Detours, Dead-Ends and Diversions:
Singapore’s Road to Development Reconsidered
Detours, Dead-Ends and Diversions: Singapore’s Road to Development Reconsidered


This booklet is the second in a series examining the role of the public service in the ‘Singapore Story’. The first, ‘UNDP and the Making of Singapore’s Public Service: Lessons from Albert Winsemius’ was published in 2015.

UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence
#08-01, Block A, 29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119620

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Front Cover
Caption: 1967 view of Mountbatten Road looking towards Geylang, with Nicoll Highway on the left

Photo credit: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore
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Simple models and catchy tag lines are compelling and attractive. For many, Singapore's development success is explained by “Dream, Design, Deliver” – far-sighted vision, good plans to achieve the vision and determined implementation of those plans.

This booklet argues that at least four additional factors have contributed to Singapore’s success: action orientation, the ability to experiment, the capacity and inclination to change tack when faced with failure or opportunity, and the determination to prevent politically influential vested interests forming around inefficient or ineffective policies. Together, these seven factors reflect a significantly messier reality on the ground that allows for continuous incremental improvement and learning from failure.

These factors make up a framework – “Dream, Design, Do, Detour, Dismantle, Disrupt, Deliver” – a non-linear sequence of actions that better describes Singapore’s success. This framework needs to be founded on determined but pragmatic political leadership supported by a merit-based, motivated and innovative public administration that is mindful of, but not paralysed by, local context.
Professional Public Service and the Road to Development

Fifty years ago, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Sir Arthur Lewis pithily noted that the secret of development was really quite simple: “sensible politics and good public administration.” Attempts to explain why such an easy formula has proved so difficult to implement over the last half century have filled libraries. Defining “sensible”, clarifying “good” and then trying to combine the political aspects with the administrative dimensions has challenged academics, confounded public officials and baffled politicians almost everywhere in the intervening five decades.

Singapore, however, is one of the few examples around the world where spectacular success in development has been achieved. This stellar performance inevitably attracts considerable interest from those eager to imitate the achievement. The accuracy of the details, therefore, of the ‘Singapore Story’ do matter.

This booklet examines this formula for success by considering the role that set-backs and failures played in Singapore’s development, and investigates how the public service learned to learn from its mistakes. It corrects some of the usual explanations. It shows that simplistic narratives presenting a linear trajectory of the country’s development path are incorrect, and stresses the interconnection of governance and economic growth outcomes. It shows that even determined leaders, rational planners and motivated officials don’t always get it right. Politically embarrassing adjustments and controversial corrections may be required when “learning by doing.” The “Singapore Story” suggests guiding principles for this, but offers no normative “best practice.” Rather, every developing country needs to identify the “best fit” for itself – what is feasible in its context.

The “Detours” dimension to the “Singapore Story” is an important refinement to our understanding. It touches on both myth and reality. Newly independent states require a founding mythology. Its purpose is to forge among disparate groups in a new nation a shared identity and common purpose. Most such political legends are inspired by liberation struggles. But for countries that amicably achieve independence, such as Singapore, inventing unifying myths and traditions is less easy – but no less important. Indeed, for Singapore, with a then fragmented multi-ethnic society, a shared narrative was essential.

From Myth to History

This small island city state derives its state-building myths from its response to the economic upheavals, social divides and political threats it faced in the 1960s. The usual account that underpins this “survivalist” credo suggests that, at independence in 1965, Singapore was a poor, small tropical island with no natural resources, rapid population growth and substandard housing. Communism orchestrated from Peking or Moscow seemed to be tightening its grip. Surrounded by countries facing similar upheavals, for Singapore, the British military withdrawal three years later highlighted the existential threat. Ruthless pragmatism was the only way to survive.

The details of the setbacks and mistakes – or the “dead-ends” and “detours”, as outlined in this booklet – add important nuance to Singapore’s “state-building” journey. It helps improve our understanding of how development “really happens” and the crucial role that the public service plays in that process. For this refinement reminds us that the “log-frame” trajectory of that simple “rags-to-riches” version of the small island city state narrative is not the whole story.

Singapore at independence was already comparatively affluent, a middle-income country with the second highest per capita income in Asia after Japan by 1965, and it achieved high-income status less than a decade later, in 1975. The closure of the British defence establishments was a major blow. But the British authorities paid generous severance pay and retraining grants to the former employees of the Royal Navy’s Sembawang dockyard, facilitating its rapid transition into the world’s busiest port. Partly as a result, by 1970, Singapore had clearly “taken off” on its remarkable development journey.

National myth puts the past to work in service of the present. History requires a maturity forged from the passing of time and the emotions of the moment to examine the past objectively on evidence. This is happening in Singapore. The People’s Action Party (PAP), in recent years, no longer claims that it has always managed to get everything right. During the 2011 general election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong even openly admitted that his Government had made mistakes.

The achievements of Lee Kuan Yew’s premiership still remain deeply impressive, even if the “founding father” was not immortal. Confucius had advised, “If you make a mistake and then do not correct it – that is the real mistake.” Lee Kuan Yew certainly corrected his mistakes – even though he rarely admitted the “detours, dead-ends and diversions” that those policy errors entailed.

The readjustment, therefore, to the “state-building” narrative outlined in this booklet suggests a credible picture of the role of the public service. Rather than a superhumanly rational, honest and brilliant group of political and administrative leaders faultlessly working in harmony to devise a national vision and implement it through the perfect plan, a more reassuringly human story of engaging in “trial and error” emerges. But then, recognizing that perhaps merely underscores another aspect of the “Singapore Story” – pragmatism. So the pragmatism argument deserves further attention as an explanation for Singapore’s success. I return to this in an afterword.

Max Everest-Phillips
Director, UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

To anyone trained in ecology, complexity and the dynamic interactions that characterise the difficult-to-manage, non-linear paths in national development are familiar territory. Details about the multiple actors related to each other in different ways, the effects of time, and the impacts of actions by each actor (including self) are of course different. However, concepts and principles of an ecosystem in nature also hold true for national development. This does not make it easier to manage, but it does make it easier to understand and describe.

Sustainable development, like real life, is never 100% efficient; progress is never without making trade-offs, and worthwhile, sustained success is never achieved on a linear trajectory. Similarly, in a mature ecosystem, every living component adjusts and accommodates to its environment - other organisms present and the physical surroundings. Any equilibrium reached is always dynamic - the environment itself changes as a result of these interactions, re-initiating more successive cycles of change.

It is said that to be fore-warned is to be fore-armed. This booklet is an attempt to fore-warn practitioners by highlighting the complexity inherent in any attempt at national development, using examples from the Singapore Story, and challenging simplistic narratives of its developmental success.

Nigel Goh
Senior Advisor, UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence
1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore’s Development Success

Much has been written about the success of Singapore since its self-governance in 1959 and independence in 1965. The evidence for this success is generally well-accepted – for example, Quah (2013) highlighted eight governance indicators in which the island nation has excelled. Singapore also consistently ranks among the top nations in the Very High Human Development category in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s Human Development Reports (e.g., see the 2014 and 2015 editions). Snapshots of changes between 1959, 2008 and 2014 further illustrate this success: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (S$1,330 to S$53,192); unemployment rate (14 percent to 2.2 percent); foreign reserves (S$1,151 million to S$250,346 million); government expenditure on education (S$63.39 million to S$8,246.3 million); extent of corruption (“High” to “Low”).

‘Dream, Design, Deliver’, ‘Muddling Through’ or ‘Dynamic Governance’ in Singapore?

A paper published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2010 explains Singapore’s development success with the catchphrase “Dream, Design, Deliver”. The authors observed that Singapore has a “strong focus on integrated strategic planning and detailed execution,” linking this to its success; they commented that “Dream, Design, Deliver aptly characterises its approach to policy development and implementation.” While the piece goes on to talk about continuous innovation, the “takeaway” impression is implicit but indelible – have a good vision, formulate appropriate plans and carry out the plans well, and success will follow; lack of success simply indicates shortcomings in one or more of these three areas.

Numerous other simplistic variations of the seamless vision-to-planning-to-effective-implementation model have been used to describe Singapore’s formula for success in development. Some of these studies – with titles such as “How Singapore Makes Central Planning Work” and “Planning for Success: Singapore, the Model City State?” – emphasize aspects of this model and accentuate the perception that Singapore’s development success is, with minor variations, essentially a simple three-step process.

In 1959 – coincidentally, in the same year Singapore attained self-government – Charles Lindblom published his now classic paper, “The Science of ‘Muddling Through’.” This article was celebrated by the American Society for Public Administration as one of the 75 most influential it had published between 1941 and 2012. Twenty years later, in 1979, Lindblom published “Still Muddling, Not Yet Through,” which also made it to this...
prestigious list. In his earlier paper of 1959, Lindblom posited that public policy related
to national development often needs to be made in environments of complexity; in
such situations, a “rational comprehensive method” is impractical, and the alternative
method of “successive limited comparisons” better explains actual policymaking
practice. Indeed, he argued that a pragmatic succession of such comparisons greatly
reduces or eliminates reliance on theory. In his later paper, Lindblom stated that, while
he was not philosophically opposed to the “occasional revolution” in policymaking, in
real life, “neither revolution, nor drastic policy change, nor even carefully planned big
steps are ordinarily possible.” When facing complex problems, his advice was to adopt an
approach “practising incrementalism more skilfully and turning away from it only rarely.”

At a high level, Lindblom’s thinking presciently reflected the streak of continuous
improvement and policy pragmatism that has become characteristic of Singapore’s public
service. This pragmatic emphasis in Singapore was highlighted when a former Head of
Civil Service spoke of the existence of a longstanding “mantra” that guided policymaking
within the Singapore public service: “Policy is implementation, and implementation is
policy.”13 As we will see in this booklet, the pragmatism parallels are evident at both the
policy and the implementation levels.

A more recent model, similar but more detailed than “muddling through”, has been
articulated by Neo and Chen, and the phrase “thinking again” – part of a larger
“dynamic governance” concept – has been used to describe the frequent, incremental
improvements characteristic of Singapore’s governance. This ability and capacity in
public officials and in the public service for continuous change appears to have become
institutionalized in Singapore, described as a place where “policy adaptation” embeds
learning and adjusts paths.14

Both the “muddling through” and “thinking again—dynamic governance” observations run
counter to the “Dream, Design, Deliver” explanation of Singapore’s development success.
Vision, good plans to achieve the vision, and a disciplined, determined march towards
implementation of the plans and thereafter to inevitable success, does not sufficiently
capture the reality of the development journey of Singapore. More significantly, it may
promote a misleading impression of what is needed by any nation trying to emulate
Singapore’s success.

‘Dream, Design, Deliver’ precludes the need for any ‘muddling through’ or ‘thinking again
–dynamic governance’ adjustments in policy or implementation. With a simplistic lens,
such adjustments would be perceived as ill-disciplined and distracting, let alone be seen
as crucial to the institutionalization of a culture for successful continuous change and
long-term development success.

Dynamic Governance Concept


Components of the Dynamic Governance Framework
Dynamic governance is achieved when adaptive policies are executed. “The foundation of dynamic governance is a country’s institutional culture …. The three dynamic capabilities of thinking ahead, thinking again, and thinking across … lead to adaptive policies …. There are two main levers for developing dynamic governance capabilities, able people and agile processes. …. The external environment affects the governance system through future uncertainties and external practices…”

Mechanics of Dynamic Governance
“Dynamic governance achieves current and future relevance and effectiveness through policies that continually adapt to changes in the environment. Policy adaptation is not merely a passive reaction to external pressure but a proactive approach to innovation, contextualisation and execution. Policy innovation means that new and fresh ideas are experimented with and incorporated into policies so better and different results may be achieved. These ideas are contextually designed into policies so that citizens will appreciate and respond favourably to them. Yet it is not just about new ideas and contextual designs but also policy execution that makes dynamic governance a reality.”

