

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AT THE SINGAPORE  
RED CROSS HUMANITARIAN CONFERENCE 2021, 3 SEPTEMBER 2021**

Good afternoon friends, partners, everyone online and offline

1. I want to first, on behalf of MOH, extend our deep appreciation to Singapore Red Cross for your many years of contribution to healthcare, especially as our National Blood Donor Recruiter. That is a tremendous piece of work.

2. Singapore Red Cross, for those who don't know, ensures that Singapore has adequate blood supply. So, it is a constant challenge, but especially during this COVID-19 pandemic, it is extra difficult, because blood donation activities slowed down significantly.

3. To overcome that, Singapore Red Cross reached out to donors via social and traditional media, and you very successfully appealed for their help. You set up blood banks all over the island, with additional precautionary measures, so that donors can give blood safely. And the public thankfully, responded very positively. And last year and this year, against all odds, you still managed to meet the demands of the healthcare system. Thank you very much.

4. In addition, members of the Red Cross championed various initiatives such as distribution of care packages to migrant workers and the elderly. It raised more than \$225,000 to assist needy families during the pandemic.

5. I thank the Singapore Red Cross for all these relentless effort to raise awareness of challenges, encouraging volunteerism and also innovation in humanitarian work.

**A Socially Conscious Generation**

6. I believe the current generation of youths is more socially conscious compared to say my generation, or previous generations. I think there are a few reasons. First,

you are far more exposed to social issues, partly because of social media and everything comes through your feed. Second, you have grown up in a school system that placed a lot more emphasis on values-in-action.

7. Third, it could simply be because that the materialistic definition of success has sort of run its course, giving way to a much more holistic notion of success in life, and involves you giving back to society and helping others.

8. I had not had a chance to address a young audience like you since I left the Ministry of Education, but during the stint there, I met students very regularly. Students, I find, are naturally very concerned about your school work and your examinations, but beyond that, you also raise many pertinent issues which you care about.

9. If you ask me what are the top three issues raised by students in all my years of interacting with them, I would say social inequality, mental health, and climate change.

10. Today, let me speak briefly on each of these issues, how the concerns of youths are also the concerns of the Government, how these are now part of the Government's agenda and priorities, and how we can all work together, young and old, government, public and private, together with civil society and NGOs to address all these challenges.

### **Inequality**

11. First, social inequality. It is a challenge for all societies, and comes in many forms. There is the income gap between the top and bottom, the distribution in between the top and bottom, whether the distribution is static or is in a flux, and the interaction between different segments and different stratum of society. I used to summarise it as the gap, the spread, the flow and the mix.

12. So, inequality isn't single dimensional and is always a function of all these dimensions.

13. Over the decades, tripartite partners, meaning the Union, employers and Government have been putting in a lot of efforts to ensure a fair and just distribution of the fruits of our nation's success. Growth is essential because it ensures that we have an expanding pie for all to share. But we do not just seek growth. What we want is inclusive growth, where everyone can benefit.

14. Inclusive growth is most sustainable when it is grounded in productivity, capability and a strong work ethos. Hence, we implemented SkillsFuture to upgrade the skills and knowledge of workers, implemented the Progressive Wage System in traditional low wage sectors, and the national Workfare Income Supplement Scheme, which is quite a unique scheme. It is a negative income tax scheme, so if you are low wage, you not only do not pay tax, the government also tops up your salary.

15. We invest in high quality public infrastructure. Many people forget that this is actually a very important part of addressing inequality. Have good public infrastructure where everybody has access to. So you have public hospitals, MRT lines, clean water, reliable power supply, public parks, sports facilities and libraries – which everyone can benefit.

16. Most importantly we continue to invest in education, so as to maximise the chance of any child, regardless of your family background, be able to do well, succeed in life, and fulfil your aspirations.

17. So education over the year has become so much more diverse, to help every child discover your interests and talents. Education is therefore the engine of social mobility, engendering the hope that regardless of where you are in life now as a parent, there is always the hope that the next generation can do better.

18. The genesis of these inclusive growth policies dates back to the 1960s, when Singapore became independent and we started our industrialization policy to bring better jobs, better lives and better pay to workers. I personally started working on

skills upgrading policies in 2005 when I was the CEO of Workforce Development Agency.

19. The Prime Minister in his recent National Day Rally has announced further measures to give stronger impetus to this longstanding effort.

