

Want a 'we first' society? Members of Parliament are vital to the effort

They must help grow civic participation and the social capital that a resilient society needs.

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and Justin Lee**

As Singapore's 15th Parliament opens, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has called for a "we first" society. This echoes a thread running through Singapore's nation-building journey.

In 1991, the Government's White Paper on Shared Values affirmed that Singapore must place "nation before community, and society above self".

More than three decades later, the Forward SG report renewed that ethos, reminding Singaporeans that "every success story is a shared story".

It urged us to see success less in terms of "I, me and mine" and more through "we, us and ours".

The report also outlined practical ways for citizens, businesses and Government to give back and act together.

The opportunity before Parliament is to take this further: to strengthen the networks, trust and civic habits that together make up Singapore's social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE GLUE OF 'WE FIRST'

American political science analyst Robert Putnam defines social capital as the networks, norms and trust that enable people to act together for mutual benefit.

He frames social capital as a public good. When people volunteer, join associations or look out for neighbours, they generate shared reserves of trust that strengthen society.

Professor Putnam distinguished between bonding capital (ties within close groups) and bridging capital (connections across different groups and backgrounds), with later scholars adding linking capital (vertical ties between citizens and institutions).

Singapore's bonding capital remains resilient, seen in strong family ties and neighbourhood trust – especially during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, when residents checked in on one another and community groups mobilised to provide support for the vulnerable.

Linking capital is also strong, with Singaporeans showing consistently high trust in government institutions, which enabled collective action during the pandemic.

But bridging capital – the connections across groups – is under greater strain.

BRIDGING CAPITAL UNDER STRAIN

Research by the Institute of Policy

Studies (IPS) found that class, more than race or religion, is today Singapore's sharpest social divide.

More than half of 3,000 respondents to a 2017 study had no close friends outside their own class, whether by housing type or school background.

Public housing residents had, on average, fewer than one private housing friend. Alumni of elite schools rarely named close friends from non-elite schools, and vice versa.

At the same time, Singaporeans' social circles are shrinking.

The average number of close friends a person has fell from 10.7 in 2018 to 6.5 in 2024, according to research led by IPS Social Lab's Dr Mathew Mathews.

That same study found more people preferring to interact only with those of similar socio-economic status.

Other channels of bridging capital are weakening.

Volunteerism, while recovering to the pre-pandemic 30 per cent participation rate in 2023, saw median volunteer hours drop from 24 in 2018 to just 9.4, according to the National Giving Study 2023.

Youth participation in weekly social groups fell from 38 per cent in 2013 to 26 per cent in 2022, while the number of those with no group involvement rose from 35 per cent to 41 per cent, according to the National Youth Survey 2022.

The worrying result: narrowing networks, shrinking circles and deeper class clustering.

As IPS director Janadas Devan warned at the Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference: "Social capital is not something you can bank for good and draw upon freely without also working tirelessly to replenish the account."

HOW MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT CAN STRENGTHEN 'WE FIRST' COMMUNITIES

The Government has long recognised the need to strengthen social capital.

Forward SG set the agenda, and national programmes such as Harmony Circles, ComLink+ and Mentoring SG have carried it through – bringing neighbours of different races together, pairing coaches with lower-income households and linking professionals with young people of all socio-economic backgrounds.

But MPs play an equally critical role. Positioned between citizens and institutions, they can connect residents, foster collaboration and bring ground perspectives into policymaking.

Early examples reflect this.

Tanjong Pagar GRC's Miss Rachel Ong launched a mentoring club pairing adults with young people in sports, business, nature, arts and mental wellness. More than 300 mentors and mentees have participated.

Sengkang GRC's Ms He Ting Ru and her team worked with residents and young people to co-design improvements to Sengkang Sculpture Park, creating

shared projects bringing diverse groups together.

Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC's Mr Cai Yinzhou, even before entering Parliament, co-founded Save Dakota Crescent, a campaign that mobilised residents and persuaded the Government to preserve heritage blocks.

These show how MPs can convene across backgrounds, sustain interactions and carry ground experiences into public decisions.

MPs can build on these efforts in three ways.

First, map community gaps and mobilise local assets. MPs can identify areas where residents' time and skills can be channelled towards most constructively, draw in volunteers and ensure initiatives are well supported.

For example, MPs could work with nearby schools to adopt Active Ageing Centres so students, parents and seniors interact regularly across neighbourhoods. Retired seniors can be paired with younger families to exchange practical wisdom across generations.

Second, make action easier. Many residents want to contribute but face barriers. MPs can set up year-round "neighbourhood labs" offering small grants, mentorship and connections for ground-up projects, from peer mental health circles to artificial intelligence learning workshops.

With low entry barriers and continuity of support, these labs can grow into sustained

community initiatives.

Third, enable hyperlocal deliberation. Beyond feedback exercises, MPs can create forums for residents to reason together and shape neighbourhoods.

Participatory budgeting, for instance, could let residents decide on the use of a shared space, balancing trade-offs and building shared accountability.

Such efforts require MPs to strike a balance: Residents may expect them to implement every idea, or misinterpret facilitation as detachment.

MPs can manage expectations by framing deliberation around clearly bounded issues and being upfront about what is within their remit.

Done well, these steps replenish bonding capital through collaboration, bridging capital across class and generation, and linking capital by feeding citizen insights into national discussions.

The 15th Parliament can be remembered for how it nurtures meaningful citizen involvement.

A "we first" society will not emerge by exhortation alone. It requires MPs who guide, enable and walk alongside citizens – building the social capital that keeps Singapore resilient, cohesive and future-ready.

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Sengkang Sculpture Park in 2008. Sengkang GRC's Ms He Ting Ru and her team worked with residents and young people to co-design improvements to the park, creating shared projects bringing diverse groups together. Positioned between citizens and institutions, MPs can connect residents, foster collaboration and bring ground perspectives into policymaking, say the writers. SHIN MIN DAILY NEWS FILE PHOTO