

Singapore leaps towards a Big Society

Forward Singapore aims to mobilise a whole-of-nation effort to solve complex challenges in the country's next bound.

Gillian Koh

One expects a 16-month long public engagement exercise led by the fourth generation of political leaders in the People's Action Party Government to suggest transformational reforms.

The 4G leaders plan to do just that: shepherd Singapore successfully into its sixth decade as a nation by portioning the responsibility, resources, and most critically, the power to find solutions and implement them, to society. They are putting an expanded sense of "us" at the heart of it. They are prepared for what it means.

Their Forward Singapore road map recognises that dealing with the complexities of energising an advanced economy, managing an ageing society, and taming social stratification all at the same time, requires true and involved partnership.

There are two elements that will make all the difference in this new model of inclusive and relational governance. The first is the rise of a central role for integrators, connectors and partnership facilitators.

The second is the propagation of a sense of shared and resilient citizenship among a broader set of citizens who need to be confident about being part of a Big Society that pairs effectively with Big Government, who they have been more comfortable with taking the lead. This, to achieve happiness and progress for all, by all, as we look ahead.

SETTING STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF JOBS

How will it all work and what role exactly does society have to play? Forward Singapore's response to the uncertain future of jobs provides answers.

For one thing, the report looks at the worries around jobs and earning prospects holistically,

beginning with its roots in anxieties around exams, as well as the pressure to get into good schools and the right career track, with the sense of vocation in work of peripheral interest.

The report outlines what the Government will do differently: Replace streaming in its education system completely with full subject-based banding to cater to diverse interests, abilities, and pace of learning of students. This is a move already under way but sets the impetus in context, given the growing parental desire to focus on child development rather than test scores.

However, it requires a further shift in parental mindsets among us all; to be open to whichever educational path our children might select based on their interests, aptitude and aspirations. It will entail a difficult transition away from the simple categorisation of performance and rigid albeit clear educational tracks of the past, to engaged parenthood and adaptive choice-making.

Yet choices have consequences. Practically, a love for learning is insufficient in ensuring employment. Our children need to be equipped with industry-relevant skills in their areas of passion, to do the jobs of tomorrow or create the businesses of the future.

Practically speaking, how will we ensure this transformation is successful when today's toddlers reach young adulthood? Forward Singapore notes that networks among business leaders, educators, parents and students must be created to share real-world insights into the demand for talent. It cites the positive example of the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) stepping up to play this critical role.

The more specific the business groups are in this industry-education connection, the more blue-sky thinking can be had in projecting the curricula

and work experience that will be useful. Many more than just "the Government" have to help.

ROOTING OUT INCOME INEQUALITY

Still, the first few years of formal education cannot be deterministic of one's station in life. In recent months, there has been brewing concern over the income gap between university graduates and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates as well as those with secondary school education.

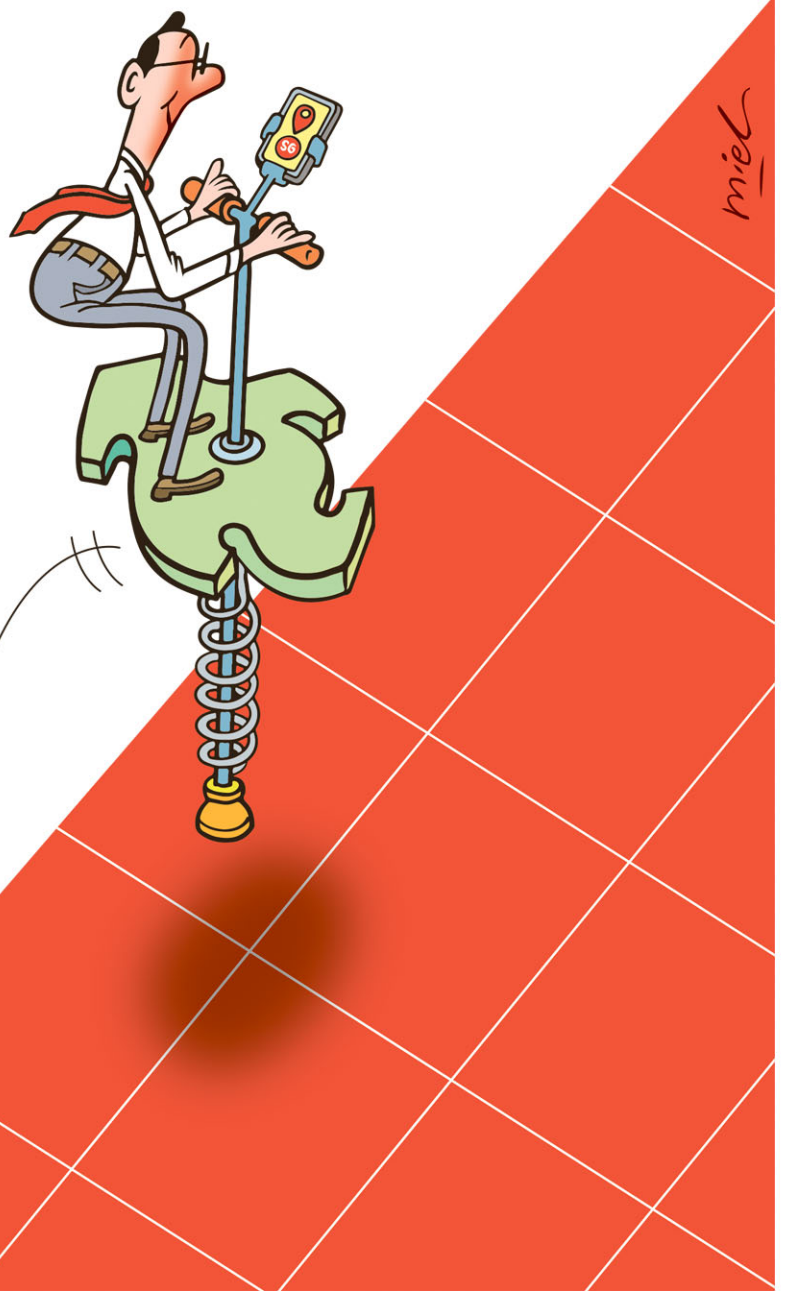
Forward Singapore's proposal to encourage ITE graduates to acquire diplomas by offering top-ups to their Central Provident Fund accounts when they do so is welcomed support.

