



Singapore's public service has pioneered innovations in many areas, says the writer. For instance, the Republic's Electronic Road Pricing has inspired similar congestion-management systems in London and Stockholm. But while Singapore has much to offer the world, it does not have all the solutions. Learning has always been a two-way street. ST PHOTO: LIM YAHOUI

At 60, S'pore is known for its innovations. Let's keep setting the pace

Successful countries that take their foot off the pedal can slide into mediocrity. Let's not fall into that trap.



Terence Ho

The recent World Governments Summit held in Dubai from Feb 11 to 13 brought together political leaders, public officers, company chief executives and heads of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund.

I was invited to the summit's Future of Work Forum to share information about and insights into Singapore's Progressive Wage Model with ministers and officials from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries. It was heartening to see

Singaporeans feature in nearly every discussion panel at the forum, speaking on a range of topics such as the impact of artificial intelligence and new work models.

Countries with different political and socio-economic contexts from ours may not be able to directly borrow and apply lessons from Singapore's experience, but they still seem keen to learn from it.

This is not only because Singapore has achieved economic success, but also because it is seen as being at the forefront of technology and innovation, including public sector and regulatory innovation.

BUILDING THE SINGAPORE BRAND

As Singapore turns 60, we should keep striving to build our national brand. This will expand opportunities for our people and

companies, while making a positive contribution to a world in need of fresh thinking and solutions. Singapore can also make a difference by mobilising collective action to address the world's most pressing challenges.

We can achieve this by continuing to experiment and innovate, learning together and collaborating with others, and forging connections at the people-to-people level.

The public, private and people sectors must continue to innovate and set the pace.

The public service has played a major part in Singapore's economic and social development journey. Along the way, it has pioneered innovations in public housing, reserves management, water reclamation, passport-less immigration clearance and many more.

Singapore's Electronic Road Pricing has inspired similar congestion-management systems in London and Stockholm.

GIC and Temasek are often cited as exemplars by other countries thinking of establishing sovereign or public wealth funds.

Our SkillsFuture movement, launched a decade ago, has captured the attention of

policymakers around the world.

The Singapore Public Service must continue to innovate to seize opportunities and address challenges in areas such as digital technologies, sustainability and demographic change.

This requires the gumption to challenge conventional wisdom and develop novel policy approaches, just as previous generations of public officers have done across many areas of governance.

Besides the public sector, our companies fly the Singapore flag abroad through globally recognised products and services.

In Dubai, I came across familiar brands including Banyan Tree Residences and Charles and Keith. Our nonprofits, too, are leading the way. On my return flight to Singapore, I ran into Mr Jack Sim, whose tireless advocacy for clean toilets and sanitation has seen him recognised as a global environmental leader.

While Singapore has achieved much over the past six decades, it is important not to lose our drive and ambition. It is all too easy for a successful nation to take its foot off the pedal, but this could be the beginning of a gradual slide into mediocrity.

To stay at the bleeding edge of technology, business and governance, we must nurture and celebrate excellence across a range of endeavours.

At the Dubai summit, a participant from Germany remarked that the desire to be the world's best was palpable everywhere in Dubai.

A senior Emirati official shared that Dubai itself took inspiration from Singapore in establishing itself among the world's leading business hubs.

Given competition from other global cities, Singapore must ensure that the drive to excel does not flag over time.

Our city state will stay in the global conversation only if it continues to set the pace.

LEARNING IS A TWO-WAY STREET

While Singapore has much to offer the world, it does not have all the solutions. Learning has always been a two-way street.

In Singapore's early years, the Government benefited from the advice of UN development experts and technical assistance from advanced economies.

Our policies are often adapted from overseas models. For instance, the Retirement and Re-employment Act drew inspiration from Japan, while Singapore's Gateway Process for public sector development projects was modelled after Britain's framework.

We must continue to learn from the best practices of other jurisdictions, while experimenting and innovating ourselves. There is much scope for mutual sharing and learning as countries across the world grapple with emerging trends and common challenges, including technological disruption, disinformation and geopolitical contestation.

Even in other domains such as

social protection and support for seniors, there remain policy gaps and room for us to improve.

The emergence of "wicked problems" such as climate change requires collaboration across national boundaries. For instance, Singapore's demand for clean energy imports is setting the foundations for a regional electricity grid in South-east Asia.

Singapore is also spurring the development of environmental standards and high-quality carbon credits through initiatives such as the Singapore-Asia Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance and the Singapore Carbon Market Alliance.

Singapore can also play a useful convening role by hosting events like the Shangri-La Dialogue and the World Cities Summit. These are important for building trust, establishing connections and exchanging ideas among global participants.

FRIENDSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS

Singapore's influence abroad is amplified by our network of "family, friends and fans".

This includes foreign nationals who have studied or worked in Singapore and maintain ties with friends and organisations here.

Overseas citizens, too, play a key role in connecting Singapore to the world. A Singaporean working as an adviser to the UAE government identified suitable speakers from Singapore for the World Governments Summit. Her former colleague in Singapore, who now helms an educational institute in Mexico, has helped establish research collaborations between his institute and a Singapore university.

The Singapore network grows when veteran leaders look out for younger colleagues and make it a point to connect them with counterparts abroad. In Dubai, SMU Emeritus Professor Annie Koh kindly introduced a group of us to visiting dignitaries whom she knew from World Economic Forum meetings in Davos. She did not just take Singaporeans under her wing, but also participants of other nationalities whom we got to know in Dubai.

We need more people like Prof Koh - Singaporeans who take a genuine interest in people from other countries and cultures, and who contribute to the reservoir of goodwill that Singapore enjoys abroad.

The Singapore Story - that of a tiny nation that succeeded despite lacking natural resources - has inspired many around the world striving for inclusive economic progress and better governance.

It is the reason public officials from around the world flock to Singapore to learn about our system of governance and find out what makes Singapore tick.

Singapore can continue to inspire, and, in so doing, enhance our influence and international relevance. This happens when Singaporeans blaze new trails, build bridges across national boundaries, and seek out like-minded partners to tackle common challenges and forge a better collective future.

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