



Singapore's Gini coefficient has risen considerably over the last decade but it is inadequate when measuring big differences in incomes or social class. It measures only incomes relative to groups within a population, and not the absolute levels of income. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

# Taking steps to raise social mobility in S'pore

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**S**INGAPORE'S income gap has widened and attracted much media attention.

But more worrying is that social mobility has slowed, making many ordinary Singaporeans feel it is harder for them to improve their lives and aspire to at least middle-class levels.

Singapore society is at risk of becoming more divided, leading to problems or perceptions of inequity, injustice, alienation, pessimism, envy and conflict.

Tackling social mobility is critical for Singapore to maintain social cohesion.

But social mobility - or the ability of a particular income group to improve their lives in society - goes beyond education and occupation and it is not a purely economic issue. Instead, it is layered with other potentially divisive social issues.

For example, Singapore's social divisions are made worse when those with lower incomes are Singaporeans while many among the wealthy are foreigners. This divide will be reinforced if more foreigners come to Singapore, taking up high-value and leadership jobs such as professionals, managers and executives.

This means efforts to raise social mobility have to be beyond education and occupation, to include job prospects.

## Beyond income inequality

**BUT** to tackle social mobility, we must first understand its relation to income inequality.

Lower social mobility can be caused by large and persistent income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, with 0 representing complete equality and 1 representing complete inequality. Parents from poorer households have fewer resources and opportunities to provide for their children compared to wealthier ones, leaving children more likely

to end up in similar positions in society when they grow up.

Singapore's Gini coefficient has risen considerably over the last decade, and is closely tracked by the Government. But this index is inadequate when measuring important issues in income or social class differences.

The Gini coefficient measures only differences in income levels between groups within a population. It does not measure the absolute levels of income, nor how a society's total income is distributed among its members.

Two countries with the same Gini figure can have vastly different income distribution and social mobility.

To see the link between income inequality and social mobility, we need to understand the different aspirations of individuals and particular income groups.

## Measuring mobility

**TO ASSESS** social mobility, we need to gather more information at both individual and household levels. Since social mobility measures the ability to move from one socio-economic group to another over time, we need to track the same individuals and households over time.

This enables us to see if there were real changes in an individual's or a household's income over the years and by how much. We should measure other background factors such as an individual's education level, the parents' education and housing types to see if they predict the differences in social mobility. With accurate and relevant data, we can have more meaningful discussions about Singapore's social mobility, formulate and implement policies, and measure their impact.

## Integrating policies

**HOW** do we formulate policies to raise social mobility?

There is a need to enhance the "whole-of-Government" approaches to social mobility, in a

more holistic and effective way.

Two critical factors that affect social mobility - education and jobs - require better integration of policy intent and content.

A good start is being made to ensure quality education is equally accessible and affordable for all. It is welcome news that the Government will help children from lower- and middle-income households have a chance to get a quality education, so that it is not just a theoretical possibility but a real experience for each cohort.

The solution goes beyond tweaking policies on school entry criteria or assessments of student performance. It means ensuring access to education from pre-school to tertiary levels.

Giving a real probability of mobility for children from lower- and middle-income households also means providing accessible and affordable quality housing, health care, education and child-care, so that families will have reasonable financial and social resources for their children's early cognitive and social development and subsequent school life.

This also means revising the definition of self-reliance, so that a child's chance of a good start in life depends less on the parents' wealth and background, and more on effort and ability based on access to an adequate suite of resources and opportunities provided by the state, non-government organisations and the community.

## Jobs for mobility

**RAISING** social mobility also means making sure there are good jobs for locals - both graduates and non-graduates - with good career and wage prospects.

This requires a labour market where salaries are not easily depressed by the easy availability of foreigners to levels that only foreigners find acceptable.

It also means workplace policies must ensure employment fairness is the norm, so that local

workers are not unfairly disadvantaged at work in favour of foreigners. This requires regulation, monitoring and enforcement. It also needs engagement and an organisational leadership that promotes a climate of fairness.

Singapore needs companies and industries which not only contribute to the economy but also offer jobs that match citizens' adaptive skills, their realistic aspirations and add to the national effort to build a strong Singaporean core at all levels.

The Government must also sensibly calibrate the pace, quantity and quality of the foreigner inflow.

In short, if education, economic, manpower and social policies are not integrated to work in a complementary manner, Singapore will not produce the conditions that allow real upward mobility opportunities for children from lower- and middle-income households.

The issues of social mobility are multi-faceted and inter-related. They involve both short-term concerns and long-term interests, and they cut across many government agencies. But the issue is more than technical coordination across agencies. It is about moving away from narrow policy objectives that address seemingly isolated problems. It is about moving towards integrated policies that address seemingly several goals together, and that avoid unintended negative impact on social mobility.

Both the Government and the people agree that fairness and opportunities for all Singaporeans are important.

To create a fairer society where opportunities are not skewed towards those who already have much, we need a more sustainable and sustained national effort that coordinates research and policies affecting social mobility.

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