

## Singapore is getting a lot right in its response to COVID-19 – What can governments and businesses learn from the example?

As the world battles to contain COVID-19, Singapore is one of a few countries that has set a good example in effectively managing the health crisis without yet having to resort to a full lockdown and its associated dire economic consequences.

Although it is fortunate in having a strong healthcare system, a small population (~5.6 million) in a concentrated area and the financial means to support it, much of its success can be attributed to strong management practices and balanced, targeted remedies that could be universally applicable.

From utilising a strong response framework designed after SARS, to novel strategies to enforce compliance with Stay Home Notices (SHN), numerous learnings are available from Singapore's response. A few, relevant for businesses and governments around the world, are highlighted below.

### 1 Structured & immediate whole-of-Government response

Singapore mobilised rapidly at the first signs of the crisis. Utilising its learnings from SARS and the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) system it had established thereafter, it commenced mitigation and suppression actions even before the first case was confirmed.

- A dedicated multi-ministry taskforce was set up on 22 Jan (the first case was confirmed 23 Jan). From day-one, all ministries that may become critical to the effort were included: Health, National Development, Communications & Information, Trade & Industry, Environment & Water, National Trades Union Congress, Education, Home Affairs, Social & Family Development and Transport
- DORSCON system was leveraged as a scaffold framework for the severity of actions required and type of public directives to implement
- Police & armed forces were mobilised to aid with contact tracing and containment, as well as logistics management for vital supplies

### 2 Consistent, frank communications with single source of truth

Singapore's public communications on COVID-19 have demonstrated how to communicate honestly and transparently to a large audience, whilst still conveying competence and care. This has helped the Government preserve some level of social and economic norm, reduce panic and maintain the public's understanding of what they should be doing to help alleviate the crisis.

- All communications are clearly coherent across a range of speakers, with the relevant expert or leader given responsibility to make the announcements
- A clear sense of the severity of the crisis is conveyed, whilst still preserving some optimism that the fight will be won. Key anxieties, such as food supplies, are directly addressed and reassured
- Key speeches, e.g. by the Prime Minister, have been meticulously crafted and used sparingly to convey importance and get the message exact in the critical times of need, such as after the raising of the threat level to Orange and resultant spur in panic buying (which subsided soon thereafter)
- Official communications sources (such as an official WhatsApp account) were established early to maintain consistency, address misinformation and ensure widespread dissemination of truth via multiple channels - 'fake news' is actively addressed and rapidly stamped out

- A range of media is used, from speeches, to scripted media broadcasts, to relatable public awareness cartoons and reassuring videos explaining how the emergency budget will affect each type of worker
- Public information dissemination is pointedly consistent across channels, even down to the wording of who should use masks and whether local food courts can still be frequented

### **3 Measures escalated progressively, strategically balancing health and economy**

Singapore has, so far, avoided a total lockdown, with shops, restaurants, etc. still operating (as of Mar 24), subject to strict social distancing and additional cleaning measures. Where many nations have delayed action and then had to take drastic lockdown actions, the Singapore's progressive escalation of suppression measures has allowed businesses, society and the economy to adapt.

- Travel restrictions were increased progressively with notice given – when travel from ASEAN was restricted, the land border with Malaysia (critical for Singapore's workforce and supply of daily essential goods) remained open allowing time to mitigate the effect on the daily 300,000 crossings and knock-on supply chain consequences
- A calculated decision was made (with the logic explained publicly) to keep schools open, albeit with strict measures in place, such as isolating each class. This supports critical workers, keeps society running and helps avoid neighbourhood outbreaks from children socialising in public housing estates
- From the outset, Ministers made sure to appear in public without surgical masks. Conscious of an impending pandemic and finite stockpile for medical practitioners, they made an early choice to set clear guidance that people should not be using masks unless unwell. This was backed by issuance of just 4 masks to each household – enough to cover a trip to a clinic if one member became unwell
- To encourage reporting and containment, all testing and treatment for COVID-19 was quickly made free of charge, with compensation for lost earnings

### **4 Strong international and Government-to-business coordination**

As a small, trade-dependent island state, Singapore is keenly aware of the need for diplomacy and international cooperation for its success. It has also nurtured a culture of trust and working relationships between government and business – 'credits' it can use in times of crisis

- Singapore banned entry for Chinese Nationals on Jan 31, but took significant steps to preserve Sino-Singaporean relations - the embassy in Beijing coordinated in the 48 hours before; letters from both the PM and President were sent to Xi Jinping pledging solidarity; 10,000 testing kits were sent and the Singapore Red Cross, with additional donations from Singapore, was on the ground in China
- On Feb 11, Singapore setup a special joint task force with Malaysia to coordinate critical decisions. Without it, decisions and planning for how best to mitigate the impact of closing the land border, for example, would have cost more both in time and economic consequences
- Since January, Government departments have been working hard to ensure the business community is well briefed and has plenty of advice on how best to continue operations, e.g.
  - The Economic Development Board actively reaches out to businesses affected by travel restrictions, ensuring they both comply and can easily ask questions
  - Enterprise Singapore issued a guide to business continuity planning (first edition in January) including setting up of A & B teams for workers and example travel declaration forms

