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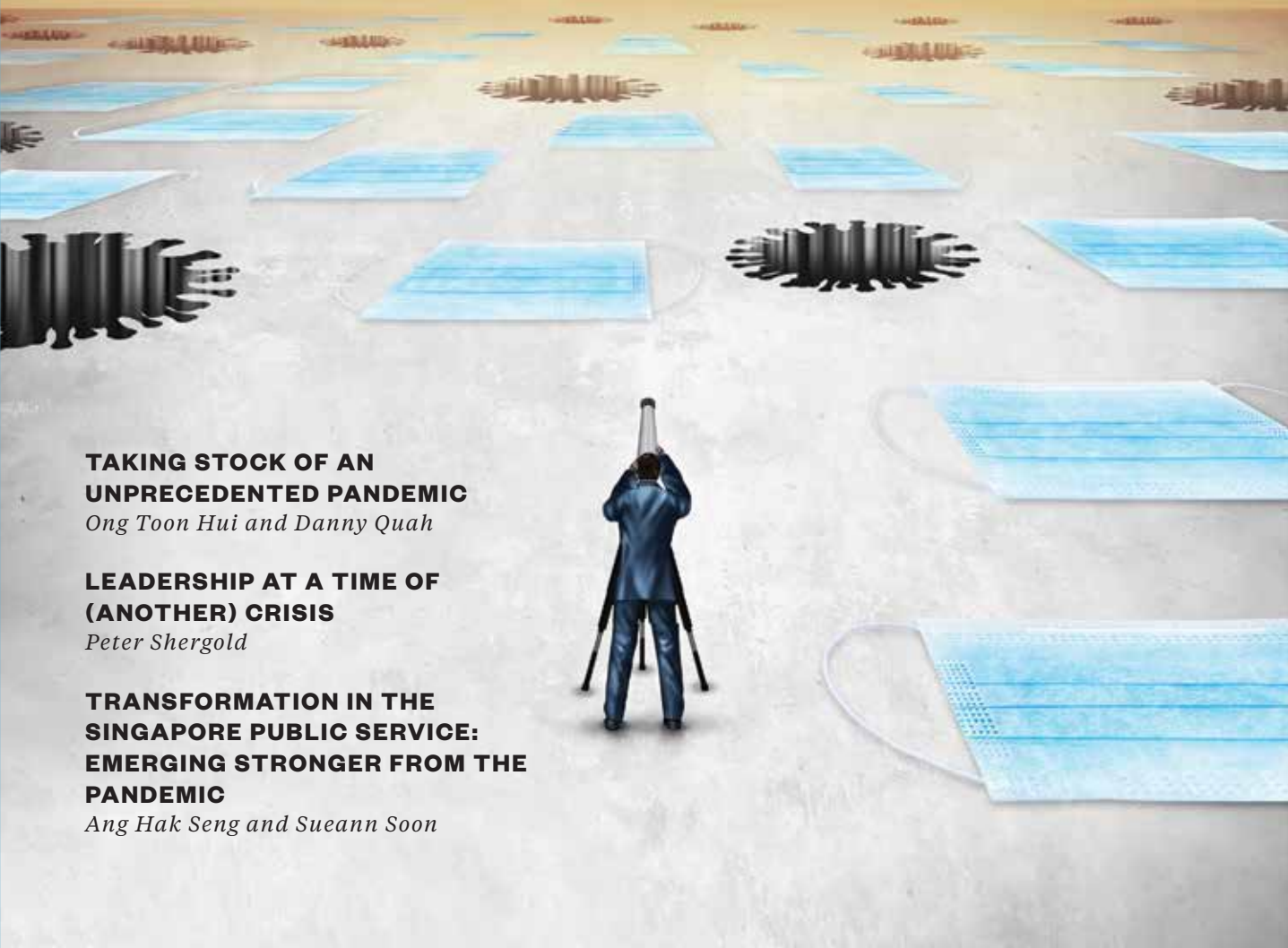
Learning from Crisis

Tharman Shanmugaratnam



TAKING STOCK OF AN UNPRECEDENTED PANDEMIC
Ong Toon Hui and Danny Quah

LEADERSHIP AT A TIME OF (ANOTHER) CRISIS
Peter Shergold

TRANSFORMATION IN THE SINGAPORE PUBLIC SERVICE: EMERGING STRONGER FROM THE PANDEMIC
Ang Hak Seng and Sueann Soon

ETHOS

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Editorial

by **Dr Alvin Pang**
Editor-in-Chief, ETHOS

Today, more than a year after the outbreak first came to light, the world remains in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we now know much more about the novel coronavirus, and the rapid development of effective vaccines has brought real hope, formidable challenges remain: not least in the form of virulent new variants, the uneven distribution of vaccines and treatments, and a subdued global economy. However much we may wish otherwise, the crisis will not pass anytime soon. The pandemic has already had a far-reaching impact on the economy and society—including significant changes to the way we live, work and play—with implications that will linger for many years to come.

We are still some way from getting a full sense of what COVID-19 means for Singapore, where the virus remains a clear and present threat—as a recent resurgence in cases reminds us. Nevertheless, we can observe, learn from and consolidate what progress we have made, continuing to improve our responses even as the pandemic evolves.

In the past year, ETHOS has sought to document and reflect on these developments in a series of digital editions. In this, our first print edition since the outbreak, we take stock of the multifarious crisis wrought by the pandemic, and begin to frame its socioeconomic, governance and geopolitical nuances in ways that

may serve future consideration. In this endeavour, the Civil Service College (CSC) benefits from a partnership with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, whose faculty have kindly lent their perspectives to several articles.

COVID-19 has been a vivid reminder of how issues of public importance are closely intertwined—what started as a health crisis soon ballooned to threaten livelihoods, sectors, economies and communities with unprecedented scale and speed (*p. 6*). It has highlighted prevailing faultlines and vulnerabilities in many societies, and underscored once again the critical role governance plays in keeping a nation safe, stable and strong. Good governance, and the indispensable public trust it both engenders and depends upon, deepen a society's capacity to withstand periods of crisis—but they must be cultivated steadily over time (*p. 20*). Fiscal prudence in good times grants governments the wherewithal to support businesses and households in a crunch (*p. 28*); broad measures to support families and jobs at every level reassure citizens that they will not be left behind to deal with economic shocks on their own (*p. 42*).

Material support is vital in a crisis of this nature, but a society's resilience also rests on the psychological wellbeing (*p. 52*) and civic spirit of its people—their sense of common cause, collective responsibility and mutual care. Some of these elements emerge from shared historical experiences but there are also habits that can be nurtured. Thoughtful policy design can help alert us to how profoundly our individual attitudes and behaviours (even in personal matters such as hygiene and physical contact) can affect those around us (*p. 66*). Likewise, measures in pursuit of the collective good (such as the collection and management of data for contact tracing) can be made more mindful and robust—assuaging concerns over privacy or misuse, and encouraging

Good governance, and the indispensable public trust it both engenders and depends upon, deepen a society's capacity to withstand periods of crisis.

compliance (*p. 80*). Honest, open and transparent communication can anchor and amplify efforts to meet a crisis (*p. 94*). It is heartening that in the past year, Singaporeans have shown a readiness to stand together and support one another through this difficult period.

COVID-19 has been a test not only of national infrastructures and social bonds, but also of leadership. Veteran public servant and CSC Senior Visiting Fellow Peter Shergold argues that times of uncertainty reaffirm the value of informed, competent, and decisive government leaders who can demonstrate they have the public interest at heart (*p. 110*). For Singapore's Ang Hak Seng and Sueann Soon, the pandemic offers another transformative opportunity—like other milestones in our short but eventful history—to advance the public sector's capacity to serve our nation (*p. 118*). There is sobering work ahead of us to overcome and emerge stronger from this great crisis of our generation.

No one country can be said to have overcome the challenges of COVID-19 on its own. In a crisis of such truly global proportions, resilience and eventual recovery must be multilateral and collective if it is to be effective. While the pandemic has underlined how fundamentally vulnerable small states such as Singapore are, it has also shown that we can be agile, adaptive, and make relevant contributions in the international sphere (*p. 132*). In some cases, the crisis has accelerated trends—such as digitalisation or geopolitical competition—that have already been underway for some time (*p. 144*). While the pandemic-induced new normal will bring fresh challenges, Singapore cannot afford to shut itself off from the world, but must find new ways to continue to thrive as an open, connected and inclusive society.

As the pandemic unfolds, ETHOS will continue to gather thoughtful perspectives that may benefit Singapore and the broader work of public policy and governance at this challenging time. We'd love to hear from you if you have insights or viewpoints to share with our readership of public sector practitioners and thought leaders in Singapore and beyond.

I wish you a stimulating read, wherever you might be. Take care and stay safe. ■

SINGAPORE AND COVID-19: IN PERSPECTIVE

As of 8 June 2021,[1] Singapore has seen

>62,000

cases of COVID-19

>61,000

cases discharged

34

fatalities from COVID-19

National Vaccination Drive as of 7 June 2021[2, 3]

>2.503 MILLION

individuals (or 44.0%[4] of the population) have received at least one dose

>1.888 MILLION

individuals (or 33.2%[5] of the population) have completed the full vaccination regimen

In 2020: Socioeconomic Impact

Singapore's economy contracted by a record 5.4%

The 13.3% year-on-year decline in the second quarter of 2020, during the Circuit Breaker, was Singapore's largest quarterly economic contraction on record.[6]

Singaporeans' mental wellbeing took a hit

Calls made to the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) rose by about

30–35%

during the Circuit Breaker period compared to the same period in 2019.[9, 10]

April 2020 saw a **42%** increase in helpline calls.

The annual average unemployment rate rose to 3%[7]

At the peak of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, unemployment was 3.3%.[8]

For FY2020, the Government set aside

>S$100 BILLION

(20% of Singapore GDP) for relief efforts. This included:

- S$73.5 billion for workers and businesses
- S$10 billion for social and household support[11]
- Policies to create and save jobs, such as the Jobs Growth Incentive and Jobs Support Scheme

The overall budget deficit was S$64.9 billion, or 13.9% of GDP: **the largest in Singapore's history**.

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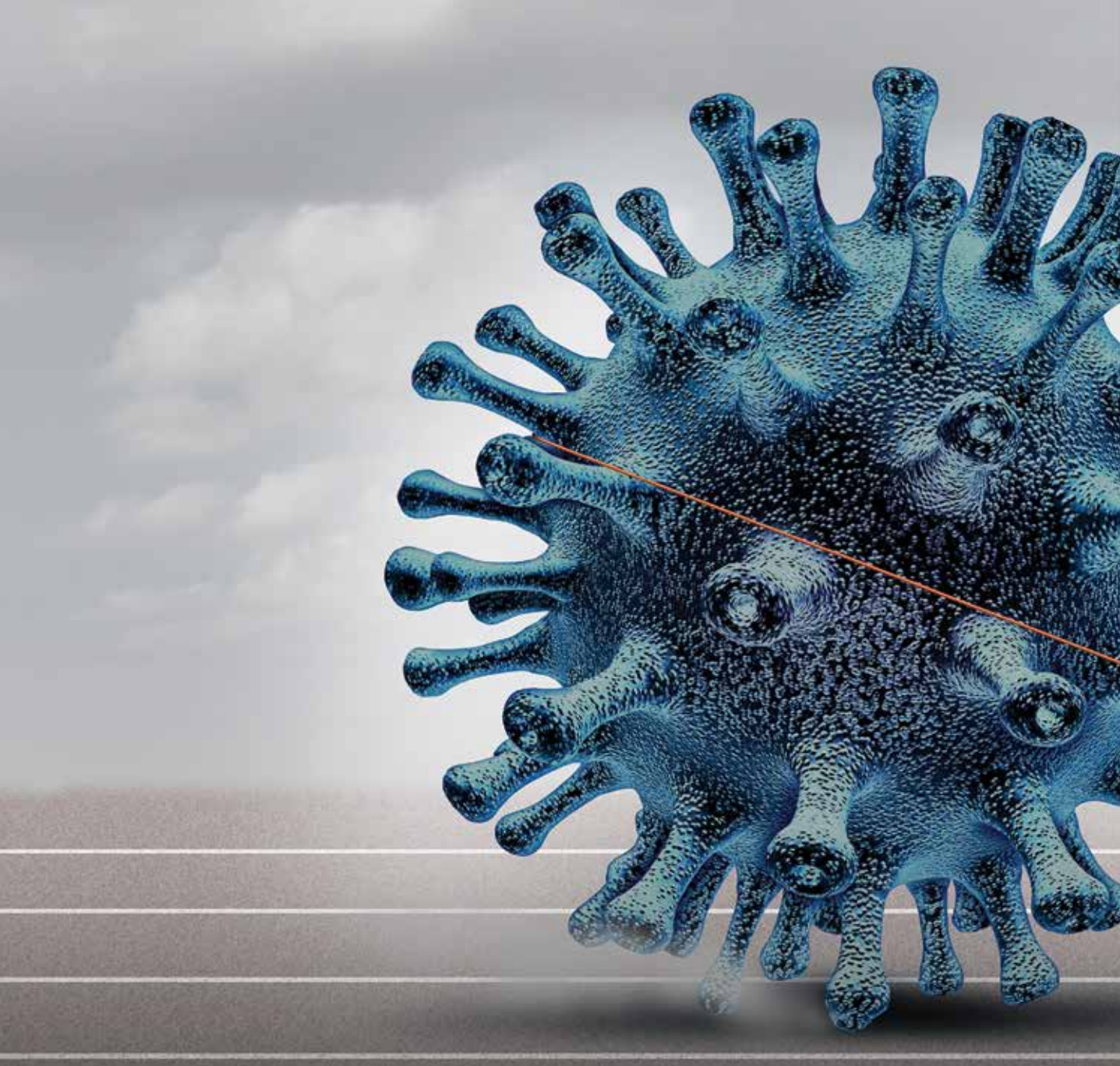
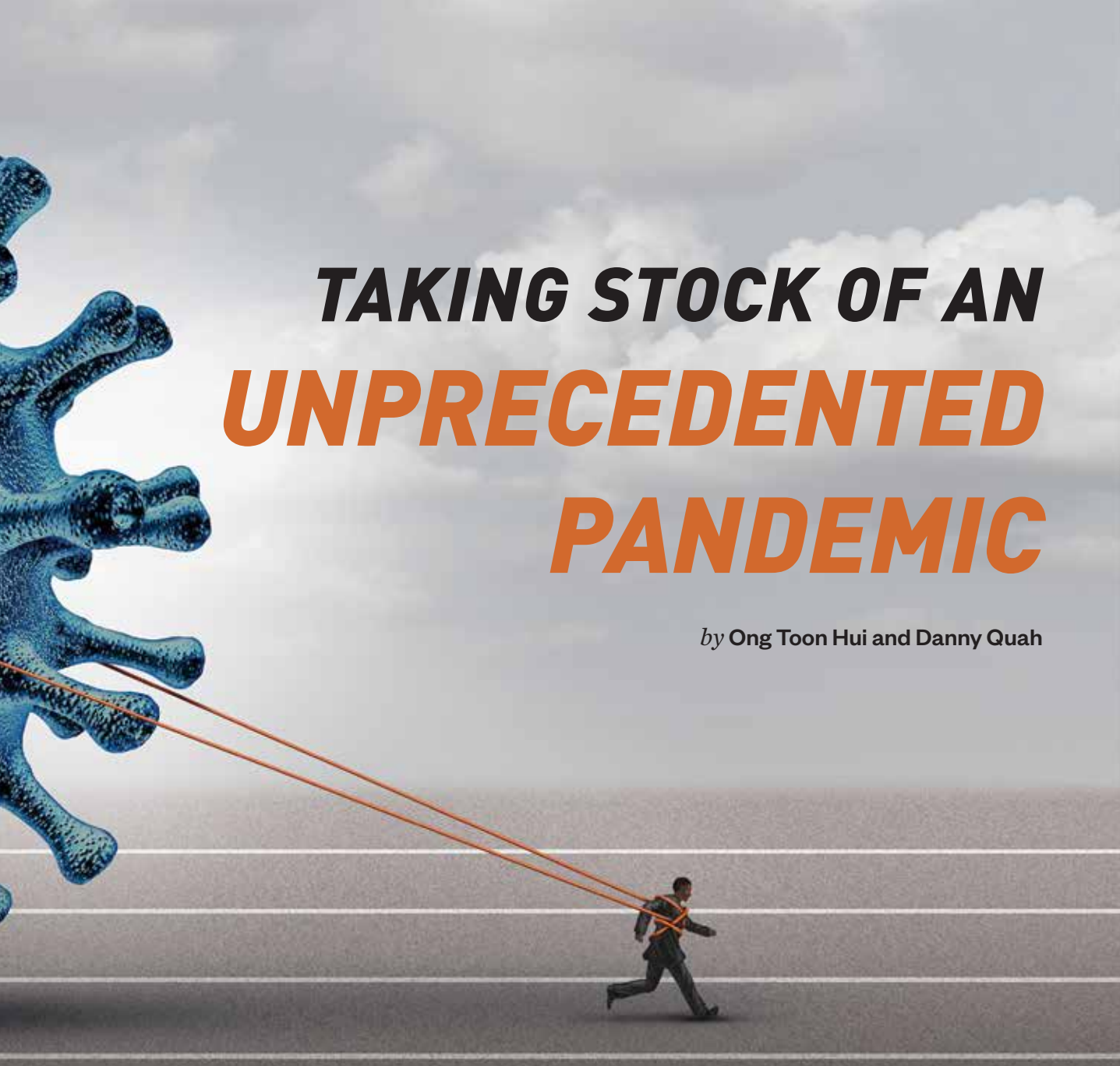


COVID-19 has tested societies like never before: but good governance, agile policymaking, social cohesion and broad collaboration remain vital in facing the crisis of a generation.

TAKING STOCK OF AN UNPRECEDENTED PANDEMIC

by **Ong Toon Hui and Danny Quah**



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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO DATE

In late December 2019, Chinese authorities reported several cases of "viral pneumonia" in the city of Wuhan, China.[1] The novel coronavirus, which the World Health Organization (WHO) later named COVID-19, quickly swept through Wuhan before spreading abroad. On 11 March 2020, with the virus having affected more and more countries, the WHO formally declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic.[2]

In 2020, without effective and widely available treatments and vaccines, governments around the world had to rely on mitigation measures such as safe distancing, as well as restrictions on movement and travel, to flatten the curve of infection and alleviate the burden on their healthcare systems.

Today, over a year after the virus was first discovered, the global situation remains alarming. Many countries have imposed nation-wide, regional or local lockdowns to deal with recurring resurgences of the virus. Even Asian countries which were broadly successful in containing the outbreak for much of 2020 have experienced intermittent flare-ups of the virus.[3] As of 1 June 2021, COVID-19 has infected over 170 million people worldwide and claimed over 3.5 million lives,[4] with cases reported in every continent.[5]

While the rapid development and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines have provided much needed hope, the fight is far from over. This is a profoundly globalised crisis, with many cross-border spillover effects. Any nation, after reducing infections to near-zero new cases, can easily see rapid re-emergence from imported infections. Until most nations have the pandemic under control, international travel and economic activity are unlikely to resume fully. The lengthy process of producing and administering the vaccines worldwide, along with the emergence of new variants of the virus that might be more infectious or resistant to existing vaccines, are all factors that threaten the situation in the near future.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The magnitude of this pandemic cannot be underestimated. What started off as a public health emergency has rapidly evolved into an unprecedented, multifaceted crisis with huge socioeconomic, psychological, and political costs.

Socioeconomic Impact

The global economy contracted 4.3% in 2020,[6] as the pandemic and series of lockdowns halted travel, hobbled businesses, disrupted supply chains and thrust millions into unemployment around the world.[7] The World Bank describes this global recession as "the deepest since 1945–46, and more than twice as deep as the recession associated with the 2007–09 global financial crisis".[8]

In 2020, GDP in the US, Eurozone, and Japan contracted by 3.5%,[9] 7.4%, and 5.3% respectively, while the aggregate GDP in emerging markets and developing economies (excluding China) shrank by 5%.[10] Singapore's GDP contracted by 5.4%

in 2020—the worst recession since independence,[11] with the Circuit Breaker accounting for 2.2% of this decline.[12]

Even more worrying is that the pandemic may have hit people from vulnerable groups disproportionately harder.

COVID-19 also caused the median income of residents to decrease for the first time since 2004. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has estimated that real median income in 2020 fell by 0.3%, after enjoying 2.2% growth in 2019.[13]

Even more worrying is that the pandemic may have hit people from vulnerable groups disproportionately harder. The pandemic's socioeconomic impact on society has been uneven, with some sectors and more vulnerable groups bearing a disproportionately larger share of the negative impacts.

Real income at the 20th percentile dropped by 4.5% (before government transfers), because the industries more adversely affected by the pandemic tend to have a high concentration of lower-income earners.[14] In addition, the number of *discouraged workers* (those who are not looking for jobs because they think they would not get any) swelled to 16,400 in June 2020—more than twice the number in 2019 and more than the previous peak in the 2009 recession. Lower-educated and older residents were the largest groups among these discouraged workers.[15]

School closures—a common measure introduced to curb the spread of the virus and protect the health of students and teachers—could also widen existing inequalities in educational outcomes,[16] which in turn may affect lifetime earnings in the long run.[17] This will be especially felt by disadvantaged households who lack the resources needed to effectively support home-based learning.[18]

Psychological Impact

Experts are only beginning to understand the full extent of the long-term psychological and social impact of COVID-19 and its spillover effects. Psychologists familiar with the effects of past pandemics and major emergencies, such as the SARS epidemic or the Chernobyl nuclear disaster,[19, 20] warn about the possible long-term mental health impact of COVID-19. Strategies to control the virus such as lockdowns and quarantine have also been shown to promote negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.[21, 22]

Singaporeans have also felt the psychological stress of the pandemic, with a rise in the number of people seeking help for mental health issues,[23] family violence cases,[24] and suicide ideation.[25] While the transition from remote to on-site work could help to alleviate the situation, the prospect of a slow recovery makes it unlikely that these heightened social stresses will fall to pre-COVID levels anytime soon.

Political Impact

The pandemic has tested the competence and political will of governments in many ways. They have had to grapple with an unprecedented public health crisis, while addressing its complex economic and social fallout and maintaining

public support and public compliance in doing so.

In many countries, while most people supported measures to contain the spread of infection, a small but significant group either disputed or actively rejected these measures, or grew increasingly frustrated with them.[26] This was made worse by a number of opinion and political leaders in some societies, including in the US under then-President Donald Trump,[27] and Brazil under President Jair Bolsonaro,[28] who communicated narratives that sowed doubt and mistrust on the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of these protests (such as against mask-wearing or lockdowns) became radical and even violent.[29, 30] Even in Singapore, there have been several cases of residents blatantly flouting safe management measures.[31, 32]

Such sentiments could sow uncertainty in a volatile crisis and undermine public trust and confidence, compromising the measures imposed to control the pandemic and risking further infections. Even among largely compliant communities, "pandemic fatigue" could set in,[33] with people becoming complacent or frustrated over time, especially when the situation appears to be improving.[34] This will profoundly test the ability of governments to hold their societies steady and keep up with necessary measures to control the pandemic over extended periods.

Even among largely compliant communities, "pandemic fatigue" could set in. This will profoundly test the ability of governments to hold their societies steady and keep up with necessary measures.

NAVIGATING THE FRONTIER OF TOUGH CHOICES

While the pandemic's effects have been global and broadly similar, given that the same coronavirus is the driver, policy responses and outcomes have varied significantly across the world. In part, this is because of important differences in parameters such as the size of each territory and its population; the physical resilience of the population; the robustness of the national healthcare system; the likelihood of imminent cure and amelioration; the tolerance of the overall economy in its sectoral and industrial allocation of jobs, employment, and investment; information levels; political culture; and so on.

But these varied responses also stem from differences in national priorities, with governments selecting policies that make trade-offs—between preserving societal health by increasing social-level coronavirus restrictions on one hand, and supporting socioeconomic performance on the other—along a frontier of acceptable possibilities. The challenge to governance in the pandemic has been to work out the appropriate mix of policy measures, taking into account a society's norms, preferences and future trajectory, while staving off the extremes of either rampant, devastating disease or economic collapse.

The challenge to governance in the pandemic has been to work out the appropriate mix of policy measures while staving off the extremes of either rampant, devastating disease or economic collapse.

These different policy interventions need to be taken in tandem with one another, so that they do not work at cross-purposes. Thoughtful policymakers design measures that acknowledge the potential negative effects they may have, and work to decouple socioeconomic benefits from risky physical interaction, where possible. For example, they may support moves to shift activity online by enhancing digital infrastructure and access for all households and companies, or improving flexi-work arrangements or tele-education.

PUBLIC INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

In general, pandemic policy measures around the world fall into three broad classes.

1. **Containment**, the most immediate and directly visible actions that governments can adopt, involves various forms of restrictions on movement and activity to curtail the spread of COVID-19. These include rules on wearing masks in public, isolation, safe distancing and quarantine, as well as restrictions on travel and mobility; temporary closures of universities and schools, as well as curtailed operations of bars and restaurants and other places for social gathering. While testing and contact tracing do not directly contain COVID-19, they do give policymakers critical information to aid effective containment.

2. **Health Measures** include policy measures to improve physical resilience against infection, in tandem with containment policies. They include information campaigns to raise public awareness, such as those promoting personal hygiene. They also include vaccination programmes, as well as general measures to enhance national health infrastructure, such as building up spare capacity (such as ICU beds, quarantine facilities or medical stockpiles) to provide options in an emergency. Health measures can also create jobs and grow relevant industries: for instance, by bolstering the manufacture of medical or protective equipment, or supporting pharmaceutical research and development.

3. **Non-pharmaceutical interventions** (NPIs) usually take the form of socioeconomic support of some kind. These may include direct vouchers or other kinds of top-up provisions. To help households both immediately and over the longer term, governments may ease rules for personal debt relief. In the formal workplace, NPIs may support employment by granting wage subsidies, providing training or job matching services. These measures can reinforce productive capacity by having public agencies take on or share risk in long-term investment projects.

HOW OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC

Singapore has not been alone in implementing firm containment measures alongside health and non-medical responses to the pandemic.

China, where the first COVID-19 cases were detected, is arguably the nation that has most strongly applied containment measures to lower infections and deaths at the onset of the pandemic.[1] As of 6 May 2021, it has allocated almost 5% of its GDP to discretionary fiscal spending, targeting epidemic control, medical equipment, unemployment insurance (including for migrant workers), tax relief, and further public investment.[2] In absolute numbers, China has also administered more COVID-19 vaccine doses than any other nation (over 700 million by 4 June 2021), with plans to inoculate most of its population by the end of 2021.[3]

In the **US**, in March 2020—more than five weeks after WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern—then-President Trump was still downplaying the severity of the situation, comparing the coronavirus to ordinary flu.[4] Despite this, US fiscal support in response to the pandemic was considerable. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of March 2020, signed into law by President Trump, provided US$2.3 trillion in economic stimulus, including one-time cash payments to taxpayers, increased unemployment benefits, loans to corporations, and aid to state and local governments. Amounting to 11% of GDP, this was the largest federal stimulus package in US history.[5] In March 2021, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan, providing another 9% of GDP to extend unemployment benefits, send direct stimulus payments to individuals, and increase school funding.

The **UK** initially considered a strategy of "herd immunity"—allowing enough of the population to get a mild case of COVID-19 and attain immunity, shielding the more vulnerable from infection. Confronted with a spike in cases, the government later imposed social distancing measures, including sharp restrictions on the operations of gyms and entertainment outlets.[6] The UK was the first Western country to administer large-scale vaccinations to its residents, starting from December 2020. By 15 April 2021, the UK had offered at least the first dose of the vaccine to everyone above the age of 50 and those in high-risk categories that accounted for 99% of UK's COVID-19 deaths. Following these measures, daily cases in the UK fell from a high of 90 per 100,000 people in January 2021 to 2.4 per 100,000 people in mid-April 2021.[7]

The **EU** saw numerous fiscal and monetary policy schemes put in place, both across the EU and in individual member states. Germany, for one, provided supplementary budgets to the tune of 5%, 4%, and then 2% of its GDP. These funds went towards hospital capacity expansion, grants for small businesses and the self-employed, expanded unemployment insurance, as well as childcare benefits for low-income parents, and parental leave benefits. Later in 2020, subsidies were also directed towards investment in green energy and digitisation.

Closer to home, **Malaysia** reported its first COVID-19 case in February 2020. A local outbreak in March 2020 prompted the government to impose its first Movement Control Order (MCO), which barred citizens from travelling overseas and shut all non-essential businesses and services.[8] Despite a dip in daily cases to double-digit lows for a few months, a spike in cases prompted the government to announce a second MCO and then a state of emergency in January 2021.[9] A renewed spike in the weeks before May 2021 led to the imposition of MCO 3.0, which still allowed businesses to operate. However, as the situation rapidly

deteriorated, Malaysia entered a total lockdown from 1 June to 14 June 2021, shutting down all non-essential economic and service sectors.[10] As of March 2021, the Malaysian government has announced six economic aid packages totalling RM340 billion,[11] the largest being the PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package which amounts to RM250 billion (around 17% of GDP).[12]

Notes

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RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC: SINGAPORE 'S EXPERIENCE

Singapore was one of the first countries to report imported cases of COVID-19. Despite initial containment efforts, the number of unlinked cases, especially in the foreign worker dormitories, continued to rise. Starting 7 April 2020, the Government implemented a series of drastic "Circuit Breaker" measures to contain the spread of the virus.[35] For close to two months, all workplaces and school premises, except for those in essential services and key economic sectors, were shut down. Homes became the new office for most workers, while students received lessons online as schools implemented full home-based learning.[36] Provisions were made for students whose parents were working in essential services and unable to secure alternative care arrangements or who lacked access to suitable digital devices.[37]

During the Circuit Breaker period in 2020, people from different walks of life and every segment in society stepped up to help one another in the fight against COVID-19, including many coming forward to help the less fortunate in their communities by donating or volunteering.[38] Community care services continued their operations during the Circuit Breaker;[39] community groups stepped in to fill gaps; and corporations donated essential items such as food supplies and face masks.[40]

Since the outbreak in early 2020, the Singapore Government has also delivered a series of budgets, including measures for job creation, wage subsidies, and financing schemes, dipping into its reserves to stabilise the economy and support its people in the ongoing crisis. These measures were effective in alleviating the short-term economic pain and containing the spread of COVID-19. We were lucky to have experienced a period of zero or very few community cases, resulting in the resumption of relative normalcy as Singapore progressively reopened its economy.

However, the fight against COVID-19 is far from over, especially with the emergence of new variants that are more infectious. After several months of relative calm, Singapore has seen a surge in community cases and new clusters since April 2021, attributable in part to the more infectious B1617 variant.[41] To control this new wave of infections, the Government has imposed additional measures and restrictions under Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) from 16 May to 13 June 2021,[42] including reducing group size numbers, stopping of high-risk activities, and moving the majority of students to home-based learning.[43]

This resurgence is not unique to Singapore. Other Southeast Asian countries who had previously managed to control the pandemic, such as Vietnam and Thailand, have also experienced higher-than-before waves of new COVID-19 cases in the weeks leading up to late May 2021.[44] While this is a concerning development, Singapore is better equipped to handle the COVID-19 situation now compared to last year, due to better testing, contact tracing capabilities, and the availability of vaccines.

Should there be a need for further tightening of measures, we are hopeful that Singaporeans will again rise up to the challenge, as they have done in the past year. Even as the Government does its best to contain COVID-19, stabilise the economy, and ready ourselves for a volatile future, the civic spirit of solidarity, cohesion, resilience and resourcefulness that Singaporeans have demonstrated in the face of crisis offers hope for the long fight ahead.

A BUMPY ROAD AHEAD

The war against the COVID-19 crisis continues. Many countries are hoping to start on the road to recovery in 2021, but this will likely be a long and hard journey. World Bank Group President David Malpass has cautioned that "while the global economy appears to have entered a subdued recovery, policymakers face formidable challenges—in public health, debt management, budget policies, central banking and structural reforms...there needs to be a major push to improve business environments, increase

While governments tackle the public health crisis and address the short-term economic and social issues, they will also need to prepare for the next phase of transformation.

labor and product market flexibility, and strengthen transparency and governance."[45]

Given the unprecedented nature and scale of the crisis, with many unknowns in play, it is hardly surprising if national governments and international institutions have made some policy missteps in the course of responding to the pandemic. In some sense, the best way forward has yet to be determined, although vaccines and improved international collaboration offer the prospect of a path towards eventual recovery.

What is important is to learn from the experiences of the past year. Three principles stand out as salient in facing the continuing crisis. First, policy measures must be designed and implemented with **Agility** so that adjustments can be made to allow for rapidly changing circumstances and new knowledge about the virus or its impacts. Second, policy measures in themselves cannot do enough to address every facet of the crisis, particularly when so much is dependent on individual compliance and personal behaviours. So **Collaboration**, involving different stakeholders across society—including public agencies, residents, the private sector and non-governmental actors—is key to effecting a whole-of-society response. While these stakeholders must exercise their own agency on the ground, they must all share a clear and common understanding and acceptance of what policy measures seek to achieve, for the public good. **Transparency** about these intentions and priorities is vital. If these aims are miscommunicated or misunderstood, then mistrust can emerge between society and policymakers, leading to cross-purposes, non-compliance or worse.

Just as all stakeholders in society must come together to **ACT**, so too will a similar understanding be important across members of the international community. Multilateral action, in which international responsibility is shared with other like-minded societies, will be needed to overcome both this pandemic and other global challenges to come.

While governments tackle the public health crisis and address the short-term economic and social issues, they will also need to prepare for the next phase of transformation. In Singapore, this means supporting businesses and workers not just through the pandemic but also in developing deep, future-ready capabilities for the post-COVID world to come. We will also need to strengthen our social compact both at a societal and community level to tackle the long-term impact of COVID-19. These long-term structural shifts might be challenging but will be essential for us to truly overcome and emerge stronger from this crisis of a generation. ■

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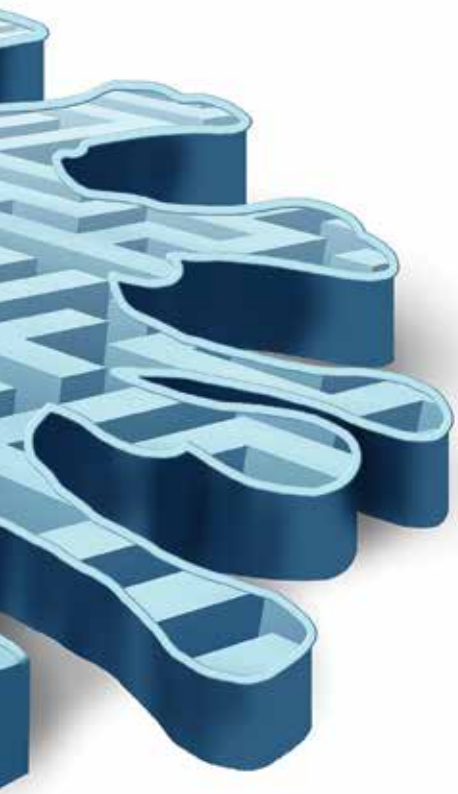

Learning from Crisis

by **Tharman Shanmugaratnam**

The following remarks—drawing lessons on governance from the ongoing COVID-19 crisis—were abridged from a speech given by the Senior Minister at the Administrative Service Appointment and Promotion Ceremony on 29 March 2021.

Tharman Shanmugaratnam is Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the gravest crisis the world has grappled with in 70 years. For us in Singapore, it is not like the existential threat we faced as a fledgling nation, but has been the most complex crisis we have faced, requiring the most forceful and comprehensive response—to protect public health and lives, the economy, social cohesion and trust, and our credibility internationally. Singapore has also been contributing actively to global efforts to overcome the pandemic, and providing bilateral support where we can to our friends abroad.

It has also been a massive learning experience. This is a crisis where so little was known at the outset, and a lot is still being discovered. We know a lot more now about the properties of the virus, but we continue to learn about the new variants that are emerging internationally, the efficacy of the various vaccines in countering them, and whether we will be dealing with an endemic infectious disease, with the population requiring recurrent booster shots. We are past the worst in the economy, but the course of the global recovery is still uncertain. We are seeing repeated lockdowns around the world as new waves of infection take hold, and do not yet know when economies and especially aviation will return to normal, or what the new normal will be.

It has been a challenge everywhere in the world, but one of the stark facts of the last year has been the wide variance of outcomes among countries that are equally developed, or that had seemed before COVID-19 struck to be equally well prepared for a pandemic.

Why so? Thoughtful observers point to the exercise of governance as a major differentiator between countries—how governments have responded in mobilising and deploying institutions, resources and skills, in convincing populations to cooperate in the public interest and stay the course, and in keeping the people's trust.

We have to learn from the experience of this crisis: because we will very likely have to live with COVID-19 for some time; so we are well prepared for the next pandemic; and also because the lessons will help us tackle other major crises that will inevitably come.

I will focus my remarks on five key lessons, from our own experience especially but also that of other countries in the past year.

"We have to learn from the experience of this crisis: because we will very likely have to live with COVID-19 for some time; so we are well prepared for the next pandemic; and also because the lessons will help us tackle other major crises that will inevitably come.

1 TAKE CARE OF TODAY, AND AVOID A SPIRAL DOWN

The first order of business, when dealing with a crisis of such magnitude and uncertainty, is to take care of today. Avoid a spiral down that takes society further than it can cope. Avoid the extreme downsides—first in public health, but also in joblessness, bankruptcies, and in public morale. Take care of today, so that people's spirits hold up, and they feel they can prepare for the future.

When we don't know how far down the bottom will be, it also means overdoing our actions, rather than trying to optimise. Better to find later that we had overdone rather than underdone our actions—be it in public health and the circuit breaker, in enabling viable businesses to survive, or in helping people cope with a loss of incomes.

It also means having to decide what our main objective is, because you cannot focus on too many objectives in a major crisis. We decided that this was, first and foremost, a public health crisis rather than an economic crisis, and our priority was to do all we could to protect lives and minimise serious infections. There was no serious trade-off in our minds between getting COVID-19 under control and the health of the economy.

There was inevitably a short-term trade-off, because the economy would be hurt by our circuit-breaker measures, on top of the fact that COVID-19 itself had led to a collapse of demand around the world. But there was no long-term trade-off. We believed firmly that if we placed singular priority on bringing infections down in the community and the migrant worker dormitories, and holding them down, we would both protect lives and avoid even greater economic and social cost over time.

The evidence is out there in a whole range of countries, including many of the most advanced countries, which are seeing repeated waves of infection and repeated lockdowns as a result of not having singularly prioritised that one objective of bringing infections down. If you seek to optimise continually, to find the right short-term trade-offs between public health and the economy, you end up with more uncertainty, more frequent lockdowns, and greater long-term economic damage.

As we bring COVID-19 under control, we win ourselves the space to start taking calculated risks—and we will have to take calculated risks as we go forward, progressively opening up to business travel to and from safer locations in the first instance. Global aviation is not going to be what it used to be for several years to come, but if we do this right, Changi can bounce back to an even more competitive position.

> **"Better to find later that we had overdone rather than underdone our actions—be it in public health and the circuit breaker, in enabling viable businesses to survive, or in helping people cope with a loss of incomes.**

2 LEARN QUICKLY, AND BE WILLING TO PIVOT

The second lesson, in a crisis where little is known at the outset, is that we've got to keep asking questions, and keep building better answers. Learn quickly as the evidence comes in, adapt our responses, and pivot when necessary. Never think that we've understood everything, set policies on that basis and stubbornly hold to them.

A good example was around the evidence of asymptomatic transmission. When the pandemic was emerging, most medical authorities had the experience of SARS foremost in mind, especially in our part of the world. That was when transmission was through people who displayed symptoms—and on that basis you test them, isolate those infected and trace their contacts. That was what we were doing initially, and we were reasonably successful at it. We did not know until late March that asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission were possible, and it was only in early April that the WHO officially recognised that this was so. Had we known at the outset that asymptomatic transmission was a feature of COVID-19, we would have advised everyone to wear a mask much sooner, and moved more aggressively on the migrant worker dormitories. But this is all, as the Prime Minister has said, wisdom after the fact.

The key is to respond quickly to evidence, adapt and pivot. And not just change the rules and guidance, but explain the considerations to the public, so they know the facts, they know why we must shift gears, and why it is in everyone's interest to do so.

> The key is to respond quickly to evidence, adapt and pivot. And not just change the rules and guidance, but explain the considerations to the public, so they know the facts, they know why we must shift gears, and why it is in everyone's interest to do so.

3 PREPARE EARLY. IT PAYS OFF HUGELY IN CRISIS

The third lesson is that early investments and preparedness will greatly reduce the human and economic costs of a crisis. And what we do to improve our systems and reflexes after each crisis will also pay off in the future.

Like some other East Asian countries, we took the lessons from the SARS crisis. Well before COVID-19 struck, we had instituted preparedness drills, put in place national stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE) and food supplies, enhanced legislative powers (the Infectious Diseases Act) to enable government to enforce orders such as on home quarantine, and worked out a carefully calibrated Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) framework.

A critical decision, made in 2013, was to replace the old Communicable Diseases Centre at Tan Tock Seng Hospital with the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID). NCID was ready in September 2019, just a few months before COVID-19 hit the world, with purpose-built labs

> Early investments and preparedness greatly reduce the human and economic costs of a crisis. And what we do to improve our systems and reflexes after each crisis will also pay off in the future.

and wards, technologies and the strong team of people needed to tackle a pandemic effectively. It has been at the forefront of our efforts—COVID-19 screenings, caring for those infected, doing urgent and critical research as data came in, and using the results to guide our strategies.

Our investments in the biomedical sciences have also proved their value. They developed a pool of capabilities and skilled manpower over the years, that got solutions off the ground quickly when COVID-19 struck—for Singapore but also helpful globally, like the Fortitude PCR test kits and the cPass serology test (the first to specifically detect neutralising antibodies). Even the innovative swab designs, enabling high volumes to be produced through injection moulding, overcoming global shortages.

Economically, our reserves gave the nation crucial financial—and psychological—advantage in this crisis. Again, the result of continuous practice over the years, of fiscal prudence. Even our efforts to build a smart nation, and help our SMEs and everyone go digital, have been of great value in this crisis, as we rolled out digital tools like TraceTogether and SafeEntry, and pivoted as a country towards working from home and operating virtually.

4 IT TAKES A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT AND NATIONAL EFFORT

Working together is the secret sauce of how Singapore overcomes crises. And we must keep improving how we do it.

When people look at Singapore's response to COVID-19, they often think about our policies and rules, and our institutions. These are important. But many of our policies and institutions are not unique to Singapore. What has mattered critically has been our ability to align and tie our policy responses together in a coherent whole, and to collaborate—across government agencies, and nationally.

The Multi-Ministry Taskforce and the Homefront Crisis Executive Group, HCEG, have been at the core of this effort, leveraging the resources and expertise of all government agencies. It is how, for example, we have devised our Safe Management Measures—tightening and then gradually loosening up, calibrating our rules sector by sector, down to the hawker centres and parks.

It is likewise how the Inter-agency Taskforce tackled the surge of infections in our migrant worker dormitories and eventually brought it down. Activating many agencies at short notice, administering diagnostic tests on a massive scale, and mobilising a whole range of alternative accommodations—for those who needed to be isolated immediately and cared for, and for medium-term capacity. An immensely complex task, carefully executed, and enabling us to open up the economy more fully.

> We have not had that simple divide where politicians mainly think of the politics, and civil servants think through the policies or even sometimes decide on them. In a crisis, even more than normal times, that absence of divide is critical. It is how we have stayed the course in our efforts to bring down COVID-19.

Equally important has been our ability to come together in a whole-of-society effort. Our corporations, community partners and countless volunteers came forward, took responsibility, and worked together with government agencies. That's how we got the Community Care Facility up and running so quickly at Singapore Expo, among many other initiatives.

Likewise on job creation. Our whole approach in the National Jobs Council has been to achieve tight coordination between government, the labour movement, employer associations, often individual employers as well, to do all we can to help Singaporeans who needed jobs. It explains why in Singapore, we have been able to match people to jobs more quickly than in most other places. The Emerging Stronger Taskforce too has been an exercise in deep collaboration between the corporate sector and the government, to develop new ideas that can add horsepower as we come out of the crisis.

But there is another key ingredient in Singapore's secret sauce of crisis management—the way the political leadership and public service leadership work together. We have not had that simple divide where politicians mainly think of the politics, and civil servants think through the policies or even sometimes decide on them.

In COVID-19, the political leadership had to be very involved, studying the data continuously, asking more questions, learning from the medical scientists and professionals, and thinking through our policy steps with the civil servants. The public sector leadership understood the public mood, how far we could go, and how best we could sustain the cooperation of the public. In a crisis, even more than normal times, that absence of divide is critical. It is how we have stayed the course in our efforts to bring down COVID-19, recalibrating carefully as we progressed, instead of see-sawing between lockdowns and opening up as many countries have experienced.

As we go forward, we have to remember that these are not two separate worlds of governance in Singapore that interact politely with each other. Our thinking in government is never fixed, and must continue to evolve with Singapore's circumstances. But it is a real strength for Singapore to have public sector leadership sharing the same basic understanding of what is in the country's interests, and on how we can hold people together.

5 BUILD TRUST ALL THE TIME

The fifth lesson from the pandemic is critical. The countries that have done best to date in countering COVID-19

are those where people had trust in government, and had trust among themselves.

It is what upholds belief in the public good. People trust government to do what it takes to protect the public good, trust others to play their part, and therefore want to play their own part to support the public good. Trust has been a real source of why some countries have been able to respond to the crisis more resolutely than others, and why their people's confidence has held up.

If you look at what is happening now in many parts of the world—the public revolts against measures to combat the spread of the virus, people getting fed-up or exhausted by the lockdowns—it is tragic because the loss of staying power is inflicting even greater cost to human lives. But it does force us to think about what it takes to keep the public trust, and how keeping that trust must itself be an objective in politics, and in the design and delivery of policies.

What's important is this: trust is not something you can summon up in a crisis. It has to be something built and earned all the time. Being straight with the public. Telling people about the difficulties or uncertainties. Telling them when the facts change, and how we have to change course. Being transparent on mistakes or oversights, which will be inevitable when we act in crisis. And giving people a sense of the long-term direction that we must take for a better future.

> The countries that have done best to date in countering COVID-19 are those where people had trust in government, and had trust among themselves. It is what upholds belief in the public good.

It is that constant habit of being open about the facts, that deliberative culture, that creates trust over time.

Government communication with the public is critical to sustaining trust during a crisis. The six public addresses that the Prime Minister gave on COVID-19 were indispensable. They explained what the issues are, what we have to do, how we will come out of this together. Simply, clearly, directly from the Prime Minister to the population. No gimmicks, except of course for his magic teacup. From my talking to people on the ground, I found that most people understood the messages. They might not have liked all of what we needed to do, but they understood why this was serious, and why everyone had to play their part.

Trust cannot be summoned up in a crisis. We have to keep building and renewing it, in our practice of politics, and in the way we shape and deliver our policies. That has to be our culture of governance.

We do not yet know how long COVID-19 will last. But we must build on the lessons learnt in this continuing crisis. They will help us tackle the next pandemic, which many scientists expect will be even more daunting, and the other major crises that will surely come. ■

FISCAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN SINGAPORE &

by **Alfred M. Wu**

Deploying judicious pandemic support measures, Singapore and Hong Kong have sought to stabilise their economies and societies, while laying a foundation for post-pandemic growth.

HONG KONG

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INTRODUCTION

In many advanced countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted unprecedented fiscal responses to support businesses and households through the crisis, especially during the lockdowns enacted to slow the spread of the virus. Through public finance and national budgets, governments have sought to provide short-term relief and stave off the economic scarring that could arise if mass bankruptcies and unemployment were to occur.[1] Some governments have also taken the opportunity in their crisis budgets to accelerate developments in technology and social support systems, laying the foundation for a more digitalised economy and society ready to grasp growth opportunities once the pandemic subsides.

Singapore and Hong Kong—two small and open Asian economies that have often been compared—have both been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Hong Kong's economy contracted by 6.1%—worse than in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis,[2] while Singapore's economy contracted by a record 5.4%.[3]

Nevertheless, the overall fiscal responses of the two governments show that small economies can still act effectively in a crisis to support their economies and societies. Fiscal prudence (generating reserves) and discipline (spending control) in past years have afforded them the resources needed to ameliorate the adverse economic impacts of a crisis without taking on substantial debt.

Singapore's initial fiscal response to COVID-19 in 2020 involved multiple budgets amounting to more than 19% of Singapore's 2019 Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and drawing on part of its national reserves. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) also dipped into their reserves in order to mount their pandemic response, which came up to about 11% of 2019 GDP.

> "Public financing measures were targeted at both aspects of the ensuing economic shock: reducing the cost burden of operating businesses through "supply-side" policies, and boosting consumption through "demand-side" policies."

SUPPLY-SIDE AND DEMAND-SIDE PRIORITIES

The economic crisis brought about by the pandemic has involved both supply and demand shocks. Safety measures aimed at curbing the spread of infection forced stoppages on many business operations. In some instances, business stoppages were also transmitted across borders, such as when restrictions in China led to stoppages elsewhere in the supply chain. Restrictions on tourism and dining, as well as anxiety over income loss and economic uncertainty, also meant greatly reduced demand.

Public financing measures were targeted at both aspects of the ensuing economic shock: reducing the cost burden of operating businesses through "supply-side" policies such as reducing taxation, and boosting consumption through "demand-side" policies such as subsidies or direct cash grants.[4]

A comparison of measures across governments indicates that the amounts allocated to supply-side measures such as stabilising businesses were substantially higher than demand-side measures such as supporting households and the vulnerable. This was due in part to the fact that consumption-based activities such as retail, travel and dining were often not possible because of safety measures. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2009 had also shown the importance of furlough schemes to reduce economic scarring during a period of sudden market decline.

Supply-side policies to support businesses have been widely adopted in many countries, and demand-side measures tend to be politically popular. However, in a pandemic, governments have to strike a tough balance between different and often competing priorities such as disease control, economic activity, and fiscal sustainability. For instance, encouraging domestic tourism or consumption to keep businesses going contradicts the public health precaution of reducing human contact. In Japan, for instance, the relationship between the "Go To Travel" domestic tourism campaign and their third wave of COVID-19 has been a point of heated debate.[5]

> "The overall fiscal responses of the two governments show that small economies can still act effectively in a crisis to support their economies and societies."

> "The amounts allocated to supply-side measures were substantially higher than demand-side measures. This was due in part to the fact that consumption-based activities were often not possible because of safety measures."

Singapore and Hong Kong have been able to commit resources to these different goals, prioritising economic stabilisation, while attending to both supply and demand concerns.

PUBLIC FINANCING IN A CRISIS: KEY AIMS

Musgrave's (1956) classical work on public finance theory frames government budgets as having three purposes: (1) provision of public goods; (2) distribution of resources; and (3) stabilisation, i.e., maintaining high levels of employment and price stability. The fiscal measures deployed to address the economic impact of COVID-19 might be described as geared primarily towards stabilisation; however, allocation and distribution measures also played a part in reducing the negative economic impact on businesses, households, and individuals.

Stabilisation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, economic stabilisation was a top priority for both Singapore and Hong Kong. Fiscal responses towards this end often took the form of wage subsidies for companies and training programmes to help redeploy those laid off from the worst-hit industries, thereby reducing the unemployment rate. Support was also given to businesses that would have not been viable under the pandemic—in the form of bridging loans to address short-term liquidity issues. Such measures helped stabilise companies, reduced corporate closures and saved jobs. By injecting state credit and liquidity into markets, both governments also sought to maintain confidence in the overall economy.

The measures from both governments did keep unemployment relatively low: in the fourth quarter of 2020, Singapore's unemployment rate was at 3.3%[1] while Hong Kong's unemployment rate was at 6.6%.[2]

Distribution

The poor were much more adversely affected by the pandemic. Some weaknesses of modern society had been exposed by the unprecedented crisis as family support was not sufficient for individuals to cope with the negative shocks.

The pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities and inequalities in societies the world over. Both Singapore and Hong Kong SAR governments intensified distributive measures to help cushion the financial difficulties associated with the economic downturn due to COVID-19. A range of social programmes were introduced to address the situation of the less privileged. These included direct unconditional cash transfers, increases in government matching funds for donations, as well as support towards digital adoption and bridging the digital divide.

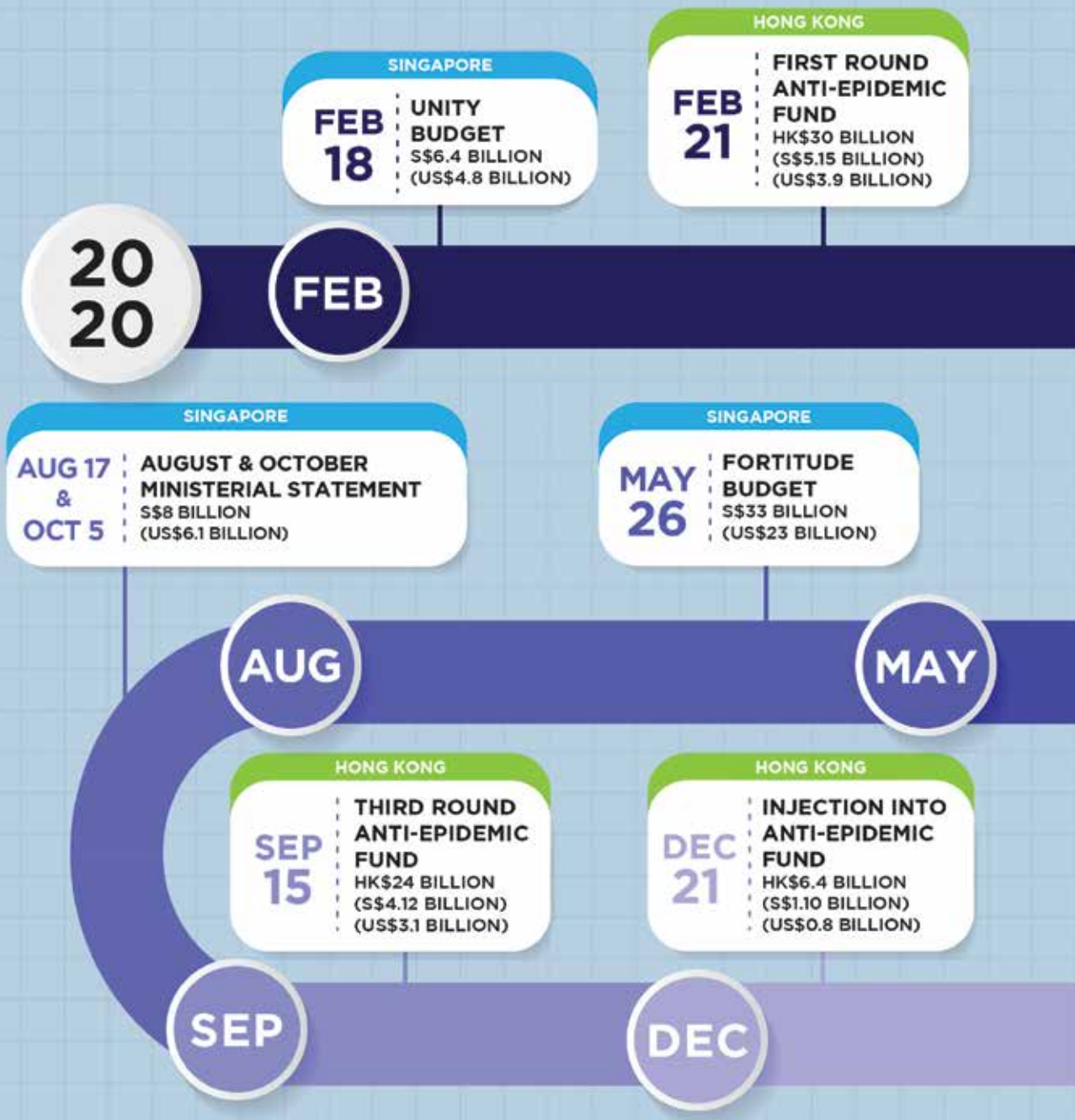
Provision of Public Goods

Both Singapore and Hong Kong strengthened public goods provision, particularly in bolstering their healthcare systems to cope with the pandemic. This included enhancing the capacity to test for and treat COVID-19 cases, expanding quarantine and isolation facilities, and providing for related needs such as protective masks, vaccinations and mental wellbeing.

Notes

1. Ministry of Manpower, "Summary Table: Unemployment", April 28, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Unemployment-Summary-Table.aspx.
2. *Reuters*, "Hong Kong Fourth-Quarter 2020 Unemployment at 16-Year High, Hit by Economic Slowdown", Yahoo! Finance, January 19, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/hong-kong-fourth-quarter-2020-091316621.html.

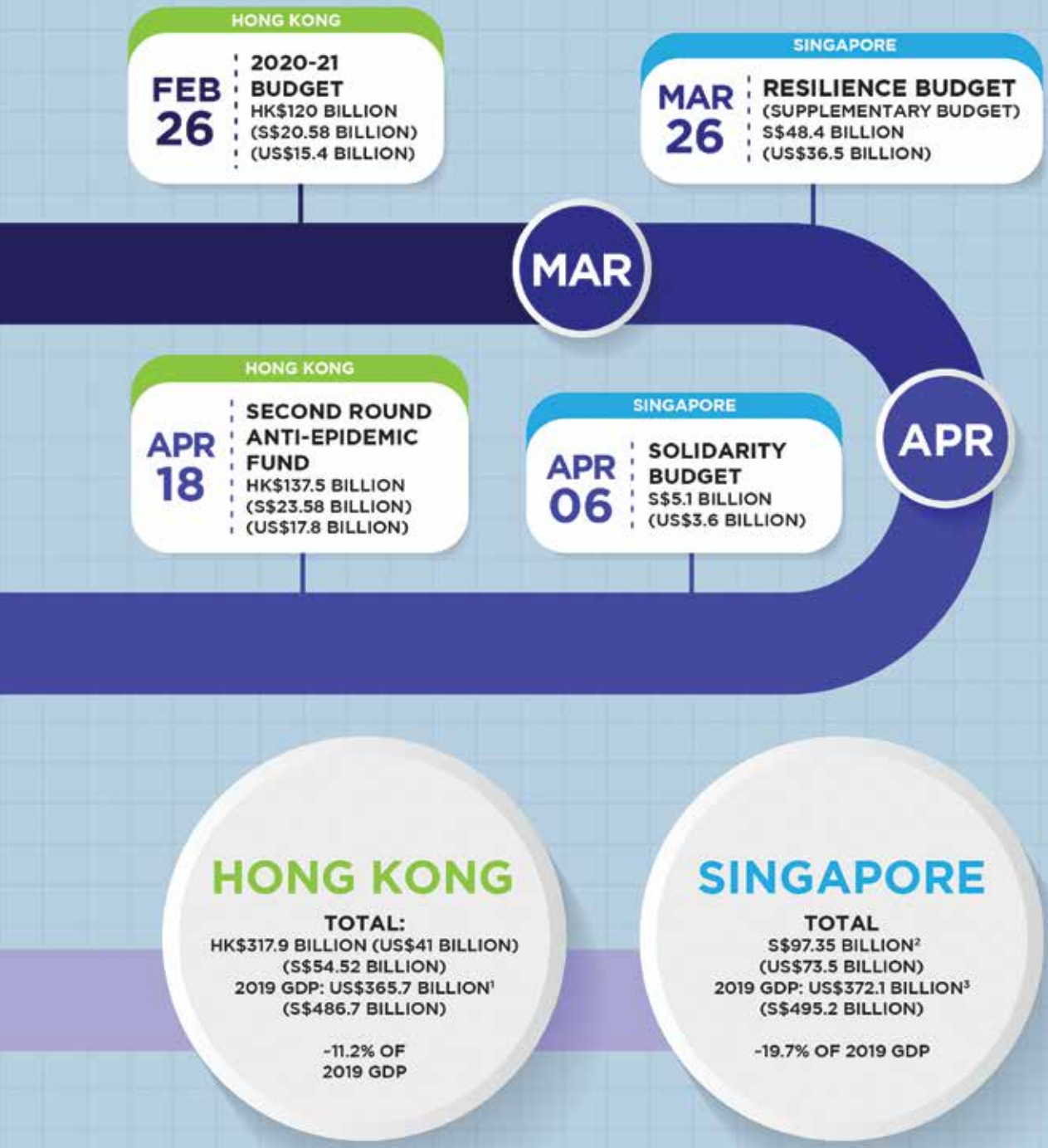
SINGAPORE AND HONG KONG — BY THEIR BUDGETS IN 2020

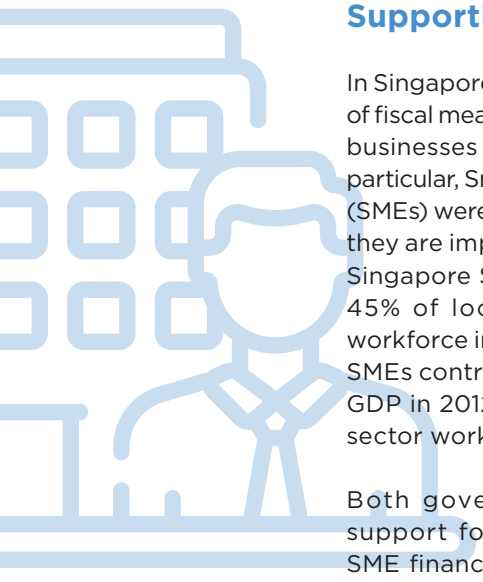


Notes

1. Figure from the World Bank.
2. Estimated COVID-19 expenditure after reallocation. Figure from the Ministry of Finance.
3. Ibid.

