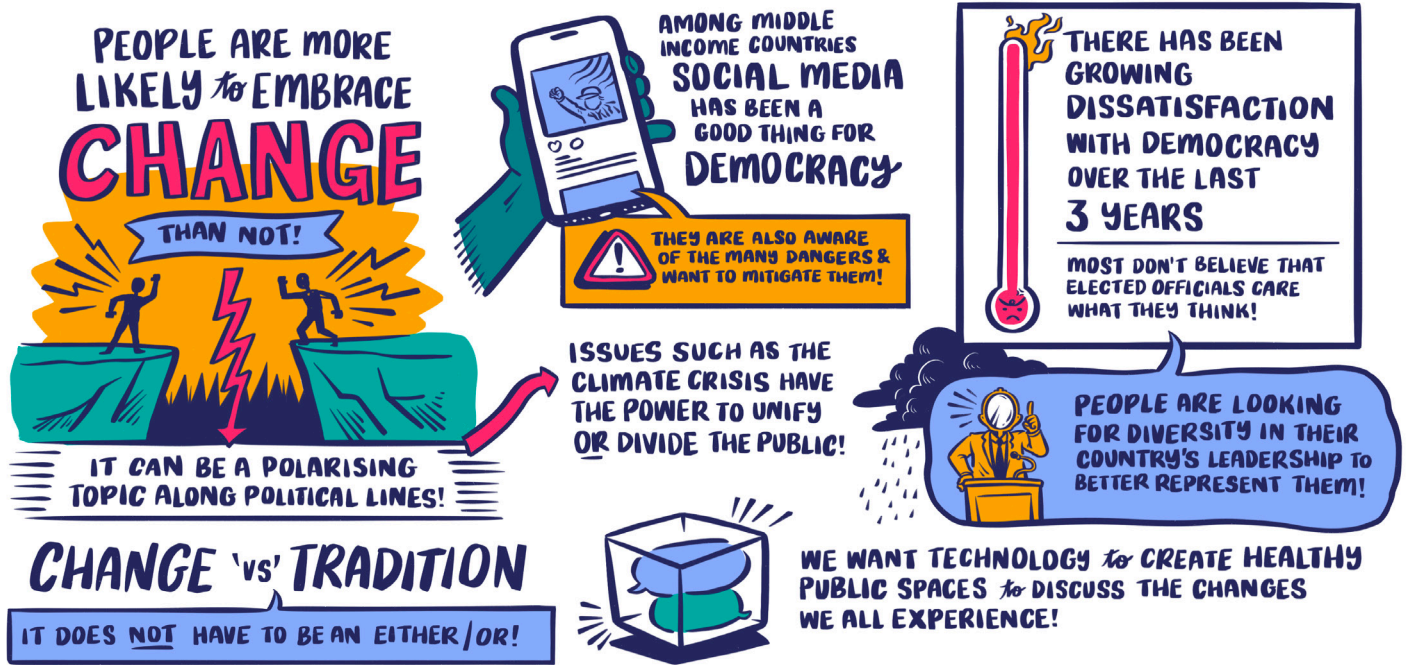
DAY 1 - PLENARIES

In Conversation: Harmony Across Cultures – Unveiling Global Social Cohesion Trends *by Dr Richard Wike;*
Dialogue Moderated *by Mr Sujadi Siswo*

SPEAKER
Dr Richard Wike
Director
Global Attitudes Research
Pew Research Center

MODERATOR
Mr Sujadi Siswo
Chief Editor, Malay News
Head, Malay Community Engagement
Mediacorp

In his lecture titled 'Harmony Across Cultures – Unveiling Global Social Cohesion Trends,' Dr Richard Wike first gave an introduction of the Pew Research Center and the Global Attitudes Research team, which studies public opinion comparatively across the world.

Tensions over Change versus Tradition

Dr Wike then elaborated on three trends relevant to social cohesion that his team at the Pew Research Center has surveyed in recent years. The first concerns tensions over change versus tradition. He was quick to highlight it does not necessarily have to be one or the other — one can embrace change yet respect traditions simultaneously. Yet, many debates today over social and cultural issues are framed by this overarching tension. Majority of those surveyed in this study — approximately 6 in 10 — believe that people are collectively better off if they embraced change. In Asia Pacific, Singapore stands out as the country with the highest share as 73% of those surveyed expressed that society would be better off if it embraced change. Views on this often differ rather significantly across age and ideological views. Specifically, those who are most open to embracing change include the younger generation and those

on the ideological left. This has been consistently found across the countries surveyed. As social and cultural issues often result in divides, the key question that needs to be considered is how such debates and changes could be managed with respect so that it does not lead to polarisation. In addition, national identities should be inclusive enough to enough to adapt to the changes witnessed today. The key is to avoid becoming polarised by the waves of social, economic and technological change sweeping across societies.

Attitudes Towards Democracy

His team has also examined attitudes towards democracy. They surveyed views that people have about the response and adaptation of democratic institutions to increasingly diverse societies. Since 2021, there has been growing dissatisfaction with democracy and representation across countries such as the United Kingdom, South Korea, Canada, Germany and the United States. Overwhelmingly, most of those surveyed do not believe that elected officials genuinely care about what their constituents think and they no longer feel that political parties and leaders represent them and their views. Thus, more have expressed a desire for more diverse leadership that is representative of them, for example, women, those from an underprivileged background, the young, business leaders and/or labour union members et cetera. Opinions about the types of leaders people want to see is also divided — those who identify with the ideologically right would prefer to see more business leaders in politics whereas those on the left would want to see more labour leaders in position of power. When it comes to having religious leaders in public office, however, opinions were mixed. There are a lot of differences both within and across countries; those who are religious themselves tended to want to see religious leaders in politics. Enthusiasm about having religious leaders in public office is lower in high income countries than in middle income countries such as those in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and Asia. Generally, there appears to be a crisis of representation where average citizens no longer feel that their voices are heard.

Impact of Technology on Social Cohesion and Democracy

Lastly, Dr Wike spoke about the impact of technology on social cohesion and democracy. The Pew research team explored people's views on the impact of social media on their lives and society in general. Broadly, most survey respondents viewed social media as having a positive impact on politics and society, especially respondents from middle-income countries in Africa and Latin America. Similar sentiments and findings were found in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia as well, but it is less likely so for Canada, Australia, parts of Europe and the United States. The negativity held in the United States appears to reflect the ideological divides at present. Even as people understood that social media can be divisive, lead to less civility, and make people more susceptible to manipulation, they remained hopeful of the impact that social media could bring for their societies. Respondents believed, for example, that social media can give people voices, raise awareness of certain important issues and change people's views on social media; when people feel that they lack a voice, online platforms become a means through which they can influence politicians and policymakers to effect change. Apart from these, respondents also felt that social media can make people more accepting of others from different ethnic and religious groups since it offers people a chance to engage with those different from them. He noted that despite understanding the risks and dangers of social media, average citizens around the world are still of the view that social media can have a positive impact on social cohesion and the forging of acceptance and

tolerance in societies. Technology, therefore, still remains a helpful tool for the creation of public spaces to have healthy conversations about the changes we collectively experience.

Discussion and Reflections

Major Global Forces Shaping Social Dynamics in the Next Decade
Dr Wike highlighted economics as another relevant force that would shape the world in the next decade, in particular the strain that economic challenges place on systems. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, people struggled with inflation, and other long-running economic challenges. In the U.S., there appears to be a gap between economic statistics and lived experiences; when surveyed, people are not of the opinion that the economy is doing well despite positive economic indicators. There has been a lot of economic anxiety in recent years with the global financial crisis as well as the downturn and inflation brought on by the pandemic. Some view economics as a zero-sum game where gains made by some come at the expense of others. As such, the presence of economic challenges along with the perception that the economy is doing poorly can make it more challenging to achieve social progress and social cohesion.

The Impact of Religiosity on Social Cohesion
When asked about the relationship between religiosity and social cohesion, Dr Wike mentioned that Pew has examined religious diversity before, and Singapore has emerged as the most religiously diverse country in the world. Religiosity is indeed a significant factor that can create both challenges and opportunities for fostering social cohesion. There are significant country differences in terms of the importance people place on religion — for example, in Sweden, 50% of those surveyed said that religion plays a less important role in society now, but in Indonesia, 83% of those surveyed remark that religion plays a more important role in society.

In developed countries, there has been a growing trend of 'nones' — individuals turning away from traditional religion — though many are simply finding new ways to embrace spirituality. In contrast, religion remains deeply rooted in middle-income countries, though it is also evolving in these regions. Often, shifts occur within religious compositions, such as the move from Catholicism to Evangelical Christianity in parts of Latin America. In summary, religion is not disappearing; it is adapting and evolving differently across the globe.

Measuring Social Cohesion
In response to a question about methods to measure and quantify social cohesion, Dr Wike brought up the work that has already been done by numerous institutions, such as Bertelsmann Stiftung and RSIS. The Pew Research Center does not have a particular index to measure social cohesion but its approach has been to ask many different questions to get at social cohesion from different angles, for example, people's attitudes towards other groups in society to assess trends of tolerance towards minority or out-groups. Attitudes towards groups such as the Jews, Muslims, and the Roma community in Europe have also been studied before. On adapting social cohesion indicators for non-Western contexts, Dr Wike agreed that there often exists a tension between wanting to keep global studies broad enough but also respect and capture the unique dynamics of a region or country. The Pew Research Center has

attempted to address this by conducting region-specific studies or delve into individual countries, such as those in East Asia, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America.

The Center has also explored questions on diversity and pluralism more broadly, asking, for instance, 'Do you think our country is better with ethnic and religious diversity?' Such questions yield valuable insights. Attitudes towards diversity and inclusivity increased during the pandemic as more rallied around the national identity against a common threat. This would need to be studied again as the world emerges from the pandemic. When democracy-related questions were posed, findings showed that individuals who supported diversity were generally more positive about democracy, while those less supportive of diversity tended to favor more authoritarian forms of government. Thus, beyond uncovering attitudes toward diversity, the Center has been able to examine how these views align with other perspectives as well.

Another important question that the Center often asks are questions related to social distance. Examples include, "How comfortable are you living near someone from another group? How comfortable are you working with someone from this group? How comfortable are you having your child marry someone from this group?" where these groups can refer to any other ethnic or religious groups. These questions move beyond simply capturing attitudes to examine interactions between those of different groups. What has been observed in the U.S. is the growth of affective polarisation where people increasingly no longer wish to live near someone of a different political affiliation. As such, these questions can also trace political divisions alongside ethnic and religious divides.

Climate Change and its Impact on Social Cohesion
In response to a question about climate change and how it might affect social cohesion, Dr Wike agreed that climate change could stress social systems — at present, it is creating economic challenges and displacing people. If left unaddressed, these issues could exacerbate themselves, but it might serve as a common threat or challenge that unites people. Political leadership is key in this instance in helping societies navigate such challenges — will they allow it to polarise and divide people? Or will they use this to rally people? Societies could go down either path — either they perceive the issue as a zero-sum game or utilise it to foster collaboration. The Pew Research Center has conducted surveys on this topic as well. When presented with a list of global threats — such as cyber-attacks, misinformation, diseases – climate change emerged as the threat that resonated the most with the average citizen. This is especially so for middle- and lower-income countries, such as those in Latin America, Africa and Asia. These regions are often already experiencing the impacts of climate change.

Spread of Misinformation and its Impact on Democracy
When asked about the damage that the spread of misinformation can cause, Dr Wike shared that recent survey findings revealed people have concerns about false information online. Specifically, people in the U.S. expressed concerns that the nation cannot agree on basic facts. Some are also worried that leaders—whether political or religious—are now able to manipulate citizens with misinformation. Apart from these concerns, however, they still see the upsides of information technology and wish to leverage

the positive aspects of these platforms. This suggests that most still hold a balanced view of social media and information technology.

The Need for a Global Identity

In response to a comment made about the need for a global identity as societies become more polarised, Dr Wike concurred that developing a sense of global citizenship is essential. There is variation both within and across countries on how close people feel to others around the world. When people feel connected, it has a significant impact on attitudes towards other issues such as international engagement and cooperation. Problems such as climate change and pandemics require cross-border solutions and these kinds of solutions are more likely to eventuate when people feel connections across borders. As such, social cohesion beyond the national level and across borders is just as important.

