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Moving from tension to symbiosis in a distinctive city

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Headline: Moving from tension to symbiosis in a distinctive city

BALANCING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

Moving from tension to symbiosis in a distinctive city

EUGENE K B TAN



For decades now, meticulous urban planning has enabled Singapore to attain a high quality of living, delicately balancing the inherent tension between the economy and the environment, which includes our natural, built and cultural heritage. This will get harder as competing demands grow and land scarcity remains our abiding national fate.

In recent years, the demolition of old landmark buildings and cemeteries to make way for new housing estates and roads, and the growing preference for high-rise buildings over old neighbourhoods, have sparked a bout of national soul-searching.

In a similar vein, the angst, anxiety and anger over the population policy — and whether rapid immigration affects Singapore's national identity — have raised questions over whether the balance between economic and social concerns has been properly struck.

Can Singapore have economic progress and retain as much of the environment as well as its identity and character? Does one have to trump the other?

To regard the economy and the environment as a zero-sum proposition, comprising two distinct sets of rights, interests and stakeholders, is a false dichotomy. Trade-offs invariably connote domination (where one prevails

over the other) or compromise (where both give in to maintain harmony).

Instead, we should aim to attain an optimal, rather than maximising, outcome in our policy choices. In the former, a decision is made on the basis that the economy and environment are collectively not worse off, and overall benefit to society increases. In a maximising outcome scenario, either the economy or the environment is preferred with the other made worse off.

Singapore's water policy is a good example of making optimal choices despite constraints. If the authorities had traded off water self-sufficiency against other pressing economic imperatives because of land-size limitations, we would not only be less confident of our own national security but would not have forged ahead with developing water technology that we now sell to the world.

This shift requires making policies with a multi-generational horizon and pricing the intangible. With a focus on the long term, extreme pendulum swings in policy options are avoided.

Policy-making, however, is under pressure to move faster in this digital age of instant gratification, answers and solutions. Partly socialised by the "change as modernisation" mindset, Singaporeans also expect rapid economic progress and ever-higher standards of living.

Yet, we also yearn for constancy and familiarity in our surroundings and lament the disappearing herit-



age — both natural and man-made. We know what we have gained, but we also increasingly question whether we really know what we have lost. How can Singapore reconcile such policy conundrums between long-term and short-term goals, and between progress and preservation?

There are no easy answers. But if the economy constantly trumps the environment, then policy strategies and interventions are not likely to give sufficient weight to concerns of social justice and inequalities since such intangible concerns do not lend themselves easily to placing an economic value on.

Furthermore, the "haves" either own or are better placed to access finance, land and other resources that would render them better placed to benefit from a policy framework that privileges economic-driven cost-benefit analysis.

The abiding focus on economic value often leads to costs being socialised but the benefits privatised. In such a scenario, policy decision-making is unlikely to consider, among other things, time horizons beyond current norms or move beyond pure economic concerns.

Neither would due attention and weight be accorded to intangibles nor would negative externalities be properly accounted for. Not everything, such as biodiversity and social equality, has a ready price tag.

However, if the environment constantly trumps the economy, that would also be problematic as development could be unnecessarily hindered.

An interesting case study is the proposed MRT Cross Island Line (CRL), which has to take into account several issues.

The authorities have to decide whether to build the CRL route directly through the central catchment nature reserve, or around it. The direct-alignment option entails constructing a 2km-long, 40m-deep tunnel beneath the nature reserve.

This translates to savings in trav-

elling time on the CRL, but its environmental effects are uncertain. On the other hand, the skirting alignment will not cross under the nature reserve, but measuring 9km, will require building longer tunnels and extra ventilation facilities as well as additional compulsory acquisition of land.

Although not required, an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was carried out for the first time in MRT construction. The first phase of the study was published earlier this year, noting that construction work could be carried out with "moderate impact" on some parts of the nature reserve. The second phase of the EIA is expected to be completed by the end of this year. With valuable information from the EIA, we can better assess the impact of both alignment options, enabling all relevant considerations to be factored into decision-making.

In this regard, we should adhere to the precautionary principle, which enjoins us, even with the lack of scientific certainty, to respond to identified threats of serious or irreversible damage to the environment or human health by not postponing cost-effective measures that can help prevent or reduce environmental degradation or damage to human health.

How the authorities come to a final decision on the CRL and how much weight is placed on the EIA will be closely watched.

Following an EIA, the developer of the Mandai eco-tourism hub announced last week changes to the development plans to reduce the developmental impact on the area. The quest to balance economic growth with environment concerns is not a mere luxury but a growing imperative.

Today FILE PHOTO

The quest to balance economic growth with environment concerns and social character is not a mere luxury but a growing imperative. As it seeks its place in the league of global cities while promoting a sense of belonging among its residents, Singapore needs to focus more on what it is that makes the city distinctive as well as a home for everyone.

With the benefit of strong state finances combined with relatively sound environmental policies and institutions, Singapore is well positioned to tackle both economic and environmental challenges in a holistic manner without the convenient resort to trade-offs and being held captive by the need to always opt for the lowest-cost option. And if trade-offs are necessary, there must be proper checks and balances to ensure an appropriate balance is struck between competing issues of progress and preservation.

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