

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

Both new migrants and locals can help in the process.

Mathew Mathews

There is a strong economic imperative for a steady infusion of migrants into Singapore, given the nation's need to maintain workforce competitiveness. Nonetheless, as President Halimah Yacob highlighted in a recent speech, it is paramount 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) 35th anniversary gala dinner, new migrants "must recognise that they are part of our society too, and in Singapore, we interact with, and live among, people who are different from ourselves".

"Left unaddressed, sentiments among Singaporeans that foreign talents play by different rules, and stick only to their own, may fester," 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 enrol their children in 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 development, migrants have found it easier to build their lives around close-knit migrant communities.

Social psychological research consistently shows that people prefer to associate with those from similar backgrounds. When migrants seek opportunities

abroad, they are drawn to familiar elements, such as fellow migrants from their home countries, the use of their native language, religious services that resonate 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.

FORMATION OF MIGRANT ENCLAVES

Migrant communities have emerged in various parts of Singapore, particularly in private housing estates that are not subject to ethnic and non-citizen quotas like public housing. Consequently, some condominiums 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 life of their respective communities.

The upshot is that while reliance on their migrant communities may quicken 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 different 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 INSULAR

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 the socio-political conditions they encounter while adapting to 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. Others are cognisant of how some on social media decry their presence in Singapore, stereotype them and accuse them of unfairly taking jobs away from locals.

Past surveys do indicate there is some level of prejudice against certain groups of migrants. For instance, only four in 10

Singaporean respondents in a CNA-IPS Survey on Race Relations conducted in 2021 were open to renting their home out to a new citizen who was previously from India, compared with over 90 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 new 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 themselves show interest in developing friendships.

ENHANCING MIGRANT-LOCAL 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 effective whistle-blower mechanisms, it will be possible to provide locals with the assurance that migrants are here to fill necessary positions and not because of some concerted plan to displace them.

Furthermore, it may be time to send a signal to migrants intending to settle in Singapore that the host society takes the matter of their integration seriously, and they should, too. One way to demonstrate this 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 aspirations of a substantial portion of locals who believe that migrants 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 basic English language proficiency for many migrant passes, along with opportunities for migrants to improve their English skills and become familiar with the local variety of English used here.

In addition to language competencies, migrants and locals should be encouraged to participate in programmes that help them develop cultural competencies. There are several that are organised from time to time by a range of social organisations, including the People's Association. Greater knowledge 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 across communities, even those which they may not personally feel comfortable interacting with. This requires an understanding of cultural differences and the adoption of a multicultural world view that embraces diversity – learnings which are best developed through well-designed programmes.

Hopefully, such training will be mainstreamed and offered more widely in workplaces and other settings to encourage migrants and locals to stand up against stereotyping and other forms of prejudice that are antithetical to the building of social cohesion. Finally, at the community level, it is important to examine structures that may inadvertently communicate to migrants that they are not welcome in Singapore. This can occur when differentiation between locals and migrants is required through different fees when accessing community programmes or services. If migrants are to be fully included in the neighbourhoods they are part of, rather than solely within migrant circles, they should know that the local community is open and inclusive, without the need for differentiation between them.

Creating stronger migrant-local relationships in Singapore requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the motivations and challenges faced by migrants, encourages cultural competencies and fosters inclusivity. By providing support, promoting understanding, and nurturing a sense of belonging for both migrants and locals, Singapore can look towards the prospect that its migrant population integrates effectively, enhancing social cohesion and stability in the nation.

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