20. However, when it comes to uplifting lives and tackling inequality, there is always a paradox. The more successful we are, the more workers and families will be lifted out of the low income bracket.

21. When that happens, it leaves behind the more challenging cases at the bottom. Their plight becomes more stark and more conspicuous, and they risk becoming a permanent underclass. That is when perception becomes that things seems to be getting worse, when it is a result of successful uplifting policies.

22. Nevertheless, we cannot allow stratification to become encrusted or entrenched, and we must do what we can to ensure that children from poor families can do well in life. The solution, I believe, is early intervention.

23. We need to support these students at a young age, through programmes such as KidSTART by MSF. KidSTART supports parents with the knowledge and skills to nurture their children's early development, including their physical and socio-emotional health and well-being. KidSTART will involve community and corporate partners to support these families holistically.

24. The government has doubled its investment in pre-school education over the past few years, and will be doubling again in the next few years. With a good pre-school foundation, children will more likely be able to benefit fully from formal school education.

25. MOE invests most heavily in students not from popular schools, but those from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. MOE protects teaching resources, so that they can be channelled to give and deliver group lessons in small groups, or

one-to-one coaching for weaker students. One example is the Learning Support Programme in primary schools.

26. Another major early intervention programme is the UPLIFT programme, which was set up in 2018. It supports students from disadvantaged families by enhancing after-school care support and deepening partnership with the community.

27. Tackling inequality and enhancing social mobility has been a constant effort of the Government, and it will always be an unfinished business. We will continue to work very hard on it.

### **Mental Health**

28. Second, mental health. It is stressful growing up, going through physiological change and dealing with our personal insecurities. While this is a truism across generations, I believe the youths today go through stresses that earlier generations may not have experienced. I think all parents need to understand that.

29. There is evidence showing that it is a growing problem globally, not just in Asia or Singapore. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), one in five children and adolescents worldwide have a mental health condition. In the United States, the proportion of adolescents experiencing depression increased by 52% between 2005 and 2017. There are similar findings in Europe.

30. The deterioration in the global state of mental health is likely caused by global factors, probably unique to this generation. One reason could be heightened competition as a result of globalisation. You just need to work harder and compete harder and this builds up stresses and pressures from your elders, peers, and often from yourself.

31. Another is social media. Not present when I was growing up but now, you are born into it. The young grow up, immersed in a virtual world of constant peer comparison, validation seeking and where herd instincts are the norm.

32. You can also be exposed to cyber bullying, cancel culture and undesirable materials on the Internet. On top of that, usage of devices takes away time that you can spend talking to people, building friendships, attend parties, exercising, doing social work, learning to drive and attending conferences like this. Digital devices have displaced social interactions. You don't have to be a youth to experience it. Even I feel it.

33. So while medical support is important to tackle this issue, we should recognise that the growing up experience has changed for the young quite fundamentally. It suggests that we may also want to refrain from over-medicalising the solutions. It is needed but do not over-medicalise. There needs to be sufficient attention paid to non-medical, social and educational interventions.

34. I should clarify that globalisation and technology dominate a young person's life, but it does not mean that you are worse-off than previous generations. On the contrary, technology and globalisation offer you tremendous opportunities, hope and optimism, and an infinite amount of knowledge is literally at your fingertips.

35. The young just need to be prepared for this. Just as while it is good to be surrounded by nature, we do not just throw a child in the mountains and expect him to thrive. It does not work that way. We need to equip our youths with the necessary life skills to cope with new stressors in the modern society and to use digital technology in a safe and healthy way.

36. Hence, a core part of MOE's new Character and Citizenship Education curriculum is on developing mental health literacy, social emotional skills and resilience building in our students. On top of that, schools are incorporating digital literacy into their curriculum for all students, starting with cyber wellness for the youngest.

37. They will also need a stronger support network. In schools and education institutions, this will comprise teachers and counsellors as the first point of help, and students and peers who will look out for one another.

38. In the community, we should strengthen the Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) and outreach teams to support those who are experiencing mental health issues.

39. But for these support networks to be effective, we need to make an effort to destigmatize mental illness. We have to recognize that mental illnesses, like many other illnesses, can happen to anyone of us or any of our loved ones, and it is perfectly normal to seek help and support.