- Strong existing relationships with the scientific community were leveraged to rapidly tackle the virus
  - A range of local institutions and firms raced to fast-track development of testing kits
  - Local scientists, collaborating across public and private institutions, successfully cultured the virus within just one week and then became the first globally to develop an antibody test
  - US biotech firm, Gilead Sciences, expanded its clinical trials to Singapore
- The broader corporate community is also encouraged to help, e.g., Temasek (a Government linked company) provided hand sanitizer to all households, while Keppel (a major local conglomerate) is providing assistance on utility bills and faster payments to SMEs

## **5 Diligent containment efforts with shrewd enforcement approaches**

Singapore's effective contact tracing has been widely reported and rightly praised, but the real key to its success is the work ethic and dedication to the cause. Where other nations may have refocused these efforts once cases became too numerous, Singapore has continued the labour-intensive activity as a primary strategy.

- Contact tracing and containment made possible by deployment of vast teams (including extra manpower from the police and armed forces) working relentlessly into the early hours
- 38,000 tests completed (as of Mar 20; more per capita than Korea) despite less than 1% being positive
- As of March 21, 7,544 'close contacts' of cases had been traced and quarantined - for 40% of Singapore's confirmed cases, their first indication was from contact by the Ministry of Health
- Voluntary Bluetooth-based app launched that tracks all other phones you have been within 2 meters of over last 21 days. To protect privacy, only your phone number is collected, log of other phones is only stored on your phone with option to then send to health officials if it becomes needed; no location information is used, and all records are deleted after 21 days
- QR codes deployed in offices and public venues to track all visitors to a location in case of a local outbreak
- Strict serving of official SHNs to those returning from overseas (in contrast to some European countries still not doing this even after going into 'lockdown')
- Real enforcement of SHNs for every necessary individual, e.g. via text messages from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority with a GPS reporting link and occasional random house visits from officers
- Fines of up to \$10,000 or six months in prison for non-compliance with a SHN
- Onus also put on employers to ensure their staff understand the regulations and comply – any foreign employees caught in breach of SHNs or travel restrictions can have visa revoked (89 instances as of March 21) and employer can be barred from hiring foreign talent

## **6 Targeted and strategic economic remedies**

Singapore was quick to announce an initial S\$6B economic support package on Feb 18, when there were only 800 cases outside of China. Five weeks later, as the global crisis became clear, it increased this by \$48B – equivalent to entire Government expenditure in 2019. This is made possible by the vast reserves Singapore has built up since independence; only the second time it is accessing them.

There is a clear intention to first assist in maintaining employment and supporting self-employed or gig-workers and then, where that is not possible, to use the crisis as an upskilling opportunity. Actions have also been taken to ensure relief reaches those who need it and is easy to access.

### **Supporting jobs**

- State will pay 25% of local employee salaries for 9 months, without need to apply (administered automatically from tax records)
- Further S\$1.1B made available to employers to help fund qualifying wage increases and the state will co-fund wage costs for traineeships offered to first time job seekers
- Government scheme identify 10,000 new jobs this year and support 8000 traineeships

### **Supporting households**

- Cash pay-out of S\$300-1200 for every adult Singaporean, plus specific support for groceries
- Self-employed persons will receive S\$1000 per month for 9 months, plus training funding
- Cash grants and temporary relief fund for lower income households out of employment
- Special bonuses for front line staff combating the virus, such as medical workers and police
- Leaders showing solidarity through 3-month pay cut for Government officials (as well as for Board Members and Management of the largest local firms)

### **Supporting business continuity**

- Compensation for employers and self-employed for absences and compliance with SHNs, plus co-funding for professional cleaning of premises following a confirmed COVID-19 case
- Automatic deferment of income tax payments for companies and self-employed, plus rebates, loss acceleration and working capital loans for SMEs
- Local 'icons' such as taxi drivers and 'hawkers' (food court purveyors) specifically called out for support in the announcements. Changi Airport, which Singaporeans are rightly proud of, received specific support partially alleviating some concern for the treasured symbol
- Specific support packages for aviation, tourism, arts and land transport sectors, plus property tax rebates to support hard-hit venues, such as conference centres, hotels and retail venues
- Various Government departments working to ensure value trickles down to intended targets, e.g. reliefs for mall owners reaching retailers and F&B outlets through rental rebates

### **Preparing for the future**

- Additional Government-backed training places opened to support sectors worst affected by the outbreak (tourism, aviation, land transport, arts, retail, food services and logistics) and encourage upskilling and profession conversion during the economic lull
- \$90m dedicated to help funding the recovery of tourism
- Enhanced support for SMEs to adopt digital business practise with up to 90% grants for investment in qualifying digital business programs
- New programme announced to improve stockpile of essential supplies for future and become 30% food self-sufficient by 2030

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Singapore's battle with COVID-19 is still ongoing and the Government will need to continue to adapt its response strategy. New measures and support continue to be announced each week and further escalation of restrictions may still be needed, but the principles highlighted above will persist.

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