



INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE WONG

Big Lessons from a Small City

Lawrence Wong, Minister for Education, Second Minister for Finance and Co-Chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on COVID-19 talks about Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects on its long-term implications for the city-state.



Lawrence Wong at MTF Press Conference in December 2020 discussing plans for Singapore's vaccination strategy.
Image: Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unexpected and formidable challenge for cities across the world. How is COVID-19 different from previous crises that Singapore has faced?

COVID-19, like SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome], is a public health emergency. Singapore is always vulnerable to such threats because we are a small, high-density city, closely connected to the rest of the world.

We have a good response system that was developed and strengthened after the painful experience with SARS. It is a Whole-of-Government, even a Whole-of-Singapore approach, with tight coordination across agencies and all stakeholders, so that decisions and measures can be undertaken decisively and swiftly.

But this is also a completely new virus, with different characteristics from SARS. Hence, we couldn't rely solely on the SARS playbook. We had to adapt and improvise amidst a great deal of uncertainty, and do our best to deal with a rapidly escalating situation.

Despite Singapore's density and limited land availability, it has been able to provide for new infection control facilities for quarantine and patient care in a decisive and timely manner. What made this possible?

Space is indeed a key constraint for us.

This new virus is much more infectious than SARS. And people can get infected without showing any symptoms. That means that we need a lot more space to isolate and quarantine travellers and close contacts.

Hence, we had to adapt quickly and make the most of all our available resources. For example, we converted sites like vacated public housing flats and army camps into decantment facilities for migrant workers. At one stage, we even activated floating hotels for this purpose.

We also made use of empty hotel rooms as dedicated facilities to isolate travellers coming to Singapore. And we converted large spaces like the Singapore Expo and Convention Centre into Community Care facilities for infected patients with mild symptoms, so as not to overwhelm our hospitals.

This was truly a national-level response, with all hands on deck. Everyone worked round the clock to get these facilities ready in quick time, and we owe them a big debt of gratitude.



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Singapore is a connected and global city whose economy is highly reliant on international trade and commerce, and the COVID-19 virus has unevenly affected different segments of society. What are some of the measures that have been taken to contain the spread of COVID-19?

To control the infection, we needed to introduce very restrictive measures like the Circuit Breaker [an elevated set of safe distancing measures aimed at significantly reducing movements and interactions in public and private places]. But we recognise that these measures come at a high price. We were well aware of the economic and social impact they would have on Singapore and Singaporeans. That's why we cushioned the impact with four Budget packages. And we stepped up our efforts to engage vulnerable seniors to mitigate the sense of isolation.

We also knew that we could not remain closed indefinitely, as we had to prioritise both lives and livelihoods. Hence, after the infection came under control, we embarked on a phased re-opening of our economy and our society.

How has Singapore's planning approach enabled it to prepare for and navigate ongoing climatic, social, public health and other disruptions?

Resilience and sustainability have always underpinned our urban development. These guiding principles have stood us in good stead to tackle any challenges or disruptions that may come our way.

For example, with 30% of Singapore less than five metres above sea level, any increase in sea levels caused by climate change could pose an existential threat to how we live. So we are taking actions now to ensure that all low-lying areas are adequately protected.

Likewise, COVID-19 will have long-lasting impact on the way we live and work, and the way that people interact with the urban environment. This warrants further study so that we can adjust and fine-tune our plans.

Ultimately, the key is to stay nimble and flexible, and to continuously adjust our urban plans to address any emerging global issues or trends, as well as the evolving needs of our people.

What do you think are some of the most likely long-term changes that disruptions such as COVID-19 will leave in terms of how we plan, develop, manage and govern cities?

We have always emphasised that this fight against COVID-19 is a marathon, not a sprint. Now with the arrival of safe and effective vaccines, we are seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. But there is still some way to go, and we must stay focussed and disciplined to complete our mission.

At some point, COVID-19 will pass, and the pandemic will be over. But there will likely be some long-term effects on how we live and use our urban spaces. One example is in the area of work. With companies and



Lawrence Wong visiting a lab at the National University Hospital.
Image: National University Hospital

employees getting used to working from home, we can expect people's commuting, retail consumption and lifestyle patterns to evolve as well. If this behaviour persists, it will naturally mean having to adjust how we plan for neighbourhoods and the Central Business District.

At the neighbourhood level, we will need to cater to more people working from home by strengthening the convenience and accessibility of amenities. It also lends greater impetus for developing the gateways and local hubs that were laid out in earlier Master Plans, to bring jobs even closer to home.

What are some key areas that cities should work on going forward to build up resilience over the long term?

For Singapore, resilience is indeed key to our survival. As a small city-state, we have a very small margin of error compared to larger, better-resourced nations.

So we must never rest on our laurels. We must keep on strengthening our capabilities and preparing for the next challenge—it could be another pandemic, a disease X in the future, or other existential challenges like climate change.

