



Mr Jason Chua, one of the young hawkers cooking for vulnerable groups during the circuit breaker, at his Beng Who Cooks stall in Hong Lim Market and Food Centre in April, amid the Covid-19 outbreak. When the chips were down, our youth stood up to be counted and will continue to do so, say the writers. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Youth Day 2020

# Youth are the pioneers of post-Covid-19 Singapore

Amid a generational crisis, Singapore's youth are showing the way forward in civic and social participation. They deserve a seat and agenda-setting power in charting the future.

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For The Straits Times

Nearly a century since the phrase first emerged, fears of a new "lost generation" of youth – a generation at risk of permanently diminished prospects due to the coronavirus fallout – are rising worldwide.

In Singapore, a new generation of youth are coming of age, their lives shaped by a generational crisis, one that will be as formative for them as independence was for

the Pioneer Generation.

While the Government is determined that there will be no "lost generation" in Singapore, youth here have had their fair share of challenges. Indeed, much has been written about how their lives have been impacted by the pandemic, and how they, in turn, have shaped the nation's immediate response to the crisis.

However, much less has been written about the long-term implications of their growing presence amid the crisis, and what these implications reveal about the future landscape of civic participation, as increasingly shaped by youth themselves. With

Singapore observing Youth Day tomorrow, it is worth taking a closer look at what a youth-driven future holds.

### FAST FORWARDS AND REVELATIONS

From the two young founders of a 3D printing start-up who created face shields for front-liners, to the two 18-year-olds who started Comm.Unity SG to help Singapore's homeless; from the two young hawkers cooking for vulnerable groups during the circuit breaker, to the two young civil servants who started Project Stable Staples to support households living in rental blocks – these are just some

examples of how youth in Singapore have stepped up to blunt the blow of the coronavirus.

Of course, rising youth involvement in the community was already observed before the coronavirus. But just as it has done for many other things, the coronavirus pandemic has fast-forwarded increasing youth involvement in community action. What is interesting is how our youth have chosen to do good.

Diverse as the full range of youth initiatives might be, they usually take the form of micro-volunteerism, on-demand help provision, crowdfunding, giving circles and ground-up

movements. Intriguingly, these types of initiatives were seen as emerging trends just a few years back – youth have now "fast-forwarded" these trends and catapulted them into the mainstream. Consequently, these trends – most of which are ground-up and social-media-driven – have power to shape the future landscape of social and civic participation.

Assuming these trends continue, it would mean that youth-led social and civic participation will increasingly involve community action in small but significant and targeted ways, as compared with large-scale, highly visible campaigns or centralised projects.

Put more bluntly, the days of the effects of national campaigns or of the rallying calls of youth leaders trickling down to the ordinary youth, and pushing them to do good, will be less prevalent. Instead, the new normal could well feature the effects of many small but significant youth efforts that will trickle up to the national level, accumulating to form currents of social and civic impact.

### SHAPING THE "TRICKLE UP" FUTURE

More than ever, the youth have firmly demonstrated that they are not just the "nation's future", but also a generation which has the ability to shape the present.

But youth, of course, do not exist in a vacuum. They co-exist alongside older generations, their mentors and bosses, societal leaders and policymakers.

As Singapore's youth continue to shape their own "trickle up" future of social and civic participation, it is in the interest of older generations to give them the space and autonomy to do so, so that youth initiatives are aligned with existing efforts.

How can they do so? First, older generations can give more space for youth to try, fail and try again. It is a common refrain that the idealism of youth will clash with the realism of their seniors. But the older generations can give more space to the youth to play out and refine their ideals, and both adapt to collaborating together.

Older generations can help youth navigate this space by mentoring them and passing on life experiences. Those in leadership positions can give youth more opportunities to lead the charge in reinventing businesses and operations for greater success in the new economic normal.

Second, policymakers must continue to deepen engagement with our youth. Long before the pandemic, youth have demonstrated increasing appetite and desire to actively shape the policies that matter to them.

Seventy-thousand youth voices, through the Youth Action Plan, said that they want to build a Singapore that demonstrates the values of inclusiveness, fairness, care, sustainability and progress. Such desires to take charge of one's own future will only deepen as future uncertainties increase.

Moving into a post-Covid-19 future, the Emerging Stronger Together movement and the Singapore Together Action Networks can help meet this need. Policymakers should ensure that these initiatives go beyond dialogue and discourse, into the sphere of policy-shaping. Our youth must be given more than a seat at the table, but an opportunity to set the agenda to be tabled, especially on issues which they care for deeply and where they possess relevant knowledge and experiences.

Finally, society needs to recognise once and for all that our youth do not "have it too good", and thus better support the choices youth make.

Our young people have grown up in a world of turbulent change since 9/11 that has seen waves of disruptive technologies, a global financial crisis, geopolitical upheavals and, now, a global pandemic. They are not ignorant of harsh realities; if anything, they know only too well the need to continually adapt to stay relevant.

Hence, when they embark on new pathways or redefine success on new terms, they do so with open eyes. Society can do better in helping youth make the best of the (possibly) non-traditional choices they may make.

In any case, traditional or not, the choices our youth make today will determine the shape of things to come. Just as the Pioneer Generation were the pioneers of a post-independence Singapore, the youth of today will be the pioneers of Singapore's post-Covid-19 future.

When the chips were down, our youth stood up to be counted and will continue to do so. Far from becoming a "lost generation", they are finding their own way forward and, in some ways, showing the rest of society the way ahead.

Moving forward, we can all do our part to champion our youth as they trail-blaze into the future and take their place as doers, dreamers and pioneers of Singapore's post-Covid-19 future.

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