RPCS QUARTERLY

SPECIAL ISSUE

Report on the International Conference on Communities of Success 2024 (ICCOS)

Editorial

In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

Dear Readers and Friends of MUIS,

The Communities of Success initiative *is a positive and forward-looking articulation of a vision of Islam and Muslim communities that engages with the modern world, and thrives in and actively contributes to contemporary societies, while drawing from the rich tapestry of the Islamic tradition. This vision is especially critical for Muslim communities living in secular political contexts and diverse social environments, as the socioreligious issues and challenges encountered in such contexts are often without much precedence in Islamic history.*

*As part of the Communities of Success initiative, the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCOS) provides a platform for global Muslim minority communities to engage in whilst enriching us with positive narratives and characteristics of successful communities embodying good **Character, Competency and Citizenry**. It seeks to contribute to the shaping of progressive religious leadership and the development of new and contextualised bodies of knowledge to guide Muslims in responding effectively to complex socioreligious issues and challenges. It highlights the need for collaboration among religious scholars, state officials and community leaders to develop successful communities.*

*At the inaugural conference in 2022, entitled **"Contributing Citizens, Dynamic Institutions"**, we explored the first step towards building a Muslim community of success, whereby Muslims act as equal citizens and participate actively towards nation-building, striving towards strengthening both community and national institutions. The conference set out to illustrate how Muslims, even as minorities, can set the example of a model community in contemporary societies, guided by Islamic principles and valuable lessons from its history and traditions, and cognisant of modern-day issues and developments in a fast-paced and continuously evolving world. ICCOS 2022 also examined the meaningful collaborative efforts between government agencies and Muslim communities in building robust and resilient institutions that contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion and active citizenry within plural societies and a globalised world.*

*Alhamdulillah, ICCOS 2024, with the theme **"Inspiring Future Leaders: Building Trust, Empowering Communities"** was successfully organised on 14th and 15th October 2024. This second conference focused on the role of current and future community leaders in nurturing Communities of Success. Their role in collaborating with other societal actors is crucial in achieving a thriving life for all. The conference explored how community leaders represent and develop a self-reliant community that is equipped with the right attitude, knowledge, competency and vision. For Muslim community leaders, we discussed how Islamic values and principles can serve as guiding frameworks. Through effective community leadership, leaders engender trust among social actors, contributing excellence at societal, national and global levels.*

ICCOS 2024 explored four key areas affecting present and future leadership:

1. Social Upliftment and Empowerment

This area emphasises the role of community leaders in empowering and uplifting community members, especially through education and social work. It highlights the need to address socioeconomic disadvantages and their potential negative impacts on community development, social mobility, and fostering trust and social cohesion.

2. Representative Leadership

This focus area stresses the importance of community leaders representing their community's interests effectively. It underscores the need for inclusive leadership, recognising the diversity within Muslim communities (cultural, ethnic, gender, age, etc.) to ensure fair representation and address the concerns of all segments.

3. Social Cohesion for the Future

This area centres on the importance of community leadership in building social cohesion. Drawing on historical and contemporary understandings of social cohesion, this area aims to foster well-being, a sense of belonging and voluntary participation among all members of society.

4. Considerations for the Future: Entrepreneurs, Professionals and Religious Sector:

This area highlights the importance of collaboration between different sectors in addressing future societal challenges. Recognising the complexity of issues in a BANI world (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear and Incomprehensible), ICCOS 2024 aimed to bring together diverse perspectives and expertise in order to develop holistic solutions.

We are pleased to share with you the ICCOS 2024 conference report, which documents the main highlights of the exciting programme, showcasing local and international political and community leaders, religious leaders, academics and practitioners across the different domains. ICCOS 2024 also actively involved youths through the ICCOS 2024 Youth Hackathon and brought participants on learning journeys beyond the conference venue. We are also excited to share with you the Communities of Success Programme (COSP) 2024, which took place in November 2024. We welcome any feedback you may have on the proceedings and contents of this report.

With best wishes from the RPCS Editorial Team

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Keynote Address

by Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam,
President of the Republic of Singapore

President Tharman expressed his pleasure in joining the guests and attendees at the second International Conference on Communities of Success. He extended his warm welcome to foreign guests, also acknowledging the diverse audience made up of religious scholars, academic scholars, community leaders and policymakers from around the world.

He highlighted that when the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) embarked on this biennial conference series two years ago, it was precisely with this in mind – to have leaders of wide-ranging backgrounds come together to share ideas and experiences, have frank discussions on the challenges faced by minority Muslim communities and explore practical pathways for these communities to thrive as Communities of Success.

While the large majority of the 2 billion or so Muslims in the world live in Muslim-majority countries, about one-fifth, which is close to 400 million Muslims, live in countries where Islam is not the majority religion. These Muslim communities have experiences which are typically different from societies where Muslims form the majority. There are, at times, no precedents from Islamic history and traditions to guide these Muslims as they seek to practise their faith within societies in which they are the minority.

Mr Tharman shared his sentiments that the theme for the 2024 conference, "Inspiring Future Leaders: Building Trust, Empowering

Communities", was also timely as it came at a time of profound uncertainty globally and growing ethnic intolerance and polarisation in many societies worldwide.

The unfolding tragic conflicts in the Middle East had their own unique political features. However, as Mr Tharman highlighted, we also saw a broader loss of trust between communities in many other parts of the world. They were a reminder that multiethnic cohesion, even once achieved, can never be taken as a given.

Mr Tharman felt that the global developments illustrated an uncomfortable reality: that history does not progress automatically towards greater understanding between people of different races or religions, a deeper sense of shared identity, or lesser segregation, even as societies advance in wealth. Ethnic prejudices and anxieties may be hard to eradicate, and they could easily be aroused or manipulated by sectarian forces, as observed in recent years both in Asia and around the world.

He pointed to the recent disorders in Britain, whose society had been regarded in many ways as being more tolerant than many others in the developed world – specifically, the riots in 2022 between Hindus and Muslims occurring in Leicester, a city once celebrated as the model of diversity, and the more recent riots fomented by white nationalist groups targeting Muslims especially. He pointed out that the causes were rarely simple and varied from one society to another, whilst often reflecting both ethnic prejudices and social and economic anxieties that had been left to fester.

What was clear enough, he shared, was that liberal or laissez-faire models of multiculturalism, where diversity was recognised or even celebrated but was not bolstered with proactive efforts to deepen interactions and build a shared identity between people of different races and religions, had failed. Laissez-faire multiculturalism failed.

It was also clear for Mr Tharman that when race and religion became woven into politics, the differences and anxieties between people grew over time and became more combustible. He invited the audience to draw lessons from not just decades-old history but the recent and continuing realities in different parts of the world.

> *On the flip side, he highlighted that just as history tells us that multiethnic cohesion is never assured, neither is polarisation a given. We could build on the positive experiences we see as we strive to build resilient multiethnic social compacts and enable minority communities to succeed and thrive.*

Mr Tharman suggested that there were indeed such examples of tolerance and harmony in societies with significant religious minorities – from Albania to Kazakhstan.

He then shared Singapore's own experience, the continuous journey of building multiethnic unity and enabling communities of success. Singapore is one of the most culturally and religiously diverse countries in the world with Muslims making up about 16% of the population. An international study in 2023 found that Singaporeans of all

faiths are tolerant and accepting of followers of different religions, and 88% of Singaporean adults believe that Islam is compatible with the national culture and values.

Mr. Tharman emphasised that it had taken decades of hard work by the Singapore government and society to weave a multiracial and multireligious fabric out of our diverse traditions. Each community took pride in its own culture and identity, but in the end, they also took pride together and became a peaceful multicultural society, where Singaporeans not only accepted one another as different communities but recognised everyone's contributions to peace and progress and thus developed a shared sense of belonging. Mr. Tharman stated that Singapore has done this, especially through its political system, through policies in education and housing that encourage integration – ethnic integration through an economy that provides opportunities for all and through continuous dialogue between religious leaders and their communities.

Coming out of a difficult history of communal strife, race and religion were taken out of politics, starting from Singapore's independence. Importantly, this included the majority community, namely the Chinese, eschewing majoritarian politics and accepting that being a majority did not mean having government policies that favour the majority.

Mr. Tharman highlighted that education has been Singapore's most fundamental strategy for developing the qualities needed for a cohesive society. It is how social mixing is encouraged from young so that each new

generation develops a sense of familiarity and solidarity with one another as Singaporeans, regardless of race or religion. This comes not from textbooks, but from their shared experience of growing up together.

Singapore has also created networks for frequent dialogue between members of different religious groups. Singapore's religious leaders engage in regular interreligious dialogues through formal platforms such as the National Steering Committee of Racial and Religious Harmony and ground-up organisations such as the Inter-Religious Organisation, as well as through informal networks that breed friendship and understanding about its religious leaders.

Within their own places of worship, religious leaders guide their followers and practise their faith in a way that is consistent with the basic tenets of Singapore's multicultural compact. At the grassroots level, its community leaders actively promote multiracial and interfaith mixing through the Racial and Religious Harmony Circles and through social activities such as sports. In government, leaders and policymakers ensure that laws and policies do not discriminate against any group. They frequently engage with community and religious leaders, speak openly about

sensitive issues that have to be addressed and keep open lines of communication.

Mr Tharman highlighted that alongside these national efforts, Singapore's Muslim community, including the ethnic Malay population, which is predominantly Muslim, is charting its path forward to uplift and empower its members. One of the most significant measures is M^3, which harnesses the resources of three key Malay-Muslim organisations – in religious guidance, self-help in education and skills, and grassroots activities. Some of M^3's initiatives include efforts to strengthen marriages and families, empower students to aspire and achieve their goals, improve education and health outcomes as well as support low-income households.

He felt that the key priority has also been to forge unity amid the diverse Islamic traditions and practices. Here, competent and respected religious leaders and teachers play an active role. For example, the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) enhances the standing of our religious leaders and religious teachers, and serves as a credible source of reference for Singapore Muslims. Returning graduates from overseas Islamic universities in Muslim-majority countries undergo the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies. This helps them to apply religious principles in ways that align with Singapore's cultural and societal fabric.

Furthermore, with the recent announcement by Singapore's Prime Minister to establish the Singapore College for Islamic Studies to train future generations of Asatizahs, such initiatives will help build a stronger Asatizah fraternity.

More recently, in August 2024, the new Islamic Endowment Fund, known as the Wakaf Masyarakat Singapura or the Singapore Community Wakaf, was launched to fund the needs of the Singapore Muslim community more sustainably. For Mr Tharman, it showed that the communities in Singapore are strong, building virtuous cycles of generosity and contribution towards a more confident, caring and inclusive society.

Mr Tharman felt that the Singapore Muslim community, even as a minority, enriches society in every way. Its members include teachers, doctors, police officers, firefighters, scientists and sports heroes whose contributions go far beyond their own community.

> *For him, building communities of success for minority communities is not just good to have, but a necessity.*

When a minority community underperforms its potential or is discriminated against, it challenges the values Singapore holds dear as a society.

> *Alluding to the points he highlighted earlier, however, Mr Tharman emphasised that building a multireligious and multicultural compact is a continuous journey, and we can never take our foot off the pedal.*

The high degree of trust and respect that exists today between Singapore's communities is not assured all the time. It can unravel, as it has in so many other

societies. And even as we eliminate overt racial or religious prejudices, we must pay attention to the subtle prejudices and subtle segregation, such as whether we include classmates or work colleagues from other ethnic groups in conversations and in circles of friends at lunch or in the neighbourhood. Even as we eliminate overt prejudices, we must pay attention to the subtle prejudices.

To conclude, President Tharman acknowledged that while he had elaborated a little on Singapore's experience in his speech, it was by no means the only example.

He felt that we have much to learn from each other's experiences. He shared his aspiration that the ICCOS conference series would not only be just a meeting place of ideas and platforms, but also enable leaders to come together, inspire one another and find practical pathways for minority Muslim communities to flourish, as well as ultimately be an effort to find practical solutions for minority Muslim communities to succeed, not just now, but for generations to come.

Conference Address

By Mr Ahmed Aboutaleb,
Former Mayor of Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Former Ambassador Ahmed Aboutaleb began his conference address by posing a question to the audience: "Which country in Europe used to be the largest Muslim country? Spain? Andalusia? More hands? No, not Britain in India. What? No. It was my country, the Netherlands."

Mr Aboutaleb pointed out that this was the case when Indonesia was a Dutch colony. He shared that when he told this to his people in the Netherlands, that they had been the largest Islamic country in the world, they were in disbelief.

Mr Aboutaleb reiterated that the Netherlands was the largest Islamic country in the world when it controlled Indonesia between 1816 and 1945. Eighty years later, Muslims in the Netherlands are a minority. Only 6% of the Dutch people – out of 18 million – are Muslims. Hence, the Muslims in the Netherlands are a minority.

According to Mr Aboutaleb, Islam in the Netherlands is visible in the streets through the presence of mosques, and people can be recognised as Muslims by their clothing, by Islamic-based schools that offer a government-dictated curriculum. He further shared that there are 49 such schools in the Netherlands, with seven situated in Rotterdam, where he used to serve as Mayor. More recently, one of the things that he and his team are working on is the establishment of Muslim cemeteries. This is a pressing need as the existing practice required Muslims who wanted to establish cemeteries to purchase the land themselves – one of the many challenges that Muslims face in Europe.

Mr Aboutaleb highlighted that the situation could get "really tough". Referring to President Tharman Shanmugaratnam's earlier speech, he reiterated on the riots in Britain, and how any action of wrongdoing would be attributed to Muslims in general. He referred to a recent case in Rotterdam perpetrated by an individual who was unwell mentally and killed someone with a knife, unfortunately preceding his action by shouting "*Allahu Akhbar*!" ("God is Great!"). Subsequently, the far-right wing in Europe dubbed him a terrorist precisely because of this specific utterance. Mr Aboutaleb countered this allegation of associating terrorism merely by the utterance of "*Allahu Akhbar*" – he himself uttered the phrase more than 100 times a day in his daily obligatory prayers. Unfortunately, he lamented, such was the climate in which people live today in contemporary Europe, and that was an important point to note.

