



An Australian Perspective on Singaporean Welfare Policy

Philip Mendes, Monash University, Australia

Abstract

From a Western perspective, Singapore appears to be an overt example of a neo-liberal welfare regime based on low social expenditure, and limited and discretionary social assistance. But the true picture is arguably more complex. Singapore's welfare policy is driven by strong cultural assumptions around individual and family self-reliance, and the inappropriateness of state welfare provision. However, there is also a strong emphasis on communal responsibility for supporting the disadvantaged. Some conclusions are drawn about the limitations of existing policies, and possible new directions for the future.

1 Introduction

Western interest in East Asian social policy is a relatively new phenomenon. And much of this interest appears to be driven by ideological self-interest. On the one hand, neo-liberals who favour minimal interference with the free market and limited social spending seem to view East Asia as a successful welfare model based on limited state expenditure and mainly non-government charitable assistance. On the other hand, social democrats who favour substantial government intervention to alleviate inequality point to the important role played by East Asian governments in promoting economic growth and social cohesion (Goodman et al. 1997, 360; White/ Goodman 1998, 3-4; Smyth 2006, 123-124).

Some writers warn that these Western ideological categories fall short when applied to the different political and cultural environment of East Asia. In particular, the assumption that state welfare provision should always take precedence over other welfare providers such as the market, the family and the voluntary sector seems to be narrowly ethnocentric (Walker/Wong 2004, 126-127).

My own interest in Singaporean welfare policy is driven primarily by an academic rather than ideological agenda. I am an Australian social policy specialist who has recently begun teaching two social policy subjects to Singaporean social work students. My concern is to move beyond my existing assumptions around Western welfare states to make these subjects relevant in political and cultural terms to these students. What follows is an account of my initial reflections on the key components of Singaporean welfare policy. Whilst I have visited Singapore on a couple of occasions and taught there briefly, my reflections are based primarily on my reading of existing primary and secondary sources.

2 Low Social Expenditure

Singapore appears to be a highly affluent country, and is ranked twelfth highest in the world. Its current per capita gross national product is US\$27,180 which exceeds that of a number of Western countries including Canada, France and Australia (Khan 2001; Ramesh 2004, 3).

Yet social expenditure is very low compared to most advanced countries. For example, general government expenditure in Singapore from 1990-2001 was only 14 per cent of GDP compared to the median OECD average of 35 per cent. And in 1995 Singapore spent only 2.86 per cent of Government expenditure on social security and welfare compared to 33.57 per cent in Australia. In 2000, social policy expenditures share of GDP was only eight per cent. The level of government expenditure on health and social security in Singapore is even low compared to other East Asian countries such as Korea and Taiwan (Asher/Rajan 2002, 235; Ghesquiere 2007, 53-56; Goodman et al. 1997, 362; Khan 2001, 7; Ramesh 1995, 229; Ramesh 2003, 87; Ramesh 2004, 25; Walker/Wong 2005a, 10).

To some extent, this low level of spending can be misleading given that the Singapore Government acts more as a regulator, rather than a direct provider and funder of welfare services. For example, the key social expenditure scheme, the Central Provident Fund, is financed via contributions by individual workers, rather than directly from government revenue. But even when this factor is taken into account, the level of social expenditure would still only rise to about 20 per cent of GDP (Aspalter 2001, 8; Goodman et al. 1997, 364; 373-374).

3 The Central Provident Fund

The major self-help programme in Singapore, the Central Provident Fund, was introduced in 1955. The CPF is technically not a social welfare programme at all, but rather a compulsory retirement savings scheme (not dissimilar to superannuation in Australia) to which both employers and employees contribute assisted by a government subsidy. CPF monthly contributions go into three accounts: an Ordinary Account, a Special Account, and a Medisave Account. These three accounts allow savings to be utilized for a number of purposes including home ownership, social insurance, health care, investment, and education as well as retirement (Aspalter 2002, 171-183; CPF 2006; Low/Choon 2004; Ng 2004, 4-6; Tan 2004, 131-135).

The CPF has contributed positively to Singapore society in a number of areas including promoting social and ethnic cohesion, providing a type of social safety net which has contributed to political stability, and facilitating national investment in housing, education and health care. There is universal free education till pre-university level, subsidised health care, and subsidised public housing. The high level of home ownership (approximately 92 per cent) is a particularly impressive achievement (Aspalter 2006, 296-297; Lim 1989, 182-184; Ramesh 2004, 198; Wijesingha 2005, 187).

