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REPORT ON A VISIT TO SINGAPORE

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SUMMARY

Singapore is a 224 square mile city-state with a population of more than 2.1 million. It has achieved a worldwide reputation for its apparent success in dealing with some of its acute problems of rapid urban growth and development.

During a three-day visit in December 1971, a limited number of urban specialists in government, university, private business, and international assistance were consulted, in order to learn the local perceptions of critical urban problems, how those problems are being addressed and with what resources, and if there is a role for U.S. technical assistance in this field. A number of documents were obtained.

There is no question that a kind of miracle has been achieved, in terms of providing shelter and jobs for a growing population. The building boom continues and labor is being imported for a rapidly expanding industrial sector. The approach has been a physical one, with an emphasis on action and quantity. Essentially ad hoc in nature, the approach has not encouraged planning, research, or a disciplined monitoring of experience. Some of the qualitative aspects of urban life (cultural, social, etc.) and the social consequences of physical and economic decisions have been given short shrift. Nevertheless, some lessons have been learned from experience; for example, subsequent changes in building designs.

Most of the "urban" activities are carried out by the Ministry of National Development, whose two principal units are the "fiercely independent" Housing and Development Board, a statutory body (which includes, among others, a Department of Urban Renewal), and the Department of Planning. The UNDP is completing a four-year planning project, the primary product of which is a Conceptual Plan for the Singapore of 1992. There are also other resources.

Several specific suggestions were made for applying U.S. technical assistance, not only in terms of possible roles, but also in terms of limitations and constraints.

REPORT ON A VISIT TO SINGAPORE

In the series of information-gathering visits to developing countries which began in May 1971, the final visit was made to Singapore. Although it was a brief stay, December 9-11, 1971, it was a "must" visit. So much has been communicated about the "miracle" which has happened in Singapore, in terms of a concerted and coordinated approach to its problems of rapid urbanization and development.

Answers to three general questions were sought: (1) What are the local perceptions of the problems of rapid urban growth and development? (2) Who is doing what about these problems and with what resources? (3) Is there a role for U.S. technical assistance? These questions had been focussed on during all of the information-gathering visits to developing countries.

It was not possible in a short stay to make contact with too many people. Nevertheless, those who were seen represented nearly every sector of the "urban development community:" government, university, private firm, and international assistance agency. Most of the contacts were in the Government of Singapore. This is not surprising given the nature of this city-state. See further, the list of people-visited which is appended.

It is difficult to talk about Singapore as a city with a hinterland. It is essentially one area of 224 square miles with a population (according to the 1970 census) of 2.113 million. Singapore is primarily urban; its rural areas of small farms and underdeveloped land have been encroached upon heavily by the Government's industrialization thrust of the last decade. (The new town, Jurong, which is about 17 miles from the central area, is a 25,000-acre result of this policy. It formerly was an area of rubber plantations and small farms.) The central area of 3.5 square miles contains about 25% of the population and reportedly has changed slightly. In the suburban areas are found the private housing estates of the upper-and middle-income groups.

Problems

The basic approach to urban development in Singapore is physical. That is to say, urban development is perceived as housing, urban renewal, roads, industrial estates, etc. The problems of rapid urban growth and development, therefore, are defined in physical and quantitative terms. So it is that the Housing and Development Board was described usually as being "preoccupied with construction" and "focusing on numbers." Although the "backbone was broken" in 1964 in the backlog in the demand for housing, nevertheless, housing still is considered by politicians and the general public to be a critical urban problem. Urban development professionals define the problem in terms of squatter settlements and slums.

The second most frequently mentioned problem in Singapore is transportation. The standard description of the problem is "1,000 additional automobiles per month." Discussion of a proposed mass transit system was making headlines at the time of the field visit.

A new sewage system, a need which has been compounded by the construction of so many high-rise buildings, is being constructed. It is being linked up and extended block by block.

The school shortage was labeled a "social" problem, and employment was defined as "the basic problem, but it is not an urban problem." As a result of the industrialization policy and the general expansion and well-being of Singapore's economy, laborers are being imported from Malaysia and technicians, engineers, and industrialists from Japan.

There is no question that visible and significant results have been achieved in addressing the substantial problems which Singapore has faced since World War II and especially since becoming independent from the Federation of Malaysia a decade ago. "As word spreads about these accomplishments, an increasing number of officials from other countries (including cabinet ministers) go to Singapore to learn the "what" and "how" and "why" of this "miracle." Chances are they will get little substantive help, because Singapore officials have not organized and prepared themselves for this instructive role. The more discerning, who are able to spend a little more time and to ask substantial questions, will begin to get a more realistic picture. (There are some who will say that it is impossible to get a true picture of Singapore. As one veteran urban planner advised, "What is not said is important, not what is said!")

