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Scenario planning for future challenges

The Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) two-year-long scenario-planning project, called Reimagining Singapore 2030, will include hypothetical events down the road and decisions on how to approach them. If, for example, Singapore is battered by another and new pandemic in that year, should citizens support greater investment in public health and a focus on safety measures, or prioritise minimising economic disruptions and ensuring that business continues as usual? The choice is stark enough even today, when repeated returns of restrictions have become a fact of everyday life, with the Government balancing socially punitive measures with ameliorative steps to reduce their economic impact.

However, bad though Covid-19 has been, it might not be the worst. Leading global experts, who predict that future pandemics would be more frequent and deadly, and need urgent global investments and reforms, have warned that pandemics would cost governments 700 times what they are proposing in yearly additional international investments. The gigantic scope of global challenges to come, which will be felt intensely in Singapore, calls on citizens to provide frank inputs into the trade-offs between public health and economics that the country will need to make. The IPS project is enhanced by the provision of an online interactive engagement tool. A beta version of this, dubbed Quest2030, will be available next January, with the goal of drawing at least 20,000 public participants.

Since public policy intervention in one segment of national life affects other areas, users will be able to see how their choices on key issues in one area affect outcomes in others across seven themes to do with community, diversity, governance, economic development, liveability, multilateralism and non-traditional security. This way, project participants will be able to see how their individual choices have an impact on the national good. The consultative approach to scenario planning being promoted by IPS is a welcome indicator of the need to constantly democratise decision-making by making it accessible to those whose lives it will change.

The value of the IPS project also lies ultimately in the use to which members of the public put it. Certainly, the inputs of domain experts would be useful given the specialised knowledge that they possess, but individual members of the public must come forward as well. Their personal experience of what Singapore is going through will help to guide the evolution of public policy in the years to come. The coronavirus pandemic is a threat, but it also presents an opportunity to build a new narrative for Singapore that focuses on culture, community and solidarity. These intangibles help to define the soul of the nation, which will outlive the pandemic.

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