



Letter from Singapore

By

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Because of its dynamic population and economic growth and increased political influence, the Asia-Pacific region is an especially active laboratory to test and evaluate approaches to solving grand sustainability challenges. For that reason, Ricoh, IBM and the World Environment Center collaborated in organizing a June 5 World Environment Day roundtable in Singapore on “Critical Skills for Implementing Sustainability in the Asia-Pacific Region.” Approximately 80 thought leaders from business, government, academia and the non-profit sector participated.

Air pollution is a major scourge to present day public health and future economic development across the region. Dr. Jin Dong, Associate Director of IBM Research in China, has been analyzing air quality measurements in Beijing, and his research team has developed a methodology for characterizing specific emission sources (e.g., automobiles, power plants), preparing a traceability assessment of pollutants to track their chemical transformation and migration, evaluating peak emission scenarios, and developing new forecasting techniques that enable policymakers to optimize pollution controls. This analysis, after adjusting for local topography, meteorology and other variables, is applicable to a range of air pollution plagued cities, including Delhi, Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila and Shanghai. When matched with local opportunities to increase renewable energy applications and improvements in energy efficiency, what emerges is a cost effective road map that cities can customize to reduce peak pollution exposures and realize relatively immediate air quality improvements. Three cheers that “smarter” decision making catches on in both emerging and developed economies.

Singapore possesses both wealth and talent to address sustainability challenges that range well beyond its immediate borders. With its concentration of financial, petro-chemical, shipping and technology industries, and first rate universities (e.g., National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore University of Technology and Design, to name a few) some thoughtful and even provocative ideas emerged from the roundtable:

- Business model innovation is evolving, in the words of Ricoh’s Ienobu Kakegawa, from “what is good for business is good for society” to “what is good for society is good for business.” As Peter Drucker would note, this innovation is likely to possess multiple discontinuities and non-linear thinking as, for example, Ricoh’s belief in saving paper while being an office products and services company.
- Some Singapore companies are beginning to recruit students with a liberal arts training because of their conceptual abilities to integrate information across disciplines and problems. This also matches companies’ greater need for skilled professionals who can learn from and work with

many different kinds of people in a cross-cultural setting where the sources of innovation are often behavior-related.

- Universities should consider fundamentally different ways of teaching by abolishing traditional academic departments and substituting a more flexible and integrated curricular design. In too many instances, the traditional, stove-piped structure interferes with knowledge acquisition and learning.
- The government should not always take the primary role as other kinds of multi-party collaboration are needed. This thought, uttered a few months after Lee Kuan Yew's passing, is one harbinger of a broader political maturity by S'poreans.

Despite this positive flow of ideas and collaboration opportunities, I have my own doubts on whether Singapore itself is a model of urban sustainability that others can or should emulate. To be sure, the very idea of Singapore is often an inspirational example of how such a diverse population of Chinese, Malays, Indians and other residents preserve their respective identities while maintaining a cohesive polity whose per capita income of approximately \$55,000 exceeds that of the United States and many other "developed" nations. The [Sustainable Singapore Blueprint 2015](#) (whose first edition was published in 2009) contains a number of ambitious proposals for energy and water efficiency, smarter infrastructure, expansion of green spaces and the creation of a "zero waste" nation.

At the heart of Singapore's DNA, however, is a commitment to conspicuous consumption. Whether it's the opening of the newest, gargantuan shopping mall or the condemnation of tall buildings (constructed only 10-15 years ago) to make way for the next tall building because of the constantly escalating real estate prices, Singapore seems stuck on a consumption merry go-round. How, or whether, to slow this carousel is a debate that has yet to be seriously engaged.



22 June 2015