Becoming a global city and promoting national cohesiveness are not necessarily contradictory goals.

Strike the right balance to make Singapore a 'city in a country'

BY INVITATION

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SPEAKING in London last week, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed confidence in the future as Singapore strives to remain a truly global city while maintaining national solidarity. He emphasised that Singapore "must get the balance just right".

In the past few years, I have been one of several observers who have spoken about the need to better manage the tensions or contradictions between these two goals.

How does Singapore get the balance just right? More fundamentally, how should Singaporeans think about the contradictions? And what does getting the balance just right really mean?

These are basic questions of mindset. The answers adopted will lead to policy and public actions that will affect both national interests and the interests of individual citizens.

The 'give-and-take' mindset

A COMMON answer to the balancing question is to adopt a "give-and-take" mindset. In other words, people need to give up something in order to obtain something else.

So to ensure Singapore's continued growth as a global city, for example, citizens need to be more tolerant of the problems of crowding, clustering, competition, comparisons and conflict brought about by the inflow of foreigners.

To give-and-take is more than to accommodate. It is to achieve consensus through compromise – to reach a middle ground between two opposing positions.

But the concepts of "give-and-take", "compromise" and "middle ground" lead people to think of issues along a single dimension. City and country goals form the two poles of the dimension. This representation leads people to think of the two goals as contradictory rather than potentially complementary.

This give-and-take mindset to the city-country paradox is a limiting one. It is based on a zero-sum approach – to move towards one goal is tantamount to moving away from the other.

When the zero-sum approach dominates in people's minds, a win for one goal implies a loss for the other. People feel forced to choose between economic growth and social well-being, between competition and compassion, or between cosmopolitan openness and national solidarity.

Such zero-sum thinking will produce growing resentment among different segments of the Singapore population. This is because the reasoning is some segment needs to lose for other segments to win.

Routinely masked by compromised or middle-ground "solutions", growing resentment will eventually surface as overt conflict and adverse outcomes. Those advocating the give-and-take mindset may get caught by surprise and fail to respond effectively.

Sensibilities for changing mindsets

THE Government has slowed the pace of foreigner intake to reduce the strain on infrastructure and social cohesion. At the same time, however, the authorities remain committed to pursuing policies consistent with the desire to promote Singapore as a global city. These include attracting foreign investment, and remaining business friendly and open to global talent and foreign manpower.

Concurrent with the pursuit of global city goals, significant resources and effort have also been put into addressing concerns related to maintaining an inclusive society and national solidarity. This is evident in the shifts in social policies on housing, education and health care to address social mobility and social security.

Getting the balance just right cannot be achieved with a mindset that adopts a zero-sum approach. Singapore is prioritising both its global city and cohesive society goals. This suggests that the balancing act cannot be driven by a simplistic mindset.

There will always be some policy decisions that require trade-offs. But this does not mean Singapore must always sacrifice one desirable goal to achieve another. Not all difficult issues involve such zero-sum trade-offs.

Indeed, it would be hard to be optimistic about the future if each step taken towards becoming a global city involved Singapore taking a step backward as a cohesive country, or vice versa.

Strategic principles

SO WHAT does getting the balance just right really mean? And how can Singapore do it? There is no consensus now, but the following strategic principles may act as a guide.

First, reject any argument that would require a choice between the cosmopolitan vibrancy of a global city and the national solidarity of a cohesive country.

Second, Singaporeans should ask what kind of country, or city, they want to live in. In doing so, however, they should recognise the fallacy of framing the question as a dichotomy between a global city goal and a national solidarity goal.

Third, adopt a mindset that emphasises matching between city and country goals. In this mindset, global city goals and national solidarity are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Fourth, interpret both city goals and country goals as components of the larger goal of Singapore becoming a "city-in-a-country". Evaluate city goals and country goals in terms of how they reinforce each other, and how they contribute to this larger goal.

Fifth, adopt what I call "home-in-community" as the building block for a city-in-a-country. This concept applies to all people in Singapore. For example, a whole-of-society approach involving not just the Government, but also the people and private sectors, should be used to enhance integration and community development through social interaction, mutual help and volunteerism.

In this way, Singaporeans can feel a strong sense of belonging, national identity and rootedness to the country. Permanent residents can see the community as their current second home, with the potential and prospect of making Singapore their first home by becoming citizens. Non-resident foreigners can see the community as a good transient home away from home – one that is attractive to work and play in but also worthy enough for them to contribute to.

Sixth, adopt a "glocal" perspective when making Singapore into a global city. By this I mean Singaporeans should be at the centre of all strategies pursuing Singapore's development in the global context. This citizen-centric approach needs to be real, and be seen to be real.

It requires more than faith in trickle-down economics. There must be clear pathways showing how the results of global city pursuits are translated into actual benefits experienced by Singaporeans. There must also be regular monitoring and evaluation of the efficacy of these pathways.

Cultural capital

SINGAPORE'S cultural capital can also be used to encourage the pursuit of the two goals.

A global city has strong cultural vibrancy that attracts visitors. Culture includes arts and fashion but also national heritage, with distinctive geographical identities related to local history and the local population. To be a global city, Singapore should build its cultural capital based on local contextual knowledge and experiences that Singaporeans already possess. It can also take advantage of heritage artefacts such as historical buildings and public spaces.

This involves developing culture industries and businesses for tourism and economic growth. It means employing Singaporeans based on job-relevant knowledge and experience, grooming them to fill high value-added jobs and become managers and leaders in these sectors. It also means conserving national heritage in order to promote national identity, and integrating these with the pursuit of economic objectives.

Distinctive geographical identities can be preserved or developed by building infrastructure in ways that are consistent with economic, conservationist and social goals.

Policy adaptation

INFRASTRUCTURE planning needs to be complemented with policy adaptations. For example, with increasing tourism, the need to build more hotels and other facilities creates a land use problem. To address this, housing policies could be revised to allow residents to open up their homes to host tourists, subject to appropriate conditions.

This housing policy revision reduces the need for more hotels and facilities, thereby freeing up land for other important uses. It also provides additional income for households. This in turn decreases the need for frequent government handouts to lower- and middle-income households and increases self-reliance.

It also allows tourists to experience uniquely Singaporean residential living and may add a day or two of tourist receipts. It may even enrich the cross-cultural experiences of Singaporeans while reinforcing their national identity and pride as Singaporean hosts, guides and representatives to foreigner visitors.

Singapore's goal to be a global city while maintaining and enhancing national cohesion can and should be pursued in complementary and mutually reinforcing ways. Singapore is both a city and a country. Getting the balance just right is not only about preventing negative outcomes. It is also about dynamic balancing to achieve the aspirations of Singapore and Singaporeans.

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