

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City Closing Dialogue Session with Minister Desmond Lee

By Beverly Tan



Caption for photo: Minister Desmond Lee giving his opening statement

The hybrid closing dialogue of the Singapore Perspectives Conference, moderated by Professor Tan Tai Yong, President and Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS College, featured Mr Desmond Lee, Minister for National Development and Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration.

In his opening statement, Minister Lee emphasised that cities reflect the diversity of the society, not only in terms of race and religion, but also increasingly in the ideas and perspectives of the people. He noted that the challenge for Singapore has been balancing different priorities and ambition, and allowing them space to flourish.

Preparing for Major Trends

In his speech, Minister Lee addressed sustainability, inclusivity, city maintenance, land use planning, and the ageing population.

On sustainability and climate change, Minister Lee highlighted Singapore's Green Plan, which was launched in 2021. The plan will remake Singaporeans' way of life, work and transport. Included in the plan are efforts to restore and enhance core biodiversity areas, naturalising the city to help wildlife transverse, planting one million trees by 2030, and meeting the goal of having every household live within a 10-minute walk from a park by 2030. The minister also highlighted other efforts that make the urban infrastructure, transportation system and power grid more sustainable. These efforts include making 80 per cent of buildings "Super Low Energy" buildings, phasing out all internal combustion engine vehicles by 2040 and installing more solar panels in various locations. In addition to the "hardware", or infrastructural improvements, the minister also highlighted that the "heartware", or people's efforts and lifestyles, would be crucial in making Singapore a more sustainable city.

Inclusivity was the next issue minister Lee spoke about. He highlighted Singapore's success with the Ethnic Integration Policy, which ensures a representative mix of races in HDB heartlands. Other efforts include the recently launched Prime Location Housing model, which includes public rental housing for lower-income households in prime locations. Minister Lee also described efforts in making the city more accessible for the differently abled through the Accessible City Network, which aims to improve way-finding tools and identify overlooked opportunities for more barrier-free features.

The third issue he focused on was preparing for a silver generation. Singapore's proportion of citizens above 65 will see an increase from one in six to one in four by 2030. To address this, the minister highlighted the steps being taken to make the city more senior-friendly. These include retrofitting almost all older HDB blocks to bring lifts to every floor, installing accessibility features at highly subsidised rates in seniors' homes, piloting Community Care Apartments as well as integrated developments aimed at integrating seniors with the community.

Tying in with the ageing population, Minister Lee also spoke about what was being done to care for and maintain the ageing city. To prevent urban decay, Singapore has rolled out the Home Improvement Programme and a Periodic Façade Inspection regime to keep homes in good condition. Additionally, research on more advanced facility management methods continues, alongside the preservation of building important to the collective heritage of Singaporeans.

On land-use planning, Minister Lee highlighted Singapore's evergreen challenge of catering to various competing needs while making use of the limited land. Singapore's Master Plan that guides short-term development over the next 10 to 15 years is reviewed every five years; and the Long-Term Plan, which caters for the next 50 years, is updated every 10 years. Building higher, reclaiming land, utilising underground space and redeveloping existing development are strategies that Singapore uses to maximise land use.

Minister Lee noted that these issues were "known unknowns", but the increasingly volatile and uncertain world has also made imperative that Singapore prepares for the "unknown unknowns".

A Vision of Our Future City

Minister Lee painted his vision of Singapore in the coming future: it is a city that celebrates diversity — finding joy in commonality and becoming closer through common spaces built together; that is more inclusive and purposefully caters to differences of the people; that is in harmony with nature; that minimises damage to the environment or even does more good for the environment than harm; that is digitally enabled and globally connects; that is rooted in heritage; and lastly, one that is a close-knit community that uplifts.

To attain this vision, he outlined the importance of trust, stewardship and collective action. Trust comes in the form of trusting that views expressed will be heard, that those who disagree come from a good place and that decisions are made with the city's and people's best interests in mind. Stewardship comes in the form of taking accountability for the city, taking care of it so the future generations can thrive in this city as well. Collective action also needs to be taken, going beyond discussion and ideation.

Question & Answer

During the Q&A session, Minister Lee responded to queries on housing policy, the pessimism of Singaporeans, Singapore's role in the region, brain drain and racial harmony, among other questions. This session was moderated by Professor Tan Tai Yong, President and Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS College.



Caption for photo: Minister Lee responding to a question during the Q&A session

The session started with a broad question from Professor Tan, on the possible tension between building Singapore to be a global city and building a city that is considered a home.

In answering the question, Minister Lee emphasised that the priority for Singapore would be to build a home, which would then enable the outcomes related to a global city. He added that it was imperative to make citizens feel at home in order to achieve the aspirations of being globally connected.

The next question was raised online by a participant who was concerned about how housing policies should be changed or developed to address the rising number of singles and non-traditional family structures. The minister noted Singapore's unique situation — where most of the population reside in public housing, which the government strives to keep accessible and affordable. He highlighted that society is not static and that policies will change as time progresses. Minister Lee explained that singles are not necessarily excluded from the recently launched Prime Location Housing, as singles who are caretakers will be eligible.

