

At what point are you considered poor in Singapore?
The Sunday Times finds out it is not all that clear-cut.

Singapore must define poverty, say experts



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A team of researchers and poverty experts at the Singapore Management University (SMU) says it is time Singapore joined other developed nations in officially defining and measuring poverty.

Doing so could lead to greater public support for efforts to help vulnerable communities, they say in a paper from the Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

"Many Singaporeans may not be aware of the scale and depth of poverty in Singapore," said poverty expert John Donaldson from SMU's School of Social Sciences, one of the key collaborators on the paper. "We hope our research can help people to understand the nature of the problem, its causes and possible solutions."

The paper, to be officially released next month, reviews the limited local research done here and discusses the merits and drawbacks of various global poverty measures.

Aside from Associate Professor Donaldson, the authors include poverty expert Sanushka Mudaliar from the Lien Centre and economist Yeoh Lam Keong from the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

They note that the living conditions and incomes of the poorest among the resident population here do not reach the levels of destitution seen in developing countries, but Singapore still needs to "reassess the way in which poverty is acknowledged, defined and addressed".

Prof Donaldson told The Sunday Times that the lack of comprehensive publicly available information is "an obstacle to informed discussion on the complex issues Singapore faces in its efforts to eliminate poverty".

For instance, while there are 105,000 households in the bottom 10 per cent of the income scale – the working poor – there is no readily available information on the number of retiree and unemployed households that are struggling financially. "We wish we had more such data," said Prof Donaldson.

Qualitative data is required too. In the second phase of the research next year, the team plans to inter-

view poor people to assess their needs.

Focus group discussions with those working with the poor tossed up some disturbing stories – such as those of intergenerational poverty. "We were told, for example, that there are family service centres that are now serving the children of their clients from 20 years ago," said Prof Donaldson.

Mr Yeoh said that as poverty in Singapore is relatively unseen, it tends to be an under-addressed problem. "We hope that by measuring poverty properly, we can help change that," he said.

Broadly speaking, a poverty line specifies the minimum levels of income needed to pay for the basic necessities in life in any country or region.

Last month, Hong Kong joined a host of developed economies in defining its poverty line for the first time, setting it at half the median household income, excluding tax and welfare transfers. That put 1.3 million people – roughly a fifth of the population – below the poverty line.

Although Singapore has been consistently among the wealthiest countries in the world over the past 10 years – measured by per capita gross domestic product – inequality has risen sharply at the same time, say the authors.

Together with Hong Kong, Singapore now has one of the highest levels of inequality in the developed world. Growing inequality here has been compounded by "low and falling real wages of the bottom 20 per cent of employed residents", the paper added.

Calling attention to the issue

The publication of the Lien Centre paper coincides with tomorrow's launch of the first public awareness campaign on poverty, called Singaporeans Against Poverty, initiated by Caritas Singapore, the social service arm of the Catholic Church.

Nominated Member of Parliament Laurence Lien, who is helming the Caritas campaign and is on the Lien Centre board, believes that having an official poverty line will help focus attention on the degree of poverty here and track how it is tackled.

"However, we should also recognise that poverty is a complex issue. Different poverty thresholds for households with different circumstances would be needed," he said.

Better information and data on the poor will also help spur philan-

thropy, said the chief executive of the Community Foundation of Singapore (CFS), Ms Catherine Loh, who helps private donors decide where to park their charity dollars.

Donors, she said, always ask where, exactly, are the people in need. "Some concrete data will complement the emotional images shown by charities when they appeal for donations," said Ms Loh, whose foundation has helped raise more than \$50 million in donations since it was set up in September 2008.

"Most importantly, CFS will be able to use the information to better evaluate and assess the programmes run by charities and be able to channel resources to areas where they are needed most."

The need to measure poverty has also found supporters among social service professionals such as Ms Jean Koh who deal daily with the poor. The acting centre manager at Care Corner Family Service Centre counted the working poor and sole breadwinners with large families as key groups to watch out for.

"Knowing where to draw the line on absolute poverty, for instance, will allow us to critically examine if there are still citizens who are falling below the minimum standards of living in spite of various assistance schemes available."

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