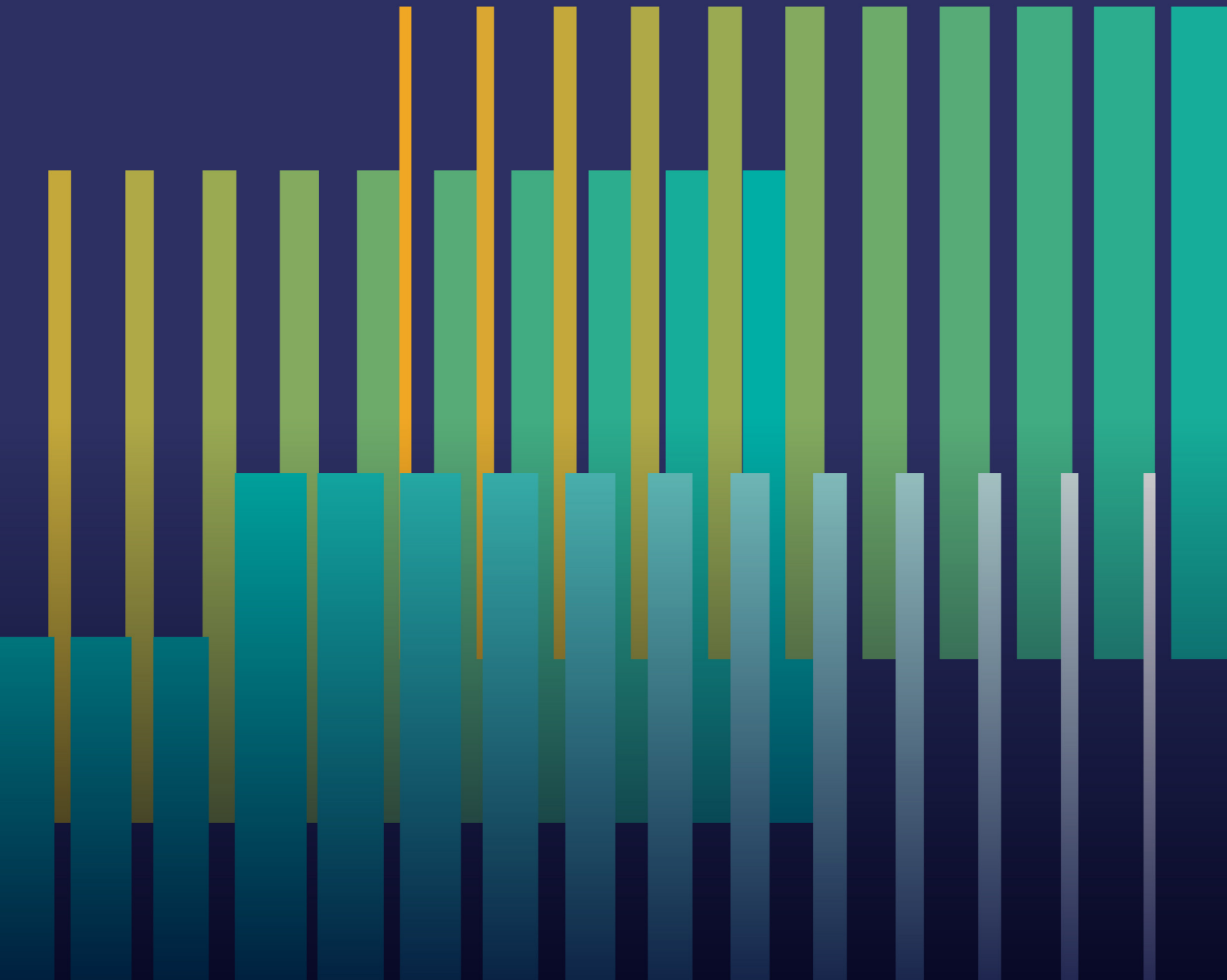


# THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES 2025

COHESIVE SOCIETIES, RESILIENT FUTURES

Post-Event Report

24 - 26 June 2025



# Event Report



**Cohesive Societies,  
Resilient Futures**



**24 - 26 June 2025**

**Raffles City Convention Centre, Singapore**

**Report on the Conference 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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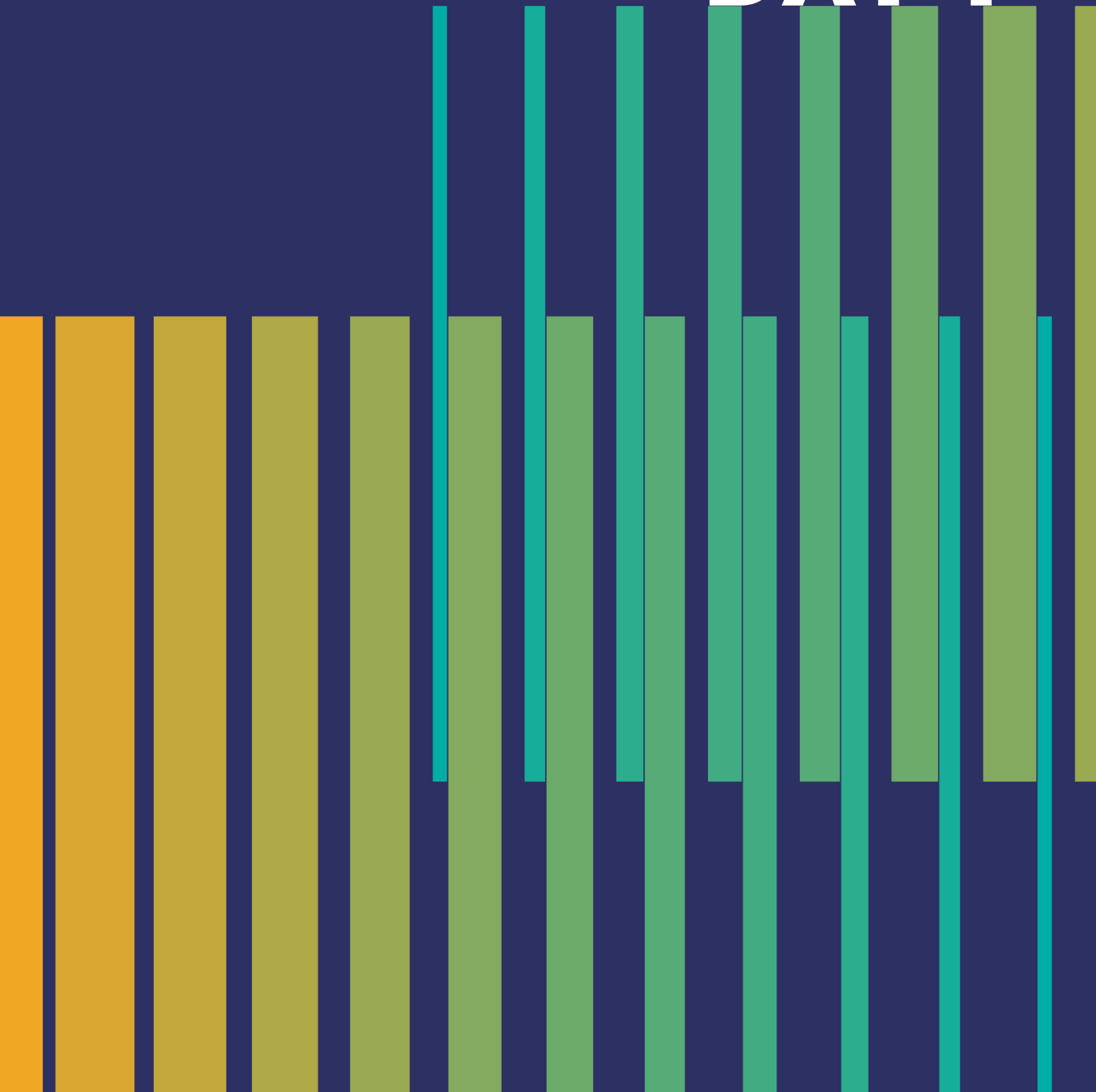
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**DAY 1**



# Welcome Remarks

*Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*



Ambassador Ong began by explaining the significance of the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS). It was an international platform for multicultural dialogue that had become more important today due to an increasingly volatile and polarised world. ICCS aspired to facilitate conversations on how to better-forge stronger and meaningful connections in the face of growing sectarian tensions and weakening social ties. He maintained that it was through the collective efforts of leaders and communities that such challenges could be overcome.

Into its third iteration, the theme of ICCS 2025 was “Cohesive Societies, Resilient Futures”. With 1,200 participants from more than 50 countries in attendance, Ambassador Ong said the conference served as a forum where participants could share and learn best practices on how to strengthen mutual understanding and respect. He envisaged that such interactions would ultimately crystallise into creative ideas and actionable plans.



# Opening Address

*Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, President of the Republic of Singapore*



President Tharman began his speech with a basic proposition: That for a multicultural society to remain cohesive in today's world, it would need more than just the coexistence of races, religions and cultures. Instead of relying simply on tolerance and a "live and let live" attitude, a multicultural society could only be sustained if its people had shared hopes, shared purpose and shared endeavours and respect for "the dignity of every individual and every group". Such respect entailed not only valuing differences but also appreciating the contributions that everyone could offer.

Across the world, multiculturalism was weakening. The Edelman Trust Barometer showed that more than half of respondents felt that their societies were more divided than at any time in living memory. In addition, only 20 percent of respondents said that they would live near someone who has different views from them.

Besides the waning respect for multiculturalism, political polarisation had increased, observable by the weakening of moderate political parties and the rise of the radical right who were championing exclusion of other races and nationalities. Across the world, the divide between the educated (those with college education) and the less educated has widened, along with the divide between those who live in cities and the countryside. All these factors feed into each other, creating a complex and challenging situation.

Culture and identity were now being injected into disagreements over economic issues. With economic insecurity, people invariably develop a zero-sum perception, that is, that they are losing while someone else is winning. This connects culture and identity into a more virulent divide, rooted in the sense that the system is not fair. In eight countries across the Atlantic, the best predictor of whether someone was willing to vote for a far-right party is the belief that minorities had better access to job opportunities than white people. The Overton window<sup>1</sup> had shifted in

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<sup>1</sup> In political science, the term refers to the spectrum of perspectives and opinions considered acceptable by the mainstream.



both advanced and young democracies, and extreme right and exclusionary views are becoming mainstream. There are multiple forces driving these deep divides. First, there has been a failure to manage immigration and integrate immigrants, particularly in Europe, where immigrants are often segregated by where they live and their role in the workforce. This causes both immigrants and the white working class to lose faith in the system.

Second, societies are subject to the polarising effects of a fragmented media landscape along with the rise of social media. While social media can empower voices around the world, it is currently shaped by algorithms run by large technology companies that lead to echo chambers. We no longer live in a world where we have a shared reality and shared framework of facts despite having different beliefs. Unlike consumer goods which only meet people's preferences, social media feeds people particular ideological views that not only meet their preferences but strengthens them too, making people more partisan. The advertising model of social media, which has an incentive to maximise attention, does so by propagating negative messages. While it is still in the beginning stages, rapid advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are about to set in motion new issues by creating a flood of synthetic media with dubious provenance.

Third, there is an intensifying social isolation affecting personal lives, particularly in more advanced countries. Societies can advance economically but regress socially. Nowadays, people are more likely to meet at home, shop from home, eat takeaways or delivered food, be entertained at home, and even worship at home. Young people are no longer going out with friends and on dates. The weakening of societal interactions has consequences, particularly in terms of undermining social cohesion. Previously, such interactions had enabled people to understand differences and accept people who disagreed with them.

President Tharman then offered insights and perspectives on how trust in people and trust in the system could be restored. He observed that no political system could provide assurances that moderate integrationist ideals would prevail in government and society. Collectively, individuals were moving away from moderate and inclusive tendencies towards more polarising ones.

As shared values and a belief in a common future do not come naturally, multicultural societies must be actively woven like a quilt. However, in times of stress, economic insecurity and polarising societies, the stitching can be broken. To sustain multiculturalism, a different cloth must be woven. Different colours and textures can be woven into a tapestry with a larger motif, like batik, that creates a nation. This nation may have many strands, but it is at one with itself.

To do this, there must be increased opportunities for interaction and the establishment of guardrails. First, education is the most powerful tool for social mixing of children. Public schools and after-school activities are avenues for children of different backgrounds to interact. Education must also be effective in uplifting people of all backgrounds. With necessary support from the government and community, those who start behind can get ahead based on their merits.

The second most important factor in public policy is urban design. Singapore is well-known for its integrated housing estates, which allow more than 75 percent of Singaporeans to live in mixed environments. Urban design must



also go beyond housing and focus on facilities for interaction and creating common spaces in everyday life where people can do activities together. While not everyone can replicate Singapore's housing, which was developed from scratch, societies with a legacy of urban segregation must still focus on providing public spaces, especially for poor and disadvantaged youth.

Third, societies must focus on combating media fragmentation. There is currently no international agreement about how to regulate social media platforms. This will require bold thinking and for both the government and civil society to work with media and technology companies to provide a more sustainable landscape, rather than just leaving it to the marketplace. Governments have started this endeavour by legislating that online hate speech must be quickly removed and by requiring larger platforms to dial back on the spread of disinformation. While some may view this as over-regulation, it is better to have a regulated media landscape than to let society unravel. The established news media would also have to respond to this challenge by focusing on accuracy, fairness and transparency, and by separating news from opinion. Singapore has been fortunate to retain the mainstream media as the largest source of news for citizens, even though they have other news outlets available.

Fourth, societies should develop a culture of respect and solidarity that comes from everyday act. This requires the efforts of all – civil society, educators, religious and community leaders, and individuals. When positive deeds are done frequently, they cascade and create new cultures. For example, Indonesia is currently running a cross-cultural literacy programme that trains teachers to educate children about diverse faiths, dispel stereotypes, and teach how to respect each other.

In a world of conflict and ethnic suppression, there are still signs of common humanity. Besides Muslims, a growing number of Jews in Europe and elsewhere are calling for an end to the killing and destruction in Gaza, and a way for Palestinians and Israelis to coexist. Even in the US, a Marist Poll found that 80 percent of Americans believe that the diversity of races, ethnicities and religions does make their country stronger.

Ultimately, a culture of respect must be built. It goes to the heart of social cohesion and is a source of mutual upliftment. We uplift people not just by offering more financial resources and opportunities (although that is important), but more so by giving each other the motivation to overcome difficulties. The respect that we lend to each other is the most powerful source of motivation. Knowing that people have your back is how we build motivation to overcome difficulties and rise together.

# Plenary

## Special Presentation: Perspectives on Social Cohesion



### **Professor Mike Hardy**

Professor of Intercultural Relations, Coventry University, United Kingdom

### **Dr Catherine Fieschi**

Fellow, Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, France

### **Dr Aaron Maniam**

Fellow of Practice and Director, Digital Transformation Education, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

### **Moderator: Professor Katherine Marshall**

Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, United States

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This context-setting segment aimed to establish a shared framework for understanding the complex notion of social cohesion and its role in society. It questioned how we should define social cohesion in today's world and whether there are universal principles of social cohesion. It also examined the ever-evolving concept of social cohesion as it may apply to today's diverse, multicultural societies.

Key takeaways: (a) Social cohesion should be viewed as a movement rather than a destination, requiring leaders to invest in knowledge about challenges, possibilities, team composition, and their own competencies; (b) inequality of all types, the feeling of being left behind, and isolation facilitated by social media echo chambers were significant challenges to multiculturalism; (c) individual diversity and self-understanding precede social cohesion.





## Social Cohesion in Southeast Asia – A UK Perspective

*Professor Mike Hardy, Founding Director, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University*

Professor Hardy surfaced three issues which had an impact on social cohesion in Southeast Asia – (a) Acceleration in the pace of change in the region; (b) the choices faced by public leaders; and (c) the investment in knowledge in a time of the unknown and uncertainty.

The pace of change was accelerating in Southeast Asia. At present, a key issue of concern was the disparity between and within nation states. Extreme differences in growth rates, urban-rural divergences, and income inequalities all fuelled tension, particularly for those who feel left behind. Other distinctive changes in the region include aging populations, generational divides, complex ethnic combinations, and uneven and discriminatory impacts from public policy that challenge senses of belonging. In addition, the region struggled with governance issues due to very limited public trust and the polarising of political views in both democracies and more authoritarian states. Southeast Asia is also not immune to the acceleration of social media, and the number of new movements that will increase as a result.

Hardy felt that social cohesion should be viewed as a movement rather than a destination. He said that leaders face a choice between fragmentation and solidarity, requiring collaboration between public sector, civil society, and private sector. He felt that leaders must distinguish between the “promise of social cohesion” (i.e., the potential movement toward better outcomes) versus “promises of social cohesion” (i.e., the assumed benefits of cohesive societies). He thought that adaptive and agile public leaders are more likely to achieve progress toward social cohesion as a direction of travel rather than fixed destination.

Public leaders needed to invest in structural vertical relationships between institutions and communities, addressing unfairness, inequalities, and discrimination. For public leaders and society to become stronger and more adaptive in leading social cohesion, they must draw from four critical knowledge domains: (a) understanding what the real challenge is; (b) knowing what was possible rather than what was desirable; (c) identifying who should be included in the journey; and (d) assessing their own competencies. Leaders should also carry three key qualities: (a) remaining open before closing things down; (b) staying curious and driven by questions rather than answers; and (c) being comfortable with paradox. Investment in knowledge, he concluded, would help leaders become stronger in uncertainty by focusing on challenges rather than anticipating all eventualities.

## Polarisation and Multiculturalism

*Dr Catherine Fieschi, Founder and Director, Counterpoint*

Fieschi said that fragmentation, by definition, makes cohesion difficult. She viewed fragmentation as raising complexity stakes and testing the limits of representative democracy and welfare state mechanisms. She said that polarisation occurred when a population divides itself into opposing groups along ideological, religious, ethnic, or linguistic lines where differences overlap rather than crisscross.



In polarised societies, knowing one aspect of an individual's background allows prediction of their positions on other issues, with opposing groups unwilling to listen to different views and refusing to compromise. Polarisation feeds the growth of the radical right and creates situations where political opponents become enemies, with voters willing to sacrifice democratic principles to defeat their rivals. Polarisation thrives on an us versus them division and inherently results in greater polarisation.

Fieschi contrasted the French integrationist model with Canadian multiculturalism, noting that both are often reduced to caricatures. Multiculturalism, she said, builds on James Madison's insight that greater variety of interests and overlapping connections reduces tyranny risk. Despite reports of multiculturalism's decline, it still delivers better outcomes than other models (e.g., populism) in managing diversity. Multiculturalism creates cross-cutting incentives for collaboration and negotiation across groups, forcing people to work together.

Fieschi then identified three fundamental challenges to social cohesion. First was the paradox that centrist politics often became technocratic and managerial, holding less attraction for voters and breeding disinterest. Second, was social media's rabbit holes and echo chambers that made people feel connected yet isolated within smaller groups reinforcing their opinions. Third, was inequality of all kinds – access, education, representation, income, and wealth – with housing access predicted as the next political “time bomb”. She concluded that the feeling of being left behind is becoming the only shared sentiment across nations, and this would create dangerous resentment for democracies.

## **Diversity, Polarities and Social Cohesion**

*Dr Aaron Maniam, Fellow of Practice and Director, Digital Transformation Education,  
Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford*

Maniam used his multicultural/ethnic background to explain the idea that individual diversity must precede social cohesion. Social diversity and pluralism, he argued, cannot occur if individuals do not have a sense of their own individual diversity and pluralism. Individual experience of managing multiple identities provides the foundation for understanding broader social cohesion challenges.

He discussed key polarities that included: (a) coordination versus spontaneity; (b) primordial versus civic identities; (c) top-down versus bottom-up approaches; and (d) ideas versus action-based cohesion.

Maniam shared four observations. First, individuals must determine how much they wish to manage polarities and how much they want to allow things to evolve spontaneously. This was a paradox that should not just be resolved but also transcend.

Second, while a shared hope, purpose and endeavour was needed to foster better social cohesion, there was a lot that individuals do not share due mainly to technology. As a result of technological advancements, many shared spaces do not exist anymore, and individuals are all engaging in their own individual digital space. He quoted Conway's Law, which states that when systems adopt new technologies or innovations, they do so in ways that mirror their existing communication and structures. Hence, if individuals are democratic, they will adopt technology



in a democratic way. If they are autocratic, they will adopt technology in an autocratic way. He warned that if society is not careful, primordial instincts that divide individuals will become exaggerated by technology.

Third, it is necessary for all policy to be based on a fundamental bedrock of reciprocity. However, reciprocity is difficult in social cohesion. The restrictions that individuals want to apply to others must also apply to themselves. Individuals cannot judge others by their impact, while they judge themselves by intent. Ultimately, individuals should come to terms with how much they need to give up to truly achieve reciprocity.

Finally, individuals need to decide on the metaphor for multiculturalism. The metaphor of the quilt and tapestry is very cohesive, while other metaphors such as a melting pot or a salad bowl showcases elements that can be together but do not necessarily blend. Other metaphors for conceptualising of social cohesion can be a river that leads to a determined endpoint, or an ecology where we are all morally connected. Like the orchestral performance in the opening ceremony of this conference, which included instruments from different cultures, we can also think of multiculturalism as a state where different people come together to create something that otherwise cannot be created.

## **Discussions and Reflections**

### **Issue 1 – Social Cohesion and Related Challenges**

It was argued that an ideal situation was when communities work to preserve not just their own interests but also the interests of others. When one only focuses on one's community, differences become reified and bitter. In contrast, when one advocates for the interests of others, they transform society from having a cohesion of necessity towards a cohesion of action.

### **Issue 2 – Practical Approaches to Improve Social Cohesion**

The example of Europe's welfare systems was discussed to draw lessons learnt. There are jurisdictions in Europe with great social safety nets, yet these social support systems do not seem to temper polarisation and fragmentation. Even though some societies have invested in redistributions of resources, these redistributions have not created desired outcomes. There is a prevailing sense that it is not clear why some people get things for free. It is useful to re-evaluate why such systems exist, what its aims and objectives are, and what are the ideals that these systems are meant to protect.

Another approach suggested was to employ a polarity mindset rather than problem-solving approach to manage polarities and paradoxes, viewing tensions as things to manage rather than resolve. In so doing, more nuanced approaches can be adopted.

### **Issue 3 – Applicability of Use Cases to Southeast Asia**

It was necessary to consider the background/environmental factors in societies that may cause approaches/policies to succeed or fail. For example, Singapore has had real success in creating integrated housing, but this approach has not been adopted successfully elsewhere. Hence, it is important to determine what has worked in the past, what one needs to keep, what elements need to be discarded and how one can innovate to deal with new challenges.

## WELCOMING REMARKS



**CULTIVATING  
MUTUAL  
UNDERSTANDING  
and  
PROPAGATE NEW  
IDEAS for  
HARMONY!**

## KEYNOTE SPEECH

**OUR SOCIETIES  
ARE FRAGMENTED...**

- UNCONTROLLED IMMIGRATION
- POLARISING MEDIA LANDSCAPE
- WEAKENING PHYSICAL INTERACTIONS

**WE MUST STRIVE to WEAVE a SINGLE TAPESTRY in THESE RESTLESS TIMES!**

**THERE IS STILL HUMANITY in the WORLD!**

**COHESIVE SOCIETIES CAN ONLY BE SUSTAINED IF PEOPLE HAVE SHARED...**

♥ HOPE ① PURPOSE ⚡ ENDEAVOUR

MR THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM  
PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF  
SINGAPORE

ONG KENG YONG  
EDC/RSIS  
AMB

## SPECIAL PRESENTATION: PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL COHESION

### 1 PROF. HARDY



"WE'RE ALL STUCK HERE FOR A WHILE, SO LET'S GET ALONG."  
- RODNEY KING

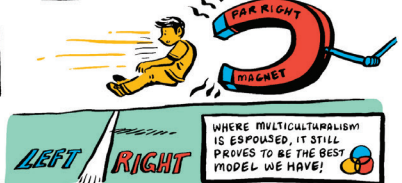


**SOCIAL COHESION IS ACHIEVED through the AGILITY & FLEXIBILITY of LEADERS**

\* WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE?  
\* WHAT IS POSSIBLE?  
\* WHO SHOULD WE INCLUDE?  
\* WHAT IS MY COMPETENCE?

### 2 MS. FIESCHI

**FRAGMENTATION**  
MAKES our JOBS HARDER, BUT THE ONGOING  
**POLARISATION**  
IS MUCH WORSE!



WHERE MULTICULTURALISM IS ESPOUSED, IT STILL PROVES TO BE THE BEST MODEL WE HAVE!

### 3 DR. MANIAM

OUR "WE-NESS" HAVE to STEM from our...  
**'ME-NESS'**



ALL POLICY HAS to be BASED on a FOUNDATION of RECIPROCITY

BE COGNISANT OF WHAT WE NEED TO GIVE UP FOR TRUE RECIPROCITY.

### 4 QUESTIONS

we need to know:

- 1 WHAT EXPERIENCES to KEEP
- 2 WHAT EXPERIENCES to DISCARD
- 3 WHEN to INNOVATE NEW IDEAS

DR CATHERINE FIESCHI

PROF MIKE HARDY

MODERATOR:  
PROF KATHERINE MARSHALL

DR AARON MANIAM





# Plenary 1

## Unpacking Multiculturalism



**Professor Dr Nasaruddin Umar**

Minister of Religious Affairs, Indonesia and Grand Imam of Istiqlal State Mosque

**Mr Ed Williams**

President, International, Edelman, United Kingdom

**Professor Colleen Ward**

Professor of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

**Moderator: Professor Farish Noor**

Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia

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This session explores the historical forces and key conditions that have shaped contemporary multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Key takeaways: (a) Indonesia's success in managing diversity lies in *Pancasila*, a unifying philosophy that promotes pluralism, inclusivity, and national harmony within the world's largest Muslim-majority country; (b) While cultural diversity is a necessary foundation, it is not enough to define multiculturalism. True multiculturalism depends on mutual engagement, supportive policies, and equitable participation that foster shared belonging and trust across communities; and (c) Multiculturalism can be a source of strength, fostering creativity and dynamism, but only where mutual trust exists. The paradox is that multiculturalism depends on trust to function, yet in today's climate of eroding trust, fewer people are willing to embrace it, creating a vicious cycle.



## **From Pancasila to Istiqlal Declaration: Unpacking Multiculturalism from the Indonesian Experience**

*Professor Dr Nasaruddin Umar, Minister of Religious Affairs, Indonesia and Grand Imam of Istiqlal Mosque*

Professor Nasaruddin Umar, emphasised that multiculturalism is not an abstract ideal, but something deeply embedded in the fabric of society. He highlighted Indonesia as a compelling example of successful pluralism, showcasing best practices that can inspire other nations grappling with diversity.

At the heart of Indonesia's success lies *Pancasila*, the country's foundational philosophical doctrine. Pancasila acts as a common ground for diverse communities, promoting inclusivity, respect, and peaceful coexistence. It is not only a guiding national ideology but also a platform that supports a pluralistic identity within a predominantly Muslim society.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, yet it is renowned for its moderate, inclusive approach to religion. Its model of soft culture, influenced by its colonial past, has shaped a society that prioritizes harmony and mutual respect. Institutions like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have played pivotal roles in nurturing Islamic moderation under the umbrella of Pancasila.

