

Detailed Notes for Pre-Budget 2024 Youth Conversation

Date/Time: Monday, 22 January 2024, 7.00pm – 9.00pm

Organisers: National Youth Council (NYC), Ministry of Finance (MOF)

Venue: Asian Civilisation Museum, River Room

Attendance: 100 participants

The dialogue started with a Slido word cloud poll: “What does the Singapore Budget mean to you as a Singaporean youth?”, followed by a breakout discussion comprising eleven groups to discuss the three Budget 2024 themes: (i) Developing a Competitive and Sustainable Economy with Good Jobs for All, (ii) Forging a Strong Social Compact, and (iii) Building a Secure and Resilient Nation. The groups then reconvened for a large group share back and panel dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

1. The moderator and host, Ms Marie Teo, welcomed the participants to the Pre-Budget 2024 Youth Conversation. She introduced the panellists:
 - i. Mr Chee Hong Tat, Minister for Transport and Second Minister for Finance; and
 - ii. Mr He Ruiming, NYC Council Member, #LifeHacks Youth Panel Adviser, and Co-founder, The Woke Salaryman

OPENING

2. Ms Teo began the session with a Slido word cloud poll: “What does Singapore Budget mean to you as a Singaporean youth?”. The poll results were as follows:

 What does the Singapore Budget mean to you as a Singaporean youth?
Wordcloud Poll 153 responses 69 participants



3. The top responses were: (i) No Corruption, (ii) A Better Future, and (iii) Remedy Inequality.
4. Minister Chee said that the Government maintained a zero-tolerance policy against corruption. He added that while zero corruption was a must, a strong social compact was also necessary to ensure a stable and cohesive nation.

5. Mr He added that the Government, businesses and individuals had a part to contribute towards strengthening Singapore's social compact and urged everyone to be socially responsible.

The moderator asked the panellists to share some common misconceptions of the Budget.

6. Minister Chee said that the Budget was often misunderstood as being solely about money and Government expenditure. He said that the allocation of the Budget ultimately reflected the Government's values and beliefs. For instance, the Government honoured the seniors' efforts in building Singapore and ensured that they would be taken care of in their senior years through the Pioneer Generation, Merdeka Generation, and Majulah packages.
7. Mr He shared his perspective that not being able to afford a home was more of a crisis than not being able to afford a dream home. He said that money should be spent on real crises such as water security and added that through the increase in Goods and Services Tax (GST), the Government would be better equipped to prepare for crises.

LARGE GROUP SHARING AND PANEL DIALOGUE

8. Ms Teo invited facilitators and participants to share the insights from their breakout groups across the three Budget themes and invited the panellists to give their comments. Ms Teo then proceeded with the panel dialogue after the large group sharing.

Theme: Developing a Competitive and Sustainable Economy with Good Jobs for All

Discussion points from large group shareback:

9. Participants shared about the importance of supporting local businesses and workers, and the need to provide Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SME) and young professionals with more opportunities and exposure abroad to foster positive attitudes towards risk and failure.
10. Minister Chee said that supporting the growth of local businesses was important in ensuring quality employment for Singaporeans.
11. Mr He shared that Singapore had been in pursuit of economic progress since 1965, and said that Singaporeans had to shift from a scarcity mindset, as exemplified by the misuse of the Productivity Innovation Grant (PIC)¹, towards an abundance-oriented perspective in line with the nation's progress.

¹ The PIC scheme was introduced by the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore to encourage productivity and innovation activities by providing tax deductions, allowances and/or cash payouts to businesses that make investments to improve their productivity.

Panel Dialogue Q&A:

Issue: Ensuring that Singapore remains an attractive investment destination through urban planning, business transformation and innovation.

A participant asked about the plans for future development of integrated transport hubs as part of the URA Master Plan and how the Government might be supporting the transition to electric buses.

12. Minister Chee shared that the Government had received positive feedback on the existing integrated transport hubs and had plans to build future integrated transport hubs where possible. He also said that the Government was progressively transitioning towards using electric buses in its commitment to build a sustainable future.

A participant asked how the budgeting process deals with instability amidst geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties.

13. Minister Chee said that the budgeting process aimed to mitigate the impact of sudden changes in geopolitics and the global economy through careful financial planning which would enable the Government to build reserves to ensure stability and protect against potential crises.

Issue: Supporting every worker to stay relevant and secure good jobs in the future economy.

A participant asked about the available support that the Government would be providing for those who might have been left behind due to the economic downturn.

14. Minister Chee said that the Government had introduced support schemes such as the Majulah Package for young seniors and Comlink+ for lower-income families to better support Singaporeans. He also said that the Government was adopting a whole-of-nation approach to uplift various communities.
15. Mr He said that addressing wage stagnation was crucial, and said that the Government should identify the root causes such as jobs being obsoleted or outsourced, and equip the workers with necessary skills rather than simply providing financial aid.

A participant asked about the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on our workforce, income inequality, and the broader Singaporean economy given the workforce disruption observed in the western economies due to AI.

