

Policymakers must be sensitive to impact of digital tools on inequality

Linette Lai

As Singapore strives towards its goal of being a smart city, it must be sensitive to the impact that digitalisation can have on inequality, said National Development Minister Desmond Lee yesterday.

He recounted an incident at a Meet-the-People session where a couple insisted that they had submitted an online application for a scheme, despite multiple letters from government agencies that the application had not been received.

“When we dug deeper, (we found out that) they were using a browser that was completely outdated and using a (personal computer) that was a couple of generations behind, and as a result they were excluded,” Mr Lee said. “So I think it’s something that policymakers have to be mindful of, but also (something that) communities and advocates should raise, so that in this new age of digital connectivity and smart nation drives, we do not apply a broad brush approach and miss out on vulnerable communities.”

Mr Lee also highlighted how lower-income households in Singapore faced more challenges with tasks such as online learning during the circuit breaker period.

“Even as we nationally seek to harness digital tools, we have to recognise that we must bring everyone along with us,” he said.

He was responding to a question on digitalisation and inequality at the Dentons Rodyk Dialogue, organised by the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) School of Law and law firm Dentons Rodyk.

At this year’s dialogue, which was held virtually, speakers discussed the opportunities and challenges around the rise of smart cities. These included inequality, data security, and the Asean Smart Cities Network, a platform for cities in the region to learn from one another’s experiences in adopting smart technology.

The dialogue was moderated by Mr Philip Jeyaretnam, global vice-chair and Asean chief executive of Dentons Rodyk.

When implementing smart solutions, governments need to make a “critical and sensitive” assessment of needs in each community, and

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**NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MINISTER
DESMOND LEE**

not be “seduced” by digital technologies, said SMU president Lily Kong, who was one of the speakers.

Digital infrastructure in a city could sometimes distract from material needs, she said, giving the example of how a government may install smart traffic lights while ignoring potholes and congested roads.

Ms Chantal Bernier, who heads Dentons Canada’s privacy and cyber security practice, also pointed out how digital innovations can disadvantage specific groups.

For instance, sensors that pick up on movement may inadvertently identify people with disabilities, who move differently from the rest. “Everyone else will be anonymous... except for the person who moves differently. Therefore, (that person) does not enjoy the privacy of the others,” she said.

Giving his take, Mr Lee said smart nation initiatives are meant to improve quality of life and catalyse opportunity. They can even help reduce inequality as the disadvantaged can use technology to circumvent challenges, he added.

To ensure that Singapore’s Smart Nation initiative carries on, it must ensure digital tools solve real-world problems and get the buy-in of communities that they are meant for, rather than being a “showroom” or “glitzy shopfront”.

“It’s no point setting out a tool and people do not own it, do not think it helps them,” he said. “Ultimately, that is critical – the buy-in and the ownership of the communities for whom these digital drives are intended to serve.”

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