What one observes on closer examination is a rather ad hoc, short-term, and essentially action-oriented approach to urban problems. It has been a matter of meeting immediate needs. That the program agencies have done so much to meet those needs is to their great credit.

However, the long-term consequences of these ad hoc solutions reportedly are ignored or are treated with an attitude of "we'll-cross-that-bridge-when-we-come-to-it." Slogans, not deliberate policies or political concepts, are relied on. For example, Singapore officials have used some of the same slogans for their urban renewal which were used in a different set of circumstances in the USA in the 1950s.

Several people stated firmly that planning is not respected in Singapore. The Planning Department in the Ministry of National Development has no authority over other departments or statutory bodies. Thus, it often is at an impasse with operating agencies; for example, the Department of Urban Renewal and Housing and Development Board which are also in the Ministry of National Development. In fact, these three units allegedly sometimes work against one another.

The lack of coordination between the Department of Urban Renewal and the "fiercely independent" Housing and Development Board was reported to have created hardships in the relocation of displaced people and factories.

The Planning Department was created in 1959 to carry out the Master Plan of 1958. However, the Plan reportedly never was approved, although parts of it have been implemented over the years. One specialist observed, "I never realized that it was good not to get things approved!" At the same time, the ad hoc, action-oriented approach has encouraged public housing to be built where land has been available, even if that were against the Master Plan. Each ministry looks for the easiest way to spend its budget. As an example, the Ministry of Public Works built a bridge "fly over". It required no displacement of people and no acquisition of land. It also was of no consequence to Singapore's traffic problems. The same cost-benefit ratios are not applied to physical development projects with the same diligence as to economic development efforts, it was stated. There seems to be no feedback mechanism which permits an assessment of the consequences of such actions.

Some commentators suggest that an inherent drawback to better planning is the lack of sufficient data. Others argue that much more information is available than is being used. Still others point to what they feel have been deliberate inefficiency in census collection and a deliberate ignoring of reports and studies. There are no data on income, kinds of employment, number of children in school, for example. The UN tried unsuccessfully to get them included in the recent census. "Data collection is a mess!" concluded one observer.

Others said that reports and studies usually are not released officially; people learn about them by "leaks". Consultants' reports which do not correspond to the government's action-oriented approach allegedly are buried.

A somewhat less critical view is that there is a lack of resources to do and to implement long-term planning and to deal with other than "construction" problems. This view holds that officials are aware of cultural, economic, and social problems and do care about people. However, technical staff and organizational mechanisms are lacking. At the same time, it has been noted that Singapore's success to date can be attributed largely to the presence

of three indispensable ingredients: political will, administrative structure, and finance.

Approaches and Resources

The political will derives from Singapore's centralized government. The Prime Minister reportedly makes most of the principal decisions. He has willed to make Singapore a "going concern" since he took it out of the Malaysian Federation, and he has been successful. The administrative structure is a legacy from British colonial days, and the financial resources are derived from the long established commercial and business sectors, the more recently developed industrial sector, political stability, and a favorable economic situation.

1. Housing and Development Board

It is reported that the amount which has been spent for housing has not been large, comparatively speaking. What has produced the housing "miracle" has been the political will and the administrative structure. It was as early as 1927 that the Singapore Government first addressed the problem of housing with the creation of the Singapore Improvement Trust. Slums were to be cleaned up and back lanes built. The first housing was constructed in 1936, and by 1959 22,000 units had been built. The Trust became the Housing and Development Board in 1960. A statutory body, its goal was to construct 50,000 units by 1965. In fact, 54,000 units had been built by 1964, thus reportedly "breaking the back" of the severe housing shortage. Another 66,000 units were completed by 1970. The current goal is 100,000 more units by 1975.

The housing units vary in size and in construction. Design changes have been made in each succeeding complex of units, although there still is reliance primarily on high-rise buildings (6, 10, and 20 + stories). While there is a Home Ownership for the People Scheme, most of the units are leased at economic or break-even fixed rents. The construction of the housing units is financed by Singapore Government loans to the Housing and Development Board; the terms are 7.75% interest for 60 years. In addition, the Singapore Government subsidizes the operating costs of these public housing units. The average subsidy is one Singapore dollar per head, or \$10 ~~per~~ \$30 a month/unit. The total subsidy doubled in 1971 and is expected in 1972 to be nearly three times the amount for 1970. The figures are as follows: \$3.5 million in 1970; \$7 million in 1971; and an estimated \$10 million in 1972.

