

President Tan looks for takeaways in Zurich

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President Tony Tan Keng Yam kicked off his visit to Switzerland yesterday by looking at what Singapore and the European nation can learn from each other in areas ranging from environmental management to productivity.

The process began in Zurich with a crash course on cutting-edge Swiss research into water and flood management.

A demonstration at the Laboratory of Hydraulics, Hydrology and Glaciology of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH) gave a first-hand look at the impact of floods and tsunamis and how the risks from such natural hazards can be managed.

ETH senior vice-president Gerhard Schmitt said the institute showcased this particular lab to Dr Tan because of the increasing incidents of flooding in Singapore.

"Floods have a high economic impact and it is important for Singapore to understand and stop flooding. Singapore is also surrounded by countries that are vulnerable to tsunamis," he said.

The ETH has a research centre in Singapore that studies ways to help cities grow sustainably. This includes research into energy-efficient buildings and how to preserve a location's heritage while developing it for future needs.

The ideas and technology created at the Singapore-ETH Centre will likely be implemented in Singapore over the next year or two, said its director Peter Edwards.

At the end of the tour, Dr Tan mingled with students, including those from the National University of Singapore on an exchange programme at the ETH, and ETH undergraduates who recently spent a semester in Singapore.

He then attended a conference organised by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies and think-tank Avenir Suisse.

Dr Maliki Osman, Minister of State for National Development, said at the event that the similarities between Singapore and Switzerland could serve as a foundation for both countries to share knowledge and jointly devise solutions to common challenges.

In particular, Singapore has much to learn from Switzerland in terms of strengthening its economic competitiveness, specifically in developing deep industry capabilities, a skilled and talented workforce and a competitive research and development ecosystem, Dr Maliki said.

He cited examples of initiatives and programmes Singapore has introduced to build an inclusive society, create a sustainable urban environment and restructure the economy. These include developing Gardens by the Bay and introducing the Workfare Income Supplement and the Productivity and Innovation Credit scheme.

Nonetheless, he noted: "Switzerland's constant search for innovative, environmentally sustainable solutions offers good learning points for Singapore."

"Creating liveable and sustainable cities is a continuous learning journey and it includes the challenges of meeting the people's needs and aspirations."

Singapore has to grow the economy and excite the young so they can look forward to a future of unexplored opportunities, and at the same time, care for the old so they can age gracefully and meaningfully, he added.

"We need to support families to earn good incomes and raise children well. Above all, we need to strengthen communities to deepen emotional connections for a sustainable future," he said.

Dr Tan's four-day visit will also include stops in St Gallen, Lausanne and Bern.

He will meet the President of the Swiss Confederation, Mr Didier Burkhalter, today and witness the signing of a declaration of enhanced partnership between Singapore and Switzerland.

Visits are also planned to the Ecole Polytechnique Federal de Lausanne and the Nestle Research Centre before the presidential party leaves for Singapore on Saturday.