However, the CPF also has significant limitations. Given that payments reflect existing levels of income, those with higher incomes receive larger contributions from employers and hence the Fund tends to reinforce rather than reduce income inequality. This means that many low income workers will have to survive on inadequate incomes in their old age. In addition, a significant minority of Singaporeans (about one quarter of the labour force plus those not employed) including a higher proportion of women are likely to have no CPF savings (Asher/Rajan 2002, 255; Chee 1994, 75-77; Hateley/Tan 2003, 106-107; Khan 2001, 12-16; Lee 2001; Ramesh 1995, 231; Ramesh 2000, 255; Ramesh 2004, 73; Schmidt 2005, 8; Tan 2004, 136).

4 Responding to Poverty

The Singaporean government has long denied that significant poverty exists in Singapore (Ramesh 2000, 253). For example, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew famously compared

the alleged lack of beggars or starving homeless people in Singapore with the increased level of social disadvantage in Western countries (Lee 1991, 391).

Similarly, the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong claims that “low income Singaporeans are much better off than low income groups in any other country in Asia. We do not have destitute persons sleeping on the streets. Our unemployment rate remains one of the lowest among developed economies. The health status of our population is among the best in the world. A young Singaporean has a better chance of getting a tertiary education in Singapore than in many first world countries” (Lee 2005). The government attributes this relative equity to state subsidies on housing, education, transport and public health (Lee 2000, 95; Lee 2005).

However, there is evidence of increasing poverty and inequality. Unemployment grew to 4.6 per cent in 2003, although it came back down to 2.7 per cent in late 2006. The major poor groups appear to be the unsupported elderly, retrenched workers, single mothers and the disabled. A disproportionate number come from the Malay population (Lee 2001; Mitton 2000). Singapore’s Gini coefficient – a statistical tool for measuring income inequality – grew from 0.49 to 0.52 over the last five years. The income of the top 20 per cent of households is now 31 times that of the bottom 20 per cent (Editorial 2006; Low 2006; Scarpello 2005; Tang 2000, 145-46; Toh 2006; Yap 2003, 75-77). Overall Singapore only ranks 25th on the Human Development Index, and it has been estimated that nearly 20 per cent of households have an income below one-half of the national gross monthly income (Ramesh 2004, 3; 21-23).

The government acknowledges that globalisation has contributed to a widening of the gap between those on higher incomes and those at the lower end (Lee 2005; Goh 2006). Internal factors such as an increasingly ageing population, the lack of a progressive redistributive taxation system and the absence of a minimum wage are also likely to play a significant role (Ghesquiere 2007, 57; 75). The Ministerial Committee on Low Wage Workers has estimated that 240,000 full-time workers earn \$1000 or less per month, and many live in dysfunctional households typified by marital conflict, large families, poor parenting and juvenile delinquency (Ng 2005).

Despite this, Singapore only provides social assistance on a philanthropic, rather than entitlement basis. This approach is characterized by the “many helping hands” philosophy whereby welfare provision is defined as a joint government, non-government, private sector and community responsibility (Vasoo/Osman 2000, 55). This means limited discretionary support for the unemployed, the poor aged, the ill and the disabled, and no redistribution of income from the affluent to the poor. (Low/Aspalter 2003, 308).

This ad hoc system suggests that poverty is viewed as a short-term problem which has mainly individual, rather than structural causes. The emphasis of interventions seems to be primarily on resolving the individual problems or deficits that prevent working age persons from entering the workforce via changing personal behaviour and attitudes or upgrading skills. Little attention is given to social inequalities or systemic barriers to employment such as a lack of jobs, or lack of adequate pay (Tan 2004, 127). There seems to be little recognition that a minority of individuals may never be able to maintain regular employment due to a range of health and other personal deficits including mental illness, physical disability, substance abuse, illiteracy, personality disorders, and poor language skills (Lee 2001).

The limited Public Assistance Scheme is administered by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports. It is only available via strict criteria for “deserving” persons or

families living in acute poverty who are unable to work, and have no family member able to assist. Approximately 2000 persons receive public assistance benefits which are paid at a relatively low rate of between \$230 per month for a single person to \$670 for a family of four (Aspalter 2001, 53-54; Goodman et al. 1997, 366; Khan 2001, 17; Ramesh 1995, 230; 232; Ramesh 2000, 246-247; Ramesh 2004, 53-54; 60-61; Tang 2000, 42).

The poor can also apply for benefits from the Rent and Utility Assistance Scheme which is administered by the National Council of Social Service, the umbrella body for voluntary welfare organisations. In 1999, more than 550 households received support from this scheme. Other indirect subsidies and payments include groceries and food vouchers, child care assistance, free medical care, housing grants, allocation of shares, and support with school fees and books (Tan and Ang 2002, 40-41; Yap 2003, 82-86).

