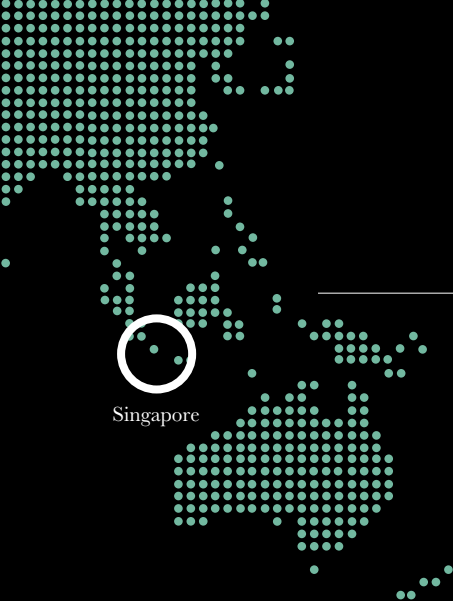




Minister Khaw at the 61st World Health Organisation Western Pacific Regional Committee Meeting in October 2010.



Singapore

Khaw Boon Wan

DEFINING RESILIENCE

As Singapore's National Development Minister, **Khaw Boon Wan** oversees policies that guide the country's urban planning and development; as Health Minister previously, he also helped steer the country through one of its greatest crises when SARS hit the region in 2003. Here, he tells Jessica Cheam, from the Centre for Liveable Cities, the lessons learnt, and why he thinks that a society's resilience is ultimately defined by the spirit of its people.

● **What does 'resilience' mean to you? How do you think Singapore fares in terms of being resilient?**

There are a few academic definitions. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, defines city resilience as "the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience".

Personally, I measure the resilience of a community by how they respond to a disaster when it strikes. The Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1995, for example, was a major catastrophe resulting in the loss of many lives and damages amounting to billions of dollars. But the Japanese demonstrated a high level of resilience – there was no loss of law and order, or futile finger pointing. The people just focused on the immediate tasks of rescue, recovery and rendering mutual help. It was an inspiring response.

In this regard, Singapore also did well when the viral respiratory disease called SARS struck the region in 2003.

There was extensive fear among the population as the nature of the virus was unknown. This was amplified when some hospital staff began to fall ill and died.

The disease struck the economy hard – the roads, Changi Airport and hotels were deserted. But Singaporeans rallied behind the government, looked out for one another, and cooperated fully with medical staff. We overcame the crisis and emerged stronger as one people. This is a mark of resilience.

More recently, the response of Singaporeans to the death of our first Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, was another mark of unity and resilience. The spontaneous outpouring of grief and gratitude for Mr Lee, with more than a million people braving the sun and the rain, waiting patiently for hours to pay their respects, pen their tributes and bid their final farewell, was deeply touching. The nation was united and further bonded as one people during that period. This gives me confidence that Singapore will survive and continue to thrive, come what may.



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● **You mentioned the SARS crisis earlier. Can you share your experience in handling it as chief of the SARS combat unit? What has Singapore learnt from it?**

We can plan and carry out contingency exercises regularly to raise awareness and sharpen acuity, but the response of the people is crucial. A key ingredient is trust – trust in one another, and trust in the government. Without trust, rules will not be followed and the breakdown of law and order will quickly lead to civil strife and further escalation of the crisis.

Indeed, SARS exposed the vulnerabilities of several cities and some did better than others. Fortunately, Singapore did well and had minimal casualties, but we should not be complacent. There will always be future disasters and tests of our resilience. While we should not be paranoid, a realistic sense of our vulnerabilities will help us to be prepared and vigilant. The key is to be mindful that we face these threats together as a community, and we are stronger when united.



Our public housing policies have always sought to foster strong family ties. Strong family relationships are the foundations of a stable society...which will be critical in times of crisis.

- 01 During the SARS outbreak in 2003, schools took precautions by monitoring students' temperatures and health conditions daily.
- 02 Shared spaces in Singapore's public housing estates facilitates interaction amongst residents, like this rooftop garden in Toa Payoh.
- 03 Minister Khaw visits Skyville@Dawson, a new generation of public housing in Singapore that aims to build a cohesive and vibrant community, with multi-generational and family-friendly living.

● **The Ministry of National Development (MND) has a vision for Singapore to be an “endearing home and a distinctive global city”. What are some policies which help build social and community resilience?**

Hardware facilitates but it is the software – the *heartware* – which defines resilience. Do we care for one another in times of crisis? Do we put community interests above individual interests?

One example of this is what we call the “*kampung* spirit” here. We had plenty of this in the old days. In the *kampung* (Malay for “village”), we knew and cared for one another. We shared meals, celebrated festivities and grieved together.

With modernisation and urbanisation, we lost some of this spirit. But I believe a modern *kampung* is not an oxymoron. Both elements can co-exist, but they cannot be achieved through a decree or through legislation. It has to be a ground-up effort with local ownership and support. Governments can facilitate this with supportive hardware and sensible policies, but the residents must believe in it themselves.

