

The Pandemic Action Plan

“First of all, a disclaimer: we do not claim victory. The battle is not over.” Even in the early successes of dealing with the Covid-19, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stood his ground on the need to remain vigilant in our response to pandemics. The Covid-19 pandemic should be seen as a reset button for Singapore as we inevitably transition into a new norm. Aiming to restore normalcy to what we experienced prior to the pandemic would be absurd given the monumental shockwaves elicited by the pandemic. Instead, the onus is on us to create this new chapter as the world moves past this dark patch of humanity’s history. Even the United Nations warned that future pandemics would be more frequent and deadlier than before. As clearly epitomised by different countries’ success in handling the pandemic, the minority of countries that managed to enjoy monumental success in suppressing the virus effectively have one distinguishing trait in common - effective collaboration within various facets of society: from the individual, to societies, governments and ultimately the entire country to elicit an inclusive and resilient response that is sustainable for our future.

Foster community spirit and social responsibility

Resilience during a pandemic begins from the individual. Covid-19 has affected every aspect of our lives from the restrictions on places we can go to the people we meet, contrary to the whole concept of humans being a social species. Yet, it is in these nations where individuals recognise the collective good in sacrificing individual liberties which exemplifies individuals can make the world more sustainable by driving change from the bottom up. We envision a country that promotes stronger social responsibility and awareness of the situation. In the initial period of Covid-19, face masks and sanitisers were in short supply. In response, individuals in the local community banded together to sew and distribute reusable masks, especially for children and vulnerable populations. In residential buildings, residents had taken the initiative to strap alcohol wipes and bottles of hand sanitisers in elevators for community use. These community efforts played a role in alleviating public anxiety during uncertain times and were excellent examples of empowered and connected individuals assuming responsibility during a crisis.

Through the years, 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 with an example being the Singapore Kindness Movement. To improve, a greater sense of collective responsibility has to be cultivated. The idea of a collective and community spirit must be established since young and the best way to do so is through reforms in education since the mind is the most malleable at a young age. Efforts to encourage community service in schools have had its

inadequacies. With the current LEAPS 2.0 system implemented since 2014¹, the focus has unfortunately been overly emphasised on the time spent participating in such activities rather than actual effort or their commitment and dedication to their cause. Although such policies were structured in such a way to ease the grading system, as Singapore's education system sees a paradigm shift in moving away from the focus on academia, perhaps we should also rethink how community service is encouraged in schools. By drawing on the success of the vocational education system in Germany² Singapore should adopt a similar approach and implement such internships styles of work experience but with volunteering and social work instead. This allows youths to have the opportunity to explore different avenues of social work in which they would have an interest or passion in. By inculcating the motive to serve others in the community from a young age, they would nonetheless continue to do so in the future. When the focus has shifted from oneself to the good of the community, an individual will start to question themselves, how as an individual can they 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 etc, to yield greater efficacy.

Inclusiveness in response (Marginalised groups)

Responses to the pandemic must also take on a more holistic approach, considering the diverse demographic in Singapore. Strategies employed such as contact tracing and frequent testing by the Singapore government have been successful in controlling the virus transmission among citizens and permanent residents. However, widespread transmission within the migrant worker population exposed a weakness in our system to protect the vulnerable and hidden groups of people within the community, including the underprivileged and isolated elderly. Evidence has shown that a confluence of factors (e.g., socio-economic factors, living conditions, financial factors, language and cultural barriers to healthcare access, behavioural risks) often leads to a higher risk of infectious disease spread among these marginalised groups. The Covid-19 pandemic also emphasised the volatility of jobs in our economy, where 97 700 Singaporeans were retrenched because of the pandemic. In response, the Singaporean government has made commendable efforts to help these individuals tide through difficult times by

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

² 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>

providing cash pay-outs like NTUC Care Fund³ and Covid-19 Recovery Grant⁴ as well as providing job opportunities for them through SGUnited Jobs⁵ and MySkillsfuture⁶. With the increase in home-based learning, unemployment, and work-from-home measures to curb the spread of the virus, the rates of people suffering from mental illnesses also saw a similar rise. During the circuit breaker period, calls to the SOS hotline rose from 3,826 in March to 4,319 in April and 4,265 in May⁷. However, with mental illness being a taboo subject in Singapore, not much has been done for these individuals. Hence, though the Singaporean government has indeed made efforts to cater to those who are retrenched, it has overlooked other vulnerable sectors of society such as the migrant workers, isolated elderly and individuals who suffer from mental illnesses.