16. Minister Chee said that it was necessary for Singapore to prepare for a future economy which incorporated AI. Businesses and workers should thus prepare for the transition by building up the necessary skills and capabilities. He assured participants that the Government would provide support to Singaporeans to adapt to these changes.
17. Mr He shared that soft skills and creativity could not be replaced by AI, and that the education system in Singapore needed to inculcate in youths the importance of

adaptability, creativity, and human connection to better prepare them for the future of work.

A participant asked about automation in the workplace, and if the Government would support the transition into a four-day work week.

18. Mr He said that a four-day work week was potentially achievable with substantial trust between employers and employees. He said that it would be more difficult to implement this in larger companies as opposed to smaller firms, where close-knit trust was easier to maintain.
19. Mr He also said that the success of a four-day week would require cultural shifts away from equating physical presence with productivity, a belief deeply ingrained in many Singapore SMEs.
20. Minister Chee said that the suitability of a four-day work week depended on a number of factors, including the industry and job scope, as some high-touch industries required human presence such as healthcare. He added that flexible work arrangements might be more feasible for businesses.

Theme: Forging a Strong Social Compact

Discussion points from large group shareback:

21. Participants said that social compacts can be strengthened through volunteerism and explored ways to entice youths to sectors beyond Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), such as integrating volunteer experiences with career development.
22. Minister Chee shared that social compact was finding a balance between individual desires and communal welfare and shared about the need to make compromises and provide mutual support.

Panel Dialogue Q&A:

Issue: Uplifting vulnerable groups and empowering seniors to live a fulfilling life

Participants asked (via Slido) about the regressive nature of Singapore's Goods and Services Tax (GST) and how individuals from lower socio-economic statuses could cope with it.

23. Minister Chee acknowledged that ordinarily, a Goods and Services Tax (GST) would be regressive. However, he clarified that Singapore's tax and transfer system (for example, GST together with Assurance Package and GST Vouchers) had tilted the system to a progressive one.

Participants asked (via Slido) whether migrant workers' welfare was considered in the Budget and how protections could be enhanced to reduce fatalities of migrants.

24. Minister Chee shared that budget was allocated to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to ensure workplace safety and protection measures for migrant workers. He also said that the Government was collaborating with various non-governmental organisations to address and work on issues faced by migrant workers.

A participant shared his experiences volunteering with the elderly and their struggles with accessibility in some of the older Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations, and asked about the Government's plans to improve the accessibility.

25. Minister Chee shared that retrofitting had been done to the older stations to make public transport accessible and inclusive and the challenges of retrofitting these older stations that were not initially designed with accessibility as a key design parameter. Minister Chee assured participants that new MRT stations would be built with accessibility as a priority.

Theme: Building a Secure and Resilient Nation

Discussion points from large group shareback:

26. Participants shared about ensuring the safety and security of Singapore's future through addressing the impact of educational segregation on societal cohesion and the need to involve and motivate youths to actively participate in forward-thinking and future-oriented actions.
27. Mr He shared that everyone should play their part in the society and added that the Government, businesses, workers and consumers could potentially collaborate to support low-wage workers and keep society balanced.

Panel Dialogue Q&A:

Issue: Balancing between supporting immediate needs and long-term planning.

Participants asked (via Slido) about SimplyGo and how would spending S\$40 million on retaining the older ticketing system affected the progress of projects under the Ministry of Transport (MOT).

28. Minister Chee shared that the current card-based system (EZLink) was due to sunset in end-2024 as it had reached the system end-of-life. He explained that MOT/LTA had judged that citizens were prepared to make the switch to an account-based system, based on its citizen-consultations, and the take-up rate for SimplyGo. However, the public reaction indicated that MOT/LTA had misjudged the public's desire to maintain the existing card-based system. MOT thus made the decision to postpone the transition.

Participants asked (via Slido) how the Government ensured that initiatives that lacked key performance indicators (KPIs) but were essential for the society in the long run (e.g. fostering greater inclusivity) were continuously invested.

29. Minister Chee shared that although KPIs were important, that Singapore should not be too rigid or fixated on the KPI, and lose track of the larger outcome.
30. Mr He added that by talking about the values that defined a country. He explained that even though pursuing actions aligned with these values may lack immediate

profit or KPIs, staying true to a mission statement would uphold a nation's values and provide guidance to the selection of leaders and the country's direction.

The moderator asked the panellists to share one key takeaway from the session.

31. Minister Chee said that unity was key in building a stronger economy to allow Singaporeans to lead better lives. He added that the Forward SG exercise was an important exercise for Singaporeans to refresh the nation's social compact and strengthen unity.
32. Mr He shared about the importance of curiosity, particularly among the youths, and the need for continuous learning and broadening perspectives beyond formal education. He said that it was important for youths to remain open to learning to prevent narrow-mindedness and rigidity.

CLOSING

33. Ms Teo thanked the panellists for their time.
34. Ms Teo invited participants to join the Holler community to engage in national conversations and directed them to Youthopia for updates on the session. She also shared that participants could be involved in civic participation platforms offered by NYC such as the Youth Action Challenge Season 5 Participatory Budgeting exercise, Youth Action Challenge Season 6 and Young ChangeMakers grant.

Notes recorded by the National Youth Council Youth Engagement Department