There is a freeze on rents; they have not increased for ten years. However, as a result of the building boom and an overheated construction industry, land, material, and labor costs have increased substantially.

It is reported that there has been overbuilding, especially of hotels and office blocks, and that land is being withheld from the market, in order to sustain land prices.

The Housing and Development Board has 140,000 housing units now and expects to have 100,000 more by 1975. It is estimated that 37% of Singapore's population lives in flats (apartments); that figure is expected to be 50% by 1975. The Board, a statutory body, is composed entirely of people from the private sector with one exception. The chairman of the Board, a close personal friend of the Prime Minister, is reportedly a powerful individual. The Board was described as being "fiercely independent" with "political and economic overtones."

The Department of Building, the largest unit in the Housing and Development Board, has a staff of architects, designers, engineers, and surveyors. The Estates Department is responsible for the management of the public housing estates, and includes estates officers, lands officers, and legal officers. There is a small Resettlement Department, a small Statistics and Research Department, a Finance Department, and a Secretariat.

The other unit, which is nearly the same size as the Estate Department, is the Department of Urban Renewal, whose staff is composed primarily of architects and planners. It was organized in 1965. It is concerned primarily with 1700 acres in the central area, an area inhabited mainly by Chinese people. The area of a concentration for migrants, it was estimated that the area by 1965 had twenty times its original occupancy (after World War II). A Land Acquisition Act of 1966 is one of the Department's instruments in carrying out its relocation and redevelopment activities. The Asia Foundation reportedly has supported "one or two" staff members in this Department.

The Housing and Development Board and the Department of Urban Renewal have been criticized heavily for being construction-oriented and for having little concern for people. Evidence of this reportedly can be found in the lack of coordination between these two units. People who are dislocated for urban renewal purposes frequently cannot be or are not relocated and resettled by housing authorities. Moreover, neither organization has shown much concern for individual or family cultural, economic, and social requirements. Some observers believe that the Chinese family unit still is strong and can deal with these matters without external assistance. Others say that the Singapore Government has adopted an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" approach, that it really does not care about people. Still others see the Singapore Government as being unsympathetic to "welfare" concerns, not for cultural or ideological reasons, but simply as a pragmatic approach. The policy, they believe, is that the government will concern itself with general conditions and the people will look after themselves.

2. Department of Public Works

The Department of Public Works is responsible for sewage and transportation and provides services to the Housing and Development Board and its Department of Urban Renewal. The United Nations has provided some assistance with sewage, and a new and enlarged sewage system is being constructed.

The Singapore Government has asked the IBRD to become involved in the mass rapid transit problem. While the UNDP has produced a plan, the Ministry of Communications has requested that a deeper study be made "from scratch;" that is, without regard to the Conceptual Plan for Singapore which the UNDP Team completed recently. The IBRD reportedly will undertake the study in this manner, although it originally had agreed with the UNDP to do the study within the framework of the new plan.

3. Department of Planning

The implementation and updating of the Concept Plan are the responsibilities of the Department of Planning. It is also in the Ministry of National Development. It has an establishment, in addition to the Chief Planner and his deputy, of 14 planners, 3 engineers, 2 mathematician-statisticians, 2 economists, 1 sociologist, and 1 assessor. All of the planning positions are not filled, and there have been no qualified applicants when the posts have been advertised. One of the drawbacks admittedly is that "qualified" is defined as having a degree from an institution which is recognized by the Institute of Town and Country Planners in London. It is hoped that the newly organized Singapore Institute of Planners will replace the one in London as the standard setter.

As mentioned earlier, planning reportedly is understood or appreciated very little by the Singapore Government. The absence of a political will to plan has been as telling in its consequences as its presence has been to the building of housing units. In addition, the lack of sufficient and reliable data and a feedback mechanism contributes to the situation.

The Planning Department has no authority over other departments, ministries, or statutory bodies. Their plans, however, are screened by a Master Plan Committee, which can recommend or refuse to recommend. While its recommendations are followed, nevertheless political or economic considerations usually prevail over technical reasons. When a plan is rejected by the Master Plan Committee, the general practice is to appeal to the appropriate minister whose decision usually prevails. In any case, ministerial approval is a second step. The Master Plan Committee is appointed by the Minister for National Development. Its members are the Chief Planner (chairman), Director of the Department of Public Works, a representative of the Ministry of Finance, the Commissioner of Lands, and the Commissioner of the Basic Economic Conversion Board (which is responsible for ex-British military complexes).