Recent rises in unemployment have forced the government to introduce some new measures. For example, the government responded to the late 1990s financial crisis by establishing nine Community Development Centers to assist the unemployed and their families (Dolven 1998; Mitton 2000). More recently, the government introduced the Community Care Endowment Fund to “address the socio-economic needs of needy Singaporeans and their families”.

The fund provides assistance for starting social enterprises, increases subsidies for kindergarten fees, and allocates new funding for community support programmes at a local level. Particular aims of the fund which includes a casework and counselling component are to promote self-reliance, prevent inter-generational poverty, and help those requiring long-term assistance such as the poor elderly and disabled (CDC 2006). Assistance is formally limited to a maximum period of 18 months in order to discourage welfare dependency, although sometimes workers based in the Family Service Centres or Community Development Councils are able to recommend a longer period of eligibility.

According to the Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong: “With economic restructuring, a small but growing minority of Singaporeans will face hardship. The breadwinner may lose his job, a family member may fall ill, or the children may have problems meeting school expenses. ComCare will provide a safety net for this small group. By targeting our resources, we will make a real difference to their lives, without inadvertently discouraging other able-bodied Singaporeans from making the effort to work and provide for themselves” (Lee 2005).

Otherwise assistance is limited to non-government agencies based on philanthropy. For example, some religious organisations such as the Heart Fund and the Love Singapore Fund provide short-term financial assistance to the unemployed. This support is discretionary, and provided only on a case-by-case basis (Tan and Ang 2002, 42). Many of the NGOs seem to use the type of patronising and condescending charity rhetoric that went out of fashion in Australia more than 30 years ago. For example, references are made to assisting “the needy in society”, or improving “the lives of the less fortunate” (NCSS 2006). This language implies that the disadvantaged should be grateful for this assistance, and appears designed to reinforce existing hierarchies in society, rather than to challenge the status quo (De Carvalho 1994, 30).

5 Hostility to Welfarism

The limited social assistance in Singapore seems to reflect an overwhelming national opposition to western-style welfare states and welfarism on both economic and cultural grounds. Singapore prefers to maintain a competitive meritocracy in which the poor are given the opportunity via upward social mobility to share in the national economic success

(Asher/Rajan 2002, 238; Aspalter 2002, 170-171; Mehta/Vasoo 2001; Tan 2004, 126; Tang/Midgley 2002, 313; Tremewan 1998; Walker/Wong 2005b, 216; White/Goodman 1998, 11). This philosophy seems to be typified by the aphorism: “Give me a fish, I eat for a day. Teach me to fish, I eat for a lifetime” (cited in Yap 2003, 80).

For example, the former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, described Singapore as a “fair, not welfare society”. He added that western welfare states are culturally inappropriate in that they allegedly foster laziness and dependency. Lee argued that welfare states “undermine self-reliance. People did not have to work for their families’ well-being. The handout became a way of life...They became dependent on the state for their basic needs”. He also claimed that they undermined economic growth and competitiveness (Lee 2000, 104; see also Lee 1991).

Similarly, a former Senior Minister Mr Rajaratnam stated “We want to teach the people that the government is not a rich uncle. You get what you pay for. We want to disabuse people of the notion that in a good society the rich must pay for the poor. We want to reduce welfare to the minimum, restrict it only to those who are handicapped or old. To the others, we offer equal opportunities. Everybody can be rich if they try hard” (cited in Khan 2001, 12). Another Senior Minister stated: “If we are moved by one compassionate concern after another, it is a slippery path to perdition” (cited in Ramesh 2000, 243). And the ruling People’s Action Party in its 1998 Budget stated: “We believe that extensive welfare programmes damage the fabric of our society as they discourage individual responsibility, self reliance, community support and the work ethic” (cited in Tang 2000, 42).

The former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong urged Singaporeans to “steer clear of the welfare mentality”, and argued that “the disadvantaged do not expect and cannot demand that they be looked after by the state as a matter of right”. Rather, public assistance is designed to be “temporary in nature. It is lending a hand to help Singaporeans in need to stand on their own two feet again, not to weaken their spirit to help themselves” (cited in Yap 2003, 81). Elsewhere, he warned against “creating disincentives for Singaporeans to take personal responsibility to fend for themselves. Otherwise, we build up a crutch mentality, which will lead to indolence, dependence and abuse” (Goh 2001).

The then Deputy Prime Minister and later Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that Singapore needed “to temper the hard edge of economic rationality with concern for those less able to look after themselves in a free market system”, but “without undermining the incentive to work and to achieve, and without incurring the heavy costs which developed welfare states have been unable to avoid” (cited in Ramesh 2004, 196). In addition, the current Deputy Prime Minister has attacked job seekers as being “too choosy” for failing to take up vacancies in sales and cashier positions irrespective of the pay or travel involved (Wong 2006).