Nasaruddin noted that a key example in this regard is the “Curriculum of Love”, an educational initiative that instils values of religious tolerance, particularly among young Indonesians. It aligns with the 1945 Constitution's emphasis on the moral and civic duties of a good citizen. In this curriculum, students are taught not only to respect but to accept religious differences, reinforcing a foundation of national unity through diversity.

Nasaruddin pointed out that tolerance is more than peaceful coexistence – it is the active respect and nurturing of other living traditions. This approach is especially significant in a global context where religious conflict remains a major challenge to peace and diplomacy.

Here, religious diplomacy emerges as a critical tool. As conventional diplomacy struggles to respond to crises rooted in identity and belief, faith-based diplomacy provides a complementary approach – one that incorporates the disciplines of international relations, political science, and theology. It acknowledges the profound influence of religious actors and institutions in shaping global affairs.

Religious diplomacy plays an increasingly vital role in peacebuilding and nation-building. By understanding the motivations of religious leaders and organisations and addressing issues like climate change through a spiritual lens, this form of diplomacy bridges divides that politics alone cannot.

Facilitated communication is essential in religious diplomacy. Leaders of faith are seen not just as symbolic figures but as key actors – bringing moral authority, credibility, and the ability to mobilise communities. Interfaith activism and the shared values between religions offer vital meeting points in global dialogue.



A powerful example of this is the collaboration between the Grand Imam of Istiqlal Mosque and the late Pope Francis during a religious meeting in Jakarta that led to the Istiqlal Declaration in 2024. This joint declaration addressed global challenges like dehumanisation, environmental degradation, and interfaith conflict, and reaffirmed the inseparability of world peace and environmental sustainability.

The Istiqlal Mosque itself stands as a symbol of these values. It has earned the EDGE green building certificate,<sup>2</sup> reflecting its architectural commitment to environmental consciousness in alignment with Islamic principles. It serves not only as a house of worship but as a beacon of ecological and spiritual responsibility.

In conclusion, Nasaruddin's message was clear: building a peaceful world for future generations requires cross-cultural and interfaith literacy. It also demands that we recognise the importance of places of worship not just as religious spaces, but as centres of learning, diplomacy, and environmental stewardship. Through religious diplomacy and shared values, nations can find common ground in confronting the complex challenges of our time.

In polarised societies, knowing one aspect of an individual's background allows prediction of their positions on other issues, with opposing groups unwilling to listen to different views and refusing to compromise. Polarisation feeds the growth of the radical right and creates situations where political opponents become enemies, with voters willing to sacrifice democratic principles to defeat their rivals. Polarisation thrives on an us versus them division and inherently results in greater polarisation.

## **The Many Faces of Multiculturalism: A Psychosocial Analysis**

*Professor Colleen Ward, Professor of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington*

Professor Colleen Ward emphasised that while cultural diversity is a necessary precondition for multiculturalism, it is not sufficient on its own. The case of many African countries, which are highly diverse yet lack cohesive multicultural frameworks, was cited as examples. Multiculturalism requires more than coexistence; it depends on intentional interaction, mutual appreciation, and supportive public policies that uphold both cultural maintenance and equitable participation. These are essential for fostering a truly inclusive and equitable society.

Under the right conditions, such as voluntary intergroup contact, institutional support, and endorsement by public authorities, cultural diversity can lead to measurable social benefits. These include reduced prejudice, enhanced trust, and a stronger sense of national belonging and shared identity. However, she cautioned that when contact occurs under conditions of inequality, fear, or coercion, it can amplify prejudice and erode social cohesion, undermining the very goals of multiculturalism.

The importance of multicultural ideology was also discussed, especially in societies that value diversity as a civic principle. In such contexts, multiculturalism is often associated with lower levels of prejudice and higher social wellbeing. Citing recent polls from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, Ward noted that many respondents believe ethnic diversity improves the living environment. Immigrant and minority groups largely support multicultural policies.

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<sup>2</sup> EDGE is a green building certification system focused on making buildings more resource-efficient. See <https://edge.gbci.org/>.



However, there is also evidence of backlash among majority populations, some of whom report feeling less secure or perceive discrimination because of multicultural policies. This underscored the need for truly inclusive multiculturalism – one that incorporates the concerns and identities of all groups, not just minorities.

An important point raised by Ward was that dominant cultural groups often fail to recognise their own practices as cultural, which can make them resistant to multicultural thinking. In contrast, Singapore was highlighted as a successful example of state-led multicultural integration. The country's Ethnic Integration Policy, especially as implemented through its public housing program, ensures regular inter-ethnic interaction by mirroring national demographic ratios. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, Singapore ranked highest globally as a place where people of different ethnic backgrounds live together successfully. The success of Singapore's model lies in the combination of a unifying national language (English), which facilitates communication and shared identity, with the preservation of strong ethnic identities. Importantly, this is not solely a top-down initiative – community organisations also play a central role in sustaining cohesion.

Ward warned that mainstream media has a powerful influence on perceptions of race and multiculturalism. In many contexts, especially in places like New Zealand, media narratives tend to amplify negative aspects of race relations, leading to more negative public attitudes. There was an urgent need to highlight positive stories of intercultural success and counterbalance divisive media portrayals.

Finally, she pointed to a global rise in discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment, linked to broader patterns of crisis and uncertainty. As the world faces climate change, pandemics, economic shocks, and conflict, these external threats fuel anxiety, making societies more inward-looking. In such conditions, “culturally tight” societies – those with rigid norms and low tolerance for difference – become even less open, and more prone to prejudice. There is a direct link between perceived threat, social rigidity, and exclusionary behaviour.

Ward concluded by asserting that multiculturalism is a journey, not a destination. No society has perfected it, but there are valuable examples that showcase both successes and struggles. In a time of global volatility, building bridges of trust, empathy, and dialogue is more critical than ever. The path forward lies in sustained commitment to inclusive policies, civic education, and mutual understanding, guided by the recognition that diversity, when nurtured, is a profound strength.

## **Addressing the Challenges of Trust Erosion & Societal Division**

*Mr Ed Williams, President, International, Edelman*

Williams began by noting that cultural diversity, when properly nurtured, can be a source of sovereign strength rather than division. But for multiculturalism to thrive, one fundamental condition must be met: trust. Trust is the invisible glue that holds society together, enabling cooperation, cohesion, and progress.

Trust does not simply happen. It must be built, maintained, and protected – especially in multicultural societies where different groups must live, work, and coexist peacefully. When there is a high level of trust, business interactions





become smoother, social integration is easier, and institutions are more effective. This, in turn, strengthens multiculturalism.

However, the absence of trust fractures societies. Social cohesion weakens. The Edelman Trust Barometer, originally inspired by the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, has evolved over the decades to track this very issue. Major global events like the 2003 Iraq War, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all left lasting impacts on how people view their leaders, institutions, and one another.

According to Williams, we are not only confronting a trust deficit at present, but also what can be called “active grievance”. According to recent findings, 61 percent of people globally harbour grievances against businesses and governments. This is not an isolated concern, it is a global phenomenon.

Yet, there are notable exceptions. In places like Singapore, where governance has prioritised public trust and equitable systems, the level of grievance is significantly lower. This contrast shows that it is possible to build resilient, trusting societies if institutions are accountable, transparent, and responsive.

One emerging problem is “trust inequality”, i.e., the widening gap between how lower-income and higher-income individuals perceive trust in society. Those on the margins feel excluded from the system and, as a result, become more susceptible to hostile narratives and radical activism.

In fact, 40 percent of the general population now support hostile activism. Among the Gen Z population, the number jumps to a worrying 53 percent. This highlights a generational shift in how change is perceived: many young people now believe change must be forced, not voted for. Democracy, for them, seems too slow or unresponsive to real grievances.

This trend is fuelled by the proliferation of disinformation, the weaponisation of identity and division, and a fragmented media landscape. These tools are often exploited by bad actors who seek to undermine institutional legitimacy. Their tactics are designed to erode trust, stir resentment, and pit communities against one another.

In today’s world, rebuilding trust is not just a moral obligation; it is a strategic imperative. Without trust, diversity becomes a source of division. With trust, it becomes our greatest strength.

## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Defining the Success of Multiculturalism

Success can be seen and evaluated through institutional trust, political stability, economic performance, and a clear rejection of hate speech. These are measurable indicators of a society embracing diversity.

### Issue 2 – Responsibility for Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a shared responsibility among institutions and citizens. The responsibility falls not only to the government but NGOs, researchers, and civil society as well. Individuals, via ‘people power’ can help shape multicultural policies via public discourse and activism, while governments need to be more responsive.

### Issue 3 – Gender, Religion, and Theological Reform

Theology can often seem too masculine. There is a need to shift toward more feminine perspectives within religious interpretations to better support inclusivity and multicultural harmony. Theological reform can help integrate gender equity into multicultural frameworks.

**ICCSA** THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

**PLENARY 1 UNPACKING MULTICULTURALISM**

**1 PROF. DR. MASARUDDIN UMAR**

**PANCASILA**

AS THE COMMON GROUND & PHILOSOPHY TO APPROACH PLURALISM & INCLUSIVITY

INDONESIA is the **LARGEST** MUSLIM COUNTRY in the WORLD

ISLAM AS A UNITING FORCE

**WE NEED TO:**

- ESTABLISH A PEACEFUL WORLD FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS
- CROSS CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY
- HAVE PIVOTAL ROLES OF WORSHIP HOUSES

**2 PROF. COLLEEN WARD**

**CRITERIA** FOR MULTICULTURALISM

- ✓ MULTICULTURAL CONTACT
- ✓ MULTICULTURAL IDEOLOGY
- ✓ MULTICULTURAL POLICY & PRACTICES

**OPTIMAL CONDITIONS**

- EQUAL STATUS
- COOPERATIVE
- VOLUNTARY
- ENDORSED BY AUTHORITY

**MULTICULTURAL IDEOLOGY**

- ↓ LOWER LEVELS OF PREJUDICE
- ↑ GREATER TOLERANCE
- ↑ MORE SUPPORT FOR MINORITY RIGHTS
- ↓ LESS PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION BETWEEN MAJOR & MINOR GROUPS

**MAKING MULTICULTURALISM WORK!**

MEDIA GOVERNMENT RESEARCH COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

**3 MR. ED WILLIAMS**

**TRUST** is the CORNERSTONE of EVERYTHING!

THE SENSE OF GRIEVANCE IS ON THE RISE

- PROMINENT IN LOWER INCOME GROUPS
- RISE OF HOSTILE ACTIVISM
- CORROSION OF TRUST

**TRUST & CORRODING** with the RAPID SHARING of DISINFORMATION!

WHEN WE ABANDON TRUTH, WE ALSO ABANDON THE FOUNDATIONS OF A SHARED REALITY!

MULTICULTURALISM FLOURISHES WITH TRUST!

**TRUST MUST be REBUILT!** IN COMMUNITIES & IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE'S SCAFFOLDING!

**ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF TRUST EROSION & SOCIETAL DIVISION**

**INSTITUTIONALISE EQUITY** **CHAMPION TRUTH** **FOSTER INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT** **INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP**

**PROF. DR. NASARUDDIN UMAR**

**PROF. COLLEEN WARD**

**MR. ED WILLIAMS**

**MODERATOR PROF. FARISH NOOR**

## Breakout 1

*Is History a Compass for Navigation or a Barrier to a more Inclusive Futures?*



**Professor Noorhaidi Hasan**

Rector, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

**Ms Lee Huay Leng**

Editor-in-Chief, SPH Media Chinese Media Group, Singapore

**Moderator: Venerable Chuan Sheng**

Vice-Rector, Buddhist College of Singapore, Singapore

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This breakout discussed how nations can anchor on common national legacies for the future, and what are the conditions that have enabled multicultural societies to be optimistic and cohesive.

Key takeaways: (a) There is a need to preserve space for distinct cultural identities within a shared national framework and linguistic or cultural development by one group should not be perceived as a threat by other groups; and (b) Islam in Indonesia was not a barrier but rather an enabler to forging an inclusive society.





## How Singapore's Unique Chinese Cultural Legacy Provided a Framework for Interethnic Engagement

*Ms Lee Huay Leng, Editor-in-Chief, Chinese Media Group, SPH Media*

Lee's presentation discussed the evolution and contemporary challenges of the Chinese community in Singapore. She traced the transformation of the Chinese community from a China-oriented migrant society to an integrated, localised, and English-speaking majority. This transformation, she argued, was shaped by a combination of historical developments, state policies, and the community's adaptation. While integration has been largely successful, new waves of Chinese immigrants and fragmented media environments present new challenges. These developments raise concerns about how to maintain national cohesion while allowing space for cultural identity and multilingual expression.

Historically, the Chinese community in Singapore emerged from successive waves of migration, primarily during the British colonial period. Lee cited census data indicating that as early as the 1830s, the Chinese constituted approximately 45 percent of the population. By 1901, this figure had exceeded 70 percent, and by 1960, the demographic had stabilised at around 75 percent, forming the majority ethnic group. These early migrants retained strong socio-cultural and political affiliations with China, referring to it as their "fatherland" and actively participating in events such as the Chinese republican revolution.

She identified three foundational institutions that anchored Chinese communal life in Singapore: (a) clan associations; (b) Chinese-medium schools; and (c) Chinese-language newspapers. Clan associations served as mutual aid networks for new arrivals. Chinese schools, largely autonomous under colonial rule, preserved Chinese and transmitted Confucian values. Concurrently, Chinese-language media reinforced linguistic cohesion and shaped political consciousness within the community.

The historical evolution of the Chinese community in Singapore is closely linked to the transformation of Chinese-medium education, which functioned as both a cultural institution and a political site. In the mid-20th century, many Chinese families enrolled their children in Chinese-language schools to preserve linguistic and cultural values. Tensions emerged in 1954 when Chinese school students protested the British colonial National Service Ordinance, culminating in riots and arrests. English- and Chinese-language media diverged in their portrayals of the incident, and Lee Kuan Yew's legal defence of the students established early ties with Chinese educators. In 1955, Nanyang University was founded by the Chinese community to serve Chinese-educated middle school graduates excluded from English-medium higher education, but it was merged with the University of Singapore in 1980 as part of state-led national integration, a move widely opposed by the Chinese-educated public.

After World War II, the government began regulating and subsidising Chinese schools, leading to their gradual assimilation. By the 1970s, enrolment had fallen significantly. In response, the government introduced Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools to preserve bilingual excellence and launched the 1979 Speak Mandarin Campaign to replace dialects with a common Chinese vernacular. Despite these efforts, by the 1980s, English had become the dominant home language, reflecting broader linguistic convergence. The 1991 General Election revealed political dissatisfaction among Chinese voters, attributed by then-Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong to concerns over the declining status of the Chinese language and culture.





Lee also examined contemporary challenges facing the Chinese community in Singapore, focusing on the implications of recent immigration and evolving media consumption patterns. She observed that new ethnic Chinese immigrants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan differ markedly from earlier cohorts, particularly in their engagement with transnational digital media. Unlike previous generations who were integrated through locally anchored narratives and institutions, these newcomers consume fragmented, externally produced content, complicating integration and social cohesion.

To conclude, she argued that traditional media once played a stabilising role by exercising restraint on sensitive issues, particularly regarding religion and culture. However, the rise of decentralised and less regulated media undermines these mechanisms. She emphasised the need to preserve space for distinct cultural identities within a shared national framework and warned against perceiving linguistic or cultural development by one group as a threat to others. Her remarks point to the necessity of rethinking integration strategies considering complex, multilayered identities and rapidly changing information ecosystems.

## **How Islam Evolved in Southeast Asia and its Consequential Impact on the Region's Social and Political Contour**

*Professor Noorhaidi Hassan, Rector, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga*

Professor Noorhaidi Hassan's presentation focused on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia, and particularly Indonesia. The question he set out to address was the extent to which the history of the religion contributed to the burgeoning of multiculturalism and an inclusive society.

While noting that it was easy today to perceive religion as a barrier to achieving an inclusive society, especially after 9/11, Noorhaidi said that the history of Islam in Indonesia painted a different picture. Islam and the way it had been interwoven with politics, culture, and social affairs had a positive effect on building an inclusive society.

Unlike in the Middle East, where Islam often arrived through conquest, Islam arrived in Southeast Asia by peaceful means i.e., via trade. Sufi missionaries played a significant role in the spread of Islam. They tried to blend the existing Hindu and Buddhist elements into the Islamic tradition they introduced to society. There is a specific form of Sufism in Java that is mystic and contains elements of religious cosmology and Indonesians have been skilfully creative in blending textual Islam with local characteristics, with minimal input from the government.

According to Noorhaidi, Islam in Indonesia is characterised by the ongoing exchange and contestation between local heterodoxy (liberal Islam) and foreign Islamic orthodoxy, arriving at an ever-evolving equilibrium. For example, the dichotomy between the *abangan* (refers to Javanese Muslims whose practice of Islam is syncretic, blending Islamic beliefs with indigenous Javanese traditions) and *putihan* (refers to Javanese Muslims who adhere more strictly to orthodox Islamic practices and teachings). As an aside, he argued that the reported increase in religious radicalism over the last couple of decades, in fact, falls within this much longer pattern of contestation; it is not new.

The position of Islam in state affairs in Indonesia naturally elicited serious debates. The question was whether Islam should have political supremacy or should it simply be left as a cultural expression of the people. Expectedly,



secularists and Islamists had differing ideas on this issue. Indonesia eventually chose *Pancasila*<sup>3</sup> as its political philosophy. The national motto to promote Pancasila is “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”, or “unity in diversity”. Prof. Noorhaidi concluded that Indonesian Islam, despite contestation between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, would always find equilibrium.

## **Discussions and Reflections**

### **Issue 1 – Applicability of Lessons from History**

What happened historically was indeed influenced by a different set of factors. There are lessons that should be learnt from these incidents but one should also be mindful that not everything repeats itself. For example, public reactions/responses to events would not be the same as before due mainly to social media. An alternative view was that although history did repeat itself, the Southeast Asian region seemed capable of re-balancing itself and achieving equilibrium despite experiencing all sorts of challenges.

### **Issue 2 – Using Technology to Strengthen Cohesion**

Technology has helped in how one expresses and understands history due the availability of more channels/mediums. For instance, archives, films, oral histories can now be accessed online (e.g., Culturepaedia – an online repository on Singapore Chinese culture<sup>4</sup>). However, such technology can also result in the spread of misinformation, especially if facts are not verified. Admittedly, knowledge is imperfect, and one does not always have all the facts to fairly judge incidents in the past. Nevertheless, efforts are being made by government departments to help individuals better-understand personal, family and school histories. Media literacy is important in this regard and individuals should be both “thinking consumers and producers of information”.

Religion also benefits from the use of technology as no single entity can monopolise and control information in the public domain. The marketplace of ideas would act as a bulwark against narrow or one-sided interpretations of religious concepts.

The way in which history and historical narratives is presented (e.g., cartoons, comics, etc.) is also helpful in getting individuals interested in and understand other cultures and religions, which in turn, can help strengthen social cohesion.

### **Issue 3 – Shared National Values to Foster Unity**

For some countries, while shared values were important to foster social cohesion and unity, it was economic prosperity that was key to achieving these goals. It was suggested that interfaith harmony should be reframed as justice and nation building as these would result in tangible action (e.g., policy changes). It was also observed that discussions about tolerance without meaningful action was insufficient.

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3 Premised on five principles: (a) Indonesian nationalism; (b) internationalism, or humanism; (c) consent, or democracy; (4) social prosperity; and (5) belief in one God. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pancasila>

4 <https://culturepaedia.singaporeccc.org.sg/>

For countries with short histories, it was unavoidable that lessons are drawn from the same few historical case studies. Nevertheless, through them, and actively learning from global affairs (e.g., conflicts), shared values of mutual respect, tolerance and coexistence were derived.

## Issue 4 – History and the Future

History does give us reasons to be optimistic about the future. Optimism is important and that if individuals are not optimistic about the future, it would adversely affect creativity and inclusivity.

While optimism is important, it was debatable if individuals would still value history in the future. The question is can we make history more interesting for people to be willing to learn from it.

**ICCS** THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

**BREAKOUT #1**

# “IS HISTORY A COMPASS FOR NAVIGATION OR A BARRIER TO A MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE?”

**1 MS LEE HUAY LENG**

CHINA IMMIGRANTS into SINGAPORE WERE CALLED: **“SINKEH”**

- STILL CALLED CHINA THEIR FATHERLAND
- DID THINGS IN ACCORDANCE TO WHAT WAS HAPPENING THERE
- WITH PLANS TO RETURN TO CHINA!

**3 PILLARS** of the CHINESE COMMUNITY

- 1956 A REPORT OF THE ALL-PARTY COMMITTEE OF THE SINGAPORE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ON CHINESE EDUCATION
- CLANS & ASSOCIATION
- SCHOOLS
- PRESS

FOLLOWING THE 1954 NATIONAL SERVICE RIOT... RECOGNIZED THE NEED FOR FAIR TREATMENT AMONG ALL CHINESE SCHOOLS & STUDENTS

**NATION-BUILDING**

- MALAY as OUR NATIONAL LANGUAGE
- MANDARIN AS THE UNIFYING CHINESE DIALECT

**2 PROF. NOORHAIDI HASSAN**

ISLAM ARRIVED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA from the 12th CENTURY ONWARDS

15-16th CENTURIES LOCAL RULERS CONVERTED to ISLAM.

SUFI MISSIONARIES PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN INTEGRATING ISLAM INTO DIVERSE LOCAL CULTURE

INFLUENCING:
 

- POLITICS
- SOCIAL AFFAIRS
- CULTURAL AFFAIRS

**ISLAM in POST-INDEPENDENCE POLITICS:**

IN INDONESIA:

- SEGULAR PANCASILA vs SHARIA DEBATES
- THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF THE PANCASILA APPEARED to be an AFFIRMATION to the INCLUSIVE INDONESIAN ISLAM

**PEOPLE'S REACTIONS TODAY ARE MUCH MORE DIFFERENT!**

WE HAVE TO HAVE NEW SOLUTIONS TO HOW PEOPLE WOULD REACT TO SOCIAL CONFLICTS

WHEN USING TECH TO WEAVE A NARRATIVE for SOCIAL COHESION WE NEED to EXERCISE DISCRIMINATION!

1 DO YOUR RESEARCH! UNDERSTAND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT RIGHTLY

2 ALLOW SOMEONE TO INTERPRET IT in their CREATIVITY!

**#ICCS2025**

**MS LEE HUAY LENG**

**PROF. NOORHAIDI HASSAN**

**MODERATOR: VENERABLE CHUAN SHENG**



## Breakout 2

### *What Conditions Promote Respect, Togetherness and Success?*



**Monsignor Indunil Kodithuwakku**

Secretary, Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican

**Professor John W. Berry**

Professor Emeritus of Psychology, Queen's University, Canada

**Moderator: Ms Michelle Tay**

Executive Director, Singapore Kindness Movement, Singapore

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The panellists shared their perspectives on creating environments that promote inclusion, trust, and collective well-being.

Key takeaways: (a) Social cohesion in Canada, as measured by the Sense of Belonging (SoB) indicator, is relatively high; SoB is also strongly associated with improved mental health and greater life satisfaction; and (b) Social cohesion is undermined by inequality, polarisation, nationalism, and environmental degradation. Building cohesive societies demands inclusive political vision, strong institutions, shared identity, interfaith dialogue, and an educational focus not only on skills but empathy and ethical values.





## **Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in Canada: Mutual Intercultural Acceptance, Sense of Belonging, and Wellbeing**

*Professor John W. Berry, Professor Emeritus, Queen's University*

Professor John Berry said that Canada, with a population of around 40 million people, of which 25 percent were born outside the country, is a striking example of how ethnic diversity and equity are closely linked. He noted that a strong sense of belonging to Canada is consistently high across migrant generations, both in Quebec and the rest of the country. This high level of belonging underscores the country's commitment to multiculturalism and social inclusion.

To better understand ethnic diversity and inclusion in Canada, Berry outlined three guiding hypotheses: (a) the Multiculturalism Hypothesis; (b) the Integration Hypothesis; and (c) the Contact Hypothesis. The Multiculturalism Hypothesis is rooted in Canada's official multiculturalism policy, which posits that when individuals and groups feel secure and respected in society, they are more likely to accept those who are different from themselves. The Integration Hypothesis suggests that when people can maintain their cultural heritage while also engaging actively with others in the wider society, their well-being improves. Finally, the Contact Hypothesis argues that greater interpersonal engagement across groups tends to result in more positive mutual attitudes and reduced prejudice.

Berry explained that Canada's multiculturalism policy aimed to promote the mutual acceptance of all peoples. A 2020 study on intercultural adaptation found that stronger endorsement of multiculturalism and lower levels of prejudice and discrimination were closely linked to increased feelings of security – not just among ethnocultural minorities, but across the population more broadly. However, he cautioned that these findings may be outdated. In recent years, external pressures such as political instability and rising threats from the United States have affected Canadians' sense of security. Interestingly, these challenges may have also led to a renewed or heightened sense of national belonging, suggesting that identity can be reinforced in times of crises and uncertainty.

Berry also highlighted the psychological benefits of belonging. Higher levels of Sense of Belonging (SoB), whether to Canada, one's province, local community, ethnic group, or religion, are strongly associated with improved mental health and greater life satisfaction. These findings indicated that Canada enjoys strong social cohesion. Nonetheless, Berry stressed the need for future research to go beyond psychological measures and incorporate more objective indicators of inclusion, such as access to employment, income levels, and housing. Only then could a more complete picture of equity and integration in Canadian society be formed.

## **Asia's Rich but Complex Legacy of Multiculturalism**

*Monsignor Indunil Kodithuwakku, Secretary, Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue*

Monsignor Indunil Kodithuwakku offered a profound reflection on the multifaceted roots and responsibilities of multiculturalism in Asia, underscoring the region's historical, spiritual, and cultural significance. He described Asia as the cradle of multiculturalism, a region enriched by enduring values such as family, hospitality, non-violence, and care for creation. However, he reminded the audience that Asia has also experienced its share of ethnic violence and intercommunal strife, making it a region of both inspiration and challenge in the pursuit of social cohesion.



He said that multiculturalism and social cohesion are not abstract ideals but deeply rooted in the realities of lived experiences. Societies today face numerous interconnected threats: (a) socio-economic inequality; (b) political polarisation; (c) rising nationalism; (d) environmental degradation; and (e) the manipulation of religion for divisive ends. Without ecological justice,<sup>5</sup> he warned, true social cohesion would be unattainable. Moreover, he highlighted that religion can either be co-opted to divide or embraced to unify, depending on how faith is understood and practiced in the public square.

Building a cohesive society, according to Monsignor Kodithuwakku, required both courage and clarity. Holding diversity together is not a passive process; it depends on the active construction of an inclusive political vision, supported by strong and fair institutions, a shared national identity, an honest historical memory, economic equity, open space for dialogue, and the embrace of religious and cultural values across traditions. He warned that exclusivist ideologies – whether ethnic, religious, or political – pose serious threats to cohesion, as all these factors are deeply interrelated.