The Charlie Hebdo crisis in France was another instance, involving the murder of several members of the editorial team of the French satirical magazine in 2015. The publication was infamous for publishing cartoons mocking Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. The murders led to high tension in Europe. It led to political questions like, "Is it okay that we Europeans allow Muslims to get into Europe? Look what they are doing! Is it okay to keep our borders open and to get so many refugees from the Arab-Islamic world? Is that okay in Europe? Is that a danger to Europe?" The whole fiasco turned political. Mr Aboutaleb recounted that the incident coincided with the month that he had decided to organise a big public gathering in Rotterdam. He delivered a speech in front of thousands of people whereby he decided to turn his face to Paris, and to speak to the

Parisians in French. A newspaper that covered his event pointed out that his speech as Rotterdam mayor had kept the country, the Netherlands, calm. Mr Aboutaleb used this as an example to show that leadership with an Islamic background can be helpful in such harsh situations in Europe. As he pointed out, be like the fireman, whereby speech is the water the fireman uses to get the fire under control. For him, that was a true moment of significance in his life.

He emphasised that, as a community leader, he felt responsible to address the issue and to defuse tensions, given the Charlie Hebdo crisis had the potential to spark unrest and deepen divisions. It illustrated leadership – to step up when necessary. For Mr Aboutaleb, it was also an example of informal leadership, which is important in helping to cultivate connections in society.

Another key challenge for the Muslim communities in Europe, he said, is the lack of proper leadership. He observed that the Muslims there did not recognise the existing leadership as representative. He felt that they did not have any real, visible leaders. Muslims who were involved in public debates about the presence of Islam in Europe usually did so in a personal capacity and did not speak on behalf of the community. Also, the community often did not regard these people as their leaders.

Mr Aboutaleb shared that Muslims in Europe are organised along ethnic lines. For example, they have Turkish, Moroccan and other mosques. Their leaders in mosques and their respective Imams have little knowledge of European cultures and do not speak Dutch, French nor the English

language. They spoke in native languages, thus complicating communication and dialogue with the majority communities. Mr Aboutaleb felt that expressing a united political position in the face of government and parliament was almost impossible. For him, Muslims were expected to show solidarity and to engage in dialogue with others. On this point, how Singapore organised its Muslim community could be a lesson for Muslims in Europe, he opined.

For political and religious minorities in a democratic country, according to Mr Aboutaleb, a form of cooperation among Muslims, regardless of ethnic background, is crucial in order to be socially and politically visible. While he acknowledged that many had looked to him in recent years for leadership, he stressed that he was a political figure and not a religious leader. He had been told by government bodies to step forward and do the work, but he had stood his ground and pointed out that he was not a religious leader per se. For him, he ought to only keep to his area of expertise and thus stuck to his values and principles taught to him as a Muslim.

Mr Aboutaleb recounted what his father had said to him – that it was truly important to work together in strengthening the community, as based on a verse in the Holy Book, Al-Quran:

"

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَى

And cooperate in righteousness and piety.
(Surah Al-Ma'idah, 5:2)

"

Additionally:

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يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوٓا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

"Oh mankind! We have created you from male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is the most righteous among you."

(Surah Al-Hujurat, 49: 13)

"

According to Mr Aboutaleb, the injunction was there – to connect with one another, learn from one another and do good things. He noted that there were indeed a lot of lessons to be drawn from Islam.

Mr Aboutaleb highlighted that for Muslims living in countries where they form the majority, many things are self-evident. Ramadan is taken as a norm; so is reading Al-Quran in a mosque. However, he pointed out that these are not the norm in the West. In some countries, things that are self-evident to Muslims are even being nullified. For example, female Muslim students in France are not allowed to wear the hijab in schools at all times, as France is a secular country. He questioned, are Muslims then supposed to keep their girls at home and not send them to school? Is setting up their own private schools a solution? Or should Muslims simply accept the situation as fact? Mr Aboutaleb concluded that he did not have the answers to those questions, but such situations are increasingly becoming the norm in Europe.

Conference Address

Mr Aboutaleb then shared how honoured he felt when he hosted the visit of the previous President of Singapore, Madam Halimah Yacob, in Rotterdam. For him, the discussions spent with Madam Halimah taught him a great lesson about tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance meant that one kept a distance and as long as one did not bother the other with his presence, it was acceptable. However, that is not the case in society nowadays. What should be the norm is to accept one another, to accept the existing differences. Alluding to his earlier point, he highlighted that God created every human being differently, and there is wisdom in our difference. If God had intended, He could have created a single people and established only one language. Hence, there was a need to move from tolerance towards acceptance. For Mr Aboutaleb, this was also another significant lesson from Singapore.

Regarding Madam Halimah Yacob, Mr Aboutaleb felt that she was an impactful President who was active and truly worked together with the people around her to make a difference. For him, that was the reason she was placed in the highest office, as she was an inspiration to the younger generation and especially to women, that they too could make an impact.

Similarly, Mr Aboutaleb saw himself as a lesson for the generations after him – that it is normal for a Muslim to be a mayor in environments that do not have a Muslim majority. He also hoped that Muslims would similarly be accepted as how the acceptance rate for him was very high for close to 16 years. He shared that he had to be persistent and knock on closed doors; sometimes he had to shake those doors, and then open them and declare, "Hey, I'm here. I'm eligible. I have the authority to serve this nation, and I love it." While he felt it might not be the best of comparisons, he highlighted that in times of war, no nation has ever sent foot soldiers to the frontline. Instead, they send in the Marines first to make the opening move, and the other soldiers then follow suit. Mr. Aboutaleb saw himself as a kind of Marine, who opened the doors and accepted the opportunity to be Mayor.

For Mr. Aboutaleb, another very important lesson from Singapore was on education. He found the role that madrasahs play in Singapore as comforting. "If I was a dictator and I have ten dollars to spend," he said, "the first dollar will indeed be spent on education. Likewise for the second and third dollar, and only thereafter will I think of spending the remaining money elsewhere."

He went on to recite the following poem:

> رَبُّوا بَنِيكُم ،عَلِّمُوهُم، هَذِّبُوا
> فَتَيَاتِكُم، فَالْعِلْمُ خَيرُ قِوَامِ
>
> *Raise your sons, teach them, refine their character and your daughters too, for knowledge is the finest pillar*
>
> وَالعِلْمُ مَالُ المُعدَمِينَ إِذَا هُمُوا
> خَرَجُوا إِلَى الدُّنْيَا بِغَيرِ حُطَامِ
>
> *Knowledge is the wealth of those who have nothing when they enter the world without material fortune*
>
> وَأَخُو الجَهَالَةِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ كَأَنَّهُ
> سَاعٍ إِلَى حَرْبٍ بِغَيرِ حُسَامِ
>
> *The ignorant, in this life, is like a man who rushes to a war without a sword*

To him, the poem was a jab at parents, reminding them that not providing knowledge to their children was akin to generals sending their soldiers to the frontline without any arms. Mr Aboutaleb expressed his concurrence with the poet, in that providing education is necessary in order to move forward in society. He strongly felt that education is key and the best form of investment. Likewise, the madrasahs in Singapore. He also alluded to the sharing by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam on the establishment of the Singapore College of Islamic Studies. He felt that Islamic Studies are very important to show that Muslims are participating in the country's development because they have something to offer and deliver. In fact, by doing so, Muslims will not be complaining about being a minority but instead be contributing and delivering to the country.

In summary, there were seven lessons he garnered from Singapore:

1. Show as a community that Muslims radiate strength

2. Show as a community that Muslims can make a difference

3. Show as a community that Muslims are tolerant, and that acceptance is very important

4. Show that Muslims are prepared to take on responsibility, step forward, feel responsible and shoulder this responsibility

5. Always be prepared to share power with others

6. Cross-cultural collaboration is also important

7. Uplifting the community is a real possibility

Mr Aboutaleb next shared an idea by the late political scientist, Professor Peter H. Russell (1932-2024), who equated sharing to multiplying. This would seem counterintuitive since students were taught in school that sharing would produce the opposite effect from multiplying; it would logically cause the share to be divided into smaller portions. However, the lesson Mr Aboutaleb learnt was that from power sharing, everyone had the opportunity to grow. And if everyone grew, there would be massive income and multiple work opportunities, and that meant an improvement in well-being overall. Thus, Mr Aboutaleb opined that in a democracy, if one held power, the change and impact that an individual leader could bring was far less than if he was able to share the power with others, including with opposition institutions, and to also listen to the opposition's perspectives.

He opined that the most important thing in a democracy was the protection of minorities and felt that was an art in itself. For him, minorities should not assume that they would not be taken care of by the majority. Instead, it should be an honour for the majority to protect the minority. Any good leadership should be consultative and

should listen to the opinion of others before making decisions. Hence, on the flipside, Muslims as the minority must not let mistrust overwhelm them and presume that the majority would not take care of their needs. Instead, they must also take the initiative to be involved in the decision-making process where possible.

Mr Aboutaleb then spoke about the modern institution of law and constitution and the presumption of its naturally antagonistic relationship with Al-Quran. He shared another instance of him being questioned by a journalist on his instinctive sources of reference and principles as a Muslim politician. His reply? Islamic teachings. Firstly, the Islamic directive is to be just, which Mr Aboutaleb held in high importance. He shared that in most countries, it also meant to be free of corruption. He proudly declared that in his 16 years of mayorship, he never appropriated any portion of the city's budget for personal use. He felt that it was truly important for Muslim leaders to be just, not only to the leaders, but to all levels of society.

Mr Aboutaleb further shared his belief through the verse:

> لَّسْتَ عَلَيْهِم بِمُصَيْطِرٍ
>
> *You are not there to compel them.*
> (Surah Al-Ghashiyah, 88:22)

He interpreted this as Muslims not being above non-Muslims. A Muslim is there to warn others, to gather them for goodness,

but to also acknowledge that they themselves are not above the rest. For Mr Aboutaleb, such Islamic lessons made it feasible to go by both the modern constitution as well as Al-Quran. He did not see any difference between ruling within a democracy and being guided by Quranic principles. He stressed that Muslims should use Islamic principles to debate and make better arguments. Muslims must show to others that the principles are similar to principles used in a modern democracy.

He quoted the following, a well-known maxim in Islamic da'wah:

> وَجَادِلْهُم بِالَّتِيْ هِيَ أَحْسَنُ
>
> *...only debate with them in the best manner.*
> (Surah An-Nahl, 16:125)

Mr Aboutaleb strongly felt that Muslim leaders ought to be using this principle in their arguments and debates. To illustrate his point, he gave the audience a hypothetical scenario. If he uttered "Allahu Akbar!" in a plane, that would not by itself would make the plane fly. He then asked rhetorically who was he to tell others that the phrase worked well on its own. Similarly, he was once in a debate with a Christian journalist who asked him if he was afraid of Salafists. He responded in the contrary, but he was instead afraid of terrorists. He opined that in the West, the word "Salafist" had been abused and conflated with the term "terrorist". To prove his point, he further told the journalist that he was also a "jihadist", to which the journalist's reaction was one of shock. Mr Aboutaleb explained

that he was a jihadist as he woke up at 6 a.m. in the morning to work and that very act was already considered jihad. Mr Aboutaleb's example sought to further underline the need to explain to the journalist – and the mass audience in the world – that the term "jihadist" did not equate automatically to the use of violence. The explanation needed to be done with wisdom, he stressed.

Further unpacking the term "wisdom", he pointed out that Muslims use the term "al-hakam" for wisdom, which shares the root word for "hikmah". He shared that he recently met the mother of the incumbent King of the Netherlands, and she acknowledged that the difference between Mr Aboutaleb and others was that he used wisdom to govern the city of Rotterdam.

In conclusion, Mr Aboutaleb applauded the efforts of the ICCOS conference in bringing people together, for the moments of shaking hands and networking, the moments of being able to look at each other in the eyes, and taking notes that the attendees would bring back to their respective countries and neighbourhoods with learning points and takeaways.

PANEL I
Social Upliftment and Empowerment

Overview

This panel discussed the importance and role of community leadership in empowering and uplifting members of its own community for the long term, particularly through education and social work. Socioeconomic disadvantage is often accompanied by social and political marginalisation which would be highly detrimental not only to the community's development and social mobility, but also limit the potential to constructively contribute to nation-building.

The perception of being pervasively overrepresented in the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder and the lower levels of education, in rental housing and in social issues such as drug abuse, viewed collectively, can also generate an overall negative image of the group's religious and social identity, especially at an ideological level. In turn, this may be potentially damaging in fostering trust, confidence and social cohesion.

Community leaders need to ensure the strategic deployment of resources and nurture and leverage on networks, resources and technology to facilitate the development of competencies and expertise for sustainable progress. Such noble objectives would also not be without challenges, and community leaders would need to continuously self-assess in order to effectively adapt and overcome issues that may arise. Furthermore, the building of social capital should not be limited within particular communities.

Collaborations with others, built on mutual trust and confidence, are also essential in uplifting the broader society. For this, Muslims need to be able to confidently communicate and contribute value in terms of their competency, knowledge and visionary outlook. Technological advancements and online platforms should also be leveraged to harness collectiveness, resources and opportunities to achieve social upliftment and empowerment, and amplify Islamic values and ethics where relevant.

The panellists provided insights into several case studies that highlighted how strategic deployment of resources and collaborative efforts could lead to sustainable progress and upliftment of the broader society. The panel began with the inspirational sharing on a ground-up initiative founded by two Muslim youths, which aspire to bring about social upliftment and empowerment among low-income families living in rental flats.