A more advisory and less powerful group is the Development Control Committee. It is really an enlargement of the Chief Planner, who is chairman, and deals with the difficult cases after the Planning Department staff has reviewed them. The Minister for National Development appoints the members. In addition to the Chief Planner, they are the Chief Building Surveyor, the Director of the Department of Urban Renewal, representatives from the Ministry of Health and the Roads Branch of the Department of Public Works, and three representatives from the private sector, representing the Institute of Architects (2) and the Institute of Engineers (1).

In addition to the screening activities, the Planning Department has responsibility for zoning regulations and for updating the Master Plan every five years, at least. The latter apparently has not been done. The earlier Master Plan is about to be superseded by the recently completed Conceptual Plan, a product of the UNDP Planning Project.

4. The UNDP Planning Project

The UNDP Planning Project began in 1967, in order to provide the first long-term look at Singapore's development. It has been financed with US \$3 million from the Singapore Government and \$2 million from the UNDP. The idea of developing a set of feasibility plans for the Singapore of 1992 (when the population is expected to have doubled) was pushed by Howe Yoo Chong, who is President of the Port Authority, President of the Central Bank, etc. While planning ahead was contrary to the general attitude in the Singapore Government, nevertheless, there was a realization that a plan was needed. After all, there was a Master Plan which now was out of date. Moreover, a plan could provide political protection when a cabinet minister decided to act.

A State and City Planning Office was formed in 1967 to make the plan and was dissolved in July 1971. Except for a "skeleton few," the entire staff (including the Chief Planner) of the Department of Planning in the Ministry of National Development was seconded to that organization. The UNDP provided a team of consultants and appointed the Project Manager, and each year it sent an expert team for one or two weeks to review the work.

The planning process was an interesting one. Town and country planners were invited to present plans. Fourteen plans were submitted: eight were excluded and six were tested for transportation costs for work and for shopping, cost of needed public services, social benefit costs, etc. It was decided to plan for a ring development for the future. This would maximize facilities at minimum cost. Data were collected for two years. During the second year feasibility plans were developed. They were tested during the third year, and in the fourth year of the project (April 1971) a Concept Plan for Singapore was submitted to the UN and through it to the Singapore Government.

Program agencies (public works, housing, etc.) are to fit their action plans (1-year, 5-year, 10-year plans) into the Concept Plan. A staging model (a computer program) has been developed which can provide another test of those areas which are "ripe" for development by 1982 at minimum cost to the public sector. Included in the model are the acquisition and compensation costs for land, as well as the costs of infrastructure and development (power stations, sewage treatment plant, road development, etc.) The outputs of the staging model can provide guidance to the program agencies.

Subject to some modification for financial and political reasons -- the Concept Plan aims at the "ideal state of what is best for the people and for the land" -- the prognosis is that the new plan will be accepted by the Singapore Government.

As a sub-project to the larger one, the UNDP has worked with the Department of Urban Renewal, seeking to introduce a planning exercise prior to the action step. This activity has not gone well. The Urban Renewal Department, like the Singapore Government, is action-oriented. Its activities are confined to land on which to build for profit. Planning not only slows action, it also requires considerations other than building for profit on cleared land. In addition to these "natural" barriers, the sub-project has been hampered by personality problems and staff deficiencies.

5. Consultants

A large number of consultants have been used on various "urban development" programs in Singapore. They have been financed by the Singapore Government, the United Nations, various foundations, and through other bilateral and multilateral assistance channels. It is alleged that these efforts have not been coordinated and that few of the reports have been released. But, as one person noted, "The Second Five-Year Plan never was released, and the Third Plan never was done. In fact, the Economic Planning Unit was dissolved!"

6. University Resources

Other resources exist in Singapore. The Economic Research Center is a Ford Foundation-supported facility at the University of Singapore. Its Director, Dr. Stephen Yeh, spends from one-third to one-half of his working hours providing leadership to the Statistics and Research Department of the Housing and Development Board.

Also at the University of Singapore is a planning curriculum in the Faculty of Architecture. It is just two years old. Recently its initiator, a Japanese, was replaced by an Indian. The program is still weak and the response has been poor. The dropout rate is high among the students, most of whom hold jobs and are able to be only part-time students.

7. Other Resources

Singapore has no private professional planning firms. Design Partnership, a multidisciplinary team of consultants, does no work locally in Singapore; it has worked for the IBRD and UNDP.