See the Appendix *(in online version of the article only)* for a fuller list of measures referenced throughout the entire piece.





Supporting Businesses

In Singapore and Hong Kong, a number of fiscal measures were deployed to help businesses tide over the pandemic. In particular, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) were a priority for support, since they are important to both economies: Singapore SMEs accounted for about 45% of local GDP and 65% of the workforce in 2020,[6] while Hong Kong's SMEs contributed to over 50% of local GDP in 2012[7,8] and 45% of the private sector workforce in 2020.[9]

Both governments provided loan support for businesses (such as an SME financing guarantee scheme), in particular making short-term liquidity available during periods of lockdown. The Singapore Government introduced a Temporary Bridging Loan Programme in the 2020 Unity Budget: this was subsequently enhanced in the Resilience and Solidarity Budgets 2020. Under the programme, the Government took on the majority of the risk of loans given to companies by participating financial institutions. The financial firms would still bear some risk, which gave them incentive to continue performing proper credit assessments and lending only to enterprises capable of repaying the loans. While the Government provided loan capital, the Monetary Authority of Singapore also provided a facility (0.1% rate) for participating financial institutions to tap on, to manage the interest rate being charged.

To save jobs, the Singapore Government co-funded between 25% and 75% of the first S$4,600 of gross monthly wages of local employees for up to 23 months, under the Jobs Support Scheme. Support levels were differentiated based on the projected impact of COVID-19 on different sectors, with firms in the tourism, hospitality, aviation, and aerospace sectors receiving the highest levels of support.

The Singapore Government also granted property tax rebates for commercial and industrial properties. Commercial properties such as shops received a 100% rebate, while non-residential properties (such as offices and industrial properties) received a 30% rebate. Property owners were also required to pass these benefits on to their tenants.

Hong Kong offered smaller property tax rebates, taking a granular and differentiated approach in assisting companies from different industries. For example, for the companies related to the aviation, tourism, and transport industries, there were several rounds of industry-targeted subsidies.[10] In addition, Hong Kong also offered targeted support for industries directly affected by the government's social-distancing measures, including subsidies and relief grants for the convention and exhibition industry, tutorial and private schools, school caterers, and school bus providers.

Such business support measures played a stabilising role in reducing job losses, by allowing companies to keep more of their workers instead of retrenching them. These measures also likely reduced the number of corporate closures—more companies were able to keep afloat and at least maintain some level of operations even with the lockdowns.

Support for Households

An important aspect of fiscal responses to the pandemic has been the extension of support to households. During crisis periods, households face the prospect of a drop in income from a decline in business, wage cuts or job losses. As a result, households might find themselves in financial distress. Government support for household activities can become vital for maintaining their wellbeing; bolstering household consumption also in turn generates demand and fuels the economy. Some of these demand-side fiscal measures might take the form of subsidies for individuals and households, in addition to supply-side measures such as reducing taxation and government fees.

Hong Kong rolled out several subsidies for individuals and households. For example, under the 2020–21 budget, all Hong Kong permanent residents aged over 17 received HK$10,000, totalling HK$71 billion (S$12.18 billion) in public spending. The Hong Kong SAR government also waived various employment taxes [Salaries Tax and Tax under Personal Assessment Reduction, with a ceiling of HK$20,000 (S$3,430) at an estimated cost of some HK$18.8 billion (S$3.22 billion)] in lost revenue. Given that property was a substantial asset for many Hong Kongers, the government also offered a Residential Properties Rates Waiver, totalling HK$13.3 billion (S$2.28 billion).

There was also policy support for job retention—the Employment Support Scheme costing HK$92.4 billion (S$15.85 billion) provided financial support for employers to retain workers for about 150,000 employers from June to August 2020. There were also programmes established to entice employment for older workers and youth, with on-the-job training allowance provided to employers.

Singapore also provided tax relief for households and individuals. For self-employed people and low-income workers, pandemic-driven support schemes included the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme and Workfare Special Payment. There were also schemes, such as the SGUnited Jobs and SGUnited Traineeships, to help job seekers find jobs and boost employability for fresh graduates. To encourage firms to accelerate their hiring of local workers, the Singapore Government also provided a wage subsidy for each eligible new local hire under the Jobs Growth Incentive.

Singapore's measures in the job market remain ahead of other regional cities in supporting local workers most affected by COVID-19. It continues to provide enhanced upskilling and employment facilitation support, with a focus on moving workers into economic activities expected to grow after the pandemic.

> Singapore's measures in the job market focus on moving workers into economic activities expected to grow after the pandemic.

Support for the Less Privileged

Across the world, fiscal measures have been deployed to support the less privileged during the pandemic. Many governments expanded existing safety nets to maintain social resilience. While some developed countries, such as Australia, offered additional unemployment benefits in addition to existing social security provisions,[11] unemployment support provisions have been largely absent in many developing countries where a substantial amount of people work in the informal sector.[12]

Singapore's social support during the pandemic was provided on several fronts. There were universal cash payouts on a progressive scale from S$600 to S$1200, with more affluent individuals receiving less assistance. Additional cash payouts were given to Singaporeans aged 50 years and above, and to parents with young children. Singaporeans living in smaller public housing flats were given grocery vouchers, and there was also additional funding for various social support agencies. Singaporean households in all residential property types received a one-off S$100 utilities credit, with HDB households also receiving double their regular GST Voucher–U-Save (utilities rebates), and larger households receiving 2.5 times their regular U-Save. HDB households also received rebates to help offset estate service and conservancy charges. The COVID-19 Support Grant was also introduced for people who lost their jobs or experienced significant income losses because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the Singapore Government provided Meal Subsidies for Children, costing up to S$2 million (in matched funding).[13] In total, the benefits and assistance disbursed lowered Singapore's Gini coefficient from 0.398 in 2019 to 0.375 in 2020, after accounting for government taxes and transfers.[14]

During the pandemic, Hong Kong enhanced benefits allocated for the less privileged. For example, the government offered an Extra Allowance for Social Security Recipients—HK$4.225 billion (S$725 million), and a Public Rental Units one-month waiver amounting to HK$1.829 billion (S$313.7 million). Furthermore, the Hong Kong SAR government extended a Special Scheme of Assistance to the Unemployed under the CSSA Scheme for six months, from 1 December 2020 to 31 May 2021 [HK$724 million (S$124.2 million)].[15] Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects for poor people [HK$127 million (S$21.8 million)] were added. The Hong Kong SAR government also provided assistance to families with schooling children. With pandemic restrictions obliging school-age children to stay at home for online learning for an extended period, the government provided an Additional Student Study Grant for the 2019/20 school year [HK$876 million (S$150.3 million) during the 1st round] to defray education expenses.

Such measures represented substantive efforts from both the Singapore and Hong Kong SAR governments to provide vital public goods and distribute resources to those who needed them most, reducing social distress.

Support for Technology and Digitalisation Efforts

Even during a pandemic, longer-term technological developments and socioeconomic shifts continue to unfold. Both Hong Kong and Singapore have been able to make investments beyond the urgent needs of the pandemic, to be ready for the future that might emerge after the crisis, as uncertain as it seems.

In the technology sector, the Singapore Government promoted a Startup SG Equity (a S$300 million injection) to boost private investment (S$800 million of private funding over the next decade expected) in emerging deep technology sectors, such as advanced manufacturing and agri-food technology. In addition, measures such as the Digital Resilience Bonus, support for digitalisation partnership, the enhanced Startup SG Founder programme, and recurrent National Innovation Challenges signalled an accelerated and determined focus on the medium- to long-term advancement of Singapore's digital economy.

At the grassroots level, the Singapore Government provided a bonus of S$300 per month over five months to encourage stallholders in hawker centres, wet markets, coffee shops, and industrial canteens to use digital payment systems. Singapore's Ministry of Education brought forward its plans to deliver digital devices for all secondary school students, from the original target date of 2028 to 2021.[16] Singapore's Fortitude Budget also included incentives to help residents, particularly the elderly, learn digital skills and acquire digital devices.[17] Such measures were timely, given that the pandemic and healthcare precautions had prompted a shift from physical to digital services and transactions across many industries.

The Hong Kong SAR government also provided support for digital efforts, albeit at a smaller scale than Singapore's initiatives. Support included a Subsidy for Encouraging Early Deployment of 5G [HK$55 million (S$9.43 million) in the 2nd round], a Distance Business Programme [HK$1.5 billion (S$273.3 million) in the 2nd round] to support businesses adopting information technologies, and a COVID-19 Online Dispute Resolution Scheme to support online resolution of disputes [HK$70 million (S$12.0 million) in the 2nd round].

> "Both Hong Kong and Singapore have been able to make investments beyond the urgent needs of the pandemic, to be ready for the future that might emerge after the crisis."

SINGAPORE AND HONG KONG—DIFFERENCES IN APPROACH

While both Singapore and Hong Kong targeted similar areas of concern in their fiscal responses to the pandemic, their approaches differed in substantive ways.

Hong Kong took a granular approach, extending one-time support to businesses most directly affected by the pandemic.

Businesses that typically rely on in-person services were subsidised to continue operating. These included beauty and massage parlours, gambling and gaming facilities, nightclubs, tourism-related businesses and conventions facilities, as well as childcare and private tuition centres.

In contrast to Hong Kong's approach of micro-targeting of subsidies and support, Singapore categorised industry clusters by need, defining different tiers according to the level of intervention required. For instance, Singapore identified the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries as having suffered the largest impact, and thus needing the most support. The next tier of concern included the food services, such as food shops and hawker stalls, as well as retail, arts and entertainment, land transport, and marine and offshore sectors. At different points, other sectors were identified for tiered intervention. For instance, the built environment sector temporarily joined other sectors, receiving the highest tier of support (75% wage support) from June to August 2020.

"In contrast to Hong Kong's approach of micro-targeting of subsidies and support, Singapore categorised industry clusters by need, defining different tiers according to the level of intervention required."

Singapore and Hong Kong also differed in their policy support for workers' skills training, especially for the self-employed. Hong Kong's policies were again micro-targeted according to their industry, while Singapore took a broad-based approach, in which training funds were offered irrespective of industry in order to facilitate demand-led reallocation. On the whole, Singapore has been able to provide more support in skills training and for the self-employed during this pandemic. It has expanded the range of training and employment opportunities for workers by creating traineeships, apprenticeships and jobs.

CONCLUSION

Despite pressing challenges and prevailing uncertainty, long-term fiscal discipline has afforded both Singapore and Hong Kong the capacity to act decisively in supporting and stabilising their economies and societies in this crisis so far, through both supply and demand side measures. Public spending on the less privileged and households in Singapore and Hong Kong has cushioned the worst impacts of the pandemic.

Even as they addressed the urgent challenges of the present, both governments have been able to invest in the future, offering businesses the means to change their operating practices and adopt new business models through digitalisation, while also providing employees with the means to retrain to be more productive and more employable to new growth industries. While the pandemic is far from over, both economies look set to resume their growth trajectories once the crisis subsides. ■

Notes

1. "Economic scarring" here refers to the protracted duration of recovery of the economy to pre-crisis periods, evident in indicators such as unemployment rates.

2. E. Lam, "Hong Kong's Economy Contracts Record 6.1% in Pandemic Year", *Bloomberg*, January 29, 2021, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-28/hong-kong-faces-difficult-road-to-recovery-after-record-slump.

3. C. Lin and A. Aravindan, "Singapore on Path to Recovery as Q4 GDP Shrinks Less than Estimated", *Reuters*, February 15, 2021, accessed February 28, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-economy-gdp-idUSKBN2AF02R.

4. Fiscal measures are regarded as "demand-side" when they are aimed at boosting aggregate demand, such as funding provided for social or corporate consumption. On the other hand, "supply-side" measures are those that focus on relaxing regulation or reducing taxation and other fees.

5. R. Takahashi, "Japan to Suspend Go To Travel Program Nationwide from Dec. 28 to Jan. 11", *The Japan Times*, December 14, 2020, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/12/14/national/suga-go-to-travel-coronavirus/.

6. Asian Development Bank, "2020 ADB Asia SME Monitor—Singapore", 2020, accessed April 30, 2020 ,https://data.adb.org/media/7281/download.

7. Ipsos Business Consulting, "Connected Hong Kong SMEs: How Hong Kong Small Businesses Are Growing in the Digital Economy", February 2014, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2017-07/Connected-HKSMEs_Report_10-Feb-2014.pdf.

8. More recent data unavailable.

9. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Trade and Industry Department, "SUCCESS—SMEs in HK", September 2020, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.success.tid.gov.hk/english/aboutus/sme/service_detail_6863.html.

10. These included the Subsidy for the Aviation Sector (HK$343 million in the 2nd round); a Subsidy Scheme for the Transport and Aviation Sector (HK$250 million in the 3rd round); Licensed Guesthouses Subsidy Scheme (HK$150 million, 1st round); a Travel Agents Subsidy Scheme (HK$138 million in the 1st round; HK$397 million in the 3rd round).

11. J. Andrew, M. Baker, J. Guthrie, and A. Martin-Sardesai, "Australia's COVID-19 Public Budgeting Response: The Straitjacket of Neoliberalism", *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 32, no. 5 (2020): 759–770, https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBAFM-07-2020-0096.

12. B. Upadhaya, C. Wijethilake, P. Adhikari, K. Jayasinghe, and T. Arun, "COVID-19 Policy Responses: Reflections on Governmental Financial Resilience in South Asia", *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* 32, no. 5 (2020): 825–836, accessed December 31, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBAFM-07-2020-0130.

13. Ministry of Education, "Supporting Students in Financial Need: School Meal Subsidies to Continue Till End of Circuit Breaker Extension", May 3, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20200503-supporting-students-in-financial-need-school-meal-subsidies-to-continue-till-end-of-circuit-breaker-extension.

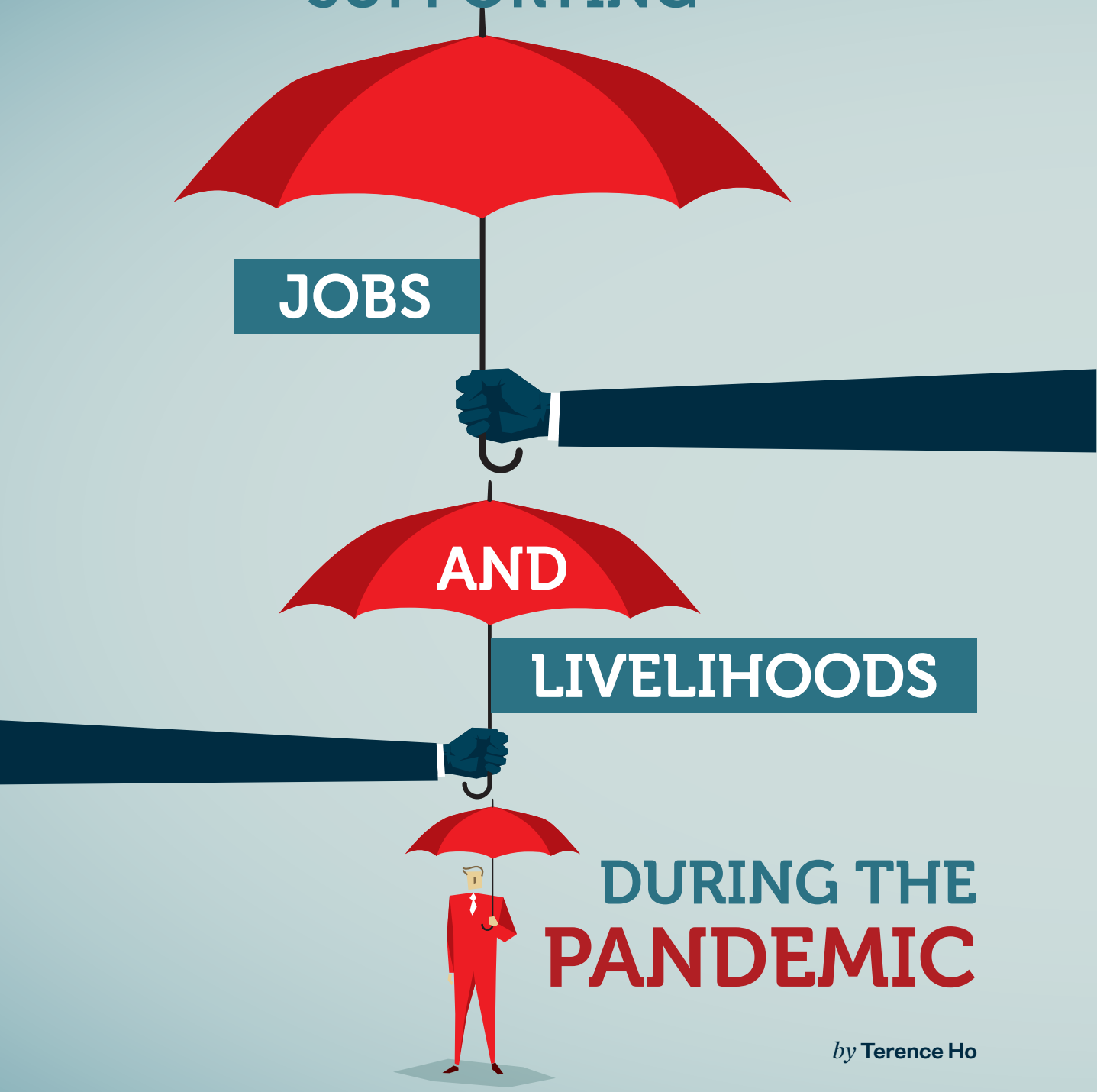
14. Hwee Min Ang, "Record Low in Income Inequality Due to 'Massive Transfers', Schemes Tilted towards Lower-Income Groups: Heng Swee Keat", *CNA*, February 21, 2021, accessed March 15, 2021 , https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/budget-2021-heng-swee-keat-forum-record-low-income-inequality-14250068.

15. CSSA stands for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme—Hong Kong SAR Government's main means-tested social support programme for families and individuals whose income and assets lie below the set amount.

16. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, "National Broadcast by SM Tharman Shanmugaratnam on 17 June 2020", June 17, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Broadcast-by-SM-Tharman-Shanmugaratnam-on-17-Jun-2020.

17. Budget 2020, "Fortitude Budget Statement", May 26, 2020, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2020/fortitude-budget/fortitude-budget-statement.

SUPPORTING JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS DURING THE PANDEMIC



by **Terence Ho**

LKYSPP's Terence Ho surveys the Singapore Government's multi-pronged approach to supporting businesses, incomes and households—for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, and beyond.

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While the human toll of a pandemic is expressed first and foremost in terms of lives lost to the disease, the longer-term wellbeing of Singaporeans is also dependent on the jobs, incomes and livelihoods that have been affected or disrupted by the ensuing economic crisis. For this reason, the Singapore Government has prioritised the protection of "lives and livelihoods"[1] in the long fight against COVID-19.

Saving Jobs for Locals

Being prepared is a hallmark of the Singapore Government, which maintains an array of contingency plans—frequently reviewed for relevance—ready to be activated at short notice. Following SARS in 2003 and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008–2009, inter-ministerial teams kept plans continually updated in anticipation of the next economic crisis.

The centrepiece of Singapore's response to the GFC—the Jobs Credit Scheme—was credited with averting a major spike in unemployment at the height of the crisis. Some have argued that the scheme, which provided employers with a wage offset of 12% for every local worker they kept on their books, might even have been too effective. By shielding less-productive firms from the pruning scythe of market forces, it may have left the economy as a whole operating below its potential. But as the COVID-19 pandemic started to bite, this wage offset approach, reincarnated as the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS),[2] became a useful rapid-response measure.

Introduced in the Unity Budget on 18 February 2020, JSS support was set at 8% of gross monthly wages. Concurrently, the existing Wage Credit Scheme, which co-funded qualifying wage increases given to local employees, was enhanced with a higher co-funding rate and support cap.

As the COVID-19 outbreak gathered pace globally, it became evident that a much larger intervention would be needed to save businesses and jobs. Many countries across the developed world rushed to implement job protection schemes. Singapore introduced a supplementary budget, called the Resilience Budget, on 26 March 2020. JSS support was stepped up to 25%, 50% or 75% depending on sector, and the qualifying income ceiling raised from $3,600 to $4,600, approximately the median wage in Singapore.

For ease and speed of implementation, support for firms was based on their sector rather than revenue or profit loss. This would also avoid penalising firms that were better able to respond and adapt to changing market conditions.

For ease and speed of implementation, JSS support for firms was based on their sector rather than revenue or profit loss. This would also avoid penalising firms that were better able to respond and adapt to changing market conditions. Firms in the most badly affected sectors (aviation and tourism) received 75% support; those moderately affected (food services) were given 50% support; firms in the remaining sectors had baseline support at 25% of wages. In recognition of the general disruption to business posed by the "Circuit Breaker", JSS support was set at 75% for all firms for April and May 2020. The JSS was later extended to March 2021, albeit at lower rates of support, and then to September 2021 for firms in the worst-hit sectors. In total, more than $25 billion was committed to the JSS, supporting over 150,000 employers.

The pandemic's outbreak affected firms very differently, even among those within the same sector and JSS tier. Most businesses experienced some income loss; revenue for some dropped to nearly zero, while others were unaffected or even

saw their earnings grow. The pressing circumstances did not allow for a careful assessment of each firm's specific situation. The priority at the outset of the pandemic, especially in view of the Circuit Breaker restrictions, was to put firms in suspended animation, avoiding an indiscriminate cull that would have condemned even viable businesses.[3]

Wage adjustment—cutting wages to save jobs, rather than cutting jobs to save on wages—was another vital move to keep Singaporeans employed during the crisis. The Ministry of Manpower convened the tripartite National Wages Council (NWC) earlier than usual, in March 2020, to provide guidance to firms on cutting wages in a responsible way. With the COVID-19 situation rapidly evolving, the NWC was reconvened in August 2020 and released a supplementary set of recommendations in October 2020. Observing wage restraint in solidarity with those whose incomes had been affected by the pandemic, the Public Service Division announced that there would be no annual variable bonus for civil servants, although the 13th month bonus would still be paid.

Supporting the Self-Employed

Self-employed persons (SEPs), however, fell outside the ambit of the JSS. The Unity Budget attempted to address this gap with the Self-Employed Training Support Scheme, providing $7.50 an hour (later increased to $10 an hour) in training allowance for approved SkillsFuture Series or sector-specific training programmes. The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) stepped in with a further top-up for union members. The Government then introduced the Self-Employed Persons Income Relief Scheme (SIRS), providing $9,000 (disbursed over three payouts) to Singaporean SEPs with less means and family support.

Simplicity and generosity in administering these support measures were the order of the day. Those aged 35 and above in 2018 who had registered as self-employed with the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore or Central Provident Fund Board (CPFB) were automatically included in the scheme. Others had to apply, as they had not registered as SEPs or did not meet the auto-eligibility criteria. Those who had narrowly missed any one of the eligibility criteria and were facing financial difficulty could also be considered on appeal. When SEPs' needs became clearer, SIRS was enhanced in the April 2020 Solidarity Budget to automatically include SEPs who also drew a salary of not more than $2,300 a month from employment. In response to ground appeal for more flexibility in the eligibility criteria, the annual property value threshold was also raised from $13,000 to $21,000, allowing some SEPs living in condominiums and other private properties to be eligible for support.

Helping Employers with Foreign Worker Upkeep

The Government's priority was locals, but foreigners were not neglected. With COVID-19 raging, many employers could not repatriate their foreign workers, due to border closures or lack of flights, but had to provide for their upkeep. With the rapid spread of COVID-19 infection in foreign worker dormitories, many workers were confined to their residences and unable to work, and were understandably anxious about their livelihoods and circumstances

at a difficult time. Even if workers could be repatriated, firms would need to keep a core of workers to resume their operations when conditions allowed: otherwise, viable firms could go under, leading to job losses for locals and foreigners alike.

To help employers meet their obligations to their foreign workers, the Government announced that foreign worker levies due in April 2020 would be waived for employers of work permit and S-Pass holders, with employers receiving a further $750 rebate for levies previously paid.

The levy waiver and levy rebate were extended for another month, the latter contingent on employers making an online acknowledgment that they would use the amount received to support their foreign employees. This caveat recognised that while companies that reduced their local employees' salaries or put them on no-pay leave would receive correspondingly lower payouts in subsequent tranches under the JSS, there was no similar mechanism for the Foreign Worker Levy rebate. Employers were reminded to treat all workers fairly and responsibly, regardless of nationality.

A third round of levy waiver and rebate was announced in the May 2020 Fortitude Budget, for firms that were still unable to restart operations after the Circuit Breaker, as well as all firms in the construction, marine shipyard and process sectors—which had been badly affected by the dormitory outbreaks and consequent disruption to operations. These sector-specific levies were stepped down from October 2020 onwards. Firms in these sectors would continue to receive a $90 rebate until December 2021, to ease the adjustment to more stringent safe management measures.

The implementation of these support measures reflected a balance between fairness and fiscal prudence (by targeting support at affected firms) with expediency in support and administration. While such measures to ease the upkeep of foreign workers were meant to tide firms over the difficult pandemic period, the prevailing policy stance remained: that firms relying heavily on foreign workers should review their workforce strategy and grow their pipeline of local workers for sustainability and resilience in the medium to long term.

The implementation of these support measures reflected a balance between fairness and fiscal prudence (by targeting support at affected firms) with expediency in support and administration.

Supporting Households

The general uncertainty at the outset of the outbreak also called for a time-tested budgetary measure—cash handouts to citizens and households. With employment at risk and income loss rife, such handouts provided help and assurance to households in financial difficulty, while giving a much-needed lift to consumption and aggregate demand. Such measures were based on the principle that everyone would receive something, but the less well-off would receive more. This would balance the intent to foster solidarity with more targeted support for those in greater need.

The Care and Support Package, rolled out with the February 2020 Unity Budget, gave every adult Singaporean $100 to $300 (depending on income and property ownership), with parents of Singaporean children aged 20 and below receiving an additional $100. Seniors received a $100 PAssion card top-up (later converted to an outright cash payment). The Package also included grocery vouchers and household rebates.[4]

By the March 2020 Resilience Budget, the worsening fallout had prompted a tripling of support under the Care and Support Package to $300–$900. The Workfare Special Payment, a special transfer for low-wage workers announced in the Unity Budget, was increased to $3,000.

The Solidarity Budget of April 2020 added a further cash handout of $300 to all citizens which, together with the earlier announced payment, amounted to a minimum of $600 for every adult citizen—the Solidarity Payment. Permanent Residents and Long-Term Visit Pass-Plus holders received a minimum of $300. A Solidarity Utilities Credit of $100 was also given to all households, in recognition that utilities consumption had risen with more people staying home, especially during the Circuit Breaker.

Another suite of measures was needed to help individuals and households that had run into financial difficulty due to the pandemic. The existing ComCare schemes, which were subject to rigorous means testing, would not be able to handle the anticipated surge in need for a time such as this. The Temporary Relief Fund (TRF) was introduced in April 2020 as an interim assistance scheme for lower to middle-income locals who had lost their jobs or suffered substantial income loss.

Cash handouts were based on the principle that everyone would receive something, but the less well-off would receive more.

In May 2020, it was superseded by the COVID-19 Support Grant (CSG), which provided income support of up to three months for those who had lost their jobs, were on involuntary no-pay leave for at least three months, or suffered income loss of at least 30%. These measures were timely and impactful: the TRF attracted nearly 600,000 applications.[5]

Securing Opportunities for Locals

Even with the JSS in place, unemployment and retrenchments were expected to rise. Economic growth for 2020 had been forecast (in August 2020) to come in between -5.0% to -7.0%[6]—far worse than during the GFC and SARS. The 13.3% year-on-year decline in the second quarter of 2020, during the Circuit Breaker, was Singapore's largest quarterly economic contraction on record.

Still, opportunities remained. COVID-19 swab testing, temperature taking, the surge in hospital admissions as well as safe distancing requirements created short-term job opportunities. Meanwhile, hiring in the information and communications technology sector continued to be strong, with the pandemic accelerating digitalisation. Recruitment for longer-term needs, such as in the publicly-funded healthcare and

early childhood education sectors, could also be brought forward.

Matching workers who had suffered job or income losses with these opportunities was a priority. Initially, short-term job opportunities were given the "SGUnited Jobs" branding, under the broader SGUnited movement.[7] Workforce Singapore and SkillsFuture Singapore organised virtual career fairs to match workers with immediate vacancies. The Public Service Division worked with companies to redeploy affected staff. For instance, airline crew were redeployed as patient care ambassadors in hospitals and nursing homes, or as safe distancing ambassadors in transport hubs.

However, there were still fears that there would not be enough jobs to go around. Fresh graduates from the universities, polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education, were entering a challenging job market. Research from abroad suggested that entering the workforce in a recession could have a long-lasting impact on earnings.[8] Besides current jobs, there was a need to create other opportunities for fresh graduates as well as displaced mid-career workers.

This motivated the development of the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package,[9] unveiled in the May 2020 Fortitude Budget. The Package aimed to curate close to 100,000 opportunities for local workers within a year, comprising 40,000 jobs, 25,000 traineeships and 30,000 skills training opportunities. A National Jobs Council, comprising government, union and business leaders, was set up to oversee the design and implementation of the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package. Under this programme, the Government would co-fund traineeship allowances for fresh graduates and mid-career workers, while providing a training allowance for those enrolled in selected subsidised training programmes offered by Continuing Education and Training centres. This initiative also saw public agencies engage firms and training providers to offer traineeships and skills training programmes. By the end of 2020, nearly 76,000 locals had been placed in jobs or training opportunities through the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package.[10]

Labour Market Outcomes

All in, close to $100 billion was set aside in FY2020 to deal with the pandemic: $73.5 billion for workers and businesses, and $10 billion for social and household support.[11] The overall budget deficit for FY2020 amounted to $64.9 billion, or 13.9% of GDP: the largest in Singapore's history. The Government estimated that these budget support measures would save about 155,000 jobs in 2020 and 2021. This would stem the rise in resident unemployment rate by about 1.7 percentage points, and prevent the economy from contracting by a further 5.6% in 2020 and 4.8% in 2021.[12]

Indeed, these measures are likely to have helped mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market and economy. While the resident unemployment rate climbed to 4.8% in September 2020, it fell short of the peak during the GFC. By December 2020, resident unemployment had fallen to 4.4%. The number of retrenchments came to over 26,000 in 2020, but the incidence of retrenchment (12.8 per thousand employees) was below that of previous recessionary highs in 2003 and 2009. Resident employment, which had contracted in the first half of the year,

turned around in the third and fourth quarters, and recovered to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020.

> **"Suspended animation" has had to give way to helping businesses and citizens take up new opportunities in areas with strong growth potential.**

Looking to the Future: Pivoting to New Opportunities, Addressing Inequality & Social Security

With the pandemic dragging on into 2021, the challenge has been to pivot support for jobs and households to something more fiscally sustainable, and in line with Singapore's medium-term economic and social policy directions.

