

## Detailed Notes

### National Youth Dialogue on Renewing Our Social Compact

Session Details: Saturday, 23 July 2022, 11.30 am – 1.30 pm. A hybrid engagement co-organised by the Global Shapers Community Singapore and the National Youth Council (NYC), which had a total of 106 participants onsite and via Zoom webinar.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. The moderator and host, Mr Tan Kuan Hian – Vice Curator of Global Shapers (Singapore Hub), welcomed participants to the first session of the National Youth Dialogue. He introduced the panellists:
  - i. Mr Alvin Tan, Minister of State (MOS) for Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of Trade and Industry;
  - ii. Ms Marlisa Rosli, Chief Executive Officer at Majulah Community;
  - iii. Dr Ng Kok Hoe, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Case Study Unit at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy; and
  - iv. Professor Walter Theseira, Associate Professor at Singapore University of Social Sciences.
  
2. Mr Tan introduced the Global Shapers Community as a global network of young people under the age of 30 set-up to tackle local, regional and global challenges. He said there were over 10,000 current and former Global Shapers based out of 444 city-based hubs in 147 countries, including 25 members of the Singapore Hub team.
  
3. Mr Tan said that the National Youth Dialogue, a partnership between Global Shapers Singapore and National Youth Council, would be a series of 7 dialogues which aimed to:
  - i. Expose youth to important perspectives on critical issues for the future;
  - ii. Give young people an opportunity to voice their views and have them heard by leaders in the public, private and people sectors;
  - iii. Provide an opportunity for youth to meet like-minded individuals and fellow peers; and

- iv. Provide a chance for youth to access opportunities and resources.
4. Mr Tan said that the session on Renewing Our Social Compact examined local and global transitions amidst a changing world and economic order. He said that based on a study examining youth insights on Singapore's social compact, (i) 9 out of 10 youths believe that social equality is a significant value <sup>1</sup>; (ii) over three-quarters of youths agreed with the statement that the country is only successful if no one is left behind <sup>2</sup>; and (iii) youths felt strongly for areas including healthcare, housing and support for the vulnerable <sup>3</sup>.

## **OPENING REMARKS**

5. MOS Tan said that global issues including COVID-19, war and climate change were generational seismic shifts in how youths work, live, play and interact with each other. He said that Singapore's leadership was also undergoing a generational transition from 3G to 4G, and it was crucial for new policy moves to support the refreshed social compact.
6. MOS Tan shared that Singapore is at a generational transition point, and Forward SG aims to build consensus on what the new social compact should be and how to build it together. He shared the six Forward SG pillars, which were:
- i. Empower – economy and jobs;
  - ii. Equip – equipping oneself through education and life-long learning;
  - iii. Care – health, social support;
  - iv. Building – where one lives and their living environment;
  - v. Steward – fiscal and environmental sustainability; and
  - vi. Unite – Singapore identity and issues that could unite or divide Singaporeans.
7. MOS Tan said that a social compact was a shared understanding of how people relate to one another and would shape the growth of society. He said that a social contract sets up the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, including

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS) Wave 5 (2021), NYC

<sup>2</sup> Youth Sentiment Polls 2021, NYC

<sup>3</sup> Youth Sentiment on Budget 2022 Poll, NYC

the Government, business, community, and the individuals in society.

8. MOS Tan said that Singapore faced pressing issues, including increasing healthcare and social expenditure due to an ageing population. He opined that the changing social compact presented new opportunities to youths who were digital natives to leverage new trends to grow Singapore's economy and create good jobs.
9. MOS Tan said that youths played an essential role in shaping Singapore and would be provided avenues to share their thoughts on the Forward Singapore pillars. He encouraged youths to share their ideas and reassured them that the Government would support them to be heard, be empowered and be the change.

## **PANELLISTS' OPENING REMARKS**

### **Ms Marlisa Rosli**

10. Ms Marlisa said that civil societies (e.g. charities etc.) advocated for causes independently from the Government and served as (i) service providers, (ii) advocacy groups, (iii) a form of check and balance and (iv) building active citizenship.
11. Ms Marlisa opined that civil society in Singapore had been doing a good job, especially during the pandemic, by addressing issues on the ground. She said that the social compact was a partnership between the people and the Government, and both parties had to agree on priorities as a community. She said it was civil society's responsibility to work with the Government and the people to establish that agreement.
12. Ms Marlisa said that different groups, including youths, should be included in such conversations. It was important to tolerate different perspectives and ensure all parties developed empathy and understanding to work towards a better good despite not having common ground. She called for Singaporeans to recognise their responsibility in ensuring a future Singapore that they hope to see.

