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Citation

CHAN, David. 2014. "Five Cs to Manage Integration." *Sunday Times*, June 16, A42.

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The Sunday Times, 16 Jun 2012 (Page A42) Commentary

Five Cs to manage integration

This is the second part of an article on integration. Part 1 yesterday identified challenges to cohesion. Today's article looks at integration efforts and possible policy responses.

By DAVID CHAN FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

A GOVERNMENT White Paper on population challenges is due at the end of this year. Its quality will depend on whether it captures the concerns of Singaporeans and the challenges we face. This is more likely if the public discussion is genuine and constructive.

For a constructive discussion on integration, I propose a framework focusing on the societal goals we would agree on and that should drive the agenda.

These are: citizen well-being and quality of life; opportunity for all Singaporeans; a compassionate and inclusive society; rootedness and commitment to Singapore; and an adaptive and resilient society. The integration issues can be framed in terms of factors that influence the achievement of these societal goals.

In Part 1 yesterday, I discussed the threats to cohesion created by large numbers of foreigners: from crowding, clustering, competition, comparisons and conflict.

Having identified the five Cs challenging cohesion, how do we enhance integration? I suggest we organise and direct our efforts towards integration around another five Cs - citizen-centricity, contributions, community development, communication and crisis management.

Citizen-centricity

SINGAPOREANS need to see that policies primarily serve citizen well-being. They need to actually experience positive outcomes from the policies.

If citizens think that policy intent, content or outcome favours foreigners over Singaporeans, then efforts to integrate are unlikely to succeed as Singaporeans will view them as attempts to benefit foreigners or serve interests other than theirs.

Having citizens at the centre of policies by no means implies that we are inward-looking, exclusive, xenophobic or ignorant of a globalising world. Policies touted as 'pro-Singaporean', when poorly construed and executed, create unrealistic expectations among Singaporeans and can lead to more local-foreigner tensions.

Benefits for foreigners are fine, so long as locals can also see clear and positive effects for citizens. 'Singaporeans first' policies should be construed not as discriminatory practices against foreigners but as policies that foreigners can appreciate. More foreigners would aspire to citizenship if we are citizen-centric.

Policies have to be citizen-centric at formulation, implementation and when revised as needed.

Both Government and people need to recognise that some policies have outlived their usefulness and some are in fact mistaken. Course corrections and U-turns in these policies are not only acceptable but necessary.

Contributions

CONTRIBUTIONS from both locals and foreigners should be recognised and encouraged as they have a positive impact on integration. But repeatedly highlighting and overemphasising the economic contributions of foreigners will lead Singaporeans to feel neglected and undervalued. These negative emotions get magnified when Singaporeans reflect on their own contributions such as national service, or when they encounter foreigners who are less capable than expected and receive more rewards than they should.

Foreigners can be encouraged to contribute beyond the economic, to community work and volunteerism. This fosters goodwill, and helps foreigners understand Singapore better. Positive social relationships between locals and foreigners increase the quality of life and build social capital, which are important for developing a resilient society.

Community development

COMMUNITY development to enhance integration is not about creating a homogenous group. It is neither practical nor necessary to expect foreigners to forgo different cultural characteristics so that they can become 'one of us'. Instead, integration is about strengthening social cohesion due to shared commonalities and complementary diversity.

Community development focuses on developing a sense of belonging and responsibility to one's community. Such efforts can develop along pathways such as increasing cultural awareness, respecting local norms, developing a sense of place and belonging in a neighbourhood, and building a community of practice or activists who share a common cause.

Communication

COMMUNICATION is critical for policy. Over the past year, the quantity of public engagement exercises has increased significantly while the quality is harder to assess. Effective communication is also critical for integration.

A powerful feature of communication is the use of labels to categorise, describe and summarise people's attitudes and their expressions.

Take for example the use of the label 'anti-foreigner' to describe what Singaporeans should not be and the sentiments that they should not possess or exhibit. If the label refers to a stereotypical, irrational and unjustified strong opposition towards foreigners, then most Singaporeans are certainly not anti-foreigner.

