

Open Letter for Diverse Voices on Emerging Stronger Taskforce

Mr. Heng Swee Keat, Deputy Prime Minister, Chair of Future Economy Council
Mr. Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Trade and Industry
Mr. Desmond Lee, Minister for Social and Family Development, Co-Chair of Emerging Stronger Taskforce
Mr. Gabriel Lim, Permanent Secretary of Ministry for Trade and Industry
Mr. Tan Chong Meng, Co-Chair of Emerging Stronger Taskforce

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are seeking to strengthen the Emerging Stronger Taskforce by making it more representative of our society. The taskforce should include members of the people sector, economic players that are most vulnerable, as well as businesses focused on bringing a climate-safe future. It should also seek to achieve the cultural, gender and demographic diversity of our nation, including representation from the disability community.

The COVID-19 crisis has shone a light on the vulnerabilities in our society and economy. Our efforts to rebuild for a stronger Singapore that can better withstand future shocks will be strengthened by having in this taskforce, those who have been most affected, ensuring our nation integrates the learnings of social resilience as we reimagine our future.

The challenges from COVID-19 have tested us as a nation

The COVID-19 crisis has brought clear and severe strain to our society and economy. As Prime Minister Lee mentioned in his speech on 7 June 2020, we are facing the crisis of our generation¹.

The existential challenge to Singapore became urgent and the hard work of the Ministry of Trade and Industry in the past to secure diverse food imports brought us some comfort, but we could not rest on our laurels, and continued to bolster our abilities to withstand future threats. We also had to recognize that the proper functioning of our economy is intricately linked to how well our neighbouring and close nation partners can respond to the pandemic and future similar crises. Our gradual and cautious approach to opening up our borders at this time speaks to our prudence.

The challenges of COVID-19 unfortunately disproportionately hurt underprivileged groups in our society and underrepresented sectors of our economy. The unprecedented four government budgets focused on protecting jobs, cushioning this impact. Through Singapore Totalisator Board (Tote Board) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS)², the government is also matching donations to charities and social services, recognizing their key role in providing the support systems much needed in this crisis and reinforcing the importance of a caring and

¹ <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Broadcast-PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-COVID-19>

² <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/governments-dollar-dollar-matching-donations-help-charities-have-manpower-and-other>

inclusive society even in difficult times.

As the current peak of our crisis wanes, we have been quick to pick up the daunting task to re-start the economy with a lens towards the future. The Emerging Stronger Taskforce is working with the various Future Economy Council subcommittees. To truly emerge stronger, we hope to see the Taskforce successfully translate the societal impacts and challenges from COVID-19 for sound integration into the Future Economy Council's work.

Emerging stronger both as a society and an economy

The Emerging Stronger Taskforce's first and second focus is to identify systemic shifts arising from COVID-19 and assess the impact of these shifts on the Singapore economy.

Assessment of the crisis's impact is an extremely important first step so that we can learn quickly and not repeat our mistakes in future crises. It is therefore important to recognise the range of systemic shifts required that has been brought to light from this crisis.

As PM Lee noted in his speech we need to continue to build "a fair and just society where everyone can chase their dreams". If so, it is imperative to think about how we can systematically:

- Make improvements to low-wage employee's well-being, pathways of progress and rights, making it more likely they can save for a rainy day;
- Support small, medium enterprises to enable remote working and ability to transform;
- Ensure health, safety and fair compensation of essential workers given their critical role in society, and especially in a crisis;
- Close the gaps in the social safety nets for the vulnerable group of self-employed individuals which can include taxi driver, workers in the "gig" economy and even our creative communities;
- Bridge digital divides in low-income and elderly communities as education services start digitizing and an increasing need for psychological well-being from staying connected to friends and family, and ensuring everyone can access critical public announcements in a timely fashion.

These challenges are both societal as well as economic. Future crises will again challenge us socially as well as economically. Future pandemics, increased global tensions and climate change all pose existential challenges. All these threats are multifaceted and hard to predict, and in fact, they often interact. If we are to emerge as a society more ready for our future, we need to focus both on the social and economic resilience.

A need to focus on social and psychological defence

Equally important is the third focus of the Taskforce where it will provide "recommendations to the Future Economy Council on how Singapore should refresh, reimagine, or reset its economic

strategies, to stay economically resilient and build new sources of dynamism in the post-COVID-19 world.”

A deep transformation is needed if we, as a nation, is to be resilient and dynamic. Taking a leaf from our Total Defence strategy, we would like to highlight enhancing our social and psychological defence pillars as we transform for resiliency.

PM Lee noted in his speech that “Our people are our strength” and that it is important that we continue to trust and depend on each other. That speaks to the need for social cohesion. The people hardest hit by this crisis were not only supported by the job support schemes through the budgets, but also by the many Singaporeans who stepped up during this crisis. While they did so quietly, their experiences and insights on what it takes to provide and build social cohesion and resilience needs to be integrated into future planning.

