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What does a highly liveable Singapore mean?

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What does a highly liveable Singapore mean?

Beware of sweeping generalisations. Instead, look at the expectations, evaluations and experiences of both locals and foreigners.

David Chan

For The Straits Times

Is Singapore a highly liveable place? Some say yes, pointing to its low crime rate, good infrastructure and efficient public services. Others cite findings from global surveys consistently showing that Singapore ranks high in liveability among cities in the world.

For example, in the latest Mercer Quality of Living Survey – in which Vienna ranked top in overall liveability – Singapore was ranked 25th in the list of more than 450 cities surveyed worldwide, and top among the cities in Asia. The overall liveability was based on evaluations on 39 factors grouped into 10 broad categories such as education, housing and health.

But national attitudinal surveys, as well as informal conversations with people from different walks of life, yield a more complex picture. For the majority, the honest answer is likely to be "it depends", when they are asked if Singapore is a highly liveable place.

Liveability varies depending on who the question is put to, but it also depends on what dimensions are referred to. Which aspects of life and living are we talking about? Will making Singapore more liveable in one aspect make it less liveable in another? Does liveability for one segment of the population increase at the expense of another?

The same group of people, and even the same individual, can have mixed thoughts and emotions about how liveable they find a place to be – Singapore can be highly liveable for some things but not for others.

So, an overall score or a general claim summarising Singapore's liveability will not adequately represent people's actual lived experiences, nor capture the ambivalence they experience. That is why Singapore's position on global surveys on liveability can evoke strong reactions regardless of what, and how much or how little, we know about other cities in the list.

Depending on which specific variables we focus on and what metrics we use, the conclusion on Singapore's liveability and what it means for policymaking can be very different.

All these are related to a more basic point. We tend to think about liveability in terms of objective conditions in the living environment, but fundamentally it is about people's expectations, evaluations and experiences as they interact with their physical, cultural, social and political environments.

A people-centric approach

Many indicators have been used to measure liveability. There are economic indexes such as gross domestic product per capita, and human development indexes such as life expectancy and education levels. Then there are conventional metrics of cost of living and standard of living such as purchasing power, crime rates as well as healthcare, many of which are assessed in global surveys on liveability.

These traditional indicators are relevant to both residents and expatriates when there is a need to make comparisons across cities, especially for human resource functions in expatriate assignments. But they often are not good measures of the actual well-being and quality of life experienced by the people.

A truly people-centric approach to liveability should directly examine and empathise with people's expectations, evaluations and experiences because these influence how people think, feel and act, which in turn influence their lives and living in Singapore, and also the relationships between individuals, between groups, and between people and the Government.

Improving people's lives and living in Singapore is fundamental for our urban planners and national leaders. This is clear to those well informed of the history and current focus of urban planning and public policies. But as we look to the future, it is important to have more clarity on what it means to effectively adopt and apply a people-centric approach to liveability.

What really matters

I suggest we focus on three important issues.

GROUPS ARE DIFFERENT

First, ensure that the liveability factors adequately capture the experiences of various segments of the population. We need to be scientific in our analyses and interpretation of findings.

For example, policy deliberations and public discourse on attitudinal survey findings have focused almost exclusively on the comparison of mean scores between groups classified by race, income or some other demographic. We compare group means, and we worry about how this group feels in comparison with that group, concluding that one group finds Singapore less liveable.

But some important differences between groups are unrelated to the group mean scores. Two groups can have the same group mean score but how individual scores vary within each group can be very different. It is the pattern of variation within a group that provides information on the dynamics among the individuals in the group.

Consider this hypothetical case of scores on a five-point rating scale measuring an attitude. Individuals within Group A are in high agreement (almost all gave a rating of 1), individuals within Group B are in high disagreement (about equal numbers gave each of the five possible ratings), and individuals within Group C are in a polarised split (about one half of the group gave a rating of 1 and the other half gave a rating of 5). These three groups are clearly different in important ways on this attitude, even though they all yield the same group mean score of 3.

