

NATIONAL YOUTH DIALOGUE 1: RENEWING OUR SOCIAL COMPACT

23 JULY 2022 | *SCAPE Treetop

The National Youth Council (NYC) and the Global Shapers Community (Singapore Hub) co-organised the first National Youth Dialogue session on “Renewing Our Social Compact”, a hybrid conversation on 23 July 2022, involving 106 attendees and the following panellists:

- MOS Alvin Tan – Minister of State for Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of Trade and Industry
- Professor Walter Theseira – Associate Professor of Economics, Singapore University of Social Sciences
- Dr Ng Kok Hoe – Senior Research Fellow and Head of Case Study Unit, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
- Ms Marlisa Rosli – Chief Executive Officer, Majulah Community
- [Moderator] Mr Tan Kuan Hian – Editor of the Birthday Book 2021, Vice-Curator, Global Shapers Singapore Hub



Here are the key insights of the conversation raised by the panellists:

1) Youths asked what the current state of Singapore’s social compact was, and why it was important to renew it

- MOS Tan said that it was necessary to renew Singapore’s social compact in the face of a “seismic generational shift”, with new and complex issues – including COVID-19, the uncertain future of work, and Singapore’s ageing population – facing the nation. He added that even though Singapore had been successful in overcoming challenges in the past, citizens should not be complacent because as a small nation, Singapore remained vulnerable.
- Dr Ng said that recent moves such as the expansion of the Progressive Wage Model to more industries were in the right direction. He added that, however, Singaporeans still tended to think that a lack of motivation to work hard and succeed was a dominant cause of poverty, which is contrary to social science and policy research. As social perceptions are both a cause and function of policy, such perceptions and mindsets (e.g. misconceptions towards those in poverty) would likely remain unchanged unless there are relevant policy shifts done concurrently.
- Prof Theseira said that Singapore faced a very different domestic and international situation than it had at independence or throughout our development. He emphasized the importance of context, in terms of time, demographics, and people’s experiences, when defining the social compact and added that the social compact that had worked before might no longer be the most appropriate.
- Prof Theseira added the country’s social compact must be collectively agreed upon by Singaporeans and suggested having more conversations between citizens and the Government to discuss policy ideas. He said that he was concerned that the increased usage of social media could fracture Singapore’s social compact as the digital platforms tended to amplify divergence since people are fed content that is aligned with their existing views.

2) Youths asked what shifts in values and mindsets were needed to achieve a renewed social compact

- Ms Marlisa said that through her work at Majulah Community, she observed that youths were passionate about speaking up and creating change in issues they cared about. She encouraged youths to ask questions that were “difficult to answer” and have conversations about their roles in society. She said that youths had much to offer and called for more “safe spaces” for them to have dialogues with policymakers without fearing “backlash” on certain topics.
- Dr Ng said that policy design could impact shifts in mindsets. He raised the example of universal schemes (e.g. the Pioneer Generation Package) as compared to targeted schemes (e.g. rental housing or food vouchers issued to the poorest 1%). He said that targeted schemes while providing direct resources to the intended individuals, would reinforce certain societal mindsets towards them.

3) Youths asked if meritocracy still existed in Singapore

- Prof Theseira said that while most Singaporeans would agree with the meritocratic process and system of selecting the most capable persons to perform specific roles (e.g., a well-trained brain surgeon to perform a medical operation), he said that people who were meritocratically selected by the system tended to have children who would also succeed in similar positions, perpetuating a form of structural inequality.
- Prof Theseira added that there was more room for debate regarding the distribution of rewards received from one’s role (e.g., whether a CEO’s salary should be significantly higher than an average worker). He said that the issue was not whether certain roles were available for everyone, but whether rewards could be more evenly and accessibly distributed across all roles.
- Ms Marlisa said that she observed youths with restricted access to education, networks and opportunities tended to have weaker confidence in and lower perceptions of their ability to succeed, compared to peers from higher socio-economic status backgrounds. She said this was not only a matter of rewards available but also of how a nominally meritocratic selection process might undermine self-esteem. She said that while there was value in meritocracy, more support could be provided to youths from low-income families to bridge the access gap.

4) Youths asked what challenges might be encountered in renewing our social compact

- Prof Theseira said that Singapore needed to move beyond the tendency of wanting to “live in the past”. He said that although the nation had encountered success in uplifting its population in terms of education and income, it was important to move beyond thinking that policies that worked well in the past would still be applicable in the present and in the future.
- Prof Theseira said that he hoped citizens and the Government would tackle difficult questions and review policies together, to allow for Singapore’s social compact to evolve.

5) Youths asked about the role of the businesses, community and individuals in renewing Singapore’s social compact

- MOS Tan said that all stakeholders, such as the Government, businesses and individuals play important roles in shaping and contributing to Singapore’s renewed social compact. He encouraged youths to partner with the Government and leverage resources such as funding and mentoring to start their ground-up initiatives. He cited examples such as the Mental Well-being and Mentoring Networks, ground-up efforts to normalise mental well-being and mentoring issues in Singapore.
- Dr Ng added that the community was an important stakeholder in renewing Singapore’s social compact, and the Government played an active role in providing the necessary resources and space for them to contribute meaningfully.
- Ms Marlisa said that from her work experience, she learnt that youths required support, such as mentoring, to guide them to drive change in the issues they care about.