If our people are to remain strong through crises, we also need to think about how our society can be regenerative through supporting psychological resilience. Nature plays a strong role in psychological resilience. There was an increase in patronage of our public parks both for solace from the open and green spaces, but also for physical exercise³. Formal and informal support systems in communities, workplaces, schools also strengthen this pillar. The practice and enjoyment of the arts not only help to build human connections, it serves to bring deeper meaning and identity as a source of strength.

Transformation to a regenerative, not extractive economic base

Not only should our society be regenerative, so should our economic drivers. As the World Economic Forum noted recently, continued reliance on extractive industries (including activities leading to deforestation, or intensive agriculture and livestock farming) will increase risks of future pandemics⁴. Continued reliance on carbon intensive industries (including aviation and tourism) not only increases the risk of climate breakdown, but also exposes our economy to the inherent volatile nature of fossil-based commodities. On the other hand, new circular based systems, like regenerative agriculture, which several companies, including Singaporean companies are working on, seeks to balance food production with ecosystem needs because that enhances our ability to meet world food demand⁵. Focusing on jobs for the future in a circular and regenerative economy and choosing nature-based solutions to ensure we are reducing the risk of climate breakdown is crucial.

A holistic approach to our transformation

Around the globe, governments are taking bold steps to fundamentally reassess their economic models fundamentally. The Wellbeing Economy Alliance, of which the governments of Iceland, New Zealand and Costa Rica participate in, recently put out 10 Principles to Build Back Better⁶ and suggested additional indicators of progress.

³ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/covid-19-seeking-fun-and-solace-worries-wide-open-spaces-singaporeans-turn-outdoors>

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/scientists-pandemics-coronavirus-nature-covid19-health>

⁵ <https://www.eco-business.com/press-releases/5-priorities-for-regenerating-the-living-world-on-world-environment-day/>

⁶ https://wellbeingeconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Wellbeing_Economics_for_the_COVID-19_recovery_10Principles.pdf

Singapore has the capacity to reimagine and transform our society and serve as a model for Asia. While Singapore is small, we are not simply at the mercy of the increased risks in the global economic systems, as a key exporter of capital, we can play an important role in reducing risks for ourselves and our neighbours, thereby increasing our own resilience. Our strong education system and economic openness have created a foundation for innovation and outward thinking that can be harnessed during this time.

Our suggestion

It is our firm belief that Singapore's and Singaporeans' future can be more effectively safeguarded if the Taskforce is equipped to consider a holistic approach to our transformation including:

- A transformation to a regenerative economic base
- How to enhance social and psychological defence
- What our most vulnerable communities need to have increased resilience

To achieve this aim, we suggest the following to enhancements to the Taskforce:

- a) Expand the membership of the taskforce to ensure:
 - i) **People sector is represented:** At least 1 representative that is formally supported by an advisory council of non-profits, charities and academics
 - ii) **Economic players that are most vulnerable are represented:** SMEs, Social Enterprises, Self-Employed Persons, Freelancer, and those with flexible work arrangements (including those involved Arts and Culture, Food and Beverages, Transportation, Delivery and Cleaning industries)
 - iii) **At least one more business that focuses on a climate-safe future for Singapore to be represented:** Innovative startups and large companies that have business models or strong commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions

It should also seek to achieve the cultural, gender and demographic diversity of our nation. For example, we should ensure there is at least 30% women representation, minority representation including Malay representation and that youths, active elders and persons with disabilities are also represented.

More clarity on how the discussions at the Emerging Stronger Taskforce, and community-wide engagements are formally integrated into the Future Economy Council's on-going work will also be needed.

SG United came together in time of a crisis, and it is important that all voices are heard and play a role in determining Singapore's future. As Deputy Prime Minister Heng noted in his Fortitude Budget speech, "building a resilient society requires our collective ideas and energy."⁷ This collective should be representative of our society and peoples. Only then will all Singaporeans feel heard.

For decades, we have enjoyed a stable and prosperous Singapore because yesterday, our

⁷ https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2020/fortitude-budget/fortitude-budget-statement

founding fathers planned ahead for our future. To give our children a better tomorrow, we appeal to strengthen the Emerging Stronger Taskforce to provide a breadth and depth of insights suited to known and unknown risks, both now and for the future.

Yours Sincerely,

Name*

Affiliation

* indicates signing on behalf of organization

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Signatories after 15th June 2020, 6pm

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Ms. Ngiam Su-Lin*	Executive Director, ArtsWok Collaborative
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Organizations represented

A Good Space Co-operative Limited



Better Trails



Aphasia SG



Community for Advocacy and Political Education (CAPE)



Artsolute



CaptionCube



AWARE



Climate Conversations



Be Kind SG



Derring-Do Dance



Dramabox



Green Lobang



Disabled People's Association



Green Nudge



Food Citizen



Ground-up Innovation Labs for Development



Foodscape Collective



Givfunds Social Ventures



ItsRainingRaincoats



People's Movement to Stop Haze



Lepak In SG



Psychosocial Support Community



MaidForMore



Quadrant Thoughts



Mother Earth Toastmasters Club



SamaSama



Nature Society (Singapore)



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Social Collider



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The Dorsal Effect



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Teater Ekamatra

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