“Our cultural heritage – our shared values, beliefs, institutions, and customs – influences our behaviour. While formal rules will reflect this heritage, it is the informal norms and conventions that are the most important carrier of cultural values. For example, in our interaction with others, we may choose not to engage in opportunistic behaviour for our personal gain at the expense of others even when we can do so because we believe it to be wrong or socially unacceptable. Culture represents our collective learning in our adaptive attempts to solve frequently encountered problems of the past. The learning process is a function of the experiences we confront and how these experiences are perceived, filtered, categorised and interpreted by our mental models. A change in culture, beliefs and assumptions and mental models is necessary for institutional change.”

Effect of Dynamic Governance
“When governments develop the capabilities of thinking ahead, thinking again and thinking across, and embed these into their paths, policies, people and processes of public sector institutions, they create learning and innovations in governance that facilitate dynamic change in an uncertain world. In essence, dynamic governance occurs when policy-makers constantly think ahead to perceive changes in the environment, think again to reflect on what they are currently doing, and think across to learn from others, and continually incorporate the new perceptions, reflections and knowledge into their beliefs, rules, policies and structures to enable them to adapt to environmental change.”
Relevance for Development

While there is much to celebrate about international development – for instance, global poverty as a percentage of population has been falling steadily for more than 20 years, since 1990; childhood mortality rates in almost all countries are better than they were in the United States a hundred years ago, even at levels of economic activity lower than in the US at that time; and adult literacy expanded from 76 percent to 84 percent between 1990 and 2011 – there is also concern about persistent and chronic (as opposed to transient), often multigenerational poverty that does not respond to the “standard development recipe of growth plus jobs”. In addition, multiple dimensions of poverty-related human impacts, often ignored in traditional academic studies on this issue in the past, are now being looked at. In this day and age, what can a developing country, and the institutions that work towards facilitating international development, learn from the Singapore example?

One factor that has already been expounded comprehensively is the link between Singapore’s effective public service and its successful, sustained national development. The assumption of the existence of a professional, functioning and motivated public service to ensure effective implementation of projects, and their sustained continuation after the euphoria of a launch, often forms the basis of international development programmes. This assumption is often without basis, and may explain the muted success of international development efforts over the years.

But what, specifically, from the Singapore experience can be sensibly transferred and successfully applied in other developing country contexts? Is Singapore’s development success explained by a linear progression from clarity of leadership vision to far-sighted planning coupled with disciplined and effective implementation, leading seamlessly to its observed development success? Is there evidence for such a clear, smooth trajectory to success when one digs beneath the high-level analyses of success in the “Singapore story”?

Perhaps Singapore’s development path to its current acknowledged success was more of Lindblom’s “muddling through” (or, as described in more positive terms by Neo and Chen, “thinking again” or “dynamic governance”)? Perhaps there were more failures and learning from them than is commonly narrated by consultants? Effective, practical learning from the Singapore experience to emulate its success may require a more detailed analysis, going beyond the possibly unrealistic “Dream, Design, Deliver” model.

This booklet looks more closely at a range of policies and their implementation for different sectors in the Singapore public service. It does not attempt to present a comprehensive narrative of the “Singapore Story” of developmental success; instead, it highlights selected, but more detailed, examples of innovations and adjustments in policy and practice in Singapore, seeking evidence to guide insights related to the questions posed above.

2. THE GREENING OF SINGAPORE

The Greening Vision
When Singapore first embarked on its greening programme, the problem was clear – rapid industrialization had led to a proliferation of concrete, and the loss of more trees than it replaced. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had commented to media, “only one tree was planted for every ten felled for building sites”.

His 1963 vision to address this problem was similarly clear – a tree planting campaign to plant 10,000 trees a year. Had the greening programme in Singapore embraced the vision (“Dream”), stuck to this original plan (“Design”) and implemented it well (“Deliver”), the city would have indeed become greener, but would arguably not have attained its status and reputation as a city of gardens – as a “Garden City”.

Lee’s vision (See Annex 1) was not purely to improve the aesthetics of the city state. His premise was that “the garden city development would be an important factor in persuading potential investors of the commitment, discipline and efficiency of the government. At the same time, Lee used greenery to improve the morale of people and make them proud of their environment.”

Planning the Greening Vision
Excerpts from an oral interview with Mr Wong Yew Kwan, Commissioner, Parks and Recreation Department from 1974-1982, on 10 Nov 1992 on operations of the Department in implementing the greening vision for Singapore, Accession Number 001379, Reel/Disc 1, 00:30:48, accessed on 13 Oct 2016 from http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/search-result

“Oh yes, yes. I think master planning, in fact is at the Planning Department. In other words, at least for a country like ours, many of the parks in fact were designated as parkland by the Planning Department. In other words, the Planning Department had an overall view of all the necessities of the state as a whole. For example, when the East Coast was reclaimed, of course some of these decisions were in fact made by the politicians, and then the Planning Department was then asked to look into the feasibility of certain decisions. On the other hand, some of the other things are decided by the Planning Department. For example, every five years, or several years, you know about this, they will review the Master Plan. As we moved along, as we advanced, we might see that certain areas would need a parkland or need greening.”

Beyond Replacing Felled Trees
Singapore’s Parks and Recreation Department realized only in the subsequent months and years, as the tree planting plan was being implemented, that, besides planting trees, the concrete structures of industrialization (retaining walls, overhead pedestrian bridges, flyovers, etc.) could be used as platforms for growing shrubs and climbers. Flowering shrubs were also planted to add different hues to the basic green, initially to high-visibility areas and then more pervasively.
Today, Singapore has a global reputation as a garden city, and this has been built up steadily over the decades. By the mid-1980s, numerous trees and shrubs beautified streets and parks, and an ambitious five-year programme to plant 89,000 fruit trees was initiated, with a policy-intent of educating urbanized children to recognize fruit trees. It was also felt that community discipline and social responsibility could be inculcated by allowing these trees to be managed by residents. The 89,000 fruit trees were planted by the Housing and Development Board and the Parks and Recreation Department, but ongoing maintenance of the trees by residents proved to be a challenge. Residents’ Committees became unwilling to continue taking on this responsibility. As a result, policymakers had to change tack and no further large-scale fruit tree planting programmes were initiated.

### The Garden City Action Committee

Excerpts from an oral interview with Mr Wong Yew Kwan, Commissioner, Parks and Recreation Department from 1974-1982, on 10 Nov 1992 on operations of the Department in implementing the greening vision for Singapore, Accession Number 001379, Reel/Disc 1, 00:30:48, accessed on 13 Oct 2016 from http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/search-result

“[The Garden City Action Committee had been] set up even before I joined the department in 1974. This was essential, especially during the early days of the work of the Parks and Recreation Department or even Parks and Trees unit. I think it is understandable that different departments tend to look at things within the purview of their own departments. So officers working for a department tend to be – I won’t say having an eye in blinkers – nevertheless, they might not see the total vision of national policy.

So it was a very good thing that the Ministry of National Development (MND) formed the Garden City Action Committee. Under which we had people like the Roads Branch officers, the Planning Department people, the HDB [Housing and Development Board] people, all come to attend the regular meetings. We used to meet for example once a month during which we reviewed what went on in the past month, and what are the programmes we should follow in the following months or in the near future.

By the way, the committee at that time was chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the National Development [ministry]. In other words it is quite a very high-powered group that coordinates very essential things within Singapore. Otherwise you might tend to have certain officers within PWD [Public Works Department] thinking that we should not plant trees there. However, if the committee can review everybody’s needs, and it might come up with a different decision, saying “Well, why not, still we can plant. Why not do it this way.” So all parties would be happy that way.”

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Faunal, Plus Vehicular Thoroughfares
The Bukit Timah Expressway road construction project began in 1983 and was completed three years later. At that time, while there were concerns in the Cabinet about possible pollution of the central water catchment area, efficiency and economic considerations dictated that the expressway bisect a previously contiguous protected forest area. This divided the nature reserve into one large and one much smaller area. This situation persisted for more than 20 years. In 2011, ground was broken to construct a bridge over the expressway to restore ecological linkages between the smaller primary rainforest at Bukit Timah Nature Reserve with the larger area of mature secondary forest in the Central Catchment Nature Reserve. This “Eco-Link” was a response to the changing aspirations of citizens, but also represented a drastic reversal from a bottom-line-driven, “guarded, bothering on hostile” attitude towards nature conservation. This new policy position in 2011 embraced enhanced concerns for nature without disregarding the practical need for the expressway as a vehicular thoroughfare for efficient traffic management. Indeed, then Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew commented that, in retrospect, it might have been a better idea if the Public Works Department had originally built a tunnel or flyover as part of the original Bukit Timah Expressway project in 1983.

Large Park on a Small Island
In the 1970s, the idea to develop a large park with facilities such as “a golf driving range, crocodile aquarium, camping site, holiday chalets, tennis complex, jogging and cycling...
tracks, and a shoreline for swimming, for both the young and old” was severely criticized and challenged in some quarters of government as a needless waste of public funds. In the days before public opinion surveys became more common, projected demand and usage rates could not be accurately ascertained. Today, the 185-hectare East Coast Park, with a 15-kilometre coastline, is visited by some 7 million people a year and is described as “one of Singapore’s most treasured urban getaways, offering an invigorating and exciting diversity of sporting, dining and recreational activities.” However, when the park was first conceptualized, the benefits vis-à-vis the cost were not clear. Realizing it required an appetite for risk-taking and a robust sense of confidence to go against conventional wisdom by building this park of unprecedented size in a space-constrained island nation.

From “Garden City” to “City in a Garden”

Starting in the mid-1990s, it was considered that “the island had been sufficiently greened up”, and there was a shift towards integrating and enhancing the quality of greenery so that “the whole would become larger than the sum of its parts.” Until then, the push for improvements had focused on increasing the ratio of park space to population size. Faced with physical limits on space for parks, a new, unprecedented path to ensure high quality of life had to be taken. The paradigm shift towards the “City in a Garden” concept – “a bustling metropolis nestled in a lush mantle of tropical greenery” – was made public at the World Cities Summit in 2008.

Resource Allocation for the Greening Vision

Excerpts from an oral interview with Mr Wong Yew Kwan, Commissioner, Parks and Recreation Department from 1974-1982, on 10 Nov 1992 on operations of the Department in implementing the greening vision for Singapore, Accession Number 001379, Reel/Disc 1, 00:30:48, accessed on 13 Oct 2016 from http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/search-result

Note: The Greening vision was initiated in 1963. In 1974 when Wong Yew Kwan joined the Department, the budget was still small, and only ramped up in 1978 as projects expanded.

“Just before I went in, the annual budget was very small indeed - I think it was about two million Singapore dollars, to take care of the whole department’s activities. Things went on. I think in 1978, ’79 the budget went up something like 30, 40 million a year, with such expanded staff I just mentioned. We were expending something 30 to 40 million a year, which I think is quite a big budget. And I should say this is a very enlightened attitude on the government. Perhaps many developing countries would not think that such a vast sum of money should be spent on the environment. Of course now is a different thing, now is a kind of world response to the green effort. I think at the moment, you can drum up quite a bit of enthusiasm easily but in the seventies it is a very different thing. The fact that our government had that kind of philosophy is something we should remember.”

29. Ibid., 17.
Flexible but Anchored Policy Responses to Changing Environments

A 2010 study by the OECD described Singapore’s education system as both a “rapid improver” and a “continuing high performer”, citing its ability to successfully implement significant changes. It noted that Singapore’s education policy transitioned through at least three distinct phases from the 1950s to the end of the 20th century in response to “changing circumstances and ideas”.

These shifts were fundamental and demonstrated an awareness of both the changing external environment and internal needs, and a willingness to implement an adaptive response.

Between 1959 and 1978, education policy in Singapore was “survival driven”, especially when independence was thrust upon the nation through its sudden separation from Malaysia in 1965. In response, four pillars to frame education policy during this period were conceived: provision of mass education, building of social cohesion and national identity, introduction of technical subjects to support economic needs, and bilingualism.

Singapore transitioned from being a middle-income country to become a high-income economy in 1975. Its education policy had no doubt contributed to this economic success, and the temptation might have been to continue on this tested policy trajectory. However, student attrition rates, even in the late 1970s, remained high, at about one in three (a drop-out rate of 29 percent in primary schools and 36 percent in secondary schools). The Report on the Ministry of Education 1978, led by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Dr Goh Keng Swee, highlighted this as waste of limited labour power, and a review of the education system was initiated, leading to extensive curriculum and organizational changes. The policy intent was clear – to improve efficiency in the development of labour resources – and this thinking directed policy in the 1979-1998 period. This efficiency-driven education system yielded clear positive results for a time, but the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 accentuated the fact that the world was shifting towards a knowledge-based economy, requiring a change in focus towards innovation, creativity and research.

3. SINGAPORE’S EDUCATION SYSTEM

“When I got into MOE in 1976, there was the Minister of State who was in charge of the day to day running of the ministry. He was Mr Chai Chong Yee. Also Mr Chua Sian Chin who was the Minister for Home Affairs, who was given the additional portfolio of Education. So he became the Minister for Home Affairs and Education. His responsibility was largely Home Affairs. So he came to the ministry for occasional meetings, serving on the main committee in the ministry, a ministerial committee, which he presided over, comprising the top officers in both the admin and the professional. That remained until, of course, 1979, ‘80 when, as a consequence of the new Goh Keng Swee Report that he stepped down and Dr Goh became the Minister for Education, so that he could implement the various changes that his committee had recommended to the government. So that was it.”

“And if we have a minister now who is covering, who comes occasionally, whose portfolio is really Home Affairs rather than Education, I am sure he feels an obligation to be more concerned with what he has to do in Home Affairs, which is his main portfolio rather than Education. No need to say that he will look after policy, Mr Chua Sian Chin, that is. Chai Chong Yee would deal with the day to day operations. It was a convenient way of doing things but it certainly was not helpful in providing the leadership that would be necessary if you want to make sweeping changes. Or not even sweeping changes, different changes, to the … I believe that somebody would have to represent the interest of education in the higher echelon of government, including the cabinet.

Now, I am not here to say one way or the other how else it could have been, no. There must have been constraints which led to this situation. Naturally, the person who is always keen on education and indeed keen on everything by virtue of the position he holds was the Prime Minister. In his position he would be very concerned with what was taking place in every section of government, including education. And it is not surprising therefore that when it was brought to his attention that there was this business of people going to seven, eight, nine years of school and not being a finished product, unable to speak or converse in the languages which they were taught in school. The phenomenon of the Hokkien Platoon. Well, there was concern for him to want to set up a committee to look into whatever was wrong. So that was it.”

“I am not being defensive when I say that I feel that there was a fair degree of coordination. But if you have to depend mainly on your permanent secretary or senior minister [of state], then, I am not sure whether you can do all the things that you want to do and you have the resources to carry out whatever it is. But be that as it may, I think a fair amount of these things were done to bring about an improvement in our schools, the examination set up and what have you.
Many countries, newly emerging countries don’t work so fast for a number of reasons. It could be cultural, it could be financial, it could be lack of resources and so on. They are far more slow, far less in a hurry to make any big changes. And of course, what is happening in the country as a whole may not require them to make such changes. Whereas, you know, we were industrialising and moving from this to that, to the other thing, so there was a more urgent need at our end to ensure that, education matched with whatever changes were being made in the country. And the consequences of that was adaptability. You must be very quick to be able to change. You must accept that teachers and education is an agent of change.

Bilingualism, how effective can you be? Can you be effectively bilingual? Yes, some can. But when you look down the population as a whole, you may not find it that homogenous. For many that might not be the case. So all kinds of things have to be done, to fine tune and so on. It is my honest opinion that we did attempt to coordinate, and to see what could be done. But as I said, there were certain ‘weaknesses’ beyond our control, or certain things happening beyond our control where we could not do all the things which ought to have been done. Not for any lack of commitment, not for any lack of talent. I think some of these chaps were very good. They had been brought into the ministry; they were admin officers; because they had performed well outside in other ministries, Finance or National Development or whatever it was. And similarly the professional officers were people who had proved their worth in the system. But it was less than satisfactory, let’s put it that way. Because there were some things which were, as I said, outside the control of the people who ran the system.”

Responding to this new and emerging environment, the Ministry of Education started the change from the efficiency focus of the previous 20 years to a new ability-based, aspiration-driven policy phase. This phase has also been described as “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, recognizing that, in an era of constant change, what worked well in the past might not work well in the future. This vision had a five-pronged objective to develop young Singaporeans’ values, skills, commitment and determination, and to better prepare them for the 21st century.

**Education as a Means to an End, Not an End in Itself**

Consistent with the country’s pragmatic streak, Singapore’s educational policies are integrally linked to economic development, with labour needs and education policies constantly adjusting to each other. This labour resource planning approach helps prepare students for growing sectors, reduces oversupply in areas of declining demand more quickly and directs public funds more efficiently for post-secondary education. This pragmatic, adaptive approach to education contrasts with a more idealistic approach commonly adopted elsewhere, where educational and labour policies are decoupled.
The 2010 OECD study also noted that “another remarkable feature of the Singapore education system is the value, attention and resources it devotes to lower level achievers, not just high achievers”, with immense resources devoted to vocational and technical training.

**Allocating “Disproportionate” Resources to Rebrand “Failures”**

The Institute for Technical Education (ITE) arose as a result of restructuring the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB), entrance to which required only a basic primary school education. The ITE was established in 1992 in response to employment data showing that companies preferred vocational graduates to have at least a basic secondary school education. In line with this, the Ministry of Education stipulated a minimum of 10 years of education for all students. Like its predecessor institutions for vocational training (the VITB, the Singapore Vocational Institute and the colonial-era Government Trade School, established in 1929), ITE was also initially perceived of as an institution for school drop-outs.

However, in a series of three strategic phases between 1995 and 2009, ITE transformed itself, making “dramatic improvements in classroom performance and student competitiveness for higher paying jobs” and becoming “a highly sustainable model for transforming poorly performing educational institutions worldwide”, as it was described when it won the inaugural Harvard University Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation and IBM Innovations Award in Transforming Government in 2007.

Part of the transformation involved a conscious decision by the Ministry of Education to spend some S$300 million to ensure that that each ITE campus would have facilities that compared favourably with many fully fledged universities in developed countries. This created an unprecedented positive branding and perception of ITE graduates – by the public and by the students themselves. The new buildings were a publicly visible symbol of a policy that decided on the unconventional prioritization of finite resources for education – spending so much on those considered to have less potential – that enabled the successful outcome.

4. SINGAPORE’S ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Reinvention in Response to Changing Economic and Social Needs
From self-government in 1959, through merger with Malaysia in 1963 and independence in 1965, reinvention was a consistent characteristic of Singapore’s economic development. Five phases of Singapore’s economic growth have been broadly recognized and described:

1. Low value, rapid industrialization, mainly to create employment for a young and rapidly growing population;
2. Higher value, low-skill industrialization, attracting capital investment and continued job creation from foreign multinational corporations;
3. High-end, high-skill manufacturing for jobs and capital investment;
4. Development as an international financial centre;
5. Development as a centre of international air and maritime traffic and cargo transport.  

Meticulous thought and planning certainly went into deciding on the country’s economic direction, but these “phases” were not part of some strategic blueprint conceptualized comprehensively at the beginning and simply rolled out systematically and effectively as milestones were met. Rather, these economic strategies evolved dynamically, in response to the changing global, regional and local macroeconomic and social environments.

44. Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, UNDP and the Making of Singapore’s Public Service: Lessons from Albert Winsemius (Singapore: Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2015), 24-25.
Pragmatism in Singapore’s Macroeconomic Management

Excerpts from an oral interview with Prof Lim Chong Yah, then Chairman of National Wages Council, on 10 Oct 1995 on the effect of the wage restraint policy during the 1985 recession in Singapore, Accession Number 001685, Reel/Disc 12, 00:29:19, accessed on 12 Oct 2016 from http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/search result

“A lot of limitations are self-imposed. The most important - I would not consider it limitation – is that we believe in the operation of market forces. Market forces must be allowed to play to the fullest, which means we that [while] we will interfere, we will not try to interfere with market operations.

But at the same time, we don’t want market forces to be the masters and to decide because market forces can result in strikes, lock-outs and industrial disputes. So we want to come in to ensure that market forces serve Singapore and not Singapore serving market forces. In other words, we don’t just let the economy run down. As long as market forces operate, we are happy.

That is a ‘limitation’ because our philosophical outlook that we want market forces to serve us but we don’t want just to serve market forces and result in whatever are the consequences. We don’t regard it as a religion. Even some people think religion must be of use to society. So market forces must serve Singapore. If they don’t serve Singapore, or what the economists call market failures, we have to address ourselves on this problem of market failures: institutional rigidities and so forth; to ensure that we always have enough jobs in Singapore; to ensure that we have a strong currency, a low rate of inflation; to ensure that our economy remains competitive, which means that our companies make money, to put it very colloquially, that most of them would have a fairly decent rate of return on their investments. This is to make sure that the environment is conducive to investment.”

Courting MNCs (multinational companies) in the 1960s and 1970s

At self-government in 1959, the population was growing rapidly and unemployment stood at 14 percent. The obvious economic and social priority was to provide jobs for the people. A retired senior civil servant recalled, “The first task was to create employment. We didn’t talk about high-tech, low-tech or whatever. Anybody who was prepared to put some money in and create jobs for Singaporeans was very welcome.” This mind-set made it possible for Singapore to go “against the grain and assiduously (court) MNCs” despite the prevailing sentiment in the 1960s and 1970s among newly independent ex-colonies of being “anti-American and anti-MNC.”

45. Quah, Public Administration Singapore Style, 17, Table 2.1.
46. Tong Dow Ngiam, quoted in M. H. Chua, Pioneers Once More (Singapore: Straits Times Press and Public Service Division, 2010), 51.
From Job Creation to Wage Increase

In 1981, the Singapore Government launched its so-called “Second Industrial Revolution” to modernize the economy “based on science, technology, skills and knowledge.” This was built on a policy of wage correction (increase) it had pursued since 1979. The intent was to pressure companies into upgrading their operations and labour productivity to match the higher wages, encouraging change in the profile of industry from being predominantly dependent on low-cost, low-skilled labour to reflecting high value and requiring more highly skilled labour.

Economically, however, this created a structural problem as productivity gains lagged behind wage increases; this structural rigidity was a significant factor in Singapore’s first recession since independence, in 1985.

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Responding to the 1985 Recession
After almost two decades of uninterrupted growth, the 1985 recession led to the formation of an Economic Committee to study the causes and recommend new economic directions for the future. Among the many recommendations of the Economic Committee was an aggressive policy response to help employers cut wage costs, which was manifested in wage freezes and lowered employer contributions (from 25 percent to 10 percent) to the national social security savings plan. This wage freeze and reduced social security contribution was a drastic reversal of the 1979 wage increase policy. Another key Economic Committee recommendation to increase economic resilience was to build up the services industry to complement the existing engine of manufacturing.