The aviation and hospitality sectors are expected to remain weak for some time, notwithstanding progress on vaccine development and rollout. The acceleration of remote working and digital commerce means that some lost jobs will never return. Hence, "suspended animation" has had to give way to helping businesses and citizens take up new opportunities in areas with strong growth potential.

While the JSS has been extended to cover wages paid up to September 2021, support has tapered across the board, and excludes sectors that are faring well, such as ICT and biomedical science. To spur hiring by companies that are able to do so, the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) was introduced on 1 September 2020, and extended to end-September 2021. Under this scheme, companies receive 25% wage support for the first $5,000, for up to 12 months for new local hires aged below 40, and 50% wage support for the first $6,000, for up to 18 months for new local hires aged 40 and above, persons with disabilities, and ex-offenders. Some 130,000 new local hires, nearly half of whom were mature workers aged 40 and above, had benefited from this scheme within three months of its implementation.

Addressing Inequality

The fallout of COVID-19 on jobs and incomes has been highly uneven, with the impact on workers mirroring the impact on companies. Those heavily dependent on cross-border tourism and travel have been most badly affected, along with those providing in-person services or whose work requires them to be on site. Data from the Ministry of Manpower's Comprehensive Labour Force Survey in June 2020 showed that lower-wage workers bore the brunt of income losses, while non-Professional, Managerial, Executive and Technician (non-PMET) workers experienced a larger increase in unemployment rate compared with PMETs.[13]

While income inequality as measured by the household income Gini coefficient after taxes and transfers fell to a historic low in 2020 due to sizeable government transfers,[14] inequality, particularly wealth inequality, remains a concern going forward. There is still a need to uplift low-income households and vulnerable workers, and to shore up precautionary

and retirement savings for self-employed workers, many of whom are susceptible to income and job disruptions and may not have built up sufficient CPF savings.

> **The fallout of COVID-19 on jobs and incomes has been highly uneven, with the impact on workers mirroring the impact on companies.**

Strengthening Social Security

Recognising that COVID-19 will impact jobs and incomes well into 2021, the Government has committed to doing "more to support every Singaporean, at each stage of life, to build a stronger and more cohesive society".[15] In this context, it introduced a new COVID-19 Recovery Grant (CRG) to help workers who have lost their jobs, been placed on involuntary no-pay leave or suffered significant income loss.[16] Beyond 2021, it is worth considering if CRG or ComCare can be adapted to provide support to those affected over the medium term, especially if the economic effects of COVID-19 linger.

Besides Government support, there may also be other options to smoothen incomes or otherwise help individuals and households to tide over periods of unemployment. While a quick return to employment is preferred, this may not always be possible in a period of heightened economic and job market volatility. One option is unemployment insurance, where workers or employers contribute regular premiums to fund payouts for members who fall into involuntary unemployment. However, this has the risk of blunting incentives to return to employment. Another option is for workers to set aside savings for use during periods of unemployment. This could be mandated or kept voluntary, with incentives such as tax deductions and top-ups to encourage saving. The merits of such precautionary saving have to be weighed against the reduction in take-home pay or retirement savings.

There is also wage loss insurance, which tops up workers' pay if they move to lower-paying jobs involuntarily. While this has the advantage of encouraging displaced workers to return to employment, such a scheme would also require workers or employers to contribute premiums, reducing take-home pay or profits.

Conclusion: Budget 2021 and Beyond

Budget 2021 has signalled the Government's intent to engineer a soft landing for the Singapore economy, while equipping businesses and workers for the future. Of the $11 billion COVID-19 Resilience Package announced, $700 million has been set aside to extend the JSS for targeted sectors until September 2021, while $5.4 billion has been allocated to a second tranche of the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, of which $5.2 billion will go towards the JGI. Another $900 million has been set aside for the Household Support Package. At the same time, the Government has stepped up financing support for high-growth enterprises, and is co-funding the cost of technology adoption and digitisation for SMEs.

Singapore has responded nimbly to secure jobs and livelihoods amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What lies ahead is the challenge of navigating towards sustainable recovery and a resilient future in a volatile, post-COVID world. ■

Notes

1. Co-Chair of the Multi-Ministry COVID-19 Task Force, Minister Lawrence Wong, said that the Government prioritised "both lives and livelihoods" in an interview with Money FM 89.3 host Elliott Danker on 2 June 2020.

2. See https://www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/schemes/businesses/jobs-support-scheme--JSS-/.

3. Notably, the business community was part of a groundswell of civic consciousness prompted by the pandemic. The Ministry of Finance reported in June that more than 130 companies had returned a total of $97 million in JSS payments for April and May, while over 250 companies had pledged to decline future payments. Other companies donated their JSS payments to charitable causes. Firms also joined with Singaporeans from all walks of life in making donations in cash or kind to support the needy and vulnerable, or in showing appreciation for frontline workers in the COVID-19 fight.

4. Grocery vouchers were disbursed to citizens living in 1- or 2-room HDB flats, along with additional utilities rebates for HDB households, and Service and Conservancy Charges rebates of between 1.5 to 3.5 months for all HDB households, depending on flat type.

5. A small number returned their payouts either because they had submitted incorrect information or no longer needed the support. Verifying employment status and income proved challenging during the Circuit Breaker period, where it was difficult to contact employers or firms' human resource departments. As with all such schemes, the Government had to be alert for possible fraud, and managed to uncover several such cases.

6. The eventual change in real GDP for 2020 was -5.4%.

7. SGUnited is an initiative to foster resilience and solidarity among Singaporeans through volunteerism and community action, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. See, for instance, Lisa Kahn, "The Long-Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy", *Labour Economics* 17, no. 2 (2010): 303–316; Philip Oreopoulos, Till von Wachter, and Andrew Heisz, "The Short- and Long-Term Career Effects of Graduating in a Recession", *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1–29.

9. See https://www.ssg-wsg.gov.sg/sgunitedjobsandskills.html

10. Heng Swee Keat, Budget Statement, 2021.

11. Heng Swee Keat, Written Reply to Parliamentary Question by Ms Foo Mee Har, February 1, 2021.

12. Heng Swee Keat, Ministerial Statement, October 5, 2020. See also Christopher Saw et al., "Impact of the Circuit Breaker and Budget Measures in Response to COVID-19", *Economic Survey of Singapore Second Quarter 2020* (MTI, 2020), 42–48. According to the MAS *Macroeconomic Review October 2020*, monetary policy would help reduce economic contraction by another 1.1% in 2020 and 0.8% in 2021.

13. Real median gross monthly income from work for full-time employed residents declined by 0.4% between June 2019 and June 2020, compared with a 4.6% decline for income at the 20th percentile. The PMET unemployment rate rose by 0.6 percentage points to 3.5% in June 2020, compared with a 1.7 percentage point increase in the non-PMET unemployment rate to 6.4% over the same period. This corroborates the results of a study by DBS bank, which found that lower-income earners (those earning $2,999 and below), and those with less savings, formed the bulk of bank customers whose incomes had declined substantially.

14. This was the lowest since the Government began tracking the Gini coefficient in 2000.

15. Halimah Yacob, Address for First Session of the Fourteenth Parliament, August 24, 2020.

16. Compared with CSG and SIRS, support under CRG is lower, while eligibility criteria have been tightened to target support at those who need it most. Applicants must also show they have been actively seeking job or training opportunities or, in the case of the self-employed, have reached out to potential clients. See: https://www.msf.gov.sg/assistance/Pages/covid-recovery-grant.aspx.

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STRENGTHENING MENTAL WELLBEING IN A PANDEMIC

by **Rianne Karthikayen**

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Measures to ease financial strain, support families and protect work-life balance can relieve key stressors during the COVID-19 outbreak.

A Pandemic of Stressors

Clinical criteria such as suicide rates, depression and anxiety diagnoses, and institutionalisation rates are commonly used to evaluate mental *health*. But this is only one aspect of mental *wellbeing*, which relates to a person's overall ability to positively experience life, effectively manage life's challenges, realise their potential and make a meaningful contribution within their community.[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many shocks that have distressed Singaporeans' mental wellbeing. These range from anxiety over the highly transmittable and potentially deadly virus itself to the prospect of economic decline and unemployment, a potential shortage of essential goods, and restrictions on movement and social contact both within and across national borders. In Singapore, such stressors have led to behaviours such as panic buying at supermarkets, a rise in calls to suicide prevention and crisis hotlines, and domestic abuse cases.

The 24/7 National Care Hotline, set up shortly after Singapore went into its Circuit Breaker lockdown in April 2020, received close to 28,000 calls within five months of its establishment. The Samaritans of Singapore similarly noted a 30% increase in calls to its suicide prevention hotline during the Circuit Breaker.[2] April 2020, specifically, saw a 42% increase in helpline calls, with callers sharing concerns around financial hardship, stress around the home environment, and anxiety from being separated from loved ones.

Existing inequalities can compound declining levels of wellbeing.

Globally, the pandemic has seen an increase in violence against women, with a rise in complaints of violence or calls to report domestic abuse. Singapore saw a 33% increase in such reports, according to an AWARE Women's Helpline report.[3] According to the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), the number of enquiries for its adult and child protection services was up by 14% in the first two weeks of the Circuit Breaker period.[4]

Existing inequalities can compound declining levels of wellbeing. For example, during the Circuit Breaker, when periods of working or schooling from home were enforced, those from low-income households were less likely to have access to the equipment, workspace or privacy needed to carry these tasks out effectively.[5] The Ministry of Education did provide laptops to support students from low-income households in home-based learning. However, finding a conducive environment for learning remained a challenge, with some resorting to working in the common corridor or stairwell of their housing estates. Such issues can affect individual wellbeing or even cause friction among family members and neighbours.

While prolonged national lockdowns and social separation measures reduce the risk of viral transmission, they can also lead to increased anxiety, depression, and stress.[6,7] In April 2021, a *Straits Times* survey, conducted one year after the Circuit Breaker, found that people are socialising less, their social circles have shrunk and their overall mental wellbeing has taken a hit.[8]

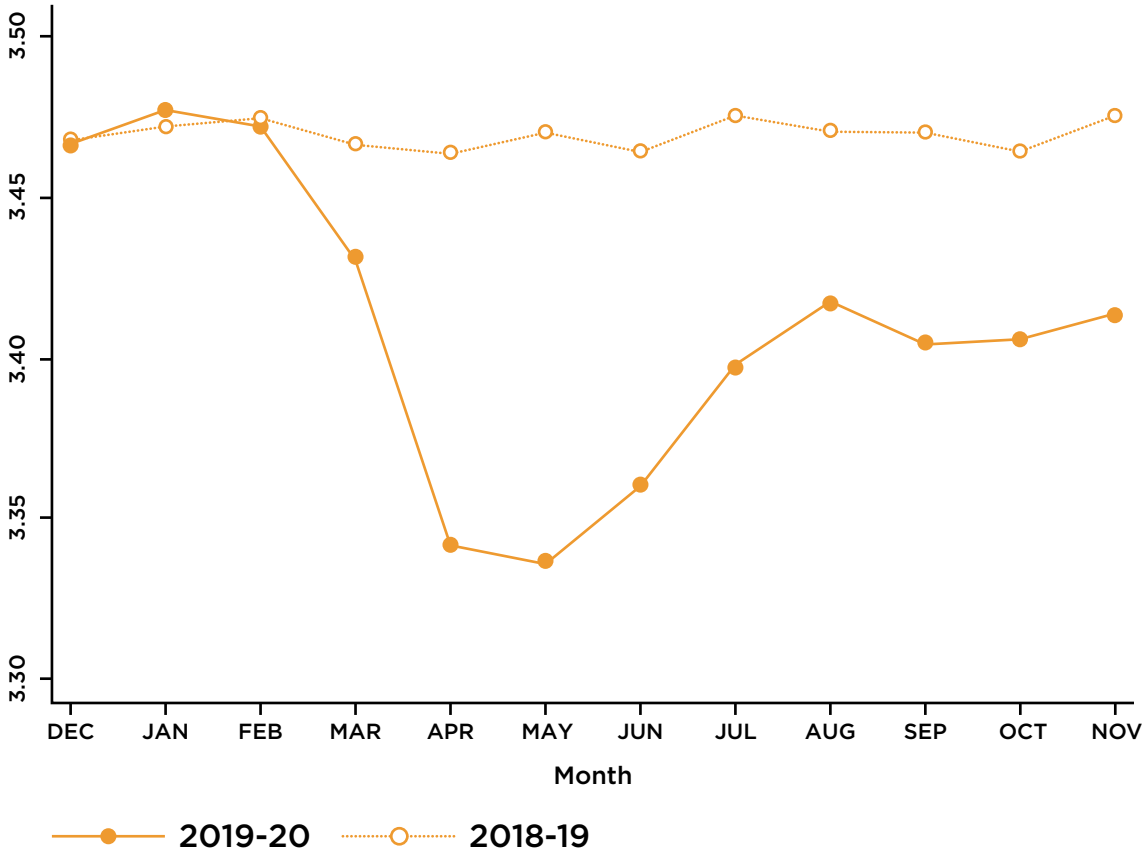

Figure 1. Elder Singaporeans' Life Satisfaction over Time

Source: T. Cheng, S. Kim, and K. Koh

Furthermore, a study by Cheng, Kim and Koh noted a significant drop in life satisfaction during the lockdown period among older Singaporeans (see Figure 1).[9] Cheng, Kim and Koh also found that individuals who reported a drop in household income experienced a decline in overall life satisfaction, almost twice as large as those who did not report any such loss. This suggests that the economic impact of the pandemic is a key contributor to the decline in self-reported wellbeing of middle-aged and older Singaporeans. However, others who did not experience an income loss also reported lower life satisfaction. This suggests that anxiety and stress associated with a curtailment of movement and the disruption to daily activities have also played a role. While the findings from this study may not be completely generalisable, they offer a timely and important evaluation of older Singaporeans' wellbeing during the pandemic.

While prolonged national lockdowns and social separation measures reduce the risk of viral transmission, they can also lead to increased anxiety, depression, and stress.

Framing Mental Wellbeing: Five Priorities

The Stanford WELL for Life Study (WELL) is an international longitudinal study which defines and assesses multiple dimensions of wellbeing beyond medical and healthcare fields, including financial, spiritual, emotional and social connectedness, among others.[10]

As part of the study, WELL researchers have developed a tool to frame and quantify mental wellbeing. For the 10 dimensions in the WELL Flower (see Figure 2), various study sites have also identified the "weight" of the flower petals based on their contribution to wellbeing as determined by study participants. In the US study site, social connectedness emerged as the most weighted domain of wellbeing, followed by lifestyle behaviours and physical health. The WELL study in Taiwan, a society that mirrors Singapore more closely, found **family**, **finances**, **sense of self**, **lifestyle behaviours** and **work-life** to be the top five priorities for improving mental wellbeing (see Figure 3).

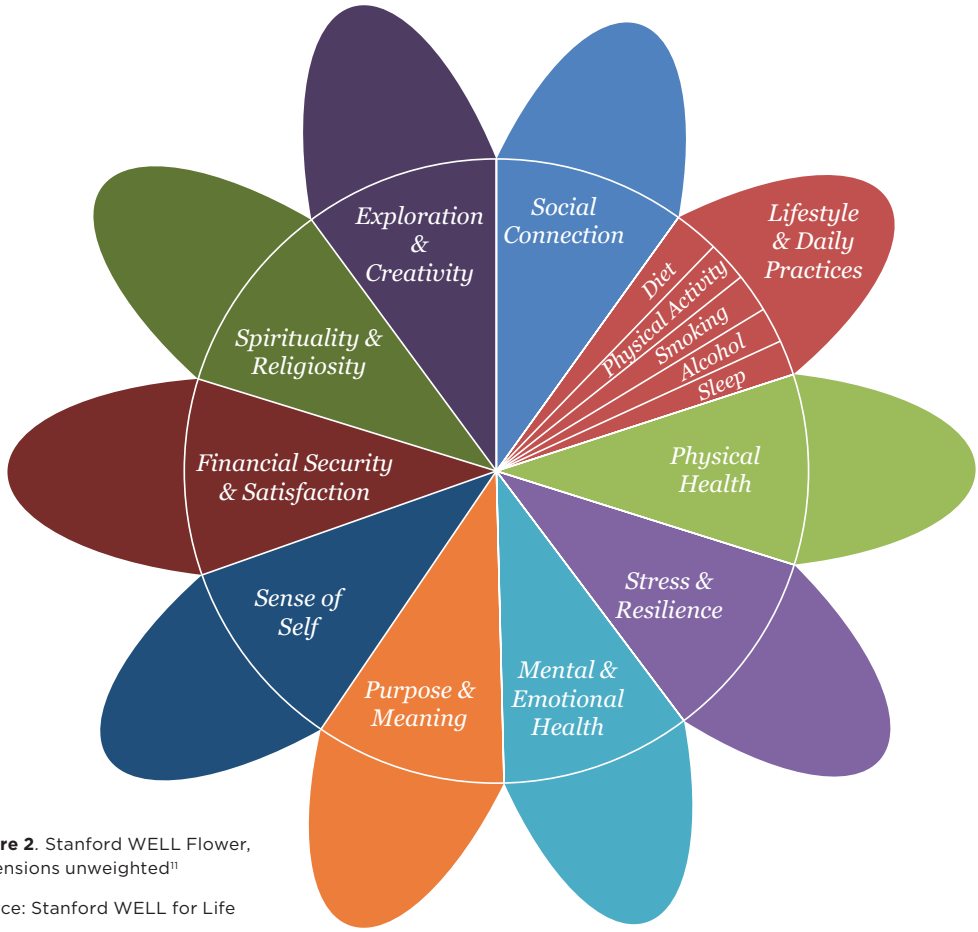

Figure 2. Stanford WELL Flower, dimensions unweighted[11]

Source: Stanford WELL for Life

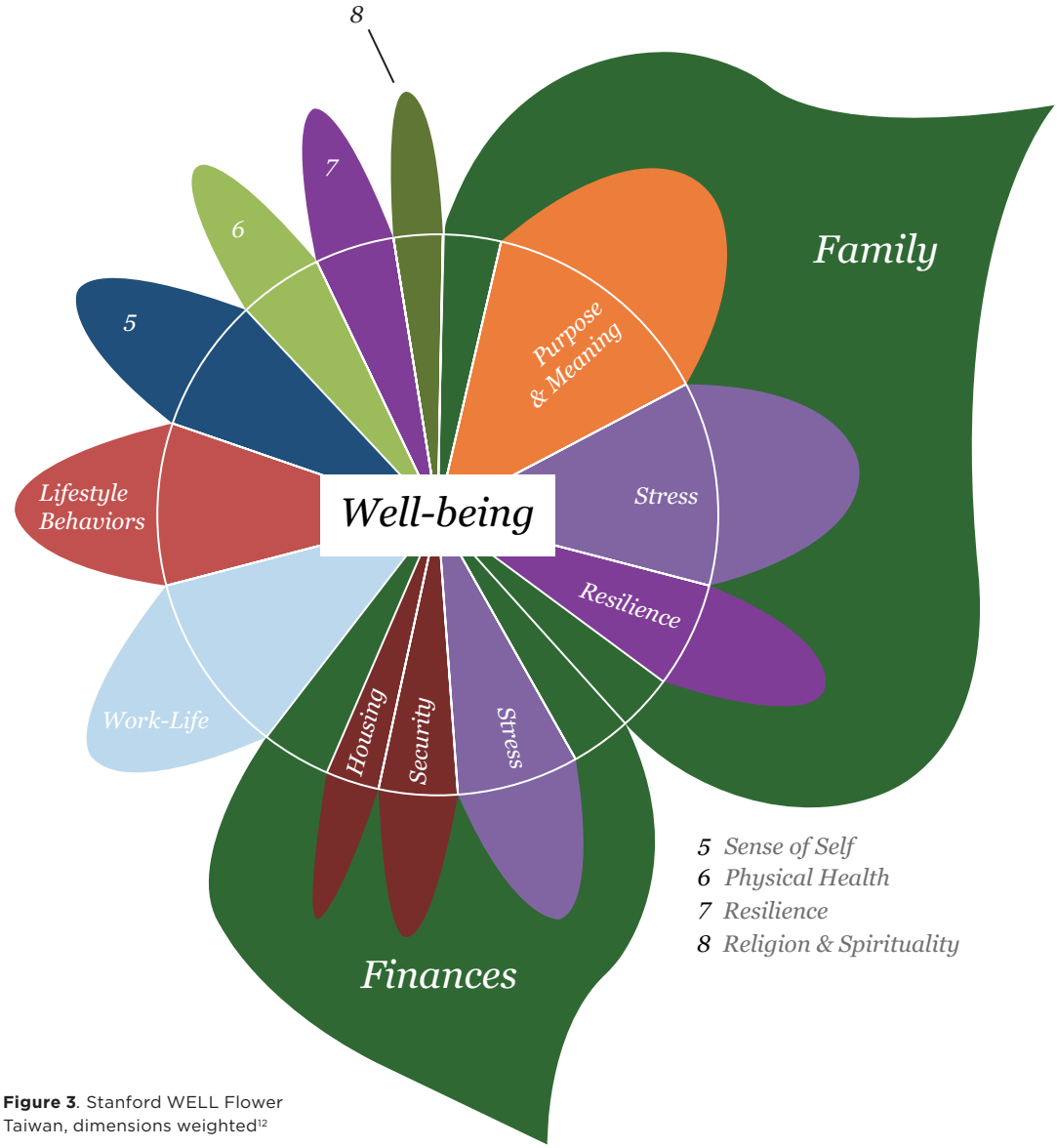

Figure 3. Stanford WELL Flower Taiwan, dimensions weighted[12]

Source: Stanford WELL for Life

These five priorities offer a useful frame with which to examine the challenges of maintaining mental wellbeing in Singapore during the COVID-19 outbreak, and to consider how the pandemic response measures have made a difference.

Mental Wellbeing: Interventions That Helped

Supporting Families

The family is the first line of support for most Singaporeans. As such, many assistance measures in Singapore are designed around families: in supporting families, individuals too are uplifted. Conversely, if households become less able to care for their members (because of financial or other resource constraints), individuals suffer. This is especially the case for those in vulnerable groups, such as lower-income residents, the elderly, or those living alone.

Recognising that the pandemic would tax Singaporean households, the MSF decided in April 2020 that social service offices (SSOs), senior care centres, residential and home-based care services, and community mental health services would continue to support their clients throughout the Circuit Breaker period, while introducing strict safety measures.[13] Those under Stay-Home Notice (SHN) or quarantine were provided for in terms of food and financial assistance. The Silver Generation Office also reached out to vulnerable seniors residing alone or in frail condition, while its ambassadors made the rounds to visit seniors to inform them of good hygiene practices and ensure their needs were met.

When working and schooling from home were enforced during the Circuit Breaker period, almost all Singaporeans experienced a strain on their shared home spaces.

When working and schooling from home were enforced during the Circuit Breaker period,[14,15] almost all Singaporeans experienced a strain on their shared home spaces. A government advisory highlighted the anxieties felt by employees who were asked to work from home for the foreseeable future.[16] The advisory asked employers to offer flexible work arrangements, to allow families to make alternative daily care arrangements for younger or older dependents, and balance sharing workspaces and devices among family members.

During the outbreak, businesses did step up to support family wellbeing.[17] Firms such as OCBC Bank implemented PSLE leave for parents, while businesses like M.Tech loaned out devices to parents with children who lacked devices to undertake home-based learning. For struggling families, CapitaLand, under its philanthropic arm the CapitaLand Hope Foundation, launched a #MealOnMe initiative in partnership with the Food Bank.[18] Great Eastern promoted and matched donations towards students and their families who had suffered income losses due to COVID-19. It also helped provide meals and access to medication for children and seniors, and accommodation and essential assistance for homeless and displaced individuals and their families.

Community groups, such as Community Development Councils and Self-Help Groups, also extended support to individuals and families during the pandemic.[19] Grants were set up to scale up local assistance schemes to vulnerable households.[20] Community organisations joined to launch an online platform facilitating donations in support of their client groups. For instance, the Mind

Community support allowed immediate, direct intervention to needy families; this helped to reduce the stress on familial relations and stave off financial despair.

the Gap campaign had a goal of $50,000 to fund the work of groups such as Daughters of Tomorrow, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and ReadAble, to name a few. This community support allowed immediate, direct intervention to needy families; this helped to reduce the stress on familial relations and stave off financial despair.

Easing Finances

Although it started as a healthcare crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic very quickly became a job and livelihood crisis. Across households, real and median incomes declined in the first year of the pandemic.[21] These losses would have been greater had the Government not provided transfers and pandemic-support, particularly for smaller households.

To ease financial stress, the Government announced four budgets incorporating a mixture of subsidies, deferment of payments, cash payouts, and special COVID-19 funding for those affected with job- and revenue-loss. Government measures such as the Temporary Relief Fund and the COVID-19 Support Grant (and more recently the COVID-19 Recovery Grant) were designed to benefit different segments of society, including the employed, the unemployed, the vulnerable and low-income, as well as small businesses and digitally-tardy businesses.[22, 23] Other initiatives that eased financial strain included the deferment of insurance premiums,[24] as well as a new Courage Fund to provide one-time payments to those stricken with COVID-19, whether in or outside the line of duty.

By offering material support in a variety of ways, such measures helped relieve the psychological distress of those whose economic situation had been adversely impacted by the pandemic. They also offered important reassurance that Singaporeans were not being left to fend for themselves in a crisis.

Secure Sense of Self

An individual's sense of self is how they regard their own nature, ability and worth: it involves their self-confidence and self-satisfaction. Supporting sense of self generally involves building individual capability and resilience.

Recognising that individuals may struggle with low self-esteem or self-satisfaction during the pandemic, a number of helplines were set up to provide support.[25] A COVID-19 Mental Wellness Taskforce was also set up to look into

Although it started as a healthcare crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic very quickly became a job and livelihood crisis.

the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the population.[26] Taking stock of mental health and wellbeing initiatives introduced across ministries and agencies, the taskforce focused on three key areas: first, developing a national mental health and wellbeing strategy to align and guide the work of public agencies; second, setting up a national mental health resources webpage to improve access to relevant information; and third, establishing a national mental health competence training framework to align and standardise training curricula on mental health in the community.[27]

Attention has also been given to groups that might have been particularly vulnerable to a diminished sense of self. A Youth Mental Wellbeing Network, supported by a number of ministries in partnership with the National Youth Council, was set up specifically to address the needs of Singaporean youth. This initiative considered the findings of the 2016 Singapore Mental Health Survey,[28] which identified youth as being susceptible to major depressive disorders, generalised anxiety disorder and other mental wellbeing issues that could be triggered by environmental events—such as the pandemic. In November 2020, another task force, named Project Dawn, provided early detection and appropriate care to at-risk migrant workers—a group that had been significantly impacted by the crisis in a number of ways.[29]

Supporting Positive Lifestyle Behaviours

According to the WELL study, lifestyle behaviours such as diet, sleep, physical activity and consumption of alcohol and tobacco can all have an impact on a person's wellbeing. Despite the safe management measures necessitated by the pandemic, there have been some concessions to help residents maintain healthy lifestyle habits. For instance, individuals have been permitted to exercise outdoors throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and to remove their mask when engaged in vigorous exercise.

Food is an important aspect of the Singaporean way of life, and dining together is a significant social bonding activity. A good meal with friends and loved ones is a morale booster. However, with COVID-19, gatherings for meals have had to be restricted in size; many restaurants and food hawkers have been heavily affected by reduced footfall, with many customers working from home. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to continue to keep Singapore's beloved food culture going despite the pandemic. One such initiative is the Hawkers United Facebook group,[30] which has provided a means for hawkers (even those less digitally savvy) to connect with customers using digital platforms. Such initiatives also help strengthen civic ties and camaraderie—imperative to building up a resilient public health stance in times of crisis.[31]

Protect Work-Life Balance

Having staff work from home instead of in the office has become an accepted way to reduce contact exposure between co-workers and hence curb the spread of COVID-19. To promote flexible working arrangements during the

TAKING CARE OF MIGRANT WORKERS' MENTAL WELLBEING

As the pandemic progressed, Singapore's migrant worker dormitories faced extensive quarantine and isolation measures for extended periods. Over time, this affected some workers' mental wellbeing. During the Circuit Breaker period in particular, the COVID-19-hit dormitories saw a spate of suicide attempts.

Working with the Ministry of Manpower and private stakeholders, the inter-agency taskforce sought ways to support foreign workers' welfare and mental wellbeing. They took the effort to celebrate migrant workers' holidays, encouraged workers to seek help when needed, and provided help hotlines.[1] Non-governmental organisations also offered vital services such as welfare, health care, and crisis management, liaising between employers and financing agents, and advocating for migrant workers' needs.

Mental healthcare for migrant workers is complicated by linguistic and cultural barriers, along with high levels of stigma in migrant workers' home countries.[2] To offer a listening ear to them, social service organisations Healthserve and Samaritans of Singapore partnered to launch a helpline available in English, Tamil, Chinese and Bengali.[3]

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Circuit Breaker period, the Government provided an enhanced Work-Life Grant to qualifying companies,[32] with more than $180 million given to 8,000 companies from April to August 2020, covering almost 90,000 employees.

However, for many Singaporeans, being obliged to work from home has meant a blurring of lines between their professional and private spaces, with some bosses expecting subordinates to be available to work at hours outside usual working hours.[33] Singaporeans have also expressed worry about job loss, admitting to working long hours from home to avoid retrenchment or redundancy—raising further concerns for their mental health and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, having had a taste of flexi-work arrangements since the pandemic, many Singaporeans now want better work-life balance in future, with a preference for work-from-home as the norm.[34, 35] For these Singaporeans, flexi-work arrangements offer a chance to meet both their work and personal demands on their own terms and in their own space,[36] while affording more time with their families and other pursuits—all of which have benefits for mental wellbeing.

Restoring and Strengthening Mental Wellbeing

The pandemic and the measures taken to contain it have wrought significant changes to the Singaporean way of life, and taken a toll on mental wellbeing and life satisfaction.

The Government's many measures in response to the pandemic, supported by initiatives from the private and people sectors, have primarily been aimed at keeping the public safe, while supporting Singaporeans and cushioning the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, particularly on the economic front. Nevertheless, these efforts may contribute to ameliorating the stressors that COVID-19 has thrown up—although it is not possible to completely assuage every anxiety or concern.

Providing support in areas that matter to individuals, with effective policies and actions paired with consistency and accuracy in messaging, is more likely to produce improved wellbeing. In this regard, Singapore's relative effectiveness—in containing the outbreak, in providing relief to vulnerable groups, and in ensuring that essential supplies are stockpiled and

Having had a taste of flexi-work arrangements since the pandemic, many Singaporeans now want better work-life balance in future, with a preference for work-from-home as the norm.

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well distributed—does contribute to the public's peace of mind and hence mental wellbeing.

