

A year of obstinate hope

It's been an emotional roller-coaster ride for Singaporeans, with the twists and turns of the pandemic. The consolation? We are wired to cling to hope amid adversity.



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For *The Straits Times*

The year 2021 has been one in which our capacity for hope has been well and truly tested.

Many Singaporeans have experienced stress, anxiety and burnout – whether from work or caregiving demands, social isolation or safe management measures arising from the pandemic. Families have lost loved ones to Covid-19, while familiar establishments such as Bugis Food Junction and Chinatown Food Street have shut for good.

Over the year, our capacity for hope was continually tested.

Hope was kindled each time Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed, only to be dashed later by a tightening up as Covid infections rose. For many of us, it has been hard to shrug off the feeling that we have been going around in circles, driven by the caprices of the evolving pandemic.

Yet, as we look back on 2021, it is worth recognising how far we have come – in terms of living with the virus, as well as in building a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable future. As we hope, again, for a better year ahead, it is worth remembering that we do have agency in how we respond to challenges, and that we never walk alone.

DASHED, REKINDLED, RINSE, REPEAT

Entering 2021, there was reason to be hopeful that Covid-19 would finally be tamed. Vaccines had been developed with unprecedented speed and were being rolled out worldwide. By the middle of the year, however, the emergence of the Delta variant put paid to any notion of a quick end to the pandemic.

The goalposts were ever-shifting. Initially, it was said that herd immunity would be attained with 60 per cent to 70 per cent of the population vaccinated; later, experts raised this to over 90 per cent.

For much of the year, Singapore succeeded in keeping the virus at bay, although there were occasional outbreaks such as those linked to imported cases, KTV joints and the Jurong Fishery Port. Then in September, daily infections and deaths began to mount despite an aggressive vaccination drive. This left many Singaporeans with a feeling of helplessness – progress in vaccination slowed as the rate topped 80 per cent, and, by the middle of the year, it was unclear what more could be done.

In dealing with the public health crisis, Singapore's approach recognised the economic need to gradually open up for business, while avoiding the high human toll that would come with throwing off the shackles of safe management measures entirely. Attempts to tailor policy to the prevailing health situation resulted in ever-changing regulations, with the limit on public gatherings toggling between two and five people. This fuelled an emotional roller-coaster ride for many Singaporeans, particularly those working in affected sectors such as hospitality and food and beverage. Still, there is no mistaking the Government's commitment to steer the country towards endemic Covid-19 while aiming for a soft landing. Vaccinated travel lanes have rapidly opened up, and Singapore



An ambulance sent to ferry workers for swab tests at a dormitory in May last year. Covid-19 has been a catalyst to improve living conditions for migrant workers, and has also raised awareness of the crucial role played by healthcare and front-line service workers. Resilience and equity are taking their place alongside efficiency as key priorities guiding public policy and business decisions, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO



Confronted with known and unknown "unknowns" in the year ahead, people may find hope in the everyday heroism of front-line healthcare workers or in the achievements of sporting heroes such as national shuttler Loh Kean Yew (above), the newly crowned world badminton champion. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

has begun to host international conferences again. Unemployment has trended down, while daily infections are finally on the wane.

The appearance of the Omicron variant in November has thrown yet another spanner in the works for a Covid-weary nation and world. We can take solace in the knowledge that booster shots offer some protection against it, while new antiviral drugs could reduce the risk of severe illness. Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies are racing to develop vaccines targeted at the new variant.

A MORE RESILIENT FUTURE

Omicron will not, in any case, be the last threat to public health. As humanity prepares for the future "disease X", we can consider the current pandemic a necessary wake-up call, underscoring the importance of resilience in public healthcare systems, vaccine readiness and supply chains across the globe.

In Singapore, Covid-19 has been a catalyst to improve living conditions for migrant workers; it has also raised public awareness of the crucial role played by

healthcare and front-line service workers. Resilience and equity are taking their place alongside efficiency as key priorities guiding public policy and business decisions.

A MORE INCLUSIVE, COHESIVE SOCIETY

While the pandemic has disrupted life in many ways, Singapore cannot put the future on hold. The year has seen Singapore take significant steps forward in tackling medium-term challenges. Notably, efforts have been made to acknowledge and address societal divides, such as those of race, religion, nationality and income.

Policy measures announced at the National Day Rally in August included a significant expansion of the Progressive Wage Model to support many more lower-wage workers, legislation to address discrimination in the job market and approval for female Muslim nurses to wear the tudung while in uniform.

Beyond policy and legislation, building a more inclusive and cohesive society requires open and honest conversations among

Singaporeans in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding. There is hope as long as a critical mass of fair-minded Singaporeans are able to find common ground, despite their differences, so that ideological polarisation does not take root here.

A STABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WORLD

On the international front, 2021 began with some observers expressing hope that the change in the US administration would precipitate a thaw in US-China relations.

Many also hoped that COP26 would see a realisation of global efforts to combat climate change. On both issues, the best-case scenario failed to materialise, but we can at least be thankful that the worst case did not come to pass either.

Singapore, as a small state, has again had to find ways to ride the waves from shifting geopolitical tides. As tensions between the G-2 rivals ratcheted up, Singapore played host to US Vice-President Kamala Harris in August and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in September.

In the fight against climate

change, Singapore is stepping up to the plate as a responsible global citizen, recognising that sustainability is in our enlightened self-interest. Climate mitigation will affect companies and households here in many ways in the coming years – from the transformation of Jurong Island into a sustainable energy and chemicals park, to supermarkets charging customers for plastic bags.

THE YEAR AHEAD

Several issues are already on our minds: Will Omicron and other Covid-19 variants continue to hold us in thrall, or will Singapore and the world finally be able to treat the disease as endemic? Will persistent inflation force a tightening of global monetary conditions, or will central banks keep interest rates low?

Will the US and China feel their way towards a new modus vivendi, or will the rivalry intensify, dividing the world into competing spheres of influence? Domestically, what measures will be taken to support gig workers, and will there be changes to the employment pass system?

Will the 4G political leaders settle on a first among equals? When will GST be raised, and will there be new wealth taxes?

Confronted with known and unknown "unknowns", we as human beings are nonetheless wired to cling to hope amid adversity. Some of us place our trust in the divine, others in human ingenuity and resolve. We may find hope in the everyday heroism of front-line healthcare workers, or in the achievements of sporting heroes such as national shuttler Loh Kean Yew, who overcame a string of higher-ranked opponents en route to becoming world badminton champion.

What may also help us to recognise that we all retain agency, despite the curveballs lobbed in our direction by a mutating virus. For instance, we can take sensible steps to protect ourselves and loved ones from the virus without becoming hermits – by getting our vaccine shots, observing personal hygiene and adhering to safe management measures.

We can even find purpose in helping to combat misinformation, or reaching out to those in distress with a helping hand and a listening ear.

We may take advantage of lifestyle changes forced on us by the pandemic to discard poor habits and limiting mindsets, and to embrace more sustainable ways of living and working. Just as small states may retain agency in navigating geopolitical shifts, individuals can likewise exercise agency in how we respond to the challenges in our homes, workplaces and society.

It is also important to remember that we are not alone. There are others who share our struggles, and those we can lean on for support within our communities or the larger Singapore family. Sometimes, all it takes is to ask for help.

By joining hands with others in society, we can also make greater headway against the scourges of disease, disunity and environmental degradation than we can by ourselves.

We are leaving behind a year of ups and downs, some of us bone-weary, others recharged and ready to go. The new year beckons, with promise and uncertainty in equal measure – but also with hope rooted in personal agency, purpose and collective action.

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