

Reset now for a post-pandemic future

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After a year of living in the shadow of Covid-19, the world must be prepared for a protracted road to recovery and more twists and turns ahead. While the global vaccine roll-out has begun and travel will eventually restart progressively, it could be a few years before the world sees some semblance of normalcy again. The vaccine uptake even in advanced countries is still patchy, and uncertainties remain over the duration of protection and effectiveness that vaccines offer against new strains of the virus. Until there is herd immunity across both advanced and developing economies, the risk of further lockdowns is ever present. Measures such as mask wearing and safe distancing will continue to be part of everyday life. For Singapore, and likely elsewhere too, the crisis has set the stage for some soul searching over the societal resets needed to secure the future.

Education Minister Lawrence Wong spelt out three in a speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual conference on Monday, and these are worth pondering. First, he called for a reset of the social compact for a fairer and more equal society. The less well-off will need more social safety nets in an uncertain and volatile post-Covid-19 world. Essential workers, too, must receive fairer remuneration. More value must be placed on the human touch, evident in roles such as caregiving. To prevent class lines from ossifying, the definition of merit must be broadened beyond academic and cognitive abilities to include soft skills and creativity.

Second, a reset towards more sustainable economic growth. As calls to invest in greener energy have grown, sustainability can be a new source of competitive advantage for small and open economies like Singapore, which could play a role as a carbon trading and green finance hub.

Third, there is the opportunity to strengthen capabilities of the workforce and social solidarity. In the area of digitalisation, this means ensuring it does not lead to greater inequality between professionals who can adapt more easily to remote work and new technologies, and those whose jobs are more at risk.

While these resets are certainly worth pursuing, other areas might also warrant a relook in the wake of the pandemic. Can employers move decisively to embed the gains from digitalisation and working from home to make flexible work arrangements, and staggered working times to ease traffic congestion, the new normal? Could schools do likewise? If travel and tourism are to remain curbed for several years, might this be the time to push ahead with longstanding plans to remake Orchard Road and enliven Singapore's attractions, as well as to train staff to raise service standards, so as to be ready to wow visitors when they eventually return? In the Covid-19 challenge, there might well also be opportunities.