"Project Hills: A Movement of Hope, Resilience and Reciprocity"

by Mr Zulhaqem Zulkifli, Co-Founder of Project Hills, Singapore

The first speaker of the panel was Mr Zulhaqem Zulkifli, co-founder of Project Hills, which began as a grassroots initiative in response to the social and financial difficulties that rental flat communities faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'Circuit Breaker' period, though much needed at the time, led to multifarious difficulties for the rental flat communities as most of the breadwinners were daily wage workers. The sudden implementation of the pandemic lockdown resulted in loss of income, food insecurity and social isolation. The youth founders of Project Hills, along with its volunteers, came together in an attempt to alleviate these immediate needs.

Mr Zulhaqem shared on the experiences of the volunteers. As they interacted with these families, it became clear that they needed more than material assistance. Project Hills began to adopt a befriending approach, walking hand-in-hand with their beneficiaries and steering clear of a saviour mentality. This meant that the volunteers would assist the individuals and families, while respecting and acknowledging their individuality.
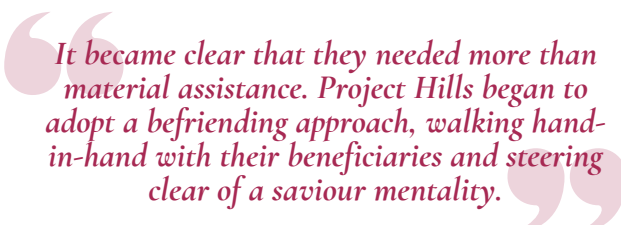
The speaker felt that one of Project Hills' strengths lies in its networking, which means tapping into informal networks that exist among rental flat communities in Singapore. As these communities are transient in nature due to the residents' frequent relocation, they would rely on word-of-mouth for avenues of support. In recognition of this, Project Hills utilised these existing networks to ensure they could assist those who were truly in need.

In its quest to empower families and individuals, Mr Zulhaqem highlighted Project Hills' three fundamental pillars that shape their activities. The first is **Immediate Assistance**, which is to ensure that the communities have their basic needs met before receiving any long-term assistance. This is required before any substantial engagement, as it lays the foundation for positive change. The second pillar is **Bridging Support for Families**, which means that one of their objectives is to connect residents to relevant agencies, healthcare providers and educational institutions for sustainable support. He shared that many of their beneficiaries harbour distrust in these organisations and institutions due to negative experiences in the past. Project Hills acts as an intermediary to rebuild their trust and facilitate their engagements. The third pillar is **Building Community Relationships**, which is to cultivate a culture of reciprocity, where former beneficiaries step up to help those in need. An important feature for a more sustainable and effective upliftment, the basis for this is to nurture an ecosystem of mutual support within the community, instilling compassion and resilience.

The speaker also elaborated that Project Hills operates with a nuanced understanding of the communities' lived realities, with a beneficiary-centric approach. Their assistance is based on the unique needs of the individuals and families, which vary on a case-by-case basis. For example, a diaper-and-milk programme was introduced after volunteers encountered young parents relying on condensed milk and reusing disposable diapers for their children.

Mr Zulhaqem stressed that social work in these communities is complex in nature due to the challenges, ranging from domestic violence to chronic financial instability. In some cases, the challenges might even be entrenched within families. Volunteers must manage the emotional weight of their work and balance realism with hope. This means that Project Hills does not expect immediate change. Instead, it acknowledges that the focus should be on long-term commitment needed to support these individuals and families for as long as necessary.

The speaker emphasised that Project Hills' main goal is to empower these individuals by having them transition from beneficiaries to volunteers who assist within their communities. Having witnessed individuals who have succeeded in making the transition, their transformation creates a ripple effect of inspiration that inculcates resilience and solidarity within the community.

> *It became clear that they needed more than material assistance. Project Hills began to adopt a befriending approach, walking hand-in-hand with their beneficiaries and steering clear of a saviour mentality.*

He concluded that Project Hills is essentially a movement that seeks to foster sustainable change within these communities. By basing their programmes and initiatives on lived experiences, they are able to build trust and community bonds, which allow them to continuously make a positive impact in the lives of those in need. While their journey is undoubtedly challenging, Project Hills is resolute that they would be able to make a difference by nurturing a compassionate and resilient society.

"Start from the Beginning: Transformative Role of Early Childhood Support in Empowering Lower-Income Families"

by Madam Rahayu Buang, Chief Executive Officer of KidSTART Singapore Limited, Singapore.

Mdm Rahayu began by sharing that several strategies have been utilised to address social inequality in Singapore. One such initiative is KidSTART, which focuses on empowering low-income families through early childhood development, providing the children with a strong foundation for future success. While economic measures are necessary, the primary aim of KidSTART is on improving social mobility by reducing the vulnerabilities faced by children in lower-income households.

The basis for KidSTART lies in studies that showed the critical role of early experiences in shaping brain architecture, cognitive development and socioemotional well-being. Research in neuroscience and epigenetics also indicated that by the age of three, a child's brain is 80% developed, making early intervention crucial. Additionally, studies conducted by The Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) underlined the impact of maternal mental health towards child development, which indicated the relevance for targeted support.

The speaker shared that the impact of early childhood intervention is multifaceted, as it does not only address cognitive and emotional growth, but also inter-

-generational poverty. She pointed out that children from low-income families face developmental disadvantages due to limited resources, stressors in their home environment, and low parental engagement. KidSTART's role is to mitigate these factors and subsequently reduce social and economic disparities.

Mdm Rahayu listed the three core components of KidSTART. The first is Building Responsive Relationships. KidSTART employs strategies like the Abecedarian Approach (AA) and Smalltalk, which emphasise nurturing and responsive caregiver-child relationships. For instance, simple two-way verbal interactions between caregivers and children help to shape brain development. Tools like the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) are used to monitor children's developmental progress.

The second component is **Strengthening Families' Life Skills**. KidSTART follows a strengths-based approach, focusing on empowering families by enhancing their parenting skills and drawing on their inherent strengths. By building caregivers' capabilities, families are better equipped to support their children's growth and development.

The third is **Reducing Family Stress**, which Mdm Rahayu elaborated as a critical family-centric approach that emphasises the vital role that parents and caregivers play in child development. The programme assesses family needs using the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool and connects families with a network of support, including Family Coaches, Family Service Centres (FSCs) and Social Service Offices (SSOs).

After its initial pilot for 1,000 children in five towns, KidSTART was formally established as a non-profit organisation in 2020, specialising in early childhood development for lower-income families. In 2021, the Singapore government announced plans to scale the programme nationwide by the year 2023, aiming to reach 80% of eligible children in each birth cohort by the time they turn six years old.

Evaluations conducted by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) and Murdoch University confirmed the positive impact of KidSTART upon participants. The children were found to have exhibited better cognitive and socioemotional behaviours by age 3, while the parents reported reduced stress and a stronger sense of competence in supporting their children's development, validating the programme's effectiveness.

> *Research in neuroscience and epigenetics also indicated that by the age of three, a child's brain is 80% developed, making early intervention crucial.*

The implementation of KidSTART was not without difficulties, as it faced hurdles in encouraging participation among eligible families due to scepticism or time constraints. Some parents were hesitant to engage in formalised programmes due to cultural barriers or misconceptions about parenting interventions. To address this, the programme focused on building trust, simplifying scientific concepts and offering practical, low-effort parenting techniques.

Scaling the programme also presented challenges, particularly in recruiting and training skilled practitioners. As early childhood specialists required a combination of pedagogical knowledge and strong interpersonal skills, ongoing professional development and mentorship were critical to maintaining service quality.

To ensure long-term sustainability, KidSTART collaborates with government agencies, corporate partners and social service organisations, utilising public-private partnerships to expand resources and outreach. Companies such as SP Group and Prudential Singapore contribute to educational and nutritional support initiatives, strengthening the programme's ability to deliver impactful programmes to the families it serves.

> *Through a combination of strong research and collaborative partnerships, KidSTART exemplifies how a programme can grow from a pilot of a thousand children to a nationwide initiative that has reached nearly 9,000 children*

The speaker concluded by encouraging more community and corporate support for KidSTART. The programme's success demonstrates that investing in early childhood development is a powerful tool for social mobility. Through a combination of strong research and collaborative partnerships, KidSTART exemplifies how a programme can grow from a pilot of a thousand children to a nationwide initiative that has reached nearly 9,000 children. It is up to the community and stakeholders to ensure that KidSTART continues to benefit families who are in need.

"Impact Of Social Connectedness and Muslim Crowdfunding, Through The LaunchGood Experience"

by Mr Omar Hamid, Co-Founder and Chief Design Officer of LaunchGood, USA

Mr Omar Hamid began his sharing by highlighting how the digital era has transformed the way communities connect and mobilise. For the global Muslim community, faith-based crowdfunding initiatives like LaunchGood exemplify this transformation. As the largest faith-driven crowdfunding platform, LaunchGood has successfully harnessed trust, innovation and social connection to empower the global Muslim community financially. In his opinion, LaunchGood demonstrates **how digital platforms can help Muslims to tap into the collective power of the Muslim community**.

In the aftermath of the tragic Chapel Hill Shooting in 2015 and the Christchurch Mosque attacks in 2019, the global Muslim community's interconnectedness came to light. The events highlighted the potential of digital platforms as a medium to mobilise collective action. LaunchGood successfully raised approximately $655 million across 106,000 fundraisers from over 2 million donors in 154 countries.

LaunchGood has been able to maintain a high level of credibility in the Muslim community by adhering to financial regulations and Shariah-compliant operations. For the speaker, trust is crucial especially in an era of online fraud. LaunchGood's diligence has led to its current position as a leader in ethical crowdfunding, which reflects a broader Islamic principle of financial accountability, reinforcing donor confidence. LaunchGood

strategically focuses on Global Urban Muslims, Educated and English-Speaking (GUMEES). It is a 350 million subset of the global Muslim market that is largely overlooked by mainstream financial institutions. The gap in services tailored for the GUMEES market indicates the underestimation of Muslim consumer power and skepticism from venture capitalists about faith-driven startups. However, LaunchGood's success demonstrates the potential of digital platforms that align with the unique needs and values of this market.

How can Islamic values be integrated into digital platforms? Western platforms emphasise monetisation and free speech, while Chinese platforms reflect state-centric governance. What would an Islamic digital space look like? According to Mr Omar Hamid, the digital age presents an opportunity to create new technological and economic paradigms, rather than adapting to existing ones. The "edge effect" in ecology, which is a phenomenon where new life emerges at the intersection of two ecosystems, offers a useful analogy for Muslim innovation in the digital space.

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> *The 'edge effect' in ecology, which is a phenomenon where new life emerges at the intersection of two ecosystems, offers a useful analogy for Muslim innovation in the digital space.*
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By engaging with digital transformation while staying rooted in Islamic values, Muslims have the opportunity to create new Models of contribution that extend beyond replication of existing platforms. This requires a shift in mindset, where Muslims actively build and innovate rather than

merely adapting to pre-existing structures. It is up to the Muslim community to create high-quality products that are not just Muslim versions of existing platforms, but better alternatives.

The speaker advocated moving the narrative away from a nostalgic view of the Islamic Golden Age. While historical achievements are inspiring, LaunchGood promotes a forward-thinking mindset: using history as a foundation for future innovation. Its brand draws inspiration from Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Prophet Muhammad saw's (peace be upon him) wife, a successful businesswoman who supported others. LaunchGood embodies this ethos by amplifying existing initiatives rather than creating new organisations.

Mr Omar Hamid emphasised that it is also crucial for Muslims to evaluate their internal narratives about themselves. Internalised narratives of decline and weakness are a hindrance to progress. LaunchGood showcases success stories within the Muslim community to foster a sense of agency and optimism, encouraging Muslims to view themselves as builders and innovators rather than passive recipients of external influences.

Essentially, LaunchGood exemplifies the potential of faith-driven digital platforms. It has carved a unique space in the crowdfunding industry by leveraging the global connectedness of the global Muslim community, fostering trust through compliance and addressing gaps in the Muslim market. More importantly, it provides a framework for future initiatives seeking to integrate Islamic values with digital innovation.

Panel 1

In his concluding remarks, the speaker raised an important question: will Muslims merely adapt to existing technological structures, or will they leverage this moment to create new paradigms reflecting their ethical and spiritual values? He suggested that the answer will shape the future of Muslim entrepreneurship and the broader role of the Ummah in the global economy.

PANEL I
Discussion

The three presentations essentially shared on the initiatives of social upliftment and empowerment from different angles through the sharing of their respective experiences in the form of a ground-up community initiative, a government-supported programme targeting early childhood development and an online crowdfunding platform.

*At the panel discussion chaired by **Ustazah Amalina Abdul Nasir** (Vice President of MENDAKI Club, Singapore), the speakers collaboratively explored various aspects regarding the improvement of community initiatives. Several important points were raised, such as ensuring sustainability, enhancing product quality integrity of crowdfunding projects and improving assessment mechanisms for social support.*

*One key point raised was the need for a mindset shift within the Muslim community to value locally produced products and adopt best practices from different sectors to enhance quality. The concept of Intentions and Key Results (IKRs), which adapts the widely known Objectives and Key Results (OKR) framework, was highlighted as an approach to ensure that **work remains God-centric**. Additionally, the importance of rigorous vetting and continuous monitoring was emphasised as a medium to maintain integrity in crowdfunding projects, ensuring that funds are used effectively and responsibly.*

*In the realm of social services, the conversation addressed the different methods suitable to assess the needs of families and communities. It was mentioned that some organisations relied on direct engagements such as interviews and checks with social service agencies, while others would use industry-standard tools for assessments. Despite challenges with existing tools such as biases and discrimination, the panel identified opportunities to develop more inclusive solutions. The panel underlined the importance of understanding and addressing the specific needs of individuals, particularly in a way that goes beyond traditional frameworks. These **assessments must engage with the lived realities of marginalised groups.***

*The discussion then touched on the **importance of intergenerational empowerment and the challenges in sustaining long-term positive change**. There was strong agreement on the need for mindset interventions, rather than focusing on age-related challenges. The conversation also explored the difficulties in meeting the religious and spiritual needs of underserved communities, emphasising the need for services that go beyond ritualistic teachings and address deeper existential questions.*

The potential for collaboration between religious institutions and social programmes was seen as an opportunity to better support families and individuals, especially in terms of identity and spiritual guidance, to ensure a more holistic approach to community support.

