

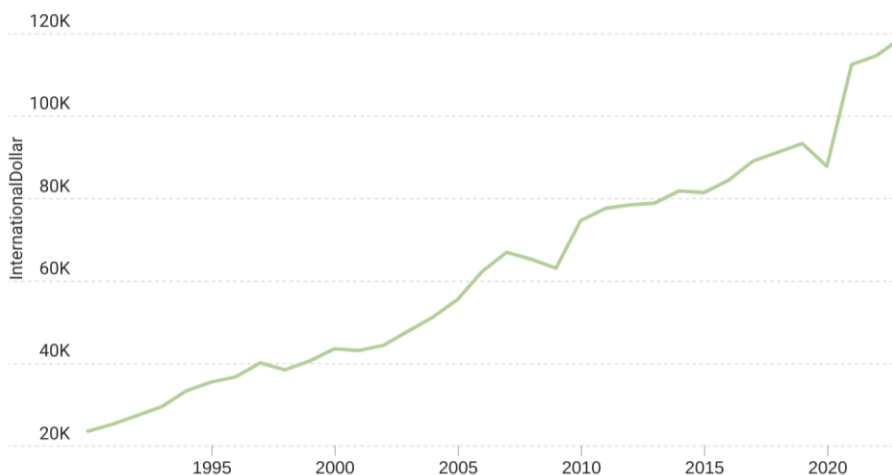


Meritocracy and Social Mobility in Singapore: Myth or Reality?

Chhun Phalanady, Nath Monika and Veasna Chansileap

Singapore’s meritocracy has long been celebrated as the cornerstone of its development—a system where talent and effort outweigh privilege and wealth. This principle has transformed Singapore into a global economic hub, with its Gross National Income (GNI) soaring from \$20,000 in the 1990s to over \$120,000 (PPP) by 2020. Such success is often attributed to its merit-based policies, which have fueled innovation, education, and upward mobility.¹

Exhibit 1: GNI Based on Purchasing Power Parity in Singapore (1990 - 2023)



¹World Bank, “Gross National Income Based on Purchasing Power Parity,” Data Commons, 2023, accessed December 19, 2024,

https://datacommons.org/tools/timeline#place=country%2FSGP&statsVar=Amount_EconomicActivity_GrossNationalIncome_PurchasingPowerParity&chart=%7B%22amount-none%22%3A%7B%22pc%22%3Atrue%7D%7D.

Source of Graph:

https://datacommons.org/tools/timeline#place=country%2FSGP&statsVar=Amount_EconomicActivity_GrossNationalIncome_PurchasingPowerParity&chart=%7B%22amount-none%22%3A%7B%22pc%22%3Atrue%7D%7D

But does Singapore’s meritocracy truly guarantee success for all? Or has it evolved into a comforting narrative that obscures growing inequalities?

Lee Kuan Yew’s Vision: The Foundations of Meritocracy

Lee Kuan Yew envisioned meritocracy as the foundation for nation-building, prioritizing free-market policies to attract foreign investment and a robust education system to cultivate a skilled workforce. These policies transformed Singapore into a global financial hub, driving its rapid rise from a post-colonial nation to a thriving First World economy. Under his leadership, meritocracy became a central narrative of progress, rewarding effort and talent over privilege.²

The Dual Nature of Singapore’s Meritocracy

While Singapore’s meritocracy has driven economic growth and created opportunities for many, it has also reinforced systemic inequalities. The rise of **parentocracy**, where educational outcomes are heavily influenced by family resources, exemplifies this. Wealthier families invest in private tuition and extracurricular programs, giving their children a significant advantage. Meanwhile, disadvantaged students in “disadvantaged schools”—which serve the lowest 25% of performers—struggle with limited resources, widening the achievement gap. By 2015, 46% of disadvantaged students attended such schools, up from 41% in 2009.³

The education system’s intense competition further exacerbates these divides. Scholarships and subsidies have helped level the playing field for some, but systemic barriers remain, particularly for low-income families, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. Over time, individual

²Nafis Alam, “How Lee Kuan Yew Transformed Singapore,” World Economic Forum, March 23, 2015, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/03/how-lee-kuan-yew-transformed-singapore/>.