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This is why our public housing policies have always sought to foster strong family ties. We have many policies and incentives to help extended families live together or close by for mutual care and support. We believe that strong family relationships are the foundations of a stable society and they will strengthen the social fabric in our towns, which will be critical in times of crisis.

Housing has played a crucial role. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) is a developer but it is no ordinary developer. The HDB does not just build flats, it builds cohesive communities. We measure our success not by how much the values of the HDB flats have increased over the years, but by how many residents are emotionally attached to their HDB towns. We are proud to note that most HDB residents – 60 per cent of them – continue to live in the first homes they bought years ago.

Our policies also extend to the larger community: as a multi-racial and multi-religious society, inter-racial harmony is a key pillar of resilience. This is why we impose an ethnic quota in each residential block to ensure that all races are adequately represented in every town. This way, children grow up with neighbours and classmates of different ethnicities. This ensures racial integration and promotes mutual respect for one another’s cultures, traditions and religious beliefs.

While we offer spaces for individuals to practise their own religions, we are careful to ensure that common spaces are secular so that people from various different backgrounds can live, work and play together.





A shared appreciation for a quality living environment also builds resilience among our people.

● **How else does MND's work contribute to building the city's resilience?**

Beyond housing, we plan and provide common amenities to promote neighbourliness and interaction, which will strengthen our social fabric. These shared spaces, such as schools, parks, food centres, sports facilities and neighbourhood shops, are built after much deliberate planning. They are distributed across Singapore and serve residents of both public and private estates.

Some other initiatives include our popular "Community in Bloom" programme, which brings residents together with meaningful community gardening events. They make new

friends, pursue a healthy hobby, and put vegetables on the dining table too.

Our many parks and park connectors make Singapore a "Garden City", and they also enable people from all races, ages and socio-economic statuses to socialise and forge shared experiences in appreciating nature. In this regard, we owe much to Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who had a vision that Singapore can enjoy the benefits of urbanisation without losing our link to nature.

A shared appreciation for a quality living environment also builds resilience among our people. As the nation continues to grow on this small island of limited resources, we will face new challenges. But technology and human ingenuity can overcome these.



In recent years, for example, our architects and landscape experts have been creative in greening our tall buildings and rooftops. We will continue to innovate and protect our natural areas and enhance our biodiversity. As Sir David Attenborough remarked in a recent television documentary, “A Wild City”, Singapore is a city in a jungle. Within half an hour from Orchard Road, you can have close encounters with otters, hornbills, civets, owls, and colugos – not in the Zoo, but in their natural habitats! Very few cities are as rich in biodiversity.

● **How do you think physical planning and infrastructure helps a nation be resilient to disasters, shocks and stresses?**

One way is via tackling climate change, which is also part of MND’s work. Climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution. We are tiny, but we can still make a contribution. For example, together with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), Singapore’s Building and Construction Authority (BCA) established the BCA Centre for Sustainable Buildings – the first in Asia to help developing countries develop green building policies and actions. Within Singapore, we have set a target of greening 80 per cent of our building stock by 2030. This will play a key role in reducing carbon emissions from the building sector.



It is the spirit of the people which will determine if a community or a nation can bounce back from a disaster and stand tall again.

Domestically, we are taking measures to prepare our city for any adverse environmental impacts. For example, we are reclaiming land to a higher level above the sea to cater for potential long-term sea-level rise. It is more costly but as an infrastructure investment over a century, it is a necessary and worthwhile preventive measure.

Hardware helps and there is no shortage of technical experts on urban planning, building codes and emergency response who can guide and offer solutions. But hardware alone is not sufficient. It is the spirit of the people which will determine if a community or a nation can bounce back from a disaster and stand tall again.

01 Minister Khaw at a community youth sport event.





● **Singapore's civil society is maturing and people want to contribute and be involved in shaping the country's future. How can we tap this energy?**

It is a natural and healthy development. Better educated people will want to have a greater say on how their country is run. We should facilitate and promote such participation by encouraging more frequent, broader and deeper public consultations.

For example, we are planning to conserve a historic, unused 24-kilometre long railway track known as the Rail Corridor, which will raise the quality of life of a million residents who live within walking distances from the track. We are spending time to gather the views, suggestions and feedback of the residents. We are confident that the results will be outstanding, but the process is even more important than the outcome. This is the people's rail corridor, and they shall have a say in its creation.

⁰¹ Community walks are organised by civic groups along the Rail Corridor.



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● **What happens when such decisions prove divisive? For instance, when citizens strongly disagree with a decision taken by the government? This happens in many countries worldwide.**

It is normal for a society to have disagreements on issues. We encourage everyone to engage in robust debates and share perspectives. We may not always agree with one another, but it is important to come together amicably to understand one another's points of view.

At the end of any debate or public consultation, some decisions have to be made and there will be trade-offs. The chosen solution will not be able to please all, but it must serve the nation's long-term interests. We respect differing views but we must get on with nation building. That is the only way to avoid paralysis and stagnation.