

# *Singapore is well placed to play a bigger role in global health*

It has the wealth of knowledge and resources to extend aid to its neighbours.

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Singapore has benefited from decades of strategic leadership and sound governance. An area where this is most apparent is the health system and the attainments in the overall health of its people. National policies have seen Singapore declared free from a number of infectious diseases, including malaria and polio. The mortality of mothers and children in the Republic is one of the lowest in the world, while the life expectancy of residents is among the highest.

All of these, and more, have been achieved with an enviably modest public healthcare budget in relation to gross domestic product, and Healthier SG

reforms promise to do even more to improve the health and well-being of the people.

In contrast, there are still numerous countries in South and South-east Asia that continue to struggle with high rates of under-five mortality, stunting from malnutrition, and even diarrhoeal diseases from a lack of clean water and sanitation.

In fact, many of these countries are struggling to cope with the additional burden from the rising prevalence of chronic diseases, including diabetes and hypertension, since their populations are beginning to age rapidly just like Singapore's.

The pertinent question to ask then is how Singapore can help these countries improve the health of their people. As an advanced economy, Singapore has the wealth of both knowledge and resources to extend aid to its neighbours.

## **WHY SHOULD SINGAPORE CONTRIBUTE?**

The cynic may ask: "Why should

Singapore be concerned about the health of the people in other countries, to even spend Singapore tax dollars on improving the lives of others outside the country?"

What many may not realise is that high-income countries have always been offering such overseas development aid to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to support infrastructure projects, to improve sanitation, and to tackle health problems including HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, and malnutrition.

Such global health aid is fundamentally about tackling inequality and inequity in the world: to support the design of health policies to serve everyone in a population equally, as well as to ensure the implementation of policies actually results in improving the health of people.

The value of equality has always been a formative element of the Singapore DNA.

There is also the matter of reciprocity and responsibility as a good global citizen. Singapore has flourished as a result of the current post-war multilateral system. Its economy has prospered from the free flow of global talent, goods and services. It has been able to maintain critical supplies of food and medicine despite the trade and travel disruptions during the Covid-19 years in part because of its commitment to the values of this system.

Contributing to the health of other countries can be said to be a different aspect of the responsibilities of a good global citizen.

It is a win-win situation – by doing its bit to maintain the overall health of the multilateral system, of which it has been a beneficiary, Singapore stands to gain too. And as the pandemic has shown, diseases know no borders.

## **HOW SHOULD SINGAPORE CONTRIBUTE?**

First, training and capacity-building has always been a key activity in global health, in enabling local leadership to set priorities and design sound national policies, or in developing local talent to conduct research and implement health programmes.

Singapore has some of the best institutes of higher learning in Asia, including the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, which are both comprehensive universities housing disparate disciplines from medicine, computing and engineering, to the humanities, law and the social sciences.

Singapore can leverage its world-class universities to run health leadership programmes for the region, as policy think-tanks, or even develop innovative ways of conducting capacity training programmes that are stackable, accredited, and yet delivered offshore with no compromise on quality and rigour.

Top academic institutions worldwide are starting to do these, to promote equity and minimise local talent brain drain that often comes with the traditional form of scholarships for applicants from LMICs.

Second, problems in global public health often require a trans-disciplinary approach to derive sustainable and effective solutions.

Consider the problem of dengue, which one can simplistically assume the solution to lies in the effective treatment of the infected.

But a long-term solution needs innovation in biomedical technology such as

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## *Strategic opportunities for countries that are forward-looking*

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Wolbachia-infected mosquitoes or a dengue vaccine, geospatial mapping to locate infection hotspots, and also behavioural science to incentivise the right behaviours on vector control.

Policies and regulations are necessary across a range of governmental agencies responsible for health, national development, water resources and the environment.

The participation of community grassroots, non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) and the private sector is especially prevalent in Asian countries in implementing national programmes, mainly due to insufficient expertise and resources to execute these development plans.

This is where Singapore can contribute, in working with governments and relevant agencies in Asia on the formulation of evidence-based policies and programmes that are contextualised for a specific country, and accompanied by

effective communications and economic assessments to monitor for equitable uptake and cost-efficiency.

Such policies and research outcomes require an independent perspective, which is often challenging for individual government agencies.

Third, Singapore plays many roles with regard to new technology, as developer, evaluator, and even a regulator.

Consider the advancements in membrane technology that Singapore developed and adopted for water purification and treatment. Can this be modified to provide an affordable and ready solution to water security woes in resource-scarce settings in Asia?

Being geopolitically neutral with strong anti-corruption and regulatory frameworks, Singapore has tremendous potential to be a trusted convener of technologies,

investments, and research for improving global public health in Asia.

Take for example the Advancing Clinical Evidence in Infectious Diseases (Advance-ID) network. A public-private partnership between Singapore, the Wellcome Trust, and the pharmaceutical industry, it aims to tackle the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance.

Involving clinical and academic experts from more than 50 hospitals across at least 18 countries in Asia, this network has the best opportunity to identify real-world solutions to tackle drug resistance in this part of the world, which incidentally is also where the majority of resistance has emerged.

Should the next pandemic strike, this network of hospitals can readily pivot and be nodes of ground surveillance to share data and experiences, and this can

only build greater resilience for the region.

### **SINGAPORE AS TRUSTED CONVENER**

There is a dangerous rise of unilateralism and a breakdown of trust in the world, in part driven by geopolitics and in part by information technology. What this means is that in the coming decade global crises impacting the health and well-being of billions around the world will need more than ever the services of a trusted convener, one able to gain the respect of disparate parties and capable of getting them to work together towards a common goal.

In such times, Singapore needs to stand even more prominently on the global stage, and contribute to the design and proliferation of sustainable solutions.

Ironically, failing multilateralism presents strategic opportunities for forward-looking countries to forge regional alliances through acts of soft diplomacy, such as in health and education.

Helping countries to achieve their health development goals not only promotes better population health, but also fundamentally achieves greater human productivity and potential.

These have always been the ethos of Singapore, together with the core value of equality.

Singapore has never been a passive bystander in global health. It is now time to do even more.

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