Looking ahead, he outlined the necessary components of a way forward: sustained interreligious and intercultural dialogue, access to education, and a commitment to justice. Dialogue, he stressed, must be rooted in mutual respect and carried out across cultures, ethnicities, and languages. Education should not be reduced to technical skill-building or preparation for employment alone; it must also nurture moral imagination, spiritual formation, and empathy. Without access to opportunity and basic equality, he warned, divisions will deepen, and trust will erode. This is particularly urgent in the context of indigenous communities, whose lives and traditions are often at risk due to ecological injustice.

Monsignor Kodithuwakku also underscored the need for collective healing, calling for a public reckoning with the past, grounded in apology, shared memory, and ethical responsibility. He called on societies to recognise the unresolved injustices of history and to commit to reconciliation – not as a one-time act, but as a sustained process. At the heart of this vision is a shared set of ethical principles: respect for life and human dignity, a commitment to truth and integrity, stewardship and responsibility, justice and fairness, and compassion and solidarity. These, he affirmed, are the values that form the ethical framework of a truly cohesive society.

He concluded with a message of hope from Asia to the world, reminding the audience that peace is more than the absence of war – it is the presence of compassion, mutual understanding, and relationship. Asia, with its diverse spiritual traditions and cultures, has much to teach the world about living together with dignity, integrity, and care.

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5 Ecological justice is the “principle that ‘everything is interrelated’, and that ethical action in the environmental sphere is central to equity at a social level”. See <https://jss.org.au/programs/ecological-justice/>



## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Immigration, Digitalisation and National Identity

Canada's model was cited as an example where former Prime Ministers acknowledged the absence of a single national identity, describing the country instead as a "nation of nations". Strong, singular national identities often lead to negative nationalism. For small states like Singapore, it was important to find ways to be more inclusive towards groups with perceived differences.

Digital tools allow individuals to stay connected to their heritage and culture, which can strengthen their sense of identity. However, the isolating effects of excessive screen time, particularly through mobile devices, must be addressed as these can have negative effects.

### Issue 2 – Social Cohesion, Polarisation and Economic Development

Social cohesion and economic development are not mutually exclusive. When pursued together, they can reinforce each other and produce stronger, more resilient societies.

The importance of education, particularly learning about one's own and others' religious traditions, as well as fostering human fraternity and environmental respect were critical for social cohesion. Ignorance, not difference, is the true enemy of peace.

### Issue 3 – Promoting Multiculturalism

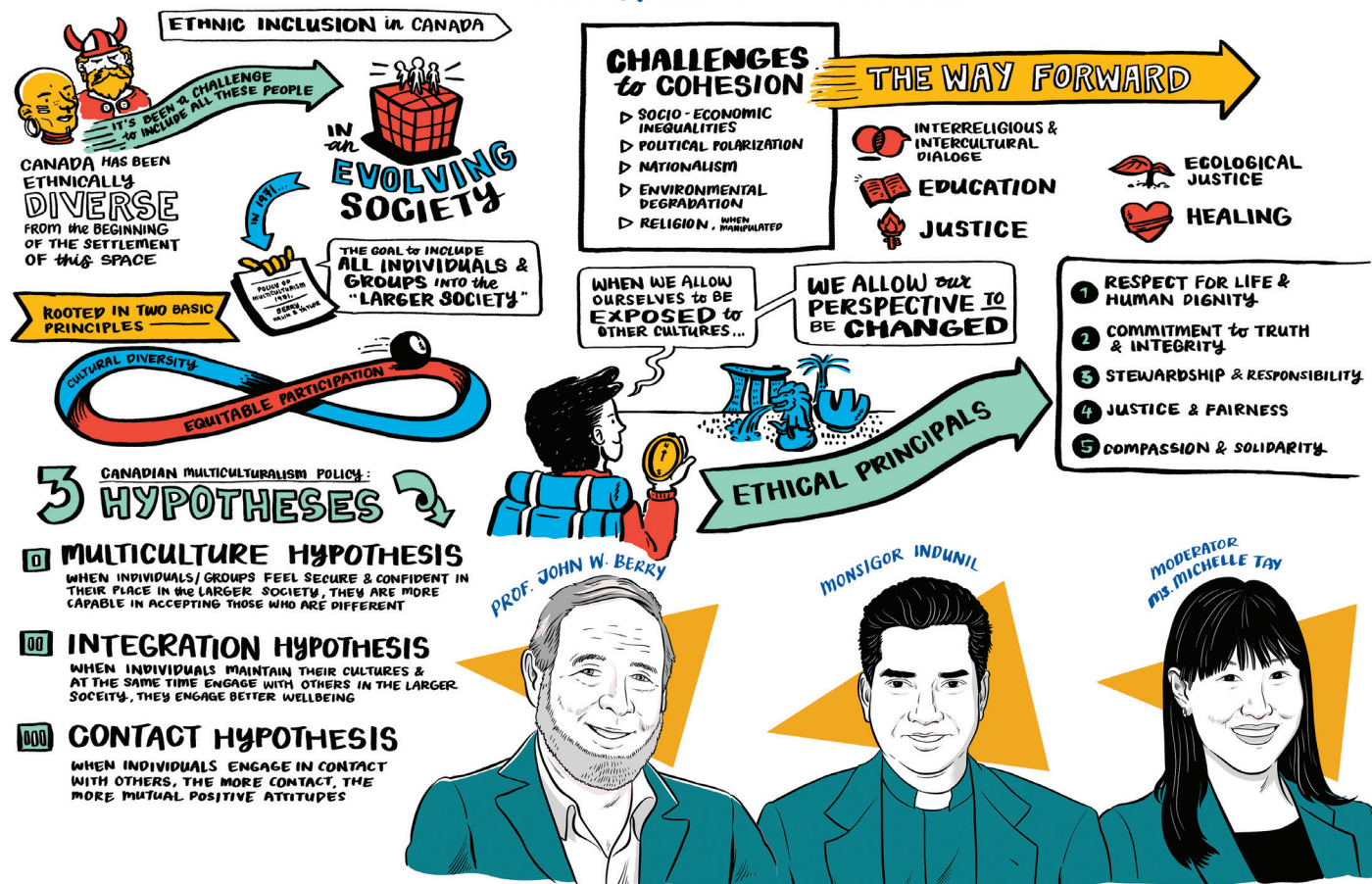
Individuals were encouraged to build authentic friendships based on trust, similarities, and complementarities. Frequent social contact, small gestures of goodwill, and interreligious dialogue all help foster inclusion. Religion should not be blamed for social problems and cultivating a culture of dialogue was useful.

While principles like diversity and equity could be shared across societies, specific multicultural models must be adapted to fit local cultures. Individuals with multiple cultural identities tended to have better social support systems and outcomes.

Canada's success with integration through higher education was highlighted as a way to promote both social cohesion and economic opportunity. The role of educational systems in uniting diverse populations was also underscored.

Singapore's Harmony Centre was mentioned as an example of how to help communities reflect on historical prejudice through learning, relearning, and unlearning. The importance of learning from successful multicultural models like Singapore in the face of global challenges was also discussed.

**"WHAT CONDITIONS PROMOTE RESPECT, TOGETHERNESS *and* SUCCESS"**





## Breakout 3

### *Stories that Inspire Multicultural Inclusion and Shared Purpose*



#### **Professor Harvey Whitehouse**

Director, Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

#### **Imam Dr Khalil Abdur-Rashid**

Chair of the Board of Religious, Spiritual & Ethical Life and Muslim Chaplain, Harvard University, United States

#### **Moderator: Mohamed Irshad**

Founder of Roses of Peace, Singapore

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This session highlighted practical insights about building bridges between evolving cultures.

Key takeaways: (a) A multi-pronged strategy that included anti-discrimination task forces, wellness initiatives, structured dialogues, renewed commitments to academic freedom, pluralism, and communal standards was employed to rebuild a cohesive and inclusive university community at Harvard following the Oct 7 attacks by Hamas; and (b) Violent extremism is driven more by the psychological effects of identity fusion; but identity fusion can also be a force for unity.



## **Student Activism and the Crisis of Social Cohesion at Harvard University**

*Imam Dr. Khalil Abdur-Rashid, Chair of the Board of Religious, Spiritual & Ethical Life and Muslim Chaplain, Harvard University*

Imam Dr Khalil Abdur-Rashid discussed what he described as a “traumatic” and “tragic” breakdown of social cohesion at Harvard University. As one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the United States, and the oldest university in the country, Harvard has a student population of nearly 25,000, including about 7,000 international students. At the time of his talk, international students were still being prevented from attending the university. Khalil explained that his goal was not just to present information, but to offer some food for thought on how Harvard ended up in such a situation and what steps were being taken to repair the damage. He emphasised that restoring social cohesion at Harvard remains a work in progress, especially in the context of ongoing tensions.

He began by describing the context that led to the crisis. On October 7, 2023, following the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel’s retaliatory strikes on Gaza and the West Bank, the Palestinian Solidarity Committee at Harvard published a statement. The letter, which was co-signed by 33 student organisations, received backlash for its timing and for allegedly lacking sympathy for the Israeli victims. Some students defended the letter, stating that it did not condone violence but was meant to highlight the origins of the conflict. The statement was widely circulated on Sidechat, an anonymous platform used by Harvard students.

By October 9, the controversy had spread beyond Harvard and was making national news. A former Harvard President called the statement “morally unconscionable,” and some Senators claimed it condoned terrorism. On October 10, a billionaire hedge fund manager and Harvard alumnus called for the names of the students who signed the statement to be publicly released and urged employers not to hire them. As a result, hundreds of strangers began contacting the students’ parents, employers, and social media accounts. Some students received threatening messages. The university president at the time released a statement, and four doxing websites targeting students emerged. On October 12, a doxing truck appeared on campus displaying students’ names and faces.

Imam Dr Khalil then discussed the various responses from different segments of the university community. Letters issued by senior administrators were seen by some as one-sided or lacking empathy for students’ concerns. Some faculty members were reported to have made statements in class supporting one group of students over another. Several prominent alumni withheld donations, and some students perceived indifference from administrators when raising their concerns. The controversy eventually led to congressional testimony by the university president and their subsequent resignation. It also resulted in leadership and staffing changes at certain academic centres.

Students responded with protests and disruptions throughout the 2023-2024 academic year. These activities culminated in a student encampment just before commencement in 2024. Imam Dr Khalil referred to these developments as the result of mistakes and missteps. Reports of doxing, harassment, and bullying continued, and there was a notable rise in anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, and anti-Semitic incidents both on and off campus.

He went on to describe the consequences of these events, which included a breakdown in campus social cohesion and the emergence of communal trauma. The campus became deeply divided, and there was a widespread perception



that it was no longer a safe space. Concerns were raised about the curtailment of free speech, and complaints of bullying and distrust were common. Feelings of grief, trauma, isolation, and tension were pervasive and often unaddressed.

In addressing these challenges, the university took several steps to rebuild social cohesion. Imam Dr Khalil mentioned the introduction of university-wide training in Psychological First Aid (PFA), anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia to address bias and promote healing. The university reaffirmed its commitment to institutional neutrality, academic freedom, and freedom of speech, while also setting clear boundaries against the disruption of campus life. Two presidential task forces were established: one focused on combating antisemitism and anti-Israel bias; and the other on addressing anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian bias.

Imam Dr Khalil then outlined five major areas for action: addressing campus divisions, promoting healing, ensuring safety, restoring trust, and repairing relationships. To address divisions, the university held listening sessions, conducted a campus-wide survey on belonging, and included input from non-student community members such as custodial, dining, and housing staff. Training on Islamophobia and anti-Semitism were rolled out across the university, along with faculty seminars and educational forums.

To promote healing, the university acknowledged communal pain and implemented PFA training to establish better intervention and coping strategies. University-wide memorial services were held, and wellness was supported through activities that encourage healthy eating, rest, and group healing. Other initiatives included spiritual discussions, a “Being a Good Neighbor” forum, monthly student check-in lunches, and the development of personal self-care plans.

In terms of safety, the university improved its resources to combat doxing and online harassment. It also reformed the systems for reporting harassment and bullying and revised its anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies. Boundaries were established to limit disruptions, and open public spaces such as a “Speaker’s Corner” were created to allow free expression while maintaining order.

To restore trust, the university worked to safeguard academic freedom and transparency. It began soliciting regular feedback from the campus community and took steps to reinforce university values and support communal life. Dedicated spaces were established for interfaith engagement and Muslim prayer, aiming to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Imam Dr Khalil concluded by sharing key lessons learnt from the experience. First, cultivating equality requires avoiding, even the appearance of taking sides, taking sides, which can deepen divisions. Second, healing should involve acknowledging harm and supporting recovery at individual, group, and community levels. Third, clear standards and expectations should be set and reinforced. Lastly, communal cultivation needs to be supported through education, forums, training, and the provision of dedicated spaces for community engagement.



## Identity Fusion

*Professor Harvey Whitehouse, Director, Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford*

Professor Whitehouse said that while suffering is universally unpleasant and something all humans naturally seek to avoid, it can paradoxically play a powerful role in strengthening social bonds. His research underscored the idea that shared suffering, when experienced collectively, could foster resilience and bind individuals into tightly cohesive groups.

Drawing from recent events at institutions such as Harvard, Whitehouse noted that the emotional intensity of collective hardship is often at the core of both conflict and solidarity. In such conditions, individuals often become willing to take extraordinary risks, including self-sacrifice, to defend their group. This dynamic, he explained, is rooted in a psychological phenomenon known as identity fusion, where a person's individual identity becomes deeply fused with their group identity.

Identity fusion can heighten group loyalty and can inspire acts of extreme altruism. It is typically activated through intense, shared experiences such as military combat or collective trauma. He cited research conducted during the 2011 Libyan revolution, where 179 members of revolutionary battalions were surveyed. The results showed that many fighters experienced near-total identity fusion with their comrades, often prioritising loyalty to the group (their *katiba*) over even their own families.

This research also shed light on violent extremism. Collaborating with counter-extremism expert Julia Ebner, Whitehouse found that ideological conviction alone does not fully explain radical violence. Instead, it is the sense of belonging and psychological fusion with a group, often forged through suffering, that propels individuals toward extreme action. Their work aims to develop tools for identifying early warning signs of such fusion-driven extremism.

Paradoxically, identity fusion is not merely a destructive force. Under the right circumstances, it can promote peace. Shared suffering can create the perception of common identity, even among traditional enemies. Political leaders have used this to great effect in post-conflict reconciliation. For example, Nelson Mandela was cited as a figure who successfully bridged the divide between in-groups and out-groups, fostering unity through a shared national vision.

Whitehouse stressed the importance of recognising both the constructive and destructive potentials of identity fusion. While it can drive out-group hostility, it can also be scaled up to unify disparate communities. This is particularly relevant in today's climate of rising polarisation, extremism, and identity-based division.

He concluded by posing a provocative question: in a world increasingly fractured by Islamophobia, misinformation, and tribal politics, could countries like Singapore develop societal 'inoculations' against these identity pandemics? Understanding the evolutionary roots and psychological dynamics of identity fusion, he suggested, may be essential for building more resilient, united societies in the 21st century.





## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Responsible Student Activism

In the Harvard campus example, activism had reached a point where students were no longer willing to engage in dialogue. People stopped talking to each other, and even speaking to someone outside one's group could result in being seen as part of "them" rather than "us". This was no longer activism. Activism, in an academic setting, must involve dialogue, especially with those who have opposing views.<sup>6</sup> Activism that becomes purely disruptive, without engagement or discussion, loses its purpose. Much of the activism on Harvard's campus had become chaotic and influenced by external agendas. Off-campus actors – both within and outside the United States – attempted to push students in specific directions to advance their own goals, using Harvard's visibility to amplify their messages.

### Issue 2 – Role of Leaders in Healing, Dialogue and Managing Crises

All levels of leadership – including student leadership – have the potential to influence broader society. Leadership must be learnt through mentorship, experience, and especially through making mistakes. Effective role models, such as Nelson Mandela and Dr Martin Luther King Jr., should be emulated, as they have undergone significant challenges and emerged stronger.

Leadership, particularly strategic and wise leadership, plays a crucial role in managing crises. In the Harvard case, some university leaders listened and responded well, while others did not. Ultimately, effective leadership was essential in fostering healing and rebuilding social cohesion.

It was important to be inclusive (i.e., to include everyone in the community) in the healing process, as prioritising some individuals'/groups' pain over others undermines the healing process. It was emphasised that healing takes time and requires a collective effort involving students, administrators, and the wider community. It cannot be left to one group alone; the entire university must recognise the need for healing and contribute to it. Today, many interventions focus on individual suffering, but if we begin to see suffering as collective, it opens new pathways for bonding and healing. Hence, there is a crucial role for "barrier-crossing leaders", i.e., those who can recognise and empathise with the suffering of both sides in a conflict.

### Issue 3 – Suffering, Fostering Social Cohesion and Identity

Several studies suggest that individuals who undergo painful initiations described those experiences as euphoric, despite the physical or emotional discomfort. There is a fine line between euphoric and painful experiences. Interestingly, negative experiences tend to leave a stronger impression in an individual's memory than positive ones, which makes them more powerful in forging lasting emotional bonds. Because strong emotions often reinforce our sense of personal identity, painful experiences are more effective at generating identity fusion than joyful ones.

Aligning oneself with a particular group does not always mean complete identification with them. It often involves adopting the identity markers of a group, which are distinct from one's personal identity. When it comes to identity

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<sup>6</sup> An example of the positive aspects of activism was when Harvard students banded together around the Trump administration's move against international students, and when funding cuts threatened the livelihoods of researchers and students. Students united in support of each other, recognising their shared vulnerability. This kind of collective action, based on mutual concern and solidarity, might be described in academic terms as "fusion".



fusion, it is important to understand the powerful emotional bonds that exist in families. These bonds are rooted in both shared experiences and biological connections. Importantly, loving one's own family does not mean rejecting others. If such familial bonds can be scaled up, we may begin to see what I call “barrier-crossing” fusion – where people develop a strong sense of unity with all of humanity.

#### **Issue 4 – Hope for the Future**

Hope can come from many sources, even from those that are not immediately obvious. One such source is dysphoric or negative experiences. Rather than viewing failure or suffering as purely destructive, we can reframe them as starting points for resilience. Within that process of struggle and renewal lies the true potential for hope and the possibility of a more unified, compassionate future for humanity.

It is also important to focus on resilience and cohesion as a response to the despair and hate present in today's world. There is a need to clearly recognise hate and actively work to counter it by planting seeds of hope in the minds and hearts of generations. This can be done by identifying sources of hate and transforming them into opportunities for unity and optimism. When facing divisiveness, one must look for common ground within disagreements.

At the individual/personal level, one should not dismiss situations or people that/who might seem unwelcoming or harsh at first. It is important to engage more deeply to find the underlying warmth. Initial reactions – such as withdrawal or anger – are natural human responses, but not always the correct ones. To bring about transformation, individuals must be willing to act as positive agents, persist in dialogue, and not give up in the face of difficulty.

## 1 IMAM DR. KHALIL

FINDING THE WAY FORWARD IN THE  
TURBULENT TIMES OF CAMPUS PROTESTS  
AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

OCTOBER 7, 2023

THE HAMAS ATTACK ON ISRAEL.  
STUDENT ORGANISATIONS  
PUBLISHED & COSIGNED A LETTER  
CRITICISING ISRAEL FOR THE  
INCIDENT.

SOME  
ORGANISATIONS  
REPRESENTATIVES  
DIDN'T EVEN READ  
WHAT THEY WERE  
SIGNING!

THIS LED TO,  
AMONGST OTHER THINGS,  
'DOXXING' TRUCKS  
NAMING VOCAL  
STUDENTS...

STOP THE GENOCIDE  
IN GAZA!

EVENUALLY, THE  
PRO-PALESTINIAN  
PROTESTS STARTED

THIS SITUATION ESCALATED INTO A COMPLETE  
BREAKDOWN OF SOCIAL COHESION...

EVENUALLY, HARVARD HAD TO  
STEP IN...

|                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>CULTIVATING<br>EQUALITY               | <br>HEALING                  |
| <br>CLEAR<br>STANDARDS<br>& EXPECTATIONS | <br>COMMUNAL<br>CULTIVATION |

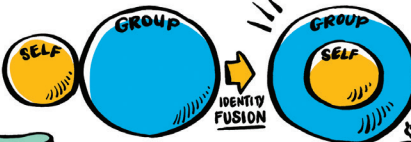
## BREAKOUT #3

### "STORIES THAT INSPIRE MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION AND SHARED PURPOSE"

## 2 PROF. WHITEHOUSE



TRAGEDY &  
TRAUMA UNITE  
THE 'SELF' IDENTITY  
& 'GROUP' IDENTITY



THIS 'IDENTITY FUSION' IS ONE OF THE KEY  
INGREDIENTS of the 'DEADLY COCKTAIL' of VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM!



HOWEVER, SKILLED  
LEADERS MAY HARNESS  
SHARED SUFFERING to  
**UNITE**  
SOCIETIES!

IMAM DR KHALIL  
ABDUL - RASHID

PROF HARVEY  
WHITEHOUSE

## 3 Q&A

"LOVING YOUR FAMILY  
DOESN'T MEAN YOU  
HATE OTHER FAMILIES."

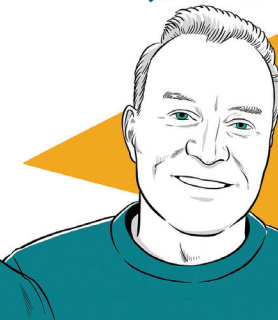


IT'S NOT ACTIVISM  
TO PRESSURE OTHER  
STUDENTS TO  
JEOPARDISE  
THEMSELVES FOR  
YOUR CAUSE

THE ACTIVISM THAT  
DID WORK WAS WHEN  
STUDENTS & FACULTY  
CAME TOGETHER WHEN  
TARGETED by THE  
TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

BOO!!  
NO MORE  
INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS!

MODERATOR:  
MOHAMED IRSHAD





# Skills Workshops

ICCS 2025 introduced a range of skills workshops for delegates to pick up and hone skills in areas such as futures thinking and conflict mediation. The following section provides a brief description of each workshop and the key takeaways. The workshops were held on Days 1 and 2 of the conference.



## Skills Workshop 1 – Polarities, Not Polarisation

**Dr Aaron Maniam** | Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

This workshop introduced “polarity thinking”, an approach to divisive issues that crafts “yes-and”, mutually collaborative responses, celebrating societal range and diversity instead of assuming that divisions between communities are inevitable and negative. The workshop highlighted how embracing polarities with a collaborative, both/and mindset enables leaders and communities to navigate tensions constructively, stay anchored in core values, and thrive in an increasingly complex “4D world.”

### Key takeaways:

1. We are moving from a “3D world” to a “4D world” defined by four forces shaping modern work: Digitalisation, Diversity, Distributed Roles, and Multi-Directional Responsibilities. Each “D” introduces new challenges for leadership, such as balancing human connection with technology or deciding when leadership should be centralised or decentralised.
2. It is important to approach polarities with a both/and mindset rather than framing them as either/or dilemmas. Neither pole should dominate consistently; this is especially vital for leaders to remember.
3. Polarities are not problems to be solved once and for all. Instead, they must be continually managed. This management unfolds over time and not in a single moment.
4. Effective polarity management is anchored in core values, which serve as the guiding compass through these



complexities. Managing polarities is deeply human work without quick fixes.

5. Managing polarities require whole, integrated individuals who bring their full, authentic selves to the task rather than operating from fragmented parts. In fact, polarities can be thought of as the very way an organisation breathes, balancing tensions to stay healthy and dynamic.
6. Tensions exist between individual goals, team cohesion, and organisational needs. Sometimes individuals must sub-optimize for the greater good. Other tensions include general principles vs community specificity, and inclusion vs domination when managing diverse voices in group settings. Practical challenges like limited time, bandwidth, and resources create additional tension, as do emotional tensions such as balancing care for others with self-care, and efficiency with empathy.



## **Skills Workshop 2 – Futures Skills**

**Ms Cheryl Chung** | Tent Futures, Singapore

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This workshop focused on how to apply foresight tools – in particular the Futures Triangle – to systematically explore the drivers, constraints, and possible futures of social cohesion in their communities.

### **Key takeaways:**

1. For Futures thinking/planning, it is important to consider both the direct actions by the individual/organisation (i.e., the ‘actor’ level) and the broader contextual environment like geopolitics, technology shifts, demographic changes that will shape the future.
2. The STEEP framework is a strategic tool designed to examine the external macro-environment impacting an organisation. The acronym stands for Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental (or Ecological), and Political factors. By analysing these five dimensions, organisations can gain insight into possible opportunities

and threats in their environment, helping to guide their strategic planning and decision-making processes.

3. Futures can be affected by three kinds of forces (i.e., the Futures Triangle):

- The Pull of the Future: the hopes, aspirations, and visions (positive or negative) that attract or motivate societies towards particular futures.
- The Push of the Present: current trends, emerging issues, and signals that are propelling us from today into the future, such as technological developments or social constraints.
- The Weight of History: past events, policies, or institutions that shape or limit how the future can unfold, serving as both foundations and constraints.

These forces are in dynamic tension and together influence how social cohesion might evolve. Depending on the context, some communities may be more guided by strong visions, others by entrenched histories, or heavily influenced by present trends.



### **Skills Workshop 3 – Developing Civic Conversational Skills**

**Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib** | Dialogue Centre, Singapore

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This workshop aimed to help participants develop the ability to facilitate impactful conversations between individuals who may have diverse opinions or who may come from different backgrounds.

Key takeaways:

1. Humour is very important in conversations – it can enhance connection and ease tension.
2. Using “I” statements and the intention behind such statements can either strengthen or weaken an interaction, depending on their delivery and context.
3. Genealogy can influence and shape an individual’s response.



4. Ideological differences must be acknowledged as it affects how individuals and groups relate to one another. Understanding different viewpoints, can lead to more meaningful and constructive interactions.



### **Skills Workshop 4 – Conflict Resolution Fundamental Skills**

**Ms Wu Ye-Min and Ms Theerada Suphaphong** | Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Switzerland

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This session helped participants learn the fundamentals of conflict resolution and mediation including identifying interests and positions and facilitating win-win outcomes.

#### **Key takeaways:**

1. It is important to recognise: (a) non-verbal cues in communication; (b) rephrasing or reframing what the other person has said, to help them feel heard; and (c) summarising, to help people recognise the progress or milestones that have achieved.
2. Skills in asking questions are important – they are necessary to understand the context or situation, as well as the motivation behind the question.
3. Past grievances could sow the seeds of distrust between communities. As such, providing assurances is essential to addressing and reducing distrust.
4. Five principles on mediating conflicts effectively: (a) How does our approach fit into the overall resolution of the broader diverging interests or conflict at play?; (b) What approach best enables sustainable, implementable, and meaningful change?; (c) How are we applying the principle of “do no harm”?; (d) How can flexibility be built into the process to creatively adapt as needed and foster buy-in for the outcomes?; and (e) Are we considering “And then what?” – to identify next steps in the process?.
5. Mapping stakeholders and their interests is a critical part of the mediation process.

6. Building trust, especially prior to the mediation process, is important for mediation. Identifying “low-hanging fruits” to foster commonality were useful in this regard.
7. Exploring alternative plans, and knowing one’s own red lines, are also critical in the mediation process.



