The future is not what it used to be

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THE Institute of Policy Studies has a 'Singapore Futures' project that grapples with the question: 'What if the future is not what we think it will be for Singapore in 2030?' Its objective is to challenge us all to think about whether we will be ready for that.

To some extent, the future is out there, especially when we think of one factor that will shape how we work, live and play - climate change.

While our local authorities may adjust planning regulations for rising sea levels, and we may fund studies on whether dykes may be needed to keep us dry, we have not begun to fully appreciate the effect climate change may have on us.

We have seen only the tip of the iceberg with the volatility in food supplies and rising prices as food-growing areas grapple, as Australia has, with the Big Dry.

In South-east Asia, changes in weather patterns have meant more rain than people can cope with. These disruptions may cause people to migrate and crowd into places where conditions seem more predictable, or better managed. Diseases migrate and mutate along with those people.

Countries in need will expect us to play a greater role in helping them out. While it is unlikely we will stand idly by - Singaporeans are a compassionate lot - there will be the burden of obligation to provide substantial financial resources, support in kind, and assistance in technical planning and management expertise to put systems in place to cope. It will be in our interest to keep their traditional homelands viable, cities liveable. With climate change, our fates will be ever more closely intertwined.

The positive side of it is that by mitigating climate change, say by helping Indonesia find a sensible market or other mechanisms to save its forests (a major 'carbon sink' in the world), or say protecting and optimising the arable land in the region, we secure

our own livelihoods in Singapore. Clean air and affordable food supply cannot be taken for granted any more.

We can barely be credible in our efforts anywhere else if we do not also begin to play our part in mitigating climate change. Industry, the scientific community and regulators have to engage each other and take decisive steps to reduce our carbon emissions, on as large a scale as possible. There is a discount we give ourselves because we are a city-state, but we should also showcase what stakeholder action and creativity within all those constraints can really achieve.

The future is also out there in the sense of another important key driver of change - communications.

As a thriving logistics hub, we are all too aware of how our air, sea and road links are the lifeblood of our economy. As long as the broader Asian region remains the growth pole of the world over the next few decades, we can retain our prominence, if not pre-eminence, in this respect.

Even if discussions on how travel and shipping are the largest polluters of the environment hot up, the magnitude of activity is only likely to increase, though we hope increasingly via eco-friendly power.

Operators of ports, airports and other transport systems will compete to build, own or operate different nodes of the global network. Are our Singapore operators ready to bid more aggressively for a piece of that pie?

As yet unrealised is the potential for green trains that run as arteries through the South-east Asian region up to the north. If forward-thinking business folk and policymakers across Asia demonstrate the will to stay the course of such long-term investments, the future of Singapore at one end of mainland South-east Asia could be quite different from what we might make of it today.

But what if China and India, and South-east Asia do not achieve the potential that is being talked about today? The point of this exercise is to ask: What is our fallback position?

The more exciting area of communications lies in information and communications technology (ICT) and its potential to power the Intelligence Revolution. ICT will allow us to telecommute so that we only need the bus, plane or train for the odd face-to-face business meeting, for pleasure trips in the main, or for a proper civil society event.

Mr Al Gore and Prince Charles showed us how they could send holograms of themselves to conferences instead of incurring the carbon emissions entailed in being there in the flesh.

But the power of computing is allowing scientists to understand how the human brain works. So at some point, we may need only to "think the thought…" Will these technologies empower and release human potential, or will they make control and suppression of that potential ever more possible?

These scenarios will influence as well as be influenced by the notion of who we are as a 'community', and in that sense, the future also lies closer to home.

It has been a year since the Government indicated that it had adopted a population planning parameter of 6.5 million people for a time frame of 40 to 50 years. In 2005, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said in a discussion on the integrated resorts that he envisaged Singapore as a buzzing metropolis of maybe even seven million people in 2030. There have been discussions since about dealing with an ageing population and increasing dependency ratios and, hence, the imperative of bulking up with skilled labour from overseas.

The Institute of Policy Studies team generated projections of population growth under different assumptions for fertility and net migration, working from the base resident population number for 2005.

Under even the most optimistic conditions of a rise in total fertility rate to 1.85 by 2020 and a net migration of 100,000 annually throughout the projection period to achieve over seven million people in 2030, we will not replicate the proportion of working people we have in relation to dependants (those aged 0-14 years, and those aged 65 and above) as we have now.

Will we need this magnitude of migrants? When they are here, will they be more like us, 'Singaporean', or will we be expected to be more like them, 'cosmopolitan'? Should we strengthen the sense of 'nation', or should we find better ways to tap the resources of our hinterland, in which case we might do better as 'Asians'?

At an individual level, we are comfortable switching through multiple identities, but there are real implications at the level of public, business and social policy. Our little experiment with foreign talent in the sporting arena illustrates this and reminds us to choose, in our daily decisions to help nurture local productive capacity - the local SMEs, architects, fund mangers, even our seniors. When we succeed, we can say it was done 'the Singapore way'.

The future may not be what it used to be. We have only cited three possible Cs of change, and we should explore more. Planning and anticipation of change will give us some sense of control over the future, but it will also suggest the limits to what centralised state effort can do. We may need, where we find ourselves in positions of authority, the courage to release those around us to find their own creative, path-breaking solutions to the unforeseen problems or new opportunities that lie ahead.

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The conclusions of the Singapore Futures project will be presented at the IPS flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives 2008, on Feb 1.

Note: This is the revised version.