This anti-welfare philosophy appears to be explicitly reflected in the everyday activities of government and non-government welfare services. Service users are given temporary assistance, but are strongly encouraged to move towards self-reliance through workfare programs. Longer-term dependency on welfare assistance is considered unacceptable (Aspalter 2001, 52). For example, the introduction of the new ComCare fund was accompanied by an emphasis on “mutual obligation, not entitlement. Individuals should be prepared to help themselves. Provide assistance, not welfare” (CDC 2006).

To the superficial observer, the Singaporean antagonism towards the welfare state appears to be based on ideological dogmatism rather than evidence-based analysis and research. In particular, the use of loaded terms such as welfare dependency and mutual obligation seems to be sourced directly from western neo-liberal ideology. These terms imply that many poor and disadvantaged people are to blame for their own plight, and are not deserving of assistance (Chee 1994, 80).

There seems to be little recognition that the free market often fails to provide for all, and that a welfare state is needed to compensate those who are poor and unemployed. Left/liberal critics of neo-liberalism would argue that increased reliance on income support payments reflects the growth of poverty and inequality in the community, rather than any individual characteristics. They believe most welfare recipients receive payments because they are poor and disadvantaged, and have little or no other income (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Mendes 2004). There is also considerable evidence that welfare states do not undermine economic growth and prosperity, and in fact play a key role in promoting social cohesion and solidarity (Goodin et al 1999; Lindert 2004).

These type of arguments seem to have little resonance in Singaporean society. Nevertheless, it is arguable that culture and historical context rather than ideology are the principal factors behind this anti-welfare philosophy.

6 Other Influences: Confucianism and History

The precise influence of traditional Confucian ideas and values such as individual self-reliance and family solidarity on Singaporean welfare policy has been the source of some contention. Some commentators argue that culture is of limited value in analysing social policies in East Asia. Their concern seems to be that simplistic distinctions are being drawn between supposedly unique Eastern and Western welfare systems. In contrast, they believe that East Asian systems reflect an overlapping and sharing of ideas and values (Ramesh 2004, 4-5; White/Goodman 1998, 15-16).

However, others argue that the emphasis of Confucianism on economic rather than social priorities, relatively low public spending, and the role of family and community supports rather than individual citizen rights is central to the Singapore system (Jones 1990; Khan 2001, 20; Zhang 2003, 104-05).

There does seem to be significant evidence to support the latter argument. For example, there is a strong expectation that individuals will rely on their own resources. When this is not possible, the second line of defence is the family. This goes both ways. On the one hand, parents are expected to provide for their children even if this involves one or both parents seeking work outside the home or country in order to provide opportunities for their children. And at the same time, adult children are expected to financially support their parents. This obligation is explicitly reflected in the Maintenance of Parent Act (1995) through which neglected parents can sue their children for support (Ng 2004, 15-16). For those who lack self-reliance or family support, the third line of defence is the community as reflected in non-government welfare organisations (Tan 2004, 128-129). Government assistance is available only as a last resort.

Acknowledging the influences of Confucian values on Singaporean policy does not mean that Singapore neatly fits into an overall East Asian welfare state model, or that there are no similarities between Singapore and Western systems (Walker/Wong 2005a, 9). But it does

suggest that these cultural traditions may preclude the introduction in Singapore of the state-dominated system that characterizes Western welfare states (Saunders 1996, 4).

Another significant influence on Singaporean welfare policy is the historical context whereby industrialisation is a relatively recent phenomenon. East Asian social policy programs were arguably introduced at an earlier period of social and economic modernization than in the Western world. They also reflected a context of high economic growth including rising incomes and very low unemployment plus a relatively young population which seemed to preclude the need for high social expenditure (Hort/ Kuhnle 2000, 181; Ramesh 2004, 2-4; Schmidt 2005, 3).

Conversely, it is reasonable to expect that these countries will expand their social expenditure as they age and prosper (Lindert 2004, 220-21). The recent financial crisis in East Asia suggests that over time Singapore may be obliged (as South Korea has done) to consider following the Western path of specifically addressing the needs of the unemployed through state assistance (Ng 2004, 14; Smyth 2006, 125).

The above discussion suggests that the Singaporean welfare system is not directly inspired by neo-liberal ideology. To be sure, there is some significant overlap in that Singapore appears to place an overwhelming faith in both the efficacy and fairness of the free market system. This is reflected in the complete subordination of social policy to the objective of economic growth (Holliday 2000, 708).