## **Skills Workshop 5 – Humanitarian Compass: Values and Actions in a Turbulent World**

**Mr Sahari Ani** | Singapore Red Cross Academy, Singapore

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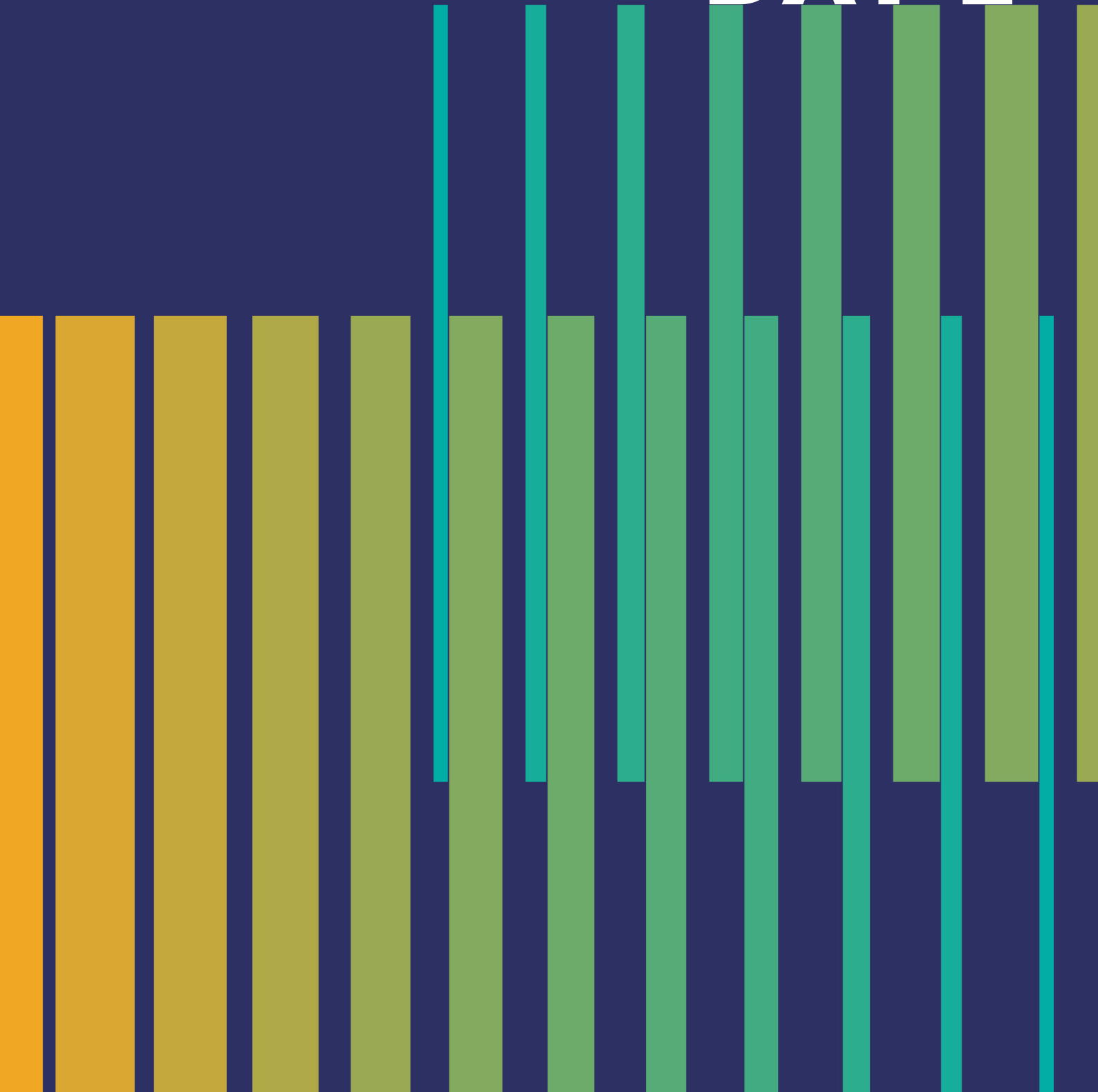
This session introduced participants to the global humanitarian ecosystem, to deepen understanding on how to act with compassion and solidarity in crises.

### **Key takeaways:**

1. The humanitarian ecosystem is categorised into four groups: UN/UN-affiliated organisations, Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, non-governmental organisations, and inter-governmental organisations like ASEAN.
2. Human and social capital are crucial in humanitarian responses. Conversely, resource constraints can impede humanitarian aid responses.
3. Enabling local communities to take the lead in delivering humanitarian aid can help build human capital for future disasters and emergencies.
4. The frameworks governing humanitarian responses include: (a) the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER); (b) International humanitarian law; (c) The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response; and (d) The Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (also known as the Oslo Guidelines).
5. Humanitarian diplomacy is not only limited to humanitarian actors trying to influence decision-makers; it could be practised at the grassroots level.



**DAY 2**



## Keynote Address

*His Royal Highness Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah,  
Sultan of Perak and Deputy Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Malaysia*



Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah began his speech by thanking the Former President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob, for her vision in bringing the International Conference on Cohesive Societies into existence. He then paid tribute to President Tharman. Thereafter, Sultan Nazrin referenced the 2022 United Nations Development Report, which described the current predicaments facing all societies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, wars in Europe and West Asia, and climate change.

Sultan Nazrin next highlighted three key factors that underpinned the uncertainty in the current era. First, regarding the impacts of digitalisation on our society, Sultan Nazrin highlighted the transformative benefits offered by digitalisation. Referring to the Me-Too Movement and Black Lives Matter, he emphasised that digitalisation has brought attention to the issues faced by marginalised communities. Furthermore, he stated that all societies are better connected in this digitalised age and are no longer “limited by geography or ethnicity, but united by shared values and forces”. He cited campaigns on environmental protection and anti-war protests as examples. Despite the benefits of digitalisation, he noted the dangers it poses. He provided an overview of how digitalisation has transformed our information ecosystem into a battleground by highlighting the rise of fake news.

Second, Sultan Nazrin discussed the dynamics of migration. He observed that migration levels today have almost doubled compared with the 1990s. He noted that migration is “one of the oldest human responses to [address] uncertainty”. He cited climate change and human migration as an example. In discussing the dynamics of migration, he highlighted how extremists have tried to frame migration as a threat to national identity, and migrants as benefit seekers and criminals, while ignoring the positive contributions made by migrants. He advocated for governments to “work harder for inclusion” and for people to be more welcoming. Amidst the current geopolitical tension and wars between neighbouring countries, he called on countries to foster trust with one another. He reflected on the good relationship between Singapore and Malaysia and asked nations to be “good neighbours”.



Third, concerning the benefits and challenges of globalisation, Sultan Nazrin provided an overview of how it has brought immense advantages, including poverty reduction and the narrowing of economic gaps. However, he also highlighted that globalisation has exacerbated inequality. He noted that the elites and ultra-wealthy have disproportionately benefited from globalisation, and many among these groups have sought to exert political influence through control of both traditional and social media, as well as through political financing.

Amidst these uncertainties, Sultan Nazrin said that individuals should not retreat but embrace and navigate through these uncharted waters with resilience, reinvention, and in a collaborative manner. He offered four guiding principles: (1) rebuild trust; (2) prioritise equity; (3) embrace pluralism; and (4) imagination. In relation to rebuilding trust, he emphasised that individuals need transparent institutions, accountable leadership, and civic spaces where people can feel seen and heard. “Rebuilding trust means investing in media literacy. Digital integrity. And honest communication, not just controls”. Regarding the prioritisation of equity, he underscored the importance of placing social, economic, and ecological justice in governmental policies. Concerning the embrace of pluralism, he stated that “Social cohesion does not demand uniformity. It requires the respectful accommodation of diverse cultures, religions, identities, and origins”. He urged us to trust in our shared humanity, to embrace compassion, and to love our neighbours. Lastly, regarding immigration, he called for cities to be designed with inclusion in mind and for policies to be guided by moral imagination. He concluded by quoting a proverb: “You cannot change the wind, but you can adjust your sails”.



## Plenary 2

### Navigating Uncertainty



#### **Mr Peter Ho**

Senior Advisor, Centre for Strategic Futures, Prime Minister's Office Strategy Group and Former Head of Civil Service, Singapore

#### **Mr Ahmed Aboutaleb**

Former Mayor of Rotterdam, The Netherlands

#### **Mr Fadi Chehade**

Managing Partner, Ethos Capital, United States

#### **Moderator: Professor Kumar Ramakrishna**

Dean, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

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This session examined the emerging challenges that threaten multiculturalism and social cohesion and explored how societies could navigate an increasingly complex future.

Key takeaways: (a) It is necessary for governments to acknowledge that technology will inevitably evolve faster than their capacity to create policies. The challenge for governments is to be mindful of what they can control and what they cannot control and respond accordingly. In this age of digital disruption, governments need to work together with the private sector to manage information rather than acting alone; (b) social cohesion cannot be achieved solely through discussion. One must do the work of cultivating social cohesion in-person, over a cup of coffee with members of the community; (c) Cultural subsidiarity, where decisions on digital norms are made at the local level rather than being centralised, can help mitigate digital risks.



## Challenges and Responses to Digital Technologies

*Mr Peter Ho, Senior Advisor, Centre for Strategic Futures, and Former Head of Civil Service*

Ho began by acknowledging that technology is a major driver of social change in the world. Today, people increasingly depend on social media to communicate with each other and to understand the world they live in, compared to communicating in-person or watching traditional news media.

Relatively, social media is a newcomer to the technological landscape. Despite that, it has exploded on the scene. Today, about 5 billion people, about 60 percent of the world's population, are thought to be using social media. Access has been enabled by smartphones, and smartphones themselves have been getting smarter as well based on Moore's Law.<sup>7</sup>

Social media both connects society and splits society. It has limited the ability of governments to control information flows and has contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The stabbing of three girls in Southport in the United Kingdom serves as an example of how a government's failure to control misinformation and disinformation leads to destructive outcomes. When the incident occurred, far-right groups stoked speculation that the teenage stabber was involved with Islam even though it was later revealed that the suspect was a Christian. The misinformation led anti-Muslim protestors to attack local mosques in the area and clash with police forces.

With the proliferation of online information sources, governments are no longer the sole or primary source of information for people. This has resulted in declining trust in the government and traditional news media from the public.

Social media also shapes how imaginary communities are formed. This raises questions about whether the concept and boundaries of the nation-state are being weakened. Movements now transcend national borders - for example, in 2020, K-pop fans and TikTok users coordinated to flood Trump events with RSVPs to create an illusion of intense interest. Online gaming also allows people to create identities that do not exist in the real world. Many young people even relate more to their online identities than their real-world identities, leading to greater complexity.

It is necessary for governments to acknowledge that technology will inevitably evolve faster than their capacity to create policies. The challenge for governments is therefore to be mindful of what they can control and what they are not able to control and respond accordingly. In this age of digital disruption, governments need to work together with the private sector to manage information rather than acting alone.

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<sup>7</sup> Moore's Law is the observation that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years. This trend has historically led to increased computing power and decreased costs in the electronics industry. While not a law of physics, it's an empirical trend that has driven innovation for decades. See <https://newsroom.intel.com/press-kit/moores-law#:~:text=Moore's%20Law%20is%20the%20observation,must%20innovate%20in%20other%20ways>.



## Social Cohesion – A View from the Netherlands

*Mr Ahmed Aboutaleb, Former Mayor of Rotterdam*

Aboutaleb shared his experiences in fostering social cohesion as the Mayor of Rotterdam. In Rotterdam, a port city where 185 nationalities reside, multiculturalism is everywhere. However, it is not accessible if you remain solely in the Rotterdam City Hall, which he referred to as a “palace”. To truly experience diversity, he would visit deprived neighbourhoods to understand residents’ needs/concerns, he would knock on doors and organise dinners where he would engage the locals.

He noticed that people who lived in the same street had no idea who their neighbours were. There was little sense of community. Through various engagements, he sought to make people understand that they all shared mutual concerns, i.e., safety, security, housing and the cleanliness of streets. He encouraged people to collaborate and step up to contribute to their neighbourhoods.

When he initiated projects such as building a park, he made sure that the initiatives were local led, with people in the neighbourhood making key decisions such as what kind of trees to plant. Together with the locals, they succeeded in achieving many community goals such as improving education by increasing study hours in math and language for children and building a learning centre to upskill adults so that they could get better jobs.

Despite these successes, he reminded the audience that he still had to make difficult and realistic decisions as a government official, given that he was working with a constrained budget. For example, he had to decide on whether to prioritise increasing social benefits for a man or increasing educational resources for the man’s daughter to decrease future generations’ reliance on social benefits.

Ultimately, social cohesion cannot be achieved solely through discussion. One must do the work of cultivating social cohesion in-person, over a cup of coffee with members of the community.

## Navigating Uncertainty in the Digital Space

*Mr Fadi Chehade, Founder of Ethos Capital*

Chehade began by sharing how his background had shaped his perspectives about multiculturalism and digital technology. Having studied Artificial Intelligence (AI) during the 1980s and mentored by the very professor who coined the term, he developed an early appreciation for the technological forces that continue to transform societies today. His multicultural heritage – a Egyptian family background, an upbringing across East Asia and Europe, and multiple citizenships – was also instrumental.

He then discussed the issue of governance of the digital world and observed that while billions of people depend on digital platforms daily, there remains little public awareness of who builds, manages, or benefits from these structures. He explained that the Internet itself operated across three interconnected layers: the physical layer of infrastructure, the logical layer which ensures the technical integrity of a single, interoperable internet (where Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers [ICANN] plays a central role), and the application or social layer – where social media and content platforms exist.



In 2011, he was appointed to lead ICANN. At that time, ICANN was largely shaped by a small group of actors sharing a similar cultural background in the US. Drawing on his multilingual and multicultural experience, Mr. Fadi was entrusted to globalise the institution. Under his leadership, ICANN grew its representation from 30 to 150 governments, extended its operations to over 35 countries, and expanded its team from around 90 staff to more than 500 worldwide. One significant milestone was the introduction of top-level domain names in non-Latin scripts such as Arabic, Chinese, and Cyrillic – a move that opened the digital space to greater inclusivity and cultural recognition.

Looking ahead, due to the evolution of the digital world, the boundaries between the digital and physical realms are fading rapidly. Within the next five years, it is predicted that up to 100 billion AI “agents” could be operating alongside humans, acting on their behalf and, invariably raising new questions about control, governance, and cultural integrity.

In this context, there were three pressing concerns. First, governance of this hybrid world would remain fragmented, especially at the application layer, where tech giants like Meta and Google hold unprecedented, largely unchecked power. Unlike the physical and logical layers — which benefit from coordinated global governance — no effective transnational body exists to oversee the digital platforms that shape daily life for billions.

Second, there are dangers posed by AI models trained within narrow cultural frameworks. Hyper-personalised content, while convenient, risks isolating individuals in echo chambers, eroding shared experiences, and diluting cultural diversity.

Third, cultural norms are vulnerable. Issues like child pornography generate universal consensus and strong global responses, but norms around privacy, free speech, and hate speech vary greatly and cannot be addressed through one-size-fits-all regulation without respecting local contexts.

To mitigate the risks posed by these challenges, the principle of cultural subsidiarity was advocated. Decisions about digital norms should be made at the smallest competent authority, allowing diverse communities to define their own cultural standards rather than being subjected to centralised, monolithic controls. In practice, this would require large tech companies to embrace decentralisation and empower communities to govern themselves within a unified digital space.

The future of the digital world would be a choice between building fortresses or nurturing an oasis. While fortresses may protect and isolate, oases invite openness, inclusion, and the sharing of diverse ideas, while still maintaining general order. The digital world, he hoped, would evolve into a network of welcoming “digital oases”, each grounded in cultural roots yet connected in ways that promote shared values and mutual respect.





## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Regulating the Digital Space

It would never be possible to fully control the Internet, so societies must be realistic about what is achievable. Freedom of speech must come with responsibility and clear boundaries under the law. When people feel offended, whether by political or religious statements, it is not politicians but the courts that should decide when limits have been crossed.

On a related point, digital governance is not only about misinformation but also about sovereignty, geopolitics and who ultimately controls information flows. At present, most of the digital infrastructure is controlled by the US, and access by other countries is sometimes denied or limited.

Societies must first ask: What do we really want from technology? Is it to drive economic growth, foster social cohesion, or enhance communication? Governments or politicians who claim they have all the answers to such complex questions should be viewed with caution. Only an inclusive dialogue involving government, the private sector, and the public can build an effective social compact. Given the pace of technological change, with AI evolving faster than policy can catch up, societies may need to accept that it is too late to develop regulation in a traditional sense. Instead, they must find ways to adapt and mitigate risks collectively.

The solution could lie in technology itself: robust tools that can trace the origin and flow of data, enabling users to audit where information comes from and decide whether it is trustworthy. But such tools require the commitment of tech companies, new governance methods, and strong cooperation among governments, private firms, and civil society to operationalise.

### Issue 2 – Ideology, Extremism and Societal Fault Lines

It is not ideology alone that creates fault lines, but the people who wield it and the choices they make. Good leadership is key and it means resisting the temptation to exploit tribal instincts and nostalgia for homogeneity. Instead, leaders must create common ground and invest in a sustainable future for everyone, rather than perpetuating exclusion or division.

Algorithms play a powerful role in shaping what people see, often narrowing perspectives without users even realising it. For audiences who do not read widely, one-sided feeds become their main window to the world, which makes it harder for them to think critically or see beyond their own bubbles. The decline in trust in mainstream media only fuels this phenomenon, making it vital to create spaces for open and sensitive dialogue between governments and citizens — something that is often lacking today.

The hyper-personalisation by AI will soon narrow perspectives even further. AI can build detailed virtual personas for everyone, tailoring content so precisely that people become isolated in their own information silos. Some ideologies build walls that exclude anyone who is not “one of us”, while others are open and thrive through connection and diversity. Societies, both offline and online, must strive to build inclusive oases where people can flourish together.

### Issue 3 – Trust, Governments and Communities

Trust cannot be built from behind a desk. Leaders needed to walk the ground and speak with people directly, thereby building relationships. Trust is mutual: governments must trust citizens just as citizens are asked to trust their leaders. Truth is complex and subjective; two people can walk the same path but see different things, and leaders must be willing to accept that.

It is crucial to distinguish between government and governance. Governance is not only about the state but also includes the private sector and citizens. When people feel included in this wider system, trust grows, even if the results are not perfect. Ignoring the fact that government is just one part of a bigger system can lead to broken trust and fragmented societies.

Multi-stakeholder governance must become the norm, i.e., a “private-public-people” approach. Civil society must always have a seat at the table alongside governments and businesses. Without this balance, governance structures risk losing accountability and legitimacy.



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS by HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS**

**UNCERTAINTY IS THE CONDITION IN WHICH WE MUST NOW SAIL...**

"SMOOTH SEAS DON'T MAKE SKILLED SAILORS"

"YOU CAN'T CHANGE THE WIND, BUT YOU CAN ADJUST THE SAILS"

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: TRUTH IS NOW UP FOR GRABS
- HUMAN MIGRATION: ALREADY TRIGGERED FROM 1990
- UNEVEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
- GLOBALISATION: BRINGING TRADE AND INVESTMENT, BUT ALSO CHALLENGES

**THE FOUNDATION FOR SOCIAL COHESION IS TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOUR!**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- REBUILD TRUST
- PRIORITISE EQUITY
- EMBRACE PLURALISM
- IMAGINE BOLDLY

**SULTAN NAZRIN MUIZZUDDIN SHAH**  
SULTAN OF PERAK & DEPUTY YANG DI-PERTUAN AGONG, HRH

**PLENARY #2 NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY**

**1 MR. HO**

PEOPLE NOW DEPEND ON SOCIAL MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER & GET THEIR NEWS

**BUT** GOVERNMENTS ARE STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP WITH ITS MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION

ONLINE COMMUNITIES PLAY A BIGGER ROLE IN A PERSON'S IDENTITY THAN THEIR OFFLINE COMMUNITIES!

**Q&A**

WE HAVE TO START WITH: WHAT DO WE WANT FROM TECHNOLOGY?

**2 MR. ABOUTALEB**

WE HAD NEIGHBOURS THAT HAD NEVER SPoken TO EACH OTHER, HAVE DINNER TOGETHER!

IF YOU BELIEVE IN DIVERSITY YOU BELIEVE IN THE TALENT OF PEOPLE

WORK WITH CITIZENS TO ENACT REAL CHANGE! IT TAKES TIME, BUT EVENTUALLY MAGIC WILL HAPPEN!

IT'S DANGEROUS FOR GOVERNMENTS TO MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ON EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES WITHOUT CONSENSUS & DIALOGUE!

IF YOU THOUGHT MISINFORMATION TO BE BAD NOW...

**3 MR. CHEHADE**

**THE FUTURE**

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

**THE HYBRID WORLD**

WHEN OUR LIVES BECOME FULLY DIGITAL!

IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS, THERE WILL BE 100 BILLION AI AGENTS TALKING TO OURSELVES & EACH OTHER

HOW DO WE GOVERN THE HYBRID WORLD?

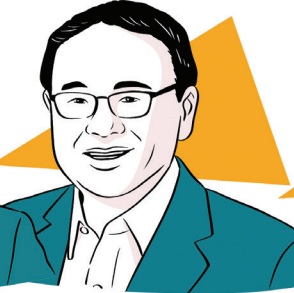
HOW WILL THE HYBRID WORLD BE TRACKED & MANAGED?

HOW WILL CULTURAL NUANCE BE SET?

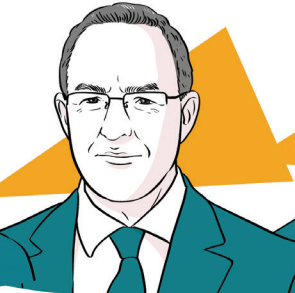
THE AI CORPORATIONS (WHETHER COMPELLED OR OUT OF GOODWILL) WILL NEED TO COMBAT ITS SPREAD!

WHEN PEOPLE ARE NOT WIDELY READ, THEY CAN BE TRAPPED IN A VICIOUS ECHO CHAMBER OF RADICALISATION!

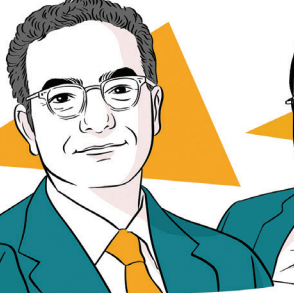




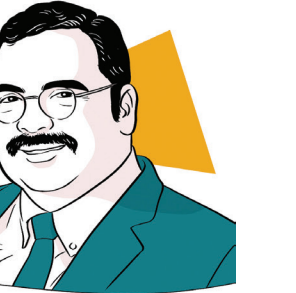
MR PETER HO



MR AHMED ABOUTALEB



MR FADI CHEHADE



MODERATOR:  
PROF KUMAR RAMAKRISHNA



# Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar

Presentation by S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies



## **Dr Leong Chan-Hoong**

Senior Fellow and Head of Social Cohesion Research Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

## **Professor Paul Hedges**

Professor of Interreligious Studies, Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

## **Professor Farish Noor**

Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia

## **Moderator: Mr Warren Fernandez**

Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

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This session presented key findings from the second edition of the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar, building on the inaugural study launched at ICCS 2022. It examined the factors that underpinned social cohesion across ASEAN states and highlighted commonalities and differences across the region.

Key takeaways: (a) The state of cohesion is relatively strong in Southeast Asia, with an average of 72 percent of respondents indicating that cohesion in their own country is relatively strong; (b) There is generally a broad acceptance of cultural diversity within Southeast Asian countries; (c) Some countries could do more to promote and strengthen institutional trust and perceived policy fairness.



## **Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar 2025: Preliminary Findings**

*Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Senior Fellow and Head of Social Cohesion Research Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies; Principal Investigator for the 2025 SEA Social Cohesion Radar*

Leong explained to the audience that, despite Southeast Asia's rich diversity, there had never been a systematic effort to assess social cohesion – an essential factor for regional harmony, national identity, stability, and broad-based economic progress. This gap prompted the launch of the Social Cohesion Radar study in 2022. He broadly defined social cohesion as the quality of social ties within societies. According to Leong, cohesion operates on multiple levels, encompassing varied communities (races, religions, institutions), and covers multiple dimensions, including trust, cultural identity, and social networks. While global research often adopts the Bertelsmann Stiftung framework,<sup>8</sup> Leong's team sought to tailor their approach to Southeast Asia's unique context and shared history. After a 2022 pilot with 100 thought leaders per country, the more extensive 2025 Social Cohesion Radar features interviews with over 1,000 participants from each nation. Importantly, the study triangulates survey data with insights from country specialists and online discourse to ensure comprehensive analysis.

Leong explained that it is expected for social cohesion scores to vary among the 10 countries due to their differing stages of economic development. He emphasised that focusing on each country's relative scores across different domains provides valuable insight into their strengths and areas for improvement.

Regarding social relations or horizontal ties, there is generally widespread acceptance of diversity and inclusion among racial, religious, and language groups, establishing a solid foundation of trust within communities. However, when it comes to vertical ties – trust between individuals, public institutions, and the state – some countries show lower levels. The sense of civic-mindedness or commitment to the common good also varies, with some nations scoring higher than others.

Leong categorised the countries into four cohesion types: Brunei and Vietnam with strong horizontal and vertical ties; Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia with strong horizontal ties; Laos and Cambodia with high trust in institutions; and the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar, which demonstrate strong civic participation.

He noted that the findings align with global macro indicators, showing cohesion correlates with economic development and stability, consistent with global studies. Cohesion appears unrelated to political systems, implying civil liberties alone do not drive it in Southeast Asia. Additionally, while economic resources help support cohesion, other key factors must also be considered to foster societal cohesion effectively.

The key takeaways, according to Leong, were – Fostering social cohesion is an ongoing process needing continuous, active engagement among communities, even with existing acceptance. Public institutions have opportunities to build trust by leveraging strong community ties, especially local civic or religious bodies familiar with local challenges.

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<sup>8</sup> The Bertelsmann Stiftung framework defines social cohesion as involving horizontal ties, social relations across diverse races, religions, and languages, measured by networks, trust, and diversity acceptance. It also includes vertical ties, linking people to institutions through identity, trust, and fairness, plus civic-mindedness, solidarity, rule respect, and participation.





Policymakers should involve diverse groups to ensure inclusive, fair policymaking. Lastly, reaching consensus on development priorities is crucial, with initial findings highlighting income inequality and rural development as significant focus areas.

### **First Discussant**

*Professor Paul Hedges, Professor of Interreligious Studies, Studies in Inter-religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

Professor Paul Hedges responded to Dr Leong's presentation with three key points. First, he compared the 2025 findings to those from 2022, emphasising that the study is a snapshot in time reflecting different contexts – COVID-19's impact in 2022 versus geopolitical instabilities in 2025, especially in the Asia-Pacific. He noted the study does not rank countries overall; top performers in 2022 differ from 2025. Second, the 2022 Radar involved thought leaders, while the 2025 version included more grassroots views, revealing differing perspectives on local versus broader issues. Lastly, he highlighted the challenge of perfect representativeness, stressing the study is not definitive.