Challenges for Social Cohesion: Intra-faith or Interfaith Relations?

On the challenges that intra-faith and interfaith relations pose for social cohesion, Dr Wike was of the view it might not necessarily be entirely from one or the other; some of these challenges might emerge from both. These changes in censuses might not always be reflective of changes between religious groups but rather changes within groups, for example, adherents leaving behind more traditional expressions of faith for newer forms but still remaining spiritual.

Content Review Simulation Showcase *by Google*
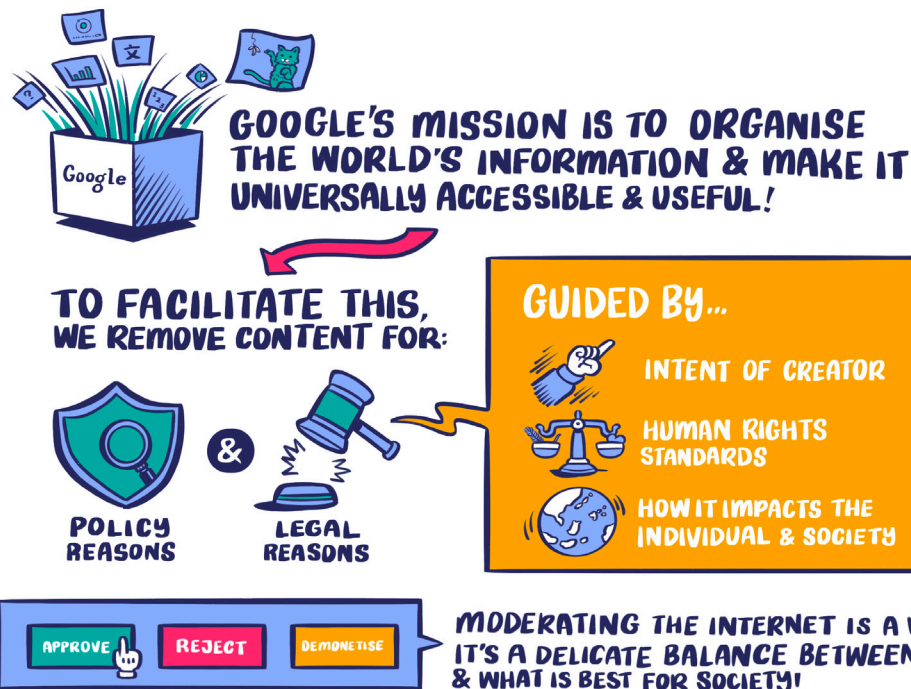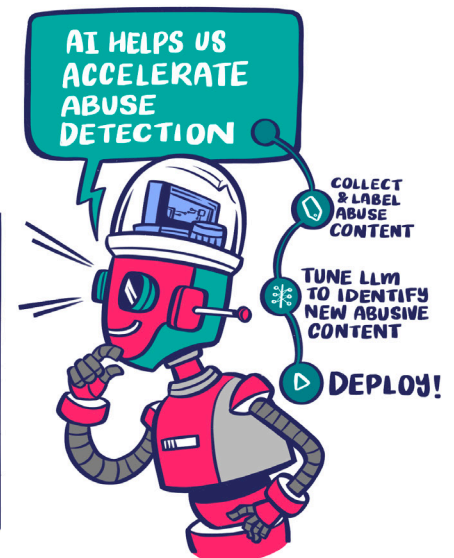
The ICCS Inter-Sessional Event sought to showcase the role of other stakeholders, such as technology companies, in fostering social cohesion. In this content review simulation showcase, the presenters from Google highlighted that their corporate mission is to organise and make the world's information to be universally accessible and useful for all. Of particular importance is the imperative to balance users' right for expressions with the responsibility that users ought to take in sharing their content. Google is most concerned about the relevance and quality of the information that they present to users. This necessitates the sorting of information and at other times, removal of content that might bring harm. To illustrate the complexities involved in content moderation, seven case studies were presented. Through an interactive platform, delegates were given the chance to cast their votes (e.g. to retain or remove the content) after reviewing each case. The presenters then invited some delegates to share their views in a lively discussion.

As the cases were reviewed, the Google presenters shared that content is often removed for the following reasons: Policy reasons — against Google's own policies or against the rights of another user; and legal reasons — involves violation of the laws of a particular jurisdiction. Simultaneously, decisions also need to be guided by the following considerations: intent of the creator, standards of human rights, the impact on individual and society, user safety, and economic benefits. As far as possible, Google will always try to comply with the local laws and public interest. Google does not desire to be the ultimate arbiter of truth. Lastly, the presenters shared that Google's goal has always been to achieve accuracy rather than be concerned with scale. As such, the platform relies on user feedback and machine learning but has also trained reviewers to determine appropriate action.

DAY 2 - PLENARIES

In Conversation: Inclusive Unity – Addressing Challenges to Social Cohesion in Plural Societies *by Prof Mona Siddiqui;*
Dialogue Moderated *by Dr Leong Chan-Hoong*

INCLUSIVE UNITY –
ADDRESSING CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL COHESION IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

ICCS / INTERSESSIONAL EVENT
THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

THE TENSIONS WITHIN PLURALISM HAS SPARKED A DEBATE: WHAT DOES EUROPE STAND FOR?

CAN A CULTURAL MELTING POT LEAD TO SHARED VALUES?

IDENTITY POLITICS TAKES AWAY FREEDOMS BY OBFUSCATING OUR SHARED VALUES

MULTICULTURALISM IS NEITHER THE HEAVEN nor HELL THAT EITHER SIDE WANT IT TO BE

THE MULTICULTURALISM EXPERIMENT IS ABOUT JUST LETTING PEOPLE BE

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOUR IN TIMES OF PEACE IS EASY... DOING SO IN TIMES OF CONFLICT IS THE REAL TEST!

PEACE, JUSTICE & COMMUNITY are FRAGILE...

WE MUST STAY VIGILANT AS WE HAVE NO OPTION THAN TO COEXIST

WE HAVE LOST THE ART OF HOW TO DISAGREE WELL!

SPEAKER
Prof Mona Siddiqui
Professor of Islamic
and Interreligious Studies
Assistant Principal for Religion and Society
University of Edinburgh

MODERATOR
Dr Leong Chan-Hoong
Senior Fellow and Head
Social Cohesion Research Programme
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University (NTU)

Prof Mona Siddiqui opened her talk by sharing her views on the August 2024 riots in the United Kingdom (UK). The series of riots dominated the media for weeks because it was deemed shocking and reflective of simmering anger amongst some communities. It was sparked by the fatal stabbing of three young girls in Southport followed by false speculation that the suspect was a Muslim asylum seeker. However, it turned out the killer was a young man of Rwandan descent who was born in the UK and not Muslim. She then read a personal reflection that she did for broadcast on radio when the riots first occurred. In it, apart from personal anecdotes of how she and her family processed the events of the riots, she reflected on how multiculturalism is neither the heaven nor the hell that opposing sides make it to be. Its stresses and strains have only been further intensified in recent years by issues related to migration.

Multiculturalism, Citizenship and Values

These events, she reflected, made some question that perhaps multiculturalism is not what people thought it was. In the 1960s, when Prof Siddiqui's parents first arrived in the UK for education, multiculturalism

was not thought of much because it was not seen as a political experiment yet. Religious and political identities were not discussed widely. Over the last 20 years, the gradual politicisation of religion has made religious prejudice almost like a new form of racism. The recent focus on citizenship has assumed a new urgency — how do governments create and nurture a sense of citizenship amongst ethnic groups and especially amongst Muslims? She holds the view that when people speak of the failures of multiculturalism, they are often referring to — though she does not want to overgeneralise either — Muslims minority communities.

Today, the issue of citizenship has become politically charged as a result of a growing perception that many are only citizens by birth but feel low engagement or loyalty to society as a whole, not just in terms of political participation but in their sense of emotional belonging too. For most Muslims, the UK is the only home they have ever known. For those whom this does not resonate with — and this applies to all ethnic minorities — there is a much deeper question about how those of different cultures can live meaningfully side by side. There may be no resentment or hostility but what exists is an indifference to difference.

She further argues that culture goes beyond dress, food and rituals. Cultural awareness and feelings of belonging, which she believes are essential for good citizenship, demand a particular mindset — an ability to have a vision for one's life along with an awareness of the limits of pluralism. It is the recognition that people coming from diverse backgrounds could still share commonalities. With a growing sense of nationalism today, the key question societies are really examining is whether a cultural melting pot could lead to shared values.

Religious Pluralism and Secular Liberal Democracies
While religious pluralism is often regarded as a positive and defining feature of Western democracies, the mix of different religious and cultural identities has raised some unique challenges for secular liberal democracies. It has required us to rethink the limits of cultural pluralism and individualism for integration and social cohesion. In recent years, in much of Western Europe, there has been a critical reaction to what is seen as exceptionalism for religious communities such as, notably, but not exclusively, the Muslims. This tension has led to a rethinking of the state's relationship to religious faith. This growing sense of political and social division has been exacerbated by the recent challenges of migration from multiple conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. People are now discussing the notion of the good versus the bad migrant, with a nostalgia amongst some that the UK, much like the rest of Western Europe, is changing due to excessive migration. These are mere perceptions; it must be noted that most migration to the United Kingdom is legal and that the majority of these migrants are Christians, and not Muslims. It is fair to say that a large majority of people come together in compassion hoping to restore social cohesion and not inflame religious tensions.

Underneath all of this is a legitimate existential question of what Europe stands for as a cultural project and as a unifying polity. Despite the presence of the established Catholic Church and Church of England, when speaking of societal norms and laws, it is widely recognised that legal and public structures are largely secular. On one level, this simply means that governmental institutions are separate from religious

institutions and that governments should neither enforce nor prohibit the free exercise of religion by its citizens. In other words, the state recognises religious choice as a matter of individual liberty.

These principles are based on the norms of democracies where political liberalism prevails. Political liberalism is complex but based on broad claims of equality, freedom and state neutrality with respect to religious observance. The state bears a moral commitment towards all its citizens, especially the minorities. Many politicians and activists have a deep desire to curb the effects of political rhetoric and populist movements which see the influx of refugees and uncontrolled borders as quite simply a threat to European civilisation. Such political rhetoric is framed as a civilisational debate about what Europe stands for and what Europe's future should be.

The structural dominance of sovereign states and nationalist priorities have resulted in various kinds of backlash against migrant flows often at the expense of humane or visionary solutions. Terms such as 'traveller', 'migrant', 'refugee' and 'displaced person' are often used interchangeably even though they have different connotations legally and politically. They have become intrinsic to the contested moral discourse around human dignity versus monetary resources, challenging convictions about race, identity, social cohesion and belonging. This has led to disputed concepts about good religion and bad religion, where religion, namely Islam, is seen to have contributed to the contemporary political and social unsettling of Europe and the West. These events and attitudes fuel the return to familiar historical tropes of pitting White Protestant Christianity against a non-White Islam, essentialising Islam as the archaic and often unwelcome 'Other' of a politically open and benign Christian Anglo-Saxon Europe. The beliefs and practices of Islam are too visible and have been deemed 'awkward' and a misfit with the way of life in modern Europe.

To conclude, she argued that the UK, notwithstanding declining church membership, is still a largely Christian nation, in terms of it being the dominant faith of the land and one which informs the cultural landscape. Institutional religion has declined as a cohesive force that gives meaning and stability to communities or as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, "Religion has lost its public hold." Nonetheless, the calendar, formal occasions, legal system, social and literary references and cultural memory in the UK are still largely rooted in the context of Protestant Christianity; most religious communities have no problems with this. Other religious traditions have been brought in through migration and for the most part, it would seem that the multicultural experiment was simply about just letting people be. The larger point about religion with all its complexities and its blurred boundaries still continues to be a central feature of human life, giving shape and meaning to our existence is often lost in the frequent media contestations about whether religion is a force for good or bad in the modern world. Conversations too often focus on legal cases which highlight negative aspects of different faith. Faith is often thought of as dragging societies into an intolerant past, whereas liberal democracies are construed as being based on secular societal and political norms which ground individual protected freedoms and provide hope for the future. Secularity as a process has been successful. The rise of democratic rule, the concept of civil society, the consciousness of human rights and individual freedom have all accelerated the growth of a secular modern liberal democracy. People make moral choices about how to live as communities within society and to recognise others as community who share the same space.