52. Chin Nam Tan, interview by the Centre for Liveable Cities, Feb 21, 2012, in Industrial Infrastructure, 14.
Role of the National Wages Council During the 1985 Recession in Singapore

Excerpts from an oral interview with Prof Lim Chong Yah, then Chairman of National Wages Council, on 10 Oct 1995 on the effect of the wage restraint policy during the 1985 recession in Singapore, Accession Number 001685, Reel/Disc 12, 00:29:19, accessed on 12 Oct 2016 from http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/search-result

“The main role NWC played was to advocate a wage restraint policy, a severe wage restraint policy and support the government on the cutting down of CPF rates, and the restructuring cess, the Skills Development cess and I think we avoided the word ‘freeze’. Actually wages were frozen for two years although the word was not used.

When we supported this policy, or advocated this policy of severe wage restraint as part of the overall government policy, workers accepted that policy. There was not a single protest on the part of our workers because they could understand the need for it. I think they also followed the guidance given by the NWC and endorsed by the government. They were used to be guided. NWC used to help to lead in that field and they followed the leadership of the NWC. So we had wage restraint, very successful wage restraint in 1985 and ’86. And that kept our costs low, or low enough to rebound and to regain our competitiveness in terms of cost.”

Question posed to Prof Lim: Unlike in the West, most of the Trade Unions would have resisted cut in wage cost. How is it that our trade unions were willing to accept and support?

“Well, in the West, and in some countries when good days were there, they didn’t have good wage increases. In our case when there was a good harvest, the workers had a better share. So when the harvest was no good, NWC had to say the harvest was poor and therefore a little tightening of the belt was necessary. That appears to be very much in accordance with common sense.

For a very open economy like ours, that is a sensible policy to pursue. But if you have a very, very big economy with a small open, external sector, that may be not a wise policy to pursue. Maybe Keynesian policy might be necessary. I had to explain to my colleagues in the NWC why we should not pursue what is called a Keynesian policy.

That means, during a recession to jack up demand in such a way as to create more jobs and to create more demand for goods and services so that the economy could recover.

Our approach was quite different that demand was external in character. That was beyond our control. Fiscal policy, monetary policy could not control that kind of demand. So our exercise must be to control costs. Not to jack up effective demand but to control our cost of production so that the cost could remain low - so that we could remain competitive in the international market.

That was to me, at that time, correct prescription, and years have passed. I still think it was the correct prescription.”
Impacts from Reversal of “Jobs at All Costs”

The move from one phase to another helped to sustain economic growth through the years, but these transitions also created their own impacts. For example, the push for rapid employment growth in the first economic growth phase did not discriminate in terms of quality of jobs, leading to redundancies for less-skilled workers in subsequent years. A 2014 report highlighted a drastic drop in trade union membership for daily-rated workers, to half its earlier number. This came about because of a reversal of the “jobs at all costs” policy that was a central imperative in the 1960s. However, one could also foresee (albeit retrospectively) that, had the policy not been reversed early enough, the impact would have been of a larger scale.

From State-centred to Market-driven Economy

When Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, its economic strategy emphasized attracting foreign multinational corporations and building local government-linked companies rather than building up other domestic private enterprises. The imperative was large-scale creation of jobs for a young population. By the 2000s, the emphasis had shifted to developing Singapore into a business hub and enhancing the regional competitiveness of local companies. From a macroeconomic perspective, this was a drastic change – effectively, from a state-centred economy to the diametrically opposite position of having an economy driven by the market.

Mobilising “Additional” Funds from the Existing Pool – Reinvestment Fund

For years, Singapore’s national budget had enjoyed surpluses with conservative growth forecasts and prudent expenditure. In the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2001 slump in the IT industry and the 2003 SARS outbreak, the nation’s budget did not enjoy the same level of surpluses as it had in earlier years. These surpluses had previously allowed more generous budgets that could support innovative projects for long-term, strategic objectives. There was a risk that these projects would be discontinued with the drop in funding support. In response, the Ministry of Finance introduced the Reinvestment Fund in 2004 to “create” the budget required for this. This was brought about by pooling part of the operating budgets of all ministries into a common project fund, from which “proposals are selected based on their innovativeness, cost-effectiveness, and how well they support the Government’s strategic objectives for the future.”

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5. DISCUSSION

“Dream, Design, Deliver” – An Oversimplification

Simplification is a recognized human tendency, especially in the development sector, where the paradox of trying to reconcile “a complex and messy reality and the linear fairy-tale world of … reports back to head office”58 make simple models and catchy tag lines compelling and attractive.

However, would it be an accurate reflection of reality to say that Singapore’s development success from 1959 onwards took a linear path, moving seamlessly from “Dream” (vision and goal setting) to “Design” (planning) to “Deliver” (effective implementation)? Sufficient examples of actual practice have been highlighted above to support the assertion that this is an oversimplification. Reflecting on Singapore’s development, Lee Kuan Yew shared his thoughts candidly: “Was it planned from the beginning? No! It was a process of learning, adjusting, refining and passing it on to the next generation so that they don’t have to relearn the process.”59 Nonetheless, students of developmental success, development agencies and officials from many developing countries may hitherto have been embracing an explanation for Singapore’s success that is not inaccurate, but may be incomplete and unrealistically simplistic. The “Dream, Design, Deliver” (or similar) model glosses over the nuts and bolts of a significantly messier reality on the ground. Having established this, is there an evidence-based framework that more completely and accurately reflects the actual practice, from which developing countries can better learn from the Singapore experience?

This booklet has already highlighted cases in Singapore where the paths to policy success have not been charted as envisaged when the vision and goals were first conceived. In these cases, the plan was important but not sacrosanct, and could be (and indeed, in the instances highlighted, were) modified and adapted to changing realities. Alternative paths, differing from those originally envisaged, were also taken. In several cases, existing policies were even reversed or institutions closed down when they had served their purposes or were no longer relevant. Other examples show instances where it had been necessary to implement a solution that had never previously been used elsewhere, sometimes requiring policy innovations that went against the grain of the prevailing wisdom of “best practice”.

Do, Detour, Dismantle, Disrupt – Missing Components?

Four key elements not captured in the idealistic 2010 “Dream, Design, Deliver” explanation of Singapore’s development success have been described above. These – “Do”, “Detour”, “Dismantle” and “Disrupt” – are elaborated on below.

Do

Driving is a practical skill. No amount of theory provides adequate preparation for it. As every learner driver knows, at some point, after adequate preparation, one has to begin. “Do” reflects a deeper attitude of being willing to continue learning while in the midst of doing. With sufficient planning (“Design”), moving on to “Do” without the assurance of full knowledge can sometimes be the best approach to avoid the paralysing inertia camouflaged by endless due-diligence. The other

58. Green, The Age of Development.
implication of “Do” is commitment. W.H. Murray, the leader of the 1951 Scottish Himalaya Expedition, talked about the simple act of putting down money to book the passage to Bombay: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.”

Many arguments against allocating scarce resources for a greening programme in a new city state could have been raised, including competing claims on resources, insufficient knowledge and experience. Nonetheless, the decision was made to initiate an intensive tree planting campaign in Singapore, with the Prime Minister himself making a public commitment to the plan. The mid-1980s fruit tree planting programme was obviously started without anticipating the problem of community unwillingness to contribute, but provides evidence for the broader “Do” attitude. It is to be expected that, at times, this means that subsequent action has to be taken to reverse an impact, as illustrated by the Bukit Timah Expressway example. Similarly, the various changes to education policy in Singapore reflected “Do” that required later adjustments. However, the alternative of attempting to formulate a policy that catered to all existing and anticipated needs would have been impossible in practice, and any attempt to do so would have been doomed to endless analysis and revision, or a policy that attempted to address many needs but would not achieve much in practical terms for each.

**Detour**

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander at the time of the World War II Allied D-Day landings, and later President of the United States, was famously quoted as saying, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” Inherent in his statement is the idea that it is impossible to comprehensively predict the future, so that even the best-laid plans cannot be followed mindlessly if one intends to have sustained success. Plans need to be rigorously prepared, but then also regularly reviewed and intentionally adjusted along the way when necessary. When enough thought and rigorous application has been put into the plans (“Design”), such adjustments (“Detours”) represent tweaking – Lindblom’s incrementalism – rather than drastic and often wasteful revamping of entire systems.

Moving from the grand strategy of planting 10,000 trees a year to beautifying infrastructure and planting flowering shrubs was an example of such a “detour” in the greening of Singapore. This was a gradual, “evolutionary” change – an adjustment of the original plan in response to opportunities that became apparent during its implementation. The three fundamental shifts in policy intent in the education system in the period from the 1950s to 2000 were also examples of such “detours” in Singapore. One thing that consistently characterized these changes through the years was that the core fundamentals remained constant. Three basic questions defined the Ministry of Education’s raison d’être incessantly from the start, and guided its metamorphosis through its transitions: Why teach?

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What to teach? How to teach? In a similar manner, the economic development of Singapore was characterized by periodic transitions from one phase to another in response to macroeconomic and social changes in the external environment, but with a consistent overriding objective of sustained economic and social viability. The reversals from a low-wage to a high-wage policy, and then back to a reduced wage policy, illustrate the strength of the underlying system that allowed such “detours” to be made with this seeming ease.

Dismantle
While driving, reversing out of a cul-de-sac or making a U-turn is the rational response of any driver when faced with a dead-end street. However, in government bureaucracies, even if the facts point to a similarly unambiguous decision, reversing policies or shutting down institutions often have unacceptable political costs. In such situations, the more expedient alternatives of quietly ignoring a legacy policy while pursuing a newer, contradictory one, or creating similar, new institutions while allowing the existing original (but redundant) ones to remain, are often taken as the route of least resistance, even if wasteful of resources.

Dismantling Industries and Its Repercussions on Jobs
Excerpts from a speech by Mr Ong Teng Cheong, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office to Port Officers’ Union on 23 Jul 1983. Emphasis added. Full speech reproduced in Annex 2.

“At the end of the 1970s, the Government concluded that we must move our products and services upmarket, that is, we must move towards skill-intensive and knowledge-intensive industries and services. Success would depend on higher skilled workers with better work attitudes.”

“The PSA was faced with a difficult decision whether to invest in container facilities, which meant expensive handling equipment and less portside workers. But containerised shipping was clearly the more efficient technology. If the PSA had delayed the decision, it would have been overtaken by other ports in the region. The PSA chose to upgrade. It has turned out to be the correct decision.”

The example of stopping the fruit tree planting programme in the middle of its implementation phase illustrates the “dismantling” of a policy that needed to be redefined in the context of new or unanticipated realities. It was intentionally discontinued, rather than allowed to fester and eventually (hopefully) fade into quiet obscurity. Other examples also show this. One is the 1960s “jobs at all costs” policy to address the then high levels of unemployment, which was stopped in the late 1970s; instead, a somewhat contradictory high-wage policy was pursued, which necessitated much higher selectivity in job creation. This in turn led to the loss of many low-wage jobs, manifested in a significant fall in the number of daily-rated workers, starting from the 1980s. The high-wage policy was itself reversed in response to a 1985 recession in order to maintain the viability of companies and minimize job losses for workers. The freedom and ability to make such policy U-turns is not a given in many countries (even when these are rationally justifiable). For Singapore, it was a reflection of the strong pragmatic (and cooperative) culture within the political and bureaucratic leadership at that time. This, together with the high level of trust in the government, allowed the implementation of important policies that would predictably be unpopular.

**Disrupt**
Schein described the ability of Singapore’s government officers to “invent what the country needs to survive and grow” (emphasis added) as a major strength in its development. Quah argued that one factor for Singapore’s development success was the strong consideration of its local policy context. Being able to come up with and implement novel solutions to match local context is, in essence, what “Disrupt” is all about. Generalizing this into a principle, the ability to take into account local context, and to innovate with new solutions rather than follow tried-and-tested conventional wisdom found in “best practices” (where the latter are inappropriate for the local context) is a key factor for development success.