It is worth considering if more might be done to make mental wellbeing an explicit area of attention in a crisis, alongside economic and other concerns. Time will tell if enough was done to enable Singaporeans to emerge from this pandemic as a more resilient people and more united citizens, standing firm in the knowledge that we look after each other in a crisis—not just materially but mentally as well. ■

Notes

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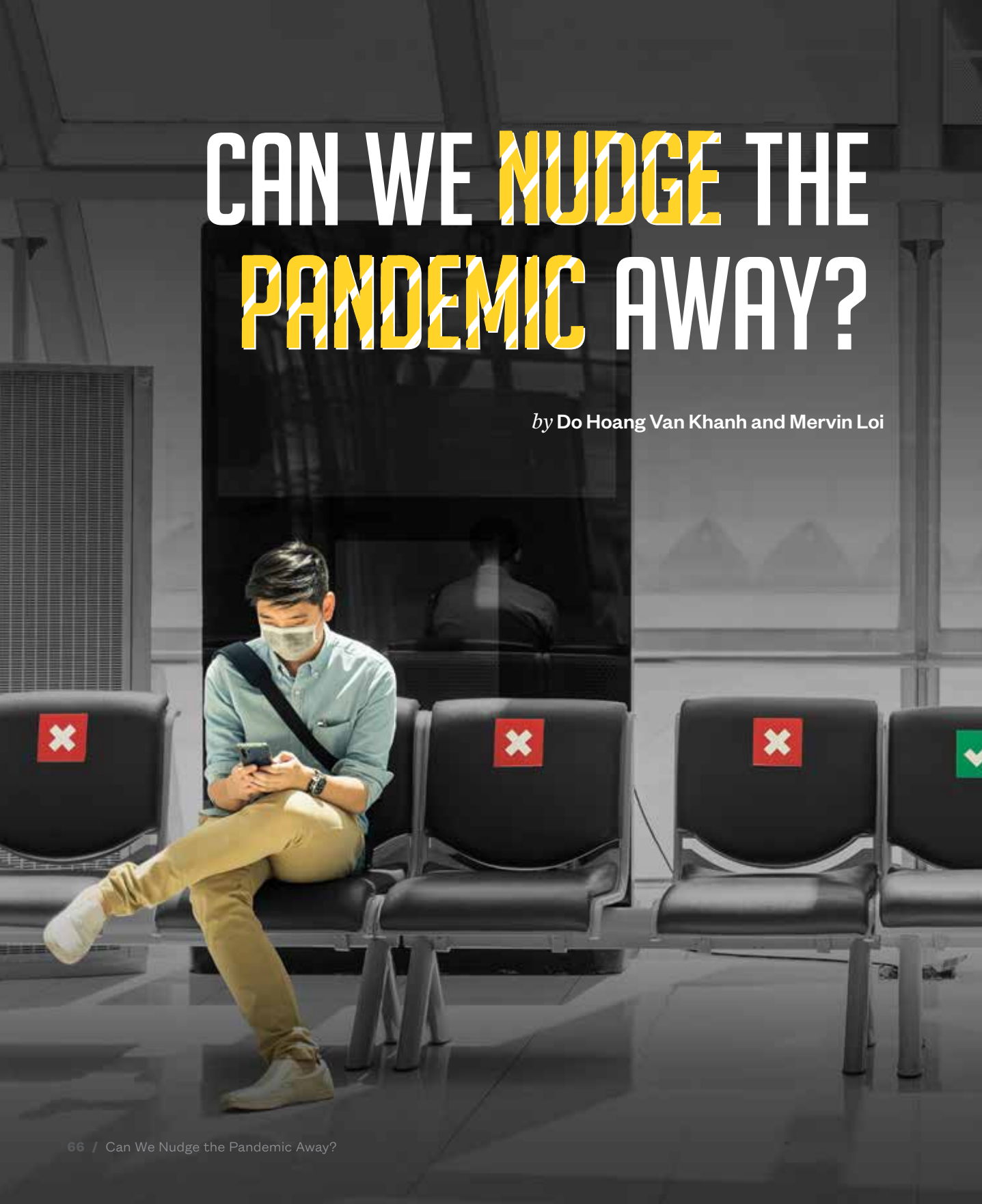
CAN WE NUDGE THE PANDEMIC AWAY?

by **Do Hoang Van Khanh and Mervin Loi**



While nudges cannot and should not replace mandatory health measures and lockdowns in the COVID-19 crisis, they can be used to complement regulations, especially in helping communities cope with the long-drawn measures and negative consequences of the pandemic.

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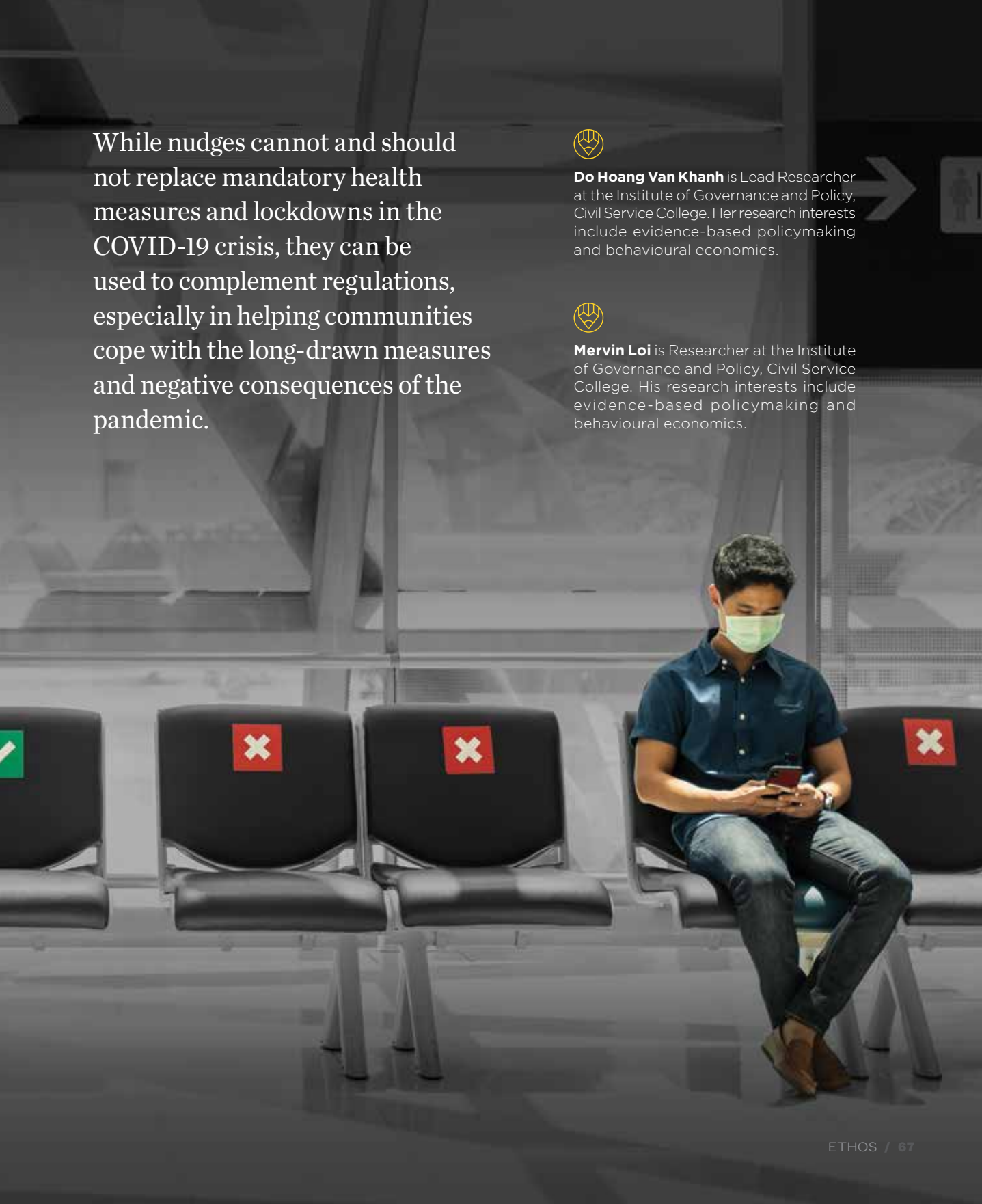
Mervin Loi is Researcher at the Institute of Governance and Policy, Civil Service College. His research interests include evidence-based policymaking and behavioural economics.



LOCKDOWNS – FOR HOW LONG?

In February and March 2020, when COVID-19 swept across the globe, most countries introduced strict movement restrictions, in the form of lockdowns, to deal with the rising number of cases and avoid overburdening their healthcare systems.

But restrictions, especially if protracted, come at a significant cost. A study found that the lockdown measures imposed in Germany increased unemployment by 117,000 persons between March and April 2020,[1] while the UK lockdown from March to May of the same year coincided with the largest quarterly fall in employment in over a decade.[2] In Singapore, the economy contracted by 13.2% on a year-on-year basis in the second quarter of 2020, largely due to our Circuit Breaker measures and weak external demand.[3]

Long periods of indoor confinement with little social interactions have also taken a significant toll on mental health,[4] manifesting itself in the form of higher incidences of domestic violence, mental distress, and divorce.[5, 6] In a number of countries, public frustration over lockdowns, mask-wearing and other mandatory safety measures have led to outward defiance, mass protests and political instability.

Experts are also starting to see signs of behavioural fatigue as people become more complacent about the risk of contracting the virus, or tired of observing preventative measures.[7] This has been cited as a reason for the resurgence of the virus in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong.[8, 9] Mobility data in England shows that subsequent lockdowns have been less effective in getting people to stay at home compared to the first lockdown.[10]

This pandemic fatigue could have also posed a problem in Singapore when community cases had remained consistently low until a new wave emerged in April 2021. Residents may ease up on safe distancing measures due to fatigue or the perceived lower risk of catching COVID-19.

Unlike previous epidemics such as SARS and Ebola, which only affected certain regions and/or were contained within months, COVID-19 may well prove a long-drawn pandemic that could persist for years even with the availability of the vaccines.[11] In the meantime, residents need to adjust to a new normal of living safely with the virus.

Because of this, governments need to strike a balance between keeping COVID-19 at bay and minimising the significant costs involved in maintaining

Governments must look beyond lockdowns and regulations to manage this pandemic, simply because these are not sustainable in the long run.

CAN NUDGES REPLACE LOCKDOWNS?

At the onset of the pandemic, the UK and Sweden pursued a softer approach instead of mandatory measures and lockdowns.[1, 2] They focused on recommendations and "nudges" to get people to maintain high levels of personal hygiene, maintain safe distancing in public, and avoid going out.

For example, in the Swedish city of Uppsala, signs were placed on bus doors to remind passengers to board "only if they had to". Compliance was entirely voluntary since passengers did not have to justify their reason for travel.[3] Meanwhile, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) recommended people wash their hands while singing the Happy Birthday song twice, to improve the saliency of getting them to wash their hands for a full 20 seconds.[4]

However, it soon became clear that this softer approach was ineffective. In March 2020, the UK had to abandon this strategy and adopt a partial national lockdown to curb the escalating number of hospitalisation cases.[5] Sweden, which stuck with its strategy for a good part of 2020, suffered a higher death rate per 100,000 people compared to its Nordic neighbours which had implemented stricter measures.[6] It too was eventually forced to impose stricter restrictions to cope with the rising number of COVID-19 cases.[7]

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safety measures. They must look beyond lockdowns and regulations to manage this pandemic, simply because these are not sustainable in the long run. Moreover, personal hygiene behaviours such as frequent hand washing—essential elements to managing the pandemic—cannot be easily monitored nor legislated.

A NUDGE-ABLE NEW NORMAL?

In public policy, nudges are ways to design the context or choice environment to influence people's behaviours in a predictable manner while preserving their freedom of choice.

Many basic measures for managing COVID-19 are behavioural changes: staying home when sick, wearing a mask, washing hands, avoiding crowds and maintaining safe distancing.

Without widely available and effective treatments or vaccines in the early outbreak, behavioural nudges were initially adopted by some countries as the primary response at the onset of the pandemic. However, this approach fell short, going by the experience of countries such as the UK and Sweden.

Experts have long argued that nudges are less applicable in cases where negative externalities are generated: i.e., when third parties who are not involved in the decision-making process of an action are harmed. This is the case for COVID-19, since people who do not comply with public health measures can harm not just themselves, but also bystanders they come into contact with. The

Image 1

Image 2

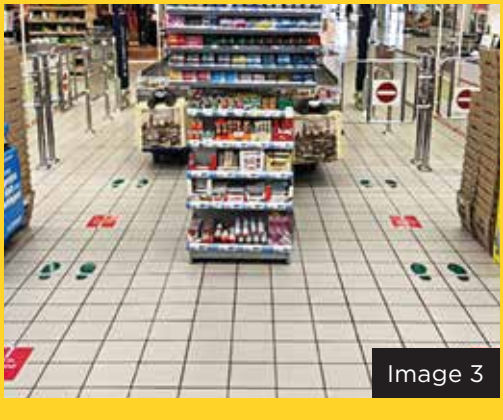

Image 3

Source: University of Bayreuth

NUDGES TO IMPROVE COMPLIANCE WITH SAFE MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Nudges to maintain safe distancing

Researchers from the University of Bayreuth assessed the effectiveness of three different designs of floor stickers—*lines* (image 1); *footprints* (image 2); and *footprints with signs* (image 3) in maintaining safe distancing between customers at a store checkout area.

The *footprints with signs* design (image 3) was the most effective at nudging customers without a shopping trolley, with 63% of them adhering to the safe distancing. In comparison, the *lines* (image 1) and *footprints* (image 2) designs achieved a compliance rate of 34% and 49% respectively.[1]

Nudges to encourage hand washing

Efforts to encourage proper hand washing as an effective and affordable way to curb the spread of preventable diseases predate COVID-19.

In Bangladesh, an experiment to encourage good hand hygiene among students—by placing cheerful footsteps along the pathway between a school latrine and brightly decorated hand washing stations—increased the incidence of students washing their hands with soap after using the toilet from 4% to 68%.[2]

In a March 2020 experiment, respondents were shown seven hand washing posters designed by various health authorities and the World Health Organization. The study found posters that used bright infographic designs, accompanied with minimal text to illustrate proper hand washing techniques, to be most effective in terms of ease of comprehension, sentiments and persuasiveness.[3]

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While nudges are not in themselves a sufficient response to the COVID-19 outbreak, they can still play a useful role in the post-lockdown landscape.

appropriate government intervention needed in such cases has been shown to be not so much a nudge as a "shove",[12] in the form of strict mandatory measures and lockdowns.

Nevertheless, while nudges are not in themselves a sufficient response to the COVID-19 outbreak, they can still play a useful role in the post-lockdown landscape, where the emphasis is on keeping infection numbers low in

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION IS LOST AMID INFORMATION OVERLOAD

A UK study conducted in October 2020 showed that there were widespread misunderstandings regarding some local rules and a lack of knowledge about risk levels of various activities. For example, 19% of those surveyed did not know that indoor activities carry higher risks than outdoor activities.[1]

BIT (Behavioural Insights Team) also conducted a study in Bangladesh to understand the impact of information overload on respondents' ability to recall key messages about hand washing techniques. In a randomised controlled trial, respondents were presented with one of four hand washing posters with varying amounts of hand washing guidance. The researchers found that additional details on hand washing techniques crowded out the most basic message of the posters, which is to wash one's hands for at least 20 seconds.[2]

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the long run. For instance, they can encourage and help sustain desired public behaviours by (a) improving compliance with public health measures in a more intrinsic manner, thereby counteracting some level of behavioural fatigue; and (b) encouraging behaviours that cannot be easily observed and legislated by public health authorities.

USES FOR NUDGES IN SINGAPORE

In Singapore, nudges could support the longer-term management of COVID-19 in several ways.

1 Improving public communications on COVID-19

The scramble to keep up with a rapidly evolving pandemic has led to a confusing sea of shifting information, guidelines and regulations. This could lead to information overload and public confusion or mistrust. Behavioural insights could help improve the clarity and effectiveness of communication materials on COVID-19 and relevant regulations.

Policymakers could explore using nudges together with the EAST (Easy, Attractive, Social, Timely) framework[13] developed by the UK Behavioural Insights Team to improve communications related to COVID-19. Making essential information more salient promotes better retention, greater public buy-in and reduced misinformation, all of which are necessary for sustaining desired behaviours in the community.

After going through a long period of low community cases, Singapore has been seeing an increase in the number of COVID-19 community cases and new clusters in recent weeks at the time of writing this article (June 2021). This led to the introduction of additional restrictions and safeguards under Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) from 16 May 2021 to 13 June 2021.[14]

In a rapidly changing pandemic, it is clear that safe management measures will still be needed, and must be updated quickly to suit new circumstances. Nudges could be used in the design of communication materials to convey these changes to the public more clearly and effectively.

Making essential information more salient promotes better retention, greater public buy-in and reduced misinformation, all of which are necessary for sustaining desired behaviours.

2 Encouraging COVID-19 Vaccination Take-Up

In Singapore, the COVID-19 vaccine is being progressively offered, on a non-mandatory basis, to those aged 12 and above (except for some subgroups such as those who are severely immunocompromised).[15, 16] Nudges can

NUDGING PEOPLE TO GET FLU SHOTS

A team at the University of Pennsylvania, led by Professor Katy Milkman, conducted two large field experiments in the US involving tens of thousands of respondents and numerous experimental nudges. They found that sending two reminder texts to patients increased influenza vaccination rates compared to the usual care control. The initial text encouraged patients to ask for a flu jab at their upcoming appointment to protect themselves and their loved ones, while the follow-up text reminded them that a flu vaccine has been reserved for them.[1]

In another experiment, Professor Milkman and her team redesigned the reminder mailer by incorporating *planning prompts*, which help to overcome procrastination, forgetfulness, and potential obstacles. The team was able to increase workplace vaccination rates simply by getting people to write down the date and time that they intend to get their vaccination on the reminder mailer, which also contained information on the free on-site clinics where employees could get the flu shot.[2, 3]

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be used to increase the inoculation rate among residents without restricting their choice.

Past vaccination projects show that a significant number of people who want to get vaccinated do not end up getting one for various reasons, including forgetfulness or competing priorities.[17] This is what behavioural scientists call the "intention-action gap".

A March 2021 survey found 67% of Singapore residents aged 21 and above

were willing to get vaccinated and another 20% were neutral in doing so.[18] However, as of 18 May 2021, only 71% of eligible seniors aged 60 and above and close to 66% of eligible individuals aged 45 to 59 years old have received the COVID-19 vaccination or booked their vaccination appointments.[19]

Since many Singaporeans have already indicated interest in getting vaccinated, there are plenty of opportunities to use simple, low-cost nudges to close potential "intention-action gaps" among our residents. While the demand for vaccination is now quite healthy, it will be important to prompt those who are not among the early enthusiasts to get vaccinated as soon as they become eligible.

A March 2021 survey also showed younger respondents as more likely to be concerned about vaccine safety which might affect their take-up.[20] Additional behavioural interventions may thus be useful as the vaccination drive reaches younger age groups.

Singapore's current vaccination registration process already requires people to register for both the first and second doses at the same time, which helps narrow the "intention-action gaps" between the doses. However, past flu vaccination-related studies show that additional nudges, such as personalised reminders, can boost take-up rates and help ensure that people return for subsequent doses. This will be especially useful if the COVID-19 vaccine requires subsequent booster shots or even annual revaccination to keep up its protective efficacy.[21, 22]

3 Increasing and sustaining compliance to socially responsible behaviours

In Singapore, nudges could play a role in spaces where the existing social and physical environment may encourage habitual behaviours that compromise safe distancing. These include cafe counters that encourage people to lean over and speak to the servers, or using the phone while waiting in a queue and forgetting to keep a safe distance.[23]

Most people do want to follow prevailing health regulations and guidelines,[24] but their intentions may not always translate into appropriate action. Nudges can help individuals to close the "intention-action gap", by redesigning spaces to help people overcome their old habits and prompt them towards socially responsible behaviours.

In addition, the evolving regulations and guidance related to COVID-19 could also lead to people developing risk compensation behaviours over time. For instance, a study found that Americans, after a mandatory mask mandate, spent 11 to 24 fewer minutes at home on average and increased their number of visits to some commercial locations, including "high-risk" ones such as restaurants—despite the rise in COVID-19 cases in much of the US.[25]

Such behaviours were anticipated by the World Health Organization, which cautioned early in the pandemic that "wearing medical masks can create a false sense of security that can lead to neglecting other essential measures such as hand-washing".[26]

The stigma associated with mental health issues could discourage people from seeking treatment. Nudges can overcome these barriers.

This does not mean that governments should not impose a mask mandate.[27] Rather, it highlights the possible unintended consequences of such measures. To manage these, policymakers could explore using nudges to remind and persuade the public to keep up with *all* safe management measures and socially responsible behaviours.

4 Seeking help for mental health wellbeing

Isolation and stress resulting from lockdowns and quarantine measures, as well as anxiety from catching COVID-19, have soared in many countries. Researchers at Duke-NUS conducted a meta-analysis of 68 studies involving 288,830 participants from 19 countries and found that one in three adults had experienced psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, related to COVID-19.[28]

In the UK, a study examining the temporal change in psychological wellbeing of the population in lockdown found an overall increase in mental distress in respondents aged 16 years or older compared with the previous year, even after accounting for the projected upward trend.[29] In Singapore, the number of calls made to the Samaritans of Singapore, an organisation providing support to those contemplating suicide, rose by about 30–35% during the Circuit Breaker period compared to the same period in 2019.[30]

It is important that people seek the help they need, whether from professionals or friends and family, to care for their mental wellbeing, since psychological distress can have long-term consequences. However, the stigma associated with mental health issues, especially among Asians,[31] could discourage people from seeking treatment.

Nudges can be innovatively integrated into communication channels to overcome these barriers. For instance, some studies suggest that emotional connections to personalities in the mass media, especially in soap operas, can help persuade people to deal with and seek help for "taboo" topics. In South Africa, officials worked with a media company to produce a soap opera with a leading character dealing with gambling and debt issues. Viewers of this soap opera were found to be less likely to engage in gambling and more likely to seek help from the national debt mediation helpline. During focus group discussions, viewers highlighted the emotional connection to the leading character as motivating their behavioural changes.[32]

Such studies could be useful references for Singapore's policymakers, when considering ways to emotionally connect with and nudge members of the public to seek help for mental

health issues aggravated by COVID-19 circumstances.

CONCLUSION

While the rollout of COVID-19 vaccination programmes in Singapore and other countries is cause for hope, it will still be some time before the COVID-19 pandemic is truly put to rest, given its scale, impact and the still uncertain nature of the virus and its rapidly mutating variants that are more infectious and/or resistant to vaccines. Furthermore, while the vaccines do prevent most people from being severely sick with COVID-19, health experts do not discount the possibility that asymptomatic infections in vaccinated individuals could still spread the virus in the community and infect unvaccinated individuals.[33]

Hence, we must continue to be vigilant and observe socially responsible behaviours, even after Singapore is past its current spike in community cases, and has vaccinated most of the general population.[34]

Lockdowns and regulations will continue to play an important role in managing the ongoing pandemic: we will not be able to simply "nudge" the pandemic away. Nevertheless, nudges can play a complementary role in helping policymakers sustain the socially desirable behaviours needed to keep COVID-19 under control in the long run, increase the adoption of and adherence to the vaccination regime, and mitigate other effects of the pandemic.

In a rapidly changing pandemic, safe management measures must be updated quickly to suit new circumstances. Nudges could be used in the design of communication materials to convey these changes more clearly and effectively.

It is also important to note that people's behaviours are complex and highly context-dependent. Policymakers must remain agile, relying on evidence to assess the effectiveness of promising nudges in different contexts. Only then might we formulate effective strategies to manage not just the current crisis, but also future pandemics. ■

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To maintain public trust and uptake and effectively curtail the spread of COVID-19, digital contact tracing apps should have a robust data governance policy.

CONTACT TRACING TECH ACROSS THE DATA LIFE CYCLE

by **Vernie Oliveiro**

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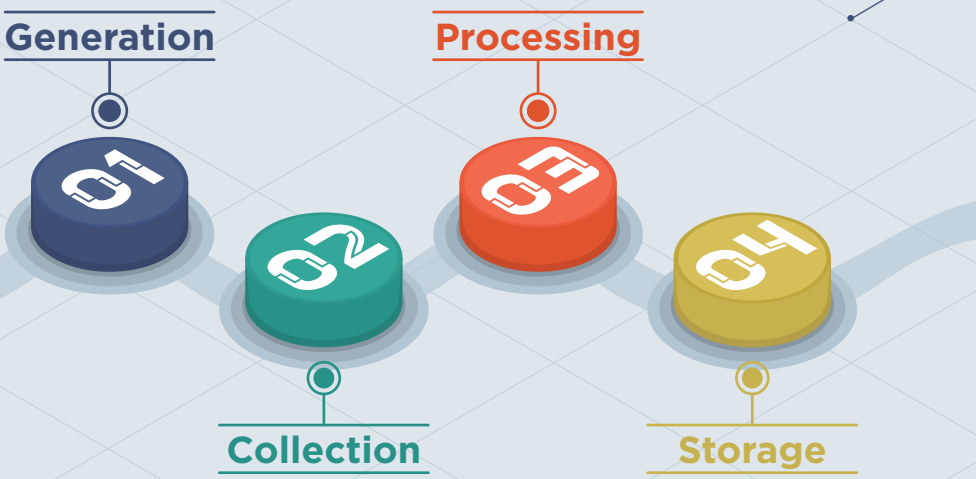
To stem the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world have created digital tools to quickly identify actual and potential COVID-19 infections. Together with traditional methods of contact tracing (i.e., interviewing patients to identify their close contacts), these digital tools aim to speed up[1] tracing, reducing the time taken from days to a matter of minutes.[2] This shortens the interval between an individual's possible exposure to the virus and entry into quarantine, which is especially useful since asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic carriers are known to be significant spreaders of the virus. Such tools also help tracers work backwards to identify clusters, curbing the spread of an illness in which patients are most infectious in the first week of illness.[3]

However, these digital tools have also sparked privacy and other concerns. Scholars at the Oxford Internet Institute[4] have highlighted two aspects of the ethics and governance questions involved. First, there are the high-level principles: are the apps necessary, proportional, scientifically sound, and temporary? Second, there are the enabling factors: such as whether use of the apps is voluntary, whether people can consent to their data being used, and the extent to which the purpose of the apps are defined.

Countries have struck different balances between public health utility and civil liberties in the use of digital contact tracing tools. In some countries, participation is practically compulsory and data is centralised. In China, for example, many cities use Alipay Health Code to determine whether people may enter buildings or use public transit. A *New York Times* analysis of the app's code found that it shares data with the police by sending each user's location and identifying code numbers to a server.[5] In Singapore, the use of SafeEntry, which people use to

THE DATA LIFE CYCLE

Professor Jeanette Wing's model of the data life cycle encompasses all but the last phase (archival/destruction), as part of her argument that privacy and ethical concerns ought to be considered throughout the life cycle of data.



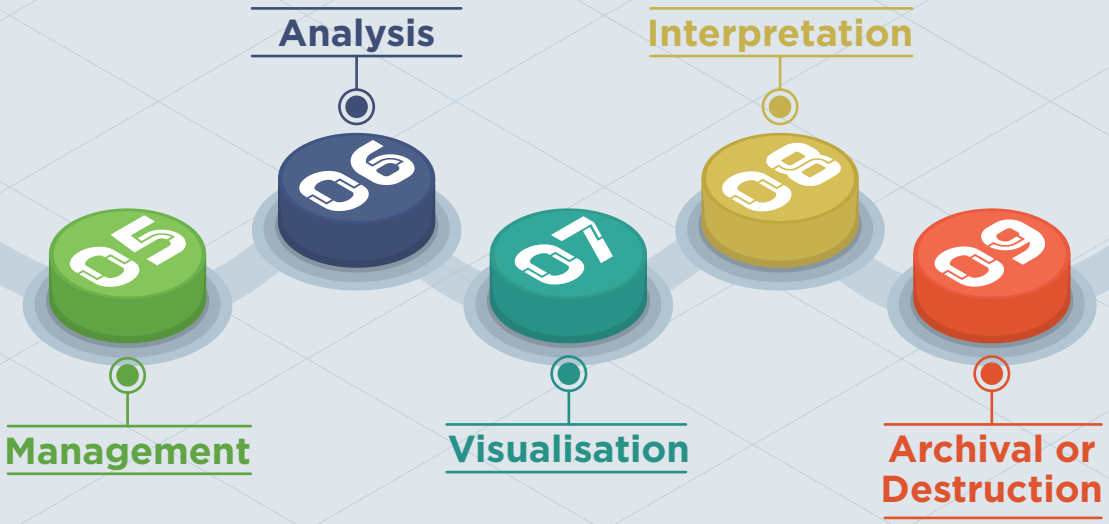
log their presence, is compulsory at a wide range of venues: offices, shops, worksites, schools, healthcare facilities, places of worship, hotels, recreation and entertainment venues, restaurants, and cultural institutions among others.[6] Data is stored and encrypted in a server for 25 days.

Other countries use apps that maximise choice and emphasise privacy protections. Canada and several European Union (EU) countries have launched apps that citizens are not required to use. As of March 2021, Canada's COVID Alert had been downloaded by just 6 million people, roughly 16% of the population.[7] As of January 2021, Germany's Corona-Warn-App had been downloaded by just 24 million people, roughly 29% of the population.[8]

Governments have a duty to protect both the safety and the rights of their citizens; they must do both in a way that maintains trust. Policymakers and citizens can better think about what trade-offs to make and what guard rails against abuse to erect by considering the data life cycle of contact tracing technology.

Decisions across the data life cycle

Data lies at the core of any digital system. A digital system uses hardware and software to turn data into a solution. Take for example what happens when we have virtual meetings. Software (e.g., applications like Zoom/Skype, or operating systems such as Windows 10 or iOS) and hardware (e.g., a computer, cables, routers, Wi-Fi signals) combine to take sound and light on one end and turn them into bits of data that emerge on the other end as audio and video. All the companies involved in this process could be collecting various sorts of data, such as data about the quality of the connection, the time and duration of the meeting, and the performance of devices.



As Jeanette Wing—Professor of Computer Science and Director of Columbia University's Data Science Institute—describes in an influential 2019 essay, data in a digital system goes through a life cycle with various phases.[9] When it comes to COVID-19 technology, policyowners need to make important decisions for each of these key phases, throughout the life cycle of the data in question.

02 COLLECTION

Our smartphones contain sensors and devices that generate data about us in order to function. Accelerometers detect motion and can be used to measure our steps taken. GPS specifies our location. Bluetooth enables our phones to "talk" to other devices, thereby registering the device's presence.

Not all data generated needs to be collected. Policyowners must determine what data generated is *meaningful* to collect. That is, does the data have quality, and is it a good proxy for the social condition being analysed? Also, *how* might they get the data they want to collect? Should they settle for less meaningful data if it is more readily collected?

Some COVID-19 contact tracing technologies collect location data (*where* you were); others collect proximity data (*whom* you were with). For the former, data can be collected in different ways. For example, some apps in China use data about user GPS locations, acquired from telcos, to determine an individual's travel history and possible exposure in high-risk areas. In this case, data is acquired automatically, with little participation from users. Singapore's SafeEntry app also logs location, but by having users scan a QR code when they visit various venues. The advantage to both approaches is their use of familiar technologies. QR code scanning has the added privacy advantage of *not* continuously logging users' locations wherever they might be, including at home.

There are, however, downsides to using these familiar technologies of location-based tracing. QR code-based systems expose users to security threats.[10] Additionally, where droplet-based transmission dominates, location-based tracking is less useful than proximity-

NOT ALL DATA GENERATED NEEDS TO BE COLLECTED. POLICYOWNERS MUST DETERMINE WHAT DATA GENERATED IS MEANINGFUL TO COLLECT.

based tracking, since our vulnerability to infection by people with COVID-19 is shaped more by how near we were to them, and for how long, than whether we were at the same venue as them.

Besides the *type* of data to collect, policyowners must also decide *how much* data to collect to make contact tracing effective. How much does the government need to know about a person who might have been exposed to the virus?

Apps built on Apple and Google's Exposure Notifications System (ENS)[11] only transmit and store random and regularly changing identification numbers that are linked to users' devices rather than their identities. This approach has won plaudits from privacy advocates,[12] but creates a different challenge, because devices could be used by different people. How do we know that the person using the device when it registers proximity with an infected person is the same person who is called up for possible exposure? In contrast, India's Aarogya Setyu, which has raised privacy concerns, collects a person's name, phone number, gender, travel history, and smoking habits (if any), on top of both location and proximity data.

In deciding how much information is needed to identify individuals, authorities need to consider two issues: what information is useful for public health efforts, and potential risks to privacy and data security.

04 STORAGE

Data collected is data that must be stored somewhere. In the case of potentially sensitive personal information, this stored data must also be secured. Here, policyowners need to weigh threat assessment (who would want to compromise the data collected, for what purpose, and how?) against public health utility.

Unlike solutions that collect location data, both BlueTrace[13] (derived from Singapore's TraceTogether) and the Apple-Google ENS use Bluetooth to collect proximity or associational data. Both transmit and receive random "nicknames" associated with users' devices. Both enhance privacy and data security by only storing nicknames on these devices. If the encryption keys that linked these nicknames to devices or identities were ever compromised, a hacker would still have to break into individual phones to access the proximity data stored within.

This means that both systems have a security advantage over systems that store data on a server. Storing data on a server creates a single point of failure—the server could be compromised by a hack, an accidental leak, or sabotage by a rogue insider. If the data is stored in plain text (i.e., readable by a human being), and if large amounts of data have been collected so that one leak exposes a great deal of information about individuals, then the leak becomes more severe. In China, COVID-19-related data, including

names, identification numbers, phone numbers, and addresses, have been leaked:[14] as a result, people who may have been exposed to the virus have been harassed. The leak of data that is difficult to change—e.g., a national identification number or biometric data—would be particularly egregious, since that could compromise people across multiple systems in ways that are challenging to quickly correct.

BlueTrace and the Apple-Google ENS differ in whether they allow information gathered to be uploaded to a server where it can be decrypted to identify individuals: BlueTrace does; the Apple-Google ENS does not. BlueTrace allows data centralisation because it enables health authorities to quickly identify and isolate potential carriers of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. As a safeguard, BlueTrace only stores and uploads information on exposure gathered over a certain period. As such, BlueTrace's compromise on data centralisation arguably makes it a better option for most health systems. Notably, centralising information and contact tracing by health authorities are already standard practices with many other infectious diseases (e.g., sexually transmitted infections,[15] tuberculosis,[16] Ebola[17]).

Apple and Google have refused to allow centralisation due to privacy concerns. As global companies, their tough stance on privacy is understandable, since they would not want their technology to be used in countries where government possession of individuals' data could enable serious incursions against civil liberties. Governments have clashed with the tech giants by asking that the ENS allow them to collect more data and centralise information for COVID-19 infections.[18] These governments question why the tech giants' commercial policies should prevent them from better integrating technology with public health operations to combat an unprecedented health crisis.[19]

Nevertheless, many governments have launched apps based on the Apple-Google protocol, leveraging their ready-to-use digital contact tracing technology to help ameliorate rising outbreaks. The efficacy of such apps does depend on governments' success in persuading citizens to update their status in the apps if they happen to test positive for COVID-19.

05 06 MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

Wing writes that data needs to be managed in ways that "maximise our ability to access and modify the data for subsequent analysis".[20] This raises a highly salient data governance issue, especially in cases where COVID-19 data is centralised: who gets access to the data collected, and what are they authorised to do with it? How this concern is addressed, and assurances that provisions will be adhered to, are key to building trust with citizens over the trade-offs in privacy that governments ask of them.

Contact Tracing and Privacy Concerns Elsewhere

Israel's contact tracing technology is managed by the state security agency, Shin Bet. The agency traces close contacts of COVID-19 patients by using the "Tool", a database which contains the details of phone users in Israel. There is little transparency about how health information collected by the Tool is stored and protected. The use of the Tool for health purposes has been challenged in courts and requires periodic authorisation by the Israeli parliament. Israel's Health Ministry reported that traditional contact tracing had only uncovered a third of COVID-19 cases, while the Tool had identified the rest. Israeli society seems to have accepted the temporary use of a security service for public health purposes, arguably because of its governance and effectiveness.[1]

Fear that a lack of robust governance would deter people from using contact tracing apps has led authorities to commit to limiting the purpose of contact tracing data.

The United Kingdom's Department of Health and Social Care assured individuals that police would not get access to data acquired by the National Health Service's COVID-19 app.[2] Australia has outright criminalised the use of contact tracing data for non-health reasons.[3]

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Singapore's experience underscores the need for legislative guarantees to limit data use. The team behind Singapore's TraceTogether initially publicly committed that data shared with the Ministry of Health would only be used for contact tracing. Politicians repeated this assurance as well. However, in January 2021, in response to a question posed by a Member of Parliament, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs acknowledged that, contrary to these public assurances, the police had in fact accessed TraceTogether data for an investigation in May 2020. The TraceTogether team subsequently clarified that TraceTogether data had always been subject to the Criminal Procedure Code, which empowers the police to access any data for the purpose of criminal investigation.

Singaporeans reacted less to the violation of privacy and more to the fact that a public assurance had been

broken, with the information about it only being released months after the fact. The undermining of trust was arguably made worse by the fact that, as Computer Science Associate Professors Terence Sim[21] and Ben Leong[22] argued separately, TraceTogether data would not have been that useful in criminal investigations anyway. Indeed, Minister of State for Home Affairs Desmond Tan acknowledged that investigators did not find useful data since the suspect had not downloaded the app onto his phone.[23] Singaporeans began to uninstall the app or leave their TraceTogether tokens at home. In response, the Government passed legislation to limit the use of TraceTogether data to investigations for specified serious crimes.

Singapore's experience suggests that there is, realistically, a need to consider alternatives to the two extremes of either opaque and liberal use of data or strictly limiting its use. The World Economic Forum's White Paper on Authorised Public Purpose Access (APPA)[24] provides a middle way forward based on public consent. APPA would move data governance away from a model that over-emphasises individual consent (which could harm individuals) to one that balances the needs of individuals, public purpose, and data holders. Masako Okamoto and Takanori Fujita explain that "under APPA, personal data can sometimes be accessed and used without explicit individual consent, provided this is done for a specific, widely agreed-upon public purpose".[25] An APPA process would include checking a White List to determine if the data type has been approved for a specifically designated purpose. It would also include review by a third party such as an independent board. In this sense, Singapore's legislation to limit the use of TraceTogether data to specific purposes is a step in the right direction.

Upholding Trust in Data Use

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has offered suggestions for how authorities might access data in a way that upholds trust. These include:[1]

- having an efficient mechanism to access data that is supported by "a clear legal framework that is subject to strong checks and balances";
- strengthening users' privacy protections to prevent the erosion of these rights in the name of efficiency;
- allowing technology companies, "except in highly limited cases", to inform users that the authorities have sought their data;
- having governments seek data from a source that is closest to the end user; and
- ensuring that any attempt to access data does not undermine security, and therefore users' trust in technology.

Note

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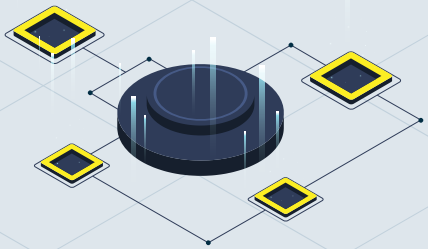
THE USE OF DIGITAL CONTACT TRACING TOOLS COULD BE STRENGTHENED BY BETTER PROVISIONS FOR DECISION PROVENANCE FOR GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY.



More broadly, the use of digital contact tracing tools could be strengthened by better provisions for decision provenance (i.e., who makes what decisions, and how) for government technology. Jatinder Singh, Jennifer Cobbe and Chris Norval of Cambridge University's Department of Computer Science and Technology[26] note that complex technological systems raise accountability challenges as data flows across technical and organisational boundaries. Transparency about who makes what decisions, where in a system, and how, could facilitate compliance with requirements and regulations, offer recourse against harm, and give users agency to make more informed decisions about how their data is used. For this approach to work, engineers, data scientists and bureaucrats will have to make their work more legible to ordinary citizens. In turn, citizens must also become more competent at querying and critically analysing these decisions.

Data governance via the APPA model and which incorporates decision provenance transparency would require a society to have robust deliberations over the robustly deliberate circumstances under which specific data can be shared with and used by specific entities for specific purposes. Indeed, if countries are to treat data as a resource as much as they do finance, then it should be similarly subjected to periodic, public deliberation as to its best use. Continuous public deliberation over data would also be a way for governments to keep abreast of changing societal attitudes towards data privacy, and to consistently replenish reservoirs of trust.

09 ARCHIVAL OR DESTRUCTION

Decisions at the archival or destruction stage of the data life cycle could also influence the extent to which people participate in digital contact tracing. Archival involves removing data from further use (by, for example, storing it in a device that is not connected to networks). Destruction involves permanently deleting it. Deleting data is, in fact, a key aspect of Mozilla's Lean Data Practices. Mozilla notes that the "value of data diminishes over time", and that sensitive data should either be deleted when it is no longer relevant, or stripped of markers that identify the person to whom the data belongs, as much as possible.[27]

The best practice in COVID-19 contact tracing systems is to delete information after some time—usually, the time it takes for the virus to incubate. The Apple-Google ENS deletes information after 14 days. TraceTogether deletes information after 25 days on account of studies which show cases of the virus having a longer incubation period than the two weeks it was previously thought to have.[28] In systems that store data on servers, information could be anonymised and aggregated to diminish its value should it be leaked. This would reduce the harm caused to any individual in case the data is compromised.

OPERATIONAL REALITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

A key ethical question with contact tracing tools is whether participation in tracing is voluntary or mandatory. A high take-up rate of apps is necessary to make digital contact tracing effective: between 56% and 95% of the population, according to a study in *The Lancet*.[29] This might tempt governments to make the use of contact tracing apps mandatory.

Indeed, depending on voluntary participation might not work. In Canada, 95% of Canadians who tested positive for COVID-19 failed to voluntarily report their diagnosis using the country's COVID Alert app. In Ontario, where the app first launched, only 4% of people who had COVID-19 logged their positive diagnoses in the app between 31 July 2020, when the app launched, and 28 September 2020.[30]

At the same time, people care about whether contact tracing apps could be used to perpetually monitor them. In Singapore, 45% of respondents in a study by Blackbox Research said that they did not download the TraceTogether app mainly because they "did not want the government tracing their movements".[31] When Singapore introduced a TraceTogether token, over 54,000 people signed a Change.org petition, "Singapore Says 'No' To Wearable Devices for Covid-19 Contact Tracing".[32] In India, citizens pushed back against an attempt by a district administration to make the use of Aarogya Setu compulsory.[33]

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister-in-charge of the Smart Nation initiative, affirmed in an interview that "maintaining trust, respecting privacy and getting voluntary participation is absolutely essential" for contact tracing.[34] Indeed, nurturing public trust in institutions is vital to governments' ability to fight COVID-19. Actions that sacrifice trust for compliance with mandated use of apps could end up backfiring on overall public health efforts.

MOVING FORWARD: STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE AND TRUST

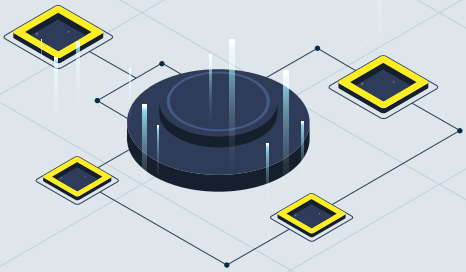
As COVID-19 restrictions ease, the case for using contact tracing tools to mitigate risk becomes stronger. More will need to

be done to assure citizens that contact tracing technology—indeed, all sorts of civic technology—is doing things *for* them rather than *to* them. In this vein, Singapore's Ministry of Health and Smart Nation and Digital Government Office promoted the use of TraceTogether as an effort by Singaporeans to "protect themselves, their loved ones and their community"[35] from COVID-19. This was an appeal to both self-interest and altruism. In Singapore, SafeEntry has long been functionally mandatory, its use required in a wide array of venues. There have latterly been moves to make the use of TraceTogether mandatory at certain venues. This is an opportunity to strengthen public engagement on when, where, and why contact tracing is used, in order to encourage enthusiastic participation.

Better data governance could also foster participation. Compromises on voluntary participation should be accompanied by stronger protections for privacy trade-offs. For example, SafeEntry could adopt some of TraceTogether's privacy safeguards, such as limiting the data's use to explicitly stated public purposes. Governments could also strengthen public assurances by stiffening sanctions on public servants who use contact tracing data for reasons other than those that have been authorised.

Ultimately, people's willingness to work with COVID-19 public health measures depends on the extent to which they trust the governance system as a whole. In this sense, citizens' enthusiastic compliance with public health measures—including digital contact tracing—is a daily poll of the authorities' ability to both protect their health and keep their data safe. ■

BETTER DATA GOVERNANCE COULD FOSTER PARTICIPATION. COMPROMISES ON VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED BY STRONGER PROTECTIONS FOR PRIVACY TRADE-OFFS.



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The Role of **PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS** and **ENGAGEMENT** in a Pandemic

by **Heather Humphries**

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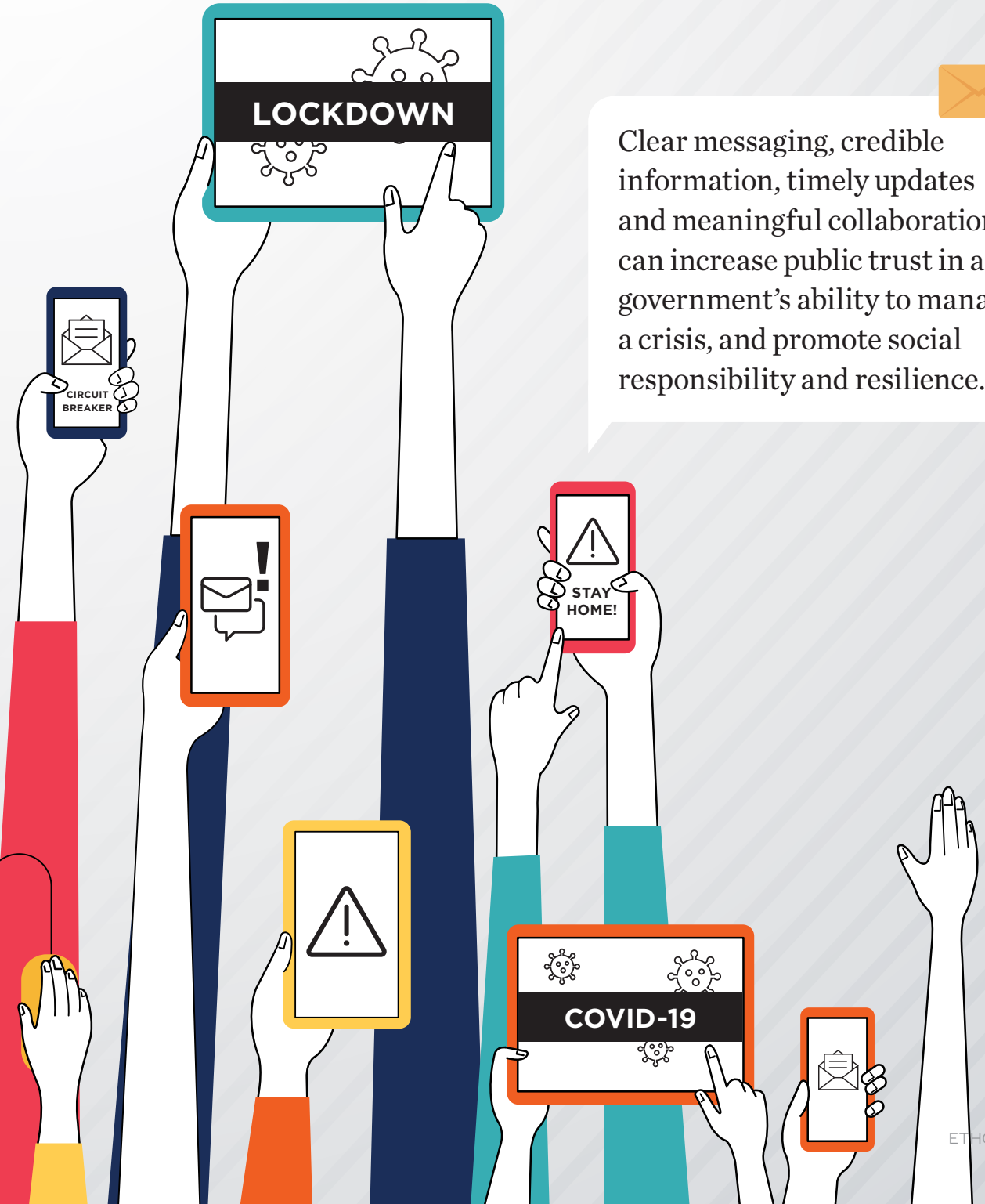


Clear messaging, credible information, timely updates and meaningful collaboration can increase public trust in a government's ability to manage a crisis, and promote social responsibility and resilience.

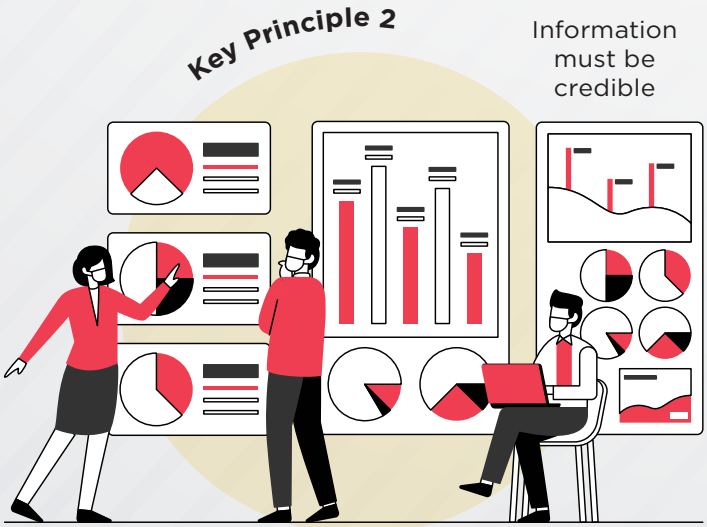
> "Our COVID-19 response also depended critically on Singaporeans working together, and giving the government their trust and support. They understood the need for tough and painful measures, and complied with them. Many Singaporeans' lives have been severely affected, but they have borne the difficulties calmly and stoically. They had confidence that the government would see them through the crisis and beyond."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong[1]

Public Trust Matters to Public Policy

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the ability of public institutions to respond effectively in a crisis and to keep citizens safe. In a pandemic, how quickly public institutions develop and implement their strategies to contain and isolate the virus has implications on public health.

However, citizen support is just as important in ensuring that public measures work as intended. For instance, for safe distancing measures to be effective, citizens need to be aware of guidelines, accept that they are for their own and others' protection, and adhere to them even if they are inconvenient. When there is trust in institutions, citizens comply more readily with regulations and there is less need for enforcement.



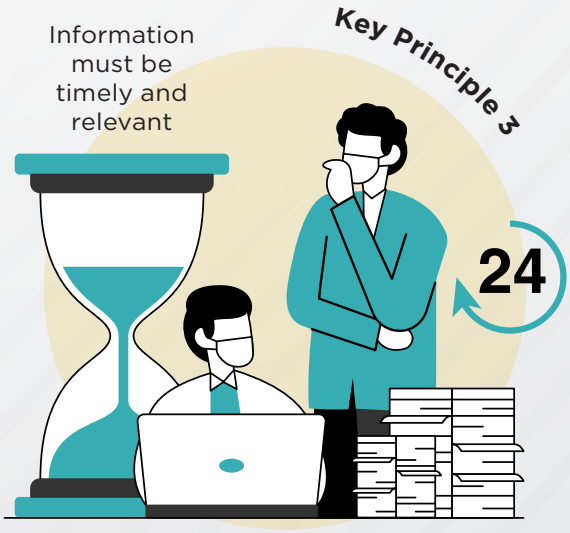
Ultimately, *trust in public institutions* has an impact on the efficacy of policies. As senior advisor to the Centre for Strategic Futures and former Head of Civil Service Peter Ho notes: "Particularly in times of crisis... public trust empowers the government to act decisively. Bitter medicine is more easily swallowed when there is public trust."[2]

Public trust is dynamic. It is influenced by citizens' expectations and their perceptions of how the government is doing—both of which can shift over time.[3] In an age where people are often bombarded with information from multiple sources, public institutions have to compete for citizens' mindshare. In volatile, uncertain circumstances, citizens must be able to rely on clear and timely information from trusted sources. Misinformation, or a lack of information, can foster confusion, diminish confidence in public institutions, and discourage desired behaviours.[4]

Public Communications amid a Crisis

In Singapore, public communications and citizen engagement have been pivotal in engendering public trust amid the pandemic. Through a multi-pronged approach,[5] the Government has ensured that citizens are kept abreast of latest developments in COVID-19 cases, and the various safe management practices and measures adopted to limit the spread of COVID-19. Beyond the public communications drive, the Government has also worked hand in hand with citizens to identify and address pressing public needs in the pandemic.

Singapore's approach is consistent with the World Health Organization's Strategic Communications Framework, which outlines key principles to building public trust in the context of health issues: accessibility, credibility and timeliness.[6]



Key Principle 1: Information must be accessible

Everyone in society must be able to easily access important health-related information, through traditional media and social media, in ways that they can understand and relate to.

For the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore's Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) has adopted a multi-platform, multi-language and multi-format approach to ensure that vital information reaches different segments of society.[7]

In the digital sphere, updates are pushed out across the official Gov.sg website, as well as official social media and messaging accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and Telegram, providing the public with accurate, bite-sized updates on the go.

> Everyone in society must be able to easily access important health-related information, in ways that they can understand and relate to.

Complementing digital platforms are traditional channels such as print media, radio and free-to-air (FTA) TV,[8] and physical posters and digital display panels in HDB estates.

MCI has also customised communications to engage different audience segments about COVID-19 developments. Messages encouraging good hygiene practices and socially responsible behaviour were aired in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. MCI commissioned vernacular programmes, broadcast across FTA TV and radio channels, featuring home-based activities and exercise segments to encourage seniors to keep active and healthy.[9]

Image Credit: Gov.sg

Image Credit: Gov.sg

MCI also engaged local content creators and artistes to create short-form content in different languages, combining important health messages with humour. The "Comedians Get Serious" video series featured four well-known local comedians encouraging the public to practice good personal hygiene in a light-hearted and entertaining way.[10] A RySense study found 70% of Singaporeans polled agreed that employing humour in public campaigns was good "as these helped keep spirits up during a pandemic".[11]

Key Principle 2: Information must be credible

Good public communications are credible and transparent. This means that any information presented must be clear, accurate and backed up by data or science. The messenger is as important as the message. How, when and what information is presented also affects audience perceptions—whether the information is trustworthy and worth complying with.

How, when and what information is presented also affects audience perceptions—whether the information is trustworthy and worth complying with.

Misinformation had been a growing concern even before the pandemic struck. However, COVID-19 has underscored how dangerous misinformation can be if left unchecked. According to a 2020 study published in the *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, at least 800 people may have died globally, and over 5,800 people hospitalised, as a result of misinformation that consuming concentrated methanol would cure COVID-19.[12] This "infodemic"—the spread of COVID-19-specific misinformation—has become a common challenge around the world, undermining public trust and government efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic.[13]

One way to tackle this infodemic is to establish the credibility of information sources. Singapore's Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF), set up to manage

the pandemic, has worked closely with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and medical experts so that decision-making is informed by the best available medical data.[14] The Director of Medical Services at MOH, Associate Professor Kenneth Mak, has been a regular figure at the MTF virtual press conferences, providing inputs and clarifications on health advisories and COVID-19 developments. The MTF has also aligned and updated their advisories based on guidelines from international institutions such as the World Health Organization.[15] Communications based on technical expertise lends credibility to the information provided.

Establishing credibility is challenging in a "post-truth" world. For public institutions, the pervasiveness of social media and online messaging platforms can be both a boon and bane. While they can be used to push out information quickly to a wide audience domestically and globally, these same channels allow for misinformation to propagate just as rapidly.

Public trust, communications and engagement operate in a virtuous cycle, where one feeds into and builds upon the other.

To combat this, the Government has tapped on social media and popular messaging platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp to dispel false claims. Citizens can access verified information on their preferred communication channels, which can help counter the false information they might receive there.[16] But this approach is predicated on the underlying trust citizens have in public institutions. Public trust, communications and engagement operate in a virtuous cycle, where one feeds into and builds upon the other.

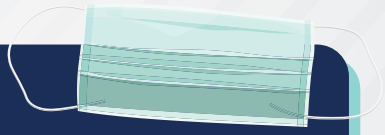
With countries now rolling out vaccination programmes, misinformation and scepticism over the effects and efficacy of the new COVID-19 vaccines have also been on the rise. According to survey findings in late-2020 by the Nanyang Technological University, close to 25% of individuals polled in Singapore believed that COVID-19 vaccines altered DNA, which is untrue.[17]

Misinformation could lead to greater vaccine hesitation. If governments do not understand ground concerns and do not swiftly educate the public on the true mechanisms, benefits and risks of the new vaccines, public trust could wane and affect vaccine take-up. Extra efforts may have to be taken to address these misconceptions. In Singapore, volunteers from the People's Association and Silver Generation Ambassadors are conducting house visits to specifically address the concerns of seniors, who may be more vulnerable to misinformation.[18]

Governments may also take legislative action against misinformation, as part of a broader spectrum of responses. The Singapore Government has used the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) to correct falsehoods circulated during the pandemic. The challenge for governments is to strike a balance between deterring misinformation and not being perceived as unduly harsh.

However, vaccine hesitation is a complex issue, for which misinformation

is only one factor. The decision to take up the vaccine can be influenced by other considerations, such as individual experiences and personal risk assessments. Singapore's ability to contain COVID-19 has ironically led some to wait to take up the vaccine, because of the perceived low risk of community exposure and low fatality rate in the city-state.[19] Public communication and education efforts must take into account such nuances when considering how to foster public trust in vaccines and other health measures.



To Mask or not to Mask?

Consistency can be a challenge, especially in a pandemic when the situation is constantly evolving. Changes have to be communicated clearly, in a manner that builds trust.

Early in the pandemic, when there was no official evidence that wearing masks could prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Singapore Government stipulated that masks were to be worn only when ill. In early April 2020, alongside the implementation of a nation-wide Circuit Breaker, the Government updated its advisory on mask-wearing. People were no longer discouraged from wearing masks even if they were well.[1] There was some public backlash as the Government was perceived to be inconsistent.

The Multi-Ministry Taskforce stepped in to explain the rationale for updating the mask-wearing advisory through a virtual press conference.[2] It explained that the decision was guided by new scientific evidence that asymptomatic patients could transmit COVID-19, and concerns about undetected community cases at the time.[3] By mid-April 2020, the Government made it mandatory to wear masks in public spaces.[4]

The incident illustrated the importance of credible information, clear explanation of changes, and updated messaging in fostering public trust.

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In a time of great uncertainty, routine updates and timely information can give reassurance to the public.

Key Principle 3: Information must be timely and relevant

Critical information should be disseminated in a timely and relevant way. If information is delayed and citizens are made aware of developments through other sources, authorities may be seen to be withholding information.[20] The absence of updated news could also lead to speculation and unnecessary fear. Messages should also be framed in a way that is relevant to the target audience. This means governments should have an ear to the ground in framing messages that elicit the desired actions.

In a time of great uncertainty, routine updates and timely information can give reassurance to the public. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in Singapore, daily case updates and press conferences held by the MTF have become the "new norm" for information on COVID-19. Information from these daily updates are swiftly disseminated through multiple channels. Since citizens may face a deluge of information about the pandemic, updates pushed out through social media and messaging platforms are kept short and easily understood. The daily case updates follow a familiar template and timing. Summarised safe management "Dos and Don'ts" provide bite-sized, actionable items that the audience can follow up on.

The importance of transparent and relevant information was underlined by the controversy surrounding Singapore's TraceTogether (TT) programme,[21] which facilitates the speedy contact tracing deemed vital to managing the pandemic's spread. While the public was originally told that TT data would only be used for contact tracing purposes,[22] it was subsequently revealed in Parliament that the police could access TT data for criminal investigations under the Criminal Procedure Code.

This belated announcement resurfaced concerns over data privacy and public trust, with real consequences: some 350 users opted to have their TT data deleted in January 2021.[23, 24]

Striking the Right Tone

Effective communications must strike the right balance in tone, both in terms of its content as well as how it is conveyed.

In Singapore, the Virus Vanguard webcomic campaign, launched on Gov.sg in mid-April, was intended to be a light-hearted way to spread awareness of safe management measures. But netizens took issue with the comic's characters and their backstories, and cited similarities to characters by other artists. The comic was also considered ill-timed as daily case numbers were high at the time of the launch. Although well-intentioned, the poor reception highlighted how public communications need to be particularly sensitive, especially in fraught times.

Beyond Information to Inspiration

In a crisis, public communications must go beyond conveying information. On the right occasion, they can also offer encouragement, lift the national spirit and inspire hope.

In 2020, MCI launched a series of initiatives via broadcast media and multiple online platforms to achieve this. For example, two media campaigns were timed specifically for the unprecedented Circuit Breaker, which kept many at home, to encourage and unite people despite their physical separation.

A national singalong event was also held at 7:55 p.m. on 25 April 2020,[25] a few days after the extension of the Circuit Breaker was announced. At the same moment island-wide, Singaporeans across the nation sang the popular national song "Home" from their windows and balconies, waving lights as a show of solidarity and support for frontline and migrant workers. A compilation video, taken from over 5,000 video submissions, was broadcast later that same evening.

A 15-minute segment, paying tribute to frontline workers and featuring individuals impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, was also launched on national TV on 1 June 2020, when the Circuit Breaker ended. These campaigns helped boost morale amid a trying period of the crisis.