Nevertheless, the Singapore Government does not appear to be motivated by the narrow goal of individual gain that underpins neo-liberalism. On the contrary, they seem to be influenced by a notion of collective responsibility for the community prevalent in East Asian political discourse (Jang 2006, 53) which includes significant government intervention to promote economic development. But the methods they utilize to pursue this objective are fundamentally different to those of the welfare state in that they view private enterprise rather than government expenditure as the solution to poverty and disadvantage (Aspalter 2006, 297; Tang/Midgley 2002, 304-05).

For example, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong emphasized the social responsibility of affluent Singaporeans towards low income earners. He argued: “They owe their success in part to the others who support our social compact. They must, therefore, be prepared to lend a helping hand to those among us who are not so well off. Only then can we remain a cohesive and stable society. It cannot be every man for himself. For a person to succeed, he needs a launch-pad from society. In turn, lower-income Singaporeans must support the enterprise and efforts of those who have the ability. We must not resent those who create wealth, for themselves and for Singapore” (Goh 2001).

More recently Goh emphasized the need to ensure that all Singaporeans including low income earners benefit from globalisation: “How do we train them and equip them with the skills to harness the forces of globalisation? This is an area in which we must all work together to find the answer so as to maintain our prosperity and social cohesion. We are determined to make the lives of every Singaporean better and not leave anyone behind” (Goh 2006).

Similarly, the President Sellapan Ramanathan Nathan recommended a stronger “social safety net... to assist lower-income Singaporeans, to help them progress with the rest of society. We will target our assistance, and encourage them to work and upgrade themselves, to build up

their assets, and to support their families”. Whilst acknowledging concerns about increased state-funded welfare, he added that “Government spending will inevitably rise over the next decade, as we invest more in Singapore’s future and spend more to meet our growing social needs” (Nathan 2006).

7 The Making of Welfare Policy in Singapore

The development of public policy in Singapore involves different processes to that in Australia whereby opposition political parties and various interest or lobby groups play an important role in critiquing government policies, and recommending alternative policy directions. In contrast, Singapore is not a liberal democracy, and most policy initiatives are exclusively undertaken by and controlled by the government – what some call the “ideology of statism” (Koh/Ling 2004) and others refer to simply as paternalism (Khan 2001, 4; Tang 2000, 58).

Civil society organisations such as the media, universities, trade unions and opposition parties are relatively limited in what they can say or do. There is little political space for groups which act outside officially sanctioned forums (Chan 1995, 217; George 2005; Koh/Ling 2004, 167-170; Leong 2003; Ramesh 2003, 96-97). Most groups tend to support rather than challenge government policies. For example, the National Trades Union Congress Secretary-General (who is also a Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office) recently endorsed the government view that Singapore must “promote self reliance and guard against creating dependence on welfare” (Lim 2005).

To be sure, there has been some trend towards greater freedom in recent years. The Institute of Policy Studies has undertaken some important analysis of government social policies, and some independent discussion groups such as the Think Centre have emerged which are overtly critical of government policies. The government seems to be willing to tolerate a greater freedom of expression, although there is still some uncertainty as to precisely where the boundaries lie (Asher/Rajan 2002, 237; Goh 2001).

There seems to be little if any structured and open discussion of the merits and limitations of existing welfare policies (Wijeysingha 2005, 197). Although most welfare services are provided by non-government organisations, they seem to have little independent input into policy development. For example, the Community Development Councils are headed by mayors who are appointed by the ruling political party (Asher/Rajan 2002, 237).

In general, the voluntary welfare sector seems to have eschewed the activist approach adopted by NGO welfare groups in the West based on contributing to policy formation and development (Keen 2006, 27; Mendes 2006). Instead, they favour a quiescent cooperative partnership with government (Vasoo/Osman 2000, 60). Hence any significant pressure for welfare change or expansion would almost certainly need to come from within the ruling party, and this seems unlikely at the moment given its strong antipathy to welfarism.

8 Current Limitations and Potential for Change

The current Singaporean welfare model obviously has significant positives in that its minimal state expenditure and promotion of a strong work ethic appears to contribute to Singapore’s overwhelming economic success. (Aspalter 2002, 183-185; Goodman et al. 1997, 375). But the model also has significant social costs, and is likely to come under serious challenge from a changing world and society.

The major limitation of the current system is that it fails to provide an adequate safety net for the working poor, the unemployed, the disabled and the poor elderly (Jacobs 2000, 15; Ramesh 2004, 189; Zhang 2003, 114). Further, the discretionary model with its emphasis on curing individual behaviour clearly stigmatizes welfare recipients as deviants and failures, and does not address the needs of groups such as the mentally ill who may require long-term support and rehabilitation before they can return if at all to the workforce. It also poses no challenge to broader structural inequalities and injustices. Infact, the reliance of the system on the family as the principal welfare provider tends to reinforce traditional gender inequalities whereby women feel obliged to perform non-paid caring roles (Goodman et al. 1997, 376; White/Goodman 1998, 17-18).