³Global-Is-Asian Staff, “Meritocracy in Singapore: Solution or Problem?,” Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, November 13, 2018, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/meritocracy-in-singapore-solution-or-problem>.

merit has increasingly aligned with inherited privilege, undermining the promise of equal opportunity.⁴

Challenges in the Meritocratic System

Inequality in Education

Singapore’s education system aims to provide equal opportunities through standardized testing, grants, and subsidies. However, resource disparities between schools have deepened inequalities. Students in disadvantaged schools often lack access to top-tier resources, affecting their academic performance and limiting upward mobility. This dynamic reflects the paradox of a meritocratic system that promises equality but often replicates privilege.⁵

Socioeconomic Disparities

Economic inequality further complicates Singapore’s meritocratic ideals. With a top marginal tax rate of just 22%, the wealthiest individuals contribute proportionately less to redistributive programs.⁶ This has contributed to a persistently high Gini coefficient—0.482 in 2007 and 0.478 in 2012—indicating significant income disparity. Wealth inequality is even more pronounced, with the top 10% earning 24 times more than the bottom 10%, threatening social cohesion and limiting mobility for lower-income groups.⁷

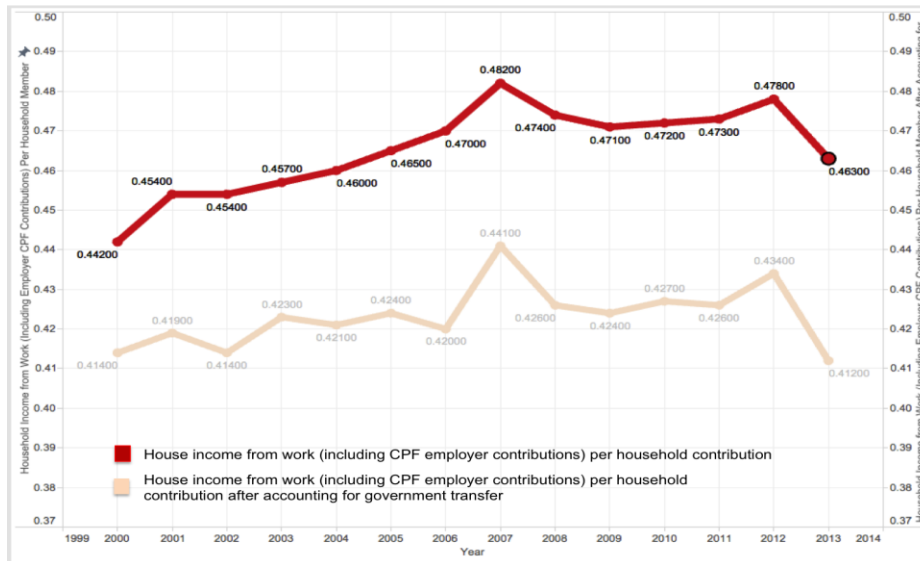
Exhibit 2: Gini Coefficient: A Measure of Income Inequality in Singapore

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Gabrielle Chan, “Inclusiveness, Equal Access to Resources: Education Leaders Reflect on Singapore’s Education System,” *The Straits Times* (blog), April 27, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/inclusiveness-equal-access-to-resources-education-leaders-reflect-on-singapore-s-education-system>.

⁶ “Individual Income Tax Rates,” Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, n.d., <https://www.iras.gov.sg/taxes/individual-income-tax/basics-of-individual-income-tax/tax-residency-and-tax-rates/individual-income-tax-rates>.

⁷ Thum Ping Tjin [PJ], “Why Is the Cost of Living so High? Part 3: Inequality in Singapore,” *New Naratif*, September 5, 2024, <https://newnaratif.com/explainer-inequality-in-singapore/>.