Again, this cannot stop with the Government. Companies must be prepared to offer ITE graduates who tend to be found in "heart" and "hands" sectors good employment opportunities, a fair wage that gradually improves to match those of other sectors, and the prospect for uplifting themselves later in their careers.

Sustainable employment, a concept coined by the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) in 2019, is worth activating with greater force.

A PUSH FOR RE-EMPLOYMENT

Radical support will also be given



to help workers cope, as the restructuring of the economy persists given the increasing volatility of business cycles. The report commits to providing financial aid to the involuntarily unemployed actively searching for work.

Yet this assistance cannot be just financial: A robust job placement system matching workers with jobs and careers ensures that such support is meaningful. The reference in the report to the development of better career guidance services, jobs-skills integrators, and digital tools to create personalised recommendations demonstrates an acute appreciation of the ecosystem at play.

There are nascent forms of these mechanisms today, but they have to be far sharper in knowledge and wit to help workers achieve placements in new jobs that pay as well as the ones they lost, and avoid perpetuating an underemployment of precious human talent that Singapore can ill afford.

Forward Singapore emphasises this needful work-in-progress in highlighting comments by the professional network, the Asia Federation of Human Resource Management, of the importance of greater dialogue across all parts of the employment system. The

subtext is that this re-employment support boils down to how well this integration across workers, businesses, educators, union leaders and human resource managers works.

Much more will be asked of employers in this changing social compact. Leading business organisations are stepping up to the plate. In addition to SNEF and the SBF mentioned above, the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre states that it already has 55 companies using its "corporate purpose framework". One firm featured in the report designs its skills training programmes to help mature workers remain relevant in the sector.

The corporate sector in Singapore is prepared to be more involved in social development as it surely knows it is part of a virtuous circle created by a healthy society from which it draws its base of workers and customers. Innovation and enterprise can contribute to broader public purpose in addition to private gain of entrepreneurs and their staff and shareholders.

The report is even-handed – employers must adapt their workplaces for these new conditions Singaporean society finds itself in, but employees must exercise responsibility for

Society as equal partner with Government

FROM B1

organisations – is welcomed as an equal partner with the Government bringing about the transformation envisaged.

Previous national public engagement exercises resulted in statements of commitment by the Government to change policies and introduce programmes in response to ground-up feedback.

Sometimes, there were also statements about things the Government could or should not change, including a minority report of alternative ideas that could not be taken up by the Remaking Singapore Committee that concluded in 2003.

However, Forward Singapore provides the scaffolding for what state and society can do in collaboration. This model of co-creation did not take place overnight but has been introduced gradually since the Singapore Together movement launched in 2019.

The subsequent mechanisms that emerged including the Citizens' Panels and Alliances for Action, provided multi-stakeholder avenues to address issue- or sector-specific reforms in practical ways.

To reinforce this approach, Forward Singapore will create the Singapore Government Partnerships Office which will facilitate interactions between contributing citizens and relevant government agencies. Through it, Singapore's practice of inclusive and relational governance can be tracked, analysed, and improved over time. This evidence base of interaction will assure ordinary citizens that their participation is welcome.

The message of a collective effort is found not only in its statements about policy reforms and their underpinning values, but also by highlighting ongoing multi-stakeholder initiatives as examples of what more is needed to create a fair and inclusive society, and a dynamic corporate landscape.

Since Singapore is small, we have every prospect of making the tighter, more specific and high-value connections work and pay a big dividend in terms of cohesion and shared prosperity – to draw Government closer to the people, and the people closer to the Government.

This is not an agenda for the short term nor will it promote political dominance of a political party on its own.

To achieve it nationally, we have to march against the trends of class envy, ethno-tribalism, populism, and political cynicism we see across the world today.

And we always have.

• Dr Gillian Koh is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.