If we fail to consider this, we will miss important group differences. It will result in misleading inferences from the data. Group means are relevant and can be useful, but we need to stop the fixation on comparing only group means.

ATTITUDES CAN CHANGE

Second, anticipate how needs and wants may change over time and across demographic groups.

This is especially relevant when using surveys to gather public sentiment for town planning. Do not simply take the needs and wants reported in these surveys as given. Instead, consider how they may change, the different demographics, and how environmental change can actually influence people's expectations.

The fact that one's attitudes can change over time obviously means we must not take people's positive liveability ratings for granted, since they may decline in the future. But more important, changes over time matter because they are directly associated with one's evaluations and experiences, which in turn influence attitudes and actions.

What people are asking themselves is: "In the past few years, what was my experience and quality of life, and what is it now?" It is about comparing our current situation with our own recent past, not the distant past as determined by someone else. When there is a negative discrepancy between now and our recent past, we feel disappointed or angry. This will be the case even if our current state is reasonably well in absolute terms.

So, international rankings on liveability and comparisons of cities can be useful for benchmarking and learning purposes. But we must not over-rely on them to drive public policies and urban planning. Inter-city comparisons are not irrelevant, but often it is the intra-city and intra-individual changes over time that matter more, or most.

SINGAPORE IS BOTH CITY AND COUNTRY

Third, understand what it really means for Singapore to be both a global city and a cohesive country. The question is how to ensure that these two goals complement, rather than contradict, each other.

Take the need for foreigners versus the need to maintain a strong Singaporean core, and the manifestations in local-foreigner relations. How can we develop environments and ways of life that will enable more emotional attachment and rootedness to the country, for both citizens and non-citizens?

For several years, I have been advocating what I call "home-in-community" as a building block of a liveable Singapore society. This concept will facilitate liveability discussions on issues such as commitment, social cohesion and local-foreigner relations.

The unifying concept of home-in-community applies to all people in Singapore. For example, we should enhance integration and community development through social interaction, mutual help and volunteerism.

In this way, Singaporeans can feel a strong sense of belonging, national identity and rootedness. Singapore permanent residents can see the community as their current second home, with the potential and prospect of making Singapore their first home by becoming citizens. Non-resident foreigners can see the community as a good transient home-away-from-home – attractive to work and play in, but also worthy enough to contribute to.

This sense of home-in-community takes time to develop, but is certainly achievable. What we need is to understand how volunteerism, social interactions, local-foreigner relations and commitment can be integrated in natural settings.

For example, foreigners may volunteer for a cause they are passionate about, but they may also give back to the Singapore community out of a sense of moral obligation and gratitude for what they have benefited from. One way to facilitate this is to create opportunities for locals and foreigners to interact in the same community, where foreigners can contribute because they feel they ought to or want to, not because they need to.

By building social relationships between locals and foreigners through meaningful personal interactions within a mixed community, foreigners are likely to develop personal attachments and positive experiences that lead to an emotional commitment to Singapore.

It also helps local-foreigner relations and social cohesion. The positive interactions and personal contributions by all will help both Singaporeans and foreigners appreciate what they have in common, understand how their different backgrounds can complement one another, and see one another as individuals rather than as a member of the outgroup.

The emphasis on home-in-community will help us examine liveability from both personal and collective perspectives. Public discussions and policy deliberations on liveability will be more meaningful and constructive because they are more contextualised and inclusive.

Home-in-community involves people's social interactions, social reciprocity and trust, emotional attachment, and sense of belonging and rootedness to the place.

These are important socio-psychological resources that we can build to enable the individual and the community to solve problems and achieve desired goals. They are also the bases that enhance and sustain liveability.

Liveability in Singapore is more complex than we think. Beware of sweeping generalisations on how liveable this place is, or is not.

But however complicated the concept of liveability and its measurement, we can better understand and enhance liveability in Singapore if we adhere to two basic guiding principles.

The first is that liveability is about people's expectations, evaluations and experiences, and it is their actual lived experiences that matter. The second is that Singapore is a highly liveable place when we are proud to call it home.

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