Source of Graph:

[S'pore's income inequality is made worse by elitist values & systematic elitism - Mothership.SG](#)
[- News from Singapore, Asia and around the world](#)

Comparative Insights: Finland’s Model

In contrast to Singapore’s competitive meritocracy, Finland offers a collaborative and inclusive approach to social mobility. Its education system, which provides free education from primary to tertiary levels, eliminates financial barriers and ensures equitable access for all. This fosters democratic stability and reduces educational inequality, emphasizing collective progress over individual competition.⁸

Singapore can draw lessons from Finland’s model, particularly in balancing economic success with social equity. While Singapore fosters competitiveness and innovation, adopting aspects of Finland’s approach—such as broader access to education and collaborative learning—could help mitigate inequalities within its meritocratic framework.⁹

Addressing Systemic Challenges by Government Initiatives

⁸David Delfs Erbo Andersen, “The Limits of Meritocracy in Stabilizing Democracy and the Twin Importance of Bureaucratic Impartiality and Effectiveness,” *Social Science History* 45, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 535–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.15>.

⁹ibid.

Recognizing the systemic challenges of its meritocratic framework, Singapore's government has introduced targeted policies to enhance social mobility and reduce inequality. Programs such as the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme and the Progressive Wage Model have improved wages for low-income workers, aiming to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest earners. From 2013 to 2018, low-income households saw an annual income growth of 3.3%, a clear indicator of progress in addressing economic disparities.¹⁰

Additionally, the SkillsFuture initiative has become a cornerstone of Singapore's workforce development strategy. SkillsFuture equips workers with the tools needed to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving economy by offering subsidized training and upskilling programs. In 2019, over 500,000 individuals and 14,000 enterprises participated in SkillsFuture programs, with 86% of trainees reporting improved job performance.¹¹

However, while these programs address immediate challenges, they do not fully dismantle the structural barriers that limit upward mobility. Disadvantaged groups, particularly those with fewer resources to begin with, often struggle to access these opportunities at the same rate as their more privileged counterparts. Without targeted support, such initiatives risk reinforcing the same inequalities they aim to address.

The Path Forward: Toward an Inclusive Meritocracy

Singapore's meritocratic system has contributed to its economic growth and upward mobility. Recognizing the limitations of this model, the government has actively introduced initiatives such as SkillsFuture, the Progressive Wage Model, and the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme to address inequalities and level the playing field. These programs aim to enhance skills, boost incomes for lower-wage workers, and ensure that all citizens, regardless of their background, have opportunities to succeed.

¹⁰Ministry of Finance Singapore, "Measures to Enhance Income Mobility and Reduce Income Inequality," MOF, January 6, 2020, <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-publications/parliamentary-replies/measures-to-enhance-income-mobility-and-reduce-income-inequality>.

¹¹Singapore Government Agency, "500,000 Individuals and 14,000 Enterprises Benefitted From SkillsFuture Programmes in 2019," SkillsFuture, February 7, 2020, <https://www.skillsfuture.gov.sg/newsroom/500-000-individuals-and-14-000-enterprises-benefitted-from-skillsfuture-programmes-in-2019>.

However, the challenges of deep inequality and systemic barriers must be addressed. Structural reforms in education, workforce development, and social welfare are essential. Increasing resources for disadvantaged schools, enhancing mentorship programs for low-income workers, and investing in housing and healthcare will create a more equitable society.¹²

Ultimately, Singapore’s ability to balance competitiveness in the job market with inclusivity will determine whether its meritocracy remains a myth or becomes a reality for all. By addressing these challenges, Singapore can ensure that its future is defined by opportunity, fairness, and shared progress—not by privilege.

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¹²Cheng Yong Tan and Clive Dimmock, “Tensions Between Meritocracy and Equity in Singapore,” The Head Foundation, 2015, https://headfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/thf-papers_Tensions-between-meritocracy-and-equity-in-Singapore-Educational-issues-in-preparing-a-workforce-for-the-Knowledge-based-Economy.pdf.

aims to be an alternative to ad-hoc research, training, and policy dialogue arrangements with limited or short-lived national and regional impacts.