

# Transiting to the New Normal – Evidence and Insights to Address COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 Challenges

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## Break-Out Session 1: How Can We Manage the Post-COVID-19 Unknowns?

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### POST COVID-19 UNKNOWNNS by MR DEVADAS KRISHNADAS

- We cannot speak in terms of a Post-COVID-19 world but only in terms of a Post-Pandemic world as COVID-19 will be with us for a very long time.
- The post-pandemic new normal is not static and highly uncertain. However, we can prepare for it. It also presents new opportunities that we can pivot to.
- There are two forms of unknowns in risk management:
  - Known unknowns – Things we know that we do not know. These are the most troubling and difficult to predict. COVID-19 known unknowns include domestic concerns in the impact of digitalisation and public debt, as well as international trade relations and cooperation. There are also those not linked to COVID-19, such as risks that existed prior to COVID-19 but were accelerated by the pandemic, e.g. climate change, the balkanisation of technology between China and the USA, the increasing power of big technology companies and the change of leadership in the USA.
  - Unknown unknowns – things we do not know that we do not know. These can be addressed with a strong public service and political leadership.
- Nevertheless, “you go into a crisis with what you have and who you are”. It is thus important to build resilience in between crises. These include:
  - Strengthening institutions and trust within the country. Forging strategic alliances with different jurisdictions and stakeholders.
  - Investing in productive infrastructure and human capital, similar to what we had done for health and research.
  - Testing and planning for different scenarios.

- We should not just build a ‘trampoline’ society (term made popular by Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in Singapore), but also a ‘trampoline’ economy and polity characterised by:
  - The ability of both the society and economy to bounce back from unknown and known shocks.
  - Tangible capacities and positive mindsets.
  - Collective leadership that people follow in a gloomy situation. The public service needs to support and share the burden with political leaders. Contributions from both the private sector and civic society are also needed.
- Two key principles in addressing known knowns and known unknowns
  - Change when you can, not when you must.
  - Better to be approximately right rather than precisely wrong. To achieve this, we need to ask the right questions; focus on failure, not just success; and conduct pre-mortems and war games.
- In any crisis, the level of uncertainty is very high. Rather than inaction, the government needs to move the “uncertainty needle” by:
  - Addressing the crisis through prepared plans. Even if the plan does not match perfectly to the crisis, any action is better than no action.
  - Introducing new information into plans and adapting the plan throughout the crisis; not being afraid to make a complete U-turn with new information.
  - Communicating the information, which the government has done well in during this pandemic.
  - Developing a structure for crisis operations and communications.
  - Applying understanding and insights to the complexity of the crisis. This leads to order and should continue in the post-pandemic stage.

## [Link to slides](#)

### REMARKS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE COVID-10 PANDEMIC by PROFESSOR MARK FINDLAY

- When talking in terms of the ‘new normal, post pandemic, there will never be a normal again as it may have been envisaged before COVID-19. Previous life certainties may not be there anymore due among other forces for change such as digitalisation, and not just the pandemic.
- We need to get used to living through crisis and consequent transition. Climate change, for instance, will bring about massive changes for communities and governments. In the face of global crises, as this pandemic has revealed, technology is not a silver bullet to every problem arising out of crisis.
- While artificial intelligence assisted surveillance technology has been around prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 saw a strong push for a surveillance society.
  - Examples include the use of Safe Entry, safe distancing monitors, as well as tracing and tracking technologies.
  - These surveillance technologies, however, have privacy implications. People are concerned about the government or hackers using/stealing the surveillance data for purposes other than pandemic prevention and control.
  - The valuation of privacy is a very context specific issue. Through social media we negotiate our privacy daily. A local study found that while most Singaporeans were not afraid of sharing private information on their social media accounts, they were concerned

about the health record leaks that happened a few years ago, and the integrity of their health data in general. Pandemic control data comes within such concerns.

- Other than privacy, there were known risks missed or ignored by policymakers worldwide when it came to pre-emptive pandemic control. These have generated hard questions for us to reflect on:
  - The neglect of the migrant workers' community's vulnerability to a COVID-19 epidemic within their dormitories, and the consequent harsh control regimes.
  - There are areas with high risks of infection in Singapore such as hawker centres, malls, KTVs etc., wherein it is difficult to force safe distancing compliance due to the local culture.
  - What are the social, economic and personal implications of less travel and more online activities conducted in place of physical ones (e.g. schools, work, activities for elderly)? Are there potential long-term risks to people's social and mental development when previously important opportunities for human engagement are curtailed?
  - Are essential, front-line workers sufficiently and uniformly valued given the risks they take and how vital their work has become? Are we relying too much on foreign workers in essential areas, such as domestic help and nursing assuming that the reserve of such labour is limitless, but the pandemic has shown otherwise? How can communities change their mindsets so that certain essential occupations are peopled by local labour?
  - Should individual liberty outweigh public interest? This tension was shown by low vaccination rate in many countries due to the rampant false information, producing harmful health outcomes for innocent children, and allowing for the development of new variants. Should there be compulsory vaccination in the future, as has been required in the past with many other mass communicable diseases?

**THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN TRANSITIONING TO THE POST-COVID WORLD: FROM IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO LONGER TERM SOLUTIONS AND BEYOND by MR ANDRE ANDRENELLI**

- We should use the experience of both our immediate and longer-term responses to the pandemic to inform discussion of future recovery efforts. During the earlier periods, COVID-19 led to uncoordinated government responses in medical supply chains.
  - In April 2020, 69 countries had adopted some form of export restriction, often in the form of export prohibition.
  - Many of these restrictions were applied on goods beyond COVID-19 medical equipment, including agricultural products or unrelated medical products (e.g. dental or ophthalmic instruments).
  - Lesson for us: Uncoordinated policy responses have the potential to affect prices of traded goods and undermine confidence in international markets. No single country produces all the medical equipment needed for address the crisis. There is strong interdependence among the countries.
- Vaccine deployment experienced the same constraints as with the earlier experiences with medical supply chains.
  - Vaccine deployment was (and still is) characterised by material supply constraints, resulting in vaccine shortages.
  - Again, the early phases of vaccine deployment were marked by uncoordinated policy responses across G20 countries and beyond.

- Lesson for us: Trade policy is essential in ensuring global vaccination, across the sourcing of inputs, delivery of final products and in ensuring effective procedures through customs.
- Vaccine supply chain shows a high degree of interdependence. This challenge is compounded by the geographical concentration of manufacturers and distributors.
- An unprecedented social challenge emerged with COVID-19's significant push for safe distancing.
  - COVID-19 led to a global movement of economic, social, and educational activities from the offline space to the online domain, resulting in the surge in demand for internet bandwidth.
  - Physical and engineering interventions were needed for this broadband increase as most of the fibre-optic cables were concentrated in business districts.
  - The surge of online activity and physical lockdowns also led to an increase in demand for electronics. Components of these are largely interdependent across different countries. Thus, free trade borders are needed to address this demand.
- Yet, many barriers remain in the digital trade environment:
  - Fibre-optic cables, routers and switching apparatus remain subject to tariffs above 5% on average in non-OECD countries.
  - Openness to foreign telecommunications service providers remains limited in many countries (e.g. China, Indonesia, Malaysia).
  - Barriers to e-contracts, cross-border data flows as well as local presence requirements still characterise the digital trade landscape.
  - Room for progress in digitalising customs procedures to enable paperless trade.
- How can we manage the post-COVID-19 unknowns?
  - Data is imperfect, but the first step to managing unknowns is to start from the things we do know.
  - We rely on each other for inputs, technology and final products. Removing barriers to trade is key to managing unforeseen circumstances, especially in times of crisis.
  - Greater international cooperation and trade liberalisation should characterise the post-COVID-19 trade landscape, especially for medical equipment and digital technologies.
  - International cooperation is a multi-turn game. We never know when we need help from others – this is clearly shown in the pandemic.
  - The lessons learned from the crisis should inform present and future discussions in relevant fora, including the G20 and the World Trade Organisation.

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### PREPARING FOR THE UNKNOWNNS by MS CINDY KHOO

- During the COVID-19 period, besides identifying major shifts in Singapore's operating environment, the Strategy Group also conducted more explorative deep dives on the implications of COVID-19 in specific domains such as innovative manufacturing (e.g. 3D printing), future of entertainment, the new vulnerable groups (e.g. digitally excluded groups). This helped support line agencies' need to continue to look to the future even amidst crisis management, to be prepared for the long-term.

- In addressing long-term risks, we need for force ourselves to look at the things we may have missed or not like to look at. One way to do that is through scenario planning. The steps include:
  - Identifying long-term driving forces shaping our future.
  - Inspiring imagination and building consensus on critical challenges and opportunities.
  - Reviewing our strategies to be future-ready.

These reviews and responses are iterative, relying on feedback from the ground. In applying strategic foresight, it is important to be roughly right than precisely wrong.

- Other than reviewing policies in response to such long- and medium-term shifts, we also require transformation in two other areas:
  - Capabilities to reach the future. These include the necessary systems, data and rules to bring about the right outcomes.
  - Partnering and engaging Singaporeans. The government does not have all the answers and should not be the sole answer provider. We need everyone, including non-government parties and individuals, to co-develop the answers and work together for a more resilient and inclusive society. This requires a deep philosophical shift from both the people and the government and will require time.

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