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Beyond Tolerance: Trust-Building for a Meaningful Social Cohesion in Singapore

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SYNOPSIS

Singapore's evolving multicultural and multireligious fabric presents opportunities and challenges for social cohesion. Recent findings from the 2024 Institute of Policy Studies Survey reveal a paradox: younger Singaporeans expect a more cohesive society yet at the same time view that discrimination is on the rise, signalling a trust deficit that should be addressed. Sustained engagement amongst the different communities is key to fostering deep connections, mutual respect, and an enduring sense of belonging.

COMMENTARY

Social cohesion is the bedrock of a resilient and harmonious society. Although Singapore can be proud of its multicultural success, often attributed to its policies that foster racial and religious harmony, the lived realities of younger Singaporeans reveal a more complex picture.

The IPS Survey (2024) highlights a duality: while 70.1 per cent of Singaporeans aged 18 to 35 believe they can learn from other racial groups, 27.1 per cent of them still do not trust people of other races in times of crisis. Furthermore, trust disparities exist across racial lines – 77.6 per cent of respondents expressed trust in the Chinese community, compared to 69.7 per cent for Malays, 68.6 per cent for Indians, and 67.4 per cent for Eurasians. Unsurprisingly, respondents reported the highest levels of trust for their particular racial group.

These findings indicate that deeper trust between communities remains a challenge. If left unaddressed, such sentiments could lead to social fragmentation. To counteract this, the authorities should move beyond passive tolerance and cultivate genuine trust through sustained and meaningful engagements.

Trust Deficits and the Risks of Group Insularity

Why do trust deficits persist despite institutional efforts to promote cohesion? An explanation lies in the tendency for individuals to gravitate towards homophily – the natural inclination to associate with those who share similar backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences. While this fosters a sense of security by being with in-groups, it also creates an unintended consequence: reduced opportunities for meaningful engagement across racial and religious lines.

The increasing perception of discrimination among youth suggests that a lack of cross-group interaction may be reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes. For example, the IPS findings indicate that some racial groups are perceived to enjoy more significant economic advantages over others. When left unaddressed, such perceptions may inadvertently strengthen in-group solidarity at the expense of intergroup trust. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges, where individuals seek affirmation from their communities rather than engage in cross-cultural dialogues that challenge their assumptions.

Some cultural proverbs resonate in this instance, like the cautionary wisdom found in the Chinese idiom "坐井观天" (zuò jǐng guān tiān), which warns against viewing the world through a narrow lens. Similarly, the Tamil proverb "கத்தற்று கை மண், கல்லாதது உலகமு" (literally, "what one has learnt is a mere handful, while what is yet to be learnt is as vast as the world") reminds us that our understanding is limited unless we actively seek knowledge beyond our immediate circles. The Malay language has a similar proverb, "*serumpun bak serai, sesusun bak sirih*" which highlights the importance of unity and respect for different cultures, languages and customs.

From Coexistence to Deep Trust: The Role of Meaningful Engagement

Merely coexisting in diverse spaces does not automatically translate into trust. Individuals build trust through sustained and meaningful interactions where they feel seen, heard, and valued. It requires a willingness to engage empathetically, to listen with sincerity, and to challenge one's preconceptions.

For those who strongly identify with their cultural or religious traditions, the question arises: does true strength come from isolation or the confidence to engage? If individuals perceive interaction with "the other" as a threat to their identity, what does that reveal about the depth of their convictions? The Tamil saying, "நீர் தேர்ந்தால் தானே மீன் தேர்வு" (literally, "only when water is tested will fish be found"), underscores this point – confidence in one's identity should be strengthened, not weakened, by engagement with others.

Learning the language of other communities is a good start to develop trust between communities. By understanding the language of different ethnic groups, one can deepen bonds of friendship and establish a more meaningful coexistence. It will also enable us to appreciate other cultural perspectives while finding ways to articulate our

identity in ways that resonate with them. Such steps toward intercultural understanding underscore the importance of shared experiences. When individuals participate in common activities, they can organically enhance shared trust.

In Singapore, initiatives such as the Harmony Circles, Onepeple.sg and Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) Youth Wing serve as crucial platforms for fostering these connections. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, can engage in meaningful conversations that challenge stereotypes and foster mutual respect. These platforms also encourage a culture of active participation, where individuals do not merely observe diversity but engage with it in ways that enhance their personal growth and social impact.

A Cyber Analogy: Trust as a Multi-Layered Defence

Today, technological advancements greatly influence human interactions. Social trust is a key factor underpinning social cohesion and community interaction. In this digital age, trust is a social concern and a critical component of cyber security. The "Zero Trust Architecture" cybersecurity principle assumes that threats exist outside and within a network, necessitating continuous verification and engagement. This analogy is similarly relevant to social cohesion – communities cannot take harmony for granted but must actively reinforce it during every interaction.

Misinformation and deepfake technologies pose a growing threat to both cyber security and social cohesion. If individuals do not verify sources or critically engage with information, they risk internalising narratives that deepen distrust and division. In this regard, digital literacy must be complemented by social literacy – an ability to navigate complex intergroup dynamics with discernment and nuance.

A Call for Sustained, Intentional Action

For Singapore to remain a cohesive society, trust-building between communities must be prioritised as an intentional and contiguous process. It requires more than passive exposure to diversity, necessitating active engagement, deep conversations, and the creation of spaces where individuals can forge genuine connections.

The IPS findings serve as both a reflection of progress and a call to action. As active citizens, how can we take greater ownership of trust-building in our daily interactions? How do we honour each other's strengths and stories, seeing one another as assets in our collective social fabric?

Through community interactions, we can co-create opportunities for meaningful engagement, advocate for systemic change, and nurture friendships rooted in mutual respect. With a collective effort, we can embody the wisdom of the saying "青出于蓝而胜于蓝" (qīng chū yú lán ér shèng yú lán) (literally, "to surpass our predecessors") and pave the way for an even more cohesive and nurturing Singapore. May we resolve to make this vision a reality within our lifetimes.

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