PANEL II
Representative Leadership

Overview

Community leadership needs to work towards the goal of being adequately representative and inclusive not only for intracommunity development, but also to serve as Muslim representatives and interlocutors between the state and the Muslim minority community, and between this community and others who are part of the broader social fabric. Leadership needs to be multisectoral, with the different leadership pillars – community, political and religious leadership – working together towards common goals.

When viewed through the tripartite framework among social actors, it is crucial for others to be able to identify and engage with the right community leaders who are accorded sufficient credibility by their community. This is also important for state authorities, to work with those who can speak on behalf of those they claim to represent and channel resources accordingly. If due care is not given, the minority amongst the minority risk being left out from important discussions and marginalised from mainstream discourse and engagement.

When fronting issues of concern on socioreligious issues or providing the voice of the community on matters on the national agenda, it is even more critical for community leaders to fairly represent and gain the trust of those they are interacting with to be able to act on behalf of their members.

Often, Muslim minority communities are internally highly diverse in terms of culture or ethnicity. In addition, Muslim community leadership is also conventionally male-dominated. Hence, gender representation also needs to be reflected when identifying representatives at state or societal levels to ensure that the critical agendas are tabled, and a diversity of perspectives and considerations are raised for policy-making and key decision-making.

Finally, it is also important to note that intracommunity diversity is also along the lines of other considerations, such as age group, mixed abilities, ethical positions and socioeconomic levels. In pursuing solutions to current and future challenges, there is a critical need for community leaders to be aware that different segments of the community they represent may be affected differently.

"Leadership in Muslim Faith-Based Organisations – Navigating Challenges and Building Bridges in a Plural Society"

by Dr Baptiste Brodard, Doctorate in Social Sciences and Religious Studies
University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

The first speaker for this panel, Dr Baptiste Brodard, explored the complexities of Muslim leadership and highlighted the unique challenges faced by Muslim leaders in plural societies. He began by drawing attention to the importance of context in leadership, noting the differences between Western Europe and other regions, and countries like Singapore, where Muslims have a longer historical presence. In Western Europe, the absence of a unified approach to leadership and the failure of top-down approaches emphasise the need for leadership coming from local levels. This approach identifies natural leaders from within the community such as those in faith-based organisations and grassroots initiatives who can authentically represent and unite the Muslim masses.

Dr Brodard proposed that these leaders must act as a bridge between the state, broader society and the Muslim community itself. In this context, the ideal leader is someone who can balance these three spheres effectively, facilitating dialogue and understanding across social and political divides. Leaders are responsible for guiding Muslims in line with Islamic principles, promoting social cohesion between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as represent the interests of the Muslim community, while engaging both the state and civil society.

According to Dr Brodard, the lack of a single, identifiable Muslim leader in Western European countries is primarily due to doctrinal and ethnolinguistic divisions within the Muslim communities. The absence of an institution like the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) further contributes to this fragmentation. As a possible solution to this crisis, Dr Brodard advocates for a bottom-up approach, focusing on local faith-based organisations (FBOs) and grassroots initiatives, where leaders emerge naturally through activism and community engagements. The speaker provided examples of impactful leaders from grassroots initiatives in Western Europe, including Imam Adam Kelwick of the Abdullah Quilliam Mosque in Liverpool and Imam Farook Yunus in Rochdale. These leaders serve as exemplars of how religious scholarship and community activism can intersect, showing how leadership can transcend religious boundaries and contribute to broader societal dialogues.

The roles of Muslim leaders are multifaceted. They must set a positive example, communicate meaningful Islamic discourse and influence their communities through both words and actions. More than just religious figures, Muslim leaders also act as mediators between their community, the state and broader society. This intermediary role is crucial for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation, especially in plural societies where diverse communities must coexist peacefully.

However, Dr Brodard argued the path of leadership is not without its challenges. A major challenge that Muslim leaders face is bridging the gap between theory and practice. It is not enough to simply preach religious teachings; these principles must be applied in everyday life, requiring personal integrity and a deep understanding of contemporary issues. Furthermore, many Muslim leaders must juggle multiple roles, such as being scholars, activists and community representatives, which can strain their ability to fully commit to each responsibility. Muslim leaders also often find themselves caught between the demands of their community and the expectations of the state and broader society, where both sides have conflicting views on responsibility.

Muslim leadership requires certain qualities to be effective. Dr Brodard emphasised the importance of leaders embodying the Islamic principles they promote. Leaders must first implement these principles in their own lives before teaching them to others, through exemplifying what they advocate in their discourse. The practice of muraqabah (self-assessment) is also vital, encouraging leaders to engage in self-reflection and continuous personal growth. Additionally, cultivating positive relationships at the local, regional and national level is essential for fostering an inclusive environment and ensuring that leadership efforts are both collaborative and impactful.

> *Leaders must first implement these principles in their own lives before teaching them to others, through exemplifying what they advocate in their discourse.*

To conclude, Dr Brodard highlighted the importance of nurturing authentic Muslim leaders from within the community, who can effectively bridge divides and promote social cohesion in plural communities. By embracing their roles as moral exemplars and mediators, Muslim leaders can play a significant role in promoting understanding and cooperation between religious communities and the broader society, making an impactful contribution to peaceful coexistence in diverse environments.

"Representative Leadership in Muslim Minority Communities"

by Dr Syed Harun Alhabsyi, President of Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (LBKM), Singapore

In his presentation, Dr Syed Harun Alhabsyi shared his insights on the concept of representative leadership in Muslim minority communities, emphasising its broad impact not only within the Muslim community, but also at the state, local society and global scale. He began by highlighting the example of Madam Halimah Yacob, former President of Singapore, underlining how her leadership transcends the Muslim community and contributes to a larger societal narrative. Her authenticity, values and commitment to faith have made her an influential figure, resonating with both local and global audiences. Her presidency has had a transformative effect on minority communities, challenging stereotypes and changing the way minorities are viewed worldwide. Madam Halimah's legacy continues to inspire pride, influencing the aspirations of minority groups around the globe.

The speaker then discussed the evolving Muslim demographic landscape in Singapore, noting key trends that will shape future leadership within the Muslim community. With Muslims now comprising nearly 20% of the population among those aged 15-34, future leaders will need to adapt to this changing demographic. Additionally, the rise of interethnic marriages and greater intracommunity diversity calls for more inclusive and nuanced leadership, both politically and within religious institutions. The influence of social media too plays a critical role in shaping religious practice and authority, particularly among younger

Muslims. Social media challenges the traditional leadership structures and forces leaders to adjust their approaches to meet the demands of a more connected, digital society.

Dr Syed Harun stressed that effective leadership goes beyond addressing the immediate concerns of the community. Leaders need to engage with national and global issues, moving beyond their community's specific needs. Using Madam Halimah as an example, he argued that her influence was most impactful when she focused on issues beyond the Muslim community, such as advocating for the welfare of vulnerable groups, women's rights and mental health. Effective representative leadership therefore involves balancing community representation with contributions to broader social and political issues. This creates a cycle that nurtures leaders capable of addressing the needs of both the minority community and the wider society.

Community organisations also play an essential role in ensuring effective representation. Dr Syed Harun highlighted the Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (LBKM), or The Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board, as an example of how organisational leadership can harness collective identity for charitable purposes. LBKM's membership model brings together the resources and efforts of the Muslim community to support educational initiatives, such as bursaries and scholarships. Despite facing challenges, LBKM thrives due to its collaborative approach. Dr Syed Harun emphasised the importance of collaboration among community organisations, mosques and the

private sector to innovate and achieve shared goals especially when resources are limited.

Dr Syed Harun also highlighted the significance of leadership development programmes like the Tunas@M^3 Leadership Programme, which was designed to nurture the next generation of Muslim leaders. These programmes focus on building trust and networks among leaders and prioritising shared priorities. Such initiatives prepare leaders to work together across different sectors, enhancing their ability to address contemporary challenges.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Syed Harun reinforced the idea that the impact of representative leadership extends far beyond the immediate community. Leaders need to remain sensitive to the changing demographics of their communities, including shifts in age, ethnicity and societal norms. He also noted that the leadership lessons learned at the organisational level can be applied on a global scale, suggesting that the principles of representative leadership are applicable across different contexts, from local communities to the broader global society.

> *LBKM's membership model brings together the resources and efforts of the Muslim community to support educational initiatives, such as bursaries and scholarships. Despite facing challenges, LBKM thrives due to its collaborative approach*

"Community Leadership – Advancing Inclusivity and Representation in Muslim Mindanao"

by Ms Amina Rasul-Bernado, President of the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy, the Philippines.

Ms Amina Rasul-Bernardo delivered a thought-provoking presentation on the peace process in Muslim Mindanao, highlighting its ongoing challenges and the critical role of community leadership in fostering inclusivity and representation. She began by discussing the long history of peace negotiations in the Philippines, noting the numerous setbacks faced, such as opposition from political leaders and the Marawi Siege. Despite these challenges, the passage of Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) marked a significant step towards autonomy for Muslim Mindanao.

She then emphasised the complexities of the region's political and social landscape, including rebel groups, violent extremists and deeply rooted cultural divisions. She pointed out that despite the region's economic struggles, with Mindanao being one of the poorest regions in the Philippines, local communities have continued to push for change. She argued that the key to moving forward with the peace process lies in community leadership, particularly from religious leaders, traditional figures and women. Surveys have shown that religious leaders were the most trusted figures in these communities and this trust is crucial for the success of any peace-building efforts.

Education was another critical area of focus. With high illiteracy rates in Mindanao being a major barrier to development, madrasahs,

particularly those led by women teachers, play a pivotal role in addressing this challenge. Many of these women are responsible for teaching both children and adults, helping to reduce the region's high illiteracy rate. Ms Amina mentioned the development of educational programmes like Islamic peace education which blend Islamic teachings with human rights education. These programmes aim to promote peace and tolerance through Islamic principles, creating a more informed and united society that can better support the peace process.

The speaker also stressed on the importance of adapting to new communication methods, like podcasts, to spread peace-building messages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional outreach was limited, podcasts became an essential tool for sharing experiences and knowledge. They allowed peace-building discussions to reach a wider audience, especially younger generations, keeping the peace-building conversations alive even in difficult times.

Ms Amina concluded her presentation by emphasising that the success of the peace process in Mindanao is not solely dependent on political leaders or laws. It also depends on the active involvement of local communities and leaders who can effectively engage with national and regional governments. She stressed that while national leaders play a role, the foundation of long-lasting peace must come from within these communities. By empowering local leaders, especially women, and fostering unity among diverse groups, Mindanao can create a more inclusive, resilient and peaceful future.

> *Surveys have shown that religious leaders were the most trusted figures in these communities and this trust is crucial for the success of any peace-building efforts.*

PANEL II
Discussion

The panel discussion moderated by **Dr Hana Alhadad** *(Adjunct Faculty member at the National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University) centred on the importance of inclusive and effective leadership in Muslim communities, and highlighted the need to consider diverse voices, including those of children, neurodivergent individuals and people with different abilities. By prioritising diversity, leaders can ensure that policies reflect everyone's needs, helping to create a more equitable and representative society.*

One key takeaway was that community leadership moves at the speed of trust. Dr Syed Harun highlighted that trust is the foundation of good leadership. For leadership to make a real impact, it must be built on strong, honest relationships over time. Without trust, getting support for change or progress is difficult, especially when dealing with complex issues.

The panel also discussed the importance of involving youths in leadership. Empowering young people not only helps build the next generation of leaders, but also ensures that community development stays forward-thinking and inclusive. This emphasis on youth involvement ensures that future leaders are equipped with the empathy, understanding and awareness necessary to guide communities effectively.

Effective leadership also requires representation from all members of the community. Collective action and consensus are key, and when leaders include diverse perspectives in decision-making, it creates a more inclusive system of governance through the creation of safe spaces where marginalised voices are heard. This ensures that everyone feels valued and included, which encourages active participation and builds a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, the panellists reinforced that effective leadership is rooted in inclusivity, trust and youth empowerment. By embracing these principles, leaders can create environments where diversity is celebrated, and all members have a voice. This strengthens not only Muslim communities, but also helps build a more just, harmonious and equitable world for everyone.

PANEL III
Social Cohesion for the Future

Overview

Social cohesion is critical for a nation to progress and flourish. The concept can be traced back to Ibn Khaldun's writings in the 14th century, whereby he postulated the idea of 'assabiyah' to illustrate a mix of "unity and group consciousness".[1] More modern definitions associate social cohesion with conceptualisations of solidarity, the most prominent being Emile Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, which essentially describes social cohesion stemming from how society functions based on the way it is organised and displays interdependence and coordination of division of labour.

Building further, social cohesion in our contemporary context is more holistic, shifting beyond although arguably still important, for functional economic growth. Social cohesion is now conceived as a multidimensional construct that unites society, crucial to address common societal challenges. Social cohesion can thus be understood as "the ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging and voluntary social participation of the members of society while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and while granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society".[2] In Singapore, discourse on social cohesion is often interlinked with its multiracial, multireligious social fabric. The concept emphasises social integration in spite of diversity, framing its dominant narrative with the concept of religious and racial harmony.

Panel 3 shared their respective experiences in contributing towards building social solidarity in different geographical and situational contexts. To further deepen a robust understanding of the mechanisms and actors that foster sustainable social cohesion, the panel also provided insights on the different positive outcomes that can emerge from a socially cohesive society, including trust-building, effective crisis management and building a stronger sense of nationalism after periods of social unrest. Finally, the panel also discussed ways forward in the domain of social cohesion, including future trajectories and factors that need to be taken into consideration in ensuring that social cohesion remains intact and sustainable.