40. We have a new Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-Being (ITFMHW), chaired by Senior Minister of State Janil Puthuchery, and he and his committee will be looking at all these issues.

### **Climate Change**

41. Third, climate change. The world is warming up and the effects can be felt as early as 2050 or even slightly earlier, within your lifetimes, which also explain why young people like you are very seized with the issue.

42. As a low-lying island, Singapore is very vulnerable to the impact of climate change. In his National Day Rally of 2019, the Prime Minister described it as 'an existential threat' to Singapore and one of the 'gravest challenges facing mankind'.

43. Because of our geographical vulnerability, Singapore has an up-close appreciation of the fragility of the environment we live in. When Singapore became independent in 1965, at that time, climate change was not part of our lingo yet. We do worry about our environment but what aspects of environment? We worry about disease transmission, we worry about our environment becoming too crowded, too dirty and become uninhabitable.

44. Today, the concern is magnified many times, to global warming. But to live in harmony with our habitat is a Singapore instinct, because this 760 square kilometres is all we have.

45. This explains why for decades, we have put in place environment policies that are actually quite ahead of their time. For example, even though we are so small, we set aside 30% of land for nature reserves. We built ourselves a garden city. We have frozen the growth of the vehicle population, and we tax congestion. We shifted almost totally out of coal-powered energy decades ago. We imposed a broad-based carbon tax covering almost all economic activities.

46. As a modern city, just like any modern cities in the world, it is inevitable that Singapore's per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emission is higher than other countries endowed with big land masses and broad expanse of forests. But with all our vulnerabilities and constraints, we have implemented some of the most forward-looking environment related policies in the world.

47. We are now taking this a further step with the Singapore Green Plan 2030. It was launched in February this year. It is a whole-of-nation movement to advance our national agenda on sustainable development.

48. There are 5 pillars. Under City in Nature, we target to increase the land area of nature parks by over 50% and plant one million more trees by 2030.

49. Second, in Energy Reset, we will increase solar energy deployment even though it is hard to do so in Singapore as it is too cloudy. But we will tap as much as possible on green energy sources from ASEAN and beyond, and convert our vehicles to run on electricity.

50. Third, through Sustainable Living, we will reduce waste sent to our landfill, repurpose roads to encourage walking and cycling, and include sustainability as part of your education curriculum.



51. Fourth, we will develop a Green Economy, so that sustainability can be a major contributor to our capabilities, growth, and dynamism.

52. Last, we will foster a Resilient Future by moderating the rise in urban heat and we have to build physical defences to protect our coastlines against rising sea levels.

53. Singapore contributes to 0.1% of global carbon emissions, so the Green Plan itself will not make a meaningful dent in the overall scheme of things for global warming.

54. But if we develop and execute our policies well, Singapore can be an important reference point for other cities in the world. We can be a catalyst for global change. It is a very meaningful role for a small city state, something that we can all be proud of.

## **Conclusion**

55. Let me conclude. I do not think I need to make a clarion call for youths to take action and get involved in solving today's challenges. Youths today naturally want to play a part. The question is how do you go about doing it.

56. We need to create the receptacles and platforms to facilitate the deeds. That is why the National Youth Council started the Youth Action Challenge (YAC) – to help put ideas into action.

57. Last year, YAC involved close to 200 youths in 50 teams. One of the teams, Team Urban Community Farm, proposed to transform community spaces into urban farms, and educate community gardeners on best farming practices.

58. Another team, Scratchbac, connects local communities to share resources to help vulnerable groups in the neighbourhoods.

59. That is also why in 2014, the Red Cross Movement launched the One Billion Coalition for Resilience. It is to rally people to help address humanitarian problems like

natural disasters and famine. We should consider a youth chapter to rally the young to contribute to these causes.

60. Individually, you don't have to wait for invitations or receptacles. You can individually make a difference, however small. If we want to help the less fortunate, volunteer for your local grassroots organization, a religious institution, a VWO, a self-help group, or be a Silver Generation Ambassador under MOH. There are many avenues.

61. If you want to do your part for the environment, don't just stop at banning yourself from using plastic straws. Try others like eating less meat, stream fewer videos, and reduce your use of air conditioning. It involves some personal discomfort.

62. You must also take care of your own well-being – have sufficient sleep, exercise, eat healthily, spend quality time with friends and loved ones, and look out for your friends and classmates.

63. I wish you a happy conference.