Another question was asked online about whether mixing rental and sold flats has achieved its intended effects, and what can be done to better support those in rental housing. Minister Lee replied that without learning to relate to one another through the lived experience of social mixing, there could be more segregation. He also pointed to research that suggests putting people of different backgrounds together in a space can enable social mixing if done well, as it provides amenities for people to mingle and share ideas. On providing better support to those in rental housing, Minister Lee gave the example of the ComLink project where agencies and social workers came together to work out a progress plan to help families in rental housing to unlock the shackles standing in their way. He also spoke about how moving to home ownership was only one proxy of stability, self-reliance and, ultimately, social mobility. Minister Lee explained that home ownership could be used as an aspiration for these families to work towards, while the core obstacles that these families face in attaining financial stability are tackled first.

The next online question was about the pessimism of Singaporeans despite Singapore's success. The minister alluded to the difference between the experiences shared online and the experiences shared face-to-face. He explained that the pessimism could actually be a sense of realism, and speaking to people, he has noticed there was often some hope and optimism. The youth today are better equipped and should be more confident that their skillsets are well placed. Thus, it is important for mentors to address our youth's fears regarding the unknown and to empower them.

Minister Lee responded to a question from the floor on Singapore's role in the region and the world, as a city-state with the rising of Asian giants such as India and China. He stated that Singapore needs to remain nimble and flexible, structuring relationships to remain relevant and flourish. In order to do this, Singapore needs talent with the necessary skillsets, flexibility and resilience, which falls on the government to make sure that the education system prepares such talent for the workforce and world. He added that Singapore serves as a neutral place that can communicate to both the East and the West, making Singapore highly relevant today when Sino-US competition is rising. As such, the government needs to connect with the region and larger countries and make efforts to encourage youth to connect with their peers in Southeast Asia.

The next question from the floor asked what could be done to prevent brain drain amidst the increasingly competitive society. Minister Lee replied that corporate leaders have the

responsibility to pay attention to the well-being of employees. He acknowledged that emotional and mental well-being have been neglected; there was a need to strike a balance for overall well-being, not just the physical. There is a need to have earnest conversations about work-life balance and the intrusion of digital devices at home, especially now when the pandemic has enabled the population to work more digitally and remotely than before. Minister Lee said the solution needs to be a collaboration between the government, industry, employers and non-government organisations.

The next online question asked about the future generations of political leaders and their understanding of the changing complexities of the multiracial, multireligious Singapore. Minister Lee emphasised the strong mentoring alliance that needs to be pushed, from older Singaporeans to guide future leaders on the intellectual, emotional and instinctual aspects of nation building, which cannot be learnt in a classroom.

A question from the floor pertaining to climate change, as well as Singapore's position and role on the world stage, was asked. Minister Lee explained that while Singapore is a small city-state, it does not shy away from participating from climate conferences, as it is important to ensure that the city-state has a chance of survival at the onslaught of climate change. He stressed the importance of global collective action, as political will is needed from countries big and small. Countries are starting to pay more attention to the issue because their people, who are being directly affected by climate change, are paying more attention to the issue as well. He elaborated that Singapore has played its part by collaborating with various universities and non-government organisations to address the issue of climate change locally. He also highlighted the importance of engaging the youth and getting their feedback on how citizens are able to partner with the government to combat this issue.

The last question from the floor was about Singapore being a leader in the region for climate and green innovation. While headline commitments were important, Minister Lee said that policies and operations that put things in action to achieve the stated goals were equally important. He added that Singapore might not sign on to agreements very readily, as it is important to make commitments that the country can deliver. Instead of simply having the political will, there is a need for the country to have the resources, mechanisms and policies to see such commitments through. Referencing the Green Plan — which seeks to galvanise policymakers, the private sector, institutes of higher learning and the community to help tackle the issue of climate change — Minister Lee noted that mere policy and infrastructure alone are not enough. He argued that there needs to be a change in the way of life and conservation, which is what the Green Plan will do to secure the environment for future generations, provided the nation sees it through.

The remaining questions asked about physical spaces. Minister Lee spoke about how physical spaces in a city are important in enabling social interactions, even though these spaces do not necessarily cause interactions to happen. He noted that open and inclusive physical spaces are necessary, but not sufficient. As such, it is important to have policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy, which might not be perfect, but is recognised as important by Singaporeans. Minister Lee also highlighted that digital platforms enabled communities to form, drawing on the example of BTO WhatsApp groups fostering a sense of friendship and neighbourliness, and has also translated to offline friendships and communities forming

through the digital platform. The minister also cautioned against the dismantling of cultural icons that make up an important part of the complex identities of Singaporeans. He added that instead of homogeneity, the preservation of such sub-identities will help to give Singapore a link to its heritage.

Beverly Tan is a Research Assistant at the IPS Society and Culture Department.

IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of IPS and Singapore Perspectives 2022:



BlackRock
CapitaLand
Centurion Corporation Ltd
Citi Singapore
City Developments Limited
DBS Bank Limited
EnGro Corporation Limited
Enterprise Singapore
EY
GLP Pte Ltd
Goh Foundation

Housing & Development Board
Institute of Technical Education
Keppel Corporation
Khong Guan Biscuit Factory (S) Pte Ltd
Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore
Nanyang Polytechnic
National University of Singapore
Ngee Ann Polytechnic
PSA
Raffles Hospital
Republic Polytechnic

Singapore Institute of Technology
Singapore Polytechnic
Singapore Pools (Private) Limited
Singapore University of Social Sciences
Singtel
Temasek Polytechnic
Thakral Group
UOB
Urban Redevelopment Authority
Wilmar International Limited

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2022 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.