To ensure inclusiveness in response, unremitting deliberate effort of the government is needed. The first step that the government must take is to be aware of the issues that these vulnerable individuals face on a daily basis. The common trait that the various stakeholders encounter is the stigma of being pariahs, causing systemic factors to deter them from progressing especially during times of pandemic. Hence, public education should be implemented to exterminate any bad inkling, allowing Singaporeans to be more empathetic towards these individuals. In addition, more specific campaigns and schemes similar to that for the unemployed should be utilised to target other vulnerable groups. Even with the government coming up with various initiatives, it is also the responsibility of every individual in society to ensure that the goal of promoting inclusiveness in response can be achieved. To better create a network for youth with mental issues, organisations focusing on mental well-being can train youth volunteers to be equipped with skills necessary to support their peers with mental health issues. The government can supplement this effort by encouraging such training sessions to take place in school, perhaps through allocating time during the school curriculum, exposing and training more youth. In addition, rebranding the image of school counsellors should

³ NTUC. (2020, November 19). Enhanced NTUC Care Fund (COVID-19). NTUC U Portal. https://www.ntuc.org.sg/wps/portal/up2/home/aboutntuc/ucare/ucarefund/details?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/content_library/ntuc/home/areas+of+interest/care+and+share/u+care+fund/de4345d3-f51f-408c-9963-0d7055c9ab25

⁴Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2021, July 9). COVID-19 Recovery Grant | Ministry of Social and Family Development. MSF. <https://www.msf.gov.sg/assistance/Pages/covid-recovery-grant.aspx>

⁵ Workforce Singapore. (2021, March 10). SGUnited. https://www.wsg.gov.sg/SGUnited.html?utm_source=SEM_Google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Li on&utm_term=job%2Bsupport%2Bhelp&utm_content=jobseekers&qclid=Cj0KCQjwraqHBhDsARIsAKuGZeG7blwIHZ9LUPh8RMducVecFjC-DdXmTZ1-fea-w7oEZFmcP_rzG3AaAnZEEALw_wcB

⁶ MySkillsfuture.gov.sg. (n.d.). MySkillsfuture. Retrieved July 12, 2021, from <https://www.myskillsfuture.gov.sg/content/portal/en/index.html>

⁷ 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>

be proposed, especially since many students may fear approaching them. This can be done by establishing a system of confidentiality to give youth suffering from mental issues an ease of mind when sharing their problems. Overall, society, collectively has to engage in more conversations about topics that we used to avoid. Only with such conversations will we not be watching the world through a pair of rose-tinted glasses or living in a resounding echo chamber. Rather, we would have perspectives about the plight the less fortunate face and hence better aid them in their healing process. After all, everyone is an asset to society, and we can and should not neglect them.

Greater collaboration among stakeholders in the community

Responses to pandemics must also focus on unifying the efforts of different stakeholders. Strong and cohesive collaborations between community-based organisations and government agencies as well as various other stakeholders are critical in ensuring a well-rounded care response. Governmental agencies have a part to play in crafting policies that best help the masses cope with financial and emotional burdens of the pandemic, and this was the focus the Singaporean government took. Through the various Covid-19 Budgets such as Resilience, Unity, Solidarity and Fortitude Packages⁸, aiming to supplement financial aid to Singaporeans. Community-based organisations and non-profit organisations often have greater connections with the vulnerable which require more attention in times of such a crisis. They are more knowledgeable on demographic trends and the help required from the government. Furthermore, they can better reach out to these vulnerable peoples actively. For example, despite the restrictions placed on community organisations' work due to the Covid-19 safe management measures, they still took the initiative to care for their beneficiaries who were residing alone. It was done through weekly phone calls or meetings in person⁹. The health and research industry has also pulled their weight dealing with the immense pressure on our healthcare systems as well as the early discovery of the vaccines. Everyone in Singapore thus has a different role to play in our response to the pandemic.

A stronger response can be crafted through closely knitted bonds between government, community organisations and its people. This untapped benefit was displayed through essential inter-agency cooperation between contact tracing teams of the Ministry of Health, Singapore Police Force, Singapore Armed Forces, and volunteers for the purposes of rapidly determining the links between individuals confirmed with Covid-19

⁸ 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>

⁹ 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>

and their contacts¹⁰. Similarly, Singapore's biomedical research and laboratory community were quickly mobilised to develop the world's first SARS-CoV-2 serological test to rapidly detect neutralising antibodies without the need for containment facilities or live biological materials. From this, we observe that a more integrated and united response, supported by all stakeholders is the way forward.