She believes that pluralism is both an ideal and a process, and it does not take much to undermine it, for example, the Israel-Hamas conflict and the tensions it has brought to light. In an age of hashtags, sound bites and fake news, societies need to accept that they face real challenges and that these challenges are not going to be eliminated by harsh words, race riots and culture wars, which have increasingly informed current politics. As such, societies are in need of a language of virtues, for example, humility, gratitude and empathy, to dominate politics; words matter because across the political spectrum, peace, justice and community are all fragile. There is no room for complacency, but neither, it seems, is there any alternative to coexistence.

Discussion and Reflections

Developing Identity and Sense of Belonging

In response to a question about how public intellectuals and leaders can promote the idea that Muslims in the West do belong, Prof Siddiqui opined that this sense of belonging has to come from oneself. She is of the view that if people feel that they do not belong, they should reflect on the reasons for feeling that way. As a minority, the onus is not just on the receiving society to make immigrants feel that they belong, but the immigrant must also reflect on the choices they made — for example, as a Muslim, why did they choose to settle in a country with a non-Muslim majority? The responsibilities of minorities are rarely confronted in pluralist societies because doing so has been framed as almost racist. There is some soul searching that needs to be done in minority Muslim communities — whilst one has the freedom to live by one's values and cultures, there are limits in pluralist societies.

Additionally, in public spaces, cultures and values often clash and collide. The responsibility is on leaders to facilitate disagreements well — people should be brought together to disagree, not just to agree. The art of disagreeing well has been lost. There are a lot of disagreements that are polarising on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter). Leadership is about bringing people into uncomfortable spaces — unless people are willing to confront difficult ideas and be self-critical, there will only be constant criticism of others, which would not lead to good societies.

Developing Shared Values

When discussing how shared values could be developed, Prof Siddiqui started off by reflecting on how European nationalism or the European project was largely an economic one, but nothing divides people as much as cultural divisions. When people's faith or culture are critiqued, the conflict immediately becomes construed as an identity issue. People do live with shared values, but communities are splintering due to issues such as the Israel-Hamas conflict and migration.

There is a perception that White, secular Europe is under threat from migration and the existence of too many cultures. This is certainly not true, but there are some communities who are antithetical to what secular Europe stands for — this is true not just of minority communities, but of indigenous host communities as well.

There is a struggle against liberal democratic values because many are used to freedom now. These values have been taken for granted and not many are willing to sacrifice them in the name of social cohesion. There are common shared values, but sometimes people claim that there are none just to stoke divisions. The UK, specifically, is a laissez-faire society where people are free to live the way that they would like to, but it has been taken for granted. As such, leaders, politicians, lawyers have a duty to remind the broader society of acceptable ways to live together cohesively.

Building Bridges between the Muslim and non-Muslim Worlds Amidst Ongoing Conflict
In response to a question on the ways to build bridges between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, Prof Siddiqui first cautioned that the Israel-Hamas conflict is not a Muslim-non-Muslim issue; seeing it as such is erroneous. It has in fact brought many communities together; people have tagged on many of their own grievances onto the conflict. The Global South is now raising their voices and exerting their power as leaders on the world stage. This is a relatively new development for leaders of the West, who have largely interpreted this as a threat to liberalism.

Framing it as an issue between Muslims and non-Muslims perpetuates the schism and makes for an even more polarising debate. There are more non-Muslims who are fighting for the Palestinian cause than there are Muslims. What was initially a debate about nationalism has now become a debate about religion. Whenever religion is added to a conflict, all it does is inflame it further. There is a need to steer away from the religious rhetoric and view the conflict through a geopolitical lens.

The Relevance of Protestantism in the United Kingdom
On the significance of Protestantism in the UK, Prof Siddiqui argued that while religion has receded into the background for many, it does not mean that structurally the Church of England is no longer the established Church; in fact, the Church of England continues to have a presence in life in the UK. Indeed, some white nationalists claim that the UK is a Christian nation because any debate involving religion immediately becomes more volatile. It is up to other adherents of the faith to refute such claims by re-centering values such as humility, gratitude and forgiveness. There is no alternative to co-existence. Although societies have become secular, the power of religious language is ever-present. It is easy to use religion for identity politics, but also as a form of racism.

The key is to consider how values intrinsic to different cultures can be negotiated. There are some communities who feel that they are compromising on their values if they speak about issues that all have in common. These values have to be negotiated, not just in theory but in practice as well. It is akin to saying that democracy requires full equality to function. Full equality is an aspiration, but for democracy to function, people need to feel valued. Even when contested, it is not done so in a demeaning manner. People think that progress is linear, but it is not. Even when there appears to be harmony or equality, equilibrium can still be lost from time to time. Human nature has an element that resists being ordered and administered, yet this is precisely what makes social cohesion meaningful and valuable.

Diasporas and their Relations with their Home Countries

Prof Siddiqui observed that there are many diaspora communities that look back at their home countries as refuges. They often want to shape their home countries in a way that they cannot do in the countries they currently live in — it is therefore simultaneously a rejection of the values of the societies they live in as well as a kind of projection of the values they desire on the country they left behind. There is an emotional tie to these nations and it is certainly valid, but it must be asked what kind of values are projected.

Effective Mechanisms for Resolving Conflicts in Multicultural Societies

On mechanisms for conflict resolutions, Prof Siddiqui is of the opinion that interfaith initiatives are oftentimes easy when everyone is getting on; however, the true challenge arises when conflict occurs. She believes that loving one's neighbour in times of peace is easy but loving one's neighbour in times of crises constitutes the real test. During times of conflict, people need to consider who their true neighbours are — their neighbours are not those who live halfway across the world, but rather the community who lives nearby and whom they interact with on a daily basis. Having a functioning peaceful society ultimately boils down to two things: no violence on the street and respect for the rule of law. The absence of violence, however, cannot be taken as mere happenstance; it has to be cultivated.

Panel Discussion: Identifying Causes of Social Division and Exclusion *by Ms Wu Ye-Min and Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar*; Dialogue Moderated *by Prof Paul Hedges*

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Regional Director, South and Southeast Asia
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PANELLIST
Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar
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MODERATOR
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Ms Wu Ye-Min

Ms Wu Ye-Min began by speaking about how societies are seeing less peace as more countries become embroiled in wars. Today, there are two theatres of conflict today—one in Europe and the other in the Middle East. The world can ill afford to have a third theatre of conflict in Asia. Although discussions about geopolitics may seem distant and removed from everyday lives, they ultimately revolve around human behavior, communities, and the choices societies make. The intensity of violent conflict has also been increasing. Violence today has escalated to its highest since the Cold War; 110 million people were displaced last year due to violent conflict. Beyond such traditional conflict, pastoral and agricultural communities are also finding their subsistence and way of life under threat due to demographic pressures,

climate change and desertification. This is true not just in regions such as the Sahel, but also in Asia where chronic droughts and climate-related disasters have become more frequent due to rising temperatures. As these places become increasingly less inhabitable, people will move to regions where they hope they can have a future. As witnessed from history, when people move, it creates tensions in communities, especially when there is competition over limited resources.

Tribal Identities

Ms Wu cited an interesting simulation by Professor Daniel Shapiro from Harvard that unveils some of the reasons for conflict. At the beginning of this simulation, participants are split into six groups. In these groups, participants are asked a series of questions, such as what they may consider the most important value of this new tribe. After fifty minutes of discussion, they have to choose just one out of the six tribes to represent them. Across over two decades of this research and conducting this exercise numerous times across the world, most people have not been able to reach an agreement. The issue of identity and a lack of empathy are some of the reasons for this. Participants often feel so connected to their new group identity that they refuse to take on a new one in order to save the world. A threat to an individual in a tribe is seen as a threat to the entire community. Also worth noting is how quickly an adversarial mindset forms in which each tribe is convinced of their own rightness. People therefore insulate themselves from learning about the other person's perspectives.

Assumptions and Misperceptions

Another reason why people fight apart from identity and the lack of empathy is the issue of assumptions and misperceptions. As economist Christopher Blackman puts it, people are overconfident creatures; have a tendency to assume that others think like them; demonise their enemies and attribute to them the worst motives; and hold mistaken beliefs at times. These assumptions and misperceptions can affect our actions and the way we treat others.

Uncertainty and Fear

The third cause for conflict lies in uncertainty and fear. This has been seen in armed groups which exploit the uncertainty of situations to maximise their opportunity for gain. Others, out of uncertainty, choose to deliver the first salvo to signal their strength early and deter others from acting against them.

Strategic Considerations for Conflict Resolution

Ms Wu then turned to the question of how social cohesion can be strengthened. She suggests that when dealing with conflict, one should always include three strategic considerations. The first is to consider if the process of dispute settlement is in itself entrenching grievances. This consideration came about because international lawyers found that oftentimes whilst trying to de-politicise conflicts, they were actually entrenching grievances in communities. The second is to examine the relationship between the parties involved. If relationships are not healed, some of the conflict could be perpetuated. Lastly, one should always question if the process addresses the root causes and how it does so; band-aid solutions that do not address root causes should be avoided.

She subsequently expanded on the specific mechanisms to address conflicts. The first is to have sortition and deliberation to encourage inclusion. An example of this is in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) utilised sortition or random sampling to convene citizen representatives across gender, ethnicity, age, education and electoral districts. Over four days, HD guided them in discussions on the risks of social media as well as the frameworks that govern or guide such social media use. Following these deliberations, citizens drafted a Citizens Charter on the responsible use of social media during elections. The work did not simply stop there. Thirty-two political parties signed a statement to support this Charter, agreeing to restrain from harmful social media behaviour.

Second, she emphasised the importance of having civil associations for diverse communities to act collectively. The United States Institute of Peace did a study in South Asia where they found that communities in which there was little interaction among members of different ethnic groups were most likely to engage in ethnic violence. What Ms Wu found fascinating was what the study deemed as civic associations—it ranged from film clubs to trade unions. What mattered was that parties were brought together beyond just having dialogue, giving them an opportunity for sustained interaction.

Finally, having more impartial peacemakers and mediators working on the ground can make a difference. Conflict is to a certain extent inevitable, but violence is not. When two parties cannot resolve an issue, a third party can be brought in to deescalate or resolve the conflict. If a peacemaker or mediator were available in every neighbourhood, then perhaps there would be less fighting. This has been evident in the Southern Philippines where HD empowers local mediators to resolve armed conflict. Over the last decade, violence has decreased in Sulu, for example. Some of the previously 'no go' zones have become beach resorts and now host a thriving tourism industry. These local mediators are now training others in next districts and towns, which speaks to the success of these processes.

Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar

Mr Raaj Kumar started his presentation by sharing the approach that has been adopted in the Inter-religious Organisation (IRO) Youth Wing. Catalysed and refreshed in 2019, the IRO Youth Wing comprises youths from all ten official religions in Singapore. Their ages range from 15 to 35, some even pushing 40. The Youth Wing aims to foster unity with passion and purpose, catalyse conversations and create friendships. They achieve this through exposing youths to different places of worship, traditions, cultures and ethnic groups as a way to have them experience a one-degree shift in perspective and learn to humanise the other.

Information Overload

He explained that one of the reasons for social division amongst youths is the information overload that they are constantly exposed to. Bombarded with an array of different arguments, youths are often conditioned to believe certain perspectives without being critical of the information they are receiving. If these content producers and their arguments are not regulated, certain individuals may be able to push their narratives and agenda and youths might find themselves divided in the process.

Youth's Need for Purpose

In Mr Raaj Kumar's view, youths are often searching for a higher purpose that would allow them to express who they are. He thus recommends the implementation of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework where the strengths and assets of youths are identified and given a platform to be developed. When youths are able to utilise their strengths and sublimate their energies to co-create a meaningful activity, the outcomes might exceed expectations. For example, youths today are active on social media platforms such as Tik Tok. To build upon this interest, they could be encouraged to learn more about videography or cybersecurity.