There is, however, the Singapore Planning and Urban Research (SPUR) Group. Its multidisciplinary and multiprofessional membership of 20 "with about an equal number of non-members closely associated with its activities" is kept small deliberately. Formed in 1964, it is "mainly concerned with Singapore's urban problems." By its own admission, SPUR Group "has often been involved in controversy, largely because it assumes a critical role in commenting on environmental questions of public concern ... (SPUR's stand) on any urban issue is non-partisan and independent of other groups and organizations ... and it is SPUR's hope that its efforts will help create a greater public appreciation of our environment."

Recognizing that the SPUR group has been a burr or a thorn to the Singapore Government, some of its members counter the allegation with accusations of their own, the principal one being their inability to get needed data from government sources. Outsiders suggested that while much of SPUR's criticism is justified, it does not always recognize political realities and constraints. In addition to its local activities of (1) anticipating new problems and defining possible approaches to solution, (2) drawing attention to existing problems, (3) proposing new solutions to old problems, and (4) educating the public, SPUR Group members exchange ideas on a wider basis. Its members have two regional projects "in hand": a publication on urban problems in the region and a regional conference in 1972 "to discuss subjects related to urbanization, bureaucracy and planning."

As a result of participating in a project of SEADAG's Urban Development Panel, Singapore's urban specialists have "discovered" 300 Singapore items for a proposed annotated urban bibliography of the region. This suggests quite rightly that a wealth of experience exists in Singapore.

Assistance

Given the kinds of problems, approaches, and resources cited above, is there an appropriate and significant role for U.S. technical assistance? The visits in Singapore provided some helpful and interesting insights and suggestions.

Several specialists commented on some of the limitations of external assistance. It was emphasized that an expatriate cannot tell what people want or need in a country or region. More specifically, in Singapore the expatriate usually is not asked! Advice really is not desired. The experiences of some American consultants on tourism and of a group of British consulting firms -- the latter gave up in three months on a one-year contract with Jurong Town Council -- are instructive in this regard.

Another aspect of this is the appropriateness of American advice. Recent experience in Singapore was cited as indicating that it is too sophisticated to be applicable and usable. Several commentators stressed the harm which is done in developing countries when too sophisticated planning techniques are employed. These countries need guidelines which are based on what these countries are, what development is there, and what potential exists. Data may be insufficient for sophisticated planning, but quite sufficient for developing guidelines. In any case, guidelines need to be brought up to date continually.

The team approach to technical assistance is difficult. One problem is being able to assemble all the members at once and on time. One member of the UNDP Planning Project Team, who should have been "on board" much earlier in the four-year life of the Project, was expected to arrive in January 1972! Another problem is trying to integrate a team into a local effort.

At the same time some of the difficulties of posting an individual advisor were recognized. An individual advisor can become absorbed into the local structure and become lost. Or he can be treated as just another civil servant. Whether an individual or a team-approach is used, a strong plea was made to abandon the name and concept of counterparts. Equality just does not exist, it was stated.

The lack of qualified personnel was mentioned as a need which external technical assistance can help to meet. Technical assistance experts are needed to do specific jobs. The shortage will be relieved also when local professional qualification standards for planners replace those which continue to be imported from the Institute of Town and Country Planners in London.

Another kind of need is how to get anything implemented and managed. The problem is finding the "do-able." It reportedly is also a concern of Ford Foundation. One approach may be pilot studies. It was suggested that funds for pilot studies should be provided initially on a regional (or subnational) level, not on the basis of a single city or metropolitan area. The IBRD reportedly is interested in such an approach.

The need for information was defined as an appropriate concern for external assistance. Available information is not being circulated. Mechanisms for the distribution of information are lacking, both institutions and media. This is another area in which the Ford Foundation is interested. Among the approaches which were discussed were a documentation center with the provision of scholarships for people to use it, regional seminars, and regional publications.

Singapore has had a considerable experience, which has become well known but not well understood. That experience could be instructive to other cities and to Singapore, too. External assistance might make a significant contribution by helping the urban specialists in Singapore to assess that experience and to organize the findings for internal and external use.

Appendix

People Visited in Singapore

Dr. Stephen H.K. Yeh
Director
Economic Research Center
University of Singapore
Singapore

Mr. William S.W. Lim
Design Partnership Architects
International Building, Orchard Road
Singapore

Mr. Kwok Cheun Wei
Executive Research Officer
Department of Statistics and Research
Housing and Development Board
Ministry of National Development
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Singapore

Mr. Tan Jake Hooi, Chief Planner
Mr. Lau Woh Cheong, Planner
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