

Goal to grow local agriculture sector may not succeed, says IPS conference panellist

Goh Yan Han

The Straits Times, 17 January 2022

SINGAPORE - The push to grow the local agriculture sector "may not probably succeed", said a local researcher at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives conference on Monday (Jan 17).

Dr Harvey Neo, a senior fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, said that he liked the idea of growing the sector and noted the aspiration, but added that it should "not be in a sense that you cannot even achieve it".

Such ideas in Singapore's Green Plan 2030 are "fictional and almost fantastical, and it's not realistic", he said.

Under the plan, Singapore aims to produce 30 per cent of its nutritional needs locally and sustainably by 2030.

One example that shows the difficulty in achieving this goal is how local farmers face uncertainty in their businesses, said Dr Neo.

Land leases, while renewed, are getting shorter and shorter, while some farmers have been asked to move their farms.

While the farm lands were not taken away and alternative sites were offered, this disrupts operations and is an inconvenience, he said.

"Do you want to provide an environment of stability that really convinces people that you truly want this and you are committed to providing the resources available necessary for people to actualise this vision, this aspiration?" said Dr Neo.

He had been asked for his comments on the plan by IPS senior research fellow and head of its governance and economy department Christopher Gee, who was moderating the panel on the topic of City as Green Space.

His fellow panellist, Dr Olivia Jensen, noted that Singapore has a reputation for setting realistic targets and going on to achieve them.

"And I think perhaps the reason why Singapore hasn't set a target for net zero is because it doesn't want to do so until there's a clear idea of how it gets there," said Dr

Jensen, who is lead scientist at the Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk at the National University of Singapore.

Net zero refers to the plan to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 to help slow global warming. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, have committed to it.

Dr Jensen also spoke on the key role of sound governance and policymaking in achieving goals in terms of sustainability and climate action.

Singapore has done well on this front, such as by installing solar panels on the roofs of Housing Board flats and improving access to public transport while encouraging cycling and walking with the efforts to improve park connectors, she said.

She added: "Taking action across sectors is always challenging from a policy design and implementation point of view. But it's much more feasible and more likely to happen at the level of the city, where, in many cases, policymakers from different sectors can meet each other physically, and can see each other's work in the same space.

"This kind of inter-sector policy planning implementation is one of Singapore's outstanding strengths."

When asked whether it is possible for conservation and development to be in harmony with each other rather than force a trade-off, Dr Jensen said it depends what stage of economic development the country is in.

A country focused on low-cost manufacturing would have an acute tension between environmental quality and economic development.

On the other hand, for a country that is high-income, highly developed and moving towards a service economy, "it is actually relatively easy for the economy to keep on growing while reducing its impact on the environment", she said.

"And that's certainly the level of development that Singapore finds itself in."

On the topic of Singapore taking the lead in environmental efforts, Dr Jensen said the easiest area to do so would be among other cities, where it can impress its learning on others while taking extensive opportunities to learn from what other cities are doing.

"In some policy areas, other cities have done things which were very innovative and exceed what Singapore has so far managed to achieve," she said.