

How study drew up what makes for basic living standard in Singapore

Four-year study arrives at the basic needs of Singaporeans despite cross-class differences

**Teo You Yenn
and Ng Kok Hoe**

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Is it possible for Singaporeans from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to come together to set a universal baseline for needs?

Can people who have different levels of income and wealth, whose social positions and roles differ, and their everyday lives and habits therefore diverge, find consensus about what a basic standard of living should entail? Will they be able to agree that “yes, this is a basic need” and “no, this is not a need, more of a luxury”? How could people articulate and agree on the needs every person living in Singapore today has?

In 2017, when we first made plans to use the Minimum Income Standards (MIS) approach, we were uncertain about the answers to these questions. The consensus-based focus group approach had been developed and used by researchers at the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University in Britain since 2008, and adapted by researchers in Ireland, France, Portugal, South Africa, Mexico, Japan and Thailand.

We were impressed by its possibilities – the strong attention given to ordinary people’s lived experiences, the commitment to capturing realistic norms around basic needs, and the rigour and detail of data generated. This seemed exactly what we need in Singapore given where we are on issues of poverty, income and wealth inequalities, and the social welfare regime.

We had not brought together Singaporeans of diverse backgrounds like this before. We knew that wide disparities in income and wealth lead to very different consumption patterns and lifestyle expectations. We were inclined to think that it would be challenging to reach consensus about “basic needs”.

By this month, after four years and two waves of research (with a total of 299 participants in 36 focus groups), we have spent hundreds of hours facilitating conversations, listening to focus group discussions, and poring over transcripts.

We have heard older people joke about mobile phones and the curt texts they receive from younger family members (“not even ‘ok’, just ‘k!’”). We have listened to partnered parents discuss how it’s cheaper and time-saving to buy baby playmats online; single parents told us how they need to



buy or do something nice for themselves because it is so tough being “both mother and father” to their children.

We saw that people do indeed have different tastes and styles when it comes to things like clothing and make-up. Some like to have friends over for meals, some prefer to treat their families to dinners out, and still others prefer more solitary hobbies. Some feel strongly that annual holidays to nearby countries are crucial to their mental well-being, while others think saving up for a major trip every few years to somewhere farther would better serve their desire to see a little more of the world, as Singaporeans love to do.

Young people brought laughter to the room by teaching these mostly middle-aged researchers that bubble tea is not just a drink, but also a social activity – the walk to and from the shop with friends or co-workers is part of the package.

REACHING CONSENSUS ON BASIC NEEDS

Amid these colourful variations, and participants’ mutual acknowledgement of diversity in focus groups, they were able to come to a consensus that people living in the same society share the same basic needs.

In certain areas where personal preferences may dictate choices, people still agreed to allocate a sum of money for that category of things, if not the specific items. What unites, what they have in common, and what they recognise as universal is the human need to feel a sense of belonging and respect, to have a sense of agency

and independence, and the capacity to participate meaningfully as members of their social worlds.

All their decisions about individual items are directed towards these human needs. Are jewellery, holidays and restaurant meals luxuries that only the wealthy have a right to? Beyond the fact that the budget they have set aside is modest (for example, \$50 a year for “jewellery” for accessories like hair ties, earrings and brooches), our respondents painted the context that framed their answer: Absolutely not.

ANXIETY OVER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Sometimes, listening closely to their deliberations, we hear frustrations. Parents from all walks of life, for example, express anxiety and frustration over the education system. Is tuition really a basic need? Yes, came the resounding answer. Without tuition, children cannot keep up in school. Children themselves often request it, and as parents you cannot ignore them. Sometimes teachers advise it.

We asked repeatedly to try to understand their rationales: How is it a need? What would happen if children didn’t have tuition? One participant made the others laugh by saying out loud what others seemed to think: “If Singapore says no more examinations, everybody go to school just play, just learn, no meritocracy, no PSLE score, no A levels, then I don’t think it’s essential lah. But sadly, Singapore is all based on scores and results.”

Are free or low-cost tuition options run by charities sufficient to meet the need? After discussion, participants came to

the consensus of no, because those may not be accessible to all children when the need for tuition arises, and may also not serve the need of getting children already struggling to learn better.

Likewise, enrichment classes were listed as a basic need. We asked why is this necessary when there are co-curricular activities (CCAs)? Parents got animated and sometimes agitated as they shared what it now takes to get into a CCA of interest, and how schools often choose only children who are good enough to compete in a given sport or activity.

TUITION, ENRICHMENT CLASSES NOT ‘WANTS’

Children’s needs to pursue interests and develop passions thus have to be fulfilled somewhere else. Again, despite differences and variations in actual consumption patterns, our participants were able to clearly agree and explain the social context that frames specific things as needs. From the palpable frustration displayed in these discussions, parents would much rather spend money on other household needs than on tuition and enrichment which they think are certainly not “wants”. At the same time, they recognise children’s needs to feel secure, to be in step with their peers, which solidifies their resolve that, even if frustrating, this is a need they have to meet as parents.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION A BASIC NEED

Participants were also sharp in recognising that not everyone in Singapore can meet the needs

The participants in the study have put in researchers’ hands the responsibility of putting this question on the table: If ordinary people can see and express that there are universal needs, that there is a baseline below which no one should fall, what will we do collectively to make sure all members of our society meet these basic needs?
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these tensions by using case studies, reminding people that we are talking about “Mr K” or “Mrs K” or “child Z” and “not about you”.

When participants dwelled too long on what they themselves preferred, such as wanting higher-quality things or relying on getting things for free, we reminded them that the purpose of discussion was to establish a baseline for everyone in society. What exactly is the need? Why and how is it a need? What happens to child Z if she or he does not have it?

We have to first clarify the need before we can worry about how people meet it. Facilitating discussions in this way – allowing the space for people to bring in their personal experiences, and yet tempering the discussions so that people would neither show off nor feel ashamed – the participants are able to come to a consensus about basic needs for everyone.

Over these four years, we have learnt from our participants that everyone living in Singapore today has needs for housing, food and clothing, opportunities for education, employment and work-life balance, as well as access to healthcare. Everyone needs a sense of belonging, respect, security and independence. Every person needs choices to participate in social activities, and the freedom to engage in one’s cultural and religious practices.

We have learnt from them too that they know not everyone in Singapore today is meeting these needs to the same degree. This does not lead anyone to say that any of these are therefore not needs; that only those who can afford it deserve belonging, respect, security and independence; that some children should have paid tuition suited to their needs and other children will just have to accept whatever they can get from charity.

In spending time and energy to share their experiences and insights with us, our participants have put in our hands the responsibility of putting this question on the table: If ordinary people can see and express that there are universal needs, that there is a baseline below which no one should fall, what will we do collectively to make sure all members of our society meet these basic needs?

Now that we know what a basic standard of living in Singapore should entail, the work ahead must be to ensure that everyone can achieve it.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Teo You Yenn is Associate Professor, Provost’s Chair, and Head of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University. Ng Kok Hoe is Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Case Study Unit at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. This commentary draws from “What people need in Singapore: A household budgets study” co-authored with Neo Yu Wei, Ad Maulod, Stephanie Chok, and Wong Yee Lok. Details at: <https://whatsenough.sg>