The development of the large, 185-hectare East Coast Park in the 1970s illustrates a “disruption” of conventional space-constrained urban planning philosophy and priorities. In another example of this from the greening of Singapore, despite being a pioneer and investing more than 40 years in implementing a very successful ‘Garden City’ strategy and building a strong brand, authorities ‘redefined the game’ and started publicizing the novel “City in a Garden” paradigm in 2008, seeking to distinguish the city state from the many other garden cities that had been developed over the years. In the Institute of Technical Education case, the decision to allocate very substantial resources to build world-class infrastructure for ‘school drop-outs’ also took a path contrary to conventional global practice. For a newly independent country to actively encourage multinational company investment in the 1960s and 1970s had few, if any, precedents, but was deemed to be the direction to take to grow the Singapore economy. The innovative Reinvestment Fund is another example where a novel approach had to be taken to find a solution around specific local constraints.

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64. Quah, “Ensuring Good Governance in Singapore.”
Risking ‘Goh’s Folly’: Development of Jurong Industrial Estate

Excerpts from a speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Minister for Finance, delivered on 24 Apr 1964 (emphasis added). Full speech reproduced in Annex 3.

“Just over three years ago, the whole of the Jurong area consisted of mangrove swamps and hills and forests. Since then, under the direction of the Economic Development Board, a prodigious effort has been mounted to level the hills, fill up the swamps, construct roads, lay power lines, build wharves and engage in all the other activities, the results of which you can see for yourself today.”

“Naturally, an expansion on this scale creates many problems... our rate of industrial expansion in Jurong has already outstripped the programme for social development, and we had to mount a crash programme to make available 2000 flats ready for occupation by the end of this year.”

“The original Jurong plan envisaged the use of the water stored up by the construction of the causeway across the Jurong River... Subsequent industrial growth has made this plan obsolete.”

“I myself remember that when weighing the odds for and against starting the Jurong scheme, I was assailed by quite a number of doubts. .... Therefore, faced with the decision whether or not to commit substantial sums of money to open up the Jurong estate, the possibility that this whole effort might wind up as the largest white elephant in S.E.A. was one that could not be lightly dismissed. At that time, no one could have guaranteed that $90 million spent in Jurong would not result in several thousand acres of empty waste land to be known to posterity as ‘Goh’s Folly’. That was a calculated risk which had to be taken ...”
Relationship with “Muddling Through” and “Dynamic Governance”
From the examples and discussion highlighted above, the Singapore experience of development over the last 50 years has indeed reflected elements of Lindblom’s “muddling through” or incrementalism.65 The instances when institutions had to “detour” are clearly examples of the incrementalism that Lindblom strongly advocated (and perhaps some are also cases of “dismantle” or “disrupt”).

Besides illustrating Lindblom’s ideas, these examples also show the “dynamic governance” concept used by Neo and Chen to describe the Singapore development model.66 These authors go further, however, describing this capability and capacity for continuous change in Singapore as an attribute that has somehow become institutionalized. This could well explain the resilience of Singapore’s development success in spite of changing, often challenging, external circumstances over the last 50 years. And if so, this is indeed an important objective for other developing countries to understand, adapt and apply based on the Singapore example. Neo and Chen sum it up more comprehensively:

“Dynamic change without a crisis requires leaders who keep learning, adapting and innovating. Proactive organizational capabilities need to be developed to ensure a country’s institutions’ continuing relevance and effectiveness. Three cognitive capabilities were defined: thinking ahead to prepare for the future, thinking again to improve current performance, and thinking across domains to learn from others. These capabilities make chosen paths, policies and strategies dynamic by incorporating into the governance system new thinking and learning that foster continuous improvement, adaptation and innovation.”67

67. Ibid., 433-434.
6. A NEW FRAMEWORK

“7Ds” – Dream, Design, Do, Detour, Dismantle, Disrupt, Deliver
The Singapore development model is necessarily made up of many components. This booklet and the proposed “7D” framework do not attempt to authoritatively define or comprehensively describe this model. This proposed framework uses seven verbs: Dream, Design, Do, Detour, Dismantle, Disrupt, Deliver. It builds on several of the earlier cited works: the 2010 OECD “Dream, Design, Deliver” catchphrase, Lindblom’s 1959 and 1975 thoughts on incrementalism and Neo and Chen’s more recent 2007 model of dynamic governance.

This “7D” framework describes a continuous cycle that reflects a more complete, and therefore a more realistic, explanation of Singapore’s development success. It is also important to understand that these components do not proceed in linear sequence; in practice they are not always implemented one after the other.

**Dream**
In the context of a nation, ‘Dream’ refers to the collective ability to envision and share an ambitious future. Predictably, it involves leadership - visionary leadership. But it is also about trust and legitimacy, ensuring that the desired future state is embraced not just by the political elite or imposed externally, but is also shared by the majority of the people and, importantly, by the public service.

**Design**
To “Design” is to have the capacity to engage in complicated long-term and detailed planning, embracing unpredictable complexities and taking into consideration the often conflicting needs of multiple stakeholders. This capacity involves foresight – to be able to anticipate as many predictable changes as possible, and to incorporate responses in the plans.

**Do**
The planning trap during the “Design” stage is that due diligence can sometimes lead to inertia, and opportunities can be lost. While ill-conceived or reactionary activity needs to be avoided while moving forward, to “Do” is to be prepared to move forward resolutely even without guarantees of success.

**Detour**
In a world of increasing unpredictability and complexity, the ability to “Detour” is the indispensable capacity to be flexible in the implementation of previously formulated plans – reviewing, adapting and making appropriate adjustments in response to unforeseen changes in the environment (both external and internal).

**Dismantle**
Occasionally, the environment changes to such an extent that the original plan becomes irrelevant and “Detours” are an insufficient response. In such situations, to “Dismantle” is the ability (technical and political) to shut down institutions or to reverse policies that have served their purpose in the past but are no longer relevant. It represents efficiency in the use of resources, and reflects policy objectivity and pragmatism.
**Disrupt**
The term “Disrupt” is borrowed from the technology industry. Loosely applied, it refers to the ability to innovate with new solutions (in policy or implementation) rather than always following tried-and-tested conventional wisdom found in “best practices” (especially where the latter are inappropriate for the local context). In significant cases, it can result in complete paradigm shifts in the way challenges are approached, defined and addressed.

**Deliver**
As far as development is concerned, policy and ideas – however rational and well-intentioned – have no real impact until they are successfully implemented and produce positive, sustainable outcomes for the people that good development is targeted towards. To “Deliver” is to align practice with policy, to build capacities and capabilities to effectively implement policy intentions.

**Lessons for Development**
Factors responsible for Singapore’s successful development are varied and it is probably impossible to describe all of them. However, this “7D” framework encompasses key elements that have allowed Singapore to develop and to sustain this development momentum successfully over the past five decades. While this new framework is less compelling and attractive than the original three-word tag line, we reason that it is more instructive. At the same time, it is also more inspirational, simply because it paints a picture that better reflects reality, and that is therefore more attainable.

As with other “best practice” programmes, initiatives and models, successful outcomes will require that conditions for the effective application of this framework are in place. Singapore’s experience provides a starting point from which to understand some of these conditions. At the core of the successful implementation of this “7D” framework in Singapore is its “rational, pragmatic, non-ideological approach to policy making.” In Lee Kuan Yew’s forthright language, it boiled down to “Does it work? Does it not work? If it works, then do it. If it doesn’t work, change.”

Other lessons have also been articulated in similar form elsewhere. Some of them are elaborated here, in the context of this discussion.

**Consideration of Local Context**
It is important to understand the circumstances and policy environment in which development occurred in Singapore. We caution, as do other authors in relation to the Singapore model, that blind replication of this framework without sufficient consideration of and adaptation to local context is likely to end in failure.

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68. Neo and Chen, Dynamic Governance, 87.
71. See Quah, “Ensuring Good Governance in Singapore.”
While specific local policy context is different in different parts of the world, there are some general conditions that enable the different steps in the framework to be implemented effectively.

**Institutional Culture that Embraces Unpredictable Change**

When it comes to **Design**, the need for **foresight and long-term planning** in sustaining successful national development over the long term is self-evident. What is less evident is that undergirding the planning process to achieve a vision in a complex and constantly changing external environment is not just the ability to envisage the future (it is impossible to do so with 100 percent accuracy, anyway). What is more important is the ability to regularly review and dynamically revise a plan even as it is being implemented. In this sense, it is more than a technical skill or a planning process. It is an **institutional attitude or culture that embraces volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity** as inevitable realities, and has the inbuilt capacity to respond effectively and in a timely manner to unexpected changes. In the words of a former Minister of National Development, S. Dhanabalan, “It would be a mistake to say it was all planned. What is key about Singapore is that we plan a little, but when the environment changes, we react very fast to seize the opportunities and then we fly.”\(^{72}\)

**Common Vision and Trust among Key Stakeholders**

Except for the unlikely situation where there exist limitless capability and resources, a substantial amount of political flexibility and cooperation among stakeholders is necessary to successfully implement the elements of this “7D” framework. In many countries, the inability of leaders of two key stakeholder groups – politicians and public service officials – to put aside partisan or personal agendas in order to adopt a common **Dream** for the national good probably explains many historical failures in development.

In particular, a **professional relationship of mutual trust between political and administrative leaders** is especially crucial for timely and effective responses to changes in the external environment, allowing necessary **Detours** to previously established plans. It has been argued that Singapore’s determined and effective curbing of corruption\(^{73}\) has contributed to policymaking that is rational and seeks public good rather than personal benefit or the enhancement of rent-seeking opportunities; the positive effects of such effective and successfully implemented policies translate into enhanced trust of the government by the population.\(^{74}\) The minimization of corruption also facilitates the mutual trust or professional respect between political and administrative leaders necessary to allow institutions or policies (which often represent power bases or personal prestige) that have outlived their functional usefulness to be closed down, or **Dismantled**.

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73. For example, see Quah, “Lee Kuan Yew’s Enduring Legacy of Good Governance in Singapore”: 382, Table IV.

74. Boon Kwan Toh, personal communication with the author (May, 2016).
Mutual trust or respect, and the ability of these leaders to work well together, while almost impossible to measure, may explain a significant part of Singapore’s success. Describing the first generation of politicians and civil servants after independence, Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong observed that “they had a complete identity of mission – to build a nation from scratch.” Together with the sense of crisis arising from the unexpected separation from Malaysia and the “thoroughgoing threat of communalised conflict,” this could also explain the apparently voluntary subjugation of personal agendas in favour of the nation-building mission.

**Institutionalised Encouragement of Innovation**

The adoption of “best practices” often works well when sufficient thought is given to enable their adaptation to local contexts. However, even with such adaptation, existing solutions are sometimes inadequate. In such situations, innovation – coming up with completely new solutions and policies – is needed. While individuals who are both innovative and influential will often rise to the occasion in such situations to champion solutions that Disrupt common wisdom and the traditional way of doing things, this is not a given. For longer-term resilience, the sustained ability to overcome new challenges within a culture where such innovative and “disruptive” mindsets are encouraged and institutionalized is required.

**Motivated Public Service**

Ultimately, even with a combination of good vision, good plans to make the vision materialize, resolute action (Do) to translate ideas into reality, and the ability to adapt, innovate and make hard decisions, the bottom line remains the ability of the public service system and institutions to Deliver results. And it is people – not merely good processes or physical infrastructure, however important they may be in themselves – that make a system and its institutions work.

As alluded to earlier, the public official of today works in a volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous (“VUCA”) environment, where there is not only an increasingly higher level of service expected by the public, but also reduced resources to fulfil these growing expectations. In such a context, if the platforms for effective and resilient development are to be sustainable, the public officials who create and maintain those platforms need to be suitably and sufficiently motivated.