Hedges' second point focused on what the study measured. He observed that the Bertelsmann Stiftung framework assigns equal importance to its nine social cohesion sub-components. However, as the Sultan of Perak highlighted, horizontal trust between people might matter more than vertical ties. The significance of cohesion measures varies by country and over time. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how crucial trust in institutions is. He expressed concern about the survey's depth, emphasising that true cohesion, especially resilience, is tested in difficult times – something not adequately captured. Building resilient social ties is a global challenge requiring collective effort.

Finally, Hedges said that viewing "religion" as especially important in Asia, is based on a concept shaped by Western colonial thinking. He noted that Southeast Asia itself is not a natural geographic unit but rather a construct of British and American colonial powers, and "religion" as commonly understood, is also a Western idea, developed in specific social and political settings. Applying it broadly to diverse Asian traditions oversimplifies matters. For example, Thai Buddhism, Bruneian Islam, and Indonesian Confucianism each possess distinct political, social, and ethical frameworks. There is no single concept of "religion" that fits all these differing traditions.

### **Second Discussant**

*Professor Farish Noor, Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia*

Professor Farish Noor concurred with Professor Hedges' earlier points, emphasising that the study highlighted a key insight: Southeast Asia has never been a homogenous region. Although interpretations of the data vary and provides a current snapshot, it shows that each Southeast Asian country addresses governance of complex societies differently. This is crucial for understanding ASEAN, which wisely avoided imposing a universal template for all members. The study's regional focus underscores the importance of respecting each nation's unique approach to cohesion. Southeast Asia has no singular common goal, nor should it strive for one, as that would be risky.

Noor observed that political analysts often overlook geography, which is crucial in Southeast Asia. Countries like Indonesia and the Philippines, located on the Ring of Fire, face frequent natural disasters, including over twenty



typhoons annually in the Philippines. Despite this, civic mindedness remains high, possibly because state responses to disasters are slow. Natural disasters and pandemics can unite or divide societies. Projects like the Social Cohesion Radar need interdisciplinary input from political analysts, historians, sociologists, and geography experts to fully understand these dynamics.

He warned against oversimplifying Southeast Asia's colonial history, noting that British, Dutch, and Spanish colonialism were distinct, creating varied challenges. Thus, claiming a common colonial history is both accurate and misleading due to these diverse experiences. He concluded that there is significant organic local agency in Southeast Asia and emphasised appreciating how people independently manage their affairs. The resulting social cohesion emerges naturally from society, which he believes is something valuable and to be thankful for.

## **Discussions and Reflections**

### **Issue 1 – Cultivating Social Cohesion**

Key factors shaping governance in many post-colonial Southeast Asian states include the legacy of colonialism, low institutional trust, and socio-political diversity. Historical scepticism toward centralised authority arises from exploitative colonial rule, fostering preference for community-led, bottom-up initiatives. This scepticism indicates resilience, as local communities often operate autonomously without strong state support. The state's role should shift from control to enabling inclusive civic participation and dialogue. While grassroots networks build resilience, they cannot replace the need for trustworthy institutions ensuring justice, transparency, and equity. Effective governance integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches, tailored to local traditions rather than imposed universal models.

### **Issue 2 – Emerging Technologies Impact on Social Cohesion**

There are concerns over AI and digital platforms adversely affecting civic behaviour and undermining traditional trust networks. Social media strongly influences public opinion and youth consumption but remains largely unregulated in many Southeast Asian regions. This lack of oversight enables misinformation, polarisation, and algorithmic bias, weakening community ties. AI's creation of synthetic content further erodes institutional trust. Fragmented governance worsens these problems, making collaboration difficult amid competing narratives. Technology-driven capitalism diminishes collective trust-building, and free markets fail to address social and ethical issues adequately. Policymakers must therefore engage tech platforms to foster systems that promote dialogue, respect diversity, and reinforce real-world social bonds crucial for trust.

1 DR. LEONG

THERE IS A BROAD ACCEPTANCE FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCE HERE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA!

**7 IN 10**  
ARE CONFIDENT THAT PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE COMMUNITIES WILL HELP EACH OTHER REGARDLESS OF THEIR IDENTITY.

OUR **SHARED EXPERIENCES**...

- COVID
- COLONIALISM
- CALAMITY (RING OF FIRE)

...INCREASE OUR **MUTUAL TRUST!**

IT'S IN THE EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SPOKE TO YOUR NEIGHBOUR?

**SOCIAL COHESION** MEANT TO COME FROM SOCIETY!  
IT HAS TO BE ORGANIC

**BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG FRAMEWORK**

|                                           |                                                |                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| <br><b>VERTICAL TIES</b><br>CONNECTEDNESS | <br><b>HORIZONTAL TIES</b><br>SOCIAL RELATIONS | <br><b>CIVIC MINDEDNESS</b><br>FOCUS ON THE COMMON GOOD! |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|

HOWEVER, WITH THE INVASION OF AI

IT MAY CAUSE OUR HUMAN BOND TO BE BRITTLE!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORK OUT YOUR DIFFERENCES WITH AI!

HOW DO YOU REGULATE THIS SPACE TO ENSURE THERE IS NO CORROSIVE ELEMENTS THAT WOULD THREATEN SOCIAL COHESION?

SEA'S HARMONY IS DUE IN PART TO THE FACT THAT WE NEVER ASSUMED A **UNIVERSAL TEMPLATE** FOR ALL!

DR. LEONG CHAN-HOONG

PROF. PAUL HEDGES

PROF. FARISH NOOR

MODERATOR:  
MR. WARREN FERNANDEZ

## Breakout 4

### *Fostering a Resilient Digital Ecosystem in a Multicultural Society*



#### **Mr Andri Kusumo**

APAC Engagement Lead, Trust and Safety Global Engagements, Google, Singapore

#### **Mr Benjamin Lee**

Head of Commercial & Marketing, Beach House Labs, Singapore

#### **Moderator: Mr Benjamin Ang**

Senior Fellow and Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

Speakers discussed how technology could be used to elevate social trust, foster healthy information ecosystems, and expand future possibilities for all.

Key takeaways: (a) By integrating safeguards, fostering digital literacy, and prioritising collaborative governance, Google aspires to help shape a more cohesive and trustworthy digital future; (b) A compact between technology platforms, community groups and government is needed as well as transparency about the way algorithms operate, cultural and religious literacy, and nimble policymaking.





## Google's Approach to Ensuring Safer Online Spaces

*Mr Andri Kusumo, APAC Engagement Lead, Trust and Safety Global Engagements, Google*

Kusumo offered a comprehensive overview of Google's evolving mission in the digital age, emphasising the company's role in fostering resilient digital ecosystems. He highlighted Google's proactive strategies in managing the opportunities and risks of generative AI (GenAI), particularly in a regionally and socially sensitive context.

He began with the discussion of Google's overarching mission: "To organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful". AI has been central to this mission, long before the rise of GenAI. Google has integrated AI into a wide range of products, from predictive text in Gmail to real-time traffic optimisation in Google Maps. These innovations reflect the shift from traditional rule-based programming to neural networks and now to generative models that synthesise vast data inputs to generate content across modalities like text, image, and video.

He said that AI holds great potential for the public good. Google's tools are now being deployed to predict natural disasters such as floods, optimise emergency medical dispatch in urban centres like Singapore, and assist in early cancer detection in under-resourced regions. These applications highlight AI's role in enhancing institutional responsiveness and civic resilience.

Nevertheless, there were risks such as opinion manipulation, monetisation, fraud and harassment, which were increasingly facilitated by GenAI. A case in point was the fake AI-generated image of an explosion near the Pentagon in May 2023, which temporarily caused a dip in financial markets. This incident, he argued, illustrated how digital falsehoods powered by AI can rapidly erode public trust and destabilise systems.

To address these risks, Google adheres to three core principles: "protecting users from harm, delivering reliable information, and partnering to create a safer internet". Google ensures that safety features are embedded into its products by default, requiring no manual activation by users. Each Google product is governed by tailored policy frameworks and enforcement mechanisms. For instance, Gemini, Google's generative AI platform, rejects prompts that incite hate speech or racial discrimination. To enhance transparency and traceability, it has introduced tools such as SynthID, a digital watermark embedded in AI-generated content, and About This Image, which provides contextual information about an image's origin and creation. Google requires content creators on platforms like YouTube to disclose the use of AI-generated elements, helping to prevent deceptive practices. Furthermore, Google actively supports public education and awareness initiatives, particularly those aimed at parents, educators, and young users, to raise understanding of the risks posed by AI. Additionally, it collaborates with startups and developers to ensure that AI tools are designed and deployed ethically across the broader digital ecosystem.

Kusumo concluded by framing Google's engagement with AI and safety not just as a technological challenge, but as a societal imperative. As AI continues to permeate everyday life, building a secure, transparent, and inclusive digital ecosystem will require both innovation and accountability. By integrating safeguards, fostering digital literacy, and prioritising collaborative governance, Google aspires to help shape a more cohesive and trustworthy digital future.



## Online Harms and the Digital Landscape

*Mr Benjamin Lee, Head of Commercial and Marketing, Beach House Labs*

Lee, known by his nom de guerre “Mr Miyagi”, has a presence on many online platforms. He is known for his unique way of expressing his views and described himself as the “resident troublemaker in Singapore”.

He observed that people do not listen to logic or make rational decisions, and peoples’ irrationality can be easily amplified on social media platforms. Hence, the necessity of mitigating the risks (e.g., online harms), while not stifling the dissemination of positive information on such platforms.

The paradoxes of digitalisation were many: how do we have digital literacy but also emotional isolation; immediacy but also reactivity; engagement but also entrenchment; democracy but also division.

Lee argued that a compact between technology platforms, community groups and government was needed. Transparency about the way that algorithms operate as well as cultural and religious literacy, and nimble policy making were also necessary. The challenge was the creation of an algorithm for good.

## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 - Reliability of AI and Curbing Misinformation and Disinformation

AI systems often reflect biases found in their training data, including those arising from entrenched social structures. Google addresses these biases and the broader risks of misinformation through a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. Central to this is the E-E-A-T framework (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness), which drives how information is evaluated and prioritised across Google’s platforms.

Content safety is embedded into Google’s design process, with policy development informed by expert consultation to define and update standards for harmful or inaccurate content. Google employs advanced AI for the real-time detection and suppression of misinformation but also relies on human reviews for complex cases. Transparency about the role and limitations of Google’s AI tools is maintained, encouraging users to verify information independently. Furthermore, Google engages in industry-wide initiatives, such as C2PA, and works with regulators to ensure both global and local compliance, helping continually refine its approach as societal expectations evolve.

### Issue 2 – Managing Hateful Language Online

Social media platforms can implement thoughtful design features to reduce rage-baiting and impulsive responses. These include introducing time delays before posting reactive comments, prompting users to reconsider offensive or emotionally charged messages, and borrowing friction-based mechanisms from banking and anti-fraud systems to interrupt automatic decision-making. Such “digital nudges” can create space for more reflective and responsible online engagement. Community-led storytelling, education, and outreach also play an important role. In an era marked by division and outrage, uplifting content rooted in emotional storytelling demonstrates that positive engagement can thrive. Singapore offers a model where diverse faith communities co-exist visibly, temples, churches, mosques on the same street, offering a lived example of harmonious pluralism.



### **Issue 3 – AI and Positive Youth Development**

A multi-stakeholder, systems-based approach is crucial for positive youth development vis-à-vis AI. Tools like Google’s Gemini include child safety safeguards, controlled by parents. Active involvement from educators, parents, and communities is also vital to shape healthy digital environments. Educators need proper training to use AI interactively. Families and communities must not rely solely on platforms but help curate constructive content.

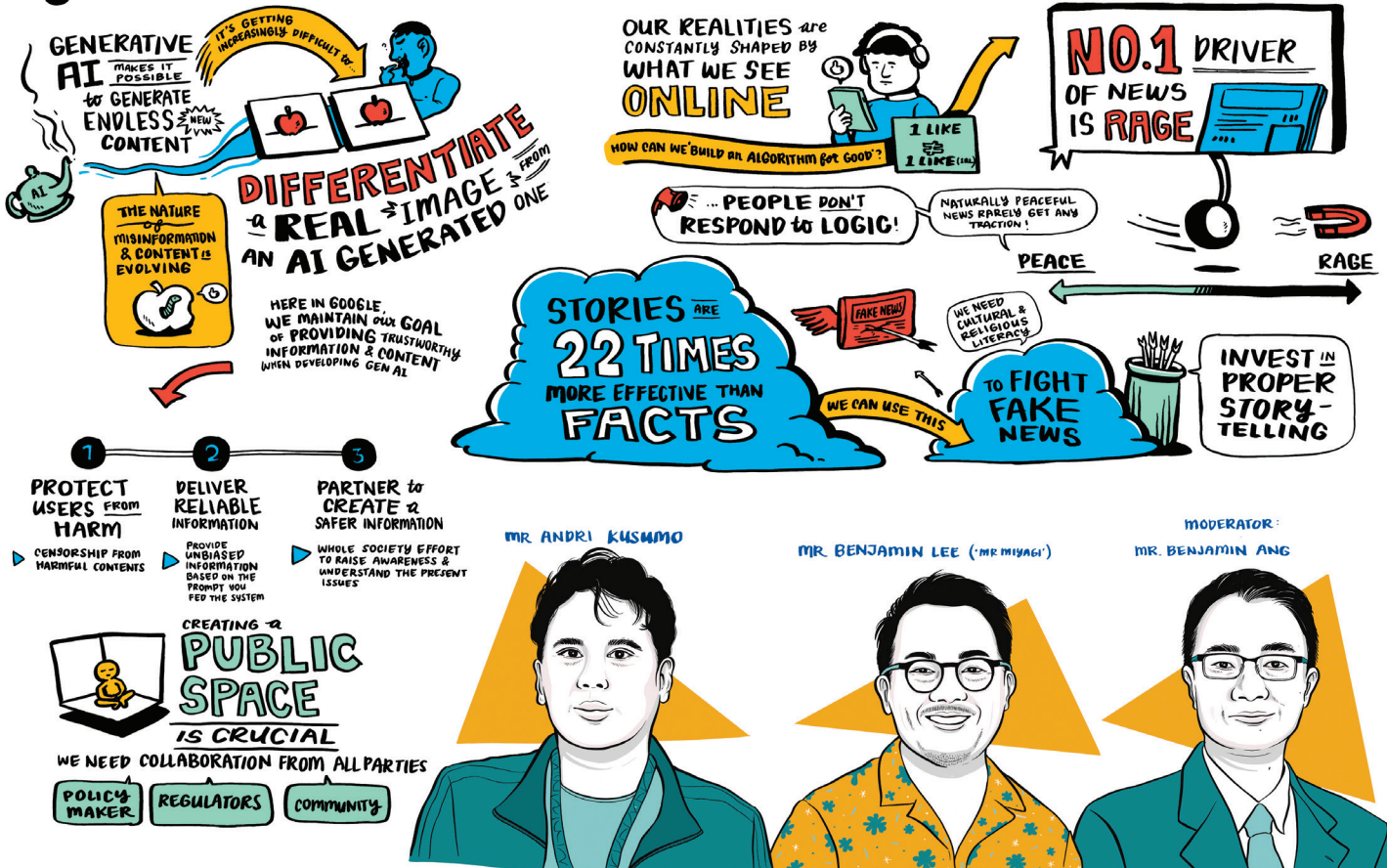
### **Issue 4 – Protecting Seniors from Online Risks**

Seniors are active online but face heightened risks from misinformation and scams. Addressing these threats requires systemic and grassroots strategies. The “train-the-trainer” model empowers senior participants with digital literacy skills, who then educate their peers, ensuring information is accessible and culturally relevant. Community-based initiatives can reach isolated individuals through informal conversations in public spaces, such as coffee shops, providing low-barrier opportunities to discuss, debunk misinformation, and promote online safety and awareness.

### **Issue 5 – AI Regulation**

The consensus around regulation emphasised that while important, it should not be the only solution for addressing online harms and falsehoods. Instead, a “whole-of-society” strategy that involves policymakers, technology platforms, and communities working together, was suggested. Regulation provides a framework but can have negative impacts if not carefully designed. Effective policy must be based on evidence and ongoing dialogue among all stakeholders. In addition to regulation, global industry standards and technological safeguards like AI detection tools and feedback mechanisms are essential. Community actors are critical too, as they bring unique insights and legitimacy, and can offer ethical guidance in shaping a safer and more inclusive digital future.

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## Breakout 5

### *Revamping Cultural and Social Institutions to Engage New Cultural Identities*



**Dr Caroline Ng Tseung-Wong**

Senior Lecturer, University of Canberra, Australia

**Professor Farish Noor**

Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia

**Moderator: Dr Leong Chan-Hoong**

Senior Fellow and Head of Social Cohesion Research Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

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This session focused on the psychological, cultural, and political factors driving shifts in identities. New affiliations, the implications to plural societies, and how to engage new groups and navigate cultural sensitivities were discussed.

Key takeaways: (a) If a community adopts the perspective that dual or multiple identities are compatible instead of being in conflict, positive outcomes emerge; (b) To understand new and emerging cultures, one cannot rely solely on the state; new approaches are needed.



## Where do I Belong? Managing Cultural Identities in a Globalised World

*Dr Caroline Ng Tseung-Wong, Senior Lecturer, University of Canberra*

Ng observed that identities can be seen as developing within a nested system. Micro systems like the family directly shape an individual, while macro systems like global events and national policies trickle down to affect the individual as well. These factors aid the individual in their quest to answer, “Who am I?”. At the same time, the digital space has become a new space that is simultaneously both micro and macro in nature.

Using Mauritius as a case study,<sup>9</sup> she observed that the country is a peaceful multi-ethnic society where diversity is normalised. However, unlike some countries, Mauritius does not have an official policy of multiculturalism. Instead, multiculturalism is embedded in daily life, with its citizens interacting across ethnic and religious lines in spaces such as the workplace. Multiple ethnic and religious festivals are also officially commemorated as public holidays, such as Chinese New Year despite the nation’s small Chinese population.

Mauritian identity can be separated into three broad categories: (a) Feeling Mauritian – referring to one’s sense of pride and belonging; (b) Being Mauritian – referring to factual events such as where a person is born; (c) Doing Mauritian – referring to actions that relate to Mauritian culture, such as speaking Creole. Nevertheless, ethnic and national identity are positive, compatible and accepted (e.g., Many Mauritian youths think of themselves as both part of their ethnic group as well as their national group).

In contrast, countries like the US and Australia have a majority group that serves as a reference group for what is culturally and economically normative. Minority groups in the US and Australia that are more culturally distinct from the mainstream must therefore juggle between their ethnic and national identities.

Drawing from these case studies, Ng observed that there were two approaches to dealing with multiculturalism: (a) The ‘Hybrid identity style’, where individuals pick and choose desirable elements of two or more cultures; and (b) the ‘Alternating identity style’, where individuals shift between different cultural identities depending on the social context.

Ng found out that adopting a ‘Hybrid identity style’ was linked to higher levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction. Generally, if a place adopts a social perspective that dual or multiple identities are compatible instead of being in conflict, it results in more positive outcomes.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr Ng’s research deals mainly with how individual identities are formed in Mauritius, a small country with no indigenous population. As compared to how individual identities are formed in countries like the US and Australia, which have a majority population and a long history of migration, Mauritius has different ethnic and religious groups that settled on the island in different ways. For instance, Creoles are descended from enslaved populations who were brought to Mauritius to work at sugarcane plantations, Chinese people came to the island as traders and eventually formed settlements there, and Indians were brought over to work at plantations after slavery was abolished.



## History and Different Modalities of Multiculturalism

*Professor Farish Noor, Professor, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia*

Professor Farish Noor analysed multiculturalism through the lens of a historian. Multiculturalism, as a concept, was an idea that was introduced to the Southeast Asian (SEA) region through colonialism. Each SEA country experienced colonialism differently and therefore grew to adopt different modalities of multiculturalism.

Colonialism resulted in increasing pluralism in SEA due to migration. At the same time, the concept of sectarian differences was introduced under colonial rule to ensure that diverse societies were functional. Different ethnic groups were allocated different appointed roles in the colonial economy. While there was diversity in the colonial era, it was a highly managed diversity under the domain of bureaucracy.

In today's world, colonial mindsets remain as SEA countries continue to maintain distinctions along ethnic, racial and religious lines. However, the idea that multiculturalism is a problem and a threat is a new concept that emerged only recently. This was because development and change have outpaced governments' ability to manage them. For example, up to the 1950s, children and adults dressed similarly, differentiated only by gender. However, in the boom years post-WW2, youth culture was invented as a way for capitalists to make more money by marketing youth fashions. As a result, children began to have their own identity as 'youth' rather than being seen as miniature adults. Along with the rise of youth culture came calls from the youth for youth representation.

In the post-independence era, each SEA country had national historians write their national histories. These state histories were written through an official perspective of the way things 'ought to be'. However, these historical narratives excluded the role of many groups such as women and youth.

In modern times, these excluded groups have increasingly called for space in national histories, which, according to Noor, is a positive phenomenon. The onus is thus on the post-colonial state to recognise its entanglement with its colonial past and the structures of colonialism. With the rise of the digital age and social media, young people have become a 'nation' of their own, existing physically within nation-states but cognitively and mentally in alternate online spaces such as Facebook and TikTok.

Youth have also been subjected to constant pessimism, surrounded by television programmes about zombie apocalypses and nuclear holocausts. This pessimism is reflected in youths' loss of trust in institutions and loss of confidence in the future.

Noor's key takeaway is that we need to recognise the limitations of the state. Tools such as the census, which still focus on ethnic and religious divisions, do not allow for nuanced analysis and for proper representation of new communities. As such, if we wish to understand new and emerging cultures, we cannot rely on solely the state, we would need to search for new approaches capable of reflecting these new realities.



## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Multiple Identities, Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion

Two factors strongly shape whether people develop hybrid or multiple identities: (a) The wider social context; and (b) An individual's motivation to integrate. Some societies create more space for people to express diverse identities, while others restrict that freedom. Fundamentally, an individual must want to integrate or blend identities.

While embracing diversity and multiculturalism is good, acceptance should not be forced. People must have the freedom to reserve judgement and disagree. Multiculturalism often gets unfairly criticised because it is presented as demanding total and unconditional acceptance. However, communities need to learn to disagree respectfully without losing mutual respect. It is akin to friendships that survive teasing and arguments, where familiarity makes bonds stronger. When everything becomes taboo, societies lose their capacity for self-reflection.

Often “tolerance” gets a bad name, but it is sometimes sufficient. It is important to agree core values that allow people to disagree in practice. For example, diversity entails balancing conflicting needs: the right to pray loudly versus the right to sleep peacefully. Negotiation and compromise are essential in such contexts. The more diverse a society becomes, the more important it is for people to move comfortably between different social spheres. While this is harder in large or super-diverse places like some Australian cities, everyday lived experience often lays the groundwork for this flexibility.

A cohesive society is one where people can argue passionately yet still share a meal together afterwards. Robust disagreement can strengthen, not weaken, trust. Conversations, even difficult ones, must start with open hearts.

### Issue 2 – Narratives, Identities and Cohesion

Different vocabularies should exist because societies are too diverse for a single narrative to fit all. The richness comes from allowing multiple ways to interpret what it means to integrate. There is no conceptual reason why hybrid identities should be considered “better” than singular ones. What matters is giving people the freedom to be different things at the same time. In highly complex societies, no single group can claim to represent the “typical” citizen. The more space people have to express layered or even conflicting identities, the more positive they can feel about who they are.

Technocrats and policymakers must learn to balance abstract principles like citizenship with the messy reality of how people actually live. They must not be rigid but adapt to societies that are fluid and evolving. People demanding to see themselves represented are not being unreasonable, they want a richer, more inclusive sense of national history. He stressed that history is never singular; it is always “histories” shaped by many perspectives.

### Issue 3 – Engaging the Young

Young people are far more grounded in the real world than they sometimes appear. While social media acts as a cultural tool that shapes how they connect, they are still rooted in the physical spaces of their schools, sports, and neighbourhoods. Assuming that young people do not want real-life connection was inaccurate, as they just connect



differently. Rather than dragging them back to old ways of doing things, society should balance shared common ground with room for distinctiveness in how people relate.

The young do struggle with face-to-face interactions, a problem deepened by the pandemic and the long lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many feel more pessimistic about their futures than previous generations did, convinced they may never own a home or surpass their parents' standard of living. This can be interpreted as a loss of faith in the state; a dangerous development, since it is this generation that will shape the future. States should do more than just manage the present: they must provide young people with a sense of belonging and show that their voices matter.

Moreover, young people are realising that they have agency to ask questions and demand change. For instance, a generation ago, museums were static repositories telling state-sanctioned stories of national identity. Nowadays, youth openly challenge these narratives, highlighting histories of colonialism, racism, and exploitation. This shift shows that agency is not just emerging but expanding. States are not designed for this hyperinflation of agency. In the past, political leaders answered to the public every five years; today, one tweet can trigger a million instant reactions. The traditional state is struggling to keep up with a generation that demands accountability every hour, not every election cycle.

**ICCS** THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

**BREAKOUT #5**  
**REVAMPING CULTURAL and SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS to ENGAGE NEW CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

**1 DR. NG**  
**MAURITIUS**  
THE FRUIT SALAD NATION  
"BANAL MULTICULTURALISM"  
MAURITIUS HAS VERY ORGANIC MULTICULTURALISM, THAT HAS DEVELOPED WITHOUT ANY SYSTEM OR POLICIES IN PLACE TO SUSTAIN IT!  
IN MAURITIUS, THOSE WITH A **STRONG NATIONAL IDENTITY EMBRACE MULTICULTURALISM**  
WHAT MAKES A PERSON MAURITIAN? "RESPECT & CARE FOR DIFFERENT CULTURES."  
SOCIAL CONTEXT MATTERS

**2 PROF FARISH NOOR**  
MOST of SOUTHEAST ASIA is BUILT on the FOUNDATIONS of COLONIALISM  
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DECOUPLE MULTICULTURALISM from COLONIALISM in S.E.A.  
WE CANNOT ADDRESS THE SHORTCOMINGS OF OUR MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES WITHOUT ADDRESSING THIS HISTORY  
CHANGES TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY has CHANGED HOW IDENTITIES EMERGE & ARE MAINTAINED!  
DR. CAROLINE NG TSEUNG-WONG

**3 Q&A**  
WE SHOULDN'T BE NOSTALGIC.  
WE NEED TO REALISE THAT OUR YOUTH ARE HAVING HUMAN EXPERIENCES, THEY'RE JUST DIFFERENT FROM OURS!  
THE YOUNGER GENERATION INHERITS THE PESSIMISM OF THE PREVIOUS GENERATION ... AND THEN SOME!  
WE BELONG TO THE STAR TREK GENERATION ... OUR CHILDREN HAVE GROWN UP ON ZOMBIE ACTION MOVIES  
STORIES THAT FEATURE FAILED STATES (& IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT!)  
ASKING THE GOVERNMENT TO FIX THESE ISSUES IS LIKE USING A HAMMER FOR BRAIN SURGERY!  
MODERATOR DR. LEONG CHAN HOONG

DR. CAROLINE NG TSEUNG-WONG

PROF. FARISH NOOR

MODERATOR DR. LEONG CHAN HOONG

## Breakout 6

### *Fighting Extremism and Polarisation Together as One People*



**Professor Mike Hardy**

Professor of Intercultural Relations, Coventry University, United Kingdom

**Rabbi Silvina Chemen**

Vice-Rector, Abarbanel University Institute and Director, Center for Dialogue and Social Action, Marshall T. Meyer Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, Argentina

**Moderator: Professor Paul Hedges**

Professor of Interreligious Studies, Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

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This session focused on insights into tackling divisive narratives, fostering inclusive dialogues, and building resilience against ideological divides.