Another factor is the rapidly ageing population, and the demands they are likely to make on health care and other social expenditure given that they already constitute the largest proportion of disadvantaged Singaporeans (Ramesh 2004, 74). It is estimated that the median age of the population will increase from 34.2 years in 2000 to 41.2 years in 2030, and that the proportion of the population over 65 years of age will increase by 2.6 times from 7.3 per cent (263,500 persons) in the year 1997 to 18.9 per cent (795,900 persons) in the year 2030. In addition, the Old Dependency Ratio, which incorporates the number of residents 65 years and above divided by residents aged between 15-64 years, is projected to increase from 10.4 in 1999 to 29.5 by 2030 (Asher/Rajan 2002, 232; CPF 2006; Khan 2001, 20).

A third factor is the challenge of economic globalisation which seems to be driving changes in the Singaporean economy that have led to greater inequality and reduced opportunities for unskilled workers. These changes may place pressure on Singapore to follow other countries in the region which have increased their spending on social protection (Gough 2001, 183; Yeates 2001, 86-87).

To date, these limitations and challenges have been somewhat obscured by the traditionally docile nature of the Singapore electorate. However, many Singaporeans are highly educated, increasingly affluent, use the internet regularly, are travelling more often and/or working overseas, and are becoming more aware of alternative policy ideas and options (Ghesquiere 2007, 5-6; Koh/Ling 2004, 170; Nathan 2006; Ng 2004, 20; Tang 2000, 61-62).

9 Possible Alternative Directions

Given the above social and political changes, it is likely that Singapore will come under some pressure to consider alternative welfare policies and directions. The need for at least some increase in social assistance seems to be recognized by the Singaporean leadership which increasingly refers to provision of a “social safety net” (Goh 2001; Lee 2005; Nathan 2006), although there is still a reluctance to increase taxes as a means of funding such spending.

The most likely shift is towards a social development approach based on a closer integration of social and economic policy (McDonald 2006, 192-193) whereby the current ad hoc public assistance schemes including the new Comcare scheme are combined into a unified social protection fund (Yap 2003, 88). This fund would be administered by the Community Development Centers in local communities with significant input from a cross-section of that community including NGOS and the private sector. A potential strength of this system would be the use of intimate local knowledge by the community organisations to identify social problems and preferred solutions (Mendes 2003, 75-76; Tang/Midgley 2002, 314-316).

The new scheme would conform to key Confucian cultural values in that it would continue to promote the integration of working age Singaporeans if at all possible into the labour market. Nor would it pose any serious threat to the continued promotion of economic growth. It is also likely that the language and terminology used will be different to that employed in the West given the continuing antipathy to welfarism, and the preference for a broad partnership of government, the private sector, the community and family.

However, there would be a greater emphasis on social investment including particularly local economic initiatives rather than narrow workfare, and also greater leverage for on-going state-funded assistance for those who are unable to work including particularly the elderly poor (Hateley/Tan 2003, 131). Hopefully, such a system would also include more compassion for those living in disadvantaged circumstances, and a recognition that participation in society may include a range of valuable community and caring activities that are not part of the formal labour market.

References

- Asher, M. and Rajan, R.** 2002: Social Protection in Singapore, in: Adam, E. and Stiftung, F. (eds.): Social protection in Southeast & East Asia. Bonn: Gesamt-Publikationa, pp. 231-268.
- Aspalter, C.** 2001: Conservative Welfare State Systems in East Asia. Westport, Praeger.
- Aspalter, C.** 2002: Singapore: A Welfare State in a Class by Itself, in: Aspalter, C. (ed.): Discovering the Welfare State in East Asia. Westport: Praeger, pp. 169-187.
- Aspalter, C.** 2006: The East Asian Welfare Model, in: International Journal of Social Welfare, 15, pp. 290-301.
- Central Provident Fund Board** 2006: Introduction to CPF. 06.08.2007 <<http://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/CPF/About-Us/Intro/Intro.htm>>
- Chan, T.** 1995: Nongovernmental Organizations, in: Singapore, in Yamamoto, T. (ed.): Emerging Civil Society. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 215-238.
- Chee, S.** 1994: Dare To Change: An Alternative Vision for Singapore. Singapore, Singapore Democratic Party.
- Community Development Council** 2006: ComCare – Helping the Needy. 06.08.2007 <<http://www.southwestcdc.org.sg/1164335758095/1164335758114.html>>
- De Carvalho, D.** 1994: Does Charity Begin At The Marketplace?, in: Quadrant, December, pp. 29-33.
- Dolven, B.** 1998: Less than a lion's share, in: Far Eastern Economic Review, 161, pp. 46-47.
- Editorial** 2006: Straddling income gap, in: The Straits Times, 12 July.
- Fraser, N. and Gordon, L.** 1994: A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the Welfare State, in: James, P. (ed.): Critical Politics: From the Personal to the Global. Melbourne, Arena Publications, pp. 77-109.
- George, C.** 2005: Calibrated coercion and the maintenance of hegemony in Singapore. Singapore: Asia Research Institute.
- Ghesquiere, H.** 2007: Singapore's Success. Singapore: Thomson.
- Goh, C.** 2001: National Day Rally Speech, National University of Singapore, 19 August.
- Goh, C.** 2006: Speech to Metal Industries Workers Union, Ritz Carlton Millenia Hotel, 30 August.
- Goodin, R., Headey, B., Muffels, R. and Dirven, H.** 1999: The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

