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It is the collective responsibility of society to provide "positive circles of aspiration and practical ambition", said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam on Tuesday (Nov 27).

SINGAPORE: If people are left to build self-reliance on their own, they will not be able to achieve what they - and the rest of society - want to achieve, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam on Tuesday (Nov 27).

It is the collective responsibility of society instead, added Mr Tharman, to provide "positive circles of aspiration and practical ambition" so that individuals develop the desire to take responsibility for themselves.

Mr Tharman made the comments at the launch of the book *How Working Together Matters: Adversity, Aspiration, Action* at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The book, edited by SMU Professor David Chan, documents a multi-year project to help more than 1,000 families living in interim rental public housing. It reflects on the lessons learned by stakeholders working together to help others.

During his speech, Mr Tharman stressed that collective action and personal responsibility are not at odds with each other, and that they are not a contradiction.

He noted how the importance of relationships and networks "comes through very strongly" in the book, and the importance of relationships between people of different social backgrounds.

"It is also a very important part of these social networks that we're trying to create. And the networks that support everyone in building practical ambition," Mr Tharman said.

"It helps for people of different social backgrounds to be able to engage together in developing those positive networks that lead to practical ambition and the desire on everyone's part to aspire and move up for themselves," he added.

Last month, Mr Tharman spoke about inequality and social mobility at a dialogue during an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) event, where he noted that Singapore has to ensure that everyone, including the middle class, keeps moving up.

This means having to work harder at keeping mobility going, by starting early in life, intervening to help people do well for themselves.

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SIMPLIFY ELIGIBILITY FOR FINANCIAL SCHEMES

Mr Tharman also highlighted the need to help people reduce the effort needed to gain access to government support schemes.

One of the ways is to simplify eligibility to government schemes and polices by having more back-end coordination.

He raised the example of how Social Service Offices have tied up with hospitals to give a common assessment of people in need, without putting them through two rounds of financial assessment.

“That's also why it's helpful, as the book points out, to have a single dedicated social worker for each family so they don't need to be talking and repeating their stories to too many people.

“It's not just about too many government agencies, but too many individuals one at a time. Having that dedicated social worker that has earned the trust of the family is also a way of reducing stress - the stress of financial difficulty,” Mr Tharman said.

GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

To keep social mobility going, the government needs to help people “bounce up” from life's inevitable difficulties.

Mr Tharman said that can be done by focusing on education, work and housing as the key pillars of the broader social strategy.

“Those are the things that give people their pride, they earn their own success that way.

“And we must never lose that trust in society, where everyone knows that someone else deserves help because they are actually going to put in the effort to helping themselves.”

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