

# NATIONAL YOUTH DIALOGUE 4: ENHANCING HEALTH AND SUPPORT FOR FAMILY

6 November 2022 | SCAPE Treetop

On 6 November 2022, youths from diverse backgrounds gathered to discuss and unpack the themes of health, social mobility and families in Singapore. This session was co-organized by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Global Shapers Community (Singapore Hub) and involved the following panelists:

- Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health;
- Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for Social and Family Development
- Ms Indranee Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office.
- [Moderator] Mr V Dhanraj, President of the Nanyang Technological University Students' Union.
- [Host] Mr Tan Kuan Hian, Vice Curator of Global Shapers (Singapore Hub)



## Theme: Health

### Discussion points from the breakout sessions:

- Participants said that stressors that impeded physical and mental well-being were often intertwined. They also encouraged youths to lead healthier lifestyles and positively influence their social circles.
- Participants acknowledged Singapore's ageing population that is increasingly afflicted with chronic illnesses. They added that means testing was arduous for Singaporeans to apply for grants. They suggested making health screenings more affordable and accessible to youths.

### 1) A participant asked how the government would ensure youths lead physically- and mentally- healthy lifestyles.

- Minister Ong said that today's youth had a different experience growing up due to having access to the internet. Prevention-wise, he said that instilling cyber-wellness knowledge from a young age through the education curriculum was crucial so that youths will know how to deal with harmful content online and filter information appropriately.
- Minister Ong said that while the Government would continue to work on increasing mental health capacity and improving psychological access, it remains critical to not "over-medicalize" mental-health issues. As such, good preventive care habits that contributed to mental wellness remained crucial, such as getting sufficient sleep and maintaining good social relations. He added that as mental health issues accumulate, it is essential to implement longer-term solutions.

### 2) A participant asked how the government would improve medical literacy (such as the ability to distinguish fake news on the Internet), especially among the elderly.

- Minister Ong said that the COVID-19 pandemic allowed GPs into the public health system to deliver better preventive care. As such, this could ensure lasting patient-doctor relationships and improve elderly medical literacy.

3) A participant asked if the means testing system was able to be simplified to ensure easier access to preventive medicine and healthcare coverage, especially for vulnerable families.

- Minister Ong said strict means testing was still needed to ensure that Governmental assistance would reach those who need it most. However, he added that the Government could simplify the means testing system by reducing repeated tests conducted by different agencies as patients pass through the healthcare system.

4) A participant asked how the Government was planning to include healthcare professionals outside of doctors (such as physiotherapists, pharmacists, nurses, and psychologists) in the HealthierSG Plan.

- Minister Ong said that while doctors would play a critical role in the patient's life course to close medical literacy gaps, he acknowledged that all healthcare professionals continue to have essential roles, especially in educating people within their social circles

5) A participant asked how Singapore could ensure sufficient manpower for nursing homes and assisted living facilities given the global increase in competition for skilled nursing care.

- Minister Ong acknowledged that the unsustainable rising demand for skilled nursing care was because the population was becoming more unhealthy and experiencing more chronic illnesses rather than it being due to the rising ageing population.
- Minister Ong said that training more local nurses would not be a sustainable solution in light of Singapore's ageing population. As such, it is also essential to encourage good foreign nurses to work in Singapore and ensure their integration into the care team.
- Minister Ong also encouraged participants not to view other countries' recruitment of Singaporean nurses as competition but as a potential for Singapore to grow as a talent hub for nursing training and qualifications.

# Theme: Social Mobility

## Discussion points from the breakout sessions:

- Participants said that social mobility was related to a sense of “not falling behind” and acknowledged that Singaporeans trusted that hard work would be rewarded with upward mobility.
- Participants said that enhancing social mobility necessitated rethinking the forms of support offered and examining if other platforms (e.g. aside from housing) could be provided as a springboard for Singaporeans to achieve their potential.
- Participants called for the private and people sectors to play a more prominent role in improving social mobility by offering upskilling opportunities for parents and providing additional support for children.

