

# 4G team to create opportunities at every stage of life for all: Indranee

**It is also trying to make sure the disadvantaged can make the most of diverse paths opened up**

**Rei Kurohi**

To tackle inequality in its current form, Singapore's fourth-generation (4G) leadership will not just strengthen support for those who have less, but also strive to create opportunities for all citizens at every stage of their life.

Apart from creating diverse and rewarding paths, the 4G team is also seeking to address a critical issue: How to make sure the disadvantaged can make the most of the opportunities that are created?

Second Minister for Education and Finance Indranee Rajah yesterday set out how the 4G team will address inequality and ensure social mobility, even as she acknowledged that the issue has been around since Singapore became independent.

"Singapore must always be a society of opportunities for all, throughout life, where everyone can progress irrespective of the starting point," she said at the National University of Singapore's Social Service Research Centre Conference.

Flagging that society could fracture in the face of widening inequal-

ities, she said: "What is at stake, therefore, is the very nature of our society. This is not just the task of the Government. It is the task of everyone because it affects all of us."

Inequality and social mobility have been in the spotlight in recent years. In March, Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee said inequality needs to be tackled on multiple fronts.

Yesterday, Ms Indranee said tackling inequality and social mobility, which have been concerns since 1965, is a "fundamental tenet of achieving a fair and just society".

The nature of the problem has also changed. In the early years, the base starting point for the majority of Singaporeans was very low.

But while the country's economic

progress has created prosperity for many, it has also meant that their children started with even greater advantages over those at the bottom end of the spectrum.

Advancements in technology also threaten to deepen the divide between higher-skilled and lower-skilled workers, who risk being shut off from new opportunities.

These trends and tendencies pose new challenges that did not exist in earlier decades, she noted. "Left unchecked, they will cause less advantaged Singaporeans to be left behind and feel that opportunities available can only be accessed by a privileged few," she added.

The 4G team's approach, she said, is not to do away with meritocracy, which some have blamed, or cap

the top, but to uplift the bottom by improving access to opportunities among the less advantaged.

She added: "In tandem with this, there must be multiple pathways for achievement, success and careers to ensure continuing social mobility."

Ms Indranee detailed various government assistance schemes, such as enhancing subsidies for child-care, and increasing the qualifying cap and raising the annual maximum payout for the Workfare Income Supplement. The 4G leaders will share more in the coming months on strengthening support for the disadvantaged, she said.

But it was important to offer opportunities for all at every stage of life, she added. "The Government will strive to ensure that no one, no mat-

ter the conditions of his or her birth, will be denied the opportunities to improve the conditions of their life."

In the area of education, this entails giving every child a good pre-school education, developing children's strengths during their schooling years and allowing them to succeed through different trajectories.

The opportunities would also be available in the working years to deepen skills and support displaced workers, she added.

The key was to bridge gaps to ensure that those for whom opportunities were created could seize them.

So, to help under-performing students from disadvantaged families and address issues like long-term absenteeism and the environment outside schools, there was a need to involve multiple agencies, ministries, self-help groups and even rope in families and community, she said.

"When the community is involved, it works two ways: It strengthens the ecosystem of care and support for disadvantaged students and, at the same time, offers people an avenue to give back."

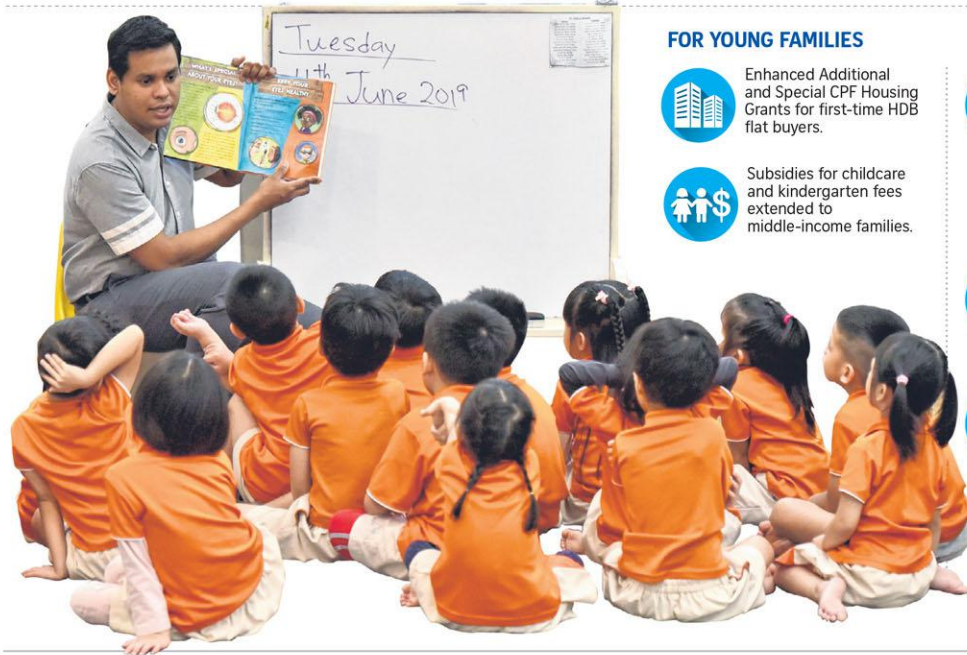
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## Reducing inequality, ensuring social mobility

