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ACCEPTING DIFFERENCES FOR AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

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Everyone has a role in upholding values and having tough conversations to build inclusion

When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was created in 1967, two points stood out at the top of the list of aims and purposes for the grouping: “To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region” and to “promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region”.

This focus on economic and security issues reflect the impetus for ASEAN’s creation – the *Konfrontasi* between Indonesia and Malaysia between 1963 and 1966 that had left hundreds dead and injured. Since then, the region has prospered thanks in no small part to what ASEAN represented – a forum for co-operation and, if necessary, conflict resolution.

But as Southeast Asian nations developed economically, rising inequality has led to increasing segments of populations that are marginalised, and with it calls to build more inclusive societies.

“We see that the context of inclusivity may be different from country to country,” explains **Belinda Tanoto** of the Tanoto Foundation. “In Singapore it may mean something else, but in Indonesia

we have children who don't have access to clean water, basic healthcare, and basic quality education.

"We need more and better teachers [but] the context of inclusivity is so broad, it could be the poor, it could be about women, and it could be about the disabled people. How do we change our mindsets and our attitude towards those different groups of part of society?"

AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Tanoto made those remarks at a recent panel discussion "Building a More Inclusive Society" for Singapore-based station Channel NewsAsia's Perspectives programme where she elaborated on how individual countries could realise the vision of inclusive growth spelt out in [Pillar 3 of the ASEAN Economic Community \(AEC\) Blueprint](#).

"I think there are a couple of things governments can do," Tanoto elaborates. "Make the right policy choices, making sure that inclusivity is not an afterthought, that you embed it in your policy as you think about providing a robust environment for growth.

"But beyond that, just waiting for the government do the right thing is the easy way out. I think we should really also think about what can the private sector or private citizens can do to promote inclusive growth."

Thinking about inclusivity, however, should not start with economics. Fellow panelist **Melissa Kwee**, CEO of Singapore's National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, points out the ambivalence of parents who express reservations about seating their child with a special-needs classmate, but at the same time claiming the importance of inclusivity in society.

"It's the assumption that perhaps my child's academic progress will be compromised by having to work with other people who are learning in a different way or at a different pace," she explains. "But then reframing the issue to say, 'Well, actually you know in life maybe your life skills are actually more important than just a narrow set of academic indicators.

"I think ultimately my hope or my dream is to get to a place where parents see and they want to send their kids to inclusive kindergartens because they say [inclusivity] is really important. It's about who we are as a society and it's about respecting the different people that come together to make up who we are as a society. So that's again another level or another shift in perspective."

Chia Yong Yong, President of Singapore's Society of the Physically Disabled (SPD), was diagnosed with peroneal muscular dystrophy at 15 and moves around on a motorised wheelchair. She agrees that parents need to commit to showing that "academic grades are not going to be number one, but values [will be]" in order to build inclusivity in society.

"It's the problem with acceptance isn't it?" she asks rhetorically. "When we have a child with a special need or disability, here right in front of us, we look at that as an abnormality, and then we go into that 'Oh I don't know how to cope with it' mentality.

"I believe, fundamentally, the only way that we're going to change things is by building relationships with people who are different. If we love people, if we understand that we have the same hopes, fears, dreams, challenges, we will make space [for them]."

“LEARN TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS”

Lily Kong, Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences, SMU, paints the ideal inclusive society as one where people “are blind to differences” but concedes it is an utopian ideal.

“Everybody as human beings will have some kind of prejudice,” she says. “It’s a question of how we manage that prejudice, how we educate against it.

“I think at the end of the day it’s about our value system. It’s about being able to climb into other people’s shoes. One of my favorite books in literature at school was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And I remember always Atticus Finch saying, ‘What really matters is your ability to climb into somebody else’s shoes and walk around in them’.

“And if you are able to just do that, you’ll understand what it means to be the person of a different ability, a different class, a different race, a different religion, a different gender. And then it comes naturally after that.”

While working towards an ultimately unachievable utopian goal – and pushing the inclusivity envelope in the process – Kwee points out the flip side of the coin: living with differences.

“You know we need to sort of learn skills of conflict management and learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. You may not come to a point of reconciliation where you have a fundamental acceptance of one another’s views. So be it.

“But how do we do that in a way that still maintains good relations that we all can still function in society? If we can learn to have difficult conversations, if we can learn to manage conflict and still respect each other at the end of the day, that’s what we should be aiming towards.”

Belinda Tanoto, Melissa Kwee, Chia Yong Yong and Lily Kong were part of a discussion panel, “Building a More Inclusive Society” for the SMU-Channel NewsAsia programme Perspectives that was recorded at the Singapore Management University School of Law.

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