[1] See The Muqaddimah by Ibn Khaldun, translated by Franz Rosenthal and edited by N.J. Dawood, Princeton University Press (2005)
[2] Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S., & Brazier, F. (2018). Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 32(2), 231–253. Available at: When viewed through the tripartite framework among social actors, it is crucial for others to be able to identify and engage with the right community leaders who are accorded sufficient credibility by their community. This is also important for state authorities, to work with those who can speak on behalf of those they claim to represent and channel resources accordingly. If due care is not given, the minority amongst the minority risk being left out from important discussions and marginalised from mainstream discourse and engagement.

"Fostering Resilience and Social Cohesion: Lessons from the 2019 Christchurch Terrorist Attacks"

by Mr Rakesh Sharanund Naidoo, Superintendent,
National Ethnic Partnerships Manager, New Zealand.

Superintendent Rakesh's presentation explored how resilience and social cohesion can be strengthened through lessons and strategies implemented in response to the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attacks. The tragedy, which claimed 51 lives and left many injured, continues to leave lasting wounds in the affected communities.

Yet, despite the grief and devastation, unity, resilience and compassion prevailed. Quoting Imam Gamal Fouda, "We are broken-hearted, but we are not broken", Superintendent Rakesh covered the extensive efforts undertaken to ensure that communities remained united, and meaningful steps were taken towards healing and reconciliation.

Superintendent Rakesh began by detailing the critical first 48 hours of New Zealand's response to the attacks. Mosques, Muslim leaders and representatives across the country were immediately engaged by central and local government authorities to reassure and support their communities. Culturally experienced police officers were deployed to Christchurch, which served as a crucial bridge between law enforcement and the Muslim community. Religious scholars and Muslim experts were mobilised to provide spiritual guidance, oversee proper burial and funeral rites, and coordinate the cleansing of Islamic facilities – essential leadership roles, at a time when many local Muslim leaders were either deceased, injured or traumatised. Additionally,

collaboration with the Christchurch's indigenous community, the local Iwi, and interfaith networks played a key role in conflict management and ensuring culturally appropriate responses.

Superintendent Rakesh also reflected on how key strategies within the response in times of crisis are applicable not only in addressing terrorist attacks, but also for instances of potential fracture in other forms, including natural disasters or for longer periods of grievances, such as the ongoing impact of local and international conflicts:

1. Building authentic and trusted precrisis relationships:

Establishing formal partnerships between associations and organisations is crucial in fostering internal resilience, a sense of belonging and trust among different cultural and religious groups. As Superintendent Rakesh stated, **"We build in times of peace, and we measure during a crisis".** This preexisting rapport amongst institutions lays a strong foundation for subsequent engagements with families and the wider community when crises arise.

2. Building authentic and trusted precrisis relationships:

An effective crisis response requires mobilising and engaging competent community leaders, which include elected representatives, government officials, Islamic scholars and interfaith leaders. Their presence ensures empathetic, united and community-centred solutions.

3. Building authentic and trusted precrisis relationships:

Strengthening community resilience involves deploying officers and officials with a deep understanding of Islamic traditions and practices. This cultural sensitivity helps address immediate community needs while reinforcing trust in public institutions.

4. Strengthening unity and national identity:

Demonstrating collective solidarity during crises fosters a shared sense of belonging. Open and transparent communication between the associations and the wider community is essential in reinforcing trust and collaboration, ensuring a proactive and inclusive approach to crisis management.

Superintendent Rakesh's presentation highlighted the pivotal role of preparedness, collaboration and cultural awareness in fostering resilience and social cohesion. **By prioritising trust, proactive engagement and shared responsibility, the Christchurch response, and by extension, New Zealand's approach offers a valuable model for societies navigating challenges of division and extremism.** It exemplifies how, even in the face of tragedy, communities can emerge stronger, more united and resolute in their commitment to fostering peace and rejecting hate.

"Social Cohesion for the Future"

by Mr Pongsak Yingchoncharoen,
Mayor of Yala City Municipality, Thailand.

In his presentation, Mayor Pongsak shared insights on fostering social cohesion through his leadership experience in Yala City in far Southern Thailand. While Southern Thailand experienced unrest in 2004, the situation has since improved, with different religious groups now coexisting peacefully. This progress is largely credited to municipal initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity and strengthening social connections among residents.

To enhance social cohesion, several participatory processes were introduced. Monthly meetings, community visitation programmes and forums were conducted to encourage open dialogue and active citizen engagement. Formal engagements brought together community leaders for decision-making discussions, while informal channels provided platforms for citizens to voice their concerns and contribute to the conversation. Digital platforms, including social media, mobile applications and chatbots such as "Line Official Account" and their Facebook account, were also leveraged as spaces for residents to express their opinions and share their concerns.

These engagements went beyond serving as mere platforms for expression. They actively involved residents from various racial, religious and age groups, ensuring inclusive participation. Every participant had the opportunity to speak and share their opinions, with speaking rights rotated throughout the gathering within a set timeframe. Proposals from these meetings and forums were then pushed forward to be considered as part of the city's agendas.

In addition to these initiatives, the municipality developed local curricula for students and children under its jurisdiction to strengthen the socialisation process. These curricula and modules were designed to instil a deep understanding of the values of living in a diverse community. Other initiatives included storytelling sessions led by local authors and artists, as well as an orchestra that provided young people with a space to learn and create music together, fostering a sense of belonging and shared values for their hometown.

Communal activities fostered cross-cultural understanding, inclusivity and lasting connections among residents. The "Dharma for Community" initiative encouraged interfaith learning, while the Yala Youth Unity Camp promoted teamwork and leadership through municipal engagement. The Summer Youth Football Camp further strengthened social bonds through sports, reinforcing unity and mutual respect across diverse backgrounds.

Additionally, committees often contribute a portion of their profits to support other committees, regardless of affiliation, as well as the municipality, ensuring collective benefit and sustainability. This collaborative approach cultivates mutual contribution between the municipality and community committees, working towards the common goal of strengthening the community.

In conclusion, Yala City's approach to social cohesion shows the importance of inclusive governance, active citizen participation and community-driven initiatives. By fostering mutual respect, shared responsibilities and cross-cultural understanding, these efforts have contributed to a more united and resilient society. Mayor Pongsak's leadership policies and meaningful engagement can transform a community, even in the face of past challenges.

> *He highlighted how community empowerment and decentralisation contribute to strengthening social cohesion. Granting the community the autonomy to elect their own leaders, providing subsidies to support local initiatives, and entrusting them with leadership and the management of resources and facilities foster a shared sense of responsibility.*

"Navigating a Changing Landscape: The Evolving Dynamics of Interfaith Relations in Singapore"

by Ustazah Liyana Asmara Rosli, Head of Harmony Centre, Singapore.

In her presentation, Ustazah Liyana discussed ways to navigate a changing landscape with evolving dynamics of interfaith relations in Singapore. Through exploring the historical context, key milestones and initiatives of local interfaith communities, she highlighted both the progress made and the challenges faced. Ustazah Liyana further discussed essential components that can help strengthen social cohesion within the interfaith space.

Social cohesion requires cooperation not only among people of different faiths but also with those who identify as non-religious, all working towards relationship-building and shared social goals. Given the complexities of an evolving society, Ustazah Liyana posed the question of whether social cohesion is a problem to be solved or a polarity dilemma that must be continuously managed. Singapore's religious landscape reflects this diversity, with Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and a growing demographic of those who consider themselves as having no affiliation to any religions.

Navigating interfaith relations and ensuring long-term social cohesion require an approach that balances governance, institutional support and community-driven efforts. These strategies can be categorised into four key components:

1. Proactive Government:

Singapore's approach to religious freedom has evolved through a careful balance of regulation and social harmony, with strategies implemented since colonial rule to manage religious diversity. A key initiative was the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), established in 1949 to foster interfaith understanding after World War II. Following independence, legal and institutional frameworks were introduced to safeguard religious freedom and prevent conflicts.

Additionally, in response to post-9/11 misconceptions about Islam, the Harmony Centre was established to promote interfaith understanding and strengthen integration between Muslim and other faith communities. Despite maintaining a secular stance, the government continues to actively engage with religious organisations to ensure faith remains a constructive force in nation-building.

2. Effective Systems and Institutions:

Institutional frameworks play a key role in regulating religious diversity and fostering cohesion. The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model, designed for communal representation along ethnic lines, has been an integral part of this system. However, it is now being reassessed in light of globalisation and shifting identities, requiring a more flexible and inclusive approach to representation.

3. Strong Community Leadership:

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced challenges that required adaptive leadership within religious and community networks. It underscored the importance of mental health and emotional support, with religious institutions playing a key role in strengthening resilience and social well-being. The shift towards digital religious

engagement also decentralised traditional leadership structures; this has reshaped how religious leaders connect with their communities. Beyond institutional efforts, grassroots initiatives, such as youth-led dialogues, social initiatives and content creators, play a crucial role in strengthening and promoting understanding and fostering engagement across religious communities.

4. Expanding Common Space:

The pandemic also highlighted the need to rethink traditional sacred places, as restrictions on physical gatherings led to a surge in virtual worship and hybrid religious services. Simultaneously, a rise in spirituality without religion has prompted new considerations for engagement beyond traditional institutions. Expanding both physical and digital spaces will be key in maintaining social cohesion in an evolving landscape.

Ustazah Liyana introduced the Futures Thinking Model to anticipate emerging challenges in social cohesion and guide strategic planning. She highlighted three possible trajectories: a secular majority society, requiring new approaches to interfaith engagement; a fragmented religious landscape, calling for adaptive management strategies; or the rise of digital religious practices.

These scenarios emphasise the need for long-term planning, adaptability and inclusive policies to ensure that diverse communities remain connected in an ever-evolving landscape. By proactively addressing these shifts, society can continue to foster mutual understanding, trust and resilience in the face of change.

PANEL III
Discussion

In the panel discussion chaired by Dr Mathew Mathews (Head of IPS Social Lab, Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore), social cohesion was first defined as the ability of a community to remain united despite differences in backgrounds, beliefs and socioeconomic statuses. While diversity can sometimes create differences, the panellists emphasised that inclusion and mutual respect can transform these differences into strengths.

They also stressed that without social cohesion, societies become vulnerable to division and instability, particularly in times of crisis. Communities that lack cohesion struggle to mobilise resources, support vulnerable groups, or respond effectively to emergencies. In contrast, societies that foster inclusivity, trust and collaboration are better equipped to handle challenges, strengthen resilience and maintain harmony.

Three strategies were explored for fostering social cohesion:
1. ***Good Governance:*** *Effective governance is a crucial enabler of social cohesion. Transparent, fair and inclusive policies build trust between citizens and institutions, ensuring equal access to justice, representation and essential services. A government that actively promotes equity and inclusivity fosters stronger communal bonds.*
2. ***Equal Opportunities:*** *Ensuring fair access to education, employment and essential resources helps to minimise inequality and strengthen inclusivity. By creating an environment where everyone has the opportunity to succeed, communities cultivate a shared sense of participation and contribution.*
3. ***Increasing Employment Options:*** *Expanding job opportunities, particularly for marginalised groups, empowers individuals and reduces social disparities whilst promoting collective purpose and a sense of belonging within a society.*

The panel discussion also highlighted that social cohesion has no definitive endpoint and requires continuous effort which includes proactive policies, strong community leadership and inclusive governance. As societies evolve, embracing diversity through trust, respect and shared responsibilities remains central to sustaining long-term unity and resilience. Through mutual understanding and collaboration, communities can navigate challenges and strengthen the bonds that hold society together.

PANEL IV

Considerations for the Future: Enterprise, Professionals and Religious Sector

Overview

Panel 4 focused on discussing multifaceted approaches to confronting future societal challenges typical of a BANI world, such as global warming and food insecurity, gaps in the community requiring technology-driven solutions, and issues that undermine social cohesion.

This interdisciplinary engagement is rooted in the recognition that multifaceted issues demand holistic solutions that transcend disciplinary confines. Each speaker offered a unique epistemological framework and specialised knowledge base, thus enriching the conversation with diverse perspectives essential for comprehensive problem-solving.

The underlying synergy among these speakers hailing from Singapore stemmed from their shared commitment to forming partnerships with diverse stakeholders through community leadership.

Furthermore, the panel's conversations extended beyond mere academic deliberation to encompass pragmatic considerations for mobilising support and resources from diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, multinational corporations, SMEs, philanthropic organisations and other community leaders.

"Innovative Leadership - Technopreneurs Shaping Communities of Success"

by Mr Shamir Rahim, Founder of VersaFleet, Singapore.

Mr Shamir Rahim shared his journey as a technopreneur, illustrating how innovative leadership can shape communities of success. Drawing from his diverse background as a biologist turned engineer, he provided valuable insights into the intersection of technology, entrepreneurship and community impact.

He began by reflecting on his early research in molecular biology, specifically on the role of heparan sulfate proteoglycans in mouse embryonic stem cell differentiation and proliferation.

While this scientific background may seem distant from his current work, he emphasised how the analytical skills developed in research have informed his approach to solving real-world problems through technology.

As the founder of VersaFleet, Mr Shamir discussed his journey in establishing a technology-driven logistics platform that digitalises last-mile logistics. He shared the success story of FairPrice Online, where his platform automated and optimised last-mile deliveries with live-tracking and SMS notifications, handling up to 15,000 deliveries daily nationwide. This example demonstrated the power of technology in enhancing operational efficiency while benefitting businesses and consumers alike.

Beyond his own ventures, Mr Shamir highlighted his commitment to fostering technopreneurship in Singapore. He founded and built GotSurge, a solution aimed at addressing fluctuations in delivery demands.

GotSurge provided businesses with scalable options to manage growing delivery volumes and won the Smart Port Challenge 2022. His efforts in this space underscored the importance of innovation in addressing practical challenges while creating opportunities for others.

Mr Shamir also emphasised the ethical dimensions of leadership and technopreneurship. Throughout his career, he has held various leadership positions, including serving as President of Young AMP, President of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI), and currently a board director at the Muslimin Trust Fund Association (MTFA). He underscored the significance of giving back to the community and encouraged aspiring technopreneurs to contribute through service and mentorship. He also addressed the challenge of impostor syndrome, advising individuals to take on leadership roles rather than waiting for the "perfect" moment.

> *Technopreneurship is not solely about financial success, but also about leveraging technology to create meaningful change.*

In his concluding remarks, Mr Shamir highlighted that technopreneurship is not solely about financial success, but also about leveraging technology to create meaningful change. Technopreneurs can play a crucial role in building resilient, thriving societies by combining innovation, ethical leadership and commitment to community development. His insights provided a compelling case for aligning business growth with social responsibility, demonstrating how technopreneurship can serve as a force for economic progress and community empowerment.

"Faith-Inspired Environmental Leadership: Building Trust and Stewardship in Communities"

by Dr Md Saidul Islam (Associate Professor and Post-Graduate Coordinator of Sociology, School of Social Sciences and Asian School of the Environment, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

In his presentation, Dr Saidul explored the significance of faith-inspired environmental leadership in addressing critical global challenges, such as climate change, food insecurity and unsustainable consumption. He emphasised the potential of religious principles — particularly those within Islamic teachings — to foster a sense of stewardship and collective responsibility towards environmental sustainability.

Dr Saidul argued that by framing environmental protection as a core religious duty (ibadah), communities can be mobilised to engage more actively in sustainability efforts. This perspective aligns with Islamic ecological paradigms and other faith traditions that view humanity as caretakers of the Earth. Dr Saidul expanded on several key components contributing to the effectiveness of faith-based environmental leadership:

1. Building Trust

Faith-inspired environmental leadership fosters trust by connecting ecological stewardship with deeply held religious beliefs. This approach makes environmental initiatives more relatable and acceptable within

communities by leveraging existing social structures and values.

2. Fostering Stewardship

A core tenet of this leadership model is encouraging individuals to view nature as a divine creation and a sacred trust. This perspective cultivates a sense of moral and spiritual responsibility, motivating communities to actively engage in environmental conservation efforts.

3. Community Engagement

Dr Saidul highlighted the importance of collective engagement, where faith-based leadership fosters a shared sense of duty towards nature. By positioning environmental action as an extension of religious obligations, communities are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices and conservation initiatives.

4. Collaborative Action

This approach advocates for an 'ontological alliance' that transcends religious boundaries. Faith-inspired leadership bridges religious principles with broader global efforts to address ecological challenges, uniting diverse communities under a common goal of planetary sustainability.

5. Addressing Global Challenges

Dr Saidul underscored the urgent need to frame environmental issues within a faith context to enhance community understanding and responsiveness. He noted that climate change is projected to cause the disappearance of 25% of living species by 2050, and that food insecurity persists despite global food surpluses. Faith-based leadership, he argued, can provide ethical guidance and mobilise communities to take meaningful action in response to these crises.

6. Reconnecting with Nature

Modernity has led to a growing disconnect between humanity and the natural world. Faith-inspired leadership seeks to counter this alienation by emphasising the spiritual connections between humans and the environment. By reinforcing these bonds, communities can cultivate a renewed commitment to ecological preservation and sustainable living.

To conclude, Dr Saidul asserted that faith-inspired environmental leadership provides a powerful framework for addressing contemporary ecological challenges. By leveraging trust, stewardship and community engagement, this approach strengthens sustainability efforts and fosters a collective sense of responsibility towards the environment.

"Evolving Religious Leadership in Singapore: Navigating diverse roles for a stronger future"

by Ustaz Muhammad Tarmizi Abdul Wahid, President of Singapore Islamic Scholars & Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS), Singapore

Ustaz Tarmizi began his presentation by sharing his perspective on the evolving role of religious leadership in Singapore, particularly within Islamic communities. He highlighted the critical importance of preparing future religious leaders to effectively navigate the challenges of an increasingly complex world where faith and technology intersect.

Stressing the pivotal role of Islamic higher learning institutions and local madrasahs in shaping the next generation of religious leaders, he noted that madrasahs serve as primary incubators for future imams and religious guides. As these institutions continue to evolve, they must adapt to the needs of an ever-changing society while remaining rooted in the traditional values of Islam.

The overarching challenge faced by future leaders, according to him, is fostering faithful stewardship in an age of ethical uncertainty and technological change. This challenge reflects the delicate balance that religious leaders must maintain, which involves leveraging the Islamic intellectual tradition to address emerging issues faced by the Muslim community.

To effectively equip asatizahs (religious teachers) for these future challenges, Ustaz Tarmizi called for the prioritisation of a couple of key initiatives. The first is **Continuous Professional Development**:

Religious leaders must have access to ongoing learning opportunities to remain relevant and effective. Secondly, Ustaz Tarmizi emphasised the importance of **Strategic Collaboration**. It is imperative to foster and strengthen partnerships with complementary institutions to ensure a more holistic approach to religious education and leadership.

In an ever-evolving landscape, Ustaz Tarmizi felt that these initiatives are essential in ensuring that religious leaders can effectively fulfil their roles.

On the topic of key skills needed by religious leaders, he further highlighted that future contexts and challenges demand a broad skill set, identified as follows:

1. Critical Thinking

The ability to analyse and engage with complex issues.

2. Technological Proficiency

Religious leaders must be familiar with modern technologies and their ethical implications.

3. Interfaith Dialogue

Facilitating discussions across religious boundaries to promote understanding.

4. Contextualisation of Islamic Teachings

Adapting traditional teachings to address contemporary issues.

5. Leadership in Various Domains

Involvement in business, economics, social advocacy and community empowerment.

6. Emotional Intelligence

The ability to lead with empathy, understanding and emotional awareness.

Ustaz Tarmizi warned that failing to adapt to the changing needs of society could lead to several negative outcomes, including a global shortage of effective religious leadership, a widening disconnect between religious leaders and younger generations, and an inability to address modern challenges and ethical dilemmas. Additionally, religious institutions risk losing their relevance in broader societal discourse. These predicaments highlight the urgent need to invest in the development of religious leaders capable of guiding their communities effectively in an increasingly complex world.

In conclusion, Ustaz Tarmizi reiterated the importance of evolving religious leadership to ensure it remains relevant and impactful in an ever-changing world. By blending traditional scholarship with modern approaches, religious leaders can future-proof their communities while staying deeply rooted in their values. He called for a concerted effort to invest in developing well-rounded, adaptable and knowledgeable leaders who can navigate the complexities of faith and modernity, ensuring that religious guidance continues to have a meaningful and lasting impact. Through these efforts, religious leadership can stay relevant and become a force for positive change and empowerment within society.

PANEL IV
Discussion

The panel discussion, chaired by **Ms Nadia Yeo** *(M³ Tunas leader, Singapore), focused on the concept of community as an interconnected ecosystem, where each component plays a vital role in ensuring collective growth and sustainability, much like elements in nature that depend on each other to thrive.*

One key takeaway was the recognition of the essential components within this community ecosystem. Entrepreneurs drive economic development through job creation and innovation, while professionals, including teachers and healthcare workers, contribute critical skills and knowledge. Religious leaders offer moral guidance and uphold community values, and institutions such as government bodies and NGOs provide necessary resources and support for community-led initiatives.

The panel also emphasised the significant contributions of entrepreneurs to community development. They shape the economy by establishing culturally relevant businesses that create jobs and foster community pride. By collaborating with professionals, entrepreneurs develop solutions tailored to community needs and mentor the next generation of business leaders. Professionals, in turn, play an equally important role through their expertise, which ensures the success of community-led initiatives. Their skills in training, knowledge sharing and advising community organisations are vital for ensuring that projects remain effective and aligned with community needs.

The role of religious leaders was also underlined, particularly in offering moral guidance and fostering social cohesion by uniting people. The panel highlighted how these leaders help communities navigate modern challenges by balancing tradition with technological advancements, promoting values like social responsibility and integrity, and ensuring that community efforts benefit all members equally. Institutional partners were also acknowledged for their role in providing funding and support to turn ideas into reality. These organisations help scale successful initiatives, offer capacity-building for community organisations, and support continuous learning and leadership development programmes.

In conclusion, the panelists reiterated that the future of the Muslim community in Singapore relies on effective collaboration across these diverse sectors. By recognising and leveraging each other's strengths, these key components can drive sustainable growth within the community ecosystem, fostering the development of a more cohesive, vibrant and resilient society.

CLOSING PANEL

Overview

The Closing Panel served as a fitting conclusion to this year's theme, "Inspiring Future Leaders: Building Trust, Empowering Communities", sharing valuable lessons and guidance that can inspire future generations of leaders at all levels, in moving towards the daunting yet fulfilling responsibility in realising communities of success.

The panel brought together distinguished political leaders from various fields, each with a wealth of experience in both community leadership and government positions representing and safeguarding minority interests including, but not limited to, their respective local Muslim communities.

The closing panel served as a preamble to the next instalment of ICCOS that will be dedicated to political leadership. The panel comprised:

- ***Mr Masagos Zulkifli**, Singapore's Minister for Social and Family Development, Second Minister for Health, and Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs;*
- ***Ms Amenah F. Pangandaman**, Secretary of the Department of Budget and Management in the Philippines; and*
- ***Mr Pongsak Yingchoncharoen**, Mayor of Yala City Municipality, Thailand*

This esteemed panel was chaired by Deputy Chief Executive of MUIS, Mr Khairul Anwar Mohamed Abdul Alim.

Ms Amenah F. Pangandaman

Secretary of the Department of Budget and Management, The Philippines.

To begin her sharing, Ms Pangandaman introduced herself as the Budget Secretary or Budget Minister of the Philippines. More significantly, she also shared that she is also the only Muslim Filipino in the Philippine Cabinet and also the first Muslim Budget Minister in the Philippines. Hence, she felt that it was also very meaningful for her to be with fellow Muslim brothers and sisters in Singapore.

The conference's theme, "Inspiring Future Leaders: Building Trust, Empowering Communities", profoundly resonated with her and served as underlying motivation for several of her advocacies. She acknowledged that the room was full of inspiring leaders who were inspiring future leaders. She rhetorically asked what it took for one to become an inspiring leader; for her, the key to being inspiring was to stay inspired.

Ms Pangandaman shared her experience in public service. After working in the government for almost twenty years — first in the Legislature, then with the Executive Branch, then with the Central Bank, and now again in the Executive Branch — she shared that even the best leaders could get jaded or lose one's sense of motivation. She urged the audience to find their source of inspiration.

She shared that if one were to consult her Instagram page, even before she became Budget Secretary, her motto had always been "We rise by lifting others". However, she shared that it was when President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. asked her to be Chairperson for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or the BARMM Intergovernmental Relations Body (IGRB), representing the side of the National Government, that she found the inspiration

that brought her to where she was: her brothers and sisters in Muslim Mindanao.

The assignment literally hit home because she is part of the Muslim minority. Muslim Filipinos comprise only 6.42% of the population. She further shared that she came from an even smaller community in the Bangsamoro Region: She is from the Maranao tribe in the city of Marawi in Mindanao. She expressed that she felt very blessed to be placed in a position where she could truly be the voice of Muslim Filipinos and continuously push for uplifting this community.

Ms Pangandaman and her team had been working very hard to make BARMM succeed because they really wanted BARMM to be a model of peace through dialogue. She was pleased to share that since taking the lead at the IGRB, together with BARMM's ministers, they had activated all mechanisms identified in preparation for BARMM's autonomy, including the activation of the Philippine Congress-Bangsamoro Parliament Forum, the Intergovernmental Fiscal Policy Board, the Joint Body for the Zones of Joint Cooperation, the Intergovernmental Infrastructure Development Board, the Intergovernmental Energy Board, the Bangsamoro Sustainable Development Board, and the Council of Leaders, guaranteeing effective and constant consultation between the Bangsamoro and the National Governments in the fundamental aspects of governance.

The Philippine Government also granted amnesty to the members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which resulted in members of the MNLF and MILF,

who were once against the government, now joining the Philippine National Police, with 396 new recruits currently undergoing a six-month training programme.

Towards the economic development of BARMM, they had allotted USD 16.0 million to be used exclusively for the implementation of the Normalisation Programme in Bangsamoro in the proposed FY 2025 National Expenditure Programme.

Ms Pangandaman further shared that they were preparing for the first elections in BARMM in May 2025. As BARMM continues to find its own wings, they also continue to support the region with USD1.66 billion for FY 2025 — 17 percent higher than their FY 2024 allocation.

For Ms Pangandaman and her team, they fervently hoped that BARMM — including all 16 ethnolinguistic and indigenous communities in it — would indeed be able to fly high in terms of economic growth and prosperity, achieving lasting peace in this region of the Philippines.

Ms Pangandaman shared that this determination to contribute to lasting peace had also blessed her with the Gawad Kapayapaan or Peace Award given by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) in September 2024.

Truly, seeing hope instead of fear, determination instead of despair, in the faces in Muslim Mindanao was one of her biggest sources of inspiration and she hoped this would also inspire future leaders to do everything they could for the peace and prosperity of the people.

Ms Pangandaman recounted that when she first assumed office, her first challenge was to clean up the procurement system in order to safeguard it from practices of corruption. She was happy to share that within two years, the New Government Procurement Act was passed – further strengthening their 20-year-old procurement law that was likewise a landmark legislation of her former boss and mentor, the late Senator Edgardo J. Angara, who himself was an inspiring leader within the ASEAN Region, having founded the Southeast Asian Parliamentarians Against Corruption during his time.

This new procurement act was signed into law in July 2024 — less than a year since she announced at the Open Government Partnership Global Summit in Tallinn, Estonia, that they would pursue procurement reform.

Also, in pursuit of improving public accountability and strengthening integrity, her side had also taken steps to intensify information transparency and access. They had vastly improved ratings in the Open Budget Index, and she was happy to report that the Philippines achieved the No. 1 spot in Asia in budget transparency based on the 2023 Open Budget Survey.

