

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The International Conference on Cohesive Societies

How to Build Cohesive Societies

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

The International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) in Singapore brought together academics, thought leaders, policy makers, youth leaders, and practitioners and pointed towards ways we can build cohesive societies.

COMMENTARY

FROM 19-21 June 2019, the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) held in Singapore explored good practice, strategies, and methods for building cohesive communities. While stressing the need to be respectful of context, some underlying principles were advanced.

These included the need for religious and cultural literacy, to overcome inequalities and injustices in society, to provide compelling narratives, good leadership at all levels, the need for interfaith action, and the importance of including youth and women. But what is a Cohesive Society?

Forging a Cohesive Society: Key Factors

It is often easier to see what is wrong with a society than what makes one strong, cohesive, and stable. Three requirements are needed for a cohesive society. First, trust and respect. We need genuine bonds between people, and the need to see others as humans rather than tools to be utilised.

Second, unity in diversity as every society has diversity and this must be accepted and embraced. Third, resilient identities so that we do not embrace diversity superficially

or only tolerate our neighbours, but build bonds that can resist the tensions of exclusive narratives and the threat of violence.

These requirements are simple and practical things, but must be developed in culturally sensitive ways in each society.

Religious and Cultural Literacy

If we do not know our neighbours, we may find it hard to appreciate their customs. This does not need intensive study. Talking to your neighbour about their faith tradition, or their reasons for not having a faith tradition, can overcome basic misunderstandings. A conversation can go a long way.

Potholes

During people's lives, many events can occur which throw them into the paths to extremism, radicalisation, and militancy. Christian Picciolini, the former Neo-Nazi who now works in rehabilitating others, introduced the much-appreciated phrase "potholes" to describe this.

This can be a sense of inequality, alienation from social and political processes, a lack of connection with parents, or wealth and privilege which isolates us from others. Tackling exclusive narratives and the fractures that break societies means tackling these and other injustices and inequalities.

Narratives, Emotions, Arguments

Lord John Alderdice, the Northern Ireland politician from the House of Lords, gave an important reminder that how we feel is key to how we think. The potholes that build our sense of being humiliated, isolated, or whatever else are hooks that extremists use.

Extremists give people, especially young people, a sense of purpose, a community to belong to, and narratives that help them make sense of their lives. As such, alternative narratives must be better stories.

We cannot simply make cold, rational arguments or tell people they are wrong (however true this is), without also – and often first – telling stories and making them feel the sense of belonging and purpose. The story of inclusion and cohesive societies must be better than the story of exclusion and fractured societies.

Leadership

Showing how we include minorities, understand people, do respectful dialogue, and build cohesion needs leaders who model this. There can be no room for populist demagogues who model discourses of hatred, exclusion, and lack of respect. This poisons the common space.

Moreover, this is leadership at all levels. The grassroots leader who shows respect to her or his neighbour is as important as a politician such as New Zealand's Prime

Minister Jacinda Ardern who responded so well in the wake of the Christchurch terrorist attacks.

The leadership from the political level to the grassroots can also increase effectiveness when it works in tandem. This means leading comes from all these layers: it can never only be top-down.

Interfaith

Around 84% of the world's population is religious, a percentage expected to increase by 2050. Therefore, including religion as part of activities in cohesion is integral. But, in a diverse society, this must be interfaith activities and include interfaith voices. In dialogue, shared service, and community projects, religions can work together in important ways.

Women and Youth

Women are half the population, and young people will take over from the current generations. The ICCS was preceded from 18-19 June by an integrated Young Leaders Programme, whose participants were then delegates through the main ICCS. However, it is not enough simply to run parallel or stand-alone youth projects.

Young people come with a passion to change the world, a desire to help, and a need to be heard. They must, therefore, be part of the mainstream decision-making processes and conversations. Often speakers at the ICCS said that young people must be included, but this cannot simply be well-meaning words without action, which is making the changes to genuinely include young people as more than a token presence.

Again, while every panel at the ICCS included women, more can be done. Often, successful ventures in dialogue, peacebuilding, and cohesion have worked better because they included women. Including only a token woman as a speaker is not enough, and like the youth they must be there as leaders and key players in all aspects of the process, with an aim for gender equity in representation.

Moving Forward

While many principles of cohesive societies are relatively simple, to put them into practice and to practise them well is difficult and arduous. Barriers must be overcome, potholes filled in, and narratives created, recreated, and told many times in different ways to various audiences.

Nevertheless, learning from global best practice, linking worldwide networks of practitioners, thinkers, and policy makers, and taking inspiration from the work and words of others, means that we can after the ICCS all do better in our own fields.

The event has had local, regional, and global reverberations. While, on its own, it cannot solve every problem, Singapore has hosted a potentially landmark event in the story of building cohesive societies.

Paul Hedges PhD is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies for the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series on the International Conference on Cohesive Societies in Singapore on 19-21 June 2019 which was organised by RSIS and supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg