

## SG75: The Resilient Red Dot

“The World Health Organisation discovers a new viral variant, XH-1340-NG which may lead to deadlier pandemic than 20 years ago.” As the headlines of the local news station blared from my television, unlike the time when COVID-19 struck, I was not afraid that we would be confined to another lockdown as for the past 20 years, Singapore has been preparing well for such a situation.

It was then, I heard a knock on the door.

“Hello Mr Lim! Here are some masks handmade by members of the Residents Network (RN) for your family. Do stay safe *ah*.” My neighbour Mr Hamesh was standing outside my door with a jovial smile plastered onto his face, a bag with handmade masks hand-stitched by residents in the community in his hand. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the compassionate side of Singaporeans with more coming together to support their own communities. When face masks and sanitisers were in short supply during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals banded together to sew and distribute reusable masks, especially for children and vulnerable populations. In residential buildings, residents had also taken the initiative to strap alcohol wipes and bottles of hand sanitisers in elevators for community use. Now, it has become a norm and individuals regularly chip in with their RN to help prepare their own communities for such a crisis.

“Thanks, Hamesh! I was just about to head out to buy groceries.” I replied as I grabbed a mask and prepared to set off.

Walking through the neighbourhood, the scenes before my eyes were reminiscent of two decades ago. Everyone donning face masks and the familiar temperature screening stations outside various establishments. I could not help but recall a time before COVID-19 ravaged the world, where the significance of collective responsibility had yet to be epitomised. Before, Singaporeans have been infamously known to rear their ugly head when it comes to collective responsibility, prompting the need for the government to encourage acts of graciousness and consideration for others in the notable Singapore Kindness Movement. Indeed, seeing Singaporeans practicing safe distancing and queuing in an orderly fashion without reminders warms my heart to see the strides Singapore has made at the societal level.

However, this positive change did not come overnight. As a mother and her child clad in his school uniform walked out of the grocery store, I could not help but think back to the reforms in the education system to inculcate this sense of collective responsibility in Singaporeans. There has been a paradigm shift in the experiences my son is currently having compared to my schooling years. During my time, I have always felt that efforts to encourage community service in schools have had its inadequacies. The LEAPS 2.0 system<sup>1</sup> was established when I was in Primary Five in 2014. The focus was unfortunately

---

<sup>1</sup> LEAPS 2.0. (n.d.). Ministry Of Education. Retrieved June 9, 2021, from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/programmes/cca/leaps2-0>

placed on time spent participating in community service rather than actual effort or genuine compassion and dedication to their cause. However, now my son is able to engage in community service with the school similar to the vocational education system adopted in Germany<sup>2</sup>. Youths can explore the different facets of community service and find a cause which they feel is in line with their mission. By inculcating the motive to serve others in the community from a young age, they would nonetheless continue to do so in the future. This greater community service and involvement contribute to building a stronger community spirit as they hope to see the entire community benefit as a result of their efforts. When the focus has shifted from oneself to the good of the community, an individual will start to question how they as individuals can further contribute to the well-being of their community. In times of crisis, it is such a mindset that enables solutions to tap on the stronger community spirit, such as mandatory mask wearing yielding greater efficacy.

At the storefront, I was pleasantly greeted by the sight of customers practicing safe distancing and queuing in an orderly fashion to enter the store. Entering the grocery store was no longer a hassle as compared to during COVID-19 with the advancement in TraceTogether technology. Commuters simply had to walk through a gantry which would automatically scan their TraceTogether token for contact tracing.

Within the store, it was business as usual for shoppers, a stark contrast to the rampant panic buying during the pandemic before. Everyone was calm and only bought necessities in adequate quantities. This demonstrates the trust of the locals in our forward thinking and adept government, who have amassed sufficient reserves of essential goods to circumvent a shortage in trying times. With my handwritten shopping list on one hand and a basket on another, I was ready to embark on my routine shopping journey. As I cruised down the fresh produce aisle, something out of the ordinary caught my attention -- a newly furnished section for local produce, done as part of a national campaign that advocates for self-sufficiency in meeting nutritional needs. Coined '50 by 40', it is a continuation of the successful '30 by 30' strategy that Singapore embarked on in 2019. Back then, Singapore was precariously dependent on imports for its food supply, with 90%<sup>3</sup> of our food supply from foreign sources. The nation's livelihood was at the hands of exporting countries and was beyond our control, this weakness was especially magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, we are home to an exceptionally productive, self-sustaining agriculture industry with the capability to meet half of our nutritional needs.

Beside the tray of tomatoes which I was just about to choose from was a holographic projection. In it, showcased the state-of-the-art technology utilised in our local farms from Artificial intelligence (AI), Blockchain, to 5G. I was fascinated by how futuristic our farms were in this virtual tour. I now understood why local produce was better than buying

---

<sup>2</sup> *The German Vocational Training System - BMBF*. (2020, November 6). Federal Ministry of Education and Research - BMBF. <https://www.bmbf.de/en/the-german-vocational-training-system-2129.html>

<sup>3</sup> *Singapore's '30 by 30' food production target: Is it feasible?* (2019, April 9). TODAYonline. <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/singapores-30-30-food-production-target-it-feasible>

imports and was now more eager to support our local farmers. As I picked up the tomatoes from the counter, I grinned as I noticed its packaging which was labeled as “local produce”.

Gaining newfound interest in our local farming scene, I began to appreciate such developments around me as I strolled home. From rentable aquaculture farm spaces that were once industrial estates to vertical farms along the corridor of housing estates, farming has been made much more accessible and intertwined with our daily lives. Every individual is now empowered to make meaningful contributions to attain food sustainability in our nation. ‘Hey honey!’ A familiar voice interrupted my train of thoughts. It was my wife, tending to our corridor shelf farm. “I have just harvested our tomatoes for dinner tonight,” she said. “*Alamak*, I bought tomatoes as well!” I exclaimed. I certainly underestimated the capability of our AI-powered farm, which optimised the conditions for tomato growth and drastically shortened the harvest time. “Well, donate it then! We don’t need that many tomatoes,” she snapped back, alluding to the food donation facility found at every void deck. It was a simple yet sophisticated machine that is able to recognise the type of food and its expiration date. This information will be sent to a cloud system where AI would efficiently allocate each donation to a beneficiary. Gone are the days when food donations had to be manpower intensive<sup>4</sup> and cumbersome. With a convenient and integrated system in place, food inequality and overlaps in services by non-profit organisations is avoided. I dropped off the tomatoes onto the conveyor belt, feeling appreciative that this unwanted food will not be wasted, before heading home to take an afternoon nap.

“Papa! I am home! Have you heard the news about XH-1340-NG? Uncle Ah Fai from the Migrant Workers’ Centre said they are going to hand out masks and hand sanitizers to the migrant workers tomorrow.” A thunderous voice reverberated throughout the house just as I was about to take an afternoon nap. My son, Xi Jun, has returned home from his weekly volunteering opportunity with the MWC at a migrant workers’ dormitory where he and his classmates befriend foreign workers and help to clean their dorms. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, where there was widespread transmission within the migrant workers dormitories due to a misstep of overlooking the migrant workers in response to the virus, the government has been ever more cautious and employed a more holistic approach in tackling the diverse demographic in Singapore. Measures include having more frequent mandatory checks on the dormitories to ensure that the migrant workers have good living conditions as well as having dormitories to partner with local schools in befriending the migrant workers, allowing students to express their gratuities towards the people who have used their blood, sweat and tears to build the skyscrapers, shopping malls and flats we enjoy today.

Xi Jun then ran pell-mell, helter-skelter to the toilet for a thorough rinse of his hands, a

---

<sup>4</sup> Tong, G. C. (2020, February 12). *Groups that help feed families in need have seen most volunteers drop out. And they worry about the impact of panic-buying on the flow of food donations.* CNA. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/food-charities-heart-volunteers-wuhan-coronavirus-singapore-12418782>

habit that his school and I have emphasised upon him since a young age, before rushing to his room where his computer was at.

“Aiyo! You should bathe before playing your computer games!” I chastised disapprovingly. Xi Jun then swiftly signalled a hush sign while pointing repeatedly at his computer screen that displays ‘Mental Health Ambassador’. The word ‘mental health’ brought me back in time to the COVID-19 saga where it was reported that during the circuit breaker period, calls to the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) hotline rose from 3,826 in March 2020 to 4,319 in April 2020<sup>5</sup>. Mental illness was a taboo subject in Singapore then, thus not as much was done for those individuals, causing them to suffer in silence. However, this has definitely taken a turn today where schools have made astute and commendable efforts to help these individuals tide through difficult times. Xi Jun is a part of his school’s ‘Mental Health Ambassador’ programme where he is trained to be equipped with skills necessary to become a peer support for his peers suffering from mental health issues. Just last week, his school also announced the rebranding of the image of school counsellors, especially since many students were worried about approaching them. This was done by establishing a system of confidentiality to give youth suffering from mental issues an ease of mind when sharing their problems. With such inclusive measures taken today, I am confident that should a lockdown happen because of XH-1340-NG, these individuals will have a platform to reach out to and a resilient community that would back them up.

“Okay, I will not disturb you anymore.” I whispered as I slowly pulled Xi Jun’s door to a shut.

I then decided to head back to the living room where the local news was still going on: “Singapore government addresses the nation on new policies made by the Pandemic Inter-agency Response Panel”, the subtitles flashed. The panel was set up after the COVID-19 pandemic which included leaders from different industries - science, health, economics, social service and even grassroot leaders to better widen the support for various communities. The importance of having such inter-agency cooperation is inextricably important, which was encapsulated by the cooperation between contact tracing teams of the Ministry of Health, Singapore Police Force, Singapore Armed Forces, and volunteers<sup>6</sup>. Together these agencies managed to rapidly determine links between individuals confirmed with COVID-19 and their contacts. Similarly, Singapore's biomedical research and laboratory community worked together to develop the world's first SARS-CoV-2 serological test to rapidly detect neutralising antibodies without need for containment facilities or live biological materials. In bringing various agencies on board a centralised panel to represent different facets of society, this allowed the response by the government to be more holistic in supporting Singaporeans. In educating the various stakeholders of their responsibility in ensuring that Singapore successfully responds

---

<sup>5</sup> C. (2020, August 9). *Number of suicides among those in their 20s highest in Singapore*. CNA. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/suicide-sos-samaritans-singapore-youths-aged-20s-12985146>

<sup>6</sup> Global-is-Asian. (2020, April 20). *COVID-19: Lessons learned? What comes next?* Lkyspp.Nus.Edu.Sg. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/covid-19-lessons-learned-what-comes-next>

during the pandemic, corporations and non-government organisations alike realised they played a symbiotic relationship with the government and that it takes two hands to clap in ensuring success in the fight against the pandemic. Thus, the panel allowed any policies implemented to be immediately enhanced by any panel participant which can mobilise their organisation to take action. With such an avenue for discussion, policies and actions implemented were made more effective, targeted and sustainable.

This was done as the COVID-19 pandemic taught us to place our focus on unifying the efforts of different stakeholders. Governmental agencies have a part to play in crafting policies that best help the masses cope with the financial and emotional burden of the pandemic. The Singaporean government, in the COVID-19 pandemic, had focused on this. This was seen through the various COVID-19 Budgets such as Resilience, Unity, Solidarity and Fortitude Packages, aiming to supplement financial aid to Singaporeans<sup>7</sup>. On another hand, community-based organisations and non-profit organisations often have greater connections with the vulnerable which require more attention in times of such a crisis. For example, community organisations, in spite of the restrictions placed on their work due to the COVID-19 safe management measures, still took the initiative to care for their beneficiaries who were residing alone. It was done through weekly phone calls or meetings in person<sup>8</sup>. Thus, while non-profit organisations contributed their knowledge on demographic trends, help in putting plans into action was rendered by the government. This is reflected in better outreach to vulnerable individuals. On the other hand, the health and research industry had also pulled their weight in dealing with the immense pressure on our healthcare systems as well as the early discovery of the vaccines. Hence, strong and cohesive collaborations between community-based organisations and government agencies as well as various other stakeholders are critical in ensuring a resilient and well-rounded care response.

On the table, laid the special edition Times Magazine I ordered for the month of August. The year is 2040 and the Times just released a special edition of their magazine on Singapore's 75th anniversary. As I turned the crisp cover page and an image of our founding father Mr Lee Kuan Yew greeted me, with the words in bold print, "What I fear is complacency. When things always become better, people tend to want more for less work." These were the very words postulated by Mr Lee in response to Singapore's success in the early 70s. Mr Lee's words definitely rang true in Singapore's fight against COVID-19 those 20 years ago allowing the Singapore I live in today to be much more well equipped in handling the onset of another pandemic. As Singaporeans were able to remain vigilant and planned for the future we are now able to move past that dark part of humanity's history and enjoy life in this new normal of where COVID-19 is merely endemic and annual vaccinations are just another part of our lives.

---

<sup>7</sup> Min, C. H. (2020, June 5). *Parliament passes Fortitude Budget, 4th package of COVID-19 relief measures this year*. CNA. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/fortitude-budget-covid-19-parliament-passes-heng-swee-keat-12808172>

<sup>8</sup> Yip, W., Ge, L., Ho, A. H. Y., Heng, B. H., & Tan, W. S. (2021). Building community resilience beyond COVID-19: The Singapore way. *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific*, 7, 100091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2020.100091>

SG75 Our Singapore Competition