

IPS forum: Time is needed to study the severity and impact of Covid-19 on Singapore, the people and economy

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The Covid-19 virus is rapidly spreading to more and more countries, spurring fear among people around the world since its first emergence in China late last year.

Speaking at a forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on 25 February, Adjunct Associate Professor Vernon Lee described the novel coronavirus as a “new virus that the people [are] still learning a lot about”.

With the research studies and laboratory tests done so far, Assoc Prof Lee, who is also the director of the Communicable Diseases Division at the Ministry of Health (MOH), said that the amount of information about Covid-19 is already unprecedented in this short period of time since its emergence.

He said that although Covid-19 appeared to spread faster than SARS, it seems that the coronavirus is “containable” as the number of infected cases has been reduced after a few containment measures were put in place by some countries, including Singapore.

“So perhaps it is not quite as transmissible as influenza,” said Assoc Prof Lee. “But time will tell, I think we still need to learn more about this disease.”

He stressed that more time and further research with international colleagues and scientists will be needed in order to understand the transmission and severity of Covid-19.

He explained, “Because of the sheer number of people that are affected across the globe, [Covid-19] still caused many deaths. So we do not want to trivialise any virus because it has some potential impact.”

Meanwhile, when asked by the forum moderator, Dr Gillian Koh, about the impact of the outbreak on Singapore’s economy, United Overseas Bank (UOB) economist Barnabas Gan agreed with Assoc Prof Lee that time is needed to understand how protracted and how severe the impact might be. Even PM Lee Hsien Loong had mentioned that “recession was possible”.

Mr Gan compared the economic impact of the SARS outbreak in 2003, saying that only one-quarter of negative growth was observed in the second quarter of 2003. He noted that the country’s economy was in a good position before Covid-19 came into Singapore.

Domestic consumption is not sufficient to help the tourism industry; Budget 2020 in place to help cushion the slowdown due to Covid-19

However, the outbreak of Covid-19 has hit the tourism sector hard, as Singapore's tourism receipts this year could drop \$6.8 billion to \$8.1 billion, said Mr Gan.

He added, "That will completely wipe out our GDP (gross domestic product) and bring it to around 0.5 per cent, just based on how much our tourism receipts actually fall."

Mr Gan also noted that it is not sufficient to help the country's economy only by relying on domestic consumption because the revenue source of some tourism premises, such as restaurants tied to Chinese tour groups, has been cut off due to the ban on Chinese tourist.

"Tourism is a big part of the Singapore economy, and I'm sure that the tourism industry alone would agree with me that just tapping on staycations and Singaporeans just going for local restaurants to have a meal, isn't going to cut it in terms of revenue," he remarked.

However, it is worth mentioning that earlier this month, PM Lee has called for the citizens to support local tourism by having a staycation and exploring Singapore's local attractions in light of the coronavirus outbreak instead of travelling abroad.

Moving on to the economic measures introduced during Budget 2020, Mr Gan pointed out that the government's support measures to combat Covid-19 are actually considered as "industry-wide measures", which covers all groups – such as corporations, households, workers, and medical – to help them get back on their feet.

Although some people criticised the short time-span of the budget measures, such as the jobs support scheme which people are only entitled to for three months, Mr Gan noted that the government has around \$8 billion in accumulated surpluses which could "push up" the economy if needed.

"We have the funds to roll out a secondary stream of aid, if needed, to help the companies."

"The question is, are we going to see Singapore be declared Covid-19-free in May? That is an optimistic view, but if it does happen, the Budget comes in handy as a three-month lifeline and by then, things may blow over and the economy may start to pick up again," he added.

"Life went on as usual" even if Covid-19 being declared as a "pandemic"; social responsibility is a key

Last Tuesday (3 March), World Health Organization (WHO) cautioned the likelihood to deem Covid-19 as a global pandemic if local transmission is sustained outside of China.

Assoc Prof Lee commented that the declaration of a pandemic, however, does not imply the impact of the disease would be severe, as a pandemic can be either mild or severe.

He explained, "What it actually means when we say that it is a pandemic is that the disease is spreading very quickly, and it's likely going to be difficult to be able to contain it globally."

Referring to H1N1 which was declared as a pandemic by WHO in 2009, Assoc Prof Lee said that the effects of H1N1, based on what has discovered by the scientist, were similar to seasonal influenza in terms of severity.

“So while there was a pandemic, if you recall, life went on as usual for the most part, with some measures to try to reduce the disease’s spread and also target our measures at the at-risk individuals,” he added.

He mentioned that asking sick people to wear a mask, see a doctor, and undergo self-isolation are part of social responsibility to prevent transmission of the disease.

Emergence of misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19; application of POFMA on falsehood of Covid-19 good

WHO has warned of an “infodemic”, with the public flooded with a lot of information – including misinformation and disinformation – about Covid-19 from various sources.

Noting this problem as “information avalanche”, IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Carol Soon stressed that it is important to understand the reason people spread false information.

Dr Soon was one of the four panelists who spoke at the IPS forum on Singapore’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak. She hinted, “When there is an information gap, people rely on heuristics, what we call mental shortcuts. People will attempt to find whatever information they can to plug the gaps, to fill in the gaps.”

She classified the misinformation about Covid-19 that people usually see into these three types which are: factual misinformation that could prompt fears and anxiety–like rumours of MRT station closures and purported death cases, misleading of health advisories, and racist and xenophobic sentiments.

As falsehoods on Covid-19 are clearly “prejudicial and detrimental to public interest”, Dr Soon opined that the government could respond quickly by using POFMA to debunk the falsehoods and ask website-owners to put out corrections.

Holding an optimistic view of the government applying POFMA to tackle the spread of falsehoods of Covid-19, Dr Soon said that it is a positive case to show the public how POFMA should be used “in terms of its very clear, verifiable application on a false statement of fact”.

She also suggested that the government should work together with multi-stakeholders and mainstream media in order to fill the information gap and help people make sense of the current situation.

“Where possible, we should not leave the members of the public to do their own interpretation, but really to be very clear in explaining what many of us who may be studying the field take for granted should be understood,” Dr Soon added.

Singaporeans should start to have emotional preparedness and rehearse for a “slow-burn” crisis

During the forum, Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Shashi Jayakumar pointed out that Singapore is in a good condition, which he described as “supernormal”.

Dr Jayakumar explained, “It is supernormal, because almost nothing of note, security-wise, seems to happen in Singapore,” while cautioning that Singaporeans need to accept the worst-case scenario where the slow-burn crisis such as pandemics and climate change will gnaw away at the social resilience.

He, therefore, suggested the government, academics, and think-tanks to start working on the society’s ability to bounce back from the slow-burn crisis, which may last for a long time.

Additionally, he also highlighted the importance for the community and the people to have emotional preparedness or emotional rehearsing to prevent them from “falling off the sharp cliff” if the situation continues to worsen.

Moving on to the issue of hoarding, Dr Jayakumar opined that the fears of the public which resulted in panic-buying could be minimised if the government delivers some strategic information of assuring the public that Singapore is well-prepared for a potentially worsening situation and reducing the trust deficit.

Responding to the public’s behaviour, he said, “Everything is there. We need it. When we need it, we take it or we’ll be given what we need, what we want, no more or no less.”

On the other hand, Mr Gan commented that the role of social media is a key driver in panic-buying situations and this was also agreed by Dr Lee, who pointed out the concern of how the public is spreading fake news through social media.

Dr Lee noted, “Social media is a quite powerful tool if used in the wrong way, can spark undue fear or panic. But if used in the right way, I think it can really help the collective approach, or that sort of collective support for what we are trying to do.”