

# Covid-19 crisis sets stage for 'resets' in society: Lawrence Wong

**By Janice Heng**

janiceh@sph.com.sg  
@JaniceHengBT

## Singapore

COVID-19's impact has increased the impetus for government support and intervention, with Singapore to make "a permanent shift towards the strengthening of social safety nets", said Education Minister and Second Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong on Monday.

While the pandemic has already changed the world, more changes are ahead, he said, on the final day of the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference.

For this year and perhaps a "good part of next year", Singapore must expect a continued acute situation, with measures such as safe distancing remaining part of everyday life. The roll-out of vaccines will allow international travel to restart, but this will take time and uncertainties remain.

While no pandemic lasts forever, it may take four to five years before we see the end of this one and the start of a post-Covid normal, he said.

Asked if the pandemic-driven rise in virtual working threatens Singapore's hub status, Mr Wong replied that physical presence and face-to-face interactions are still needed.

If Singapore can be positioned as a stronger candidate, "we can be more relevant as a hub, not less relevant", he said, adding that when companies think about establishing some presence in Asia, Singapore ought to be the first location that comes to mind.

In line with the theme of the con-

ference – Reset – the crisis can be seen as "setting the stage for a software update" of society, said Mr Wong. He laid out three such resets.

First, the reset of the social compact, with the pandemic having taken a greater toll on the lower income. While Singapore has long believed in a combination of open markets and effective state intervention, the pandemic has increased the impetus for the latter, he said. "We aim to give Singaporeans more assurance and support in a more uncertain, volatile post-Covid world," he added.

Singapore must also ensure that meritocracy does not "ossify into a hereditary system". The government is intervening early to uplift children, and merit's definition must be broadened beyond academic and cognitive abilities.

With Covid-19 prompting a deeper appreciation of the role of essential workers, Singapore must value such jobs more, which will also result in a more equal spread of incomes.

The second "reset" is for a greener Singapore. Sustainability can be a new competitive advantage for Singapore, both as a carbon trading and services hub in Asia and a regional and global centre for green finance.

Finally, a silver lining in the pandemic is the opportunity to strengthen social solidarity. Such cohesion is critical in Singapore's recovery, which is why the government is creating more opportunities for involvement in decision-making, with the Emerging Stronger Conversations dialogues.