Key takeaways: (a) Tackling polarisation requires conscious, civil responsibility: confronting fear with shared vulnerability, addressing exclusion by making the invisible visible, and reclaiming language and memory to heal past trauma. Disrupting digital echo chambers and confronting inequality are not acts of charity but essential duties for a more cohesive society; (b) To counter populism and fragmentation, societies must cultivate purposefulness, confidence, adaptability, and social support—while learning to embrace complexity and change.



## **Polarisation and the Need for Personal and Collective Transformation**

*Rabbi Silvina Chemen, Vice Rector, Abarbanel University Institute, and Director, Center for Dialogue and Social Action, Marshall T. Meyer Latin American Rabbinical Seminary*

Rabbi Silvina Chemen, a renowned interfaith leader and scholar, delivered a thought-provoking address on the individual roots of social polarisation and the urgent need for personal and collective transformation. She emphasised that polarisation was not merely the result of external forces, but is deeply entrenched in naturalised categories of thinking: deep-seated mental frameworks through which individuals perceive and judge others. These reflexive attitudes must be consciously deconstructed, and this work must begin at the level of the individual.

Rabbi Chemen used the metaphor of “windows” and “doors” to describe how societies have grown increasingly inward-looking. While diversity has become more visible, she warned that many people are closing emotional and cognitive doors, retreating from engagement with others. Healing, she argued, begins with opening windows to one another, and allowing light, difference, and vulnerability to enter. She observed that “the world becomes smaller with every additional covering over these windows,” stressing the importance of openness for social cohesion.

She identified six critical drivers of polarisation: (a) Fear as a political tool, often exploited to mobilize voters against constructed external threats; (b) Information bubbles and digital echo chambers, which shield people from opposing views and reinforce biases; (c) Exclusive identity narratives, intensified by globalisation, where individuals define their identity in opposition to others rather than in relation; (d) Manipulated collective memory, where unspoken trauma and pain can be shaped into resentment, fuelling ideological extremism; (e) Hate speech, which she noted, can lead to violence and dehumanisation e.g., “the Holocaust began with words,” she reminded the audience; and (f) Persistent inequality, which she described as the “breeding ground for radicalism,” deepening societal fractures and marginalisation.

She also observed that these forces not only divide societies but also weaken shared moral and emotional foundation. To counter them, she proposed a framework of transformative civil gestures, grounded not in charity, but in civic duty and moral responsibility. These include: (a) Opening the circle of shared vulnerability to address the culture of fear; (b) Making the invisible visible, to disrupt systems of normalised exclusion; (c) Weaving shared memory, to confront historical trauma and promote healing through honest reckoning; (d) Reclaiming language as a form of shelter, resisting hate and restoring dignity through the words we choose; (e) Interrupting digital feeds, taking responsibility for our media consumption and actively challenging algorithmic polarisation; and (f) Committing to social equity, not as benevolence, but as an essential responsibility to uphold justice and cohesion.

In closing, Rabbi Chemen issued a powerful call to remain present at the table, even amid discomfort and disagreement. “Polarisation thrives in silence and fear,” she stated, “but hope is born when we choose to stay, to listen, and to reach across the divides.” Her address offered both a diagnosis of current fractures and a deeply ethical vision for repairing the social fabric through daily acts of courage, compassion, and accountability.





## Dealing with Extremism and Polarisation through Cultural Shifts

*Professor Mike Hardy, CMG OBE FRSA, Professor of Intercultural Relations, Coventry University*

Professor Mike Hardy began by drawing a critical distinction between a moment in time and a movement of change. He reminded the audience, many of whom already share common values and aspirations, that being in such a room of like-minded individuals carries with it not just comfort, but responsibility. It is not enough to simply agree on what needs to be done; participants must leave better equipped to act. While no one could change the world alone, each could make a difference. At the heart of this is the commitment to an inner strength that begins with the individual, spreads through communities, and ultimately contributes to global well-being.

He then discussed polarisation, describing it as a centrifugal force that pulls people away from the middle ground – something far more dangerous than mere fragmentation. Polarisation removes the very space where common understanding and compromise can flourish. In today's digital age, this is compounded by misinformation, the decline of trusted institutions, and a growing sense of insecurity. He observed that extremism and polarisation were not limited to any system of governance: both democratic and autocratic regimes are affected by widening ideological divides that complicate governance and erode social cohesion. These forces make social solidarity increasingly difficult, and their impact will be long-lasting.

Commenting on the accelerating pace of change, he noted that what were once unlikely outcomes are now part of our daily reality. In such an environment, embracing paradox has become a necessary trait for 21st century resilience. He warned that while technology has expanded our networks, it has often come at the cost of depth and quality in our connections.

Moving on to the issue of trust, he said that leaders must understand that the essence of building resilient societies lies in strengthening the relationships between individuals, institutions, and structures. He encouraged a deeper understanding of both vertical and horizontal trust; from citizen-to-state, and between citizens themselves. Trust, he argued, is the foundation for mobilising long-term change.

While extremism and polarisation are not going away soon, they can be addressed through strategic, long-term cultural shifts. Rather than merely responding to crises, Hardy urged leaders to look upstream and to address the underlying ethos and values of societies. Only by changing the cultural context can enduring resilience be achieved. Resilience, he said, was the interplay between individual capacity and community strength. Individual resilience depends on internal processes that are easily eroded by anxiety, while community resilience is about the ability of people to come together, respond to challenges, and celebrate collective successes. Building resilience requires us to take responsibility for the actions of our time.

In conclusion, Hardy proposed four essential pillars to counter the rise of populism: (a) Purposefulness – a clear sense of direction and moral clarity; (b) Confidence – trust in ourselves and our institutions; (c) Adaptability – the flexibility to cope with change and ambiguity; and (d) Social Support – strong networks of mutual care and solidarity. He called for the adaptation of cultures over time and with intention to embrace change, reduce polarisation, and foster a more resilient, unified world.





## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Understanding and Responding to Polarisation

It was suggested that polarisation tended to operate in cycles, deeply influenced by context. When societal conditions, such as the economy and employment, are relatively stable, polarisation finds little ground to take hold. However, in times of uncertainty or crisis, it can quickly become a tool that offers seemingly immediate and relatable solutions. Current conflicts and their consequences provide fertile ground for polarisation to grow.

Many religions, at their inception, sought to displace earlier traditions to establish themselves. However, true belief involves embracing a sense of fraternity, rather than succumbing to the political and social polarisation that pervades the world today.

To mitigate the risks of polarisation, it was important to call it out when it occurs and foster open discussions about its consequences. Early education is helpful because just as people can learn to hate, they can also learn to love and find common ground.

### Issue 2 – Managing Opposition

It was recommended to prioritise engaging people who are neutral or undecided, rather than those who are uninterested or strongly opposed to change. Such people may simply be unaware of the opportunities for connection, and by creating spaces for dialogue, they would be more likely to participate. More needed to be done to facilitate this type of engagement.

Finding common humanity is often harder than just managing differences. One cannot assume that people will instantly want to connect with each other, hence it was recommended that opportunities are created for them to naturally discover shared values.

### Issue 3 – Youth, Trauma, and Moving Forward

Young people were becoming more isolated, and more should be done to bring them into mainstream agendas. While inter-generational initiatives exist, true multi-generational collaboration is needed. The Brexit referendum, where young people were largely excluded, was cited as an example.

Alternative narratives were seen as key to addressing trauma that fuels polarisation. Beyond official accounts, many stories – particularly in the Middle East – show shared pain and mutual understanding among Palestinians, Jews, and Christians. Though often overlooked, these counter-narratives have the potential to unite rather than divide.

Painful experiences also cannot be ignored. Genuine relationships require acknowledging mutual trauma. Referring to October 7th and the ongoing crisis in Gaza, there is immense grief on all sides. Moving forward means remembering and choosing what to carry: keeping values while discarding anger and hatred. Though difficult, this process is vital to foster honest, collective reflection.

# BREAKOUT #6 "FIGHTING EXTREMISM & POLARISATION TOGETHER AS ONE PEOPLE"

**THE PROPOSAL**  
TO WORK ON  
OURSELVES  
& OUR SOULS

WE HAVE CLOSED  
THE EYES OF OUR  
HEART & MIND  
... AND THE  
QUESTION IS:  
HOW DID  
WE GET  
HERE?

**6 KEY DRIVERS OF  
SOCIAL  
POLARIZATION**

- **FEAR** AS A  
POLITICAL  
DRIVING  
FORCE  
↳ POWERFUL EMOTIONAL TOOL!
- **INFORMATION BUBBLES  
CREATE  
ECHO CHAMBERS**  
↳ WE ARE POORER IN  
UNDERSTANDING OTHERS
- **EXCLUSIVE  
IDENTITY NARRATIVE**  
↳ AT WHAT POINT DOES MY  
IDENTITY NEED AN ENEMY?
- **MANIPULATED  
MEMORY**  
↳ WE ARE SOMEHOW CONVINCED  
THAT WE KNOW THE TRUTH &  
ALL OTHER NARRATIVES  
ARE FALSE

**6 TRANSFORMATIVE GESTURES**

- **OPEN THE CIRCLE**  
FROM SELF-PRESERVATION > SHARED VULNERABILITY
- **MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE**  
DON'T LET PEOPLE BE FOOTNOTES
- **WEAVE SHARED MEMORY**  
COMPETITIVE SUFFERING > BRAIDED MEMORY
- **RECLAIM LANGUAGE AS SHELTER**  
LINGUISTIC SHELTERS THAT RESTORE DIGNITY
- **INTERRUPT THE LEAD**  
RECLAIM AGENCY IN HOW WE SHAPE OUR VIRTUAL REALITY
- **NOT CHARITY  
CO-RESPONSIBILITY**  
HEALING BEGINS WHEN SOCIETY ASKS:  
"WHAT IS WORTH REPAIRING?"

**HATE  
SPEECH!**  
↳ WORDS THAT HURT,  
NARRATIVES THAT  
DESTROY

**PERSISTENT  
INEQUALITY**  
↳ AS THE  
BREEDING GROUND  
FOR RESENTMENT

**COUNTERING  
POPULISM**

RABBI SILVINA CHEMEN

**POLARISATION**  
MUST BE EVERYTHING WE DON'T WANT!

WE NEED TO BE  
COMFORTABLE  
WITH PARADOX!

**BUILDING  
RESILIENCE**

**INDIVIDUAL  
RESILIENCE**  
↳ PROCESSES  
THAT HELP WITH  
ANXITIES

**COMMUNITY  
RESILIENCE**  
↳ PROCESSES THAT  
SET UP A  
WORKGROUP

**PERSONA  
RESILIENCE  
RESOURCES**

PROF. MICHAEL HARDY

"I WITNESSED BOTH THE ANTAGONISING  
GROUP & VOLUNTEER GROUP JUMP IN  
TO SAVE THE DROWNING REFUGEE."

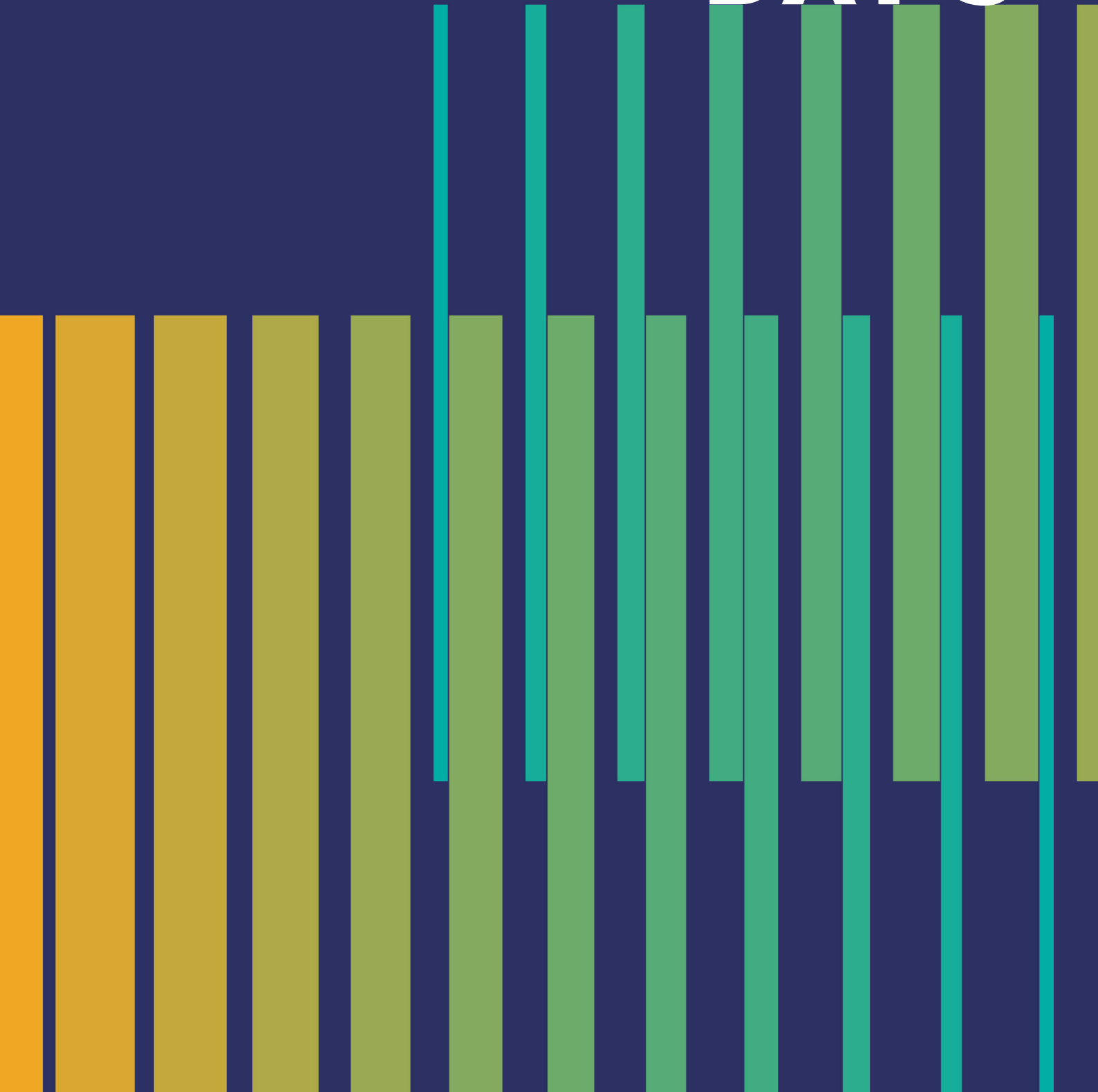
THE EASIER THING  
TO RESOLVE  
TOGETHER IS OUR  
HUMANITY

YOU NEED TO ASK  
WHAT HAPPENED  
IN **YOU**

THAT HAS  
REJECTED  
OTHER PEOPLE?  
POLARISATION IS LEARN'T!

MODERATOR:  
PROF. PAUL HEDGES

**DAY 3**



## Plenary 3

### Forging Societal Resilience



**Mr Dinesh Vasu Dash**

Minister of State, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the Ministry of Manpower, Singapore

**Mr Ho KwonPing**

Founder and Executive Chairman of Banyan Group, Singapore

**Venerable Napan Thawornbanjob**

Founding Chair, Institute of Buddhist Management for Happiness and Peace (IBHAP) Foundation and Secretary-General, Religions for Peace Thailand, Thailand

**Moderator: Professor Mona Siddiqui**

Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies and Assistant Principal for Religion and Society, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

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This session discussed the policy tools, community initiatives, and societal strategies that could bridge divides and foster resilience, even in the aftermath of conflict.

Key takeaways: (a) The social glue that keeps Singaporeans together is a forged sense of Solidarity, which is premised on public policies that focus on integration, use of English as lingua franca, and National Service for males; (b) Lasting cohesion depends on whether businesses themselves genuinely uphold multiculturalism; and (c) Relationships, leadership and friendships can be used to build social cohesion.





## Forging Societal Resilience – Singapore’s Experience

*Mr Dinesh Vasu Dash, Minister of State, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth*

Minister-of-State (MOS) Dinesh began by explaining that Singapore’s journey started with bloodshed and divisiveness following its independence. Under the leadership of Singapore’s first Prime Minister, it decided to forge Singapore “not as a Chinese country, not as a Malay country, and not as an Indian country, but as a Singaporean country”. As such, social cohesion was a fundamental building block for Singapore from the start. In fact, social cohesion is imbued in the national pledge where citizens endeavour to be united “regardless of race, language or religion”.

He said that the social glue that keeps Singaporeans together is a forged sense of solidarity. This sense of solidarity was built based on three main pillars that the government put in place:

First, it implemented public policies that focussed on fostering integration (aka the hardware). For example, the Ethnic Integration Policy, which mandated that all Housing Development Board estates (public housing) comprise the same percentage of different ethnic groups as the national profile. When Singaporeans from different ethnic groups live together and see each other every day in spaces like void decks, social integration occurs due to proximity. Second, Singapore moved to use English as lingua franca, which enabled Singaporeans to have a common language for communication and business. On the other hand, Mother Tongue Languages aka second languages, were retained, which allowed people to remain connected to their ethnic roots.

Third, Singapore implemented National Service for men. All men over the age of 18 are required to serve for 2 years in the army, police or civil defence. National Service bands the male population in Singapore together with the united goal of serving the nation. He has personally observed organic integration during his time in National Service, with Chinese, Malay and Indian men coming together regardless of race, language or religion.

Besides top-down initiatives, it was also important for Singapore to implement bottom-up initiatives. The Singapore government gives support to self-help groups that address the specific needs of different ethnic groups. Examples of such self-help groups are Mendaki (Malay), Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) and Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA).

It was also necessary for Singapore to invest in its ‘software’ – groups that build bridges across society. Examples of these groups are the Harmony Circles and Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO). These groups help in promoting social cohesion by bringing different sectarian and religious groups together. MOS recalled an incident in November 2024 where a man had stabbed a pastor in a church. In the aftermath, the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities came together and issued a statement of support and solidarity for Christians. He was heartened by the response as it happened organically without government intervention and showed unity in a time of crisis.

Singapore’s journey is only 60 years old. It has achieved several milestones towards building a multi-faceted cohesive society. However, the city-state cannot rest on its laurels and must work hard to build and maintain its social cohesion. This task is always a work in progress. More work is necessary, not just at an intra-state level but even more so at an inter-state level. Singapore will need to continue to extend its knowledge and connections with the world in this regard.



At the societal level, the state, businesses, civil society and religious organisations must continue to come forward and work together so that Singapore is not just tightly banded together, but also socially blended together, just like how it is impossible to fully separate ice cubes and coffee in an ice-blended coffee.

## **Moving Beyond Institutional Multiculturalism**

*Mr Ho KwonPing, Founder and Executive Chairman, Banyan Group*

Ho began by acknowledging that Singapore stands out as a remarkable success story of multiculturalism, particularly in today's deeply divided world. However, he pointed out that this success has largely been built on what he described as 'institutional multiculturalism', referring to societal structures and policies established by Singapore's pioneer leaders, such as language requirements and housing integration, that enforce diversity.

While these have served Singapore well, he expressed concern that the nation risks allowing multiculturalism to become static and purely institutional, rather than evolving into a dynamic 'interculturalism' where different communities actively and naturally engage with one another beyond government mandates.

As younger generations grow up accepting multiculturalism as a given, he urged that more needs to be done to foster genuine interactions among races and religions. Ho said that the workplace as a critical arena for this, sharing how his own company, Banyan Tree, intentionally builds multicultural teams, both through global virtual meetings and by sending diverse teams to new projects, with the goal to cultivate deeper intercultural understanding.

Ho's second point was that while Singapore is rightly alert to the dangers of racial and religious divisions, it must also pay attention to class divides driven by income inequality. He noted that discussions about class are often avoided, perhaps out of discomfort or fear of sounding ideological. Yet he argued that class differences are a powerful source of social division, one that is increasingly visible in Singapore.

Drawing on his perspective as someone from the older generation, Ho observed that Singapore once had a stronger culture of egalitarianism, where people with wealth refrained from flaunting it. Today, he lamented, it is common for the affluent younger business figures to openly display their riches, eroding the modesty that once helped hold society together.

Lastly, Ho spoke from his vantage point as a businessman to highlight the crucial role of corporate leadership in sustaining social values. He criticised how quickly many American companies abandoned Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives when political leadership changed under Donald Trump, revealing that these commitments were often superficial.

Ho cautioned that Singapore should take this as a lesson, while the Government has admirably championed multiculturalism, lasting cohesion depends on whether businesses themselves genuinely uphold these values. He called on fellow business leaders to recognise that fostering multiculturalism and DEI is not merely the state's responsibility but must be a true conviction within the private sector. Otherwise, should political winds shift, Singapore too could see these principles easily discarded.



Ho concluded by urging his peers to embrace their role in driving social change, stressing that businesses must stand up for the values they profess to believe in. He reminded everyone that “every crisis is an opportunity to strengthen the trust between leaders and the community”.

### **From Inner Peace to Social Harmony: A Buddhist Monk’s Journey Towards Cohesive Societies**

*Venerable Napan Thawornbanjob, Founding Chair Institute of Buddhist Management for Happiness and Peace (IBHAP) Foundation*

Venerable Napan Thawornbanjob introduced the Buddhist concept of Kamma, which refers to an individual’s bodily, verbal and mental actions. If one begins by transforming one’s mind, he/she in turn, change his/her Kamma, and in so doing, can change the world. Venerable Napan believes that religious leaders and religious organisations ought to work harder to promote social cohesion; for the case of Buddhism, he believes that all Buddhist monks can serve as agents of change and peace.

Venerable Napan then shared about the events in his life that had shaped his future. Even though he was born in Bangkok, he was sent by his mother to the countryside to be educated. His experience in the countryside was what enabled him to realise that religion can serve as an important driver of change, something that he otherwise would not have learnt if he had stayed in Bangkok. As such, exposure to different environments was important for his personal growth.

After gaining his diploma, he went to do work in Thailand’s Deep South, where there was a conflict between the residing Malay Muslim majority and the Buddhist Thai state. His time in the Deep South allowed him to meet and build connections with soldiers and other people whom he otherwise would not have met if he had not ventured forth.

Venerable Napan met an important mentor, Martine Miller, who introduced him to peacebuilding. His path, which was forged through mentorship, showed the importance of being welcoming and being a mentor figure to others so that one can lead others into the world of advocacy. As he attended more conferences centred around social cohesion, he befriended people who eventually rose to high positions in the Thai National Human Rights Commission and in the Thai National Catholic Council. In this way, bonds forged early can lead to connections with others that can be the foundation for inter-organisational cooperation in the future.

It is Venerable Napan’s deep-felt belief that social cohesion can only be built if people from all sectors – private, civil, religious – come together to actively cooperate in building it. He concluded by reminding the audience that each person had three ships that could be used to build social cohesion – Relationships, Leadership and Friendships.



## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Multiculturalism as a Virtue

Multiculturalism tends to matter most to minorities, who stand to lose the most if it is not upheld. For majority groups, it is often easier to pay lip service without fully embracing it as a core value, partly because of majority privilege. In Singapore, this can be seen within the Chinese community, which may not always feel the same urgency. Ultimately, multiculturalism must be more than a virtue we admire from afar. It needs to be internalised as a deeply held value. Simply coexisting is not enough. Genuine engagement across cultures is necessary, and the majority carries a larger responsibility to drive this.

### Issue 2 – The Practice of Social Cohesion

Many people fear the unfamiliar. When they do not know each other well, anxieties grow. Increasing meaningful interactions can help dissolve these fears. It is telling that many young Singaporeans are more familiar with faraway places like New York or Paris than with our own regional neighbours such as Indonesia. Encouraging travel and cultural exchange within Southeast Asia could help bridge these gaps and foster mutual understanding.

In the Singapore context, given its small size and the many social and external forces that could divide it, building strong cohesion is not optional, it is essential for national resilience. With globalisation and social media amplifying divisions, efforts must go beyond government initiatives to include civil society, businesses, and religious communities. While Singapore has already progressed beyond people simply living side by side, there is still much more that can be done to deepen bonds.

Historically, Buddhism's adaptability has helped prevent conflict, but today, people face more insidious forces that easily drive people apart. Hate speech and divisive narratives spread by the minute, while peacebuilders might only meet once a year. This imbalance means we need both preventive measures and quicker, more responsive efforts.

### Issue 3 – External Conflicts and Singapore's Social Fabric

In today's hyperconnected world, individuals often view global events through the lens of their own identities and cultural ties. It is only natural to feel sympathetic toward certain sides. However, one must also adopt a national perspective that puts Singapore's unity first, ensuring these external conflicts do not fracture local cohesion. Social media makes this especially challenging by amplifying emotionally charged narratives, so we must be even more deliberate about maintaining harmony.

Singapore prioritises interfaith dialogues, conferences, and small-group engagements that build authentic understanding and relationships. This behind-the-scenes and quieter method, as compared to public marches or demonstrations, is very much a Singaporean way of fostering cohesion and less confrontational, but often more meaningful and lasting, with positive effects that ripple through communities.

### Issue 4 – Economic Inequality as a Social Faultline

Historically, Singapore under the People's Action Party, had roots in democratic socialism, like Wilson's Labour Party in the UK, fostering egalitarian values despite a capitalist economy. In the 1970s to 80s, Singapore was more





like Scandinavia, socially egalitarian though economically unequal. But over time, this shifted away from what we had where early leaders imbued society with egalitarianism, but they are no longer around to enforce those values. Now, social ethos in Singapore resembles Dubai or Hong Kong, where flaunting wealth is common, unlike in Japan where social cohesion is high, partly because flaunting wealth is seen as culturally inappropriate. We need to learn from societies that maintain egalitarianism as a successful social value.

### **Issue 5 – Businesses and Social Cohesion**

Holding companies accountable is important, whether it is about sustainability, DEI [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion], multiculturalism, or even profitability. But the starting point should not be that companies inherently resist accountability. The responsibility starts internally where CEOs and businesses must reflect on what they believe is their mission in society, articulate it, and try to live it. Then, civil society and the public can hold them accountable, through methods like boycotts or by not investing. Business schools also play a role in shaping future leaders. In places like the US, the focus on shareholder returns has narrowed CEOs' priorities. So, accountability should involve all of society, starting with leadership within companies themselves.

It was suggested that a differentiated approach was also needed. Smaller companies can still show an inclusive spirit, while larger companies with boards should do more to ensure diverse representation, not just by race or religion but also gender. More can always be done, especially given concerns over income inequality.

### **Issue 6 – Blind Spots and Social Disruption**

A major blind spot is assuming future crises will resemble past ones; leaders must avoid reusing outdated tools and instead adapt to unique new challenges. Crises should be seen as opportunities to deepen trust between leadership and the community, reinforcing the social contract rather than exposing societal rifts.

