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Equity of opportunities, not equality of outcomes



Pedestrians along Robinson Road. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

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Improving the absolute well-being of Singaporeans and achieving relative equity or equality within the country are not mutually exclusive policy objectives. Growth with equity is, therefore, a worthy objective.

Distinguishing the equity of opportunities and the equality of outcomes, and stressing the former, brings attention to the important principle of justice.

And while it might be true that from intelligence to work ethic, "human beings are unequal in almost every respect", it does not follow that Singaporeans should then accept the consequent inequalities or ignore governmental or community potential to increase equity (Why we should care less about inequality in S'pore, June 1).

Increasing emphasis on the equity of opportunities also raises the question of deservedness, or the extent to which success can be attributed to individual factors such as hard work per se.

In addition to luck or good fortune, the role of public institutions - such as schools and scholarship boards - would be to account for parental, familial, or other demographic traits which may give some individuals a head start.

This is before working to make sure that those who are disadvantaged have the same access to developmental resources compared with their more-privileged counterparts.

Given that wealth and privilege have been accruing over generations, even as others are empowered through education and social welfare, those who are ahead in Singapore's meritocratic race must recognise their privilege to do more.

These links between equity and equality, in terms of how increased inequality could raise inequity - when two students of equivalent academic abilities have different prospects as a result of their family circumstances - illustrate the need for government intervention.

They also show how wealth is not the only outcome of concern: High-stake university admissions or scholarship awards, for instance, are zero-sum games which can be skewed by privilege.

Opponents are likely to insist that even equity is not a problem in the country, pointing to anecdotal examples of Singaporeans who have achieved success in spite of their poor starting points.

Yet besides information about the socioeconomic backgrounds of students in the top schools and of public sector scholars, these claims about equality and equity can be empirically tested, at least crudely through the respective use of the Gini coefficient as well as inter-generational mobility.

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