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After the ICCS

Building Social Cohesion: Committing to a Participatory Approach

By Stephanie Neubronner

SYNOPSIS

While discussing ways to build social cohesion is important, how do we move beyond such conversations and motivate everyday individuals to take action?

COMMENTARY

DEPUTY PRIME Minister Heng Swee Keat's closing remarks at the recently concluded International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) stressed the importance of promoting a "democracy of deeds" in Singapore. In his keynote speech, Jordan's King Abdullah II also emphasised the need to "gather our forces" and "commit for the long term".

President Halimah Yacob highlighted these complementary messages as well. In her opening address, she stressed the importance of individuals, not just governments, embracing diversity and nurturing social unity. Still, ensuring everyday individuals recognise the important role they play in upholding social cohesion, and encouraging commitment to practices that promote common ground is an ongoing challenge.

The Role of the Individual

The ICCS facilitated many discussions and encouraged mutual learning and capacity building amongst delegates. Pulling resources, building trust, strong leadership and commitment to embracing differences were highlighted as key elements in finding common ground. Additionally, youth engagement was stressed as being fundamental to encouraging greater concern for civic mindedness.

These factors have, however, been emphasised before. While the ICCS was successful in underscoring the need to have on-going conversations on difficult and uncomfortable topics surrounding social cohesion, what is more pertinent is the establishment of a narrative that encourages active participation from all levels of society.

The role of the individual is vital to ensuring common spaces continue to be forged. Individuals need to see the relevance of embracing diversity and maintaining harmony to their own lives before ownership and the call to action can be inspired. Otherwise, discussions will always seem to be beyond everyday individuals, and governments, academics, religious leaders and activists will be left to tackle such issues themselves. Real cooperation and the pulling of resources will then be difficult to achieve.

Active Participation

To inspire such engagement, conversations and the exchange of ideas need to inspire action at the grassroots level. Ensuring a trickle-down effect – one that motivates individuals on the ground to leverage on the platforms and resources available so that real issues can be addressed, is thus, essential.

A participatory approach that is committed to the long term is crucial to the building of stronger common bonds, as well as the formation of more inclusive identities. Reaching out to everyday individuals, getting them involved in community activities and allowing them opportunities to interact with neighbours and colleagues of different ethnicities and religions is a start, but such activities cannot come across as heavy handed or forced.

Awareness and concern for such issues need to be inculcated first. Doing so will encourage individual involvement, which will in turn create the connections and meaning necessary to ignite passions as well as the desire to take ownership.

Investing in inter-faith education and developing social relations will promote compassion and greater understanding, further breaking down boundaries. Still, government and community partnership in boosting awareness and the motivation to engage is important. With more support for ground-up initiatives, it will be easier for individuals and groups to get assistance, thus inspiring more innovative approaches to building cohesion.

Harnessing the Power of Social Media

Mobilising audiences via social media has been very effective. The Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street campaigns are just two instances where the influence of social media have been utilised to spread ideas. At the other end of the spectrum, online self-radicalisation is another example of how divisive ideologies that are spread online can take root and result in disastrous consequences.

With the challenge of our age being that of digital disruption, it is imperative that we build capacity, take ownership and ensure cohesion is championed particularly in the online realm. Inspiring positive connections and emotions is one way to encourage everyday individuals to open up and contribute to discussions.

The Public Utilities Board's (PUB) heartwarming Hari Raya video is indicative of Singaporeans' desire to join conversations they associate with. The short film that went viral was based on a Malay proverb and had the poignant message of kinship, family and forgiveness.

Released on PUB's Facebook and YouTube platforms, reactions to the video were overwhelmingly positive, and netizens repeatedly asked for a sequel to be produced. Having touched the hearts of Singaporeans, the PUB decided to invite viewers to suggest an "appropriate conclusion" for the video. Such public engagement through social media, encouraging co-creation, is one way societies can utilise to develop common spaces and ensure no one is left out of the conversation.

Encouraging Innovation and Flexibility

Apps bringing faith to the individual and augmented realities have dramatically altered the practice of religion. Shock factors attracting attention online, the threat of deep fakes, fake news, echo chambers, and online experiences removing physical interaction, have also resulted in social isolation and a greater propensity for misinformation to perpetuate.

Allowing detachment and social distancing increases misunderstandings, which can cause greater distrust between communities and the heightening of social fault lines. As such, relevant and constructive narratives need to be proliferated so that the right messages and thoughtfulness can be promoted.

Relevance and flexibility of approach in engaging audiences is therefore essential to encouraging individuals, not just youth, to be motivated to participate in conversations and use digital platforms in responsible ways.

Initiatives such as "Ask Me Anything", a community-led series aimed at encouraging deep and honest interfaith discourse in Singapore, the play *Without Reason*, and the Channel NewsAsia documentary, "Regardless of Religion" that was made in collaboration with OnePeople.sg, are promising ways that can be further developed to create spaces for such engagement.

Need for New Ways in Understanding Differences

However, while education and the promotion of more positive ideas of people of other faiths can be useful, without shared experiences and a common identity individuals can rely on, building meaningful common spaces forged on emotions and experiences will become even more challenging.

The need to encourage integration, not assimilation, and the acceptance of differences will prove critical to ensuring harmony going forward. Sustaining unity despite diversity and withstanding forces that aim to divide society is necessary in a globalised world that embraces cosmopolitanism and the constant movement of people across borders.

With youth increasingly indicating that traditional categories are not important, new ways of understanding identities and differences are essential if individuals are to feel like they have a stake in building cohesive societies for the future.

Inclusiveness as an Intrinsic Mindset

It is without doubt that the energy and innovation youths possess should be harnessed to drive change. Youths having grown up surrounded by social media also implies greater comfort levels and adaptive capacity when dealing with rapid technological change.

Yet, the participation of all levels of society, not only youths, is necessary if cohesion is to be realised. Additionally, youths need to be included in strategies aimed at inculcating inclusiveness now. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that because youths are technologically savvy, they do not need to learn how to use social media appropriately.

Instead of focusing only on specific segments of the population, all levels of society need to rally together and tackle the issues at hand. Individuals need to want to contribute and engage in difficult topics like that of religious diversity.

And, to ensure social cohesion continues to be practised, inclusiveness needs to be encouraged within individual spheres of influence as an intrinsic mindset. How we adapt and respond to future challenges, such as the changing make up of society, will depend significantly on how we choose to forge community ties now.

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