Economic progress has created prosperity, but has also resulted in inequality over time. Second Minister for Education Indranee Rajah outlines Singapore's approach to the problem.



### FOR YOUNG FAMILIES



Enhanced Additional and Special CPF Housing Grants for first-time HDB flat buyers.



Subsidies for childcare and kindergarten fees extended to middle-income families.



Pre-school education is being made more accessible and affordable. Quality is also being improved, through certifying schools and training educators.



There is targeted early intervention for children from low-income homes and their families.



Schools are providing pathways for all students to realise their potential, and secondary schools will replace streaming with subject-based banding to focus on students' strengths.

### FOR WORKERS



Workfare boosts incomes of the lowest paid. From January 2020, the qualifying cap will be raised and the annual maximum payouts increased.



Progressive Wage Models, which set the minimum pay and peg wage increases to a skills ladder, raise incomes for low-wage workers.



Opportunities for continuous education and training are available at every stage of a person's career.



Employment support programmes like Adapt and Grow help displaced workers retrain for new jobs.

### FOR SENIORS



The Special Employment Credit scheme subsidises wages of Singaporean workers aged 55 and older who earn up to \$4,000 a month, to encourage hiring of older workers.



The Pioneer Generation and Merdeka Generation packages help seniors with their healthcare costs.

## TWO KEY MINISTRIES ARE ALSO DOING MORE

### MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT



Social service offices (SSOs) have been set up near HDB precincts with needy residents, to better coordinate social aid.



Video-conferencing is used so residents do not have to travel to and fro between agencies to get help.



There is also better information sharing among agencies to cut down paperwork.



### MINISTRY OF EDUCATION



The Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce (Uplift) was set up to study and help under-performing students from disadvantaged families.

#### It will focus on four key areas

- Long-term absenteeism
- Lack of structured and supervised environment outside school
- Lack of self-confidence, motivation and resilience
- Lack of strong family support

#### Three initiatives to help these students

- \$800 annual cash award to students from lower-income families who do well enough to go to independent schools
- Better after-school care and support through school-based care centres and after-school programmes in secondary schools
- Uplift Programme Office will be set up to match community resources to schools

PHOTOS: JASMINE CHOONG, KUA CHEE SIONG, ST FILE STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

## Drive to improve coordination in tapping volunteers, resources

**Tham Yuen-C**  
Senior Political Correspondent

An effort is under way to coordinate resources and community efforts on the ground, Second Minister for Education Indranee Rajah said yesterday.

Also, training is being considered for those who want to volunteer so that they are conscious of the issues faced by those in need, she added.

Ms Indranee revealed this at a dialogue when responding to a representative from a social service agency, who said that there are many well-meaning people who want to help low-income families. But sometimes, they may end up doing more harm than good without an insight into issues such as poverty and inequality.

The dialogue was part of a confer-

ence held by the National University of Singapore's Social Service Research Centre. It was attended by about 300 people, including representatives from social service agencies, academics and policymakers.

Ms Indranee, who heads the Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce (Uplift) to better support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, had earlier set out in a speech the approach the ruling party's fourth-generation leadership is taking to tackle inequality.

Ms Carrie Tan, founder of the Daughters Of Tomorrow charity, asked the minister whether the Uplift Programme Office (UPO) can help sensitise volunteers before they hit the ground.

The UPO is going to be set up under the Ministry of Education to improve coordination in tapping

community efforts and resources more systematically.

Ms Indranee said: "UPO is at the ministry level. We are still working out another piece, which is to do the coordination at the ground level. That is a work in progress and would involve working with welfare organisations and volunteer groups, and then we will see how the training can be done at that level."