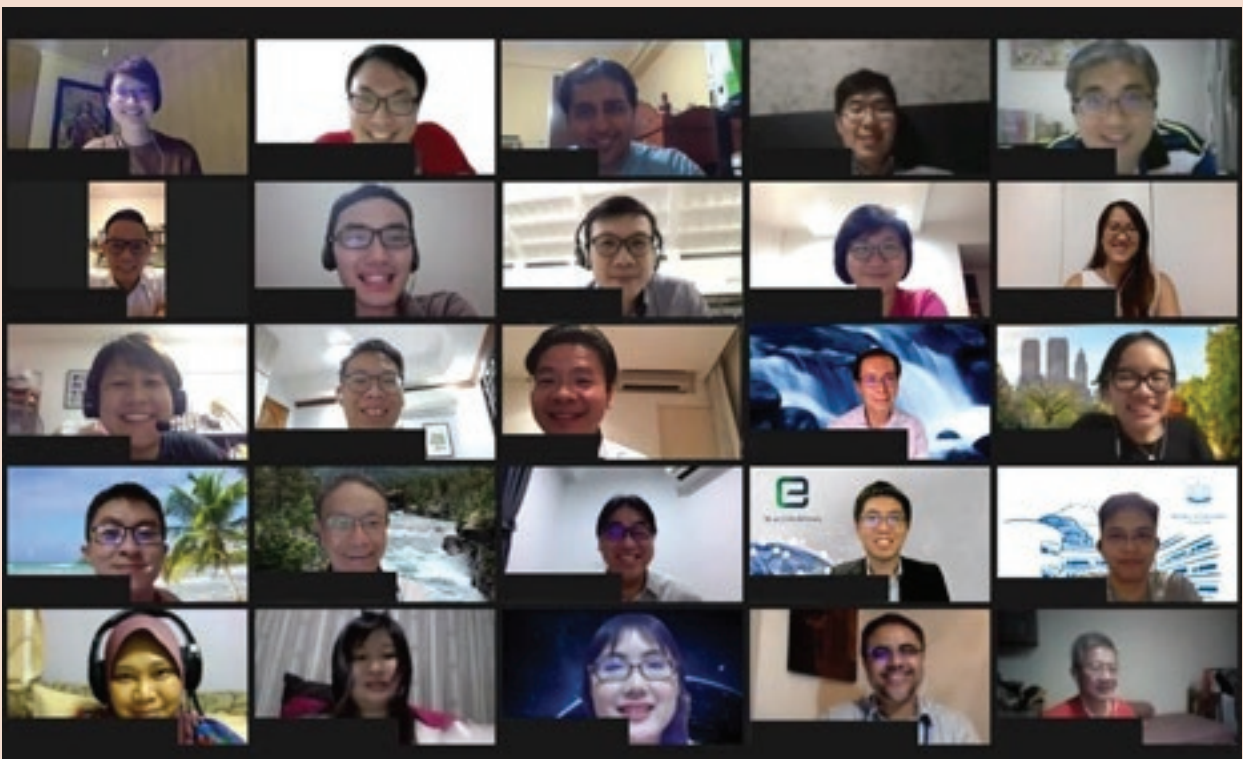
In tackling these challenges, we have to take a systematic and interdisciplinary approach and avoid working in individual silos. We must also constantly re-examine our own assumptions, be prepared to push the boundaries, and develop new and creative solutions that may well be different from the status quo or conventional norms.

As disruptions become increasingly unpredictable, social resilience becomes even more important for societies to bounce back. In this regard, how have businesses and individuals supported the government's efforts in crisis response?

A city can only be as strong as its people. The ability of our people to stay resilient in the face of mounting challenges is crucial to Singapore's survival and liveability. In that respect, the pandemic has clearly demonstrated our mettle and brought out the best in Singaporeans.

During the pandemic, we've seen many examples of individuals and companies rallying together and launching numerous ground-up initiatives. The pandemic has also been a momentous shared experience for all of us and will define the collective consciousness of our generation.

This is why we initiated the Emerging Stronger Conversations [part of the Singapore Together movement that provides opportunities for Singaporeans to partner with the government and provide support for more citizen-led initiatives]—to give Singaporeans the chance to reflect on this experience and share their views on how to create a more caring, cohesive and resilient society.



Ministry of Education's Emerging Singapore Conversations.
Image: Ministry of Education



Even the best-laid plans will go awry. What's more important is our ability to adapt, recover our footing and turn the situation around.



As we move forward, the Singapore Together Alliances for Action, which are industry-led coalitions, will transform these reflections into action and move on key growth areas for Singapore. Through close partnership between government and industry, we hope to quickly explore, prototype and implement new ideas in crucial sectors, paving the way to indeed emerge stronger.

What is the one thing you are most grateful for in terms of how Singapore has been able to weather crises such as COVID-19 so far? What is one thing that you wish we had been better prepared for?

Planning and preparation are indispensable but even the best-laid plans will go awry. In a crisis, we must expect and be prepared for the unpredictable. New issues will pop up; things will trip up; and we won't always get things right all the time. What's more important is our ability to adapt, recover our footing and turn the situation around.

Over the past year we have shown that we can do this as a nation, by staying united and working together in common purpose. That's the "Singapore Together" spirit that will enable us to win this fight against COVID-19, and to deal with any future challenges that may come our way. 📍