In this first part of a two-part article on integration, Professor David Chan discusses societal cohesion. The second part on integration efforts and policies will be published tomorrow.

The outcomes and consequences of population policies affect all areas of Singaporeans’ lives. At stake is not just how citizens perceive the Government or view a political party. At stake is the very quality of our lives in physical dimensions such as space and infrastructure supporting economic dimensions such as jobs and taxes, and social dimensions such as inter-group relations and community cohesion.

Population and integration challenges cannot be addressed in a top-down manner and by the Government alone. We need a “whole-of-society” approach where people not only have a voice but can also be part of the solution. Public discourse on this issue, however sensitive or difficult, must continue constructively so it makes a positive difference to the outcomes. An honest and thorough national conversation on this helps Singaporeans work together on solutions that will benefit our future and those of our children.

All sides in the discussion must consider what goals we would agree to achieve as a society. Most of us would agree on major societal goals. These would include citizens’ well-being and quality of life, adding to the productivity for all Singaporeans; a competitive and inclusive society with equal opportunity for all Singaporeans; a sense of community and inclusiveness with citizens rooted and committed to Singapore as an adaptive and resilient society.

If we agree on societal goals, then integration policies should be framed to influence achieving these societal goals. Challenges of social cohesion can be discussed in terms of five C’s: crowding, clustering, competition, comparison, and conflicts.

Crowding

CROWDING lowers efficiency, well-being and quality of life. A result of a mismatch between the large and rapid influx of foreign workers and the available physical and psychological space is an increase in social anxiety. The experience of crowding is in both physical and psychological dimensions, it is not just an increase in absolute numbers or density. Our experience of crowding is affected also by the quality of sharing and sense of familiarity and mutual attitudes with other citizens/citizens.

Improvements to infrastructure and more physical space will mitigate the problem by reducing the number of people per square area. But the underlying psychological and integration issues have to be tackled. So it is a mistake to compare Singapore with Tokyo, which has a highly homogenous population, and to argue that Singapore can therefore comfortably support a larger population of much higher density.

The issue is not optimal density but crowedness and its impact on effective functioning and well-being.

In any case, physical improvements take time to materialise. We need to tighten the inflow of foreigners and address integration issues urgently and adequately.

A well-integrated population could have a higher quality of life and experience fewer problems of crowedness that one with equal or lower density but poorer integration.

Clustering

CLUSTERING is a challenge for integration, where the physical congregation of foreigners and their interactions exclude those outside the group. It is an urban trap.

But clustering of foreigners tends to signify exclusiveness and discourage Singaporeans to join in the activities and interactions. This reinforces group membership and contributes to the development of a “us-versus-them” mindset, negative feelings between locals and foreigners and ignorance about each other. Clustering produces a sense of competition, comparisons and ignorance about each other. One example is the belief that foreign employers are hiring or discriminating against Singaporeans about integrating.

Understanding the 5C challenges of cohesion will help focus attention on the real concerns of Singaporeans about integrating foreigners and provide a framework for efforts towards integration and policy formulation and implementation.