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Reflections on ICCS 2022

Achieving Connectedness and Cohesion

By Ong Keng Yong

SYNOPSIS

Diversity, modernity, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, have complicated social relationships across many societies globally. Mutual trust, stronger bonds, and the harnessing of technology are needed to keep diverse communities together. Strengthening social cohesion requires deliberate effort and conviction from everyone.

COMMENTARY

From 6 to 8 September 2022, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) hosted the second International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) with the support of Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). Mooted by President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob, the conference was first held in Singapore in 2019 to encourage conversations on social cohesion so as to build knowledge, and to strengthen and forge networks across diverse communities.

The two editions of ICCS have adopted the thematic framework of faith, identity and cohesion to explore solidarity and togetherness. Being multi-racial and multi-religious, Singapore is an appropriate setting for the discussion of sensitive issues, and the brainstorming of new ideas conducive to forming bonds and bridging divides.

COVID-19 Deepened Rifts in Societies

ICCS 2022 took place as the world slowly emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference, which adopted the theme "Confident Identities, Connected Communities", took a studied approach in exploring various identities that people in today's world have, and to understand how these affect relationships within communities.

In her opening address, President Halimah stated that cohesive societies are built based on proactive choices and convictions. She highlighted that the pandemic had brought into focus the deepening fault lines present in society, and that social cohesion played an important role in gluing society together to build collective security. The President reminded all that “despite all our differences and disagreements, we are human beings at the end of the day, equally fragile, yet equally resilient.”

Deepening the Understanding of Cohesiveness

The carefully curated line-up of speakers for the ICCS addressed several specific areas, including the key questions “*How faith can bridge divides*”, “*How diversity can be harnessed for the common good*”, and “*How technology can be leveraged to foster mutual trust*”. Participants discussed the intricacies within social cohesion and got to understand how people individuate and group themselves in society.

During the opening presentation, Professor Lily Kong, Singapore Management University, and Dr Katherine Marshall, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, highlighted the increasing superdiversity across the world. Faith, ethnicity, culture, and nationality are only some of the intertwining factors that define people. Despite their different identities, it is important to find ways to bring people together, to build solidarity in them, and to imbue in them a strong sense of belonging to society.

Throughout the conference, many useful approaches to build social cohesion were shared by both speakers and delegates. During the plenary on ways that technology can positively influence social cohesion, Mr Jasvir Singh, an inter-faith activist from the UK cited their South Asian Heritage Month as an example of information technology being a positive force. Leveraging digital/online platforms, the initiative enjoyed widespread support from the community as people shared personal stories, history, arts, culture and their connectedness with each other.

Other ICCS speakers highlighted the potential pitfalls in using cyberspace to engage communities, and how people need to think about using online tools to build resilience in communities. Meanwhile, the “digital divide” between those who have easy access to information technology platforms vis-à-vis those without, could have a significant impact on social cohesion efforts. It is also pertinent to bear in mind that greater connectivity in itself, does not necessarily lead to greater connectedness.

Mapping Cohesion

ICCS 2022 saw the introduction of a study in mapping social cohesion in Southeast Asia. An RSIS research team attempted to understand how people in Southeast Asian countries felt about social cohesion, and the key areas that helped build their sense of belonging in their respective societies. Called the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar, the study found that the quality of social relationships played a strong role in how connected people felt to their society. The study explains that trust, acceptance of diversity, and supporting networks are significant elements of social relationships.

President Halimah noted that some of the insights from the study could benefit communities working on strategies to enhance social cohesion. MCCY Minister Edwin Tong suggested that there is value in using the study as a baseline for future regular

surveys to track social cohesion in the region. There was general agreement among conference participants that more research is needed to increase public knowledge about social cohesion and how it could be strengthened.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of the Vatican, in his special address to the ICCS, emphasised that education is important in helping people from different faith groups understand that inclusivity, accepting diversity, and helping others regardless of their faiths and culture, will promote solidarity and therefore build stronger cohesive societies. He emphasised that everyone must play a part in this endeavour.

Involving Youths in Fostering Social Cohesion

One of the takeaways from the Young Leaders Programme (YLP) in ICCS 2019 was that YLP delegates wanted to be more involved in the conference component of ICCS. Therefore, ICCS 2022 saw youths participating in both the main conference sessions and the specially curated YLP segments.

The energy of the YLP delegates was especially palpable during the main plenaries and breakout group discussions. They appreciated the ICCS structure, and many commented that it was important to understand the facets of social cohesion from the leading subject matter experts, in order to apply the relevant portions creatively to the YLP activities.

Digital natives that they are, the youths enthusiastically discussed the positive uses of technology in cultivating social cohesion. The young leaders highlighted how technology had been useful in bridging communities, facilitating online worship, and providing a space for collaborations and positive discussions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, they also cautioned that technology could not replace the physical rituals of going to places of worship, and the deeper connections developed through face-to-face interactions with others in society. Hence, they were keen to understand how they could move beyond engaging superficially with others on social media platforms, to gather youths for conversations on faith, identity, and cohesion. It was stressed that social responsibility and education were vital to ensure that information coming through different online platforms was accurately assessed before it was shared with peers.

There are many ways that technology can be harnessed to build relationships with “the other” in society. It is important to be able to regulate and implement appropriate measures to ensure that hate messages, disinformation and misinformation online do not create insecurity and distrust in society.

Next Steps

Building socially cohesive societies requires a lot of work. As Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said during the “In Conversation” session he had with Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS, Amb Ong Keng Yong, “Trust is built in drops, but is lost in buckets.” He emphasised that fostering mutual trust among people is essential.

Going forward, technology has a vital role to play, especially among youths who are savvier with digitalisation than their parents. It should be harnessed positively by both the young and old to strengthen bonds across different faiths and identities.

The key takeaway from ICCS 2022 is that everyone has a part to play in connecting communities and promoting social cohesion to sustain peace and security for all. Education and information must be available for constructive engagement within each society, and across different societies. Knowledge must be used to advance the common good. Raising the level of conversations, widening the network of relationships, and expanding the community of practice, remain the cardinal points to plan for future interactions on cohesive societies.

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