Another issue raised was about people working in the gig economy. Mr Fang Xinwei, a senior social worker at the Singapore Children's Society, said quite a number of those from low-income families are gig workers doing freelance work.

This deprives them of benefits such as annual leave and Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions, and as a result, many face difficulties owning a home or planning for retirement, he said.

Ms Indranee said the Manpower Ministry is studying the issue.

"Because like you, we are quite concerned with the gig economy, which gives a kind of short-term income. But like you point out, it doesn't build up (a person's) retirement reserves," she added.

She also said that these workers, who may struggle to find permanent employment can be helped through schemes such as SkillsFuture and Adapt and Grow, which help people to get new skills.

Those who may not have accumulated enough retirement savings already receive top-ups to their CPF accounts from the Government's Silver Support scheme for needy seniors, she added.

For those who are at a young age now, what they really hope for is that "when they become older, by the time they retire, they won't be in a position where their reserves are low. So, we will have to try and figure out a way to help them build up their reserves", she said.

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SEE OPINION A26, HOME B2



# Dismantle meritocracy? No, create opportunities for all, for every stage of life

This is an edited excerpt from a speech by Second Minister for Education and Finance Indranee Rajah at the NUS Social Service Research Conference yesterday. The conference focus was on low-income families. In her speech, she laid out the vision of the new generation of political leaders – dubbed the 4G – to create a society of opportunities for every stage in life.

Today, I would like to speak about the 4G team's vision for a society of opportunities throughout life – one in which all will have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, irrespective of their background; a society in which birth is not destiny, nor where the starting point determines the end point.

The conference topic puts squarely in the frame the issues of inequality and social mobility currently confronting many countries, Singapore included.

While very much in the news today, these issues are not new.

In the 1965 Proclamation of Singapore, we proclaimed and declared as our goal that "Singapore shall forever be a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded on the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society".

So as you can see, inequality and social mobility were issues even back then, and we had from inception made tackling them a fundamental tenet of achieving a fair and just society.

Since that time, we have achieved much in pursuit of our goal, and the statistics tell the story of the tremendous progress we have made in our quest for a more just and equal society.

In 1960, life expectancy was 62.9 years. In 2018, it was 83.2 years.

In 1980, nearly 45 per cent of the Primary 1 cohort did not complete secondary education.

Today, it is less than 1 per cent.

In 1965, only about 10 per cent made it to post-secondary education. Today, more than 90 per cent of Singaporean youth go on to our institutions of higher learning.

Home ownership was less than 60 per cent in 1980. Now it is more than 90 per cent, of which more than 80 per cent is public housing.

This transformation can be attributed to our adherence to meritocracy, our heavy investments in education and our people, and our policies aimed at economic development, job creation, income growth, affordable quality healthcare for all, our public housing programme and generous subsidies to promote home ownership.

The cumulative effect of these policies was to generate a rising tide that lifted all boats.

The early generations saw significant improvements within their lifetimes and were able to give their children a better life than what they had experienced.

## REASONS FOR RISING INEQUALITY

Why is it then that inequality and social mobility are still issues today? And what is the difference between then and now?

First of all, in our early years as a nation, the starting base for the majority of Singaporeans was very low, across almost all indicators: education, income and home ownership.

There was a greater sense of all being in a similar situation. Or, as some older Singaporeans have put it, "we were all equally poor".

However, things have since changed. Our economic progress has created prosperity for many, but it has also resulted, over time, in different levels of resources accruing to low-, middle- and higher-income families. It's natural for families to want to use their resources to help their children advance, be it in the form of extra educational material, enrichment programmes or social networks.

As those parents who have accumulated more over our five decades of growth pass on advantages to their children, who in turn pass on further advantages to their children, this has given rise to a new concern that children at the bottom end of the spectrum have increasingly unequal starting blocks, which will translate down the line into very different outcomes and hinder social mobility.

At the same time, other deep-seated forces are also at play.

In an era where growth is driven by the knowledge-based industry in which the well-educated and exceptionally talented reap more rewards than others, economic and social benefits quickly accrue to those at the top.

This is exacerbated by rapid



Tackling inequality and maintaining social mobility are continuing challenges. They take different forms in different times, and each generation will have to address them as they manifest. The question for 4G leaders, says Second Minister for Education and Finance Indranee Rajah, is how they will tackle inequality and sustain social mobility, in this time and on their watch. ST FILE PHOTO

## Getting the community involved in helping students

The difference the community can make is tangible.

For example, Xishan Primary School is one of the seven schools that RSVP Singapore – an organisation for senior volunteers – is partnering for their mentoring programme.