- Goodman, R., White, G. and Kwon, H.** 1997: East Asian Social Policy: A Model to Emulate?, in: May, M., Brunson, E. and Craig, C. (eds.): *Social Policy Review* 9. London, Social Policy Association, pp. 359-380.
- Gough, I.** 2001: Globalization and Regional Welfare Regimes, in: *Global Social Policy*, 1, pp. 163-189.
- Hateley, L. and Tan, G.** 2003: *The Greying of Asia*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Holliday, I.** 2000: Productivist Welfare Capitalism: Social Policy in East Asia, in: *Political Studies*, 48, pp. 706-723.
- Hort, S. and Kuhnle, S.** 2000: The coming of East and South-East Asian States, in: *Journal of European Social Policy*, 10, pp. 162-184.
- Jacobs, D.** 2000: Low public expenditures on social welfare: do East Asian countries have a secret?, in: *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 9, pp. 2-16.
- Jang, D.** 2006: East Asian Perspectives on Liberal Democracy: A Critical Evaluation, in: Chung-Si, A. and Bertrand, F. (eds.): *Democracy in Asia, Europe and the World: Towards a Universal Definition*. Singapore, Marshall Cavendish, pp. 37-56.
- Jones, C.** 1990: Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan: Oikonomic Welfare States, in: *Government and Opposition*, 25, pp. 446-62.
- Keen, S.** 2006: Non-Government Organisations in Policy, in: Colebatch, H. (ed.): *Beyond the Policy Cycle: The Policy process in Australia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, pp. 27-41.
- Khan, H.** 2001: *Social Policy in Singapore: A Confucian Model?* Washington: World Bank Institute.
- Koh, G. and Ling, O.** 2004: Relationship between State and Civil Society in Singapore, in Lee, H. (ed.): *Civil Society in South East Asia*. Singapore: NIAS Press, pp. 167-197.
- Lee, H.** 2005: ComCare fund for needy Singaporeans. Address to Launch of ComCare, 28 June.
- Lee, K.** 1991: Why the Welfare States failed, in: Kwang, H., Fernandez, W. And Tan, S. (eds.): *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and his Ideas*. Singapore: Times Editions, pp. 390-391.
- Lee, K.** 2000: *From Third World To First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Lee, W.** 2001: The Poor in Singapore: Issues and Options, in: *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 31, pp. 57-70.
- Leong, H.** 2003: *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power. The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Lim, B.** 2005: Address to Seminar on Global Challenges and Union Response, 11 January.
- Lim, L.** 1989: Social Welfare, in: Kernial, S. and Wheatley, P. (eds.): *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 171-197.
- Lindert, P.** 2004: *Growing Public: Social Spending and Economic Growth Since the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Low, A.** 2006: Mind the income gap, in: *The Straits Times*, 8 July.
- Low, L. and Aspalter, C.** 2003: The Welfare State In Singapore: Welfare Without Redistribution, in: Aspalter, C. (ed.): *Welfare Capitalism Around The World*. Taipei: Casa Verde Publishing, pp. 305-328.
- Low, L. and Choon, A.** 2004: *Social Insecurity in the new Millenium: The Central Provident Fund*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.
- McDonald, C.** 2006: *Challenging Social Work*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

