SINGAPORE AT 50

PROGRESSING TOGETHER AS A NATION

Illustration: Dr Kevin Loy

Singapore turned 50 on 9th August this year. Many articles have been written about our achievements during this period. The statistical indicators of our economic growth, the long list of international acclamations that attest to our success in many areas of socioeconomic development, and the surveys that consistently rank Singapore as an ideal destination to visit, work and emigrate, give testimony to the success story of Singapore progressing from third world to first, all within five decades.

In healthcare, our indicators are equally impressive. Singapore has one of the lowest infant mortality rates at two per 1,000 live births and one of the highest average life expectancy at 83 years. Indeed, we have shifted our healthcare resources to prepare ourselves for a population that is ageing rapidly. The remarkable fact is that all these improvements in healthcare came on a low national expenditure on healthcare of around 3% as a percentage of the GDP for a long period of time, before climbing to 4.5% recently, leading Bloomberg to rank Singapore's healthcare system as the most efficient in the world in 2014.

As a national medical association, we would have liked to congratulate our doctors for these remarkable achievements in Singapore's healthcare indicators. However, medical advances, technological innovation and good doctoring did not seem to have contributed significantly to such improvements. The accolades squarely belong to the nation's public health measures when it comes to improving the health of the entire population. These include the provision of clean water fit to drink from the tap, reliable and safe sources of food supply, proper sanitation and good public housing for the masses. The government of Singapore has certainly been able to deliver and meet the needs of Singaporeans since our independence.

Like Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs for individuals (1943), the needs of the population seem to conform to a natural order of priority as well. In trying to understand the factors that motivate people, Maslow described a five-stage hierarchy, with the needs progressing from basic to higher level growth needs. These needs start from physiological/physical needs to safety needs, social needs, esteem and finally, self-actualisation. Singapore's progress and development in the last 50 years has been able to meet the needs of its citizens as they progressed up the stages of Maslow's hierarchy.

With this observation in mind, I thought that it would be an interesting exercise to try to mirror the progress of our society according to Maslow's hierarchy. Is it possible that a psychoanalytical tool for individuals can be used to comment on a society in general?

Attempting to apply this model to populations is certainly imperfect at best. Firstly, not everyone moves through the hierarchy equally; due to differences in stages of life and opportunity, people are always at different stages of achievement. There will always be some that are left behind, struggling to survive and meet basic needs. It is crucial that those at the top lend a helping hand. Secondly, in a multicultural society such as Singapore, the motivations for different groups of people are diverse and the importance of each level of need cannot be generalised. Most people are happy with their social situation, and self-actualisation is not necessarily the ultimate goal in life. Thirdly, the government does not deliver its programmes in stages, but rather treats physical, safety and social needs as a whole and implements them through broad national policies.

Nevertheless, the model (page 10) is useful as a commentary on our development as a society; perhaps, it may also provide a glimpse into where we are heading in the future.

SAFETY, SECURITY AND A HARMONIOUS SOCIETY

Let us start with the most basic needs of the individual — the physiological requirement for survival such as water, food and shelter. These needs were identified very early right after Singapore's independence. In terms of the provision of shelter, public housing for the masses has successfully evolved over the years, from

the humble walk-up flats in Queenstown to the green and energy efficient flats of Punggol eco-town today. Provision of water was also a priority, with the need to establish diverse and stable sources of water supply. We achieved this through a combination of local catchment in the reservoirs supplemented with imported water. To this we have recently added desalinated water and reclaimed NEWater to our list of water sources. Although we do not produce our food in any significant amount, our country is fortuitously situated at the crossroads of trade, enabling us to enjoy such abundant and varied produce that we have been labelled the culinary capital of Asia.

Safety and security include factors such as physical safety from harm, financial security, freedom from threats, and living in comfort and peace. Such needs were met with the development of Singapore's Total Defence strategy, which encompasses the five aspects of military, economic, civil, social and psychological defence. Our armed forces provide an effective deterrence for would-be aggressors, our civil defence force and home team regularly prepare us for emergencies and disasters on home soil, and our strong economic performance and fiscal policies enable our citizens to achieve financial security. We no longer worry about our basic needs, sometimes to the extent that we have come to take them for granted.

Social needs addresses the individual need of belongingness, to feel accepted as part of a larger social group, be it friends or family. On a population level, maintaining a harmonious society with diverse peoples and cultures can often be challenging. We now live and work closely together in a multicultural society and are able to choose from all manner of social, religious and educational organisations to which we can contribute our time and energy. The provision of a stable and safe environment that encourages families to grow, a culture that respects our pioneers and promotes intergenerational ties, and an education system based on meritocracy such that all students have a good chance of achieving their full potential, are some of the important achievements that Singapore has made in meeting our social needs in the last 50 years.

SELF-ESTEEM AND ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

Once the basic-tier needs are met, individuals next seek self-esteem and recognition for their achievements. We long for our voices to be heard and our contributions to society appreciated. On a whole, it is important that Singapore achieve a position of prestige among its neighbours and on the international stage. From economic performance to education, from shipping hub to sports, and from healthcare to housing, we have consistently punched above our weight in the international arena despite being a small and young nation.

UNIQUENESS, CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Maslow proposed that the pinnacle of motivation for individuals is to achieve "self-actualisation". According to him, these are self-confident people who accept their own shortcomings as well as those of others. They form opinions independent of cultural norms and are able to perceive reality accurately. They function autonomously by being resourceful and have a larger purpose to fulfil in life. Self-actualised individuals

PROFILE

TEXT AND DIAGRAM BY

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are able to develop strong interpersonal bonds, are socially compassionate and contribute back to society.

As a nation, Singapore has progressed to a point where we have been successful in meeting almost all our basic needs. Further advancement towards higher needs becomes more dependent on "software", such as strong social bonds, feelings of happiness and esteem, and achievement of individual goals. A society that hopes to "self-actualise" is a society concerned with continuous growth.

THE CHALLENGE

Is there a higher goal for Singapore in the future? How can Singapore continue to stand out and be unique among the nations? These are important questions that we have to continually ask ourselves as we look ahead.

The challenge before us is to sustain a society that is able to provide stability and security for psychological wellbeing, maintain our heritage as a nation with a rich cultural diversity and varied opportunities for individuals to grow and excel, and create an environment in which ideas can be exchanged freely and where creativity and innovation are nurtured. This must be our goal for the next 50 years. ◆

Individual | Society | Individual and Society Maslow's Hierarchy

Individual	Society
SELF-ACTUALISATION	ACHIEVING UNIQUENESS, CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION
ESTEEM	EXCELLING AMONG NATIONS
SOCIAL	STRONG AND HARMONIOUS SOCIETY
SAFETY	PROVIDING A SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENT
PHYSICAL NEEDS	MEETING BASIC NEEDS