Including the Excluded

Lastly, Mr Raaj Kumar urged the audience to consider how voices that have not already encountered this space can be brought in and included. Youths active in the space of social cohesion seem to share similar demographic characteristics, for example, educational level, household income et cetera. It is only by including other voices that people can get themselves out of their echo chambers. For Mr Raaj Kumar, this has been one of his challenges in the IRO Youth Wing. To address this, the Youth Wing has had to actively engage in outreach to seek out more communities but this is only possible with the building of trust. He elaborated that adopting a social constructivist approach has helped him in creating a safe space for youths to thrive in. He believes that it is only within a safe space where youths can feel empowered to act on the causes that they are passionate about, create friendships and bring communities together. In co-crafting initiatives, the key is not homogenise views, but to allow for diverse, pluralistic views. With that, it is hoped that youths can go beyond acceptance to advocacy and create a deeply embedded supportive structure.

Discussion and Reflections

Platforms to Gather Parties with Different Pre-existing Assumptions

In Mr Raaj Kumar's work, he attempts to ensure that the relationships built are so deep that conflicts do not develop. The work that he is engaged in is therefore very proactive and often involves partnerships with various organisations within Singapore. It is an ongoing process; there is a need to constantly examine if there are gaps or organisations that have been inadvertently excluded. Once these gaps have been identified, strategies are crafted to address them.

According to him, there is a current initiative to create and sustain a circle of youth friendships within the ASEAN region in the form of an ASEAN Youth Network. With this network in place, when tensions or conflicts occur, there is already an effective channel of dialogue, and this would help tackle misinformation and disinformation.

Ms Wu shared two examples of engagement platforms. The first being schools since young students usually have not developed strong prejudices yet. Specifically, conferences and platforms that gather youths and professional mediators are important since participants typically bring the skills they have acquired back to their schools or organisations, which is a good start. The second example is confidential backchannels that bring those in conflict together for them to converse and build trust away from the

attention of the media. Ms Wu remarked that politicians are often invited to these backchannels too, but it is not openly publicised as confidential exchange is only within the walls of the room. This does not come easily; it often requires several rounds and years of work to build trust.

The Importance of Mediators and Mediation Training
According to Ms Wu, in some contexts or regions such as Sulu, external evaluators are brought in to monitor and evaluate processes so that practices can be improved, although this is not consistently done. Mediators also want to be recognised for their efforts since they sometimes spend years mending these relationships. Therefore, ways to offer recognition to people who have volunteered to mediate professionally should be considered.

Mediation training is another important focus area. Ms Wu brought up an example the Peacemakers' Conference that has been organised in Singapore over the past ten years. It gathers high school students and trains them over three days through simulation exercises. Professional lawyers volunteer to provide feedback for these youth participants. The practice of mediation is therefore brought into schools and peer support leaders are encouraged to acquire the skill. Mentors are invited to guide these young leaders.

Root Causes of Social Division
Mr Raaj Kumar remarked that whilst factors such as wealth inequality are problematic in and of itself, what is most critical is how these factors are framed to create divisions between communities. Indeed, it is when these factors are interwoven with certain trauma, grievances or perceptions that crystalise these divides. For example, some communities might begin to create or strengthen their in-group identities when they feel excluded. Individuals should also deepen their understanding of their own traditions lest they be exploited by those seeking to further their own agenda.

Favourable Conditions for Dialogue
Mr Raaj Kumar began by sharing what he believes would facilitate good dialogue — a willingness to reach out to communities with sincerity and respect; a willingness to be open, authentic and vulnerable; as well as a willingness to practise active listening so that we hear the concerns of the other party. There is no need for large initiatives; when we do small things with great love, people will open up.

Ms Wu then spoke about the importance of timing and momentum in facilitating effective dialogue. The way dialogue spaces are curated to foster trust can determine the success of these dialogue efforts. As much as possible, these safe spaces should be away from the media.

She also highlighted the need for dialogue interlocutors, such as mediators, to be self-aware even as they are practising active listening. When interlocutors are not trained to be self-aware, it is easy for them to forget what assumptions they are bringing into the room, how they are projecting these onto others, as well as how to read others. There is often a difference between a bargaining position and what the true interests of others are, but this can only be differentiated with self-awareness. It always boils down to the fundamentals of fear and uncertainty — people are concerned about how the issue at hand affects them and their identity — but these cannot be uncovered until interlocutors learn how to read the true interests of others.

Community Engagement – Visit to the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Gallery

To learn more about community efforts towards social cohesion, delegates visited the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Gallery located in Masjid Khadijah. Established in 2003, the RRG was a voluntary initiative by individual ulama and a community of asatizah (Islamic teachers and scholars). Its key objective is to rehabilitate detained Jemaah Islamiah members through correcting misinterpretations of Islamic concepts along with the extremist ideologies that detainees have been indoctrinated with. As detainees' families are often affected as well, assistance and counselling are also extended to these family members. Apart from counselling and rehabilitation, the RRG commits to a range of outreach programmes, such as forums, dialogues and conferences, to educate the wider public on key Islamic concepts that are prone to misinterpretation.

At RRG, delegates were given a guided tour of its Resource and Counselling Centre along with the recently launched Majulah Gallery. Delegates learnt — through the interactive exhibits on display — the history of the RRG, the reasons for its establishment as well as the essential role it has played in fostering social resilience in Singapore.
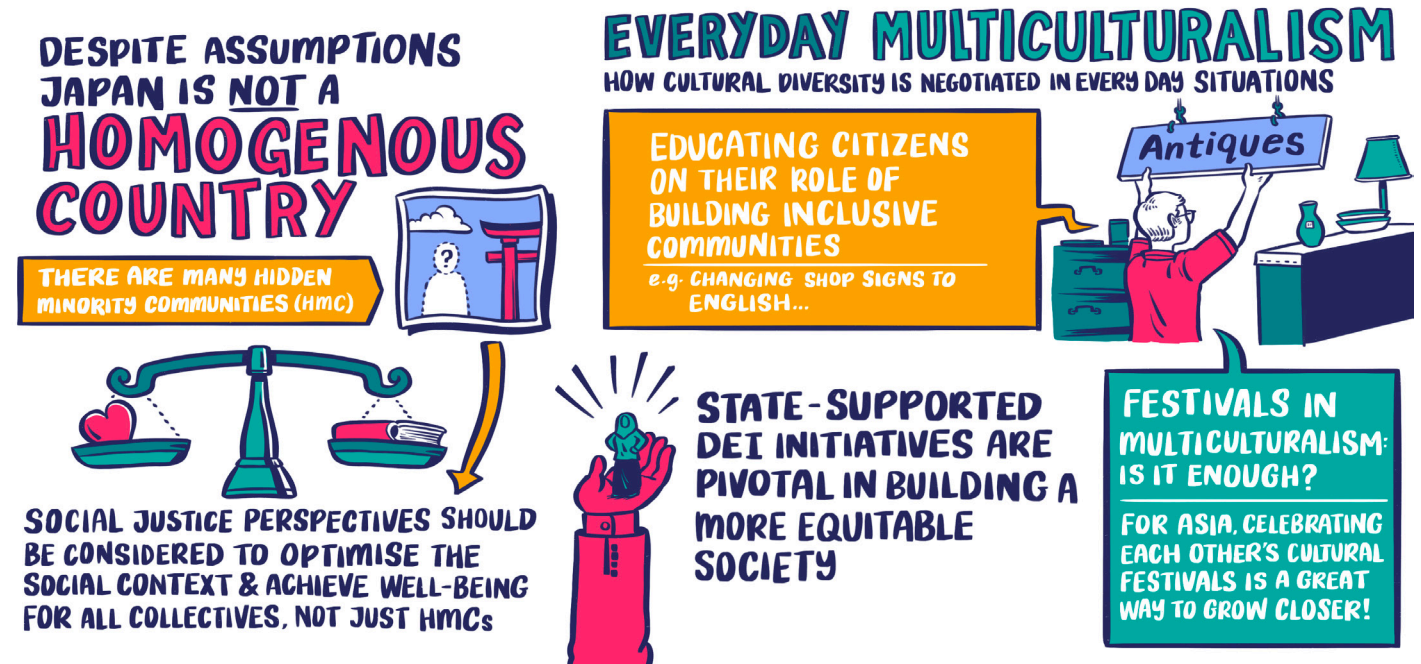
DAY 3 - PLENARIES

Panel Discussion: Building Bridges – Best Practices of Social Cohesion *by Prof Toshiaki Sasao and Dr Selvaraj Velayutham; Dialogue Moderated by Ms Li Xueying*

BUILDING BRIDGES
BEST PRACTICES OF SOCIAL COHESION

ICCS / *THE* INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
INTERSESSIONAL EVENT

DESPITE ASSUMPTIONS JAPAN IS <u>NOT</u> A **HOMOGENOUS COUNTRY**

THERE ARE MANY HIDDEN MINORITY COMMUNITIES (HMC)

SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVES SHOULD BE CONSIDERED TO OPTIMISE THE SOCIAL CONTEXT & ACHIEVE WELL-BEING FOR ALL COLLECTIVES, NOT JUST HMCs

EVERYDAY MULTICULTURALISM
HOW CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS NEGOTIATED IN EVERY DAY SITUATIONS

EDUCATING CITIZENS ON THEIR ROLE OF BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES
e.g. CHANGING SHOP SIGNS TO ENGLISH...

Antiques

STATE-SUPPORTED DEI INITIATIVES ARE PIVOTAL IN BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE SOCIETY

FESTIVALS IN MULTICULTURALISM: IS IT ENOUGH?
FOR ASIA, CELEBRATING EACH OTHER'S CULTURAL FESTIVALS IS A GREAT WAY TO GROW CLOSER!

PANELLIST
Prof Toshiaki Sasao
Professor of Psychology, Education and Peace Studies
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Foreign Editor
The Straits Times

Prof Toshiaki Sasao

In his sharing titled 'Tackling the Neighbourly "Ghosts" of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: A Community Psychologist's Musings on Multicultural Struggles and Intervention Strategies for Asia and Beyond', Prof Toshiaki Sasao opened with a few questions and observations about diversity and multiculturalism in Japan. He first asked, "Are we appreciating and embracing diversity or everyday multiculturalism in various sectors of Japan?" He personally believes it is both a "yes" and "no". The second question is, "Who are the stakeholders in policy and intervention work on diversity issues in Japan?" His view is that it appears to be top down for now. The third is, "What would the future hold for societies given the increasing number of foreign workers, students and families amidst fewer children and more elderly past the age of 65?" On this, Prof Sasao argues for well-being and social connectedness as the ultimate goals to work towards

from a social justice perspective. Despite the common perception that Japan is homogeneous and collectivistic, Japan is actually more diverse than usually thought. While it is true that the country does not have too many immigrants — they make up 2-3% of the Japanese population — there is a deep diversity in terms of values and belief systems.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Programmes in Japan

Currently, there are a range of programmes in Japan that promote diversity and multiculturalism, but public attitudes and sustainability of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programmes remain questionable. There appears to be a focus on 'me' as opposed to 'we' cultures; the nation has become more inward-looking, especially since the pandemic. This points to a changing social ecology in Japan. It is critical to ask, then, who makes decisions on matters relating to diversity. Diversity seems to be disguised in the shadow of a "peaceful and harmonious" facade.

Hidden Minority Communities (HMC)

A couple of years ago, Prof Sasao proposed the idea of 'Hidden Minority Communities (HMC)' or 'Foreign Minority Communities (FMC)'. This group of individuals are not necessarily defined by clear ethnic, religious or cultural markers and categories; instead, they are defined as groups or individuals intentionally neglected or ignored in society due to historical-cultural reasons, value differences, or their distance from daily routines in homes, schools, neighbourhoods and/or workplaces. Once identified, HMCs are often superficially regarded as exotic and unfamiliar. Some examples of such groups include Zainichi Koreans, people with disabilities, elderly with dementia, et cetera. Not enough attention is paid to these issues. What is needed then is a social justice perspective which would optimise the well-being for all communities, not just HMCs.

Social Justice in a Multicultural Context

Prof Sasao then introduced the way he conceptualises social justice in a multicultural social context. For social connectedness to be nurtured in families, schools, workplaces and communities, both access to as well as the quality of life resources must be elevated. These include both contextual factors (e.g. power relations, economic indices) and individual factors (e.g. acculturation and language). While the end goal is framed as social connectedness instead of social cohesion, the two concepts are actually related. Psychologists would examine social connectedness on an individual level whereas social cohesion is the corresponding macro-level variable. Diversity and inclusion has now become an outcome in itself, but the goal should actually be collective well-being.

