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By Imelda Saad

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Experts at a conference on Monday said Singapore may rank well when it comes to factors like the economy, security and infrastructure, but not as well in meeting the social and emotional needs of residents.



File photo: A general view of the Singapore skyline.

SINGAPORE: Just how liveable is Singapore?

Experts at a conference on Monday said Singapore may rank well when it comes to factors like the economy, security and infrastructure, but not as well in meeting the social and emotional needs of residents.

With the country's changing demographics, they said there now needs to be a different yardstick to measure quality of life.

Speakers at the conference said liveability goes beyond just meeting physical needs. Sometimes, it is about managing expectations.

Gerard Ee, chairman of the Council for Third Age and the Public Transport Council, said: "More and more people, I feel, are not distinguishing between a 'need to have' and a 'nice to have'.

"So I always wonder with the size of apartments in Singapore, why anybody ever has a need for a 42-inch or even larger TV screen? That is their aspiration -- to have as large a screen as possible, a smart TV -- getting the latest and the best.

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"So unless one begins to distinguish and (determine) the things (one) really needs to have and measures that, and determines that as affordability, I don't think we will get the answer."

As Singapore progresses, coupled with its changing demographics, the speakers added that the measurement of liveability must take into account less tangible needs.

Professor David Chan, director of Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University, said: "There are issues about demographics, there are issues about integration, there are issues of social habits... therefore we need to pay attention to the social behavioural issues underlying all these sentiments."

A pivot towards the social and emotional needs of residents may be needed. The speakers all agreed there is room for the community itself to step up to cater to this.

Laurence Lien, CEO of National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, said: "There are a lot of opportunities for greater social capital, more social trust, and for citizens to get together to do things for one another, for the community."

"We don't see a lot of community ownership by citizens and residents and they are not creating new (ground-up) initiatives sufficiently."

Mr Lien added that the government needs to do less and the citizens need to be empowered more.

He said: "It needs to start with a mindset shift because citizens have been very dependent on the government on all aspects of life. This has to shift."

"We need to invest in more community facilitators. These are paid full time staff who are skilled at mobilising people at the community, working with interested people -- the connectors (and) the initiators encouraging them, giving them, perhaps, seed money to start initiatives from little experiments. Some may become models for others. I think we can build a movement of ground-up initiatives."

The shift in mindset comes with risks, but also a sense of ownership. Professor Chan called the concept the "home-in-community" concept, where Singapore is home to everyone, regardless of nationality, race, and social status.

Professor Chan said: "It is a concept that allows for commonality across people of different grouping, no matter how you slice them. It's important because you want people to live, work and play and have a high quality of life -- everybody that's physically in Singapore."

And this is where, he said, the government will have to put social issues at the forefront of any policy.

One question that came up during the conference was whether there is a tipping point to Singapore's population growth?

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The answer is "yes", but speakers said they cannot give a number. What is important, they said, is for scenario planning to also take into account social issues.

Professor Chan said: "We need to think upfront so that we do not get ourselves caught in certain situations where if we want to reconcile differences or deal with them, it's a bit too late."

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