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75. Lee Hsien Loong, speech to the 2016 Administrative Service Dinner and Promotion Ceremony, Singapore, April 26, 2016.
Interventions to improve motivation in public officials need to go beyond simplistic “carrot-and-stick” solutions. There are many reasons for this. For one, reward and punishment are only effective where good performance can be clearly defined and accurately measured before either rewards or punishments are fairly dispensed. In VUCA environments, defining in advance the performance measures that will lead to meaningful future outcomes is next to impossible. These measurable and predetermined targets are more than likely to change in jobs of the future, when officials will have to routinely operate within a volatile and unpredictable environment.

The Singapore experience continues to provide relevant experience to be studied and adapted in the global pursuit of poverty alleviation and human development. A key factor that stands out in the development success of this nation is the understated dynamism of its public service. This “7D” “Dream, Design, Do, Detour, Dismantle, Disrupt, Deliver” framework is derived and distilled from evidence found in the actual implementation of policies by the Singapore public service in three sectors in which it excels: greenery management, education and economic/financial management. Because of this, it unearths a deeper perspective on the “Singapore Story” than is commonly described. This allows a more detailed and realistic starting point from which countries or institutions interested in learning from the Singapore experience can confront the unique development challenges they themselves face.
7. REFERENCES


Two Contrasting Anniversaries

2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution in China. Unsurprisingly, there have been few celebrations. Mao Tse-tung’s blatantly self-serving political manoeuvre to reassert his authority resulted in fanatical Red Guards plunging the country into chaos. The outcome was huge suffering in the name of revolutionary dogma. The best estimates suggest the number of people killed exceeded 1.7 million.\(^1\) It took years for China to recover from the destructive force of unfettered idealism.

By contrast, in 2015, Singapore commemorated its half-century of independence, with justifiable razzmatazz. The country’s undoubted success, it is widely claimed, has been due to its “rational, pragmatic, nonideological approach to policy making.”\(^2\) The people in the world’s only small island city state consistently have voted for this winning formula since self-rule in 1959. Then, half of all Singaporeans were residing in squatter huts, and GDP per capita was around US$400. That was about one third that of her colonial ruler (the United Kingdom), and a seventh that of the US. By 1980, Singapore’s GDP per capita had risen to half that of the UK and about 40 percent that of the US. With seemingly relentless growth, the country finally overtook the UK in 2009 and the US in 2011, with GDP per capita reaching US$51,855 by 2015. Another comparison, this time with developing countries, is even more startling. In 1959, Singapore’s GDP per capita was about 10 times that of Malawi, a “typical” small Commonwealth country in Africa; by 2015, it was roughly 210 times larger.

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2. Neo and Chen, Dynamic Governance, 87. See also Schein, Strategic Pragmatism.
To explain such results, Lee Kuan Yew himself cited meritocracy, anticorruption and pragmatism as key to his achievements in office. When he died – sadly, just a few months before the celebrations – almost every obituary around the world consistently agreed on one thing: that he had been pragmatic. In the Western media, The Guardian described him as “leaving a legacy of authoritarian pragmatism” used to justify one-party rule, The Economist stated that “Singapore owes much of its prosperity to a record of honest and pragmatic government”, the New York Times asserted that “Lee’s only religion was pragmatism”, while the BBC noted his “ruthless pragmatism.”

In Asia, The China Daily highlighted his “diplomatic pragmatism”, while The Times of India argued that he had forged his country in his own image as “efficient, inventive, forward looking and pragmatic.” Tokyo’s Nikkei Asian Review reflected on his “ultimate” pragmatism in coming to terms with Japan, which had occupied Singapore with intense brutality during World War II. At home, the semi-official Straits Times argued that the key lesson of his premiership was that “Pragmatism can serve as a trustworthy compass when all agree that the good of the nation is what really counts.”

Distinguished academics and former senior officials who had worked for Lee Kuan Yew concurred. Kishore Mahbubani, a retired top diplomat and now Dean of the National University of Singapore School of Public Policy named in Lee Kuan Yew’s honour, suggested Lee Kuan Yew’s account, “The Singapore Story”, was sufficient for explaining the country’s success. He therefore merely repeated Lee Kuan Yew’s own explanation, boiling it down to the acronym MPH – meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty.

“You Have Got to Believe in Something”: The Ideological 1960s and the Invention of the Myth of Pragmatism

That the pragmatic approach explains Singapore’s development success therefore seems incontestable. In later years, Lee Kuan Yew had frequently stated the same thing, declaring in a newspaper interview in 2007, for example, “We are pragmatists. We don’t stick to any ideology. Does it work? Let’s try it and if it does work, fine, let’s continue it. If it doesn’t work, toss it out, try another one. We are not enamored with any ideology.” The appeal of having such a remarkably simple – or simplistic – explanation for the country’s exceptionally rapid development has resulted in its being endlessly repeated. Yet, in light of the “Detours” correction to the narrative, how credible is it?

When asked in 1965 whether the answer to communism and colonialism was purely pragmatic, lying in the provision of housing, social welfare, higher standards of living, education, or whether it required a positive ideology and political philosophy, Lee Kuan Yew was emphatic: “You have got to believe in something … you have got to have the ideological basis.” PAP supporters admired the leadership’s commitment to creating a fair and equal society.

3. Editorial, Straits Times, March 30, 2015. The newspaper is owned by Singapore Press Holdings whose former Executive President ran the Internal Security Department from 1986 to 1993. S. R. Nathan, Director of the Ministry of Defence’s Security and Intelligence Division and subsequently President of Singapore, had served there as a senior editor.
6. March 5, 1965 (Document lky19650305, National Archives of Singapore).
“Pragmatism” is the non-ideological search for optimal results. Ironically, the idea is a key component of Singapore’s successful political ideology. That is built on pride in hard-headed realism and the flexibility of adapting and innovating while “learning by doing.” What distinguishes this from simply “muddling through” is the idealized belief that merit-based public service, liberated from the messiness of democratic debate or concern for popularity, can best advance rational and realistic policies.

Of course, in the 1960s, the prospects for Singapore had looked grim. The “confrontation” with Indonesia, communist insurgency, the war in Viet Nam, Malaysian animosity and the British decision to close the military bases that had guaranteed Singapore’s defence left little room for complacency. As a result, for the political party that has run Singapore since independence, the People’s Action Party (PAP), the espousal of pragmatic performance that supposedly guided the government through those tumultuous days has been integral to its image. By accepting this reputation of having a single-minded focus on results rather than beliefs, voters have entrenched a somewhat authoritarian ideology. To this we can put hard numbers – the communist threat was mentioned in Singapore’s Parliament no less than 62 times more often than any claim to pragmatism in the face of it.

The evidence confirms this, for in the 1960s it was not Lee Kuan Yew and the other PAP leaders who promoted pragmatism. At that time, they were still explicitly committed to an openly ideological fight with the far left in defence of the principles of democratic socialism, although this has sometimes been airbrushed out of history or declared to have been insincere. Indeed, at that time, Lee Kuan Yew attributed pragmatism to British colonial rule, from which he was making a break.

Rather, the evidence suggests that it was the PAP’s rank-and-file MPs who, in those early years after self-rule in 1959 and around the time of full independence in 1965, turned to pragmatism to justify the Government’s actions to their constituents. They emphasized how their pragmatic approach contrasted with the dogmatic nature of Chinese communism in the 1950s and 1960s. As Fong Sip Chee, then Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, told Parliament in December 1965:

We are caught, as in every developing country in the world, in a dilemma; that is, in our political approaches, the Government must be ideological and as pragmatic in its administration.

Another important intellectual founder of the PAP’s ideology of pragmatism in Singapore in the mid-1960s was Ho See Beng (1918–2008). An MP from 1963 to 1984 (for Bras Basah until 1976, then for the Khe Bong constituency), Ho was one of the founders of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in 1961, and, as NTUC Chairman 1962–1964, President 1964–1966 and Secretary-General 1966–1967, a key figure in the fight to wrest...
control over the union movement from communist hands. He transformed the then atmosphere of distrust and confrontation among unions, employers and the government into the harmonious tripartite relationship that continues to this day. He achieved this by fighting for better wages and conditions for workers, but he also demanded a positive investment climate to create more jobs. His efforts to help black market taxi drivers find legitimate employment led to the establishment of the NTUC Co-operative Comfort Cabs, whose drivers are my most trusted barometer of popular opinion. In the 1960s, “pragmatism” was a term that littered Ho See Beng’s speeches.

In contrast, despite their later espousal of the concept, in those tense years the term was rarely used by Lee Kuan Yew or his ministers to describe his Government’s domestic policies. Appropriately, therefore, it was the general election of 1984, when Ho stood down as an MP, that first raised widespread doubts about the continuing political validity of “pragmatism”. For by then, the enchanting certainties of econometric data increasingly confronted a concern for democratic quality. The gnawing doubt took hold among a much wealthier and better educated electorate that the single-minded pursuit of materialism risked creating a nation of spiritual and artistic poverty, which, through mass migration, was also losing its unique identity.

By the 1970s, pragmatism was the official ideology of the PAP. Pragmatism has been presented in Singapore ever since as a positive characteristic and perhaps does indeed usually trump dogma. But elsewhere it is recognized that it can all too easily shade off into the cynicism of realpolitik. In the 1970s, Singapore’s “pragmatism” of colluding with the Apartheid regime in South Africa was hardly admirable. Furthermore, Singapore’s adamant policies on capital and corporal punishment, often in the face of intensely hostile media coverage abroad and diplomatic pressure from key allies, demonstrate that the “pragmatism” narrative is, at best, inadequate. That certainly has not stopped those policies being defended rather than pragmatically dropped, at least for foreigners. International ridicule over the chewing gum ban is another, more surreal, example of Singapore’s clearly non-pragmatic policies. Pragmatism is clearly as much myth-making as explanation for Singapore’s successful development.

Serious research, however, has for at least two decades been raising serious doubts about the role of pragmatism in the “Singapore Story”. Pragmatism’s quest for “what really works” had perhaps, for too long, been ignoring the political response, “For whom?”

Competent Public Service with Ideas and Ideals

Furthermore, this is to overlook something more important than pragmatism – immediacy. The Government was committed to delivering services to the public with the “managed intimacy” of a small island state – roads were repaired and street lighting fixed whenever the Prime Minister toured a district.

16. One example is the Michael Fay case in 1994. Fay, an 18-year-old US citizen, was sentenced by a court in Singapore to caning for vandalism. The then US President Bill Clinton publicly intervened, while the US press roundly condemned Singapore as “barbaric” and referred to it as “Lash-land.” New York Times columnist William Safire described the “torture” that the “dictatorship” of the “fascist city-state” Singapore inflicted as “flogging by rattan cane, which elicits the screams satisfying to a torturer and scars the torturee physically and mentally for life” (New York Times, April 19, 1994).
17. See, for example, Chua, B.-H., Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore (London: Routledge, 1995).
18. He had joined the colonial service in 1939 and resigned from it to become an MP in 1959, when he was appointed Minister of Finance, and from 1965, Minister of Defence.
To achieve this, the Government prioritized professionalizing the administrative and civil services. The February 1963 report of the World Bank’s Department of Operations for the Far East, The Current Economic Position and Prospects of Singapore, had stressed this, and Lee Kuan Yew endorsed that recommendation, which eventually led to the establishment of the Staff Training Institute in 1971. Professionalization was achieved in the 1960s, however, less by formal training and more by “on-the-job”, hands-on experience. Working directly for ministers, officials broke away from the Whitehall tradition of political neutrality. Energetic ministers such as Goh Keng Swee won the loyalty of their officials, such as Goh Chok Tong. These actions were important in instilling competence, attention to detail and punctuality, while binding the civil service to the PAP. Technocratic ministers and politically minded public officials blurred into one coordinated effort. This created stability and prevented “capture” by powerful vested interests.