Recommendations for DEI

In closing, Prof Sasao made a few recommendations for community psychology principles to be applied to better promote DEI. Firstly, there is a need for more face-to-face interactions and collaborations amongst the stakeholders involved in designing and implementing interventions, so that all can be empowered. Secondly, the 'process' of diversity is just as important as the outcome. There should be more focus on the methods adopted to achieve the outcome.

Thirdly, it is also crucial to utilise qualitative data alongside quantitative data; this mixed methods approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of DEI on multiple levels. Fourthly, as it is in any community psychology-based intervention research, a balance between scientific rigour and humanitarian values must be emphasised; an integration of both is most ideal. Finally, discussions about religion, justice and peace must be introduced for policymakers, teachers and leaders, not just for students.

When done right, the outcome of these strategies should result in communities "dancing with ghosts", that is, living with and enjoying the specialness of others, instead of simply "living with ghosts" in their neighbourhood.

Dr Selvaraj Velayutham

In his presentation titled 'Convivial Labour and Urban Commons', Dr Selvaraj Velayutham began with a quote by sociologist Stuart Hall: "The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the 21st century." This question, which frames the issue of how people might forge a civic culture out of difference, has preoccupied sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and other social scientists. Out of this central problematic has emerged concepts such as urban citizenship, cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and activism. Stuart Hall was reflecting on the multiculturalism that the United Kingdom has found itself in as those from the Commonwealth began migrating there; the West now has to deal with the 'other' in its own metropolitan centre.

In the global South, the experience with diversity has differed. There has also been stratification in terms of income inequalities et cetera and all these should be investigated perhaps more so than religious and racial divides. Countries such as Singapore and Japan have seen an influx of both temporary and permanent migrants, resulting in friction.

The Concept of 'Everyday Multiculturalism'

Dr Selvaraj, along with his colleagues, began thinking about everyday multiculturalism conceptually. In Sydney, Australia, diversity due to waves of migration is evident in the languages found on signages across the city. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in xenophobia as racism; some fringe groups do not allow for the acceptance of diversity due to their desire to maintain the rights of a particular group. Even as settler societies move away from their old ways of maintaining white nationalism to embrace multiculturalism, the existence of such fringe groups raises questions about the management of national space as well.

Developed against this backdrop, everyday multiculturalism is a meso-level methodological and conceptual approach to understanding everyday relations, practices, possibilities and outcomes of everyday living in super diverse societies. Central to this is the defamiliarising of the familiar where the mundane, the obvious and the taken-for-granted is questioned. This would help reimagine cultural difference and diversity not as antithetical, but as something that can be successfully negotiated.

While divisions, tensions and racisms always exist, there are just as many positive engagements that deserve attention in ordinary spaces, such as workplaces, streets, public housing estates et cetera. Some

examples include acts of service, gift exchanges, language, humour, food, festive occasions, urban commons, workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, playgrounds, food centres, coffee shops, et cetera.

Everyday Multiculturalism in Australia

Dr Selvaraj referred, in particular, to Ashville, a suburb in Sydney, Australia as an example. The statistics from the 2021 Australia Census reveal a high degree of cultural plurality. The suburb has seen waves of migrants since the post-war era in the 1950s — Greeks, Italians, Polish, Indians, Nepalese, Chinese et cetera. Shops signs would have been all in English, then Polish, Greek and Italian, before becoming Chinese since the 2000s and now in Nepalese and Indian languages. To celebrate this diversity, Dr Selvaraj and his colleagues initiated a street exhibition to document the history of this particular street of neighbourhood shops. In the process, the team discovered that there were many who have enriched the local suburb historically over time. Trips were organised to visit these shops and business owners were encouraged to translate their signages into other languages so as to open up to a broader customer base. This educates people of their roles as citizens and creates a sense of community rather than alienation.

Informal Sport Events in Singapore as an Example of Everyday Multiculturalism

Another poignant example is the case of informal sport events in Singapore. At the field on which the former Kallang Airport used to stand, several thousand temporary migrant workers of various nationalities — Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, Bangladeshi — gather on Sunday for a sports carnival. This becomes a spontaneous gathering and revival of the space. Those of different races and religions come together to play informal sports without the need for any formal stakeholders and/or state support. The everyday multiculturalism perspective looks at such cases where multiculturalism is celebrated without any kind of formal intervention and/or support.

Transient Migrants and Social Cohesion

Dr Selvaraj opined that when speaking about social cohesion, societies ought not to forget about transient migrants, particularly in Singapore where close to a million belong to that category. In other words, social cohesion should not just be about citizens and permanent residents but involve others who are just as much a permanent fixture in the demography.

Multiculturalism as a Form of Labour

In closing, the growing scholarship on multiculturalism has identified situations, practices and spaces that enable an openness to others while also acknowledging that cultural intermingling can be hard work. This hard work should be seen as a form of labour, not simply because it is hard, but because of its productive, transactional and cumulative nature, creating communities and identities over time, for example. Approaching these challenges as problems that can be worked through acknowledges both the ambivalent and hopeful dimensions of social change. It also spotlights the active role demanded of all stakeholders from individuals to governments in fostering more hopeful communities.

Discussion and Reflections

Research Methodologies for Studying Japanese Culture

On the best research methodologies to adopt for understanding the dynamics of Japanese traditions and religious values as well as how they influence the everyday behaviour of Japanese youth, Prof Sasao believed the answer depends on who the target group is. Depending on researchers' expertise and strengths, some might prefer to utilise quantitative methods whereas others might favour qualitative interviews. He personally prefers to conduct in-depth observational fieldwork to uncover people's beliefs and behaviours. However, he highlighted the reluctance of Japanese to speak about religion, especially since the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack.

Shift from 'Everyday Racism' to 'Everyday Multiculturalism'

When asked about the shift from 'everyday racism' to 'everyday multiculturalism', Dr Selvaraj clarified that everyday multiculturalism does not negate, and in fact includes, microaggressions and everyday racism as well. By focusing on 'everyday multiculturalism', he could explore the subtle types of racism that were distinct from institutional racism. He explained that the concept of 'everyday racism' emerged from a long tradition of the study of racism. He specifically cited the work of anthropologist Philomena Essed who examined the way racism manifests in taken-for-granted interactions as opposed to racialised policy, for example.

'Everyday Multiculturalism' as a Form of Labour

Dr Selvaraj explained that 'everyday multiculturalism' was coined as a conceptual lens to understand diversity in multicultural societies. In particular, it represents an attempt to move beyond scholarship that has traditionally focused on institutional frameworks and policies enacted to accommodate differences in rapidly diversifying countries. In Australia, for example, policies have shifted from being assimilationist to integrationist, and finally to multiculturalism, but even multiculturalism as a term has disappeared from recent policy statements. The objective is to observe everyday interactions and highlight their potential, not to romanticise them. It is differentiated from being 'cosmo-multicultural' where interest in the "Other" is limited to the exotic aspects that can be consumed. This has been commonly observed in White settler societies, which is contextually very different from Singapore.

The labour of everyday multiculturalism does not always have to be the burden of the individual. For the example raised during Dr Selvaraj's presentation, it was a collaborative effort that involved researchers and the community, but also politicians and institutions, and councils. He emphasised that everyday multiculturalism, whilst focused on everyday interactions, is not separate from broader social integration efforts.

The Impact of Interfaith and Interethnic Marriages on Identities

On interfaith and interethnic marriages, Dr Selvaraj cited the example of Australia, which has some of the complex interethnic and interfaith marriages. Marriages between those who have hybrid identities could help society move away from essentialist notions of identity.

Future of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Asia

On DEI, in Dr Selvaraj's view, the implementation of affirmation action for the Dalits in India is perhaps an analogous example. In part, this has been positive since those from the lower caste can now access educational opportunities. However, there has also been significant backlash from other segments of society. Nonetheless, strategic intervention remains important. The same can be said of the indigenous population in Australia. Instituting such policies is critical to give the disadvantaged more opportunities. However, politicians do have to make it clear that these policies are not undermining others or creating gaps between communities but rather would ensure that society becomes more equitable.

Social Cohesion in the Next Five Years

In relation to Japan, instead of thinking about social cohesion, Prof Sasao prefers to consider everyday interactions and connectedness. In his opinion, there appears to be a move towards a 'me' culture in Japan. There is not enough awareness of the importance of social cohesion since it is not emphasised in education or business. As a community psychologist, he finds this trend concerning.

Dr Selvaraj shared how heartened he was to witness numerous academics, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and stakeholders actively engage in efforts towards social cohesion. He believes that it is important to keep faith despite the megatrends we are observing around us, whether they are political polarisation, ideological shifts or geopolitical conflicts. Citing efforts to care for the marginalised in Australia as an example, he reiterates the need for such work to be recognised.

Breakout Presentations: Celebrating Collaboration
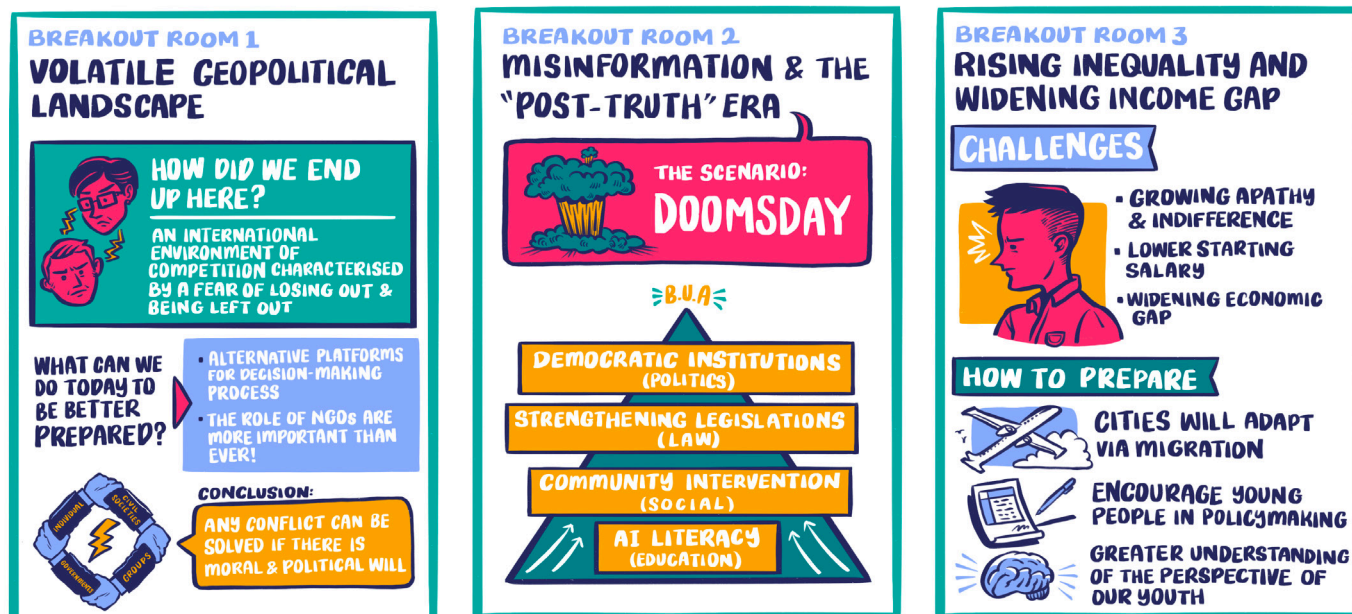
Across the event days, delegates participated in different breakout sessions where they discussed community divisions and developed potential solutions to divisive trends. In this plenary segment, one group from each breakout room was invited to present the outcome of their discussion and their proposed solutions. The top three trends identified via voting were 'Volatile Geopolitical Landscape', Misinformation and the "Post-Truth" Era and 'Rising Inequality and the Widening Income Gap'.

Volatile Geopolitical Landscape

The group working on 'Volatile Geopolitical Landscape' began their presentation by raising issues over the South China Sea and the ongoing conflict in Myanmar as examples of existing tensions in Southeast Asia. These cases, they argued, underscore the complexities involved in regional or multilateral decision-making processes leading to stalemates. This has in turn created a geopolitical environment characterised by competition and the fear of being excluded from key conversations.

