

By Invitation

What it means to live well in Singapore

Social inclusion, affordable options and self-responsibility are key to living well and sustaining social cohesion



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For *The Straits Times*

How much does a family need to live comfortably in Singapore? A study, led by researchers from the National University of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the Nanyang Technological University, has come up with the following estimates: \$6,426 a month for a couple with two children aged seven to 18, and \$3,218 for a single parent with a child aged two to six.

These findings are based on a research methodology known as the Minimum Income Standards approach. Focus groups comprising members of the public were asked to discuss and agree on the goods and services needed by a family for a basic standard of living, taking into account social norms and expectations.

According to the study's authors, basic needs go beyond what families require to survive; also included are items that enable "a sense of belonging, respect, security and independence".

The study drew a response from the Ministry of Finance (MOF), which pointed out that the findings were highly dependent on the profile of focus group participants and the ensuing group dynamics.

MOF also highlighted, among other things, that the study should have considered lower-cost alternatives to expenditure items in the basket of needs – for instance, enrichment classes by government-run student care centres and self-help groups, which could substitute for privately run programmes.

MOF's statement affirmed continued support for those in need "through a combination of building their capacity for self-resilience, strengthening their family support, and partnering with the community for further support".

Both the household budgets study and MOF's response draw attention to vital aspects about living well in Singapore: the importance of social inclusion, the need for affordable living options,



With a strong ethos of personal responsibility accompanying robust social support, Singapore can aspire to be a nation where all citizens feel they belong – a home that not only provides for their needs, but also equips them to give their best for themselves and the community, says the writer. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

and the responsibility of individuals, families and the community.

NEED FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

One approach to determining individual or family needs is to have experts provide input based on nutrition, healthcare and other essentials of living. While this can establish an absolute benchmark for poverty or subsistence, it is less relevant in identifying spending that appears discretionary, but is nonetheless important for social inclusion.

In Singapore, absolute poverty is much less of a concern today after decades of strong economic and income growth. However, the rising tide has lifted some boats much more than others.

Inequality, the product of Singapore's economic success and global city status, matters in at least two key dimensions: its impact on social mobility, and its effect on social inclusion. For these reasons, relative poverty is also pertinent.

Many goods and services provided by the market cater to what the bulk of the population can afford – for instance, casual restaurants have proliferated across suburban malls and residential estates, while hipster cafes are now common in many gentrified precincts in Singapore.

Social exclusion may arise when a child feels she cannot afford to join her friends for lunch at the mall after school, or when her classmates are comparing their holiday experiences abroad and she is left out of the conversation.

There are also social norms dictating the amounts people contribute to funerals or weddings, which impinge on an individual's social respectability.

Enrichment classes speak to both social norms and social mobility. Notwithstanding the high quality of public education, many parents feel obliged to put their children through private tuition and enrichment programmes, which they view as necessary for their children to keep up or keep ahead.

The approach taken in the household budgets study, subjective as it may be, takes a crack at factoring in social norms and expectations which have a role in shaping social inclusion.

AFFORDABLE LIVING OPTIONS AND COMMON SPACES

If social inclusion is the glue holding society together, sustaining inclusivity must rank high among national policy priorities. While raising incomes and providing social transfers play a critical role in addressing the cost of living, the Government also possesses other levers that can influence affordability and social inclusion.

For instance, government land sales affect property and rental prices. A steady supply of land adequate for residential and business needs can avert supply crunches that would drive up prices; where necessary, the authorities may also take steps to rein in property speculation. No less significant are upstream measures to influence demand,

such as medical insurance reform to contain healthcare inflation.

By managing the cost of delivering public goods and services, the public sector can avoid transferring an excessive burden to the public when pricing these for cost recovery.

Innovation, too, may help to cut costs. Improvements to system design and processes in public agencies and corporatised service providers have led to significant savings which may be passed on to end-users.

The point made by MOF on lower-cost alternatives is an important one. Whether provided by the public, private or people sector, affordable options for food, transport, housing, healthcare and education can hold down the cost of living for the less well-off.

Take food, for instance. Supermarket house brands coexist with premium brands, catering to a spectrum of budgets and needs. Singapore's distinctive hawker fare has kept the price of cooked food relatively low for a rich country, besides engendering a shared culinary identity across socio-economic strata.

Affordable hawker food is itself the outcome of policy choices. In 2011, the Government announced that it would be building new hawker centres after a 26-year hiatus. Social enterprise hawker centres were set up, and the subletting of hawker stalls, which had previously driven up rentals, was disallowed.

The sustainability of hawker culture depends crucially on the next generation of hawkers. To this end, a work-study programme

in "hawkerpreneurship" was launched to prepare young Singaporeans for a career as hawkers.

In other domains, policy decisions may likewise determine affordability. Cycling could be a viable alternative to other forms of transport if made safer and more convenient; smaller public housing units and no-frills public amenities may be welcome options for those with less financial means.

Singapore's urban planners have done well in making available free common spaces for public enjoyment, including playgrounds, parks and beaches. These are places where children from different backgrounds can mix, where families can bond over picnic dinners, and people may exercise or simply enjoy the outdoors – all without burning a hole in the pocket.

Public museums, too, are free for locals, while sports facilities can be booked at nominal fees. There is potential for these common spaces, vital for social inclusion and mixing, to be gradually expanded over time, so that Singapore will remain an inclusive home for all Singaporeans and not just an exciting city for the well-heeled.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR SELF, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

While recognising that socio-economic driving forces necessitate a step-up in social transfers, it is important not to let go of the spirit of personal effort and responsibility that

Singaporeans are known for. The Pioneer Generation had industry and grit in abundance; today's young have a different set of challenges, but would do well to emulate the drive and resilience of the pioneers.

If there is a gap between one's income and what is required to meet basic needs, it should be reflexive to ask what one can do to reduce the gap. In today's context, this must go beyond just putting in more hours of work – managing personal finances, making prudent investments, upgrading one's skills and innovating at the workplace may all have a part to play.

In many industrialised societies, responsibility for social provision has largely passed from family and the community to the state. However, there is merit in retaining in our society the "gotong royong" spirit – where members of a community look out for one another and lend mutual support.

The community is often better-placed than the state to respond quickly to local needs; social bonds are strengthened, and collective resilience enhanced, when people transcend boundaries of race, religion, education and income levels to reach out to those in need.

A suite of public policies encourages responsibility for self, family and society. These include tax reliefs for topping up one's own or family members' Central Provident Fund (CPF) accounts for basic retirement needs; tax deductions and matching contributions for donations to charitable and social causes; and state support for social service agencies and voluntary organisations that serve the needy.

The "many helping hands" approach to social service provision has resulted in instances of service gaps or overlaps, but it is sometimes necessary for the public sector to take a step back to allow the people sector to step forward.

To sustain social cohesion in Singapore, social inclusion must be prioritised; public policy should promote affordability and inclusion; and self-responsibility ought to be nurtured and reinforced.

With a strong ethos of personal responsibility accompanying robust social support, Singapore can aspire to be a homeland where all citizens feel they belong – a home that not only provides for their needs, but also equips and challenges them to give their best for themselves, their families and the wider community.

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