



INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
**DESMOND LEE**

# Tackling Singapore's Complex Challenges with a Whole-Of- Society Approach

**Desmond Lee, Singapore's Minister of National Development, discusses the merits of working with different facets of society to tackle cross-cutting urban challenges.**



| *Image: Ministry of National Development (MND), Singapore*



**With limited space, we have to constantly make difficult trade-offs to balance the evolving interest of different stakeholders and manage the common fault lines...**



### **What are the key urban challenges that global cities like Singapore will face in the next few decades?**

Singapore is the only sovereign city state in the world. Unlike other global cities, we cannot afford to locate important functions away from the city—airports, military training facilities, water treatment and waste management ports have to be built within a small space of 730 km<sup>2</sup>, close to housing and commercial facilities. Within this finite space and resource envelope, we have to find a way to meet all our needs and aspirations—to create a vibrant and competitive global city, and an endearing home for all Singaporeans to live, work and play.

However, like other global cities, these needs and aspirations are evolving. With limited space, we have to constantly make difficult trade-offs to balance the evolving interest of different stakeholders and manage the common fault lines—between generations, income groups, citizenship or immigration status, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. We can see how in other cities where this is not managed well, these fault lines can become powerful forces that divide society. As a young and diverse society, we are especially aware of the importance of a cohesive society and have made continuous efforts to build and preserve it through over 50 years of nation building.

### **Are there specific risks that Singapore will need to look out for?**

There are a few risks that I think are important to highlight.

First, our society is ageing rapidly. Nearly 1 in 5 Singaporeans are aged 65 and above, and this will increase to nearly 1 in 4 by 2030. With an ageing population and a falling dependency ratio, we will need to increase expenditure on social and healthcare services, and infrastructure. This will require additional expenditure and land, which will place a fiscal burden on a smaller working population. As a nation, we will have to refresh and calibrate our social compact carefully to remain sustainable, and avoid inter-generational divides which have polarised the political landscape in some societies.



As an island surrounded by water, and with 30% of its land less than 5 m above mean sea levels, Singapore is threatened by rising sea levels.  
 Image: Carolyn / Unsplash

10

||  
**As a small city-state with no natural resources, Singapore's success depends on the industry and unity of our people.**  
 ||

Second, as a small and open economy, we are susceptible to global economic and technological shifts that can accentuate the skills divide in our society. Those with the right skillsets in demand will have their income determined by the global market, while those with obsolete skillsets are at risk of unemployment and income stagnation. Without intervention, lower-income families invest less resources in their children and aggregate in poorer neighbourhoods. This entrenches income divides across generations, and poses a key risk to social cohesion and national unity.

Third, climate change is another risk that will impact the current generation, and many generations to come. As a country, we have to work with the international community to reduce global carbon emissions, but we also have to be clear-eyed about the impacts of climate change—rising sea levels and more extreme weather patterns—and start taking steps now to adapt.

These challenges are not exhaustive. We also have to guard against unknown unknowns and black swan scenarios. In the context of urban planning, we will need to set aside space buffers, be agile and flexible, and be ready to mobilise both government and community resources, just as we did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **How can partnerships in urban planning help to address these strategic risks?**

As a small city-state with no natural resources, Singapore's success depends on the industry and unity of our people. The challenges that lie ahead, including those I highlighted earlier, are complex and multi-dimensional. How we tackle them must similarly be multi-pronged, using a whole-of-

society approach. In the context of urban planning, planning for and building social infrastructure is just as important as the physical infrastructure. The government takes the lead to watch for longer-term trends, plan ahead, and marshal community and private sector partners to meet these challenges.

For example, an ageing population presents not just an economic or fiscal challenge. It is also about how we can fundamentally reshape the way society thinks about eldercare to enable seniors to live longer in good health and remain productive. We are placing a greater emphasis on ageing-in-place and involvement of the community. Ageing-in-place allows seniors to live independently and actively in the community they are familiar in while having close access to social care and support services. This relieves burden on the healthcare system, improves emotional well-being outcomes and staves off ills like social isolation and loneliness.

The government is leading the way to build a city-for-all-ages. We have launched a new model of public housing for seniors integrated with care service packages which we call the Community Care Apartments. We are also integrating more healthcare, commercial and community facilities suited for seniors into more public housing developments. To complement these physical infrastructure that enable seniors to age in place, we partner with the community to develop engagement and support networks through initiatives like the Community Network for Seniors or Silver Generation Ambassadors.



Singaporeans, today, are enjoying longer and healthier lives. The supporting infrastructure will help them pursue their aspirations as they age.  
Image: Ministry of Health (MOH), Singapore

Another example is how we support inter-generational social mobility. The government provides public rental flats at heavily subsidised rates to serve as a social safety net. For the lower-income families and individuals in public rental flats, our aim is to uplift them, so that they can eventually buy a flat of their own. Through ComLink, an initiative which we are expanding nationwide, we bring together community resources to partner various government agencies to support disadvantaged families in rental housing to achieve stability, self-reliance and social mobility.

We do so by taking a family-centric approach—looking at their needs holistically, and coordinating health and social support from across different government agencies, including housing, social services, health, employment and education, as well as other non-governmental actors such as social service agencies, secular and religious organisations, and healthcare institutions. This is a whole-of-society effort to enable social mobility by building communities of care that empower and uplift families.

Beyond the social sector, partnerships with the private sector and the wider community are also important as we tackle pressing and complex challenges that will affect us and future generations. Our efforts to address climate change demonstrate this very clearly. To do our part to limit global warming, we launched the Singapore Green Plan 2030, a whole-of-nation movement to pursue sustainable development. Last year, we also announced our climate ambition to achieve net zero carbon emissions by mid-century.

For the Built Environment sector, we worked with the Singapore Green Building Council to engage over 5,000 stakeholders, from industry associations and businesses to consumers and youths. This culminated in the latest edition of our Singapore Green Building Masterplan which



An artist's impression of a community care apartment in Queensway Canopy housing development, featuring open layouts with sliding partitions, a built-in wardrobe, cabinets and a furnished kitchen.  
*Image: Housing & Development Board (HDB), Singapore*



Industry stakeholders are partnering Singapore in greening its buildings, as seen in Keppel Infrastructure @ Changi that officially opened in October 2022.  
Image: Ministry of National Development (MND), Singapore

sets out our ambitious “80-80-80 in 2030” targets (to green 80% of buildings, to have 80% of new developments classed as Super Low Energy buildings, and to achieve 80% improvement in energy efficiency from 2005 levels for best-in-class buildings by 2030) to accelerate the decarbonisation of our built environment. We continue to work in close partnership with our industry stakeholders and academic partners to drive greater innovation in the sector and intensify our greening efforts.

### **As our social compact evolves, how will Singapore’s approach to urban planning change? How can partnerships feature more critically in this process?**



**This can only be done through extensive engagement to understand the needs and aspirations of users from all walks of life.**



We are already coping with such shifts today. Singaporeans’ aspirations have evolved with rising affluence. There is growing demand for more entertainment options, better jobs, and better and more accessible services like transport, healthcare, and education. More singles desire to live on their own. Our seniors desire to live independently too. Household sizes are growing smaller. There is a growing call to conserve more of our green and blue spaces, as well as our built heritage. Given our limited space, we will have to make difficult trade-offs. To do so, we need to constantly refresh our social compact as the demands and aspirations of society shifts.

This can only be done through extensive engagement to understand the needs and aspirations of users from all walks of life. For example, in the Long-Term Plan Review that was recently concluded last year, we engaged more than 15,000 individuals, and received a wide range of ideas.

The government also launched Forward Singapore last year, to bring Singaporeans together, to examine our society’s values and aspirations, discuss possible ideas, and build consensus to refresh our social compact on how we should move forward together. Specifically, under the Build pillar, we will establish more partnerships with local stakeholders to build more vibrant, inclusive and liveable environments.

II

**It takes time to nurture relationships, foster trust and gradually build up capabilities to work together on the challenges facing our city.**

II

## Is there a big picture strategy by Singapore for partnerships at different scales?

Cultivating a culture of partnerships starts at the citizen and grassroots level. We want citizens to participate actively in the community and take ownership of the spaces that they are in. In managing municipal issues, individuals and community organisations can play a crucial role in discussing community issues, and coming up with recommendations that take into consideration the needs of diverse members of the community.

For example, we set up the Community Advisory Panel on Neighbourhood Noise in April 2022 to look into addressing noise from neighbours and congregation noise from common areas. The panel engaged close to 4,400 to understand the views and experiences of the community, and came up with recommendations on how to manage neighbourhood noise. This was a community-led effort, that was able to consult widely, and harness the views and ideas from the public on how we can build a more gracious and harmonious living environment.

At the level of the city-state, partnerships are also deeply ingrained into the way we plan our city. The feedback and suggestions gathered from our Long-Term Plan Review exercise, for instance, will eventually feed into our urban masterplan.

Many Singaporeans also feel that it is important to conserve our green spaces and live in harmony with nature. We have been transforming Singapore into a City in Nature, to weave nature more closely into our urban fabric and incorporate ecological considerations into our long-term land-use planning with a science-based approach.



The ongoing OneMillionTrees movement invites Singaporeans to play an active role in restoring nature back to the city. Launched in April 2020, almost 50% of the target has already been achieved.  
Image: Ministry of National Development (MND), Singapore

Minister Desmond Lee connected with over 70 ministers, mayors and city leaders at World Cities Summit 2022.

Image: Centre for Liveable Cities



We recently completed the Ecological Profiling Exercise, an island-wide study of green spaces across Singapore, in partnership with experts and members of the nature community. Based on the findings, we were able to better understand the role of different green spaces in enhancing ecological connectivity, and are establishing new Nature Corridors. These will strengthen ecological connectivity between source habitats in these areas, and help us protect our rich biodiversity.

Finally, at the city-to-city level, we have been working hard to build up links with other cities, to share best practices, and establish a global network of cities working to resolve current challenges. Though the World Cities Summit, we have also been providing a platform for cities to come together, share ideas and find ways to partner with one another.

From the individual to the international conglomerate, working with partners across different scales allows us to adjust policy to meet real needs, bring on board experts and key stakeholders, mobilise community resources, and help Singapore become more resilient and responsive to changes in a rapidly evolving global environment.

### **Are there limitations to partnerships and how will Singapore address them?**

Partnerships will continue to be crucial for Singapore, and for cities around the world. Our experience with the pandemic has shown us that resilient cities need to have engaged citizenry, extensive links with people and private sectors, as well as robust global networks. In our urban development, the Singapore of tomorrow will have to work closely with stakeholders to build, rejuvenate and imagine a home that is liveable, sustainable and globally competitive.

Partnerships are not easy. It takes time to nurture relationships, foster trust and gradually build up capabilities to work together on the challenges facing our city. The partnerships that we have developed in Singapore are the result of many years of painstaking dialogue and collaboration. We have to remain committed to building and sustaining platforms for partnerships, so that partners at all levels can continue to contribute. As a global city, we will have to remain open to ideas, and be prepared for the changes to come. It is this mindset of partnerships, a willingness to try, and deep trust across society that will allow cities like Singapore to flourish in the years and decades to come. 📍