RSVP volunteers visit the school weekly to provide practical help such as after-school homework supervision and conduct activities like handicraft work to build healthy hobbies and interests.

Over time, the seniors have befriended the children and serve as positive role models for them.

Aryan, a Primary 5 student in

the programme, was thankful that Uncle Jimmy shared his life story with him.

Uncle Jimmy shared that when he was a child, he used to dislike doing homework, but he realised that he needed to work hard in his studies in order to support his family, which was going through some financial difficulties at that time. This has motivated Aryan to study harder.

The bonds forged between the volunteers and students are precious and benefit the students tremendously.

Every Saturday night, Mr Lim Seng Kee, an airside operations

manager at Changi Airport Group, plays football with a group of SportCares youths between 13 and 21 years. He trains with them and leads by example, completing the sessions to the best of his ability and inspiring them to give their best.

With the time spent on the pitch together, Mr Lim has become not only their football kaka but also their role model and trusted mentor who, through the sharing of his life experiences, motivates, inspires and encourages them to be resilient.

Such ground-up volunteerism and active contributions from community organisations and

alumni members are examples of the partnerships between citizen volunteers and schools that we are looking to expand.

Through local connections, students are able to receive more immediate, targeted help required. When the community is involved, it actually works both ways: It strengthens the ecosystem of care and support for disadvantaged students but, at the same time, offers people an avenue to give back.

• Speech by Second Minister for Education and Finance Indranee Rajah

technological advancement.

The structure of our economy, like that of many others, is seeing rapid change driven by technology, automation and AI (artificial intelligence). Some of these changes have had the effect of worsening wage dispersion, threatening to deepen the divide between higher-skilled and lower-skilled workers.

Lower-skilled workers risk being shut off from the new opportunities being created.

Meanwhile, as we have become more developed and gradually caught up with some of the most advanced economies of the world, our growth has naturally slowed.

This new phase of our development coincides with our changing demographic profile.

Our people are not as young as before – within a few generations, we have gone from enjoying the baby-boomer demographic dividend to dealing with the challenges of an ageing population.

This trajectory is not unlike that of other similar economies, such as South Korea and Taiwan. A slower pace of economic growth directly translates into how much progress each new generation is likely to see. It can also lead to stagnation for lower-skilled workers who are unable to adapt or reskill.

These trends and tendencies pose new challenges to our society that did not exist in earlier decades.

Left unchecked, they will cause less advantaged Singaporeans to be left behind, and to feel that the opportunities available can be accessed only by a privileged few.

As the needs and viewpoints in our society continue to become more diverse, such a situation will make it easy for new fault lines to emerge between the haves and have-nots, or the will-haves and the won't-haves.

Our Gini coefficient as a measure

of income dispersion has remained stable in recent years, but if we do not actively intervene to mitigate inequality and enhance social mobility, our sense of being one united people will gradually erode.

These developments show that tackling inequality and maintaining social mobility are continuing challenges. They take different forms in different times and each generation will have to address them as they manifest.

The question for 4G leaders, therefore, is how we will tackle inequality and sustain social mobility, in this time and on our watch.

## RETHINK MERITOCRACY?

One common call is that we should "rethink meritocracy".

If that means that we should do away with letting people advance on merit, that we should abolish the principle of choosing the person best able and best equipped to do the job, then the answer is no, that cannot be the right approach.

We must remember that meritocracy was adopted as an antidote to corruption and nepotism and a means of ensuring that positions were obtained on the basis of substantive ability.

Doing away with meritocracy would be an invitation for those ill to resurface and weaken our system.

If the suggestion is that we should hold back those who can achieve more in a bid to equalise outcomes, then the answer must also be no.

Which parent doesn't want their child to be the best that they can be? Students too have their own aspirations. Each new generation will want to reach for the greatest possible achievement for themselves. It would not be right to hold them back.

People have diverse skills, talents and abilities. It's inevitable that

there will be some differences in outcomes.

The crux of the matter is not the principle of meritocracy per se. The crux of the matter is that while we have worked very hard to provide equal opportunities, those from the lower-income and disadvantaged backgrounds might find it harder to access these opportunities.

Our approach is not to cap the top but to uplift the bottom – to improve access to these opportunities among the less advantaged and make the most of the opportunities on offer, to bridge the shortfalls and narrow the gaps so that all can rise together – an enabling meritocracy, if you will.

In tandem with this, there must be multiple pathways for achievement, success and careers to ensure continuing social mobility. Some may progress faster, others may take longer; some may take familiar routes, others the path less travelled, but ultimately all can have good outcomes – not necessarily the same outcomes – with effort on their part and, where needed, with support from the Government and others.