- Mehta, K. and Vasoo, S.** 2001: Social Security and the Social Development Perspective, in: *Asia-Pacific Journal of Social Work*, 11, pp. 1-5.
- Mendes, P.** 2003: *Australia's Welfare Wars*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Mendes, P.** 2004: Is there such a thing as Welfare Dependency, in: *Arena Magazine*, 69, pp. 31-35.
- Mendes, P.** 2006: *Inside the Welfare Lobby: A history of the Australian Council of Social Service*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Mitton, R.** 2000: For Richer or Poorer: who will care for the city-state's deprived?, in: *Asiaweekcom magazine*, 44, pp. 32-36.
- Nathan, S.** 2006: *A competitive Economy: an Inclusive Society*. Opening Address to Parliament, 2 November.
- National Council of Social Service** 2006: *Rapport*, May/June.
- Ng, I.** 2004: How Unique and Sustainable is the Singapore Welfare Model? Evaluating Welfare Statism in Singapore, in: *Historical and Comparative Context*. Unpublished paper: University of Michigan.
- Ng, E.** 2005: *Workfare: Rewarding Work*. Ministerial Committee on Low Wage Workers.
- Ramesh, M.** 1995: Social Security in South Korea and Singapore: Explaining the Differences, in: *Social Policy & Administration*, 29, pp. 228-240.
- Ramesh, M.** 2000: The politics of social security in Singapore, in: *The Pacific Review*, No. 13, pp. 243-256.
- Ramesh, M.** 2003: Globalisation and social security expansion in East Asia, in: Weiss, L. (ed.): *States in the Global Economy*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, pp. 83-98.
- Ramesh, M.** 2004: *Social Policy in East and SouthEast Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Saunders, P.** 1996: *Social Policy in East Asia and the Pacific Area in the Twenty First Century: Challenges and Responses*. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre.
- Scarpello, G.** 2005: Singapore's rising poor, in: *Asia Times*, 7 December.
- Schmidt, V.** 2005: *Varieties of Social Policy: East Asian Welfare Capitalism in Comparative Perspective*. Unpublished Paper, National University of Singapore.
- Smyth, P.** 2006: *Australian Social Policy in an International Context*, in: McClelland, A. and Smyth, P. (eds.): *Social Policy in Australia*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp. 112-127.
- Tan, E.** 2004: Balancing State Welfarism and Individual Responsibility: Singapore's CPF Model, in: Jones Finer, C. and Smyth, P. (eds.): *Social Policy and the Commonwealth*. Houndmills: Palgrave, pp. 125-137.
- Tan, N. and Ang, B.** 2002: Social Development in Singapore Context, in: Tan, N. and Kalyani, M. (eds.): *Extending Frontiers: Social Issues and Social Work in Singapore*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, pp. 37-53.
- Tang, K.** 2000: *Social Welfare Development in East Asia*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Tang, K. and Midgley, J.** 2002: Social Policy After the East Asian Financial Crisis: Forging a Normative Basis for Welfare, in: *The Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, 1, pp. 301-18.
- Toh, E.** 2006: Income gap cushioned by wealth-sharing schemes, in: *The Straits Times*, 8 July.
- Tremewan, C.** 1998: Welfare and governance: public housing under Singapore's party-state, in: Goodman, R., White, G. and Kwon, H. (eds.): *The East Asian Welfare Model*. London: Routledge, pp. 77-105.
- Vasoo, S. and Osman, M.** 2000: Non-Governmental Organizations in Singapore and Nation Building: Some Emerging Trends and Issues, in: *Social Development Issues*, 22, pp. 54-63.

Walker, A. and Wong, C. 2004: The ethnocentric construction of the welfare state, in: Kennett, P. (ed.): A Handbook of Comparative Social Policy. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 116-130.

Walker, A. and Wong, C. 2005a: Introduction: East Asian Welfare Regimes, in: Walker, A. and Wong, C. (eds.): East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 3-20.

Walker, A. and Wong, C. 2005b: Conclusion: from Confucianism to globalisation, in: Walker, A. and Wong, C. (eds.): East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 213-224.

White, G. and Goodman, R. 1998: Welfare Orientalism and the search for an East Asian welfare model, in: Goodman, R., White, G. and Kwon, H. (eds.): The East Asian Welfare Model. London: Routledge, pp. 1-22.

Wijeyesingha, V. 2005: The welfare regime in Singapore, in: Walker, A. and Wong, C. (eds.): East Asian Welfare Regimes In Transition. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 187-211.

Wong, K. 2006: Speech to Anniversary Dinner of the National Transport Workers Union, 14 August.

Yap, M. 2003: Poverty Monitoring And Alleviation In Singapore, in: Tang, K. and Wong, C. (eds.): Poverty Monitoring and Alleviation in East Asia. New York: Nova Science Publishers, pp. 75-90.

Yeates, N. 2001: Globalization and Social Policy. Sage: London.

Zhang, Y. 2003: Pacific Asia. London: Routledge.

Author's Address:

Dr Philip Mendes
Monash University
Department of Social Work
PO Box 197
AU-East Caulfield Victoria 3145
Australia
Email: Philip.Mendes@med.monash.edu.au

**Social Work
& Society**