ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary

Identities and Inclusiveness: Rethinking Social Cohesion

By Yasmine Wong

SYNOPSIS

Identity politics has made salient the link between identities and social cohesion. Real solutions can emerge when a multi-pronged approach is taken to provide diverse communities with equal access, due recognition, and the opportunity to participate in creating a shared vision of inclusiveness and justice.

COMMENTARY

The International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) 2022 was organised amid unprecedented times. The event is a testament to various societies' commitment to social cohesion at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably failed to rally humanity against a common threat.

In Singapore, ICCS 2022 stands against the backdrop of evolution in the way society engages with topics like identity and discrimination in its endeavours towards more equitable understanding of the grievances of the various identities that exist within the small city state. In seeking to overcome fissures along diverse identity lines, it is essential to relook at the relationship between identity and the forging of inclusive social cohesion.

Maintaining Balance

At ICCS 2022, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong spoke of the country's approach to social cohesion as a "deliberate and consistent effort to understand one another, to accommodate one another, and to flourish together."

Central to this culture of accommodation is the delicate balance of interests amongst Singapore's diverse communities built on consensus and compromise.

Contact between different communities in any diverse society is cardinal. Yet, when different cultures, ideas, and beliefs congregate, there are bound to be disagreements. The challenge thus remains for societies in a globalised age to ensure that disagreement does not escalate to dissension. This is especially pressing in an age of observed pluralisation and polarisation of, and along, identity lines.

[Katherine Marshall](#), senior fellow at Georgetown University, told the ICCS 2022 audience that social mapping today is no longer a two-dimensional affair due to intersectionality. In the context of Singapore, [class is fast becoming the most pronounced faultline](#), emerging amid traditional issues of race and religious harmony. Around the world, societies are also increasingly divided on issues surrounding gender and sexuality.

In contemporary times, identity politics has made clear the link between identities and social cohesion. It presents both challenges and opportunities to establish more inclusive practices of social cohesion. A nuanced understanding of how identities feature in the lived experiences of individuals in a society, and the expectations of different groups vis-à-vis their identities is required to formulate appropriate policies.

Receiving Less and Feeling Unrecognised

Identity is intrinsically tied to access. The unequal distribution of resources across communities deepens divides along identity lines between the haves and have-nots. This presents challenges to social cohesion as a sense of unfairness is foundational to the escalation of violence. Inter-group strife is more likely when groups feel disadvantaged vis-à-vis other groups and when they feel that they have [no access to the good life and means for peaceful expression of their grievances](#).

The rise of Hindu nationalism in India has exacerbated the sense of vulnerability among its Muslim citizens. Despite constitutional protection, systemic prejudice is perceived as being legitimized in more domestic arenas. It has been found that [1 in 4 Indians faced discrimination while accessing health services](#) due to their caste and religion, and, as of late, Muslim students donning the *hijab* are being [shut out of schools](#).

In the United States of America, [racial disparities in policing and police violence](#) are sustained by systemic exclusion and bias against people of colour, revealing discrepancies in access to safety and justice. The desperation felt by these communities amid racially differentiated surveillance has resulted in movements like *Black Lives Matter* and protests like those that trailed the death of George Floyd.

Countering Misrecognition

However, more equitable access and the redistribution of resources across identity groups in a society is an insufficient solution. Individuals and groups are [affected when encountering demeaning representations](#) of themselves, a concept that academic [Nancy Fraser](#) develops through her understanding of misrecognition. She explains

that misrecognition is a form of institutionalised subordination, where individuals are categorised in laws and policies as less-than-full members of society. As such, receiving due recognition is a vital human need. Fraser argues that a socially just outcome requires not just redistribution, but also recognition.

The misrecognition of the Muslim community in the United Kingdom sheds light on this phenomenon. The [portrayal of the Muslim community as a "suspect community"](#) for state securitisation attempts has contributed to the misrecognition of the community. This is reflected in state policies and has contributed to the proliferation of anti-Muslim sentiments amongst the population, worsening inter-group relations.

As such, there ought to be a style of social cohesion that is cognisant of needs and requirements of diverse communities vis-à-vis their identities.

Building Just and Fair Societies

The fact that social cohesion is a continual [work in progress](#) is a recurring piece of wisdom at ICCS 2022. Balancing between different needs of diverse groups requires understanding and effort. This delicate balance endeavours to achieve a state of fairness – the building of a just and fair society, where, as Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong affirms, every community has the space to live their lives freely.

This is no easy task. As many in ICCS 2022 have stated, social cohesion is an ongoing journey, one that is fraught with difficult conversations. An example of such a conversation in Singapore is the recent announcement of the [repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code](#) which criminalises sex between men, and the [constitutionalisation of marriage](#) to maintain Singapore's "current family-centric approach, and the prevailing norms and values of Singapore society." The heart of the matter is in establishing a state of fairness, understood as the need to represent the middle ground and "reconcile and accommodate both the traditional mores of our society, and the aspiration of gay Singaporeans to be respected and accepted" in official discourse. This has prompted a plethora of reactions from celebration to dissatisfaction.

Further negotiations on these issues are to be expected in the future, and for this, strong social ties and trust are required to weather debate and negotiations. There is also a need to recognise that striving for more inclusive social cohesion that accommodates the needs of more identity groups does not equate to the majority being lesser off, and, as Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong remarked, not every compromise should be construed as injustice.

Working with Present Realities

Today, social media places increasing pressure on societies to confront their own inequalities and injustices, and to work towards more equitable redistribution of resources, and better recognition of the minorities.

In Singapore, the increase in [racist incidents](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic took place against a [proliferation of conversations on race and racism online](#). The younger generation of Singaporeans has taken to online spaces to talk about the discrimination they faced due to their identities. These conversations bring to the fore new notions of

justice that differ from established concepts of fairness that may serve to benefit one group over another.

Justice in this context means addressing both political and socioeconomic inequalities, and the correction of deeply rooted biases and prejudices. They point to a necessity in urgently managing shifting perceptions among different identity groups to achieve greater inclusiveness and social cohesion.

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