Leaders could also pre-empt some of the challenges and work towards mitigating them. A case in point is how education can be improved to help youth critically assess pervasive and potentially harmful social media narratives that may threaten social cohesion. Another foreseeable challenge is income inequality, which if not managed properly, would have serious impact on social cohesion.

# PLENARY #3 FORGING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

## RESILIENCE



- ▷ STATE of MIND
- ▷ WAY of LIFE
- ▷ CARDINAL VIRTUE
- ▷ ENDURANCE

... BUT THERE'LL ALSO BE A TIME FOR RESISTANCE, REFORM, and REST & RECOVERY

### 3 KEY PILLARS



- 1 THE HARDWARE  
POLICIES & REFORM  
INTEGRATED SOCIETIES + ETHNICITIES



- 2 LANGUAGE
  - ▷ ENGLISH AS THE COMMON LANGUAGE FOR BUSINESS & COMMERCE
  - ▷ SECONDARY LANGUAGE on our RESPECTIVE ETHNICITIES



- 3 NATIONAL SERVICE POLICY
  - ▷ MORE WOMEN SHOULD JOIN TOO!

**60%** OF SINGAPORE BELIEVE THAT PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH OTHER RELIGIONS ARE IMPORTANT



LIKE ICE-BLENDED COFFEE & YIN YANG, WE CAN ALL COME TOGETHER WELL!



WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?



- 1 INSTITUTIONALISED MULTICULTURALISM  
↳ beyond WHAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS DONE!
- 2 SOCIAL COHESION DUE to INCOME INEQUALITY IS A PROBLEM!  
↳ RECOGNISE THAT SINGAPORE THE EGALITARIANISM CULTURE IS A LOT LESS THAN IT WAS BEFORE
- 3 IT'S ALL OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO ADHERE TO OUR VALUES  
↳ BUSINESS LEADERS ESPECIALLY MUST SPEAK UP ON THE VALUES THEY BELIEVE IN!

GO-EXISTING is **NOT** the SAME as MULTICULTURALISM



WHEN IN PRAYER, WE ALWAYS SIT IN A CIRCLE SO THAT WE KEEP OUR HEARTS OPEN TO EACH OTHER

IN THE SAME WAY, WE NEED TO OPEN VIRTUAL SPACES

WHY DO BUSINESSES NEED SO MUCH ACCOUNTABILITY?

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT BUSINESSES' ROLE IN SOCIETY?



I WANT PEACE to MATTER to EVERYONE, NOT JUST A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE!



**USE EACH CRISIS**

THEY'RE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD TRUST & RESILIENCE!

**PEACE** in

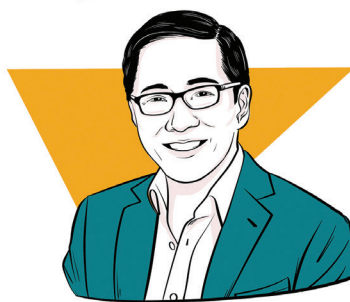
ONE'S HEART STARTS in ONE'S HANDS. LET'S PUT OUR HEARTS, HANDS, AND HEADS TOGETHER!



MR DINESH VASU DASH



MR HO KWON PING



VENERABLE NAPAN THAWORNBANJOB



MODERATOR: PROF. MONA SIDDIQUI



## Breakout 7

### *Expanding our Common Space Through Everyday Multiculturalism*



**Professor Katy Bennett**

Professor of Human Geography, University of Leicester, United Kingdom

**Professor Susanne Wessendorf**

Professor of Social Anthropology, Institute for Peace and Security, Coventry University, United Kingdom

**Moderator: Dr Selvaraj Velayutham**

Associate Professor of Sociology, School of Communication, Society and Culture, Macquarie University, Australia

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The panellists discussed the intricacies of bonding between immigrant and receiving societies in two large European cities, and how social resilience can be strengthened against rising xenophobia.

Key takeaways: (a) Informal social infrastructures are important in building social cohesion, as well as sustaining acts of kindness through structured support, and developing inclusive public spaces, such as local libraries; (b) Public spaces can function as safe spaces where young people feel a sense of belonging.



## Infrastructures of Kindness in the Context of Migrant Arrival

*Professor Susanne Wessendorf, Professor of Social Anthropology at the Institute of Peace and Security, Coventry University*

Professor Susanne Wessendorf discussed her research which was primarily focused on how informal social infrastructures, particularly those embedded in routine social interactions, contribute to migrant integration. She highlighted the importance of initiatives, such as English language classes and crochet groups at local libraries, in building social cohesion. Individual gestures, such as helping with administrative forms and offering signposting, provide concrete support to those in need.

Drawing on her qualitative studies in East London – an area with a long history of immigration and lower socio-economic status – she found that shopkeepers who were established by people with migration backgrounds, often play a pivotal role in facilitating interactions and transfer of knowledge to newcomers who arrive with few social contacts. For instance, shopkeepers refer them to required services when in need of help, such as doctors, hospitals and other services. Moreover, they also offer social and emotional support and opportunities to interact with long-established migrants of the same nationality or speak the same language. This is especially crucial in times of hardship. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many Indian students lost their jobs, shopkeepers organised a food bank to assist those in need. Thus, local businesses are often the first point of contact for those seeking help, and can serve as an informal bridge to formal institutions.

Her research also explored the challenges and limitations of these informal social infrastructures, including issues of language barriers, digital exclusion, and mental health concerns. While signposting can be effective, it requires shopkeepers and other community figures to be updated with the knowledge direct people to the right services – often going beyond their job descriptions and working hours. She observed that discretionary acts of kindness were becoming more structured forms of support to bridge gaps in access to basic needs and to promote the inclusion of migrants.

The policy implications of her research suggest the importance of recognising and strengthening informal social infrastructures as part of wider social cohesion strategies. This involves sustaining acts of kindness through structured support, and developing inclusive public spaces, such as local libraries, and collaborating with local businesses and commercial shops – such as takeaway food places and hairdressers – to distribute multilingual resources and leverage their roles as community hubs. By integrating these everyday spaces into urban social policy, cities can create more inclusive environments where migrants and long-term residences alike can connect, share information, and access the support they need.





## **‘Segregation Doesn’t Divide Us’: New Directions in Everyday Multiculturalism**

*Professor Katy Bennett, Professor of Human Geography, University of Leicester*

Professor Katy Bennett’s presentation focused on two key messages: (1) thinking beyond traditional integrationist agendas to embrace convivial disintegration and fragmented togetherness in practice; and (2) exploring new directions in everyday multiculturalism through mobilities and social media. Situating her research in Leicester, UK, she traced how public discourse on multiculturalism and immigration has shifted since the 2005 London bombings, including a critique of UK Home Secretary Braverman’s 2023 speech where she declared that multiculturalism has “failed”.

She noted that while Leicester may appear segregated at the surface, these categories used in the census are overly broad and ignores the diversity within each group. Moreover, the census is only completed once every ten years, which only captures a static view of geographical dynamics and does not effectively highlight the fluidity and mobility of people’s lives.

As such, her research explored the day-to-day experiences of how people live together, with a particular focus on young people’s mobility, reframing rootedness and belonging as shaped by mobility rather than fixed residence. Using tools like Google Earth, she interviewed young people in Leicester and gained insight into their lives on the move, such as visiting their grandparents, going to London, and to places they had previously lived – revealing affective attachments and stories that shape their identity beyond one static place.

One notable finding was the role of chicken shops, such as Nando’s, as “third places” for young people – they are socially neutral, affordable, culturally inclusive spaces outside home and school or work. Often alcohol-free and offering vegetarian options, these places provide familiar environment that encourages informal interaction without pressure, allowing for both social mixing and what she describes as “civil inattention”. New local vocabularies, such as the affection term “Bossman” to address the shop owner, signals respect and familiarity. For many, these chicken shops serve as a safe and comfortable “second home” and act as hubs of everyday multiculturalism.

Bennett also brought an innovative methodological angle by combining her ethnographic observations with geo-tagged Tweets in Leicester. This allowed her to trace how Nando’s feature not only in physical, everyday encounters but also in digital conversations. This analysis revealed how social media captures routine social interactions and expressions of belonging, while also revealing discreet acts of “othering” via uncivil attention, highlighting the complex tensions within semi-public spaces.

Ultimately, Bennett’s work suggests that segregation does not necessarily equate to division; this research offers an alternative perspective to policymakers who often view immigration solely as an endpoint. Instead of focusing solely on formal integration requirements on newcomers, she suggests investing in community spaces and local venues where everyday multiculturalism takes places.



## Discussions and Reflections

### Issue 1 – Importance of Public Spaces in Building Social Fabric

Keeping public spaces open and accessible is essential for fostering social cohesion and enabling diverse groups to interact. Spaces such as schools, libraries and youth clubs provide critical venues where people – especially young people – can express themselves and build connections. Schools are important avenues to facilitate social mixing, though language barriers, time constraints and socio-economic factors limit access for some, potentially fostering tensions and prejudice between groups. Sustained investment in public spaces is crucial to ensure minorities have places to share their experiences, rather than seeing such spaces closed.

### Issue 2 – Engaging Local Communities to Build Inclusive Spaces Organically

Supporting grassroots, community-led initiatives help organically create inclusive spaces. For instance, micro-grants can empower local groups to organise events like street parties, communal meals, organise interfaith weeks that open places of worship and schools to broader participation, including non-religious individuals. Despite funding challenges and austerity cuts affecting public avenues like libraries, young people and local businesses can also find ways to creatively repurpose spaces for socialising and community-building.

### Issue 3 – Bridging Research and Policy through Stakeholder Engagement

Effective policy development benefits from collaborative engagement between researchers, local authorities, and civil society. Workshops and dialogue sessions provide opportunities for stakeholders to share challenges, refine strategies, and co-create solutions. Continuous interaction and engagement can then turn into support for institutionalised forms of outreach efforts, ensuring that academic findings translate into practical, community-responsive initiatives rather than merely remaining theoretical.

### Issue 4 – Social Infrastructure is Multi-Dimensional

Social infrastructures serve diverse users with varying needs. Gender and intergenerational dynamics also influence who uses which spaces and when. For example, those who participated in crochet groups at the library tend to be women. However, other groups like elderly men also gathered in the library to do their own activities. As for migrant communities, Bangladeshi men tend to visit mosques or barbershops when seeking help, while women chat with others who are also waiting at school gates for their children. Recognising these nuances can aid outreach strategies to different communities where targeted initiatives can be crafted to suit their needs and preferences.

### Issue 5 – Continuing Research, Recognising Tensions, and Shaping Policy Together

Ongoing research is needed to understand how people navigate living together amid tensions and disagreements. Recent social unrest in the UK underscores the fragility of social cohesion and the need for proactive spaces that encourage dialogue and respect. Academics have an important role in collaborating with policymakers to translate nuanced insights into effective, context-sensitive policies. Clarifying the aims and meaning of social cohesion is essential to avoiding oversimplified agendas and to better support the realities of multicultural societies.

WE SHOULD NOT OVERLOOK  
THE STRENGTH WE'VE BUILT  
BY DEALING WITH  
**DIVERSITY**  
DAILY!

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- ▷ RECOGNISE THE ECONOMIC & SOCIAL ROLE OF INFORMAL SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES
- ▷ STRENGTHENING FORMAL-INFORMAL SYNERGIES
- ▷ SUSTAINING ACTS OF KINDNESS THROUGH STRUCTURED SUPPORT
- ▷ INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES



THINK  
GEOGRAPHICALLY  
HOW PEOPLE BECOME  
**WISER**



**THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF KINDNESS**



**SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES**

THE PHYSICAL PLACES & ORGANISATIONAL THAT SHAPE THE WAY PEOPLE INTERACT

DIFFERENT ECOSYSTEMS PROVIDE:



**2 TAKEAWAYS:**



**CHICKEN SHOPS** in the UK



**AFFORDABLE**

**INVITING & COSY ATMOSPHERE**

**THIRD SPACE**

**SOCIALLY NEUTRAL**

CONVIVIAL DISINTEGRATION INVITES US TO INVEST IN SPACES & RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT FRAGMENTED TOGETHERNESS!

**LIVES ARE LIVED ON THE MOVE**



MODERATOR:  
DR. SELVARAJ  
VELAYUTHAM

PROF KATY BENNETT

PROF SUSANNE WESSENDORF

**HANDHOLDING:**

- IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO HELP
- IN FRIENDS & FAMILY, But also COMMERCIAL SPACES
- CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS





## Breakout 8

### Rebuilding Trust and Cohesion After Social Tragedies



#### **Datu Mussolini Sinsuat Lidasan**

Executive Director, Al Qalam Institute, Ateneo de Davao University, The Philippines

#### **Mr Rakesh Naidoo MNZM**

Manager, National Ethnic Partnerships, New Zealand Police, New Zealand

#### **Moderator: Dr Alistair Cook**

Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

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The panellists examined the multifaceted approach to disaster recovery, immediate and long-term challenges, and discussed the role of the humanitarian sectors, governments, and the public.

Key takeaways: (a) Turning conflict into collaboration requires recognising that peacebuilding is an active, transformation process. It can be achieved through active listening, shared storytelling, and action-oriented frameworks; (b) Rebuilding trust and maintaining cohesion requires a multi-faceted approach. All parties must also invest in education and constant dialogue, with a focus on hope.





## Turning Conflict into Collaboration

*Datu Mussolini Sinsuat Lidasan, Executive Director, Al Qalam Institute, Ateneo de Davao University*

Datu Mussolini Sinsuat Lidasan began by asking his audience to pause and imagine a scene of former religious extremists, grassroots people and government leaders sitting at the same table, engaging in dialogue. That is what the Al Qalam (the “The Pen” in Arabic) Institute, accomplished. It created a space where former combatants and scholars sat at the same table; a space where imams and government leaders exchange ideas instead of bullets. His institute aims to facilitate healing by getting conflicting groups to rebuild the future together.

The Bangsamoro region in the Philippines is defined by war, displacement and deep-seated mistrust. The Al Qalam Institute recognises that this complex conflict is not just a matter of politics but also about the complex intertwining of history and land issues. Datu Mussolini likened social cohesion to alchemy. Social cohesion requires one part courage, two parts humility, and the precise temperature of the truth.

The mission of the Al Qalam Institute is to study Islamic culture, bridge divides and enact inclusive policies, especially in the Bangsamoro region. It is founded upon three pillars: (a) Research, policy and advocacy. Peace is rooted in facts, and the Al Qalam Institute makes sure that policies are shaped by real voices, not political agendas. The Institute was one of the creators that penned the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which resulted in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao; (b) Understanding each other. The Institute brings people together not to debate but to ask how they can move forward together. For example, it once facilitated a meeting between a military officer and a staunch opponent. While they originally argued with each other fiercely, they eventually realised that they both wanted the same thing – a future where their children would not have to engage in combat; (c) Youth and Communities. The Institute recognises that youth are the next generation of peace builders. Therefore, it is necessary to equip the youth with skills for governance and social entrepreneurship.

The Al Qalam Institute’s actions have created a ripple effect; it has led to the further creation of de-radicalisation policies, international partnerships with Indonesia and the Middle East, and women’s empowerment.

To turn conflict into collaboration, it is necessary to recognise that peacebuilding is an active, transformation process. It can be achieved through active listening, shared storytelling, and action-oriented frameworks.

He concluded by encouraging the audience to think about what frictions in their own community that they can transmute into fuel for innovation and lasting peace.



## Rebuilding Trust And Cohesion – A New Zealand Perspective

*Mr Rakesh Naidoo MNZM, Superintendent & National Partnerships Manager, New Zealand Police*

Naidoo recalled that in 2019, New Zealand was shaken to its core by two mass shootings at mosques by a terrorist. It resulted in 51 deaths and many more injuries. Despite the tragedy, New Zealanders were able to remain steadfast and maintain trust and societal cohesion. In the words of the imam of one of the mosques that was attacked, “we are broken-hearted, but not broken”.

After the attacks, stakeholders in New Zealand reached out to mosques nationally. Muslim members of the police served as a bridge between Muslim and the government. Religious experts were also consulted to make sure that spiritual and cultural protocols were upheld as part of New Zealand’s response. For example, the indigenous Maori community were engaged to make sure that New Zealand’s response was grounded in understanding and respect. New Zealand called on all its citizens to respond not with fear and division but with unity, compassion and resolve. Importantly, this response was guided by principles that were forged long before the crisis.

While the attack was unexpected, New Zealand’s response was not improvised. It was guided by strong principles that were made possible by its people’s trust in institutions and the cultural competence of the institutions themselves. Following the attack, people of all faiths and backgrounds mobilised in support. A nationwide call to interfaith prayer was issued, and people were united in solidarity through grief. Using the framework proposed by Harvey Whitehouse, Naidoo stated that identity fusion occurred in New Zealand in the wake of the trauma.

Rather than spurring sentiments of hatred, New Zealanders rejected division and reaffirmed their national values of inclusion and peace. The New Zealand government made sure to learn from the incident, issuing 44 recommendations to address systemic gaps that were brought to light by the attack. Collectively, New Zealand’s people and institutions took shared ownership of the recovery process.

The formula that New Zealand used to remain resilient in the wake of the attack is the same formula that allows New Zealand to survive other crises such as pandemics, earthquakes, national security issues, and overseas forces. The formula is as follows:

- Invest in relationships before crises. Before the attack, New Zealand’s police had issued a Memorandum of Understanding with the Islamic Federation of New Zealand, even though people at the time questioned the need to enter such agreements. This strategic foresight laid a foundation of trust that New Zealand could rely on after the 2019 attack.
- Mobilise leaders and cultural experts. People must be united at all times with empathy and cultural values at their centre. When the attack occurred, all organisations in New Zealand were able to speak a similar language of visible and inclusive leadership due to their prior bonds and understanding with each other.
- Uphold people’s dignity at all times.
- Balance immediate needs with long-term needs. Recovery should be considered not just in terms of days and weeks, but also in terms of years and decades.
- Maintain transparency and frequent communications.
- Recognise systemic issues, learning from failures as much as successes.

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- Harness the power of unity and always focus on prioritising rule of law. New Zealand's strength comes from its ability to come together in crisis.

Rebuilding trust and cohesion requires a multi-faceted approach, with transparency and humility from the government, empowerment and leadership from civil society, accountability from all, and resources and expertise from the private sector. All parties must also invest in education and constant dialogue, with a focus on hope.

Naidoo concluded with a Maori proverb: "I walk backwards into the future with my eyes firmly on the past". The past, present and future are all intertwined, and it is important to carry the lessons of one's shared history forward. While a next crisis is inevitable, it is always possible to emerge stronger from it.

## **Discussions and Reflections**

### **Issue 1 – Trust and Crisis Response**

In Mindanao, crises are not isolated events but part of a long history of displacement and struggle, dating back to American colonisation. The Bangsamoro Organic Law, signed under President Duterte, was the result of decades of negotiation and interfaith dialogue between priests and Imams. This process rebuilt trust among communities, especially among Catholic Filipinos, by showing that Bangsamoro autonomy can strengthen the entire country. This trust did not come overnight but grew through consistent efforts to recognise historical injustices and open spaces for conversation.

Trust is dynamic and rooted in education. Universities, church-based and state, can help open minds and foster dialogue. However, online misinformation increases polarisation, hence there is a need for credible voices to be amplified and quick fact-checking, stressing that individuals, especially the youth, must learn to navigate digital tools critically and responsibly.

Crises always bring fear and uncertainty, but decisions must be guided by hope rather than fear. The quality of relationships that people build over time matter. Trust must be established before crises occur, by being present, visible, and willing to listen. During a crisis, that trust is put to the test, but it cannot be built from scratch when it is needed most. Building trust online and offline must go hand in hand to strengthen community resilience.

### **Issue 2 – Youth and Resilience**

Today's youth are not just passive observers, they are leading conversations on climate change, social justice, and other global challenges. Young people also face economic inequalities, social isolation, and intergenerational disconnects. Communities must create safe, meaningful spaces for young people to be heard, understood, and supported so they feel equipped to carry resilience forward.

In Bangsamoro, a new generation is rising. Many young people, educated in top universities, are bringing fresh ideas about good governance and global issues like climate change. Although they face resistance from more traditional elders, they are increasingly entering government and even Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leadership. This marks a shift from leadership defined by family ties to one based on competence and broader perspective, a hopeful sign for a more inclusive future.



### **Issue 3 – Community Leaders, Resilience, and Practical Strategies**

Resilient communities are often held together by grassroots groups, interfaith networks, and multicultural councils that emerge from the community itself, not from top-down government orders.

In Mindanao, conflict roots lie partly in attempts to “Filipinize” everyone, erasing indigenous identities. Leaders such as priests, bishops, Imams, and community heads, need to understand local history to build genuine trust. As a practical approach, he described “Bitiala”<sup>10</sup>, a safe space for conversations with coffee and active listening. Since 1998, these dialogues have empowered grassroots communities to talk openly about what they need — education, livelihood, security — without fear, ensuring everyone’s voice is heard, not just that of elite leaders.

### **Issue 4 – Role of International Partners in Post-Crisis Rebuilding**

After the Christchurch attacks, international partners, from trauma recovery experts to security advisors, provided invaluable support. Good neighbours prove their worth in times of crisis, helping communities reflect and rebuild stronger. Foundations like the Helen Clark Foundation and cross-Pacific programmes help communities deepen understanding of their own neighbours and the wider region, which is vital for true cohesion.

Agencies like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and regional partners like Australia and Indonesia have worked closely with Mindanao. While regional contexts differ, cross-country studies and exchanges help societies recognise shared and unique challenges, building solidarity and shared security in Southeast Asia.

### **Issue 5 – Forgiveness and Rebuilding Trust**

Forgiveness is vital for moving forward, but remembering the past is equally important to prevent old wounds from reopening. In Bangsamoro, conflict is not only political but also deeply communal, with inter-clan violence still happening today – a sign that healing must be an ongoing process.

Forgiveness is about finding peace within oneself so that past traumas no longer control the present. Resilience and dignity come from knowing that you belong, that your story matters, and that you have a valued place in society.

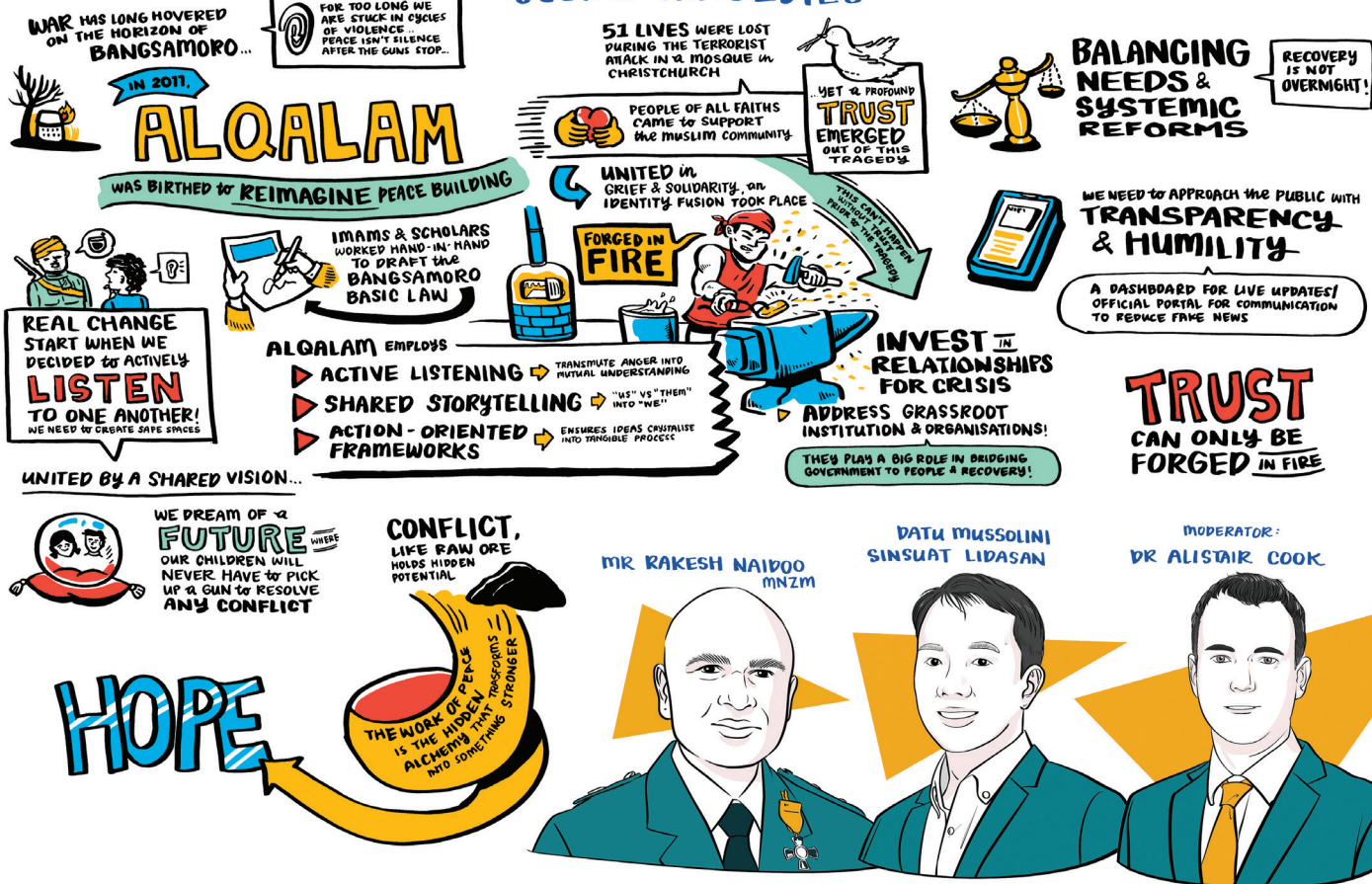
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10 <https://alqalam.addu.edu.ph/event/bitiala-series/>



# ICCS THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COHESIVE SOCIETIES

## BREAKOUT #8 REBUILDING TRUST and COHESION AFTER SOCIAL TRAGEDIES



# Sharing Sessions

ICCS 2025 featured a series of facilitated sharing sessions where delegates could share best practices and discuss shared challenges in specific issue areas. These sessions explored: (a) Novel ways in which dialogue can be made more inclusive; (b) Best practices for outreach across platforms and audience segments; (c) Strategies and opportunities for moderating uncomfortable interactions online; and (d) How uplifting spirits, remembrance, and positive storytelling play vital roles in recovery and social cohesion in difficult times.

Key takeaways from the sharing sessions: (a) To engage deeply, participants must show curiosity, courage, and care, operating from values of equality, justice, and reciprocity; (b) Kindness contributes to a cohesive society; we cannot live with selfism or a “survival of the fittest mentality” but must be “other-centred”; (c) Content moderation should be situation-specific; deleting content may not always be a useful response; and (d) Crises should be seized as opportunities to deepen resilience, strengthen societal bonds, and collectively shape a future that upholds shared values of dignity, solidarity, and humanity.