They also ranked sixth in the world for budget oversight, as their Commission on Audit institutionalised and mainstreamed the Citizens Participatory Audit technique into regular financial, compliance and performance audits.

Ms Pangandaman and her team were also increasing public trust through public participation and sought not only to inform, but also empower citizens. They were doing so by practising participatory budgeting, as part of their commitment to the Open Government Partnership, which was institutionalised through an Executive Order in June 2023.

Ms Pangandaman shared that they had a project called Support and Assistance Fund to Participatory Budgeting that would provide 75 municipalities nationwide access to a safely managed and resilient water supply and sanitation services, and climate-smart evacuation centres. However, the unique and satisfying aspect of this programme was that civil society organisations themselves had contributed to identifying the beneficiaries.

They had also just launched the Public Financial Management (PFM) Reforms Roadmap, wherein a central strategy is to use digitalisation as a tool for economic development. One of their game-changing initiatives is Project DIME (Digital Information for Monitoring and Evaluation). It utilises advanced technologies to compare fund utilisation with actual project completion status, with a mechanism for citizens to participate in monitoring, to ensure that infrastructure development goals are realised and adequate public service is delivered throughout the country.

To empower not only National Government Agencies (NGOs), but also local budget officers nationwide, they had embarked on a nationwide PFM Competency Programme, a capacity-building programme which sought to give local budget officers the knowledge and skills to improve local budget utilisation as the National Tax Allotment of local government units had been vastly increased

to empower local governments.

All of these were geared towards the economic transformation of the entire Philippines. Furthermore, Ms Pangandaman shared that they were also on a mission to ensure that economic growth was inclusive and sustainable. Hence, she had personally been going around the country to see for herself how helping the communities could contribute to their national development. Ms Pangandaman disclosed that she had been to Mindanao 23 times since she became Budget Secretary.

In these visits, she personally saw how undervalued their halal industry had been. As such, she increased the budget for the Halal Food Industry Development programme by 286 percent or from PHP19 million (USD336.3 thousand) to PHP74 million (USD1.30 million). This was still a relatively small amount, but Ms Pangandaman was positive that it would help the halal industry reach its potential.

She also visited one of the farthest islands, Tawi Tawi, which could only be reached by boat, to install a National Historical marker on the oldest mosque in the Philippines, the Shiekh Karimul Makhdum mosque. She felt that it made her realise how important it

was to honour their heritage even as they focused on economic development. That as they moved forward, they must also remember where they started.

In conclusion, she expressed her hope that she was able to honour and bring with her the wisdom and values of those who came before her, all the way back to Sheikh Karimul Makhdum, who introduced Islam to the Philippines. In turn, when she returned to the Philippines, she would bring home with her the wisdom imparted upon her in the Conference:

> *"That we are the flag bearers of our forefathers' values. And that as we develop our nations, we must continue to build bridges for our communities, so that we may not only inspire, but develop future leaders who will also rise by lifting others."*

Mr Pongsak Yingchoncharoen

Mayor of Yala City Municipality, Thailand

Mayor Pongsak began with his reflections on contemporary societal contexts. In today's fast-changing world, with advances in technology, globalisation and the impacts of climate change, he stressed that the challenges faced are becoming more complex and frequent. He asserted that tackling these challenges requires leaders to collaborate closely with the community. By promoting inclusivity and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard, decision-making gets strengthened and this consequently helps to build more resilient, empowered communities. He opined that creating cohesive and inclusive communities is not just an option, but is essential for the sake of shared progress and sustainable success.

In terms of public participation in a bottom-up approach, whether through public hearings or feedback on platforms like Line OA, Facebook and other communication channels, opportunities for diverse and equal engagement get created. Mayor Pongsak reminded the audience that when it is ensured that everyone can contribute to the conversation, not only is transparency built, but also stronger community bonds. Collaborative efforts, where the community is involved from start to finish, are key to fostering a sense of belonging and mutual trust. This, in turn, makes it easier to respond effectively to change.

Mayor Pongsak also felt that working together helps to uncover leadership potential. He shared that within his municipality, many of their council members and executives began as community leaders and grew through collaboration. Similarly, young people who joined the Youth Council often went on to become provincial Youth Council presidents or student leaders.

Closing Panel

Stressing that leaders must be approachable, humble and continuously open to learning, being open-minded and willing to listen to different opinions ensure that leaders care for the community fairly and inclusively. Leaders must also be decisive when necessary, showing the courage to act quickly, and they must possess a deep love for their hometown, which guides them in leading with heart and purpose.

Mayor Pongsak emphasised that in order to succeed, leaders must also educate and empower the people, working alongside them. When individuals are informed and knowledgeable, they are better equipped to navigate changes, making it easier for leaders to guide them. This mutual support strengthens both individuals and the community, paving the way for future success.

He continued to share that a thriving community requires two key elements: effective leadership and engaged citizens. Leaders must be accountable, courageous and wise, guiding the community with integrity. Meanwhile, citizens need to be empowered, educated and aware, feel that they belong and can contribute to shaping the future.

Ultimately, Mayor Pongsak underlined that trust is the foundation that holds all of th at together. Without trust, even the best leaders and most capable citizens could not drive a community forward. Trust is cultivated through openness, engagement and transparency. When leaders are clear in their actions and decisions, and when citizens are empowered to share their ideas and concerns, the relationship between the

two grows stronger. To reinforce this trust, leaders must actively involve everyone in the process. He cited examples such as hosting community meetings and town halls, as well as sing online platforms to allow people to share their thoughts and be part of the conversation.

He also shared that transparency is equally important; leaders must be open and honest, ensuring decisions are made in a way that is easy to understand. By being accountable and transparent, they build lasting confidence among the people.

To conclude, Mayor Pongsak pointed out that building a strong community takes effort – from both leaders and citizens. Leaders ought to be wise, courageous and transparent, and citizens should feel empowered, informed and connected. Most importantly, he stressed the need to nurture trust. By working together, engaging in open dialogue, and being transparent, leaders can create a resilient, united community capable of facing any challenges. He urged members of the audience to come together and build a future where everyone feels connected and included.

Mr Masagos Zulkifli

Singapore's Minister for Social and Family Development,
Second Minister for Health, and Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, Singapore

Minister Masagos started his sharing by expressing his delight at having convened for the conference and hoped to discuss an important topic which was close to his heart. He began by posing a question to the audience; he would only answer it at the end of his presentation. He provided the context: in 2015, he became the Minister of Environment and Water Resources. He felt that it was a very good job and cited "inni ja'ilun fil ardi khalifah", that Allah made men to be vicegerents, to care for the Earth, and the universe. Hence, he regarded his role as a Minister to be similar to that of a khalifah.

Later, he realised that part of his job was also to bring food from all over the world to Singaporeans. He shared that 90% of Singapore's food is imported. He then reminded the audience that the majority of Singapore's citizens were not Muslims. He then realised that he also had to bring in pork and alcohol. He remarked that he did his job so well that during the swine flu, when many pigs were dying in China, he called on his staff and instructed them to ensure that the price of pork did not go up. He got them to source for pork elsewhere.

The question he posed to the audience was thus: "Am I a good or bad Muslim? I bring pork, I bring alcohol into Singapore as a Minister." He felt that this was the dilemma minority Muslims face when they lived in an open, secular, progressive and modern society. As a Muslim Minister, one could not tell the Prime Minister that the task one was willing to carry out did not include importing pork and thus request someone else to do the task. Instead, one ought to seek some guidance on how to fulfil his responsibilities fully. He explained that in order to resolve the need to have the guidance, he consulted

his peers from various agencies when he took over as the Minister -in-charge of Muslim Affairs. He was motivated by the understanding that Muslims needed to be true to their religion and practise Islam as truly as possible.

However, there were many issues as a Minister which needed religious guidance, which may not apply to many Muslims who lived in majority contexts, such as in neighbouring Brunei and Malaysia. Minister Masagos felt that therefore religious leaders bear a very big responsibility to guide the community, which will then be at peace and calm, with the confidence that each of its individual members is able to practise being a good Muslim. He opined that one could be a good Muslim living in a society as a minority, and even be a better Muslim than those living in a majority context.

Minister Masagos then shared that such reflections thus brought forth the idea to rally the community together, a community that would be referred to as a community of success. This community of success was based on three things. First, character. He invited Muslims to reflect: "That as Muslims, as humans, also as a minority Muslim, how are you known as a community? Are you a lazy community? Are you a community full of corruption? Are you a community for extremists, terrorists?" He posited that our character as Muslims could build us as a community of the best character. He felt that the responsibility also rested upon the religious leaders because the Muslim community's values and norms stemmed from an understanding of this implementation of Islam, or specifically for the minorities.

Minister Masagos shared how he thus convened many religious leaders to get together, to discuss the key relevant issues. At the end of the first ICCOS conference, he felt that the main takeaway was that Muslims needed to be true to their teachings of Islam. He further reflected that when it came to implementation of its teachings, it must be relevant to the place and time, and the culture of the people who were living in it.

He also stressed that Muslims need to be united, with the knowledge that Islam has many colours and came from many places. He highlighted the case of Singaporean Islamic studies students hailing from all over the world through their tertiary education – Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Brunei, amongst others. He suggested that a united front was needed to prevent returning graduates from turning the Singapore context into one that they were familiar with during their studies overseas. He emphasised that they instead needed to be united and understand the purpose of their respective positions as religious leaders, how they were to guide their community, how far they would bring the community, and how to manage the challenges that Muslims faced.

At the same time, Minister Masagos urged for the need to build a community of competence. The Muslim community should be known for how they contributed to the society, to the nation. He explained that this was done through education, lifelong learning, acquiring competence, and that this was not just limited to professionals such as doctors or engineers, but also other domains, in order to give the community a solid voice. He highlighted that this task was

not just limited to the religious teachers but across all walks of life – people who could contribute in impactful ways, not only to the Muslim community, for and with the community, but also to the larger nation.

Finally, the third dimension was citizenry. He felt that Muslims needed to display, more so than other communities, as a minority, what it meant to be a citizen. He highlighted a contemporary common dilemma: "Are we part of the Ummah first, or are we part of the country first? Or is that a contradiction?" He opined that a Muslim could be a good citizen, and there was now guidance, even in Al-Quran, in the hadith, that one could be a good citizen as well as a good Muslim without contradicting one's love and allegiance to one's religion, nor to lose one's religious credentials.

Minister Masagos summarised that character and competence, as well as citizenry, served as the pillars of a Community of Success. He stressed that the people who were responsible to deliver this were the religious leaders, the community leaders and the political leaders. These three groups needed to work together. If religious leaders are responsible to help their community to navigate the difficulties of living in such countries and the challenges of living in such a community, community leaders need to build strength, a strong community. The first thing that needs to be done is to be united. However, this was the biggest problem faced by many Muslim communities. This could be done through cultural strength, intellectual strength and historical strength.

Minister Masagos went on to emphasise that it was also important to acknowledge

weaknesses in the community. This meant having the courage to identify what the community's weaknesses were and to address them. He advised against trying to hide the problems and to deny them. He encouraged the need to acknowledge any problems as community leaders and then to solve them.

Political leadership also had a complementary role with the community leaders. Apart from addressing the weaknesses, community leaders must also build trust. They must build trust with other communities and with the authorities. This is because as a minority, the reality is that protection is needed and this requires trust in the authorities and also trust in the other communities.

For Minister Masagos, the political leaders' job is therefore to ensure that the nation, despite being very diverse like Singapore, remains united. He felt that uniting the country is the primary issue or challenge that political leaders must always strive for. He referred back to the earlier speech by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam who stressed that unity was always a work-in-progress. because there were always new challenges. However, these challenges should shape confidence and unity and that a community must always be united.

> " *One could be a good Muslim living in a society as a minority, and even be a better Muslim than those living in a majority context.* "

Closing Panel

Reiterating that this second ICCOS conference was on community leadership, Minister Masagos expressed his delight in hearing many contributions from leaders who were also community leaders at one time and still contributing as community leaders in building strength and uniting the people. This was not only done among the Muslim community, but also within the larger nation.

In conclusion, he reminded that Muslims are also a community of mercy (rahmah). A community that puts mercy at the beginning and end of everything that they do. Minister Masagos expressed his deepest hope that all of the attendees reflected on how to build the community leadership – a strong, united community that has trust and continues to build trust between communities.

