What’s holding back migrant integration in Singapore and ways to break barriers

Both new migrants and locals can help in the process.

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There is a strong economic imperative for a steady influx of migrants into Singapore, given the nation’s need to maintain workplace competitiveness. Nonetheless, as President Halimah Yacob highlighted in a recent speech, it is important that new migrants integrate into Singaporean society. Failure to do so risks undermining our social cohesion and stability. As President Halimah said in her speech at the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) 30th anniversary gala dinner, new migrants “must recognize that they are part of our society, that they should contribute to and interact with, and live among, people who are different from ourselves.”

“Soft-straddled, segmented, among Singaporeans that foreign talents play by different rules, and stick only to their own, may feed,” she cautioned.

Her observation that newer waves of migrants may not feel compelled to mix with the local population and instead maintain exclusive social networks among themselves has been a growing concern.

Earlier waves of migrants who arrived in the 1990s, during Singapore’s initial efforts to augment its talent pool with foreign workers, had little choice but to integrate with the local population due to their smaller numbers. These migrants were more likely to adopt local language features, develop friendships with Singaporean neighbours and colleagues, and send their children to local schools. Failing to integrate meant exclusion from social and cultural life, making it difficult for them to establish a home in Singapore.

In the new millennium, with a larger influx of migrants accompanying Singapore’s rapid economic growth, those migrants who have found it easier to build their lives around close-knit migrant communities.

Social psychological research consistently shows that people feel less isolated when they see others from similar backgrounds. When migrants seek opportunities abroad, they are drawn to familiar elements, such as fellow migrants from their home countries, for use of their native language, religious services that reiterate them with them, and access to familiar food options.

For many migrants, particularly those from China and India, the presence of a significant population of co-ethnics has been a motivator in their decision to move to Singapore. Ease of travel, given the number of air routes connecting Singapore to many first- and second-tier cities in China and India, has also meant that migrants could continue maintaining strong cultural connections with their home countries.

FREQUENT MIGRANT ENCOUNTERS

Migrant communities have emerged in various parts of Singapore, particularly in private rental enclaves, which are subject to ethnic and non-citizen quotas like public housing. Consequently, some migrant communities have witnessed high concentrations of migrants from specific countries. For migrants, residing within their communities offers familiarity and the opportunity to recreate elements of their home countries, such as celebrating cultural festivals or engaging in activities not commonly practised by Singaporeans. They are also more likely to find specialised services such as grocery and food outlets that cater to their specific culinary needs.

Even if physical proximity to fellow migrants is not possible, social media networking apps allow them to easily establish networks, exchange information and resources, and further immerse themselves in the social and cultural aspects of their respective communities.

The quintessence is that while reliance on migrant communities may quench their adjustment to life in Singapore, it also weakens migrants’ emotional attachment to the country. Studies show that migrants who build connections with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds within the host society are more likely to develop a sense of belonging to it, rather than merely continuing to identify with their home countries.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT DECISIONS TO REMAIN IN SINGAPORE

It is important not to place the blame solely on migrants for their unwillingness to integrate into Singaporean society. Migrants, in many ways, respond to socio-political conditions they encounter while residing in a new society. Some migrants in Singapore see little point in building strong networks with locals when they are uncertain about their chances of remaining in the country due to work permit complexities, or when their jobs are dependent on social media outlets that are not rooted in Singapore, and are afraid they will be unfairly taken away from locals.

Past surveys indicate there is a significant level of prejudice against certain groups of migrants. For instance, only four in 10 Singaporeans respondents in a CNS-Ipsos Survey on Race Relations conducted in 2001 were open to having their own children with a migrant, compared with over 80 per cent when the would-be tenant was a local Chinese. Only about half of the respondents in the survey found it acceptable to have a non-Citizen boss.

Under these circumstances, some migrants may choose to remain in the safety of their migrant communities and interact with Singaporeans on a superficial level unless locals also make efforts in developing friendships.

EMPOWERING MIGRANT-LINKED RELATIONSHIPS

If migrant-local relationships are to be improved, it will require efforts from both sides. Facilitated by state support at the work and community levels, policies also need to strike a balance between the necessity of immigration for a vibrant workforce and the protection of local interests.

The hope is that with the adoption of the Workplace Fairness Legislation (expected some time in 2024), some of the current friction will be avoided, as hiring and other human resource practices become better regulated and transparent. With robust legislation, greater clarity and certainty in related policies, mechanisms will be possible to provide locals with the assurance that migrants are here to fill certain necessary positions and not because of some concerted plan to displace them.

Furthermore, it may be time to send a clarion call to locals intending to write in Singapore that they should learn to be more open-minded. It is important that locals be educated about why certain groups of migrants are here and the benefits they bring.

To sum up, the onus is on locals to work closely with migrants and help them develop cultural competencies. There are several ways this can be achieved, from one to time by time to a range of social organisations, including the People’s Association. Greater engagement and understanding will help bridge the gap between individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

Locals and migrants in Singapore are largely well aware that racial and religious tolerance is a fundamental principle in society, and there are legal consequences for disrupting harmonious relations. However, the fear of breaching cultural propriety should not hinder locals and migrants from forming strong bonds, as long as these bonds are made over shared values, even those which they may not normally appreciate. For instance, many locals may see the practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan very seriously, and they, too, may join its celebration in Singapore, knowing that their commitment is through their willingness to develop cultural competencies.

Recently, there has been debate over English language proficiency testing for citizenship applications. While the proposal may have its flaws, it reflects the need for migrants who believe that citizens sharing workplaces and living in multicultural housing estates should be able to communicate in English, Singapore’s lingua franca. Perhaps there should be an expectation of newcomers to be able to communicate in English, as well as understanding the local culture and traditions. It is important to ensure that migrants are integrated effectively, enhancing social cohesion and stability in the nation.

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