## Sharing Session 1 – Conversing Better: Broadening and Fostering Inclusive Dialogue

Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib | Dialogue Centre, Singapore

The session began with an engaging “handshake exercise” aimed at fostering empathy and identity awareness. Participants introduced themselves by sharing their name, birthplace, and a fun fact. After exchanging handshakes and introductions, each person “embodied” another’s identity, repeating the exercise until they met someone with their own name.

This activity revealed important insights. One person noted that carrying another’s name encouraged deeper listening. Yet, many found it challenging to set aside their own identity and authentically represent someone else’s, highlighting



that adopting another’s identity carries responsibility, sensitivity, and care. Misrepresenting identities can lead to misunderstanding, stereotyping, or conflict. The exercise showed how unfamiliarity with others’ backgrounds can breed assumptions and biases.

The facilitator then introduced the concept of a safe space: an environment where individuals feel free to express themselves without judgment. Participants defined it with qualities like confidentiality, mutual respect, authenticity, and shared ownership. One participant stressed that the right to coexist must extend to all, regardless of differences. The speaker emphasized kindness and generosity as essential traits in such spaces, recognising that people may err as they learn.

In discussing interfaith dialogue, the speaker highlighted that dialogue is not simply a tool but a transformative process, noting, “Religions don’t dialogue, people do.” Transformative dialogue fosters empathy, trust, and collaborative action, even if full agreement isn’t reached. To engage deeply, participants must show curiosity, courage, and care, operating from values of equality, justice, and reciprocity.

Concluding, the facilitator introduced “brave spaces” – inclusive environments encouraging meaningful action beyond discussion – and cautioned that excluding groups from society risks fostering rebellion.



## Sharing Session 2 – Enhancing Outreach: Educating and Rallying for Good

**Dr William Wan** | Managing Director, Fervent Chambers, Singapore

Wan began by asking participants to define the ambiguous term “kindness”. Responses included “mobilising”, “fundraising”, “inspiring change”, and “self-improvement”, “empathy”, “compassion”, “warmth” and so on. He then

introduced a Kenyan charity worker who emphasised “virtuousness” and mindset as key to kindness. He introduced the Tagalog phrase “malasakit”, connoting empathy beyond sympathy, in other words putting yourself in another person’s shoes and carrying their pain.

Wan shared insights into the science of kindness, highlighting the research of Dr David Hamilton, who studied how activities like meditation affect feel-good chemicals such as oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine. Acts of kindness positively impact both mind and body, benefiting the giver as well. Wan noted that kind individuals have twice the levels of DHEA, a hormone that slows aging, and 23% less cortisol, which reduces stress. Despite Singapore’s stressful environment, Wan emphasised that this makes kindness even more essential. He also discussed the “Roseto Effect”, a natural experiment from a small Pennsylvania town settled by Italians after WWII. There, strong community bonds and kindness led to significantly lower heart disease rates; the risk was nearly eliminated for those under 55 and halved for those over 65. However, these health benefits faded as the community shifted away from close connections toward a more individualistic lifestyle.

Wan proposed that kindness plays a vital role in fostering a unified society, regardless of whether it stems from religious, humanist, or other cultural viewpoints. He expressed the view that living solely by self-interest or a “survival of the fittest” mindset would eventually lead to our downfall. Instead, we need to adopt an “other-centred” approach.



### **Sharing Session 3 – Moderating Conversations on Social Media**

**Mr Malminderjit Singh** | Chair, Sikh Advisory Board, Singapore

Singh began the session by explaining the sessions’ goals, which were: (a) Understand why and how online tensions escalate; (b) Explore principles and best practices for effective moderation; (c) Understand challenges in the online-offline nexus; and (d) Engage with experts on platform policy and community guidelines.



This was important because social media is a powerful application that can cause division and harm. There are many unique aspects of online conflict, such as the speed of conflict, echo chambers and algorithmic amplification, anonymity, performative outrage, and consequences can spill offline. There are several key risks to communities: (a) Group marginalisation; (b) Erosion of trust; (c) Real-world backlash; and (d) Diminished public discourse.

Singh then discussed the role of moderating online content and outlined several principles: (a) It was not about censorship but about protecting dignity; (b) Focus should be on vulnerable communities; (c) Dialogue rather than dominance must be encouraged; and (e) Digital resilience must be promoted. He said that initiating a dialogue is usually more advantageous, since deleting content can often lead to backlash. However, he emphasised that each situation is unique, and context matters greatly, hence, deleting content could be valid in some cases.

Additional content moderation principles for consideration include: (a) Speak to clarify not condemn; (b) Assume ignorance before malice; (c) Determine public vs. private response; (d) Redirect don't retaliate; and (e) Empower others to step in.



## Sharing Session 4 – Uplifting Spirits: Recovery, Remembrance and Resilience

Mr Hassan Ahmad | Special Advisor, Humanity Matters, Singapore

The facilitator began the session by highlighting the difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism, referencing Mr Ho KwonPing's earlier talk. Multiculturalism involves coexistence of diverse communities, whereas interculturalism emphasises active interaction, mutual understanding, and integration, essential for creating truly cohesive and inclusive societies beyond mere diversity.



He then discussed three essential humanitarian principles: sovereignty, impartiality, and neutrality. These principles were the foundations to guide actions, especially in complex or divided environments. These principles ensure that efforts to help are ethical, equitable, and respectful of all communities. Additionally, whatever action was taken had to emphasise dignity, and this was encapsulated by the equation: Human + Dignity = Humanity.

The power of sports and the arts was highlighted as practical means to foster unity and shared identity. Sports were cited as an activity where people could rally behind common goals and transcend divides. Similarly, the arts serve as a universal language that brought people together.

He emphasised that resilience must be approached and developed systematically through five stages:

- Recognition: identifying and acknowledging the unique risks and vulnerabilities that different communities face.
- Reduction: actively working to mitigate these risks through targeted measures.
- Readiness: strategic allocation, enhancement and positioning of resources.
- Response: ability to appropriately adapt and address adversity in steady, sure and swift manner.
- Recovery: overcoming the shock or setback, and laying grounds for rebuilding.
- hence, Resilience: building lasting capacity to withstand and adapt to future shocks.

In Singapore, for example, Humanitarian Matters (HM) recognises social cohesion as a critical vulnerability that, if left unaddressed, could disrupt broader human development. This insight drives HM's focus on local initiatives to strengthen cohesion, while also continuing their humanitarian work across the region.

Humanity Matters has begun to champion more ground up initiatives, encouraging citizens to actively participate in sustaining social harmony. This approach emphasises working within the rule of law of harnessing the power of people, positioning civic action not as opposition or criticism of government, but as efforts to fill gaps and complement state initiatives.

The facilitator concluded by echoing Mr Ho KwonPing's powerful reminder to never waste a crisis. Instead, crises should be seized as opportunities to deepen resilience, strengthen societal bonds, and collectively shape a future that upholds shared values of dignity, solidarity, and humanity.

# Igniting Change: Showcase



**Ms Zulayqha Zulkifli**

Co-founder, Project Hills, Singapore

**Ms Arizza Ann Nocum**

Founder, Champions for Peace, The Philippines

**Ms Debbie Choa**

Founder, Projek57, Malaysia

**Ms Amsa Nadzifah**

Co-Founder, Yayasan Literasi Desa Tumbuh, Indonesia

**Mr Matius Ho**

Director, Leimena Institute, Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy, Indonesia

**Hosted by: Mr Elliot Danker**

Multi-award winning presenter and media consultant

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ICCS 2025 featured a Showcase segment that brought together five inspiring initiatives from across Southeast Asia, each demonstrating how locally driven solutions can address complex challenges of peacebuilding, inclusion, and social cohesion.





From the Philippines, peace advocate Nocum shared her journey growing up in a multi-faith household in conflict-affected Mindanao, which inspired her to co-found the Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (KRIS). Through partnerships with organisations such as the Kofi Annan Foundation, KRIS has trained over 1,000 youth leaders, reaching an estimated five million people with projects ranging from storybooks for peace to safe learning spaces in conflict zones. Her new Champions for Peace initiative, supported by the Temasek Foundation among other partners, aims to equip and fund youth peacebuilders in five Southeast Asian countries. Nocum called for more inclusive and intergenerational leadership, highlighting the structural barriers young people face in policymaking and peacebuilding.

From rural Indonesia, Nadzifah presented Yayasan Literasi Desa Tumbuh, an organisation that promotes literacy and the arts as tools for strengthening social cohesion in a culturally homogenous village. Weekly sessions for children and adults use books, traditional dance, and storytelling to spark dialogue on diversity, climate change, and fairness, while also engaging mothers on parenting and financial literacy. The initiative blends global exposure with pride in local heritage, showing how small-scale, sustained efforts can transform communities from within.

Representing the Leimena Institute, Ho, alongside Djalimun and Salabiyati, introduced the Leimena Institute's Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) program in Indonesia. Training over 10,000 educators, CCRL develops personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies for interfaith engagement. They shared how CCRL inspired unprecedented exchanges between faith communities and encouraged tolerance even in religiously homogenous settings, underscoring the role of teachers as key agents of pluralism.

From Malaysia, Choa showcased Projek57, a social enterprise advancing unity and shared national identity through youth leadership workshops, public campaigns, and initiatives like the Unity Ribbon. Projek57 also empowers indigenous youth through education, scholarships, and storytelling projects, promoting values of forgiveness, compassion, and respect amid divisive narratives.

Finally, from Singapore, Zulkifli presented Project Hills, a grassroots volunteer network supporting families in rental housing through groceries, domestic aid, and emotional solidarity. Beyond meeting material needs, Project Hills focuses on building trust, breaking cycles of poverty, and reinforcing the dignity and resilience of vulnerable communities.

Across the presentations and questions segment, common themes emerged: the importance of sustained engagement over one-off interventions, the need for inclusive leadership that reflects gender and generational diversity, and the role of education—formal and informal—in shaping civic values. Each speaker showed that social cohesion is built not only through policy and institutions, but also through everyday actions, local creativity, and the courage to bridge divides.



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1 MS. ZULAYQHA

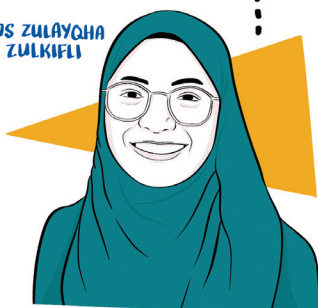
**PROJECT HILLS**

FAMILIES in the ESTATE we were LIVING in were STRUGGLING DURING THE CIRCUIT BREAKER

NOW, WE'VE SERVED **3000** FAMILIES to DATE!

"YOU DON'T NEED to be BIG to MAKE an IMPACT!"

1 MS ZULAYQHA ZULKIFLI



2 MS. ANN-NOCUM

**SOCIAL COHESION**  
from the GROUNDUP!



YOU CAN'T FIND WORLD PEACE WITHOUT INNER PEACE!

CHAMPIONS for PEACE!

EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE to BECOME PEACE ADVOCATES



HELPING THEM TURN THEIR CONCERN INTO ACTION!

TRUE MULTICULTURALISM HAS to be MULTIGENERATIONAL

3 MS DEBBIE CHOA



3 MS. CHOA

**PROJEK57**

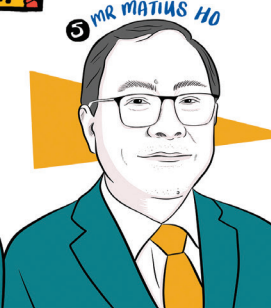
WE BELIEVE THAT OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON DIFFERENT PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER



**UNITY**  
begins with  
**FORGIVENESS**

BEING EMPOWERED TO BELIEVE YOU CAN!

5 MR MATIUS HO



4 MS. AMSA



ASSUMPTIONS are like LOCKED DOORS. YOU'LL NEVER KNOW WHAT'S BEHIND IT UNLESS YOU UNLOCK THEM!

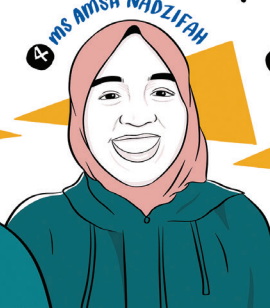
IMPROVING SKILLS and KNOWLEDGE

SOCIAL CAPITAL

ECONOMIC BENEFIT

NARRATIVE MEDIA

4 MS AMSA NADZIFAH



5 MR. HO

**CCRL**

THE CENTRE FOR CIVIC RELIGIOUS LITERACY

PERSONAL COMPETENCY

COMPARATIVE COMPETENCY

COLLABORATIVE COMPETENCY

OUR FRAMEWORK AIMS TO TRAIN EDUCATORS IN ALL THREE!



"INTERACT WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO LEARN TO BE A MORE TOLERANT PERSON."

2 MS ARIZZA ANN-NOCUM



# Fireside Chat with Young Community Leaders



## **Mr Alex Low**

Heart of God Church Youth Member and Co-Founder and Director of interfaith.sg, Singapore

## **Ms Wendy Maryzeline**

Producer and host of content platform Our Grandfather Story, Singapore

## **Ms Neila Maryam**

Architects of Diversity, Malaysia

## **Ms Tarina Ahuja**

Youth advocate and organiser whose work spans organisations such as the Sikh American National Youth Council, Young Khalsa Girls, Greater Good Initiative, and the Parliament of World's Religions, United States

## **Ms Amna Ben Amara**

Researcher and consultant from Intercultural Management, Tunisia, Australia

## **Moderator: Dr Aaron Maniam**

Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

ICCS 2025 featured a youth-led plenary comprising five young leaders who spoke about their personal journey and initiatives in the cohesion space. The session was moderated by Dr Aaron Maniam. The young leaders included Ms Neila Maryam, Architects of Diversity, Malaysia; Mr Alex Low, Heart of God Church Youth member and Founder,



Interfaith.sg; Ms Wendy Maryzeline, Our Grandfather Story, Singapore; Ms Tarina Ahuja, Young Khalsa Girls, United States; Ms Amna Ben Amara, Diversity Atlas, Australia.

The youth leaders recounted their personal journeys in advocating for and campaigning toward social cohesion. They shared diverse stories, including firsthand experiences with racism, as well as incidents involving violence and religious tensions. Drawing from these experiences, the youth leaders conveyed powerful messages about embracing cultural and religious diversity and learning from history to foster societal reconciliation, allowing communities and societies to progress together as one.

They also highlighted the significant contributions of young people in policymaking and urged decision-makers to trust them and intentionally foster an inclusive environment. They view young people as the future pillars of society, noting that many social issues affect them directly, which is why greater opportunities should be provided for young people to participate in shaping policies.

Furthermore, the panellists noted that the current generation of young people grew up in an age of social media. Therefore, decision-makers should make use of social media to connect with young people, and more importantly, to understand young people's lives and how social media may have contributed to the perception that young people are indifferent.

The panellists discussed how technology can be leveraged to promote social cohesion by sharing their experiences within their communities and organisations. One youth leader described a novel approach to organising a blood donation drive in 2024. The event was creatively transformed into a youth carnival featuring snacks, and social media was utilised for promotion. This initiative successfully brought together young people from diverse social backgrounds. Another youth leader recounted using social media to support a farmers' protest in India. With the help of social media, the youth leader and their organisation were able to raise approximately USD \$20,000 to aid in efforts to prevent farmer suicides.

They also talked about the difficulties in connecting with decision-makers, including understanding the “right thing” to say. Despite these obstacles, they felt that collaboration between young people and decision-makers benefits everyone involved. They encouraged decision-makers to “take a chance on young people” by giving them the opportunity to express their concerns and viewpoints. Highlighting the importance of intergenerational dialogue, they noted that most current decision-makers belong to older generations.

The panellists highlighted the significance of commonality, such as food, humour, music, and faith, in fostering social cohesion. They also stressed the need for those working with civil society to embrace uncertainty and have confidence in the value of their efforts. Reinforcing the message from the keynote address by the President of Singapore, the youth leaders emphasised education's crucial role in raising awareness about social cohesion.

Additionally, they conveyed an important point: social cohesion is not about the quantity of connections made online, but about the meaningful relationships developed in the real world. Social cohesion represents a movement that encompasses various forms of work, including advocacy, policymaking, and academia. Thus, achieving social cohesion depends on the continued dedication of individuals from these diverse fields.





THE  
SOURCE  
OF KNOWLEDGE IS  
AS IMPORTANT AS  
KNOWLEDGE  
ITSELF



**HUMOUR**  
IS A GREAT  
EQUALISER



**TRUST**  
the  
YOUTH  
WE MUST DO MORE  
THAN JUST LISTEN  
TO THE YOUTH...  
GIVE THEM A SEAT  
at THE TABLE!



BE CURIOUS  
& DON'T JUDGE, AND  
YOU MAY FIND YOUR  
COMMONALITIES!



**POPULISM**  
TELLS PEOPLE THAT IT  
WILL PROTECT THEM FROM  
THE 'OTHER'...

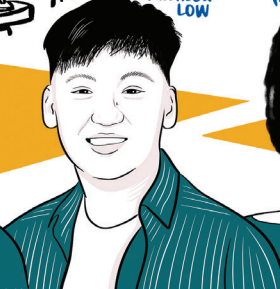
FRAMING THE 'OTHER' AS AN EXISTENTIAL  
THREAT IS WHAT LEADS TO VIOLENCE

DON'T JUST  
WAIT for a  
**CRISIS**  
to TAKE  
**ACTION!**

MS NEILA  
MARYAM



MR ALEX  
LOW



MS WENDY MARYZELINE



MS TARINA AHUJA



MS AMNA BEN AMARA



MODERATOR:  
DR HARROU  
MANIAM





# Keynote Address

*Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Law and Second Minister for Home Affairs, Singapore*



Minister Edwin Tong observed that three fruitful days of ICCS 2025 had flown by. Even though this was the close of the event, it did not mean an end. Instead, it was a beginning – a beginning of friendships, networks that have been formed, and knowledge that has been exchanged at ICCS 2025, which can all be brought back to attendees’ home countries.

Since the past iteration of ICCS, the world has become a more uncertain and fragile place. There has been a rise of conflicts, sometimes civil, sometimes violent. Trade tensions have disrupted global economics, and disinformation that has been disseminated at breakneck speed has increased social fissures between nations. All these forces reveal the emotive fault lines and weak links in societies.

ICCS demonstrated the collective determination to not just talk about difficulties but to actively work on addressing them. It showed that participants were not content to simply coexist and be tolerant of each other, but wished to build genuine bonds across differences, celebrate diversity as a virtue, and show a commitment to building cohesion. Social cohesion does not happen by chance. It will not, and cannot, arise happenstance. Individuals must work hard at building cohesion, and cohesion requires intentionality.

Minister Tong shared that Singapore’s experience of cohesion is akin to something that knits a diverse society into a shared community. As individuals, our primal instincts tell us to look towards people who are like us and hang out with people who look like us and share our beliefs. Given these instincts, we cannot assume that cohesion will materialise if a community is simply left to their own devices. There is no substitute for the painstaking work of building a cohesive nation.



In the case of Singapore, the key to social cohesion lies in everyday life. Cohesion does not appear only at festive events and celebrations where everything is fun, instead, it is forged in the everyday actions and interactions of Singapore's citizens.

At a macro-level, the Singapore government fosters a cohesive society by implementing appropriate public policy. But Minister Tong wished to emphasise that we cannot ignore the micro-level, and that individuals with their own hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations are the core of any and every society. At the individual level, every person should be recognised as someone with personal beliefs, a unique heritage, and particular cultural norms. To foster social cohesion, it is therefore necessary to look through the different lens of people from different communities, especially those from minority communities. When this is done, we make people feel valid and help them better understand the role they play as part of the community.

The important constitutional elements of social cohesion are public spaces and daily rituals that foster interaction and build understanding. Programmes that organise the community such as art programmes, sports and cultural activities may seem innocuous but play a major role in building the community. This is because they enable the formation of teams and friendships across sectarian groups. Similarly, spontaneous meetings, coffee breaks, neighbourhood festivals and playground interactions are all examples of micro interactions whose importance cannot be ignored.

2025 marks Singapore's 60th year of independence, a moment of national reflection. At the heart of the Singapore story lies multiculturalism. Instead of pursuing assimilation, Singapore embraced its diverse identities as a collective strength. Over the decades, it has layered a shared national identity atop a rich tapestry of ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions. In this context, societal cohesion is not about erasing differences but about respecting them, while uniting around common aspirations. Importantly, there is no one-size-fits-all model for achieving cohesion.

Multiculturalism must be viewed as a "constant work in progress." It is neither natural nor guaranteed; rather, it must be continually nurtured and protected. Societies need to maintain a sense of vigilance, a conscious awareness, even a degree of nervousness, that cohesion could be lost, so that they remain committed to preserving it. Achieving social cohesion requires both strong leadership and active civic participation. Neither policies alone nor communities alone are sufficient.

The government provides the structural framework, but it is people who bring these ideas to life through everyday actions and interactions. In this regard, social interventions play a vital role, as they create shared lived experiences that help build bonds across divides. True cohesion is not forged in theory, but in daily life.

To foster such cohesion, society must be willing to accept a degree of social intervention. At times, these interventions may feel deeply personal. For instance, Singapore's policy of integrating living spaces ensures that people of different ethnic groups grow up together, share neighbourhoods, and gather at the same table. Over time, these everyday interactions foster mutual understanding and allow individuals to see beyond the lines that might otherwise divide them. Therefore, while some forms of intervention may seem intrusive at first, they are ultimately part of a broader and intentional policy framework aimed at sustaining long-term harmony.



Minister Tong emphasised that building a cohesive society requires responsible speech, particularly in public spaces, as “words, too, not only weapons, can wound and even kill”. Careless language can escalate tensions and spark real violence, making it essential to balance freedom of expression with sensitivity toward others, especially minorities. He warned against the weaponisation of race and religion, noting that while it may be easy to exploit these differences, doing so causes deep, lasting harm and erodes the trust that communities have painstakingly built.

Instead, he called for open-heartedness – a willingness to build shared hopes with those who differ from us – and urged that dialogue across differences be nurtured within civic spaces. Highlighting the critical role of youth, the Minister praised the participation of over 200 young leaders at ICCS 2025 – nearly double the previous turnout – noting that they were not passive attendees but active co-creators who led conversations and designed programmes. Through exposure and empathy, young people have the power to dismantle barriers and transform society, and intergenerational dialogue, though more challenging than peer exchange, is vital for sustaining long-term social cohesion.

Singapore’s 60 years illustrate that cohesion and harmony are not abstract ideals, but tangible, daily commitments. They require courage, patience, and intentionality. ICCS 2025 showcased a collective will to uphold cohesion. The minister urged all participants to take this shared spirit back to their own communities and contribute actively to cohesive, resilient communities. He emphasised that difference and diversity are strengths, and that moving forward, we should continue to make sure that every identity is respected and that every voice is heard.



THE WORLD HAS  
BECOME A MORE  
**FRAGILE**  
PLACE  
▷ TRADE DISRUPTIONS  
▷ DIGITAL ACCELERATION  
▷ RAPID SOCIAL MEDIA REACH

**HOW DO WE KEEP GOING?**  
and NAVIGATE THESE CHALLENGES:

1. ALWAYS WORK ON THE BASIS THAT  
MULTICULTURALISM ISN'T A NATURAL STATE!  
↳ LIVE WITH A NERVOUSNESS WONDERING IF  
IT WILL BE TAKEN AWAY
2. LEADERSHIP & CITIZENS MUST  
WORK IN TANDUM  
↳ POLICY IS USELESS WITHOUT PEOPLE, and  
THERE'S NO COMMUNITY WITHOUT POLICY
3. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY &  
ACCOUNTABILITY for WHAT WE SAY  
↳ SACRIFICE OUR DESIRE TO SPEAK WHAT WE  
WANT TO BE SENSITIVE to the ATMOSPHERE
4. EMPOWER OUR YOUNG PEOPLE!  
↳ WE MUST SHAPE & NURTURE SOCIAL  
COHESIVENESS FOR THEIR FUTURE &  
LET THEM TAKE OVER

**COHESION**  
DOES NOT HAPPEN BY CHANCE,  
but by **INTENTIONALITY**

COMMITTED TO SOCIAL COHESION  
FOR A RESILIENT FUTURE!

AND WE NEED TO  
ORGANISE OURSELVES  
AROUND COHESION!



ACCEPT A  
DEGREE OF  
SOCIAL  
INTERVENTION!



THE FIRST STEP TO HARMONY  
IS TO **UNDERSTAND!**

LASTLY,

**NEVER** WEAPONISE  
RELIGION OR RACE!

MR EDWIN TONG  
MINISTER for LAW  
and SECOND  
MINISTER for  
HOME AFFAIRS



IT TAKES  
**HARD**  
WORK!

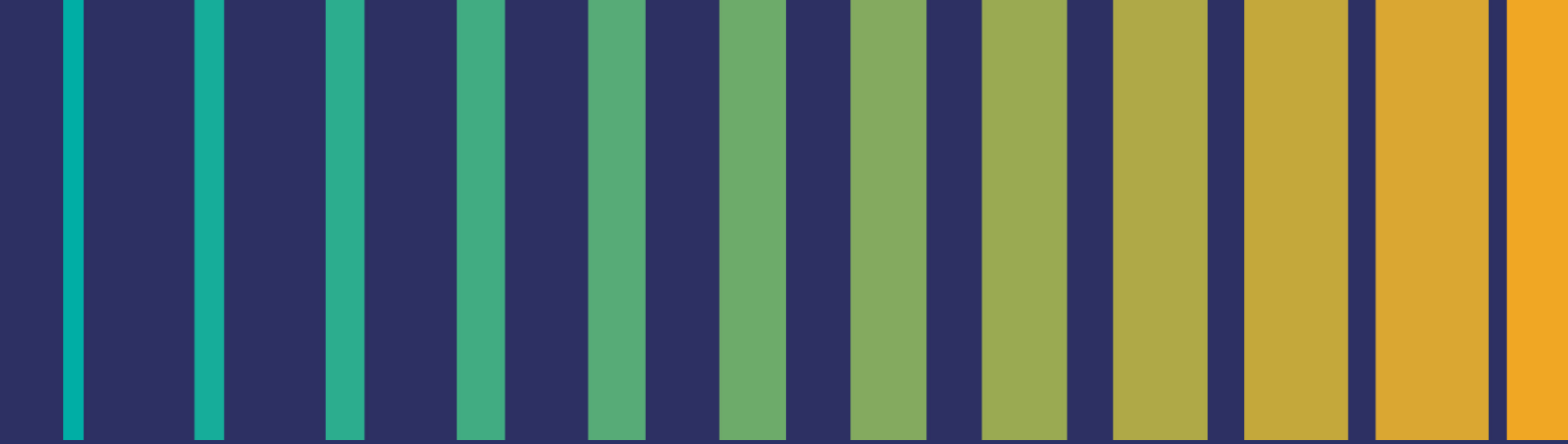
COHESION &  
**HARMONY**

- ✦ NOT ABSTRACT
- ✦ FORGED by LISTENING
- ✦ REQUIRES INTENTIONALITY to FOSTER

OPEN YOUR HEART...  
BUILD HOPES WITH  
PEOPLE DIFFERENT  
THAN YOU!







For more information on the International Conference on Cohesive  
Societies, please visit [www.iccs.sg](http://www.iccs.sg).

For enquiries, please contact the ICCS Secretariat at  
[iccs-mail@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:iccs-mail@ntu.edu.sg)