Our approach therefore is twofold. First, we will continue to strengthen the support for those who have less. Second, we will build a society of opportunities for all, at every stage of life.

## STRENGTHENING SUPPORT

As a government, we are committed to do the best we can to bring about the right conditions for our people to thrive. In the early years when we had fewer resources, heavy emphasis was placed on economic development, a policy approach which lifted an entire generation out of poverty.

As circumstances changed, we saw a rising trend of inequality in the 1990s. Without letting up on

economic development which is the engine that generates the wealth that is a prerequisite for redistribution, in 2006 we made a decisive shift to provide greater social support to more vulnerable groups and those who need it most.

The coverage and level of our assistance schemes have grown in the last decade and span the life cycle. We will continue to strengthen support for those who need it.

In the coming months, my 4G colleagues will share more on this subject. But even as we do more to moderate the effects of unequal circumstances and strengthen support for those in need, we must in parallel also work to provide opportunities for all Singaporeans to do well in life.

## OPPORTUNITIES AT EVERY STAGE OF LIFE

The second key area of work therefore is building a society of opportunities for all, at every stage of life. This is a fundamental basis on which our nation is built, and remains a key pillar of the 4G's vision for Singapore.

The Government will strive to ensure that no one, no matter the conditions of his or her birth, will be denied the opportunities to improve the conditions of their life.

We will make sure that all are enabled to take advantage of the opportunities we provide in education, skills training, housing and other relevant areas. This is what we mean by an enabling meritocracy.

Ensuring that Singaporeans have a solid foundation from which to advance and progress is core to MOE's (Ministry of Education's) work. But it also extends across many other policy areas – finance, social and housing, among others. Minister Desmond Lee has

outlined moves by the Ministry of Social and Family Development in the social space to moderate the income gap and strengthen the support for low-income families.

In housing, Minister Lawrence Wong has highlighted various initiatives to help rental tenants progress to home ownership.

Let me elaborate on what this means in relation to education.

First, we want every child to have good pre-school education, given the importance of early childhood development as a key factor for good outcomes in later life.

To increase the availability, affordability and quality of pre-school education for all, including the lower and middle income, we introduced the Anchor Operator scheme as well as MOE kindergartens, implemented the Nurturing Early Learners curriculum framework and Spark certification, and set up NIEC (National Institute of Early Childhood Development) as a pipeline of well-qualified early childhood educators. Fee subsidies are also available for those in need.

To help bridge unequal starting points, we piloted KidStart to provide targeted and upstream intervention for low-income children and their families, starting from pregnancy and going all the way to pre-school.

Early childhood is a continuing area of work and we will do more.

Second, for children in their schooling years, our education system must serve to develop every child's strengths and allow for success through different trajectories.

We in MOE see it as our responsibility to ensure that our public schools continue to provide quality education pathways for all students, regardless of their background, and to help them realise their fullest potential.

Our remaking of secondary school pathways with full subject-based banding is a latest step towards this direction.

Our institutions of higher learning – ITE (Institute of Technical Education), polytechnics and universities – provide different paths for our students to achieve their aspirations.

We will look into what else can be done to remove barriers to education and training at different levels.

Third, beyond opportunities in the early and schooling years, we want to ensure there continue to be diverse and rewarding paths for everyone in their working years.

Our economy continues to generate good jobs for our young adults as they enter the workforce. We must make sure we equip them with the right skills to take advantage of opportunities in our new economy. But this is just the start. We must make sure there are good opportunities for continuous education and training, and that learning does not stop after you enter the workforce.

Singaporeans should have the opportunity to deepen and broaden their skills at every stage in their career. We are looking hard at how SkillsFuture can be enhanced to support this goal.

We will also take care of our vulnerable workers – these include not only the lower-income or older workers but every worker who is at risk of displacement. Given the pace of technological change, it is especially important for us to see how we can help those affected by setbacks like job loss, illness or family difficulties to get back on their feet quickly. MOM's (Ministry of Manpower's) employment support programmes under Adapt and Grow are part of this.

This task of tackling inequality and ensuring social mobility is a critical work.

We do this because as Singaporeans, we must care for one another and look out for one another. Every Singaporean matters and we want all to do well.

Singapore must always be a society of opportunities for all, throughout life, where everyone can progress irrespective of starting point; where all Singaporeans will have equal chance to seek better lives – to meet their aspirations and find happiness – regardless of background. We must also do this as a matter of national interest.