

Nurturing a Sense of Identity and Belonging through Selfless Service in One's Neighbourhood

Reflections on Forward Singapore (SG) Report – Contributions to the *Unite* Pillar

November 20, 2023

Amidst a global backdrop of uncertainties and stark challenges, the Forward Singapore (SG) national conversation exercise initiated by Deputy Prime Minister Mr Lawrence Wong on 28 June 2022 was an applaudable and significant step that partnered the key stakeholders of society in forging collectively Singapore's social compact and advancement. The Forward SG Report: *Building Our Shared Future*, released on 27 October 2023, reflected a desire and eagerness of institutions, organisations, establishments, communities, and individuals of various backgrounds in shaping the nation's progress. The Office of External Affairs – an office of public discourse – of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, likewise, is thankful to have participated in the Forward SG exercise and would like to humbly share additional insights that stems from experience and learning arising from grassroots action, towards the *Unite* pillar.

The constructive participation of many individuals, communities, and establishments in the national Forward SG exercise have shown that there is a genuine overall desire to explore and contribute towards a collective purpose and to the nation's evolving narrative. Having agency and the attribute to serve selflessly to improve the lives of people is an innate quality of the human spirit. A practical and logical means to purposefully direct individual agency or civic participation, then, is for its expression towards addressing the needs and contribute to the wellbeing of residents in the neighbourhood where one resides. The consensus from the Forward SG exercise, national policies, and efforts of grassroots organisations – such as public housing policies, inclusion of common spaces in city planning projects, organising social gatherings and activities at community centres, and the *Residents' Networks*, to name a few, reflect an acknowledgement of the importance of providing such means in Singapore. It is heartening to know of the normalisation and increasing initiatives that strive to empower residents in collaborative projects at the neighbourhood and societal levels.

Having meaningful ground up interactions in the neighbourhoods, that nurtures a mentality of “we” and builds a sense of an all-embracing community, are crucial. The definition of, or what makes up the demographic of “we”, however, merits further reflection and understanding. To ensure that Singapore remains a thriving economic hub in the region, the country is dependent on overseas nationals, who come to live in and are part of our nation's existing multicultural and multireligious social landscape. Additionally, recent world issues have raised a consciousness of the global and interconnected nature of the pending crises. Singapore may not be impervious to the effects of forced mass migration due to climate change and geopolitical tensions. As such, the nation's security and prosperity are very much dependent on how well the country is able to live harmoniously with increasing diversity and uncertainty.

It appears the way forward, albeit seemingly challenging and insurmountable, is to build capacity for cooperation and unity, and in achieving consensus amidst diverse and polarising

views. The foundational principle that guides such efforts to fruition is the acknowledgement of the truth that the human race is but one human family. The analogy of the human body helps us to understand the implications of the concept of our oneness and interconnectedness. The various cells, tissues, and organs, all cooperate and function towards a higher goal, which is to achieve the functioning and wellbeing of the collective whole – the human body. It reflects the notion that oneness, far from being conforming, celebrates humanity’s rich cultural diversity. It gives a vision of how individual agency, rather than that of defending one’s rights and agendas, can be based on cooperation and trust in relation to each other and to its institutions, and of how institutions effectively and justly channel these energies and initiatives towards the contribution of the overall health and wellbeing of society and all nations.