The foundation for this rested on three key turning points in the “Singapore Story.” Survival justified “Operation Cold Store” in February 1963, which destroyed the far left. It also justified the State ruthlessly deploying the compulsory land purchase powers enshrined in the 1966 Land Acquisition Act. That enabled the Government to literally reconstruct Singaporean community through the Housing and Development Board. This imperative followed the race riots of July 1964, which had starkly exposed Singapore as “a transient and disunited society, a simmering cauldron of emotions which was all too easily stoked up by demagogues, chauvinists, racists, extremists and fanatics.” Such moves were not pragmatic.

With the consolidation of the PAP’s grip on power, the country’s citizens were also increasingly told that they too were pragmatic, not idealists. At the same time, as the intrinsic motivation of the early “state-building” days faded, “merit” was handsomely rewarded. Since the 1994 White Paper on public sector pay, Singapore’s ministers and senior civil servants have been by far the highest paid in the world. In the Istana, the official residence and office of the President, too, this was justified as pragmatic. Officials suggested that high pay was essential to compete with the private sector to recruit the brightest minds, although research suggests intrinsic motivation was just as, or more, important.

Such remuneration levels are also claimed to be part of the answer to the puzzle, at least in many developing countries, of how to build competent and honest government. Yet the experience of poor African countries does not seem to validate this argument. Kenya pays its President and MPs strikingly high salaries yet corruption remains endemic. In Ghana, doubling pay for the police force in 2010 actually made corruption by its officers worse.

19. Yap, Lim and Kam, Men in White, 593.
20. The Prime Minister, in 2016, receives a salary of US$1.7 million per annum to govern a nation of 3.4 million citizens (5.5 million residents in total). By contrast, the President of the United States earns less than one quarter of that, US$400,000 per annum, to run a country with a population of 322 million, or some 60 to 95 times more populous, and 13,675 times larger in landmass, than Singapore. At Singaporean rates prorata per head, if people were to be governed, the US presidential salary would be in the range of an astonishing $104 million to $152 million per annum. See also D. Navot, Y. Reingewertz and N. Cohen, “Speed or Greed? High Wages and Corruption among Public Servants,” Administration & Society, 48, no. 5 (2016): 580-606.
22. For example, Kenya ranks 139th of 167 countries in Transparency International’s 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.
Politics as the Art of the Possible

Politics is the process by which society allocates resources according to power – of ideas, vested interests and collective action. The pragmatism argument as an explanation for Singapore's success is inadequate. The evidence suggests a more complex picture, of “detours, dead-ends and diversions” on the road to development.

Practicality matters, but the world's truly great leaders are surely principled idealists trying to improve the world. Would a pragmatist stand on the steps of Capitol Hill and declare, “I have a dream”? If everyone were a pragmatist, the world would surely be a sadder, duller place.

Nor does pragmatism, of and by itself, guarantee development. As a Commonwealth study on the Caribbean concluded:

*There is seldom any meaningful discussion on the role of the state at all in political and bureaucratic circles; Caribbean governments pride themselves on being “pragmatic”. The upshot of this is that … there is no demand for good governance from within Caribbean societies themselves.*

Conclusion: The Lesson for Development

The details of Singapore’s “state-building” narrative demonstrates how development “really happens” and the crucial role that public service plays in that process. Rather than a superhumanly rational, honest and brilliant group of political and administrative leaders faultlessly working in harmony to devise a national vision and implement it through the perfect plan, a more reassuringly human story of engaging in “trial and error” emerges. It shows that even determined leaders, rational planners and motivated officials don't always get it right. Politically embarrassing adjustments and controversial corrections may be required when “learning by doing.” There are guiding principles for this, but no normative “best practice.” Rather, every developing country needs to identify the “best fit” for itself – what is feasible in the context. That, to no small extent, depends on building up a motivated and innovative bureaucracy, driven by ideas and inspired by ideals. The mission of the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, based here in Singapore, is to help today's developing countries do exactly that. Achievement of the 2030 Agenda on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals will depend on such committed public officials.

The “Detours” correction to the lessons to be derived from the nation's state-building dynamic also reveals that an even more interesting adjustment is needed to its history – even if its national myth on pragmatism appears by now to be set in stone. Every generation adjusts history. Singapore was fortunate in having, as its post-independence leader, a man of undoubted ability and unquestioned integrity who, while later claiming to be pragmatic, had started the independence era with more than a hint of idealism for promoting the common good. After the failure of the neo-liberal ideology that increasingly defined Lee Kuan Yew's pragmatism, the worry today is, “What next?” Growing inequality, climate change and bad governance cannot be left to pragmatism. Ideas and ideals are needed.

But then they always were.

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The “garden city” vision was introduced by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 11 May 1967 to transform Singapore into a city with abundant lush greenery and a clean environment in order to make life more pleasant for the people. It was also envisaged that the presence of ample greenery in an environment clean of litter would signify that Singapore was a well-organised city and hence a good destination for tourists and foreign investments.

In the initial phase, the “garden city” vision was implemented in the form of an intensive tree-planting programme spearheaded by the Parks and Trees Division to recreate the tree-lined boulevards that Lee had come across during his overseas trips. The programme was a great success: Over 55,000 new trees were planted by the end of 1970. To maintain the momentum, Tree Planting Day was reintroduced in 1971 as an annual event involving students, grassroots leaders, and residents living in both public and private housing estates. In addition, the Parks and Trees Act was enacted in 1975 to mandate government agencies like the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC), as well as private developers, to set aside spaces for trees and greenery in projects such as the development of housing estates, and construction of roads and carparks. These greening initiatives had a significant impact on the rate of tree-planting: The number of new trees planted increased from about 158,600 in 1974 to 1.4 million by June 2014.

By the mid-1970s, the creation of parks had become an additional focus of the “garden city” vision. The park development programme aimed to provide more recreational spaces for residents and to establish green spaces that provided ventilation or act as “green lungs” in built-up areas. The programme, which was led by the Parks and Recreation Department set up in 1976 to replace the Parks and Trees Division, had a profound effect on Singapore’s landscape: The area of parks and green spaces increased from 879 ha in 1975 to 9,707 ha by March 2014, and the number of parks grew from 13 to 330 within the same period.

From the 1990s, various efforts were made by the Parks and Recreation Department, which was reconstituted as the National Parks Board (NParks) in July 1996, to enrich the Garden City experience that had been put in place by the tree-planting and park development programmes in the earlier decades. For instance, park connectors were established as green corridors to link parks, and nature reserves were set up to preserve the nation’s natural heritage. Furthermore, campaigns such as Clean and Green Week and community partnership programmes like Community in Bloom were introduced to instil a “green consciousness” among Singaporeans. Currently, Singapore’s greening policy is guided by the “city in a garden” vision. Unveiled in 1998 as the next phase of the “garden city” vision, the new concept aimed to integrate greenery into not just the built environment, but also into the daily lives of Singaporeans.
References


2. Lee, 2000, p. 188.


The information in this article is valid as at March 2015 and correct as far as we are able to ascertain from our sources. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete history of the subject. Please contact the Library for further reading materials on the topic.
SPeECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO, AT THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER AND DANCE OF THE SINGAPORE PORT OFFICERS' UNION AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON SATURDAY, 23 JULY 1983 AT 8 PM

At the end of the 1970's, the Government concluded that we must move our products and services up-market, that is, we must move towards skill-intensive and knowledge-intensive industries and services. Success would depend on higher skilled workers with better work attitudes. Workers using better equipment, improved production methods, working together with their supervisors as a team can achieve higher productivity. Wage increase can only be justified by increase in productive output per worker.

After a sustained campaign by the NPB, fully supported by the trade unions and employers, most Singaporeans are now aware of the need to increase productivity if we are to continue to enjoy increase in income. Most of us are conscious of the need to invest in more automated and computerised machines, and understand that workers must be better educated and more highly trained. At the same time, management must know how to motivate its workers, how to win their loyalty and how to get them to identify with the company, so that they will give of their best and work as a team. The workers' loyalty can only be earned when the company shows its care for the workers' welfare and their future.
Being aware of the need for higher productivity is not enough. We must be able to translate it into actions and results. There is no better way to learn how it can be done than by studying actual examples. One such example is the PSA. In the late 1960's, Singapore was a major port well served by conventional shipping. Cheap labour was abundant to handle general cargo. With the pull-out of the British forces at the time, the prospect of massive unemployment was real. The PSA was faced with a difficult decision whether to invest in container facilities, which meant expensive handling equipment and less portside workers. But containerised shipping was clearly the more efficient technology. If the PSA had delayed the decision, it would have been overtaken by other ports in the region. The PSA chose to upgrade. It has turned out to be the correct decision.

The PSA experience also shows that the success of restructuring depends very much on close labour-management understanding and co-operation. Elsewhere in other ports, containerisation had been held back because of union resistance, driven by the fear of job loss. With the British withdrawal, unemployment was a real threat. Lesser unionists would have resisted. However, our unions were led by farsighted leaders who understood the necessity for change. They worked together with management to help workers phase into the new work methods. The management convinced the workers of their care and concern by providing retraining on full pay, and avoiding the need to retrench. Now with increase in productivity from adopting a more efficient system of cargo handling, PSA employees have steadily enjoyed increase in take-home pay year by year. If restructuring had not been successful, there is no doubt that the Port
of Singapore would have been by-passed by modern shipping and declined rapidly. Our Port employees would have lost their jobs in retrenchment exercises. This example shows why it is important to be alert to changes taking place, and why it is even more important that management and workers work harmoniously side by side. Our labour-management relations are good and stable. But we must strive constantly to improve this relationship by adapting to change and to innovate.

We must strengthen the mutual trust, respect and confidence between workers and management. This can be done by improving the framework within which the union operates at enterprise level. The bond between manager and worker will be stronger if they regard each other as fellow workers or team-mates with common interests. It is easier to foster this relationship with house unions. Where conditions are favourable, we should encourage the formation of house unions.

But where the conditions are not so favourable, we should take steps to improve them. This can be done through Work Excellence (WE) Committees, or through the promotion of small group activities which allow workers to establish mutual trust and respect from working together in groups.

Apart from encouraging the setting up of WE Committees or QC Circles, we should also look at the impediments in our trade union organisation structures. One such impediment is the existence of more than one union or union branch in an enterprise. For instance, in some enterprises, the workers are organised into "workers' union" and "supervisors' union". Historically, these have developed because of a perceived conflict of interests between supervisors and workers. Such union organisation
structures accentuate the imaginary and artificial division between fellow workers. This is not conducive to teamwork. Such division and groupings have existed for many years. I am afraid that unless there are informal liaison committees between the two artificial groups, they will grow further apart. We must try bringing them back together, and encourage them to merge ultimately. There may be exceptions where conditions are such that the two groups are better left apart. However, in principle, where there are more than one union or branch in an enterprise, we should identify and iron out their differences and encourage them to merge into one union.

An example of two unions in one enterprise exists in PSA. Yours is the Port Officers’ Union, whereas your fellow workers are in the Port Workers’ Union. I understand that the Port Officers’ Union suggested a merger with the Port Workers’ Union a few years ago. You were encouraged to form a Liaison Committee as a first step. The Liaison Committee should focus its efforts towards establishing mutual trust and confidence, not only among union officials, but also among the members who work with each other everyday. When the man-made barriers are broken down, and when trust and confidence are established, a merger will be considered.