Galvanising the Public to Tackle the Pandemic

Effective public communications are only one aspect of cultivating public trust. The burden of tackling the pandemic is not limited to governments or healthcare workers and requires broader community involvement.[26]

Indeed, the outpouring of help in Singapore since the outbreak shows that the public is willing and able to support those adversely impacted by the pandemic. For example, several community initiatives were kickstarted to translate medical information for healthcare and migrant workers so they could communicate better with each other.[27]

Many of the pressing challenges of dealing with COVID-19 have also been addressed by engaging citizens in co-creating and co-delivering solutions. This approach allows a government to tap on the collective wisdom and insight of different groups to deliver help where it is most needed.[28] In the process, a government and its public build up mutual trust by cooperating on initiatives for the common good.

Citizen engagement offers a platform and voice to citizens to contribute to public decision-making and implementation. Depending on the mode of engagement, the level of

citizen participation may differ, with co-delivery and co-creation entailing deeper engagement and involvement by citizens.

A government and its public build up mutual trust by cooperating on initiatives for the common good.

During a pandemic, how governments engage citizens may take a different form, but the underlying principles remain unchanged. Expectations should be articulated clearly and early to avoid misconceptions. Engagement that is perceived to be merely a "paper exercise" risks undermining public trust and confidence. This is especially salient in an environment where access to information is vast and easy, citizens are more discerning, and expectations of the government are high.[29] Good citizen engagement is intentional, people-centric, collaborative, transparent and inclusive.[30]

This is similar to what some Public Health researchers from the Dialogue, Evidence, Participation and Translation for Health (DEPTH) research group at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine have outlined in their four steps[31] for developing effective citizen participation in response to COVID-19:

1 Invest in co-production

The DEPTH research group recommends that governments dedicate specific space, resources and manpower to coordinate community participation.[32] Providing space (whether virtual or physical) and information on relevant networks, agencies and available funding sends the signal that governments are willing to support ground-up initiatives in a concrete way.

For example, SGUnited, a Singapore Together initiative, is a rallying movement for Singaporeans to work together to combat the challenges of the pandemic. The SGUnited banner has brought together community initiatives supporting frontline workers, as well as vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19.

In response to community support and interest in volunteering, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre created the SGUnited Portal.[33] This one-stop site connects interested volunteers with charities that need vital manpower and offers people the autonomy to kickstart initiatives that address important issues in the community.

One such initiative is Welcome In My Backyard, a campaign led by a group of volunteers seeking to encourage Singaporeans to be more accepting of migrant workers, after it was announced that healthy workers would be relocated to housing estates to stave off the spread of COVID-19. Comprising local ambassadors who live in estates that would house the workers, the volunteers seek to debunk stereotypes of the workers.[34]

2 Work with community groups

Community groups can play a pivotal role in citizen engagement. Their on-the-ground expertise and networks provide

insight into the immediate needs and challenges of those affected by the pandemic. They are well-placed to raise awareness and mobilise the community in ways governments may not be able to do as quickly in a pandemic.

The SGUnited Buka Puasa initiative is a multi-partner collaboration between the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), local mosques, the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation, the People's Association, Roses of Peace and the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry.[35] The project aimed to deliver 20,000 meals a day during Ramadan to frontline healthcare workers and their families, zakat beneficiaries of MUIS, and other families who needed the meals. By early May 2020, the project had managed to raise close to S$2.6 million in funds, including through community donations.[36] These joint collaborations not only bolster public trust, but also strengthen mutual trust within the community.

Public trust may be affected when policies or issues have disparate effects for different people.

3 Commit to diversity

Citizen engagement can be an important channel for different experiences to be shared with policymakers and to co-create solutions, provided engagement modes are accessible to and intentionally inclusive of different segments of society.[37] The effects of the pandemic are not felt equally across different segments of society. Low-income individuals are disproportionately affected by the economic downturn. People with disabilities may face difficulties with certain safe management measures that others may not.

Public trust may be affected when policies or issues have disparate effects for different people. First, groups who find it difficult to access such engagement channels may feel excluded and ignored, and cynicism over citizen engagement efforts could grow. Second, if those consulted or engaged are largely homogenous groups, there is a risk of missing unintended consequences. This could affect the perceived ability of governments to deliver effectively—which is a function of public trust.

In Singapore, the Emerging Stronger Conversations (ESC), initiated in June 2020, has brought together citizens in virtual Zoom sessions to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, raise issues and propose ideas. The Government has committed to developing partnerships through the Singapore Together Alliances for Action to tackle prominent themes raised, translating the conversations into concrete actions.[38] To ensure greater accessibility, ESC sessions have been held in Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, in addition to English.[39] As part of the ESC, some 120 members in the disability community also gathered to share with political office holders their experience during COVID-19.[40]

4 Be responsive and transparent

Being responsive and transparent is not only important during citizen engagement, but after as well. Leaving citizens high and dry after engagement activities are over can be detrimental

Leaving citizens high and dry after engagement activities are over can be detrimental to public trust: engagement can seem merely transactional or superficial.

to public trust: engagement can seem merely transactional or superficial.

Policymakers involved in citizen engagement highlight the importance of "closing the loop": one way this can be done is to summarise the insights gleaned and explain the next steps that will be taken.[41] In the case of the ESC, sessions were summarised into an ongoing series of infographics, highlighting the key themes and talking points raised.[42] Subsequently, a report was published online, on a website which also provides multiple opportunities for further participation and action by citizens.

There is often a time lag between engagement and the tangible implementation of solutions. In the interim, it is important to keep the process open and transparent, ensuring that citizen participants are made aware that their contributions have been heard; they may also want to know how their feedback may feed into a specific policy. As not all ideas may be incorporated, governments should manage expectations by explaining the rationale behind their decisions. Doing so provides assurance to citizens that their participation is valued and valuable.

Building Trust in Government after the Pandemic

Trust and engagement enjoy an interdependent relationship.[43] Citizen engagement is a useful means to understanding the needs of citizens and fostering confidence in government. Conversely, the success of citizen engagement in a crisis also relies on existing public trust built in quieter times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of cultivating relationships and growing community capacity during peacetime. The groundswell of community action was possible due to the strong partnerships and mutual trust between community partners and the public sector, which had been built over a long period of time.

Singapore has continued to see high levels of trust in government, evidenced by the findings in the recent Edelman Trust Barometer 2020

Trust and engagement enjoy an interdependent relationship.

report.[44] However, it is important that trust-building continues.

Public trust is sensitive to public perceptions and expectations. It hinges on the government's ability to keep a finger on the pulse of citizen concerns and preferences.

Keeping open and transparent communications is vital. Transparency and trust go hand-in-hand.[45] Providing timely, clear and transparent information provides certainty at a time when uncertainty and ambiguity is high. Critically, it also provides assurance and allows for more effective recovery without being sidetracked by wild speculation or misinformation.

Ensuring that communications and engagement are inclusive, accessible and meaningful goes a long way in maintaining public trust. Offering Singaporeans opportunities to contribute, help one another and share personal stories can help our people to feel more rooted and nurture greater national solidarity. Ensuring citizens feel heard and have a sense of ownership in shaping the future can strengthen the government-citizen and citizen-citizen relationships for the long term. Such relationships, founded on hard-earned trust, will be vital as we navigate the uncertainties of the future. ■

Ensuring that communications and engagement are inclusive, accessible and meaningful goes a long way in maintaining public trust.

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LEADERSHIP at a TIME OF (ANOTHER) CRISIS

by **Peter Shergold**

Strong, nuanced communication and the ability to seize opportunities have emerged as attributes of effective public sector leadership in a COVID-disrupted world.

Five Traits of Effective Leadership: Are They Enough?

In 2009, as a newly appointed Senior Visiting Fellow with Singapore's Civil Service College, I arrived in the city-state at a time of crisis. A global financial collapse had triggered recession. There was widespread concern that the event might presage worldwide depression. It was already apparent that the severity and depth of the economic downturn would require bold responses from governments around the world. Public administrators would need to support them with policy advice and delivery.

At meetings at the College I was asked what I considered to be the essential qualities of civil service leadership that were needed. In a subsequent article in *Ethos* (Issue 6, July 2009),[1] I identified five characteristics: whole-of-government **collegiality** across the silos of bureaucracy; effective **execution** and delivery of government decisions; **persistence** in the face of uncertainty and adversity; the application of **authenticity** to decision-making, so that both personal experience and public behaviours are recognised as influential elements of "evidence"; and a shared **pride in the vocation** of working with integrity for the public good. These attributes implicitly called for emotional intelligence and experiential learning to complement traditional cognitive approaches associated with administrative leadership.

Today the world faces a very different crisis, the potential consequences of which may be even more far-reaching. The global pandemic has forced governments to grapple with how best to protect public health without closing down the economic activity that sustains societal well-being. It's a difficult balancing act. It requires administrative compromise at many levels, not least between individual freedoms and collective responsibility. To what extent, and for how long, will citizens accept limits on their traditional liberties? How does one maintain public confidence in the tough decisions being taken? How does one ensure that the burdens and benefits of government interventions are seen to be shared equally across society?

At a time of such pressure, questions abound. What are the elements of public service leadership that come to the fore as societies seek to make urgent decisions in the best long-term interests of the citizenry? On reflection, did I—a decade ago—correctly identify the most important qualities? As we prepare for the post-COVID-19 "new normal", do I believe additional attributes are required?

Communicating in a Crisis

To my earlier list of five attributes, I would now add two others. One is the **ability to communicate**. I do not simply mean the capacity to write clearly and speak persuasively.

Rather, I mean the ability to weave a convincing story that the public can understand.

Usually it is the role of politicians to craft the political narrative that conveys to the public the reasons for the policy proposals that they espouse or the decisions that they take. In general, the views of civil servants are offered more circumspectly, at least in public. To a large extent they communicate behind closed doors. Their goal is to influence.

Good public servants will communicate more effectively to the extent that they are able to tailor their arguments to government ambitions. To be apolitical, providing frank and robust policy advice in a confidential and non-partisan manner, does not mean being non-political. A keen understanding of the goals of government can be mightily advantageous to public officials seeking to wield subtle power in a manner that is likely to evoke a positive response from the government of the day. They need to capture the interest (and stoke the enthusiasm) of the minister they serve. A senior civil servant cannot depend exclusively for influence upon the advantage of situational authority.

In times of crisis, things can change significantly. Senior officials, who may have been almost invisible to the public, can unexpectedly become reluctant national celebrities. Ministers, seeking to take challenging and

GOOD PUBLIC SERVANTS WILL COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO TAILOR THEIR ARGUMENTS TO GOVERNMENT AMBITIONS.

potentially unpopular decisions, are tempted to defer (at least in public) to the superior knowledge of their "independent" experts.

In late 2019 and early 2020, when horrendous bush fires raged across much of the Australian landscape, political leaders increasingly left it to the heads of emergency service and first responder organisations to update the media each morning on the dire situation. Presumably, politicians figured that the public had greater confidence in hearing directly from a frontline expert.

Similarly, at the daily updates on COVID-19 presented by the Australian Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers, it has become prevailing practice to have the chief medical officers and senior health officials available to answer the detailed questions. It is apparent that a similar approach has been taken in many other democracies, including Singapore.

At a time of crisis, the expertise which always resides among anonymous public servants, and which underpins their ability to formulate evidence-based policy, becomes increasingly

IN TIMES OF CRISIS, THINGS CAN CHANGE SIGNIFICANTLY. SENIOR OFFICIALS, WHO MAY HAVE BEEN ALMOST INVISIBLE TO THE PUBLIC, CAN UNEXPECTEDLY BECOME RELUCTANT NATIONAL CELEBRITIES.

IN THE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA, EVERYONE'S OPINION IS FREQUENTLY REGARDED AS EQUALLY VALID. FORTUNATELY, AT A TIME OF SOCIETAL CRISIS, THE VALUE OF ADVICE PROVIDED BY EXPERT PUBLIC OFFICIALS CAN BE RE-ESTABLISHED.

visible. The power of effective communication, often honed to convey information and ideas confidentially, now has to be undertaken in the full gaze of media scrutiny.

In general, that's a good thing. In the world of social media, everyone's opinion is frequently regarded as equally valid. Expertise is often denigrated as elitist. Celebrity opinion dominates. Conspiracy theories that seem to explain complex events simply can become beguilingly attractive.

Fortunately, at a time of societal crisis, the value of advice provided by expert public officials can be re-established. There is political value in governments acknowledging

expertise, both as a means of strengthening public confidence and, on occasion, as a means to defer to others the responsibility for enacting unpopular decisions. The problem is that the public often expects experts to subscribe to a single unchanging opinion. This has become apparent in the present pandemic. One difficult challenge for public officials, whether behind closed doors or in front of a microphone, is to communicate effectively why different experts hold divergent views at different times.

That is especially true when expertise is contested. The traditional media will take some pleasure in interviewing academic epidemiologists or senior medical practitioners whose advice is at odds with that presented by public officials (and government ministers). In some instances—for example, on whether or not to wear face masks or the most strategic approach to vaccination—experts may alter their recommendations as more evidence becomes available.

But it can be far harder to convey to the public the differences of opinion that relate to the public policy goal being addressed. It is vital that senior public officials carefully articulate the objectives they are pursuing on behalf of government. Is the intention to manage or to eliminate the virus? Is the priority to minimise COVID-19-related deaths, to lessen pressure on the public health system or to alleviate the broader detrimental impact of lockdowns or loss of employment on the mental health of the community?

DISRUPTION CAN BE A SOURCE OF PUBLIC INNOVATION. IN A CRISIS, THERE IS A HEIGHTENED WILLINGNESS TO EMBRACE HASTE AND BOLDNESS.

In short, civil service leadership requires the capacity to communicate clearly the political objectives that determine the expert advice being provided. Citizens will look to officials for answers but administrators need first to explain more precisely the questions that they are being asked. Unless public purpose can be accurately conveyed, it is difficult for citizens to judge success.

Finding Opportunity in Crisis

A final and most vital attribute of leadership at a time when civil society is under severe challenge is the capacity to **seize the moment**. Do not let the opportunities presented by a crisis go to waste.

At a time of worldwide dislocation and fear, there are opportunities for democratic governments to act in ways that would have been less possible, or been achieved more slowly, in normal times. Outcomes can be achieved that might otherwise have been considered too ambitious. Decisions can be made fast, that might previously have involved years

NECESSITY CAN BE THE MOTHER OF INVENTION—BUT ONLY IF THERE ARE LEADERS ABLE TO STRUCTURE INVENTIVENESS TO THE PUBLIC GOOD.

of careful bureaucratic negotiation. Disruption can be a source of public innovation. But it requires public service leaders with the insight, fortitude and capacity to recognise and pursue the chances that emerge and to imagine the future that might be created.

Public sector leaders can take advantage of the greater flexibility of decision-making at times of crisis. The processes generally associated with the interactive processes of public administration can be hastened, even on occasion circumvented. Government, organisations and society are more open to change. In a crisis, there is a heightened willingness to embrace haste and boldness.

Necessity can be the mother of invention—but only if there are leaders able to structure inventiveness to the public good. Sometimes this may best be achieved through new or enhanced government programmes. Often it simply requires government to establish the policy settings that enable and encourage innovative market responses.

In many key areas of the economy, such as retail, the pandemic has accelerated and accentuated the profound shift to online transaction and interaction that was already underway. In other sectors, such as tourism or international education, the pandemic has thrown up barriers to international travel which will not quickly be overcome. More generally, the disruption to the global flow of labour is likely to have significant medium-term impact on population growth and skills shortages in migrant-dependent countries like Australia or Singapore.

The pandemic has generated other economic disruptions. COVID-19 has brought us the Zoom era and expectations of a digital workplace that are likely to outlive the pandemic. The move to allow white-collar employees to work from home has the potential to change working habits, office and building design, public transport provisions and even residential preferences. Online employment skills can be harnessed from around the digitalised world.

Public service leaders need to assess how such developments can be guided by governments to the most socially beneficial outcomes.

At the same time, the public expectations created by crisis have to be managed carefully. In many countries, including Australia, the scale of government financial intervention would have been unimaginable at the beginning of 2019. It will be tempting for governments to maintain higher levels of expenditure (and, in effect, place the cost burden on future generations) rather than to return to the financial stringency of balanced budgets.

SEVEN TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE CRISIS LEADERSHIP

01 Ability to communicate and weave a convincing story that the public can understand

02 The capacity to seize the moment and not let the opportunities presented by a crisis go to waste

03 Whole-of-government collegiality across the silos of bureaucracy

04 Effective execution and delivery of government decisions

05 Persistence in the face of uncertainty and adversity

06 The application of authenticity to decision-making, so that both personal experience and public behaviours are recognised as influential elements of "evidence"

07 A shared pride in the vocation of working with integrity for the public good

As we have learnt from behavioural economics, the public is much better at assessing immediate effects than future consequences. Public servants, and the governments they serve, will need to consider not just how to capture the beneficial opportunities of crisis but how to lower public expectations that the crisis-driven level of government spending can be sustained.

In such, and countless other ways, public administrators will need to seize the challenges of crisis and transform them into longer-term opportunities to create public benefit. That will require leadership, of the sort I have summarised in this checklist of seven traits. Perhaps this may serve as *Seven Ways for Civil Servants to Exert Most Influence* on the design and delivery of their governments' capacity to build a new and better post-COVID world. ■

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS WILL NEED TO SEIZE THE CHALLENGES OF CRISIS AND TRANSFORM THEM INTO LONGER-TERM OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE PUBLIC BENEFIT.

Note

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TRANSFORMATION IN THE SINGAPORE PUBLIC SERVICE:

EMERGING STRONGER FROM THE PANDEMIC

by **Ang Hak Seng and Sueann Soon**

Drawing lessons from its past experiences with disruptive and transformative change, the public sector has helped steady and bring together Singaporeans in a turbulent post-COVID world.

Image Credit: kandl stock / Shutterstock.com

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Introduction

The Singapore Public Service is familiar with the experience of massive and disruptive change, of which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is but the latest manifestation. When Singapore attained self-governance in 1959, and then independence in 1965, the Public Service had to localise and re-orient itself—from its roots as part of the colonial administration—towards nation-building. It had to quickly adjust to take on all the functions of a sovereign state, doing whatever it took to evolve into a bureaucracy that could survive. These early experiences in disruptive change set the foundation for a public service that would seek constant improvement amidst shifts in global and local contexts.

Constantly building and improving on what was done before, each past phase of transformation has been in the core pursuit of sustainable growth and cohesive social development. Each shift has been anchored by an ethos of public service that seeks to understand the fears, concerns and aspirations of Singaporeans, strives to constantly do better with our people and for our people, and invests time and effort to pre-empt tomorrow's challenges.[1]

These principles echo lessons gathered over 56 years of transformation efforts in the Singapore Public Service, in seeking to remain relevant to the citizens it serves:

While COVID-19 has brought tremendous disruption to the global landscape, this article outlines how the same hard-earned lessons continue to ground Singapore's response to the crisis as the Public Service works to support and bring Singaporeans as a nation through this challenging period of transformation, and other disruptive challenges the future may hold.

Lesson 01

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION ARE THE PREREQUISITES FOR TRANSFORMATION

> We need to shift from a government that focuses primarily on work for you, to a government that works with you. Working with you, for you.

– Heng Swee Keat
Deputy Prime Minister[2]

Over the decades, the Public Service has learned important and sometimes painful lessons about the need to engage citizens as partners in sensemaking and solutioning for Singapore's future. While engagement in the 1960s through to the 1980s was characterised by *telling* citizens about the pros and cons of policies and the way forward for Singapore, a shift to a more *consulting* style emerged in the 1990s through to the 2000s.

Since the 2010s, as transformation in the Public Service shifted towards "do it together (with citizens)", the tone of citizen engagement correspondingly shifted from consulting to *co-creating*, reflecting a greater "partnership between those who govern and those who are governed".[3] This new stance is exemplified by *Our Singapore Conversation* (OSC)—a series of conversations which took place from 2011 to 2013 over various platforms and involved some 46,000 participants from multiple sectors.[4] Designed to be more inclusive and open than prior engagement efforts, OSC expanded the shared space between citizens and government, helping to build the mutual trust needed for further partnerships and collaboration.[5]

Likewise, the COVID-19-prompted *Emerging Stronger Conversations* (ESC)[6] initiated in 2020 aims to increase community partnerships and expand common spaces in which the Government and citizens can work together to contribute towards the designing and implementation of policies in complex times. The ESC serves as a platform where citizens can share their stories and suggest potential actions and solutions targeted at improving Singapore in a post-COVID era.

Partnerships are critical for converting conviction into action. As issues become more complex, the solution is not to grow the public sector, but to grow and leverage partnerships with people—citizens, corporations, not-for-profits and public

As issues become more complex, the solution is not to grow the public sector, but to grow and leverage partnerships with people.

officers—synthesising collective efforts in co-authoring Singapore's future. The role of the Public Service is to bring together all perspectives to facilitate sense-making, cultivating new and better ways of understanding a situation, how it will unfold and what we can all do about it.[7]

Lesson 02

MEANINGFUL SOCIAL INNOVATION COMES FROM EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

> Today's problems and issues...require the collective will, ideas and effort of the government and citizens.
>
> – Dawn Yip
> Coordinating Director for SG Together, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (Partnerships Project Office)[8]

To build a trusted, thriving and innovative public sector, the Public Service must engage with citizens in more sophisticated ways. "Partnership is also a form of continuous innovation",[9] and public officers will find that partnerships can offer greater access to a wider range of ideas, perspectives and expertise from across Singapore's society.

Building on lessons from the OSC, the *SG Together* movement was launched by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat in 2019 to purposefully develop systems, structures and people that nurture long-term relationships within and among public agencies, stakeholders and citizens.[10] Such longer-term relationships will facilitate even more effective partnerships and collaboration.

SG Together will complement the ideas and connections arising from the ESC initiative. It will also align with efforts and recommendations from the Emerging Stronger Taskforce (EST), announced in April 2020. These efforts will bring together public, private and people (3P) sectors to ensure that economic and social development occur hand-in-hand as Singapore works through the COVID-19 crisis and its impacts.

To ensure that these conversations lead to action, the EST has set up the *Singapore Together Alliances for Action* and the *Singapore Together Action Networks* to draw ideas from different sectors and turn them into real-life solutions for Singaporeans.[11]

Lesson 03

TOGETHER WITH INNOVATION, LEADERSHIP IS REQUIRED TO HAVE A CLEAR VISION OF SUCCESS

> Leadership needs to prevail at every level of society. It is our job to activate not just the talent in our (public) service, but to catalyse the entire nation to come along on this journey.

– Chan Chun Sing
Minister-in-charge of the Public Service and then-Minister for Trade and Industry[12]

The context in which leadership is practised matters. Where it was considered good leadership to closely direct the Public Service's early experiences of transformation, today's leaders must be able to share a clear and inspiring vision of success across all levels of the system. This vision holds the potential to enable and empower people to reimagine the future they want and can achieve.[13] Such a shared vision is key to developing a sense of common purpose, ownership and motivation. Over time, as this "ownership quotient"[14] increases, working in partnership can become instinctive.

This applies beyond the public sector. For example, with a clear vision "to make every senior a volunteer", the volunteer organisation RSVP Singapore (RSVP) leads and initiates people-private-public partnerships to engage seniors to serve the community. This affords participating seniors a sense of ownership, allowing them to become a positive force in the community. Over the years, RSVP has engaged about 2,500 volunteers and served more than 200,000 beneficiaries. This was done even during the COVID-19 pandemic, with RSVP leading virtual platforms to conduct virtual outreach and virtual volunteering.

Leadership must also help their people connect all the small pieces to the whole, to enable them to "think big" and convene the efforts of all public officers so they act as a whole to fulfil whole-of-government (WOG) outcomes. Leaders do this as a part of sense-giving by looking at issues from a higher vantage point and providing others with a sense of meaning or different ways of seeing.[15] For instance, in the protracted battle against COVID-19, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF) has consistently reminded Singaporeans to stay vigilant and adhere to safe management measures even as the nation moved into later phases of reopening. In coordinating

and managing the WOG pandemic response, the MTF maintained laser-sharp focus on two objectives—early detection and ring-fencing to prevent the transmission and formation of large clusters. This clarity of aim helped responding agencies cut through the "noise" of (mis)information.[16]

Leaders must be able to manage change effectively, as well as rally support and involvement from public sector staff as well as different stakeholder groups.

This aspect of leadership was underlined at the launch of the EST. In his keynote address, Mr Heng emphasised that the Government is responsible for "facilitating and enabling" the partnerships between it and the private sector, unions, workers and institutes of higher learning, to be able to move quickly as a "whole ecosystem" in order to seize opportunities.[17] For instance, the effective public-private partnerships among companies such as Veredus Laboratories, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), Duke-NUS Medical School and the like, greatly sped up the development of a range of diagnostic kits for detection, contact tracing and containment efforts.[18]

To enable effective innovation in the Public Service, "mobilisation and movement" characterises the new operating paradigm. Leaders must be able to manage change effectively, as well as rally support and involvement from public sector staff as well as different stakeholder groups. At the same time, they need to be agile and ensure that stakeholders continue to keep the big picture in mind as circumstances change. Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a good example of this. When the virus was still surrounded by uncertainty, the MTF was clear in their focus of stopping the spread of the virus and also ensuring that jobs were protected. This led to the quick introduction of clear social distancing measures, as well as clear policies and support measures.

Lesson 04

WITH A CLEAR VISION, WE NEED TO HAVE OPENNESS AND A GROWTH MINDSET TO DRIVE TRANSFORMATION

Even with a clear vision, the Singapore Public Service must operate with openness and a growth mindset in order to drive transformation. The public sector must tap on Singaporeans' passion and expertise[19] so that it can continue to evolve its DNA for improvement. It must continue to seek opportunities to grow to become the best it can be, and then even better—as a system, and as individual public officers who make the system work.[20]

> The measure of success for these engagements would be the "automatic reflex action" for Government agencies and citizens to work with each other on future ideas and policies.

– Indranee Rajah
Second Minister for Finance and Second Minister for National Development[21]

Adopting a growth and open mindset is not only about strengthening the Public Service, but also about empowering the people sector. While the social service sector has made much progress, particularly in the areas of governance and public accountability, a lack of coordination among organisations and volunteers has led to situations where different beneficiary groups have been either over-served or under-served. This imbalance has been made more evident by the COVID-19 crisis.

By adopting an open and collaborative stance, the SG Cares Office has pushed for more sustainable and effective solutions by partnering the people sector to solve such issues. Since each social service agency is most familiar with the issues in "their town", the SG Cares Office has identified these agencies as Volunteer Centres in each town to promote awareness, galvanise participation, develop volunteer communities and offer regular and impactful volunteer opportunities. This approach offers a much more effective way of connecting volunteer efforts with beneficiaries' needs.

Adopting a growth and open mindset is not only about strengthening the Public Service, but also about empowering the people sector.

The value of Volunteer Centres was demonstrated during the COVID-19 Circuit Breaker period between April and June 2020, in which many vulnerable groups were affected by the enforced physical and social isolation. During this period, Volunteer Centres stepped forward to gather needs and worked with partners to coordinate efforts and provide essential goods to the vulnerable such as face masks, hand sanitisers, food items and exercise bands.[22] Such efforts have continued even as Singapore moved into later phases of safe reopening.

Lesson 05

FOR TRANSFORMATION TO BE SUSTAINABLE, EMPATHY IS NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND NEEDS AND TO STAY RELEVANT

> If there is interest from the public, the Government will not shy away from holding debates on controversial topics...the key is to ensure that these discussions can take place in a safe common space, where people feel they can speak out without it turning into a fight.

– Indranee Rajah
Second Minister for Finance and
Second Minister for National Development[23]

On top of understanding the people's perspectives, the Singapore Public Service must be able to engage citizens about their concerns in a safe and constructive space.

For transformation to be effective and sustainable, the Public Service must stay connected with the circumstances, needs and sentiments of citizens. On top of understanding the people's perspectives, the Singapore Public Service must be able to engage citizens about their concerns in a safe and constructive space. For instance, the ESC has indicated that, since the COVID-19 outbreak, Singaporeans have been most concerned about issues pertaining to social support, jobs and economy, education and training, digitalisation and technology, and engagement and partnership (between government and people).[24]

Beyond the broad labels, the Public Service must be able to appreciate the more nuanced dimensions of citizens' aspirations, concerns and fears. These include (1) maintaining the public's trust that the Government will not leave them behind in the pursuit of economic development, (2) giving assurance that the Government will continue to support citizens as they work hard towards a better life for themselves and their children, (3) involving the public as partners in the creation of Singapore's future, and (4) understanding and having empathy for the concerns of stakeholders, including those who may disagree on particular issues.

A group that the Singapore Public Service must quickly learn to empathise and partner with is the youth—the generation that has the greatest stake in the future. Purpose-driven and willing to contribute,[25] our youth did not choose to remain bystanders during the COVID-19 period: instead, they took action individually and collectively to provide assistance and support to fellow Singaporeans who needed a leg-up in coping with the circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Whether it was delivering food to families who could not queue up for their usual packages (e.g., delivering meals to 500 families for Ramadan), sewing reusable masks for those who could not procure them (particularly prior to the Government's free mask distribution exercise), leading efforts through non-profits (e.g., Engineering Good's Computers Against COVID), or even starting their own businesses (e.g., Beng Who Cooks)[26]—youths from all walks of life invested themselves in improving the conditions of fellow Singaporeans even as they grappled with their own challenges during the pandemic. This is an encouraging sign for Singapore's future. The Public Service must find constructive ways of tapping on the energies, ideas and passions of this new generation—within and beyond the public sector—through active engagement and collaboration.

A group that the Singapore Public Service must quickly learn to empathise and partner with is the youth—the generation that has the greatest stake in the future.

Conclusion

EMERGING STRONGER FROM COVID-19

> Having embarked on Public Sector Transformation, agencies approached this crisis with stronger capabilities. Yet, COVID-19 has taught us lessons that will last way beyond this crisis.

– Heng Swee Keat
Deputy Prime Minister[27]

The five lessons discussed above have served Singapore well in past phases of change, and continue to stand us in good stead in the disruptive wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the new normal brought about by COVID-19 may be experienced as demanding and disruptive, we need to remember that transformation is also natural and a necessary part of innovation and growth. In this spirit, Singapore cannot just aim to cope with COVID-19. We need to emerge stronger from this pandemic by tapping on the opportunities that COVID-19 has presented.

First, we can become a stronger society by **quickening the pace of transformation through technology and innovation**. COVID-19 has accelerated digitalisation in the 3P sectors, from conducting meetings virtually to providing services online. To combat COVID-19, we have also built up digital solutions such as TraceTogether. Singapore's response to the crisis highlights the potential for making better use of data collection and greater integration of operations and technology.