### **Dr Ng Kok Hoe**

13. Dr Ng said that different social welfare policies and systems (e.g. social democratic, liberal and conservative), depending on their underlying beliefs, produced consistent and predictable consequences for equality and cohesion.
14. Dr Ng said that Singapore's public housing was an example of a liberal approach. Although developed by the state, housing was based on market principles, thus making it an asset and not a right. He said that HDB rented out to persons of lower income, but units were under-resourced, highly residualised, of poor quality, and difficult to qualify for.
15. Dr Ng said that a liberal approach to welfare often created social stigma by limiting support to minorities and singling them out as anomalies, leading to moral judgements that these beneficiaries must be undeserving. He said that liberal welfare based on market principles was competitive, individualising, and divisive.
16. Dr Ng suggested that Singapore move from a market-based model to a universal model to create a more equal society and support the vulnerable more effectively. He encouraged participants to think of public services as acts of collective responsibility and mutual support beyond the immediate family and suggested the pooling of resources and sharing risks through more universal social policies as acts of care towards others to create a kinder and more resilient society.

### **Professor Walter Theseira**

17. Prof Theseira recounted that the largest Government non-defence expenditure at independence in Singapore was education. He said that presently, the Government spending on education and health is almost the same and constitutes about 30% of the Government budget overall. He said the shift in expenditure was due to changing demographics from having a large young population to a large ageing population.
18. Prof Theseira said that the spending priorities of a country were primarily structural, and social welfare policy would influence Government spending. He raised examples post-independence, where approximately a third of Singaporeans lived

in kampungs and there were high unemployment rates. He noted that many policies were created to encourage foreign direct investment and reduce the fertility rate. He compared this to the present day, where most Singaporeans are well-educated and live in public flats.

19. Prof Theseira said that it was often difficult for people of different generations to see things from other points of view and encouraged Singaporeans to work towards achieving common ground by appreciating the views of people with different personal histories and backgrounds.

### **QUESTION AND ANSWER SEGMENT**

**“How do we sensitise a population that is still very much against concepts like getting welfare, to be more embracing of some of these support structures for the less well-off and married couples who come from the less affluent backgrounds while also maintaining a system of meritocracy?”**

20. Prof Theseira agreed it was worrying when inequality is stratified and isolates populations from each other. He raised the example of marrying within similar social circles, which was difficult to overcome through social policy.

21. Dr Ng said that policy design could be considered in changing people's impressions of beneficiaries, social policies, and social support. He compared targeted schemes and universal schemes and said that targeted schemes were available to fewer people, and this minority was more likely to be stereotyped as different by the others.

22. MOS Tan said that the state's role was to address the present issues, where initiatives must be designed to smooth out society inequalities. He said that with the social compact shifting over time, the Government had to consider how better to distribute resources.

**“What is your opinion of the state of Singapore's current social compact, and how is that social compact going to hold up?”**

23. Ms Marlisa said that youths have a lot to offer but may lack courage or a safe space to effect change without fear of backlash. She called for youths to talk about such issues openly in a school setting and be encouraged that they too have a responsibility in society. She said that families should also be empowered to hold such conversations as they too have a say within their community to make changes.
24. Dr Ng said that Singaporeans were more aware of the pressure on the social compact and were more ready to talk about social sustainability. While he acknowledged social progress being made via the Progressive Wage Model, he also called for changes in societal perceptions of poverty and poor people. He said that deeply entrenched mindsets that explain poverty using psychology and individual motivation were at odds with social science and policy analysis.
25. Prof Theseira said that a social compact was something citizens collectively agreed to through a social contract. He expressed concern that people's ideas of what a social compact should be would become increasingly fractured. He said that the presence of social media tended to amplify the divergence in society, making it more challenging to come to an agreement.
26. Prof Theseira said that while having such conversations between citizens and the Government were necessary, he suggested having a more formalised system of contesting policy ideas and trialling them.

