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

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It is possible for Singaporeans from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to live in the same net of universal basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and education. But what does it mean to be able to meet these needs, and how do people articulate and agree on what everyone needs by living in Singapore today?

In 2007, when we first made phantasie use the Minimum Income Standards (MIS) approach, we were surprised at the answers we received to these questions. The common-sense-based focus group approach had been developed and used by researchers at the Centre for Human Development Studies (CHDS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and then by researchers in the USA, Australia, Sweden, Ireland, France, Portugal, South Africa, Mexico, Japan, and Thailand.

We discovered that the possibilities—such as strong attention paid to material consumption experiences, the commitment to representative samples drawn from different socio-economic backgrounds, and the rigor and depth of data collection—seemed exactly what we need in Singapore, given where we are on issues of poverty, income and wealth inequality, and social mobility in the city-state. Without that kind of support, we may have found that it was too challenging to reach consensus about " basics."

In this month, after four years and several rounds of research (with a total of 249 participants in 36 focus groups, we have spent hundreds of hours talking to Singaporeans, listening to the rich concerns they have about the quality of their lives, and trying to find consensus on the needs of Singaporeans.

We have heard older people joke about mobile phones and the current generation recipients from younger family members ("not even Wi-Fi, just i-Pod"). We have listened to parents and grandparents talk about how they experienced and saw their family members cope with the lack of things you take for granted today. By using the MIS approach, we can show that these concerns are not just individual, but also systemic.

The participants in the study were asked to discuss and explain what is needed to meet the basic needs of Singaporeans today. They were asked to collectively imagine the needs of members of our society, meet three basic needs:

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The results of our study show that the basic needs of Singaporeans today are not universal, and that these needs are not fixed. What makes the basic needs of Singaporeans today is not just a question of what is needed, but also of what is done about it. The results of our research also show that the basic needs of Singaporeans today are not just a question of what is needed, but also of what is done about it.