In their view, this landscape has resulted in the following challenges:

1. Distrust between countries in the region;
2. Difficulties in reaching consensus, for example, within ASEAN;
3. Lack of confidence in leadership and multilateral structures;
4. Reduced influence of multilateral organisations.

This uncertainty and lack of trust has, however, given civil societies and non-governmental organisations opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes. As a result, more platforms and collaborative means of decision making can be developed. This might give youths and women a space to be involved

in co-creating solutions. As a result, consensus and shared values can be developed in a more fair and equitable manner. The presenters concluded that no conflicts would go unresolved as long as we have moral or political will from individuals, scholars, experts, civil societies and governments.

Misinformation and the 'Post-Truth' Era

Next, the second group examined 'Misinformation and the "Post-Truth" Era'. In their view, having excessive misinformation in society can lead to the fragmentation of societies and nations as tribalism and polarisation prevail. The existential threats societies are faced with today require consensus—the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for concerted efforts. However, it is increasingly difficult to arrive at a global consensus when the divides within societies are becoming so deeply entrenched. There is a lack of dialogue at global platforms and therefore, a resulting lack of multilateral solutions from international institutions. The lack of accountability from, or worse, weaponisation of misinformation by politicians has only fuelled conflicts and solidified rifts, thereby diverting our attention from the issues that really matter. For example, given the current circumstances and our lack of concerted action, climate change will continue until it becomes irreversible a few decades later, leaving future generations in dire straits.

Furthermore, the speed of technological advancements means that regulations are oftentimes not developed in time to manage the new tools that emerge on the market. Technology giants, which are driven by their desire for profit-maximisation, are often not adequately regulated as well.

As such, the group believes that as a society, we need to prepare ourselves so the doomsday scenario does not become a reality. Perhaps societies need to practise what the sociologist C. Wright Mills has once termed 'pessimism of the mind, optimism of the spirit' to stay driven to solve the critical problems we are encountering.

The group proposes a comprehensive bottom-up approach that involves the following:
- Democratic Institutions (Politics): Requires political will
- Strengthening Regulations (Law): Needs to be discussed at the international level
- Community Intervention (Social): Cultivate literacy and develop robust ethics, for example, literacy and ethics to guide the use of artificial intelligence

Rising Inequality and the Widening Income Gap

Finally, the third group examined 'Rising Inequality and the Widening Income Gap'. The scenario that they imagined could result from this trend is a disgruntled younger generation. They argued that while meritocracy has worked well before, fissures are starting to appear due to reduced opportunities, causing dissatisfaction amongst the youth.

The following challenges might arise from this scenario:
- Growing apathy and indifference towards social responsibility;
- Many not being able to afford the basic necessities of life due to the rising cost of living;
- Many not feeling compelled or having the capacity to perform acts of services for others;

- Widening gap between rich and underdeveloped countries;
- Increased migration as people seek cities that will allow them to have increased purchasing power — mass movement from developed to developing countries

However, this scenario could also create the following opportunities:
- Lifelong learning and greater independence amongst the older generation;
- Greater awareness globally of this issue;
- Rethinking and renewing priorities in life amongst the youth — striving for intangible instead of material goals

The group suggests that societies can do the following to be better prepared for this scenario:
- Youths should be rallied and encouraged to participate more in policymaking
- Paradigm shifts should be made in terms of understanding behaviours and perspectives of the younger generation — it should be recognised that different generations view life priorities and equilibrium differently

Celebrating Ideas: Towards ICCS 2025
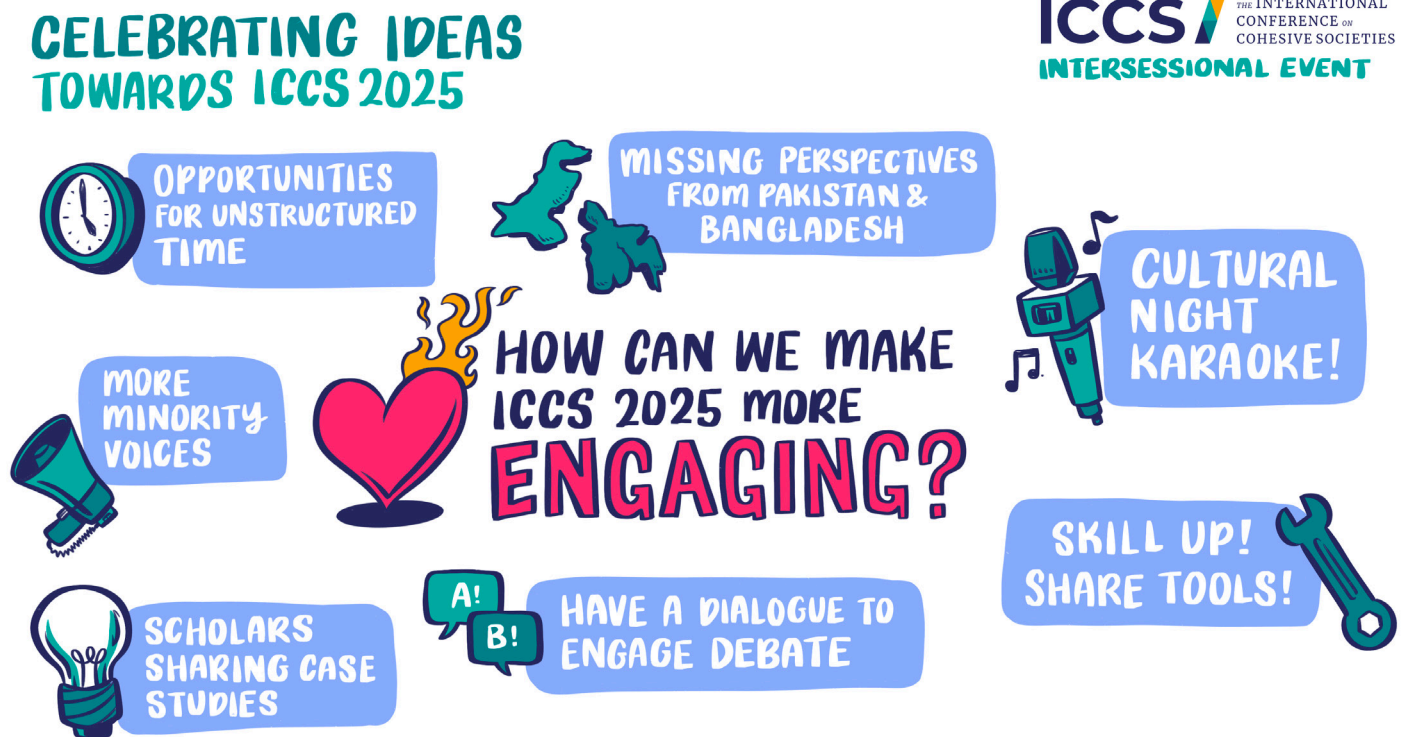
This session, facilitated by Ms Cheryl Chung, invited delegates to reflect on the ICCS Inter-sessional Event and contribute ideas for the upcoming ICCS. Delegates gave their inputs both via Pigeonhole and the roving mics provided. Some ideas that were shared include:

- Having a Cultural Night where the diversity of cultures can be showcased;
- Having panels with a mix of academics and practitioners so that different angles and approaches to topics can be discussed;
- Having panels that focused on specific case studies where successes and failures could be shared;
- Adopting an UnConference format where time is set aside to allow delegates to gather and discuss any themes of their interest;
- Heritage walks where delegates can visit districts and institutions of significance;
- Visits to residential areas to learn how communities live alongside one another in Singapore;
- The use of various genres of resources or modalities of delivery — such as films and documentaries — to spark conversations and dialogue

Closing Remarks *by Dr Leong Chan-Hoong*

CLOSING REMARKS

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong
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In his closing speech, Dr Leong reflected on the intense 2.5 days of discussions at the ICCS Inter-sessional Event. Specifically, he noted that Day 1 focused on an overview of global changes and how that shape the experiences and perceptions of different communities. Thereafter, on Day 2, the programme focused on the forces that shape conflicts and underlying tensions, before turning towards the actionable solutions to bridge divides on Day 3.

Dr Leong shared that when the Event Organising Committee first began planning this event, they took a user-centric approach; they considered what the programme might mean to the 'users' who, in this case, were the practitioners, religious and civic leaders, scholars and policymakers. Instead of adopting the typical conference format, the organisers wanted to introduce different skills such as conflict resolution and futures planning to help delegates to conceptualise the future so as to make a difference. Whilst delegates gathered at the Event were all experts in their respective domains, they might not know of similar challenges experienced by others in other fields. This was where the organisers had hoped that the Event could make a difference by enabling delegates to see that there were overlapping sentiments and shared challenges across disciplines, for example, polarisation resulting from misinformation, the

misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI), systemic marginalisation of communities et cetera. The interactions across the inter-sessional event have hopefully inspired camaraderie in delegates that all of us are navigating this uncertain world together. As the saying goes, "You never walk alone." No matter what it is that delegates are trying to tackle or solve, no one should ever have to walk the journey alone.

Finally, Dr Leong took the opportunity to thank everyone who had contributed to the success of the event, including the Singapore Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth which had been supporting RSIS and SCRP in planning this event. He then thanked speakers, facilitators and rapporteurs for their contributions and noted that their work had deepened the mindshare of shared social norms of inclusion and close existence. Lastly, he thanked participants for their contributions and presence at the event, which signals a commitment on their part to building cohesive and resilient societies.

SKILLS WORKSHOPS AND BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS

The ICCS Inter-sessional event sought to equip delegates with skills and knowledge that they could apply to their work in their respective communities. Two skills were presented in smaller workshops: futures planning and conflict negotiation. For the latter, delegates attended a two-hour workshop facilitated by the experts from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. For the future planning workshop, delegates were first brought through the basic principles of futures thinking. Thereafter, delegates were placed breakout groups to discuss two pertinent questions: what did they foresee as the biggest challenges to social cohesion, and what solutions could be developed to address these challenges. Facilitators were on-hand to guide the discussions. The summaries below capture the key points for each segment.

Skills Workshop: Conflict Negotiation – Mediating Divides
Facilitated *by Ms Wu Ye-Min, Ms Theerada Suphaphong (Jan) and Mr Ian Alexander Rigden*

FACILITATOR
Ms Wu Ye-Min
Regional Director, South and Southeast Asia
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

FACILITATOR
Mr Ian Alexander Rigden
Regional Advisor
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

FACILITATOR
Ms Theerada Suphaphong (Jan)
Senior Programme Manager and Country Representation, Thailand
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Three esteemed negotiators from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue taught delegates the principles of conflict negotiation. The workshops explored the fundamentals of conflict negotiation, focusing on the role of a mediator, negotiation techniques, and the importance of understanding parties' motivations and needs. Below are key highlights and themes covered in this workshop.

Understanding the Role of a Negotiator

The session began with a reflection on the concept of a negotiator, challenging participants to consider what makes an effective mediator. Characteristics highlighted included neutrality, empathy, patience, listening skills, and the ability to remain calm under pressure. The role of a negotiator was discussed as someone who leads their team to build understanding and facilitate solutions without imposing them, differentiating between negotiation, mediation, and arbitration.

Practical Exercises: The Widow and the Chef

A central feature of the session was the simulation exercise known as "The Widow and the Chef." Participants took on roles to mediate a neighbourhood dispute, allowing them to experience the complexities of real-life mediation. They practiced rotating roles to develop a deeper understanding of negotiation dynamics and tested skills like building relationships and staying emotionally neutral. This exercise emphasised the challenges of working without full context and highlighted the importance of reading non-verbal cues and asking probing questions.

Mediation Techniques and the Art of Questioning

The session underscored the critical skill of questioning to uncover underlying motivations. Participants were trained in various questioning techniques to explore positions, interests, and needs, using the PIN model (Positions, Interests, Needs) as a framework to identify and understand the motivations behind each party's stance. Key techniques included paraphrasing, using timeout techniques, and creating a conducive environment for dialogue.