**“How can we encourage a culture of feedback and active citizenship if there is a strong taboo surrounding dissent and activism?”**

27. MOS Tan said that at the end of every Cabinet discussion, the one question that stood out would always be, “Is it good for Singapore/Singaporeans?”. He said that it was a difficult question to answer as Singapore was not homogenous, but healthy contestation of ideas was welcomed.

**“Do you think that meritocracy still exists in Singapore?”**

28. Prof Theseira said while most people did not have an issue with the meritocratic process of determining who gets to perform certain roles in society, there were

issues in the distribution of rewards, and certain people received significantly more rewards than someone else in another profession.

29. Prof Theseira said that meritocracy produced the best person for the job. Still, meritocracy perpetuated itself to a certain extent, i.e., those selected meritocratically tended to have children who also succeeded in the same system and obtained similar positions. He said that rewards should not be hoarded to the point of becoming completely entrenched, and others who are not selected should be able to make an honest living to ensure their children have a good chance of succeeding.

30. Ms Marlisa agreed with Prof Theseira and said that the lack of access in terms of education, networks and privileges affected youths from low-income families more and negatively affected their well-being, confidence and how they viewed themselves. She said that while the Majulah Community had been reaching out to youths to provide them with access to programmes, more could be done to bridge the gap. She called for more support to be provided to youths regarding job opportunities and supporting their interests and passions.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

31. Dr Ng said that the community (including families, individuals and informal social networks) played an important role in a renewed social compact. He said that while space could be acceded for the community to step up, public policy too played a governing role in all aspects and areas of everyone's lives. He said that even in areas not covered by public policy, a conscious decision had been made not to govern. He called for the community to be provided resources to perform their role meaningfully and encouraged the Government to provide spaces on when to give and when to pull back.

32. Prof Theseira said the social compact was driven by a consensus on values and existing structures. He cited the example of housing policy in Singapore and said it was hard to reach a consensus on affirmative action or provide special consideration to specific groups.

33. Prof Theseira said that Singapore's social compact needed to evolve to meet the needs of the public now. He said that while Singapore is an incredibly successful society, there was a tendency to live "in the past" and think that policies could be changed slightly and would continue serving the people well in the future. He said that this would mean not questioning Singapore's value system. He said he hoped everyone would not hesitate to ask difficult questions if the social compact needed to evolve.
34. Ms Marlisa agreed that renewing the social compact should involve the community and additional resources (e.g., space and support) should be provided. She hoped to hear more from the perspectives of youths with limited access to opportunities. She said that outliers, too, had useful insights to change Singapore through their own means and were able to contribute to the community. She said that the Majulah Community aimed to better support underprivileged youths through mentoring. She hoped to destigmatise mentoring into a natural and organic process for youth and working adults. She called for Singaporeans to have more empathy and understanding and to come together to have conversations on the shared values needed to support each other as part of society.
35. Ms Marlisa said it was important to understand different social media platforms and what content to put out to gain insights from youths. She encouraged participants to educate themselves, have an open mind, be humble in learning and relearning certain things they see online, and discern right from wrong.
36. MOS Tan said that it was not easy for the Government to make weekly decisions on key issues (e.g., foreign relations, food security etc.) that may seem abstract to Singaporeans. He said that despite making significant progress, Singapore remained vulnerable but affirmed that the basis and foundation of Singapore society had already been established through the social compact.
37. MOS Tan said that certain structures and policies may need to be significantly changed and that social compacts were constantly being refined over time to steward the next generation. He said that ultimately Singapore would have to

depend on the next generation to define the social compact and deal with pressing issues such as mental well-being, mentoring, and fiscal and environmental sustainability.

38. MOS Tan encouraged the community to partner with the Government for funding and network resources. He cited the Singapore Mentoring Alliance for Action, which aims to create a mentoring culture in Singapore through peer-to-peer mentoring and across different societal groups. He called for youths to reach out to NYC if they had an idea and affirmed the Government's commitment to support ground-up projects.

### **CALL TO ACTION**

39. Mr Tan thanked the panellists for their time. He shared that youths could partner with the Government through the Youth Action Challenge and Young ChangeMakers Grant and encouraged participants to attend the Youth Corps Community Fair 2022 or join the Global Shapers Community.

Notes recorded by the National Youth Council Youth Leadership Team.