By taking such steps, we will help workers in the same enterprise to identify with each other. There will be better teamwork, improved efficiency and higher productivity, to ensure that the Port of Singapore remains competitive. Ships will continue to call here, and jobs for all employees of the Port will be secured.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to wish the Port Officers’ Union a happy 15th Anniversary and all members a bright future with the Port of Singapore Authority.
SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

MC.AP.54/64(PIN)

SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE, DR. GCH. KENG SWEE,
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF SIMALPAN STEEL INDUSTRIES
LTD. ON FRIDAY, 24TH APRIL, 1964 AT 5.00 P.M.

I am greatly honoured to be invited today to perform
the opening ceremony of the Simalpan Steel Industries Ltd.
This modern plant is certainly a most valuable addition to
the industries now growing up in Jurong. Since you have
so ably set out problems facing your company and its future
plans, I shall not say much more than congratulate all those
who have contributed to the successful establishment of this
modern enterprise.

I intend on this occasion to address you on the problems
which are facing the Government in its effort to industrialise
the State. More particularly I want to deal with development
of the Jurong Industrial complex.

First may I give you an idea of the size of operations
undertaken to date, in terms of areas developed or under
development. Just over three years ago the whole of the
Jurong area consisted of mangrove swamps and hills and forest.
Since then, under the able direction of the Economic Devel-
opment Board, a prodigious effort has been mounted to level
the hills, fill up the swamps, construct roads, lay power
lines, build wharves and engage in all the other activities,
the results of which you can see for yourself today.

At present 1,360 acres are sufficiently developed to be
ready for immediate use or occupation. A further 600 acres
are in the course of preparation. This gives a total of 1,960
acres which can now be used or will soon be available for use.

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Of this 1,960 acres, 480 acres are set aside for various public services such as roads, drains, the Jurong port area, railways and so forth. A further 120 acres have been set aside for housing. This leaves 1,360 acres available for industrial use.

Of the 1,360 acres that were available, 915 acres have been allocated to 55 enterprises, 21 in the field of light industry and 34 in the field of heavy industry. When these 55 enterprises go into production, they will provide direct permanent employment for 6,350 workers.

In addition to this, there are a further 45 applications under consideration for the use of 325 acres. This gives a total of 1,240 acres of industrial sites allocated or under consideration for allocation. So, most of the 1,360 acres for industrial use have been allocated or have prospective users.

So with the massive effort that we have mounted in the last three years, we have just about managed to keep ahead of the demand. Naturally, an expansion on this scale creates many problems. Last week, on the occasion of the opening of a new factory in this area, I referred to the fact that our rate of industrial expansion in Jurong has already outstripped the programme for social development and we had to mount a crash programme to make available 2,000 flats ready for occupation by the end of this year.

Today I intend to discuss two important matters which concern industrialists. These are the supply of industrial water and of electric power.

The original Jurong plan envisaged the use of the water stored up by the construction of the causeway across the Jurong river. This source should be able to provide one million gallons a day. Subsequent industrial growth has made this plan obsolete. It is necessary to produce a much larger volume of industrial water.
To this end, the Economic Development Board has prepared an industrial water project. In the preparation of this project, we are indebted to the E.C.A.F.E. for technical assistance kindly extended to us.

Under this project, effluent water from the Ulu Pandan sewerage works will be purified in a treatment plant to be situated in Jurong. Tenders for the construction of this plant had already been issued and will close on 1st June this year. We hope that the construction will be completed within 12 months from that date. Together with the treatment plant, distribution net work, pumps, generators and a five million gallons service reservoir, this project will cost $9.8 million and the first stage will provide 10 million gallons of industrial water per day. Subsequent extensions will bring the capacity to 20 million gallons a day. This should be sufficient for our needs for some years to come.

Without an adequate supply of power, industrial expansion cannot take place. The present installed capacity in Singapore comes to 224 mw. As you all know, power extension plans are being implemented and financed by a World Bank loan. Two 60 mw. generators should be commissioned by next year giving an additional 120 mw. capacity.

In our original plan which has been agreed with the World Bank, a further two 60 mw. generators are due to be installed by 1969/70. However as a result of the current rate of industrial expansion, these plans have to be advanced considerably.

The Public Utilities Board have examined the plans of their Electricity Department and the consultants engaged in constructing the new power plants and have agreed that the further two new 60 mw. generators should be installed by the end of 1966. In other words, the expansion will be advanced by three to four years.
So if the amended power expansion plans go into operation on schedule, this means that in just about 24 years, we would have doubled our installed generating capacity from the present 224 mw. to 464 mw. Such a rate of expansion can have few parallels in the history of the economic development of the developing countries.

I think it is a fair claim to make that the Jurong Industrial Estate has been a success. Yet its success could not have been taken for granted three years ago. I myself remember, that when weighing the odds for and against or starting the Jurong scheme I was assailed by quite a number of doubts. You will recollect that at that time, the position in Singapore was not as healthy as it is now. The pro-communist front organisations were in full cry and there was no prospect during those riotous days that we could ever have achieved the rate of industrial expansion that subsequently did take place.

Therefore faced with the decision whether or not to commit substantial sums of money to open up the Jurong estate, the possibility that this whole effort might wind up as the largest white elephant in S.E.A. was one that could not be lightly dismissed. At that time no one could have guaranteed that £20 million spent in Jurong would not result in several thousand acres of empty waste-land to be known to posterity as "Goh's Folly". That was a calculated risk which had to be taken and I am very glad that I took the decision to press ahead.

If counsels of timidity had won the day then all of us today would not have been able to attend the opening ceremony of Simalpan Steel Industry Ltd. This is a complex venture in which industrial interests of no less than three countries are involved, Japan, Switzerland and Malaysia. I am sure you will want me on your behalf to congratulate the industrialists, engineers and workers concerned on their imagination and foresight and on the skill which had enabled them to set up
this modern plant in so short a time. You will also want me to convey our best wishes to Simalpen Steel Industry Ltd. for a successful and prosperous future.

APRIL 24, 1964. (Time issued: 1800 hours)
Annex 4

SINGAPORE’S INSTITUTE OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION ANNOUNCED AS WINNER OF IBM INNOVATIONS AWARD IN TRANSFORMING GOVERNMENT

Harvard University’s Ash Institute and IBM Honor Contributions to Vocational and Technical Education

Cambridge, Mass., – September 25, 2007 – The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government today announced Singapore’s Institute of Technical Education (ITE) as the winner of the (US) $100,000 IBM Innovations Award in Transforming Government. Selected by an international panel of experts, the Institute of Technical Education was recognized as a model program in improving vocational and technical education due to its measurable successes, collaborative and innovative practices, scope and potential global replication.

“We are deeply honored to be recognized as the winner of the IBM Innovations Award in Transforming Government,” said Bruce Poh, director and CEO of the Institute of Technical Education. “The transformation of vocational and technical education in Singapore is a goal that the whole organization and its stakeholders believe in passionately. Throughout this process, we have remained steadfast and focused in our desire to transform the lives of our students for the better, by providing them with relevant technical and social skill sets that will best prepare them for high-paying jobs and further education.”

Under its 10-year reform plan launched in 1995, ITE reinvented itself from an inadequate last resort for underachieving students into a prestigious post-secondary institution aligned with Singapore’s broader labor and economic development initiatives. Widely credited as a contributing
factor in Singapore’s high youth employment rate, the Institute provides the lowest academic
performers, representing 25 percent of each secondary school graduating class, with a viable
alternative to traditional academic pursuits.

Prior to ITE’s formation as a post-secondary institution in 1992, student attrition was nearly 40
percent. Those students successful enough to graduate were often ill-prepared for the workplace,
equipped with only basic technical skill sets. Determined to reshape ITE’s public perception and to
enhance the caliber and delivery of its technical curriculum, the ITE board of governors and senior
management team worked hand-in-hand with Singapore’s Ministry of Education, industry experts
and community leaders. As a result, student enrollment numbers have doubled and the program
reports a 33 percent increase in graduation rates. Over the past decade, more than 90 percent of
ITE graduates have secured skilled industry employment and have cited increased monthly wage
earnings despite international challenges like the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s.

"IBM is deeply committed to innovation and collaboration – for our business, our clients and the
communities in which we live and work," said Todd Ramsey, general manager of IBM Global
Government and Education. "Innovation is measured not by the number of new ideas, but by
positive impact that new ideas have on people. The innovative reforms implemented by the
Singapore Institute of Technical Education have clearly demonstrated dramatic improvements in
classroom performance and student competitiveness for higher paying jobs. The best practices
can be used by educators and communities throughout the world."

The ITE Transformation Plan was launched in the following three strategic phases focused on
improving its overall marketplace reception and optimizing the program’s location and curriculum
for learning:

- **Phase I (1995-1999):** During the initial phase, ITE launched an innovative semester-based
credit training initiative to better support students with course evaluation and selection. The
Institute collaborated with international brand experts to develop new avenues for
repositioning the Institute with outside stakeholders and students.

- **Phase II (2000-2004):** In the second phase, outside industry experts worked with ITE
leadership to revamp curriculum and promote higher learning standards among students
and teaching staff. Irrelevant courses were replaced with learner-centric practical classes
addressing the latest innovations in high technology. Additional teachers with practical
expertise in the new curriculum’s innovative technology focus were recruited to join the
teaching staff. Specialty schools in the areas of Applied and Health Sciences, Business and Services, Engineering and Information-Communications Technology were launched to host more than 50 pre-employment programs.

- **Phase III (2005-2009):** Designed to further elevate the status and brand image of ITE throughout Singapore, the Institute leadership is currently consolidating its 11 campuses into three larger colleges with state-of-the-art laboratories and technical facilities. ITE College East was completed in 2005, and two additional colleges are slated for opening in 2010 and 2012. Throughout the reform plan, international business and technology industry partners continue to play a valuable role assisting with curriculum development, equipment donations and train-the-trainer programs. ITE fosters a newfound holistic approach to learning, integrating extra-curricular sports, arts and community activities into the technical-focused curriculum to ensure that all students have a holistic 'hands-on, minds-on and hearts-on' education.

"Singapore's Institute of Technical Education has not only improved the lives of its students, it has created a highly sustainable model for transforming poorly performing educational institutions worldwide," said Stephen Goldsmith, director of the Innovations in American Government Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "We are pleased to honor the Institute's achievements and commend the outstanding dedication of multiple administrations of ITE leadership in collaboration with an international portfolio of technology and business partners. ITE's contributions extend far past the school room and have a direct impact on youth employment rates, community safety and the Singapore economy."

"We would like to thank our leadership in government, successive boards of governors, management and staff of ITE for believing in the worthiness of this cause and pursuing this transformation process with passion and dedication," Mr. Poh said. "We are humbled by the award, and would like to thank IBM and the Ash Institute of Harvard University for the recognition."

Additional information on IBM can be accessed by visiting [www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com).

**About The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation**
The Roy and Lila Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence in governance and strengthens democratic institutions worldwide. Through its research, publications, leadership training, global network and awards program – developed in collaboration with a diverse, engaged community of scholars and practitioners - the Ash Institute fosters creative and effective government problem-solving and serves as a catalyst for addressing many of the most pressing needs of the world's citizens. The Ford Foundation is a founding donor of the Ash Institute. Additional information about The Ash Institute is available at [www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu](http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu). Organizations are encouraged to apply to the 2008 Innovations in American Government Awards by October 15, 2007 at [www.innovationsaward.harvard.edu](http://www.innovationsaward.harvard.edu).

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Ms Vanessa Chan, Director-General of the International Organisations Directorate at the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs first sparked the idea to look at lessons learnt from Singapore that moved beyond the usual narrative of linear, uninterrupted progress from one success to the next. Board members of the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence supported the idea to produce this booklet.

Three anonymous reviewers, together with Prof Jon Quah provided substantive and invaluable comments on earlier versions of the main text, leading to an improved manuscript.

Present and past colleagues at the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence were involved in intellectual discussions on the topics covered, and also supported the writing and production of this booklet with suggestions and practical assistance.