Relationship Building and Emotional Awareness

The facilitators stressed the need for building trust and fostering relationships during mediation. Informal conversations were encouraged to create rapport before formal negotiations, and the significance of a mediator's emotional self-awareness was discussed. There was emphasis on the importance of vulnerability, creating a safe space for emotional expression, and understanding one's biases to maintain impartiality.

Strategies for Effective Mediation

A structured process was laid out for successful mediation, which included:
- Gathering different viewpoints
- Focusing on interests rather than positions
- Evaluating options and creating win-win scenarios. The workshops also covered challenges like power imbalances, strategies for handling asymmetric negotiations, and maintaining momentum between sessions through follow-up and shuttle mediation

Managing Complex Dynamics and Power Imbalances

Participants explored how to handle situations with unequal power, such as negotiations between government entities and community groups. The idea of finding one's strengths in a seemingly weaker position was discussed, along with strategies for maintaining credibility and momentum over multiple negotiation rounds.

Five Keys to Successful Negotiation

The session concluded by summarising five critical elements for effective negotiation: Relationships, Interests, Creativity, Mindset, and Preparation. Each element was seen as essential for ensuring that negotiations proceed smoothly and lead to sustainable outcomes.

Overall, the workshop provided a comprehensive introduction to conflict negotiation, equipping participants with a range of tools and techniques to navigate complex interpersonal and group dynamics.

Skills Workshop: Futures Planning – Understanding Community Dynamics Facilitated *by Ms Cheryl Chung, Ms Farah Sanwari, Mr Lewis Liu, Ms Lin Chin*

INTRODUCTION TO FUTURES THINKING
UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

ICCS / THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES
INTERSESSIONAL EVENT

OUR OBJECTIVE IS A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ZEITGEIST!

THE KEY ASPECTS OF FUTURES THINKING

I. QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS
II. SCANNING THE HORIZON
III. IMAGING MULTIPLE FUTURES
IV. TAKING PRESENT ACTION

WHAT IS ONE QUESTION YOU HAVE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL COHESION?

- INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA, INCLUSION, TECHNOLOGY.
- THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES
- NEW & COMPETING IDENTITIES
- ADAPTING SOCIAL COHESION TO MODERN CHALLENGES
- CLIMATE, ISLAMOPHOBIA, IDENTITY POLITICS.

S - STRENGTHS W - WEAKNESSES
O - OPPORTUNITIES T - THREATS

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?
WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO PRESERVE?

FACILITATOR
Ms Cheryl Chung
Founder and CEO
Tent Futures

FACILITATOR
Ms Farah H. Sanwari
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FACILITATOR
Mr Lewis Liu
Founder and Director
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FACILITATOR
Ms Lin Chin
Founder
Deliberate Humans

Ms Cheryl Chung provided delegates with a foundational overview of Futures Thinking, a strategic approach to anticipating and navigating future challenges. This framework was designed to guide the breakout discussions that took place over Days 2 and 3 of the event, focusing on the evolving challenges to social cohesion.

Key Challenges to Social Cohesion Identified

When delegates were asked about the current and future challenges to social cohesion, their top responses highlighted several pressing issues:

1. Intergenerational trauma, inclusion, and the impact of technology.
2. The evolving nature of national identities.

3. The emergence of new and competing identities.
4. The need to adapt social cohesion frameworks to contemporary challenges.
5. Issues surrounding climate change, Islamophobia, and identity politics.
6. The increasing hostility in mainstream spaces towards minority groups.

Introduction to Futures Thinking

Cheryl framed the conversation around the core elements of Futures Thinking, which aim to challenge existing assumptions and broaden perspectives. The main aspects included:

1. **Questioning Prevailing Assumptions**
- Examining mental models and planning parameters about the future
2. **Scanning the Horizon**
- Identifying emerging trends and weak signals that could influence the next decade
- Exploring potential blindspots
3. **Imagining Multiple Futures**
- Considering how the future might differ from current expectations
4. **Taking Present Action**
- Developing scenario-specific strategies
- Rehearsing for future challenges
- Identifying steps to enhance preparedness

Broader Context: Learning from the Past

Cheryl underscored the importance of Futures Planning by referencing H.G. Wells' lament that society was unprepared for significant changes like the advent of motor cars. She emphasised that while historical frameworks are well-established, similar attention is often lacking when it comes to future-oriented thinking.

Futures Planning vs. Forecast Planning

Cheryl distinguished Futures Planning from traditional Forecast Planning. While Forecast Planning relies on projections from the past and present, Futures Planning acknowledges uncertainties and considers multiple possible scenarios to anticipate transformative shifts.

Three Horizons Model

To facilitate a structured approach to Futures Planning, Cheryl introduced the Three Horizons Model:

Horizon 1: Mapping the present situation and existing conditions.

Horizon 3: Exploring potential long-term futures.

Horizon 2: Charting the transition from the present to the envisioned future.

Breakout Format

Delegates then moved into breakout rooms, where facilitators guided them through the stages of futures planning using the Three Horizons Model. They employed tools such as the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to identify what needed to change and what aspects should be preserved. This hands-on application enabled participants to engage deeply with the concept of

Futures Thinking, exploring how they might navigate the uncertainties ahead and contribute to a more cohesive society.

Breakout Discussions

Horizon 1 – Mapping the Present

In line with the Three Horizons Model, the participants first discussed Horizon 1 (Mapping the Present) by discussing two key questions: "What are some current things that need to change?" and "What are some things to preserve?"

What Are Some Current Things That Need to Change?

- **Diversity and Inclusion**: Participants noted that while there's a general desire for unity, policies and power structures often hinder genuine understanding and acceptance. There was a call for embracing diversity, such as learning other languages, and addressing the decline of community-based support systems.

- **Depth of Engagement**: A lack of depth in social and political discussions was highlighted, with a focus on transactional social processes and superficial approaches to cohesion. There was also concern about indifference and apathy toward ethnicity and religion.

- **Political Systems**: There was critique of political institutions and leaders, with suggestions to address ethnonationalism and political exploitation. There is a need for more empathetic and inclusive leadership.

- **Ethnonationalism and Urgency**: An emphasis was placed on countering ethnonationalism and fostering a shared sense of humanity through better media literacy and platforms for collective action.

- **Misinformation and Technology**: The impact of technology, including misinformation, was seen as a major challenge, alongside generational gaps, rigid identities, and the persistence of colonial legacies with racist implications. Participants noted the need for better digital frameworks to regulate information.

- **Social Fragmentation**: Issues of economic inequality, social injustice, and fear of the "other" were central concerns. There was criticism of stagnant academic discussions that do not translate to real-world action.

- **Leadership**: Radical conservative leadership and resistance to change were identified as barriers to greater social cohesion

- **Cycle of Oppression**: Acknowledging that social cohesion cannot be achieved simply through unity, participants called for proactive legislation and a redefined approach to cohesion that accommodates the realities of marginalised groups. They criticised the "kumbaya" mindset, suggesting that true cohesion involves addressing power imbalances.

- **Digital Literacy & Individual Empowerment**: Digital literacy, both in government policy and at the grassroots level, was identified as a key area for improvement. Participants stressed the importance of better access to education and infrastructure, as well as greater accountability for leaders.

- **Misinformation and Government Overreach**: The threat of misinformation in the digital space and the potential overreach by governments in regulating information were seen as major concerns, suggesting a careful balance to protect freedom of expression.

What Are Some Things to Preserve?

- **International Collaboration**: The importance of international cooperation and grassroots movements in promoting empathy and shared values was emphasised. Participants noted the value of frameworks like interfaith groups and international forums.
- **Moderate Voices**: There was concern over the silencing of moderate voices amidst polarised discussions, and a desire to preserve spaces where diverse yet moderate opinions could thrive.
- **Openness of Younger Generations**: The younger generations, such as Gen Z and Millennials, were seen as assets due to their open-mindedness and adept use of technology. Technology was also valued for its ability to spread accurate information and foster dialogue.
- **Community Networks**: Strong community networks and cross-segment relationships were seen as vital to social cohesion. The importance of role models and common causes, like climate change, in uniting people was noted.
- **Indigenous Wisdom**: There was a strong emphasis on preserving indigenous knowledge, which has historically helped communities manage differences. Evidence-based programs and inter-group solidarity were also viewed as crucial to maintaining social cohesion.
- **Digital Communication and Voices**: The ease of communication through social media and the diversity of voices it enables were valued. Participants stressed the need to balance the benefits of digital connectivity with improved digital literacy to ensure the responsible use of technology.

Overall, participants highlighted the need for deeper, more inclusive engagement in fostering social cohesion. They called for a shift away from transactional processes and superficial unity towards addressing root causes and power imbalances. At the same time, they emphasised the preservation of international collaboration, community networks, indigenous wisdom, and the positive potential of digital technology and younger generations in building a cohesive society.

Thereafter, participants engaged in discussion on Horizon 3 (Looking into the Future). Before the session, participants were provided a trends deck that listed some of the more pertinent trends (e.g. rising inequality and identity politics) that were expected to impact social cohesion.

Horizon 3 – Looking into the Future

Overview of Key Trends Identified
The participants reviewed the original list of ten trends, added some new ones, and reflected on which would have the most significant impact on social cohesion. Here is a breakdown of their discussions:

Most Discussed Trends Across Participants
- **Climate Change and Sustainability**: This trend was repeatedly highlighted due to its far-reaching implications, particularly concerning displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased resource conflicts. Many noted that the burden of climate change would fall disproportionately on lower socio-economic groups, leading to deeper inequalities and social fragmentation.
- **Rising Inequality and Widening Income Gap**: This trend was viewed as a persistent and escalating issue, with concerns about economic disparities growing both within and between nations. The unequal access to education, technology, and social mobility was emphasized as a barrier to social cohesion.
- **Volatile Geopolitical Landscape**: Geopolitical instability was cited as a major concern, with increasing global tensions, regional conflicts, and shifts in power dynamics. The rise of "Splinternet" (i.e. different countries having their own internet space) and potential digital fragmentation were noted as emerging risks, particularly with cyber warfare and the challenge of regulating digital spaces.
- **Immigration and Integration Challenges**: Immigration, particularly forced migration due to conflicts or climate change, was seen as a significant trend. Integration challenges in increasingly diverse societies were highlighted, along with concerns about social cohesion and identity formation in digital spaces.

New Trends Highlighted by Participants
Participants also suggested additional trends that they believed would significantly impact social cohesion:
- **Military-Industrial Complex**: Identified as a high-impact but low-preparedness issue, participants expressed concerns about how conflicts driven by military interests could deepen societal divisions.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**: AI was seen as both a potential disruptor and an opportunity. Concerns included unequal access to AI-driven jobs, ethical challenges, and its impact on climate change due to high computing requirements.
- **Crisis Capitalism**: The behaviour of multinational corporations (MNCs) that exploit crises, such as climate disasters, was seen as a trend contributing to economic inequality and social fragmentation.
- **Ineffectiveness of Global Leadership**: There was scepticism about the capacity of current global institutions and leadership to manage complex, multilateral challenges, particularly in crisis situations.
- **Impact of "Godlessness"**: Some delegates discussed the declining influence of faith and traditional values, worrying that this might reduce generosity and community solidarity, thereby impacting social cohesion.

Trends Categorised by Impact and Preparedness
Participants then analysed trends based on their potential impact and current level of societal preparedness:
- **High Impact, Low Preparedness**: Volatile geopolitical landscapes, climate change, rising inequality, AI, and identity politics were commonly cited as high-impact trends with inadequate preparation.

- **Low Impact, High Preparedness**: Trends like the increasing plurality of the faith landscape were seen as manageable, particularly in contexts like Singapore, which is perceived to have robust frameworks for dealing with diversity.
- **Emerging Threats**: Digital religion, misinformation, and the growing influence of identity politics were seen as emerging issues that are difficult to monitor and regulate, yet hold potential to disrupt social cohesion.

Key Insights on Preparedness and Sentiment

Participants agreed that there is a general lack of preparedness for many high-impact trends. There was a perception that society often reacts to crises rather than proactively preparing for them. The sentiment towards these trends was generally negative, with concerns about growing inequalities, the fragility of global systems, and the challenge of bridging generational and cultural divides. It was noted that the impacts of certain trends, like climate change and geopolitical volatility, would disproportionately affect marginalised and lower-income communities, highlighting the need for more inclusive policies.