## 1) A participant asked how wealth can be enabled to flow better across society given the resistance to wealth taxes within.

- Minister Ong said that wealth taxes and income transfers had been one of the levers in solving inequality issues. However, such efforts would require cooperation from the majority of Singaporeans, similar to past efforts (e.g. 95% taking vaccinations to protect the 5% of anti-vaxxers from COVID-19 spreading).
- Minister Ong said that as such, many international economies would conclude that the fairest taxes are GST taxes, where taxes are levied on all in society. He added that this could improve livelihoods among vulnerable families, paired with good social spending programmes by providing better public services targeted at the masses (e.g. education and healthcare systems).
- Minister Masagos agreed that taxation was just one of the many structures for income redistribution. However, he added that wealth was best transferred through citizens’ generosity and should not be forced, as many charitable actions tended to be carried out to fulfil personal spiritual needs.

## 2) A participant asked if there were better ways to increase the accessibility of opportunities and accurate supporting information to vulnerable groups who may be unaware of aid they qualify for.

- Minister Masagos said that while the Government provides various aid to vulnerable groups, they were usually unaware of the support available. As such, Singapore must endeavour to close gaps present in its last-mile efforts and build trust with these families to understand their needs better and assist them accordingly. He added that the Government is looking into implementing a scalable action plan that centres around families, ensuring a more extensive support system for individuals.
- Minister Masagos said that outreach efforts to vulnerable groups should not solely rely on the Government alone but requires coordination with other parties, such as volunteer organisations and corporations, to ensure society's long-term betterment. Minister Masagos also said that Singapore, as a society, should strive towards assisting each other as much as possible as it would be logistically impossible to help every affected family.
- Minister Masagos highlighted that corporations could go beyond donating money to fulfil their corporate social responsibility and instead run upskilling programmes targeted at lower-income groups to impart helpful knowledge.

# Theme: Family

## Discussion points from the breakout sessions:

- Participants said that Singaporeans faced many challenges in building and supporting their families, such as housing stressors, rising costs of living and caregiving burdens.
- Participants emphasised the importance of social structure in supporting families, such as social support from communities. They encouraged individuals to extend support to others to foster a family-friendly culture.
- Participants said that work-life balance issues affected Singaporeans' desire to start families. While they acknowledged that flexible work arrangements (FWAs) were helpful, they also called for more equitable work arrangements between mothers and fathers and infrastructure to support different needs (e.g. childcare).

1) A participant asked if it was possible for the Government to create a multi-ministry taskforce for familial support.

- Minister Indranee said that the Government already coordinates family-related policies across various ministries through the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). By doing so, agencies can cross-share ideas and solutions to address issues on familial support.

2) A participant asked how the Government could strengthen the social structure and ensure better work-life balance for families such that Singaporeans receive the assurances needed to start a family.

- Minister Indranee said that the Government encouraged FWAs to ensure better work-life balance. However, she said that while FWA was generally associated with work-from-home arrangements, it would not apply to all employees (e.g. frontline workers). Furthermore, she said that to ensure the effectiveness of FWAs, employers must also come on board, as changing and redesigning structures would start from the workplace and HR departments.
- Minister Indranee added that the Government would continue to review other forms of social support in light of rising living costs (e.g. reducing fee caps for childcare). She encouraged parents to adopt good parenting habits and provide a supportive environment aligned with their child's needs, focusing on supporting their children's self-confidence and development in their learning processes.

3) A participant asked if it was possible to equalise parental leave in the long run.

- Minister Indranee said that while the policy for shared parental leave was a start, the Government would first have to encourage fathers to utilise paternity leave better, as the current uptake was 50%. She said employers also had to be encouraged to be more facilitative of fathers taking paternity leave.
- Mr Ong said that if the Government were to mandate equal parental leave now, it would cause an undue burden on industries and companies that may still need to adapt. However, he added that as gender roles evolved, leave entitlement should also move in a similar direction, although he acknowledged that more needed to be done to ensure gender equality.