In the future, we envision greater communication and collaboration among governmental agencies, organisations and even Singaporeans. To do so, the government first needs to educate the various stakeholders that it is also their responsibility to ensure that Singapore pulls through the pandemic through playing a role in our response. They must realise that it takes 2 hands to clap and that any policies the government implements must be supported and synergised by their actions as well. This can be done through fostering greater social responsibility, as presented above previously. Second, given the lesson learnt from Covid-19, we envision the government setting up a stronger "Pandemic Response Panel" which includes leaders from different industries - science, health, economics, social service and even grassroots leaders. Any policies implemented can thus immediately be enhanced by any panel participant which can mobilise their organisation to take action. With such an avenue for discussion, policies and actions implemented can be made more effective and targeted. Greater collaboration among stakeholders in the community thus raises the efficacy of our response.

Reduced reliance on other countries

A key takeaway from this pandemic is that self-sufficiency and dependence is paramount to maintaining a resilient Singapore economy for the livelihood of its people. As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, many panic-stricken nations scrambled to resolve the needs of their nation, neglecting the clear-cut need for global cooperation. This left Singapore, a nation devoid of all forms of natural resources, at a disadvantage. This was an Achilles heel that threatened our national security. As food and water supplies are essential for survival, such vulnerability in supply may be fatal. In tackling this issue, we will definitely need all-hands-on-deck, both from individuals and the government.

At first glance, it may seem insurmountable to resolve this persistent issue for our small, land-scarce nation. However, optimism arising from our success story in attaining water security points towards Singapore being able to overcome this. Consisting of the "Four National Taps - imported, NEWater, desalination plants as well as local water catchments, Singapore has assembled a robust and diversified supply chain. Impressively, 70% of local water demand is met locally, with aims to ramp up local

¹⁰ 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>

supply to meet 85% by 2060. This remarkable feat is attributed to NEWater, which produces high grade reclaimed water that is treated by new technologies like reverse osmosis and ultraviolet disinfection. This allows for water sustainability as sewage water is converted into clean water for human consumption, reducing the reliance on fluctuating rainwater collection or hostility from our water importer. However, our water security was not achieved through these technologies alone. Individuals also played a crucial part in reducing water demand by controlling their water usage, with the onset of water tax hikes, and also through sourcing for water efficient appliances with the aid of the mandatory water efficiency labelling scheme.

Food security, on the other hand, can draw lessons from our water success story. Our target currently consists of the 30 by 30 goal, whereby 30% of food security is achieved by 2030¹¹. Clearly, traditional agriculture and aquaculture methods are unfeasible here due to land scarcity, necessitating the need to turn to the untapped potential that new technologies bring.

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Blockchain and 5G will be crucial in innovating highly efficient methods of farming for food. AI can analyse agricultural data to maximise crop yield and quality via computational algorithms, Blockchain can improve the supply chain to reduce costs and ensure allocative efficiency within the nation and 5G will act as the backbone to ensure lightning speed data transmission to optimise these data-heavy technology. Complemented by current technologies of vertical farming, we aim for smart farming to also be intertwined in our daily lives. Future housing can include a personal vertical farming for households either within their homes or along corridors to rear their own food. Buildings that provide office rental spaces for agriculture or aquaculture can also be conceptualised. However, with technology comes an exorbitant cost which can only be overcome through sufficient support for local produce by the locals. To promote switching from imports to local substitutes, we propose greater interaction between the local farmers and consumers, in the form of live streaming of the farming process or opening the local farms to the public. This will give consumers confidence in local produce and stimulate sufficient demand to fund the implementation of new technology over time. Henceforth, with the knowledge-based economy of Singapore today, we are poised to experience an agricultural resurgence with the assistance of modern technology.

The three core pillars (sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience) of a society's efforts to overcome challenges are equally important for Singapore's survival a nation through a pandemic. They are akin to nets, and the strongest nets are built through knots and

¹¹ 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>

loops. Hence, we can only strengthen the foundations of our nations through the combined efforts of governments, firms and individuals who form these knots and loops of society's safety net.

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