Second, we need to continue being citizen-centric and business-centric in the way that we design and implement policies. COVID-19 has highlighted the **importance of an agile, integrated Public Service**. To manage and stabilise the spread of COVID-19, many public agencies worked together to enforce safe-distancing measures, distribute face masks and hand sanitisers, and provide aid to the vulnerable. This would not have been possible without a WOG approach. We need to lock in the mentality of working as One Public Service so that we can serve the public holistically.

Third, we must persist in building social resilience and unity among Singaporeans. Singapore could not have contained COVID-19 if everyone had not adhered to safe management measures. Many individuals and businesses also went the extra mile to help the vulnerable. This is the **spirit of Singapore Together**. As we emerge from this crisis, we must continue to partner citizens in co-creation and provide more opportunities for all to care for one another. ■

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COVID-19 and SINGAPORE'S HEALTH DIPLOMACY

by **Gianna Gayle Amul and Tikki Pang**

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Singapore's health diplomacy initiatives have sought to reaffirm its relevance to the regional and international community.

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INTRODUCTION

Even before the global pandemic, global health has had a place at the diplomatic table alongside health security, humanitarian affairs, and social and economic development, as a significant component of foreign policy.[1] And as the COVID-19 outbreak has shown so vividly, viruses do not recognise national borders. Singapore, having faced the dire effects of the SARS epidemic first-hand, has long been aware of the need for multilateral cooperation on global health issues—including the prospect of a pandemic.

Accordingly, Singapore has been an active participant in multilateral efforts—such as the US-led Global Health Security Agenda—to bolster the pandemic preparedness and response of low- and middle-income countries. It has contributed to international programmes to provide technical and medical assistance, and helped promote global health security as a national and global priority.[2] This is a reason why, despite being a small state, Singapore has come to play a significant role in global health, as a knowledge and innovation hub for the control of infectious and chronic diseases.[3]

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of small states and Asian societies have demonstrated best practices in managing the pandemic compared to many larger countries—particularly in areas such as diagnosis, contact tracing and health surveillance. For instance, Singapore's rapid development of test kits for COVID-19 in the early days of the pandemic, subsequently shared globally, demonstrates how even a little red dot can contribute to countering a pandemic of unprecedented scale.

Singapore's participation in global health diplomacy in the current pandemic can be noted on four broad fronts: (1) bilateral assistance for ASEAN member states and beyond; (2) participation in multilateral mechanisms through the ASEAN Plus platforms; (3) participation in international efforts (G20, Belt and Road Initiative) on COVID-19; and (4) contributions to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan, and UN mechanisms and processes for COVID-19 response.

Singapore, having faced the dire effects of the SARS epidemic first-hand, has long been aware of the need for multilateral cooperation on global health issues.

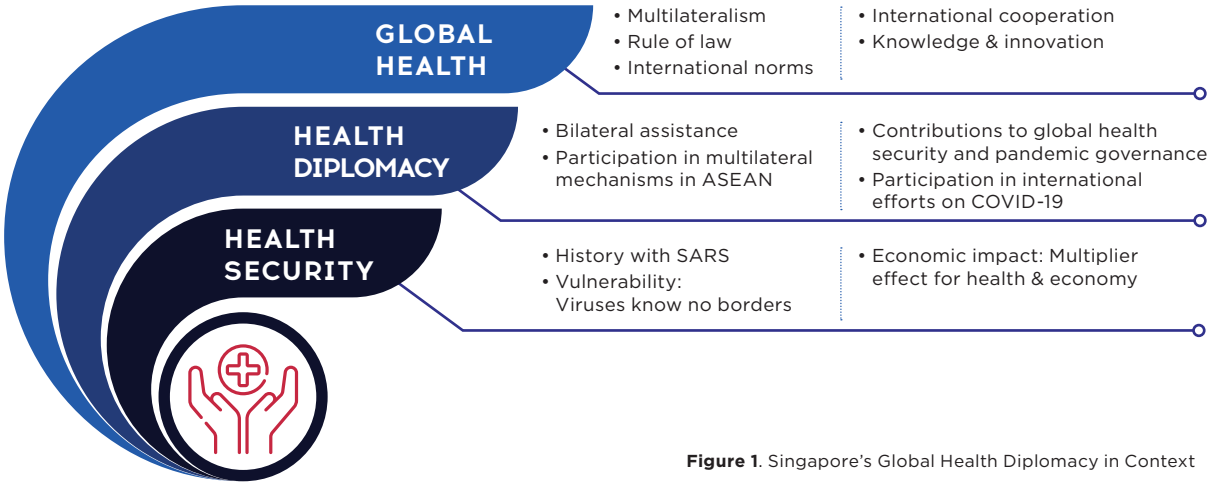

Figure 1. Singapore's Global Health Diplomacy in Context

FOUR FRONTS OF GLOBAL HEALTH DIPLOMACY

As a responsible small power, Singapore's participation in multilateral and international mechanisms contributes to what Alan Chong has called "virtual enlargement".[4] This is a strategy in which small states enlarge their importance to the international community, enhancing their influence and prospects for survival and success.

Bilateral health assistance: "Test-kit diplomacy"

Singapore's health diplomacy includes engaging in bilateral health assistance. Home to more than 50 biomedical companies, Singapore's strategic investment in biomedical manufacturing has provided ballast in an economy battered by the impact of COVID-19.[5] It also afforded the city-state the infrastructure and capacity to rapidly develop diagnostic test kits in the early days of the pandemic, and then to help fulfil international demand for kits to detect the novel virus, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

Fortitude Kit 2.0 was the first complete diagnostic kit to be approved and produced at scale in Singapore, and is also the most common test kit donated by Singapore's Temasek Foundation.[6] Developed by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Diagnostics Development (DxD) Hub, Fortitude Kit 2.0's technology can be transferred through a non-exclusive license for manufacturing to meet local and regional demands.[7]

Such bilateral technology transfers engender goodwill for Singapore, at a time of uncertainty in which most high-income countries with similar capacities had been slow to act. This is part of what Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in March 2020 termed "test-kit diplomacy".[8] While Singapore,

By facilitating the global fight to detect, treat and protect against the virus, Singapore also serves to protect its own population and accelerate an eventual return to normalcy.

recognising its own vulnerabilities as a small island state, is reliant on and advocates multilateral cooperation, it is in turn also ready to share its homegrown technological know-how for a good global cause.

Accurate and rapid detection of the virus helps everyone: by facilitating the global fight to detect, treat and protect against the virus, Singapore also serves to protect its own population and accelerate an eventual return to the normalcy of open borders and trade that it thrives upon. Notably, Temasek Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Temasek, one of Singapore's two sovereign wealth funds, has earmarked S$800 million (US$563 million) for COVID-19 response, with at least S$250 million of the earmarked funds redirected to COVID-19-related therapeutics and vaccines research and development.[9]

In addition to test kits, Singapore's bilateral health assistance to support the pandemic response has also included polymerase chain reaction machines, oxygen and ventilation equipment, personal protection equipment, and hand sanitisers. While these have mostly gone out to the nine fellow ASEAN member states, Singapore has also provided assistance to countries in Asia, Oceania, Africa, and Europe.[10]

These assistance efforts have also been bolstered by public-private partnerships. One such initiative was between Temasek Foundation, Singapore Airlines and the World Food Programme.[11] With global travel at a standstill because of the pandemic, the freight and flight capabilities of Singapore's national air carrier were redirected to help deliver bilateral health assistance globally.

Non-government organisations based in Singapore have also stepped in. The Singapore Red Cross channelled the Singapore Government's seed donation of S$1 million to provide assistance to communities affected by COVID-19 in China;[12] it also contributed more than S$800,000 of support for COVID-19 response to all ASEAN member states and other countries in Asia, including Timor Leste, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives.[13]

Maintaining relationships through bilateral health assistance enables Singapore to stay relevant and preserve goodwill at a challenging time. Many of the countries that received bilateral health assistance from Singapore are source countries of its migrant worker communities, as well as important suppliers of essential goods to Singapore. China is also one of Singapore's key bilateral partners particularly in terms of trade and investment. Indeed, the global health-science diplomatic relations between Singapore and China has fed into a partnership in the development of COVID-19 vaccines, treatment and diagnostics.

While there has been multilateral cooperation in infectious disease control and response between China and ASEAN in the past, Singapore and China have also signed bilateral MOUs and agreements related to global health amid COVID-19, including health cooperation, food safety cooperation, health policy fellowship exchange, biomedical cooperation and scientific research cooperation through the Sino-Singapore International Joint Research Institute.[14,15] Such bilateral commitments further galvanise Singapore-China global health cooperation, on top of other socio-cultural and economic ties.

ASEAN matters: Participation in ASEAN and ASEAN Plus platforms

During the SARS and H1N1 epidemics, Singapore was active in engaging regional platforms to enact coordinated, cross-border responses. With the outbreak of COVID-19, Singapore has again been actively participating in ASEAN and the ASEAN Plus mechanisms to develop and implement a regional response to the latest pandemic.

For instance, in the crucial early stages of the outbreak, Singapore was able to quickly share technical protocols and guidelines on the clinical management of COVID-19 cases (based on its global health expertise and experience of past epidemics) at the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network for Public Health Emergencies Special Video Conference in February 2020.[16]

With the pandemic shutting borders and placing strain on global supply lines, Singapore has reaffirmed the ASEAN framework as vital in promoting regional cooperation to "keep trading routes and supply lines open", particularly for essential goods, including medical supplies and food.[17] With trade being necessary for food security, Singapore has also encouraged the region to support related regional platforms like the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve to bolster the region's food security.[18]

As one of the high-income countries in ASEAN, Singapore has also shown that it can be a dependable source of contributions for regional initiatives like the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, to which the city-state contributed US$100,000 in November 2020.[19] Singapore has also pushed for regional cooperation in the production and distribution of vaccines, citing the November 2019 ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on ASEAN Vaccine Security and Self-Reliance.[20]

Multilateralism matters

Singapore's active participation in multilateral, cross-border efforts to contain COVID-19 is consistent with its core principles of foreign policy—promoting friendly relations to protect and advance its own interests—in both global health and economic fronts.[21]

At the global level—including platforms such as the G20, the Forum of Small States and the Global Governance Group (3G)—Singapore has consistently expressed its commitment to the principles of multilateralism, cooperation and interdependence in controlling the pandemic.[22,23] Singapore along with other members of the 3G have strongly supported the UN as a central driver in

"intensified global action, cooperation and solidarity that puts people at the core of the COVID-19 response."[24] Singapore has also advocated the key role of the WHO in directing and coordinating multilateral cooperation "to ensure that extensive immunisation against COVID-19 remain a global public good for health".[25]

A multilateral and broad-based approach to vaccination remains the best prospect for the world to be able to gradually reopen its borders to international travel—vital to Singapore's economic interests as an open economy and travel hub. Notably, while there have been efforts to establish safe travel bubbles (such as between Singapore and Hong Kong), implementation has been delayed by sudden surges of infections.

At the 75th UN General Assembly, despite scathing criticisms of the WHO and the UN from the United States, Singapore expressed its support of the WHO's efforts in responding to COVID-19 and in facilitating vaccine development, while also acknowledging the need to evaluate the WHO and its processes.[26] Such support reflects Singapore's prevailing stake in multilateral institutions that are "open, inclusive and fit for purpose" in tackling global problems.[27] Singaporean leaders have urged the international community to give multilateral institutions such as the UN and WHO the "commensurate latitude, resources and mandate" to carry out their mission for the global public good.[28] Issuing a statement on behalf of ASEAN at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in October 2020, Singapore also stated that the pandemic was the time for countries "to double down on multilateralism" and "reaffirm commitment to a rules-based international system", which includes supporting the UN and providing it with adequate financial resources by paying assessed contributions in full.[29]

Contributions to global health and pandemic governance

As a responsible member of the global health community, Singapore has walked the talk by keeping up with its funding dues to the WHO. Singapore also increased its assessed contributions from US$4.227 million (for 2018–2019) to US$4.641 million (for 2020–2021)—and more than doubled its voluntary contributions from US$548,000 in 2014 to US$1.125 million in 2020—to support WHO health emergencies programmes and help strengthen its capacities in the Southeast Asia region.[30] In March 2020, Singapore announced a contribution of US$500,000 to the WHO's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 response.[31, 32] This is beyond its assessed and specified voluntary contributions to the WHO, which amount to US$ 6.538 million for 2020-2021.

As one of very few high-income small states that can make a contribution on international platforms through global health and science diplomacy, Singapore was one of the early supporters of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility.[33] It also co-chairs, with Switzerland, the Friends of the COVAX Facility network of supporting countries.[34] In December 2020, Singapore committed to contributing US$5 million to the COVAX Advance

Market Commitment mechanism, to help 92 low- and lower-middle-income countries including six ASEAN member states (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam) to access 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021.[35] Singapore is also participating in the WHO-led multi-country Solidarity Vaccine Trials, slated to begin in 2021.

A significant aspect of Singapore's global health-science diplomacy is the engagement of infectious disease experts in Singapore. These include Dr Dale Fisher of the National University of Singapore, who sits on the Steering Committee of the WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN). Medical and public institutions in Singapore have been actively engaged not only in research and development for treatment, vaccines and diagnostics for COVID-19 but also in health communication, battling the infodemic that has spread with COVID-19.[36]

No one country can be said to have conquered the outbreak; it is only through solidarity in global action that the virus and its impacts might be overcome.

The pandemic could prompt governments to reflect on the need to incorporate a health-in-all-policies approach.

Singapore has also shown solidarity with the international scientific community, by implementing pandemic response measures based on the scientific data it has contributed to building up.

PROSPECTS FOR SINGAPORE AND THE ROLE OF SMALL STATES IN GLOBAL HEALTH AND GLOBAL HEALTH DIPLOMACY

Lingering impact on foreign relations

COVID-19 is likely to have a lasting impact on regional and global relations. The pandemic could prompt governments to reflect on the need to incorporate a health-in-all-policies approach, and accelerate a shift towards a global health paradigm that acknowledges and moves beyond state-centric notions

of global governance. In the Southeast Asia region, the pandemic will test the ASEAN way of working through consensus and consultation, and it will retune the balance to be struck between state-led health diplomacy and the role of non-state actors in addressing global health needs. For Singapore, health aid and cooperation will remain critical components of foreign policy for some time to come: as was the case in the aftermath of the 2003 SARS epidemic.

Singapore's four-frontal approach to global health diplomacy during this unprecedented pandemic balances between two main principles. It recognises health issues as a vanguard of regional and global governance, and it harnesses strengths in health and science to enhance regional and global influence.[37] With COVID-19, Singapore has shown how a small city-state can take on effective global health diplomacy with bilateral health assistance and multilateral cooperation, while battling a pandemic, at home and abroad.

Singapore does not act alone however. It recognises that there is power in numbers and that a global pandemic needs global action. No one country can be said to have conquered the outbreak; it is only through solidarity in global action that the virus and its impacts might be overcome.

Singapore's actions for global health are made in cooperation with other small states and neighbouring states, both developed and developing. It demonstrates how small states can contribute and pool their convening power, political will, leadership and resources to address a global crisis—in the process undergoing a "virtual enlargement" of its international influence and relevance as a responsible, valuable member of the global community.

Need for a more deliberate health diplomacy agenda

It is hard to compare Singapore's global health diplomacy with that of other relatively small developed countries. For example, New Zealand and Qatar might be comparable to Singapore in terms of economic power, population and size, but while New Zealand and Qatar have dedicated aid agencies (New Zealand Aid and Qatar Fund for Development, respectively), Singapore does not. Despite this, Singapore coordinates and distributes health aid for COVID-19 response in a strategic and systematic manner, comparable to developed countries with a vast network of distribution hubs for international health assistance. Singapore's test-kit diplomacy, for example, was done through a whole-of-government approach, and unprecedented cooperation with the private sector and non-profit and philanthropic organisations.

The public sector at large will need to be able to discern and understand how global health issues inform their country's ability to pursue security, trade, development and social progress.

The need for an ongoing global health and humanitarian response could be cause for Singapore to consider developing a specific, if evolving, health diplomacy agenda. One aspect of this might be the establishment of its own aid agency. This could allow Singapore to comprehensively respond not only to humanitarian crises in the region but also global health emergencies.

Cultivating tomorrow's global health diplomats

COVID-19 has illustrated how global health challenges can have a profound, cross-border impact on any country's wellbeing. Increasingly, the public sector at large will need to be able to discern and understand how global health issues (beyond pandemics) inform their country's ability to pursue security, trade, development and social progress.

If global health concerns are to be embedded as part of public policy and foreign policy going forward, a new set of diplomatic and public sector skillsets will be needed. These should embrace, and also go beyond, both foreign policy and global health expertise. For instance, expertise in areas such as global health ethics, global health communication and global health policy analysis will be critical for risk communication, infodemic management and global health negotiations.

To stay relevant to the international community, Singapore should have tangible mechanisms to systematically nurture young professionals trained in global health diplomacy—not only in Singapore but also among its Asian neighbours. This will build mutual trust and shared expertise: enhancing the region's propensity for and capacity to cooperate for mutual benefit, in a world increasingly beset by challenges that transcend national boundaries and capabilities. ■

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OPINION

THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC, US-CHINA RELATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE AND ASEAN

by **Khong Yuen Foong**

Geopolitical rivalries will continue to shape a post-COVID world, confronting smaller states with strategic choices that may be challenging to balance.

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In a recent semester, I had my graduate class in International Relations "role play" United States (US) and China negotiators. The thirty-person class was divided into five groups, with six members in each group: three donned "American" hats, and the other three "Chinese" hats. Their task was to identify two issue areas where cooperation was possible, and two where they just had to "agree to disagree". Across the five groups, the one issue area in which cooperation or agreement was deemed most possible (and urgent) was containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

That in real life the US and China have behaved so differently speaks volumes about the strategic distrust between them. China was perceived by the US as late in informing the world about the virus; while the Trump administration thought it had done enough by banning travellers from China, President Donald Trump embarked on a blame game that sought to stigmatise China for allowing the spread of the virus, once infection and death rates mounted.

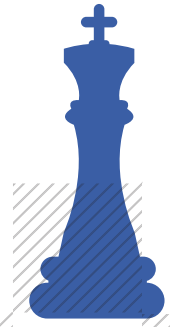
Trump's gambit was premised in part on his need to deflect attention from his mishandling of the crisis in the wake of the presidential elections. Under his watch, the US suffered one of the world's highest infection rates per capita and among the top few in per capita deaths. But his administration's China hawks have had China in America's crosshairs since 2017. Previous administrations, they claimed, had allowed China to grow so strong that it had become an economic and security threat to the US.

Ramifications of Current US-China Relations

The pandemic is but the latest example of the inability of the US and China—Asia's two superpowers—to work together. What can Singapore and the region learn from this?

The first and perhaps most important lesson is that this is not just about President Trump. Having lost but not conceded the election, Trump has nevertheless left the White House. Joseph Biden, inaugurated as the 46th president of the United States in January 2021, has pledged to jettison the unilateral "America first" policies of the Trump administration, and to return to the more multilateral approach of previous administrations. The US has rejoined the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization (WHO), and is reviving its participation in the Iran nuclear deal (complicated by the recent assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh), while

The Asian international system has two superpowers whose comprehensive power are way ahead of those below them. In such a system, strategic rivalry is the dominant dynamic.



adopting a less protectionist approach to trade.

The Biden administration, however, will also have China in its crosshairs. On the one hand, the Biden team will give human rights and democracy a much more prominent spot in their foreign policy agenda. China is coming under greater pressure for its policies on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. More crucially, there is now a consensus in the US foreign policy establishment that China needs to be constrained or contained. China is closing in on the US in terms of its comprehensive power. The Lowy Institute's 2020 *Asia Power Index* puts China's comprehensive power at 93% of that of the US (in Asia). The issue is a structural one: the Asian international system has two superpowers whose comprehensive power are way ahead of those below them (such as Japan, Russia, India, etc.). In such a system, strategic rivalry—of the kind we saw during the US-Soviet Cold War—is the dominant dynamic. Cooperation is possible in some areas, but discord and competition will characterise the relationship. Put another way, the first lesson is that the downturn in US-China relations in the last four years is a symptom of a larger dynamic at work—strategic rivalry between two nearly equal powers in a contained area (Asia).

The second lesson is that America has changed. Looking beyond the Biden administration, it becomes an open question whether the US has the will and ability to lead. As many observers of America have argued, it has become entirely possible to imagine the country being one day led by a Republican who is capable of pursuing Trump's "America first" policies with more discipline and less narcissism. Like many of its Asian neighbours, Singapore has tended to view the US as a "benign hegemon": the predominant power in the region who leads with the consent of its many followers. The majority have consented to US leadership because, since World War II, the US has chosen to pursue its interests in a "win-win" way with its followers in Asia and elsewhere: providing security via bilateral military alliances with Japan, Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, and opening up its markets to those who chose "free market capitalism"—including Singapore—as the path to economic development. Such leadership entails costs, including tolerating uneven economic playing fields (for allies such as Japan and South Korea during the Cold War) as well as putting boots on the ground when US hegemony was challenged in Korea and Vietnam. The latter Asian land wars cost the US over 100,000 battle deaths.

Based on past experience, the world has also come to expect the US to take the lead in mitigating the consequences of global crises and natural disasters by bringing together the relevant parties and (international and regional) organisations to tackle such events. The US did so with the AIDs/HIV epidemic, the 2004 tsunami, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2014 Ebola epidemic. The Trump administration's decision not to assume a national and global leadership role in confronting the COVID-19 crisis—with devastating consequences for the US itself—raises questions about US will.

More important than the will to lead globally is the ability to lead domestically. America today is so ideologically fragmented, politically disunited, and dysfunctional that mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic became a heated political issue. Republicans and Democrats view each other as sworn enemies; the Trump administration renounced national leadership on confronting the pandemic, "devolving" responsibility to the state governors. As the world watched in horror at the rising number of Americans infected and dying, conclusions were drawn: if the US is unable or unwilling to lead locally, can it be counted on to lead globally?

This is relevant to Singapore and the region because of the belief that America's leadership—occasioned by the latter's predominant economic and military power—has been crucial in maintaining the peace and stability that Asia has enjoyed in this half century or so.

Although Singapore's leaders are pragmatic decision-makers who will ensure that they can work with whoever is in charge in Washington, D.C., they are probably relieved that the new Biden administration is likely to pursue a broader, less transactional view of America's interests while taking multilateralism seriously.[1] In a recent interview, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (PM Lee) noted the promise of a "new direction for America" under Biden, but he also saw fit to point to the challenges for the new administration. Asked by Bloomberg News Editor-in-Chief John Micklethwait if "Trump has done permanent damage or changed the way that America is viewed in the region", PM Lee replied that the Trump administration's "narrow definition of where America's interests lie" will have "some long-term impact on perspectives on America". Anticipating the future, PM Lee reminded his audience that Trump "collected more votes than Barack Obama... He has not disappeared, nor the pressures which he represented."[2]

I interpret PM Lee's remarks to mean that while America's allies in Europe and Asia will be overjoyed to work with an administration that takes allies, multilateralism, and cooperation seriously, there will be one nagging factor in their interactions with the erstwhile hegemon. The fact remains that 74 million Americans wanted another four years of Trump despite his dismal failure to stem the pandemic, despite their having to pay more for goods because of the trade war, and despite the growing disunity and acrimony of the last four years. Trump may be gone, but Trumpism is not; it will be sticking around, hobbling the Biden administration's domestic and foreign policies, and introducing a new factor into the future calculations of America's interlocutors in their strategic interactions with the US.

Trump may be gone, but Trumpism is not. America's allies and partners will have to factor this into their dealings with the US.

The consensus about America's role in upholding the liberal international order has been shattered: without such a consensus, it is hard to have a coherent foreign policy and sustain it over time.

This new factor will be especially salient in the medium (after 2024) to long term (around 2030). America's allies and partners will have to factor this Trumpism in their dealings with the US. Many hoped and assumed that Trump's "America first" foreign policy was an aberration, and that US abdication of its global leadership in the last four years was a one-off. The question is: will the next Republican President—the inheritor of Trump's base, take off where Trump left off?

If America's allies and partners cannot be sure that the US can be counted on to live up to its international commitments, they will hedge against the US, i.e., be more cautious or circumspect about following the US or doing its strategic bidding. When we look back on Trump's and Biden's foreign policies many years from now, what we are likely to conclude, I wager, is that the consensus about America's role in upholding the liberal international order has been shattered: without such a consensus, it is hard to have a coherent foreign policy and sustain it over time.

For the US, there is a way out of this disunity and lack of consensus, and that is to find or construct an external enemy. Samuel Huntington has argued that America needs an external *other* or rival in order to know who it is and what it stands for. There are indeed two ready-made others: China and Russia. The Trump administration has kickstarted the construction of China as "the other" with the trade war, blaming China for the pandemic, criticising China on Xinjiang, and confronting it on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea. China has not helped itself by some of its policies on these issues. Ultimately what makes China a lead candidate as America's other is the fact that China is closing in on the US in comprehensive power terms, and the US is fearful that China will replace it as the hegemon in Asia.

The third lesson stems from the US's fear of China replacing it as the predominant power in Asia. As the strategic rivalry intensifies, each superpower will put pressure on the region's key players to align with it. Singapore has been among the most articulate in asking the two superpowers not to force countries in Asia to choose. Recall the choices made by Singapore and

As the strategic rivalry intensifies, each superpower will put pressure on the region's key players to align with it.

ASEAN in the last decade. Joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and most recently, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) all advanced Singapore's interests; they also showed positive economic-political engagement with China. The US actively sought to dissuade its allies and partners from signing on to the AIIB and BRI—the Obama administration's displeasure with Britain's joining the AIIB, for example, led to accusations of the UK being too "accommodating" (just one step shy of appeasement) to China. Once the UK joined, it opened the floodgates for the rest of the European Union to sign on to the AIIB. For now, the AIIB's lending standards are like those of existing financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and World Bank, but that should not obscure the point that it is a China-led regional economic institution.

Welcoming the Obama pivot to Asia and the Trans-Pacific Partnership similarly advanced Singapore's strategic-economic interests while

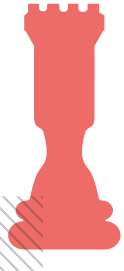
reiterating Singapore's belief in the helpful role of America's forward military and economic presence in maintaining peace and stability in Asia. Yet there are signs that the two superpowers are getting impatient with such nuanced approaches to hedging. Speaking at the launch of a photo book celebrating 30 years of Singapore-China diplomatic relations, former Chinese vice-minister (Foreign Affairs) He Yafei spoke in favour of building "regional supply chains to better utilise resources...in the region", but went on to warn that the strategy of hewing "economically close to China but relying on the US for protection is a bad choice and is not going to work".[3]

Choices Facing Singapore and the Region

Viewed from the perspective of US-China competition, the COVID-19 pandemic presented two choices for Singapore and the region, both of which were easy to make. The first had to do with

whether to participate in the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, the WHO-based multilateral initiative to distribute vaccines equitably when they become available. While the US had earlier chosen not to participate in the COVAX Facility, the new Administration announced in January 2021 that the US would join the Facility. China signed on, as did Singapore and the small and middle powers in Asia. This issue here is less about choosing sides than about one's approach to multilateral cooperation and by implication, international leadership.

The second choice presented by the COVID-19 pandemic concerns the "blame game". Stated this way, it was a no-brainer—only Australia chose to go with the US in calling for an independent investigation of the origins of the virus. The rest of the world, Singapore included, was content with a WHO-based inquiry after the emergency phase was over. Australia's call for an independent investigation implied that it, like the US, distrusted the WHO to carry out the investigation. This hit a nerve in China; together with Australia's earlier decision to cut out Huawei from its 5G infrastructure, this has led to a serious deterioration in China-Australia relations, with significant economic costs for the barley, copper, and most recently, wine sectors in Australia.



If our choices repeatedly seem to favour one side, then we may have actually ended up choosing a side.

The point is that such choices will present themselves more frequently in the years to come as the rivalry between the two superpowers goes into high gear. The recent signing of RCEP, the largest trading bloc in the world that includes China but not the US, suggests to some that it is yet another sign of the ASEAN countries being drawn increasingly closer to China's economic orbit. It is a truism that when presented with such choices, Singapore and its neighbours will choose on the basis of what serves their national interests best. Yet the lesson here is that we should be aware of the possibility that our choices may add up. If our choices—albeit based on case-by-case calculations of our interests—repeatedly seem to favour one side, then we may have actually ended up choosing a side.

Finally, it is also necessary to consider who is proposing the initiatives or plans that Singapore and the region are choosing from. On initiatives like the AIIB and BRI and Huawei, for example, it is China. On the pivot to Asia and the TPP, it is the US. The TPP was perhaps the most significant multilateral economic initiative appropriated (from Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore—the original four), and then championed, by America since the end of the Cold War. As then President Obama put it, quite apart from the economic goals, the political-strategic rationale was to ensure that the US continued to set the rules of the international economic game. But it was jettisoned by Trump on his first day in office. RCEP, contrary to many media presentations, is more ASEAN than China inspired, although it is true that as the largest RCEP economy,

China will reap significant economic as well as rule-setting advantages. Perhaps that was why India pulled out of the agreement. It appears that China is putting more "dishes" on the table. How palatable those dishes are does not just depend on the economic priorities of individual countries; each country will also have to factor in the strategic implications. Yet the economic logic of growing with the largest economy (in purchasing power parity terms) will be hard to resist.

Navigating a New Era of Superpower Rivalry

To sum up, the three lessons of US-China relations in the time of COVID-19 for Singapore and the region are: (1) The deeper cause of US-China discord—including their inability to cooperate on stemming the COVID-19 pandemic—is structural. China's catching up with the US in comprehensive power suggests that there are now two superpowers in Asia and the logic of the situation is one of strategic rivalry; (2) The Trump administration's mishandling of COVID-19 raises questions about US will and ability to continue in its role as global leader; the recent US presidential election, in which half of the American electorate were content to have another four years of Trump, suggests that Trumpism and the "America first" approach are not aberrations; (3) Singapore and its neighbours should expect increasing pressures from the superpowers to side with them on new issues and initiatives in the years ahead. Although choices are likely to be made on the individual merits of the issue or case, it is probably wise to approach such choices with some conception of an overall strategy, lest, through a series of discrete choices, one inadvertently ends up choosing one side over the other. ■

Notes

1. Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh put the issue in perspective in a recent article: "During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). President Trump issued an order to all American companies manufacturing PPEs outside America to ignore their contractual obligations and send their production back to the US." Koh's hope was that Biden's foreign policy will revert to a more benign and less "America first" policy. See: Tommy Koh, "Biden's Foreign Policy: A Prognosis", *The Straits Times*, November 17, 2020, accessed March 24, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/bidens-foreign-policy-a-prognosis-0.
2. See: Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, "Interview with PM Lee Hsien Loong for the Bloomberg 2020 New Economy Forum", November 17, 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Interview-with-PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-for-the-Bloomberg-2020-New-Economy-Forum.
3. Aw Cheng Wei, "Online Showcase Traces Growth of S'pore-China Ties", *The Straits Times*, December 4, 2020, B10, accessed March 24, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/online-showcase-traces-growth-of-spore-china-ties.

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