

The goals matter, so does the journey

By DAVID CHAN

PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his three ministers spent a large part of their National Day Rally speeches on Sunday night talking about hope, heart, home and various elements of the Singapore Pledge.

These elements – unity, democracy, justice, equality, happiness, prosperity and progress – are values and goals that we commit ourselves to aspire to and achieve when we recite the Pledge.

In national conversations about the future of Singapore, the discussion of values, or what matters most or more, needs to be focused and driven by the societal end goals that we want to achieve as a country.

I do not think anyone will disagree with the goals: improve citizen well-being and quality of life; create opportunities for all Singaporeans; create a compassionate and inclusive society where citizens feel rooted and committed to Singapore; and build an adaptive and resilient society.

The major issue confronting the Government is less about the ends or the qualitative nature of the outcomes, but more about the means and the effectiveness of the processes that could achieve the intended outcomes.

So, in the national conversation the Government wants to encourage about the future of Singapore, we should clarify or reaffirm our societal end goals – but we cannot stop there. We also need to discuss the means and processes to achieve the end goals.

There are multiple means to reach the same end, and many pathways to the same destination. When we say there will be no sacred cows in the national conversation, we should also use it to refer to no sacred adherence to any one road to reach the goal.

Debates over the need to go beyond material aspirations to pursue happiness and subjective well-being, and to pursue values and aspirations like fairness and justice, are likely to recur more regularly, increase in intensity and multiply in implication and impact.

In these debates, we need to

discuss both ends and means, as well as both outcomes and processes. Only then can we better build consensus, when we have a common basis to discuss current problems, longer-term issues and the relationships linking them.

We will better appreciate the various economic-social linkages and develop constructive responses to them. We will be able to adopt more principled approaches to policy trade-off situations. This includes discussing and understanding the policy trade-offs, and how to prioritise, resolve or address them.

Finally, it is important for all parties to this conversation to be genuine and to have a level of engagement that lives up to what is promised and committed to. It is important for the discourse to be realistic and honest, because when expectations are raised significantly but not met, credibility and trust are eroded quickly and will be difficult to restore.

The outcomes of the national conversation on Singapore's future will affect every aspect of Singaporeans' quality of life. The impact will be felt not just in our lives, but also those of our children and future generations.

The quality of the conversation and engagement process is key to the success of this endeavour. All parties should be honest and constructive, and take all views seriously. We must pay attention to disagreements and divergent views because disagreements – with the Government or among Singaporeans – are themselves important issues. When handled constructively, they can point us to alternative roads not previously considered, some of which could better lead us to our intended goals.

David Chan is the director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and a professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.

ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE