

# Social cohesion is more than about race or religion: SMU president

Social cohesion is not left to fate and chance in Singapore, with much attention focused on building racial and religious harmony.

Beyond these, migration and multiculturalism, social and economic inequality, the digital divide and inter-generational relationships are also important factors and potential fault lines impacting a socially cohesive society, said Professor Lily Kong, president of the Singapore Management University.

"It is no longer as simple as race and religion. All these dimensions are intersecting, and so, for any society to address social cohesion, we will need to focus not just on race and religion, but also all these other dimensions," she said.

Prof Kong was speaking at the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) at Raffles City Convention Centre on Tuesday.

She added that now, more than ever, there is a critical need to build social cohesion and the resilience that accompanies it.

"Resilience is so important be-

cause as societies confront the challenges that we all face today, we need to learn to cope with all the stresses and disturbances that arise from social, political, economic and environmental challenges."

The influx of immigrants from different contexts, backgrounds and historical conditions within the Chinese and Indian populations brings with it new pluralisms in race and religion, she said. This is on top of those from other ethnicities and nationalities.

While policies such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act address inter-racial and inter-religious differences, intra-racial and intra-religious diversities should not be overlooked.

Income inequality and reduced social mobility also affect social cohesion. Prof Kong called for more diverse networks in schools, workplaces, national service and common-interest associations to help bolster trust and promote upward mobility.

The digital divide between seniors and younger generations, as

well as between the poor and better endowed, also threatens social cohesion. Inter-generational segregation and ageism can be more pronounced with Singapore's ageing population too.

Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, speaking to the media on the sidelines of the conference, said he was particularly happy to see youth leaders coming together for the Young Leaders Programme, with some returning from the first ICCS in 2019 to mentor others.

"It tells us that young people are interested in outcomes and very much invested in finding solutions to build a more cohesive society," he said.

Mr Tong also said that one challenge arising from the Covid-19 pandemic is the "me first" attitude. It is important for everyone to refocus on the community, looking at commonalities and similarities rather than differences.

Speaking remotely from Vatican City, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Secretary of State of the Holy See

and a guest speaker delivering the conference special address, said: "The objective of cohesive societies... is the formation of individu-

als capable of relationships, of inhabiting societies, and of transcending the individualism of 'I' to embrace the diversity of 'us'".

"Everyone, without exception, is a promoter of solidarity," he added.

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