Reflections on Addressing the Trends

There was consensus that addressing these trends requires collaborative efforts across sectors, with an emphasis on youth engagement and rethinking traditional concepts of work and community building. The idea of fostering a mindset shift from competition to collaboration was emphasised, suggesting a move away from economic growth as the sole indicator of success to a focus on sustainability and social well-being. The importance of digital literacy and the need to improve infrastructure for equitable access to technology were discussed as critical components in mitigating the negative effects of misinformation, cyberbullying, and digital exclusion.

Consensus on the Most Urgent Trends

While the groups had diverse perspectives, there was alignment on the urgency of the following trends:

1. **Volatile Geopolitical Landscape**: Seen as the most immediate threat, requiring attention due to its potential to destabilise global and regional relations. The increasing unpredictability of global and regional politics poses a significant threat to social cohesion. Participants highlighted that a volatile geopolitical landscape—marked by conflicts, power shifts, and territorial disputes—creates an environment of uncertainty and insecurity. These geopolitical tensions can spill over into local communities, leading to heightened fears, distrust among groups, and the hardening of nationalistic sentiments. The digital dimension, including cyber warfare and the emergence of the "Splinternet," further complicates matters, as countries may fragment the internet into regional spheres of influence. This geopolitical instability requires comprehensive preparedness and a nuanced approach to diplomacy, community resilience, and fostering dialogue across cultural and national divides.

2. **Rising Inequality and Widening Income Gap**: Rising economic inequality and widening income disparities were identified as foundational issues with far-reaching consequences for social cohesion. Economic divides exacerbate social fragmentation, limiting access to quality education, healthcare, and opportunities for upward mobility. Participants noted that as the gap between the wealthy and the poor grows, marginalised groups are increasingly alienated, which can lead to social unrest and

deepen existing divisions. This trend underscores the need for more inclusive policies that prioritise equitable access to resources and opportunities. The persistence of these inequalities across generations has created systemic barriers that inhibit cohesion, making it essential to address not just economic disparities but also the underlying structures that perpetuate them.

3. **Misinformation and the Post-Truth Era**: Misinformation, accelerated by the rise of digital platforms, was recognized as a critical threat to social cohesion. In the post-truth era, where false information can spread rapidly and be amplified within echo chambers, the ability to discern fact from fiction is increasingly compromised. This erosion of a shared reality has led to heightened polarization, distrust in institutions, and social fragmentation. Participants highlighted the urgency of improving digital literacy, fostering critical thinking, and holding platforms accountable to counteract the divisive impact of misinformation on communities and public discourse.

4. **Climate Change and Sustainability**: Climate change was consistently highlighted as a long-term but pressing threat to social cohesion, with the potential to disrupt societies on multiple fronts. The impacts of climate change, from natural disasters to resource scarcity, can drive displacement, loss of livelihoods, and forced migration — consequences that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. This environmental crisis can lead to increased competition for resources, escalate tensions, and challenge existing social safety nets. Participants stressed the importance of framing sustainability not just through technological or economic lenses but also through cultural and community-based approaches. To foster social cohesion in the face of climate challenges, a concerted effort is needed to develop adaptive policies, build local resilience, and ensure that sustainability efforts are inclusive and just.

5. **Identity Politics**: The increasing prominence of identity politics, where political allegiances are shaped by ethnicity, religion, gender, and other identity markers, was seen as a high-impact trend that can polarise societies. Participants expressed concern that the emphasis on identity can create "us versus them" dynamics, deepen divisions, and reduce the space for constructive dialogue. In the digital age, identity politics is further fuelled by online platforms, where echo chambers and targeted content reinforce existing biases. This trend challenges traditional notions of social cohesion, as it underscores the difficulty of finding common ground in diverse societies. Addressing this requires fostering a culture of empathy, promoting inclusive dialogue, and finding shared values that transcend individual identities. This discussion highlighted the need for a strategic, proactive approach to social cohesion, integrating diverse perspectives and prioritising inclusivity, sustainability, and adaptability to future challenges.

Charting the Path: From Scenarios to Strategies

In Futures Thinking, strategic foresight is not only about identifying trends and mapping the horizon, but also about envisioning possible futures based on current driving forces. The goal is to explore how different scenarios might unfold and determine what actions can be taken to shape a more desirable future. This process requires a degree of "world-building" — imagining detailed scenarios and the potential developments over the next decade.

To advance these discussions, participants were reshuffled into three thematic breakout groups, each concentrating on one of the top trends identified in the previous session: the Volatile Geopolitical Landscape, Rising Inequality and Widening Income Gap, and Misinformation in the Post-Truth Era. Using Horizon 2 in the Three Horizons model — transitioning from scenarios to strategy —facilitators guided each group in developing potential scenarios linked to their trend and corresponding strategies to address them. Participants were encouraged to consider three crucial questions:

- How did we end up here?
- What challenges and opportunities emerged along the way?
- How can we better prepare for the future? This approach enabled them to explore the complexity of each trend and identify actionable solutions to steer towards a more cohesive society.

Trend 1: Volatile Geopolitical Landscape
Scenario 1: Nations increasingly adopt inward-looking policies, turning towards isolationism and withdrawing from the international community to focus on domestic issues.

Path to This Scenario: Participants traced this inward shift to a growing disillusionment with international cooperation. Many perceive global institutions as ineffective, leading to a rise in extremist ideologies on both the far left and right. This trend has historical roots, dating back to the late 19th century when anarchist sentiments arose in response to dissatisfaction with the prevailing world order. Today, the impact is intensified by social media and digital communities, which provide a platform for these ideas to spread. A future global pandemic could further exacerbate this retreat from internationalism.

Opportunities and Challenges: This scenario presents an opportunity to strengthen regional institutions and clarify the objectives of transnational organisations, such as ASEAN. Reworking foundational documents and redefining international cooperation may help build a more resilient global order. However, these efforts are challenging and will require a concerted effort to find consensus among diverse actors.

Scenario 2: Regional tensions and multilateralism. Participants highlighted ongoing US-China rivalry, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and regional competition as factors influencing geopolitical stability.

Path to This Scenario: Regional mechanisms, like ASEAN, could face fragmentation due to geopolitical realignments and internal disagreements, particularly in response to complex issues like the Myanmar crisis. This fragmentation may lead to a decline in multilateral influence and increased distrust among member states.

Opportunities and Challenges: Despite the challenges, there are opportunities to strengthen advocacy and involvement through Track 1.5 and Track 2 initiatives — programmes that foster dialogue between government and non-governmental actors, including NGOs and civil society. Examples include Track 1.5 discussions in Lao PDR, which engage digital platforms to raise awareness.

What Can Be Done to Better Prepare? The group emphasised the importance of youth involvement in these issues, encouraging young leaders to advocate through digital means despite the difficulties of speaking out in sensitive geopolitical contexts.

Trend 2: Rising Inequality and Widening Income Gap
Scenario: Rising inequality within societies and an increasing income gap
Path to This Scenario: Participants traced the roots of rising inequality to several structural and socio-economic factors:

- **Education Access**: Lower-income groups face barriers to education, leading to a cycle of limited opportunities, higher risks of engaging in crime or substance abuse, and social segregation.
- **Economic Growth and Policy**: Rapid economic expansion has created disparities, leaving behind certain populations, particularly in rigid policy environments that fail to adapt to the needs of vulnerable groups.
- **Meritocracy and Elitism**: While meritocracy was effective for a time, participants noted that it often ended up benefiting a select "elite" who then protect their privileges, creating a sense of disillusionment among younger generations.
- **Housing and Support Systems**: Examples from countries like Egypt highlighted challenges in equitable housing distribution, with flexible but unequal rules leading to preferential treatment based on connections.

Opportunities and Challenges: The group identified several opportunities and challenges that have emerged in the face of rising inequality:

- **Economic Priorities**: The prioritisation of certain industries over others, exploitation in agriculture, and the persistence of unregulated capitalism have marginalised low-income workers and small farmers. Inflation, climate disasters, and social discrimination further deepen divisions.
- **Ground-Up Initiatives**: Despite these challenges, there is growing awareness, particularly in places like Singapore, where grassroots movements are advocating for fairer economic policies and greater social support.
- **Social Apathy**: One key challenge is the increasing apathy among younger generations, who feel disconnected from traditional notions of social responsibility. This disillusionment is compounded by struggles to meet basic needs and perceived burdens like elder care.

What Can Be Done to Better Prepare? Participants suggested several strategies to address rising inequality:

- **Empowerment and Education**: Efforts to empower the poor and underprivileged should focus on dialogue, community involvement, and targeted programs to uplift marginalised groups. Lifelong learning and skills development were identified as crucial tools for social mobility.
- **Policy Shifts**: A paradigm shift is needed in policymaking, with a greater emphasis on understanding the perspectives and priorities of younger generations. Encouraging youth participation in policy decisions was seen as essential for fostering more inclusive governance.
- **Rethinking Social Values**: The younger generation's changing values, symbolised by lifestyle choices such as prioritising mental health and well-being over traditional savings goals, should be understood not as a negative trend but as a redefinition of what constitutes a good life. There was a call to appreciate these shifts as a sign of evolving societal equilibrium.

Trend 3: Misinformation and the 'Post-Truth' Era

Scenario: Irreversibly fragmented and polarised societies due to misinformation and disinformation

Path to this Scenario: The group explored how misinformation and disinformation contribute to polarisation, fragmentation, and extremism. These dynamics are expected to drive global militarization, with AI playing a significant role in shaping information landscapes. A decline in trust towards traditional authorities, coupled with the rise of conspiracy theories, has led to a lack of global consensus on critical issues like climate change. This inability to align on shared goals may exacerbate the climate crisis, making it harder to reverse its effects. Additionally, the maturation of AI and digital technologies could diminish the importance of local and national identities, as online identities and communities become more prominent. There is also a risk of AI journalism eroding ethical standards, which could undermine political and social trust.

Opportunities and Challenges: The group identified two challenges. The first concerns AI. AI-driven media could compromise human subjectivity, potentially leading to a decline in democracy and trust in political mandates. The digital divide remains a persistent issue, contributing to disparities in education and access to information. Narratives are increasingly weaponised, with misinformation becoming a tool for manipulation. There are concerns about the rise of non-state actors, including powerful corporations that may influence governance without democratic accountability. The second concerns technological reliance, as society becomes more dependent on AI for news, information, and everyday decision-

making. There is vulnerability in this dependence, as exemplified by the potential impacts of large-scale tech failures, such as global outages or security threats like voice cloning. The group identified some opportunities. There is potential to develop robust digital literacy programs to help people better discern between reliable information and disinformation. This includes empowering younger generations to navigate the digital landscape effectively. Sophisticated verification tools and shared databases for mutual information validation can also play a key role in mitigating misinformation.

What Can Be Done to Better Prepare? To prepare for the challenges of misinformation and the post-truth era, participants recommended several strategies:

- **Digital Literacy and Education**: Increase focus on digital literacy to enable individuals to critically evaluate information and reduce the impact of disinformation. This includes educational programs targeted at youth to develop their skills in identifying false narratives and using technology responsibly.
- **Technological Tools**: Invest in advanced tech solutions for information verification, including AI-driven platforms that can flag and cross-check suspicious content. Creating reliable databases for mutual information validation would also help establish a shared foundation for fact-checking.
- **Strengthening Communities**: Promote the formation of digital communities that foster humanistic values and resist the oversimplification of complex issues. These communities can serve as counterweights to the echo chambers that often form in digital spaces. Building alliances between digital platforms, educational institutions, and civil society can create a more resilient information ecosystem.
- **Regulating Non-State Actors**: Establish frameworks for greater accountability of non-state actors, particularly large tech corporations, to ensure they operate in a way that supports social cohesion rather than fragmenting it. This might involve international agreements on digital ethics and standards for AI use in media.

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Established to advance the study of social cohesion, the Social Cohesion Research Programme (SCRP) at RSIS seeks to engage in policy-oriented research, forge strategic partnerships, and develop leadership to inspire cohesive and resilient societies, both within Southeast Asia and beyond. With this in view, SCRP aspires to promote social cohesion research and nurture research talent in this domain, create platforms for dialogue and problem-solving on interfaith and social cohesion issues, and inspire collaborative approaches across societies towards the practice of social cohesion.