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Towards ICCS 2022

Cohesion as a Choice: Regardless of Faith and Identity

By Jolene Jerard

SYNOPSIS

Social cohesion is a work in progress. Societies can choose to achieve greater levels of social cohesion by forging greater inclusivity. Two things can break this: Exclusivist ideas and the imposition of perceived group superiority.

COMMENTARY

SINGAPORE COMMEMORATES its 56 years of independence in 2021. As much as it is a time for celebration of strengths amidst the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also a time for reflection of the human spirit and to deliberate on the vision and aspiration for Singapore for the years ahead.

President Halimah Yacob mooted the idea of the inaugural [International Conference on Cohesive Societies \(ICCS\)](#), convened in Singapore in June 2019. This timely Conference opened doors for inclusive thought-provoking conversations on critical issues of faith, identity and cohesion.

A State of Being versus A State of Doing

Countries aspire towards the broad ideal of cohesive societies. Cohesion is often reflected as a sense of solidarity and togetherness amongst members of the community.

Social cohesion, an important facet of community resilience, is an ongoing process where communities collectively embrace a sense of belonging, advance the values of

the community and guard against occurrences that may tear the fabric of community relations.

More than 'a state of being' where communities arrive at the proverbial destination of cohesion, it can be perceived as 'a state of doing'. This is often a long-drawn consistent work in progress. It is a process guided by a search for ways through which the community can continuously position itself to sustain and enhance levels of social cohesion. While it is no mean feat, on a positive note, most societies are not starting at a zero baseline of social cohesion.

Studies have shown why [social cohesiveness is integral](#). Socially cohesive societies are better poised for stability, growth and a general sense of satisfaction and trust in both inter-community and intra-community relations. It provides the scaffolding for a harmonious society.

Finding Pathways to Higher Levels of Social Cohesion

Recognising its importance, future-focused thinking, which combines scenario planning and decision analysis, will guide the process towards the desired outcome.

Instances of [casual racism and micro-aggression](#) in society, point to the critical need for reflection on finding pathways for working together towards higher levels of social cohesion.

It calls for honest, open and engaging conversations, reciprocity of respect and the creation of common space anchored on shared values. This ought to be done in a spirit of finding solutions while refraining from missteps of the past by avoiding the oft-mentioned "difficult and uncomfortable discussions".

As communities develop, the 'toolkits' that have been used to educate on notions of social cohesion will also need to evolve. Discussions on social cohesion today will need to account for the ebbs and flows of concepts of faith and identity in modernity.

Regardless of Faith and Identity

Faith and identity are familiar and potent forces. They often channel an almost primordial reaction amongst groups to enact change for the sake of the greater good. History has constantly shown how these forces can both unite and divide.

Inclusivity is the inevitable spearhead of efforts to foster social cohesion. In so doing, the first step will be the expansion of the parameters of the terminology. To broaden and open the avenues for discussion, unspoken assumptions on societal norms may need to be re-evaluated.

The [Singapore Census 2020](#) showed that 20 per cent of Singapore residents had no religious affiliation. Moving forward, discussions need to be expanded across the spectrum to include those without any religious affiliation with a view to furthering the goals of social cohesion. Singapore's economic success can lull pockets of the community into a sense of complacency. The absence of major disruption to society may well hide cracks and fissures.

In attempting to identify shared values of social cohesiveness, a fundamental challenge may arise from groups that do not subscribe to the general mores and culture of cohesion — the so-called out-group. This refers to a group or community that an individual does not identify with and will perceive them as an outlier.

Cohesion is A Choice

While diversity in communities need not divide, the art of cohesion is borne out of a conscious choice. There is strength in diversity albeit not an inevitable outcome. The art lies in manifesting this strength in diversity to harness, nurture and to sustain cohesion.

Honouring the legacy of our forefathers, cohesion is a choice; it embodies at its crux a commitment to common values. It is one where all sectors of the community have a part to play. In multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-cultural Singapore, the strength in diversity is seen in the art of progressing from tolerance to acceptance of the other.

On a spectrum, tolerance is the lowest threshold of harmony. Acceptance is the higher ideal. It is a constant quest to climb the metaphorical ladder while helping those around to achieve a common vision of the desired future.

The length of common and shared history does not instinctively make for a more socially cohesive community. The best possible outcome can be achieved when members of the community set up the necessary infrastructures to ensure that it can maximise the outcome of achieving a cohesive society.

To achieve the desired cohesive future, the current generation of youth will also need to step up and play a part in all sectors of the community. The scale of success is dependent on choice. A choice the individual members of the community makes towards the greater goal of an inclusive and cohesive society.

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