## Promoting positivity in Singapore

**Minister of State for National Development Maliki Osman suggests deeper, smaller scale engagement between leaders and citizens, and empowerment among the community, to build positive attitudes and experiences.**

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File photo: People walk through an underpass in Singapore. (Photo: Francine Lim)

SINGAPORE: Encourage deeper, smaller scale engagement between leaders and citizens and empower people to create solutions to problems within the community, suggested Minister of State for National Development Maliki Osman.

He was speaking at the Behavioural Sciences Institute Conference organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) on Friday (Feb 27), on how positive attitudes and experiences can be promoted in Singapore.

Professor David Chan, director of the Behavioural Science Institute at SMU, said: "Sometimes, we tend to have a high negativity bias, we tend to focus on negative things, much more than positive things. So the challenge is for the community, Government, we ourselves to be able to look at the positive as well."

## POSITIVE OUTLOOK

"Your well-being can be significantly enhanced if you look at things more positively," said Dr Maliki. "From a community and national development point of view, I think it is also important for society to look at things from the positive angle."

But dialogue participants acknowledged that keeping a positive outlook takes work.

"We tend to assume that our communities are functioning well. But I think deep down inside, we have to ask ourselves what do we mean by them functioning well," said Dr Maliki. "Today I think we have not done much. I think we can do a lot more."

He said that one way is to empower citizens to take collective responsibility for problems and come up with solutions.

"What comes across for the Government, agencies - we have to begin to appreciate some of these sources of negative sentiments and try to understand where they came from," said Dr Maliki. "At the same time, create opportunities for people to feel and experience positive outcomes, positive processes."

Participants also spent time discussing the role of the People's Association in organising mass community activities. Dialogue participants felt that such events should be more than just about the numbers - such as calculating how many people attended the event and how many activities the People's Association organises annually.

Dr Maliki added: "The essence of building a community is about building relationships. It is about building trust between people and you can only do that when you are in small circles. So that is why I introduced the concept of micro-communities to start engaging people at the micro level.

"We need to appreciate the value of doing small-scale engagement, because there is deeper appreciation of people."

## INFRASTRUCTURE PLAYS A PART

New flats without common corridors and the introduction of the Lift Upgrading Programme, in which lifts stop at every floor, limit opportunities for interaction among residents.

Dr Maliki said the Housing and Development Board (HDB) has been mindful about building common community spaces in new neighbourhoods.

He said: "Maybe corridor spaces are limited but there are more community spaces on the ground, and that means that community programming is critical," he said. "The positive energies that exist within communities are when people come together. People want to come together. Grassroots leaders and volunteers knock on every door to make people appreciate each other and create opportunities for them to come together."

"Space is just one aspect. We need to bring in community involvement, in making sure that the space works for the community," he added.

Dr Cheong Koon Hean, CEO of HDB, said: "The community is alive, and our job is really how to support the growth of this type of community. So even in some of the policies for example, when we do SERS - Selective En bloc programmes - when we move, we move them by communities.

"Because we are very mindful that while we need to replace and give them new flats, we do not want to break the community bond. We encourage them to apply for flats together. So the same neighbours in the same floor can apply together and be the same neighbours in the same building."

Participants added that in today's digital world, this engagement should also apply online.

"Voices can be everywhere. Voices can be online or offline. But the online voices are particularly important," said Prof Chan. "There is a danger that sometimes we demonise social media too much. It is true that there are some things there that are a bit more negative than it should be."

"But it is quite important to understand the underlying anxiety and angst. Things online are not necessarily negative. So understanding the reasons behind the negativity, enhancing constructive positivity, would be quite important," he added.

He noted: "Of course you need to have people more involved and for people to talk more. But what we should not do is to say, 'These are the negative ones, we just get positive people to come in and talk and that's it'. Understand why people speak negatively, so that they will also speak up realistically, which will involve both negative things and positive things."

Several panellists agreed that the only way to counter negativity was to learn more about positivity. Giving examples, they spoke about how companies in Singapore can be better engaged to do charity work.

The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre said it is engaging bigger organisations to adopt non-profit organisations and focus more on giving back time rather than money.

The conference was attended by about 300 people from the public and private sector, as well as non-governmental organisations.

- CNA/xq