Endeavouring around the central principle of the oneness of humankind, Bahá’ís together with growing numbers of neighbours and friends, around the world and in Singapore, are engaged in concerted efforts to build united, vibrant, and inclusive communities that centres around service to others. The capacities, skills, attitudes, and qualities required for such noble aspirations are developed through educational materials that addresses both the material and spiritual nature of human beings, and where knowledge is translated into action and practice through service in one’s neighbourhood or village. Through the service activities that arise from the educational materials, residents – be they Singaporean, permanent resident, or foreigner, from diverse backgrounds, capabilities, and age, become involved and are empowered to come together to organise constructive activities, beyond social events, for the betterment of one’s neighbourhood. Through such endeavours, a sense of collective ownership, unity, and community is nurtured among the residents when they are invited to cooperate and contribute towards a shared vision and future of the neighbourhood. Collaborating in action alongside neighbours towards the common weal is a natural way that brings diverse people – people who might never have otherwise interacted, to come in contact with each other in a consistent and regular basis. Such co-participation in trying to address the needs of the neighbourhood is where capacity to find consensus among diverse perspectives is developed, meaningful bonds of friendship are forged, and the dignity and capabilities inherent to all are allowed to manifest and be utilised. Such meaningful and life-long interactions, where residents become the protagonists in their local reality, go beyond social constructs of populations merely live next to each other, and result in creating a sense of meaning, purpose, and sentiments of belonging and community.

Examples of such Bahá’í-inspired fledgling endeavours in Singapore neighbourhoods are, where families of the children’s class and/or the junior youth spiritual empowerment programmes come together to organise “family festivals” that strengthens intergenerational relations and collective responsibility towards the educational development of the younger generations in the neighbourhood; service projects initiated by the children and junior youth of the educational programmes to address the needs of the neighbourhood; visits to each other’s homes in the neighbourhood; and spaces created in homes for shared worship and exploration of themes central to the life of society. Such activities when sustained and regular, foster ties of fellowship, enrich the culture of the community, and foster understanding and cooperation towards the creation of shared narratives and goals.

However, more can still be done, such that an altruistic long-term commitment to serving in one’s neighbourhood become increasingly part of the nation’s culture and identity. Emphasising the importance of having a posture and attitude of service should, thus, be a focus of the nation’s education system. That the notion of one’s purpose, excellence, and

necessarily success, then, is twofold – that of developing oneself and contributing to society. The environment of the family, community, and neighbourhood, naturally becomes the arena where one can achieve one's twofold moral purpose. Having an attitude of service, framed by the principle of oneness, allows one to appreciate that the people, communities, organisations, establishments, and institutions, one encounter are potential protagonists in the collective efforts in contributing to the common weal and prosperity.

Ensuring sufficient consultative spaces in the neighbourhoods is another crucial element. Such spaces encourage individuals from various backgrounds, and the institutions within the neighbourhood, to come together to define and engage in shared initiatives that contribute to its moral, intellectual, and material wellbeing. It provides a collaborative focus away from self-serving agendas or an overdependence on external aid, to one of creating opportunities where residents become more aware of the lived experiences and challenges that their neighbours face. This helps to break down barriers caused by ignorance, prejudice, and biases.

Identity and belonging, as mentioned in the Forward SG report, are fundamentally that of manifesting active citizenry and civic responsibility – of having a sense of agency, a desire to care, to generously contribute, and to support one another. This expanded concept of identity and belonging that is beyond one's nationality, race, residency, cultural or religious affiliations, helps to bring about solidarity and unity in diversity. In such an inclusive and supportive environment, social ills and other areas of concern such as health and psychological issues, and feelings of isolation, get reduced. The above are just a few initial considerations the office would like to offer towards fostering agency and the building of bonds that will contribute to a resilient, inclusive, harmonious, thriving, and advancing nation.

ANNEX – PHOTO GALLERY OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY'S ENDEAVOURS



Visiting homes in the neighbourhood, where deep and meaningful conversations occur and relations between neighbours are built, is a crucial element of the community building efforts.



A community garden project facilitates circular economy by involving residents and neighbouring establishments.



A festival in the neighbourhood, organised around families of the junior youth programme, brings together families from diverse backgrounds in recognition of our shared identity as members of one community.



Exploring the importance of material and spiritual educational development of children and junior youth, as a shared responsibility of parents, the community, and institutions.

Consultation spaces involving inhabitants of a neighbourhood coming together to reflect and plan for efforts to reach out to others and build a more vibrant and inclusive community.





Left: Youth group

Bottom: Children's class

Groups involving young people coming together to interact meaningfully and reflect on developing qualities, attitudes, and skills that will aid their contributions to their neighbourhood.