If we fail to acknowledge their concerns and the issues underlying their angst, then using labels such as 'anti-foreigner' and 'xenophobic' may actually contribute to producing such sentiments in more Singaporeans. We need fairer descriptions of foreigners, but also fairer descriptions of Singaporeans.

Communication on integration issues, especially in management of adverse cases, should be proactive, prompt and practical, not patronising, preachy or provocative.

The style and not just substance of communication affects whether Singaporeans view the communicator as principled and adaptive, or proud and arrogant. The former type of communicator, but not the latter, will be effective in explaining, persuading, motivating and influencing people.

Communication needs to first address Singaporeans' belief that some policies fail citizens and their feelings that citizens are unfairly treated. Failing to do so will reinforce the perception that policymakers are not connected to the ground and do not care.

Crisis management

WE UNDERSTAND the need for effective crisis management response to racial incidents, or to security incidents. The same level of attention is needed for crisis management in incidents involving local-foreigner conflict.

This involves effective planning, prevention, education, monitoring and handling of incidents. We need to learn from incidents to improve risk and crisis management and develop resilience and adaptability.

When managing negative incidents or conflicts that originate or intensify in social media, enforcement may be necessary but perhaps only in the highly defamatory or clearly seditious cases that need to be responded to before they deteriorate into serious harm.

For integration to work, pluralistic and holistic approaches to encouraging social responsibility and multiculturalism are needed.

Social media makes it easier to propagate negative stereotypes of specific groups of foreigners. But social media is also a potentially effective medium for frank and tactful discussion of sensitive issues.

Masking true concerns may give a false and temporary sense of security in managing an incident. Left unaddressed, the fundamental sensitive issues could eventually surface and manifest themselves as socio-political crises with heavy costs and that cause lasting damage to our society.

The factors outlined in the framework are not exhaustive but they serve as useful starting points for further constructive discussions.

To be constructive also involves keeping an open mind to understand what Singaporeans are saying - and not saying - about foreigners and immigrants.

Foreigners are attracted to Singapore. They come here to work and play, and some to build a home. It takes time for foreigners and new citizens to develop affection and a sense of belonging in Singapore.

We need to invest more in integration. We cannot rush to take in more foreigners hoping that tensions will naturally ease over time. We need a critical mass, and we need to guard against making a critical mess.

3Ps to policymaking

WHEN managing integration, we should consider three Ps at the strategic level of policy formulation and implementation - purpose, priorities and perceptions.

What is the strategic purpose of a policy? In addressing issues of a shrinking workforce and a potentially shrinking economy compounded by an increasingly larger elderly population to support, we need foreigners and immigration.

We also need to raise productivity in work and in fertility. However, the strategic purpose of addressing these economic concerns should be for achieving societal goals and the type of society we want as a country.

Next, what are our priorities in policy trade-off situations? When the strategic purpose is explicit, we have a more principled approach towards managing trade-offs. There are real trade-offs in many situations but not all policy decisions need to be a zero-sum game. Also, trade-off situations are increasingly complex. The difficult value judgments of what constitute short-term concerns and long-term interests, and the consequential policy decisions, need to involve both people and Government.

Clarifying priorities is also important in managing inflows of foreigners. We should tighten and calibrate the inflow but also give higher priority to quality. The potential to integrate should not be based on ethnicity per se. The violation of acceptable behaviours is a critical factor influencing integration.

Finally, strategic approaches to policy must address people's perceptions because they influence how people think, feel and behave. This is not to say policymakers should be populist, but it does not mean you need to be unpopular. And never dismiss or trivialise the ongoing emotions over population and integration. The emotions need to be understood and addressed sensitively and holistically. It is a grave mistake to treat emotional responses as short-term obstacles to be cleared for long-term goals related to macro issues such as age-dependency ratios or economic and productivity growth.

The ongoing concerns involving emotions are fundamental and part of the well-being issues relevant to both current and future interests of people and society.

Economic growth and age-dependency ratios are important, but they are means en route to the societal end goals. If we do well in these goals, they contribute positively to economic growth and ageing issues and so we get a positive spiral, which broadens and builds.

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