ICCOS 2024 Illustrated

ICCOS 2024 Human and Digital Libraries

"Learning from Real Experiences, Raising Awareness and Nurturing Empathy"

As part of the conference programme, ICCOS 2024 offered a Human Library Experience which served as a platform where members of recognised community organisations and ground-up initiatives, relevant to the four focus areas of ICCOS 2024, took on the role of Human Books to share their stories of leadership and contributive citizenry within their communities. Participants engaged in authentic conversations, gaining insights into these leaders' journeys and the impact of their initiatives. This experiential platform aimed to break down barriers and allowed for accessible discussions surrounding community leadership. It ultimately aimed to inspire others to contribute meaningfully to their communities in various ways, fostering a culture of collaboration and inclusivity. Participants had the opportunity to engage a living catalogue of Human Books, each one a compelling voice of lived experience, courage, and contribution to the community.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our Human Library Books:

Ms. Zulayqha Zulkifli (The Project Hills): *PBM recipient and social worker who overcame youth homelessness to co-found Project Hills, supporting low-income families with food and community aid.*

Ms. Nabillah Jalal (ArtSee): *Founder of NJ Studio and ArtSee, providing free music education to underserved youth and actively involved in migrant causes and youth policy dialogues.*

Ms. Adriana Rasip (Empowered Families Initiative): *Co-founder of EFI and seasoned community developer, empowering lower-income families through grants, peer support, and local care hubs.*

Ms. Yuslyana "Lyana" Yusof (NTUC & Youth Corps Singapore): *Head of Youth Development at NTUC and Youth Corps co-cluster lead, mentoring young volunteers and developing youth-focused programmes.*

Mr. Muhammad Afzal Abdul Hadi (Young ChangeMakers, NYC): *Experienced Youth Corps leader and YCM curator, mentoring youth-led projects and curating grants for social-impact initiatives.*

Dr. Haslina Mohamed Hassan (SG Enable): *Board member and educational therapist with 30 over years' experience championing disability inclusion, special-needs education, and counselling.*

Assoc. Prof. Razwana Begum Abdul Rahim (PPIS, SUSS): *President of PPIS and SUSS academic specialising in law, ethics, counselling, and restorative justice with 18 years in social policy work.*

Mr. Mohamed Irshad (Roses of Peace): *Founder of interfaith NGO Roses of Peace, former NMP, and youth ambassador leader in fostering religious harmony.*

Human & Digital Libraries

Mr. Leonard Sim (hash.peace): *President of hash.peace, organising interfaith dialogue circles in Singapore and representing the country at ASEAN youth camps.*

Ustaz Ahmad Saiful Rijal Hassan (Religious Rehabilitation Group): *Associate Research Fellow at RSIS and religious counsellor working with at-risk individuals as part of RRG.*

Dr. Jared Poon (Harmony Centre 3.0 Futures Workgroup): *Philosopher-futurist and consultant at CounterFictional, contributing to forward-planning for social cohesion.*

Ms. Ella Badis (Malay Muslims in Tech): *Senior Client Solutions Manager at LinkedIn and core team member of MMiT, empowering Malay/Muslim talent in tech.*

Mr. Suhaimi Salleh (LBKM): *Anugerah Jasa Cemerlang recipient and past-president of LBKM who scaled it into a national institution supporting over 35,700 students with $31 million in aid.*

Mr. Ahamed Sha Sayed Majunoon (AMP, Singapore Tenkasi Muslim Welfare Society): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient and long-serving AMP leader who advanced education access for low-income students and supported holistic community initiatives.*

Hj. Nordin Bin Mustafa (Masjid Al-Amin): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient and mosque chairman who provided technical expertise in mosque infrastructure and design across Singapore.*

Mdm. Patimah Binte Abdul Rahim (Masjid Al-Mawaddah, FITRAH): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient and pioneer volunteer supporting zakat recipients, elderly, and incarcerated families with compassion.*

Ustaz Muhammad Luqman Hakim Bin Roslan (Asatizah Youth Network): *Anugerah Belia Harapan recipient and youth asatizah who engages online audiences and promotes interfaith understanding.*

Ms. Nur Hakiima Zainol Abidin (Malay Muslims in Tech): *IT and logistics professional, contributing analytical and negotiation skills to uplift Malay/Muslim representation in tech.*

Mr. Safafisalam Bohari Jaon (MARA Mentoring, Mendaki Club): *Sustainability strategist at Eden Strategy Institute and youth mentor in policy and social-enterprise initiatives.*

Ustaz Muhammad Azri Azman (Muhammadiyah Association): *President of Muhammadiyah Association, chairing eldercare and welfare initiatives, active on Mendaki & MUIS committees.*

Ustazah Liyana Musfirah Anwar (Hayaa' Network): *Islamic family-law graduate and founder of Hayaa' Network, empowering women through counselling, psychotherapy, and social enterprise.*

Mr. Abdul Rahman Bin Mohd Hanipah (MTFA): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient and MTFA President who launched Singapore's first transitional living programme for Muslim youths and a funerary service that funds pro bono burials.*

Mr. Muhammad Jawad Abdullah (Masjid Haji Yusoff): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient and mosque leader who drove its redevelopment and inclusive community outreach for vulnerable groups.*

Mdm. Shamim Hasanali Dhilawala (PPIS): *Anugerah Jasa Bakti recipient, legal advisor, and advocate for Muslim women's rights, family planning, and personal law reform.*

Ustazah Amalina Abdul Nasir (Asatizah Youth Network): *Anugerah Belia Harapan recipient and youth asatizah advocate empowering marginalised groups through humanitarian aid, mentorship, and tech inclusion.*

Mr. Muhamad Shahril Bin Samri (Malay Language Council): *Anugerah Belia Harapan recipient and early childhood language educator preserving Malay heritage through pantun, education, and cultural exchange.*

ICCOS 2024 Youth Hackathon

ICCOS 2024 engaged youth participants from various educational institutions and organisations across Singapore in a social hackathon which was held on 21st and 22nd September 2024. The main objective of the youth hackathon was to cultivate youth leadership skills and empower youths as active contributors to community upliftment and development. By providing them with a platform to voice their perspectives and collaborate on solutions, we aimed to nurture a generation of empathetic and socially conscious community leaders. Through mentorship and guidance made available to them for this programme, youths had the opportunity to translate their ideas into actionable projects that addressed pressing community needs relevant to this year's four focus areas. This inclusive approach not only harnessed the creativity and energy of youths living in Singapore, but also fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their communities and the future of their communities.

*Seven outstanding teams were selected to showcase their projects at the ICCOS 2024 World Café. Among them, three teams - **CareViz**, **Healing Hat**, and **NewRoots**, were shortlisted to present their solutions on stage before a panel of judges. CareViz introduced a digital platform that enables financial aid beneficiaries to visualise their personal development through progress dashboards, milestone badges, journaling, and appointment tools, while also easing case management workflows through AI-powered tracking. Healing Hat presented a smart, AI-driven platform tailored for youth, using SingPass MyInfo integration, and motivational profiling to deliver personalised recommendations for support schemes, educational pathways, and opportunities, as well as rewarding engagement through "Hope Points" and offering optional teleconsults. NewRoots focused on sustained youth volunteerism, fostering meaningful relationships with migrant workers through culturally responsive engagement, gamified features, and co-organised events that promote social cohesion.*

Youth Hackathon

The remaining four teams participated in the rotational table-round segment of the World Café. C-Hive proposed a platform dedicated to empowering women, especially those from marginalised communities, by linking them to NGO services, career development tools, and state support structures. Safe Haven developed a digital support network for caregivers of neurodivergent children, offering resources, mental wellness tools, and peer-based communities. BondedAF reimagined volunteerism through gamification, using challenges, leaderboards, and rewards to make civic engagement fun and accessible for youth. Lastly, InspiHER spotlighted the lived experiences of migrant workers, calling for increased youth advocacy and volunteerism to address inequality and build empathy across communities.

Together, these projects reflected the innovation, compassion, and agency of Singapore's youth in responding to real community needs and signalled the promise of future-ready leaders committed to contributing meaningfully to society.

ICCOS 2024 Jalan-Jalan Learning Journey

The Jalan-Jalan Learning Journey was an immersive programme for all participants on Day 2, which offered local and foreign delegates a firsthand glimpse into the Singapore Muslim community's commitment to community leadership and contributive citizenry. Through engagement with esteemed community partners at the compounds they operated from, participants delved into exemplary initiatives that have garnered recognition for their excellence. This programme provided unique opportunities for participants to interact with these partners as well as uncover inspiring stories and insights through guided tours and enriching conversations with community leaders. Participants visited four thoughtfully chosen venues which align with the conference's key themes and with each embodying a key facet of communal impact:

Wisma Geylang Serai (WGS)

Selected for its role in Social Upliftment, WGS is home to M³@WGS, a collaborative platform involving MUIS, MENDAKI, and MESRA. Participants explored initiatives such as Project Dian by M³@ECO, which supports single mothers, and visited on-site agencies like Kurnia and PPIS Family Service Centre, gaining insights into how community needs are identified and addressed through integrated services.

Highlighting Representative Leadership, Enabling Village is a national model for inclusive design and disability advocacy. Delegates toured inclusive facilities such as an integrated preschool, gym, and dental clinic, and engaged with Tech Able, an assistive technology hub by SG Enable. The experience underscored how community infrastructure can empower people of all abilities while showcasing inclusive employment and training pathways.

Enabling Village

Harmony in Diversity Gallery (HDG)

Featured for its focus on Social Cohesion, HDG immerses visitors in Singapore's interfaith and interethnic journey through interactive exhibits, oral histories, and multimedia storytelling. Participants engaged in both gallery and outdoor trail experiences, reflecting on challenges and strategies for building resilient, diverse communities beyond institutional narratives.

Selected under Considerations for the Future: Enterprise, Professionals & Religious Sector, SCG showcases Singapore's urban development journey. Delegates explored how spatial planning integrates sustainability, multiculturalism, and religious inclusion. Exhibits demonstrated how urban strategies support social cohesion through zoning, inclusive housing policies, and inter-sectoral collaboration.

Singapore City Gallery (SCG)
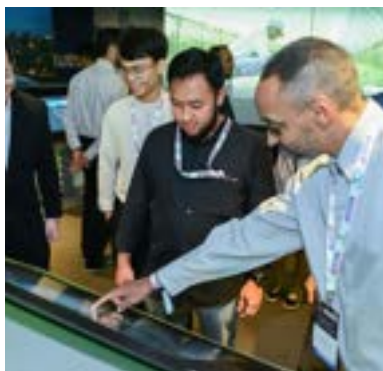
Communities of Success Programme 2024

For the first time, the Communities of Success Programme (COSP) 2024 was successfully integrated as a follow-up programme to ICCOS 2024, aligning with its four core themes of Social Upliftment and Empowerment, Representative Leadership, Social Cohesion for the Future, and Enterprise, Professionals and Religious Sector.

From 9 to 13 November 2024, the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (RLAF) organised COSP 2024, under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) and supported by MUIS. A total of 24 participants from Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Spain joined this third run of the COSP. The programme brought together a diverse group which included government officials, as well as community and religious leaders, ensuring a rich exchange of perspectives and experiences. Over the course of five days, the programme involved six partners and organisations, and included visits to five community spaces.

Figure 1: COSP 2024 Partners and Programme Highlights

Communities of Success Programme

Among some of the key takeaways from COSP 2024, participants appreciated that collaboration between community organisations and government agencies played a vital role in uplifting the Muslim community in Singapore. A multi-hands approach, along with networking and shared best practices, contributed to the strengthening of interfaith and community efforts to promote unity in a diverse society. Participants gained new perspectives and understanding on social cohesion, representative leadership and strategic collaborations between community and government agencies. Participants also shared that they would seek to apply the new understanding and knowledge gained to their own communities back home.

Community Partnerships and Alignment with Government

A combined focus on interfaith harmony, cultural diversity, and alignment with government strategies fosters sustainable community development. Numerous feedbacks cited the M³ initiative – a strategic collaboration between MUIS, MENDAKI, and MESRA - which exemplifies this effort by combining resources and experties to uplift the Muslim community while promoting social unity.

Volunteerism

Commitment and participation of volunteers in empowering minorities and engaging youth in meaningful activities are critical drivers of social upliftment.

Community Centres and Mosques as Pillars of Support

Community centres and mosques serve as vital hubs, providing essential services, such as zakat distribution and multicultural activities, in a centralised planner. These spaces strengthen social bonds and promote inclusivity, making them indispensable to community development.

Strategic Governance and Building Community Trust

Socio-economic conditions, governance alignment with community needs, and community trust-building are crucial for future cohesion. Some feedbacks cited strategic and sustainable practices which prioritise education, well-being, and community participation will ensure long-term racial and religious harmony.

Harmonising Commonalities while Embracing Diversity

Harmonising commonalities and embracing diverse perspectives simultaneously will foster trust and provide a foundation for sustainable coexistence. It is also important to have interfaith dialogue and community engagement to promote understanding and unity across different races and religions.

Advocacy for Minorities

Representative leadership is vital in lending voices to minorities and ensuring their interests are heard. It is also equally important to have representative leadership at both community and national levels.

Building Trust Through Competency and Communication

Some feedbacks cited leadership traits in building a Community of Success. This includes gaining full support from their community by demonstrating competency, open communication, sensitivity and empathy. These traits will help bridge gaps between diverse groups and foster unity regardless of race, language or religion.

Enterprise – Sustainable Income through Wakaf Management

Harnessing Wakaf (Islamic endowments) for sustainable income generation is crucial. Initiatives like Warees Investments demonstrate how effective management of Wakaf properties can support vulnerable communities and ensure long-term financial independence.

Collaboration Between Professionals and Religious Leaders

Bridging the gap between professionals and religious leaders fosters impactful outcomes. The example of Warees and MUIS highlights how corporate expertise and religious guidance can work together to address challenges and achieve shared goals and community development.

Social Upliftment & Empowerment

Representative Leadership

Social Cohesion for the Future

Enterprise, Professionals & Religious Sector

Figure 2: Summary of Key Takeaways by COSP 2024 Participants

Communities of Success Programme

THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS (RPCS)

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focuses on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges through its research and publications.

The RPCS aims to bring together local scholars and senior practitioners to study current and future issues in the socio-religious life of the Singapore Muslim community. Through RPCS seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions, it serve as platforms to nurture the right intellectual ecology and environment to facilitate the growth and development of its own group of religious leaders, scholars and thinkers who are seen as authentic and credible to guide the local Muslim community.

Aside from conducting research, the RPCS also aims to develop future thought leaders through its fellowship programmes and research training workshops to familiarise with the evolving religious discourse and analysis of issues relevant to the theme of Muslim Communities of Success. Its research agenda encompasses three broad areas:

GOVERNANCE
Islam, Secularism & Diversity

Study and develop new understanding on the relationship between religion and secularism, identify models of successful citizenship and contribution, and formulate a robust and credible framework of successful living drawn from Islamic traditions, history and experiences.

SOCIETY
Family & Social Cohesion

Identify ways of supporting and strengthening the family institution and review laws as society evolves so that they remain resilient amidst these challenges, and how religions can be an efective resource in enriching further the common space and common good in any pluralistic society.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
Biomedical ethics, new food technologies, digital technologies and ethics, crypto-currencies

Develop Islamic thought and ethics to provide new guidance on issues such as new food technologies, digital and financial technologies, environmental challenges and others.