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Towards ICCS 2022

Inside ICCS: Building on Success from 2019 to 2022

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Delegates and speakers almost universally welcomed ICCS 2019. While pulling together an international event of this scale is never easy for the organisers, there were still ways that ICCS 2022 could be improved from its predecessor. Developing the youth track, coping with Covid-19, and further thinking about technology and IT platforms have all been key issues, tying continuity with change and innovation.

COMMENTARY

Responses from delegates and speakers at [ICCS 2019](#) suggested that it found a [sweet spot for discussions](#) about what would be considered sensitive if not taboo in other contexts. But, as with anything, there is always room for improvement. Attendees wanted a longer conference with more time to network and forge ties. As such, [ICCS 2022](#) will run over a longer period and include networking time.

The conference will be held across three days with [3 plenaries, 9 breakouts, and a number of special or keynote addresses](#), with over 40 figures contributing to the discourse. Delegates will again get to share local, regional, and global insights on [Faith, Identity, and Cohesion](#), which remain ICCS' motif themes. This time, questions around technology, especially post-Covid, will be more central, and the Young Leaders Programme (YLP) will be more centrally woven into the conference. The event will balance both continuity and change and innovation. Yet, beyond the number of themes and speakers, it is the quality of conversations, and the practices that result, that matters.

Engaging Youth

In 2019, having a [dedicated platform for young global leaders](#) was considered essential, and this continues to be key in 2022. Importantly, although ICCS is not simply about bringing these figures together every few years, events and networks have continued in the intervening period. While Covid-19 has prevented some physical meetings, connections have continued online.

Leading global experts in dialogue training, using social media for social cohesion, and interreligious dialogue, will engage the YLP participants throughout the conference, with special events directed for them taking place. Old connections will be renewed, and new friends made.

An Engaged Conference

One thing that ICCS should not be is to simply be a talking shop. It is easy enough to pull together the big-name speakers from the international circuit who have turned up and done their piece at events across the globe. It looks glossy and impressive. But what happens afterwards?

As noted about the YLP, ICCS seeks continuity, and some of the 2019 ICCS speakers were not just showcased in the main event, but they also spoke at grassroots events around Singapore in the following days. As such, real connections and skills-building were encouraged in grassroots groups like the Racial and Religious Harmony Circles (at the time known as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles). This will be occurring again.

The breakout sessions seek to bring practitioners and people involved in initiatives in organisations and at the grassroots level to provide practical ideas about best practices and skills building. It is not simply abstract talk, but grounded talk.

There have also been efforts to ensure continued work across communities in Singapore and beyond. Of course, Covid-19 has intervened in the years between 2019 and 2022 making the kind of face-to-face engagement that so often helps promote trust and relationships difficult.

Technology

While issues of technology were briefly discussed in 2019, they have become more prominent in 2022. [Online hate and division](#) have, in many places, been more openly visible during the pandemic as we have often had to rely on virtual platforms to connect. [Fake news, misinformation](#), and conspiracy theories have proliferated. As such, this is directly addressed.

But social media and the online world are not simply about a deterioration of cohesion, for new bonds have been made, and religious communities amongst others have utilised online platforms to stay meaningfully connected and to forge new links. Best practices and success stories will be shared.

Truly International and Diverse

Attendees at ICCS will certainly encounter quite a few new things no matter what their experience levels are. Those who remember 2019, will see one or two familiar names in the [line-up](#), but things have moved around, and an almost entirely new set of speakers await. Moreover, the range of people speaking is diverse. Some have helped negotiate peace deals, some actively do deradicalization work, others lead organisations inspiring and training activists and leaders, and yet others work on social cohesion in social media platforms.

The speakers come not just from Singapore and the region, but from many parts of the globe. Perspectives from other countries in Asia as well as various Western nations are on offer. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Taoists and more will be speaking and taking part, as well as people who profess no religious identity. Academics, policy makers, grassroots activists, youth leaders, and more will rub shoulders and share their expertise, knowledge, and experiences. The breadth is quite stunning.

Further Explorations

Continuity in the broad themes of Faith, Identity, and Cohesion from 2019 to 2022 may belie the fact that many new areas are broached. As noted, technology and social media are now more heavily featured, while a dedicated session discusses how religious tradition continued to build community during the pandemic.

A question not picked up in 2019 was the issue of language groups, especially as this relates to minority groups within societies. Language use can relate to a sense of belonging but may either hinder or assist in bridging any potential divide with a majority group in society.

[RSIS](#) has also initiated the first iteration of a [research project](#) mapping social cohesion across Southeast Asia based on the Bertelsmann Stiftung framework on cohesion, and the results of the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar will be released during ICCS.

These areas barely touch the surface of themes. Moreover, what was clear at ICCS 2019 was that beyond the expertise of panels and speakers, leading scholars, practitioners, and experts were also amongst the delegates, leading to much sharing and knowledge exchange in questions, and conversations both inside and outside the main talks and workshops.

Promoting Cohesion

A question that might arise is whether such events really help when it comes to social cohesion. Cynics may ask: if ICCS 2019 was successful, why do we need ICCS 2022? Such a question, though, is naïve. Cohesion is not something a society builds, then it exists. At most it [can only be promoted](#). Because society means people, it is complex, changing, and always contested. Both personal and group dynamics can act against cohesion at any time, fracturing seemingly harmonious societies.

Cohesion needs to [go deep and build resilience](#) in people and groups. It is always an ongoing endeavour. Local, regional, and international factors can both promote

cohesion but also cause fractures and conflict. It is never enough to think that things are OK now because the vicissitudes of fate and the polemics of hatemongers can reach every corner of the globe.

There is a constant need to promote cohesion, and because humans are complex, a vast variety of factors can be considered. Therefore, even as we look forward to ICCS 2022 and hope for its success, we also need to be thinking about what comes next. It is part of a process, not a single event, nor an end in itself.

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