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# The Straits Times

ASIA'S LEADING NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

Review - Tech & Science  
**S'pore could help shape a climate deal**

956 words  
10 October 2009  
Straits Times  
STIMES  
English  
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In Copenhagen this December, nations will meet to thrash out a climate change mitigation plan. Amresh Gunasingham speaks to former National Environment Agency (NEA) chairman **Simon Tay**, who chairs the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, about the role Singapore can play in this effort.

How do you assess the threats of climate change to Singapore and the region?

If you look at the recently released report on climate change from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), it noted that South-east Asia is likely to suffer more from climate change than elsewhere in the world.

Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand are especially at risk because they have large coastal populations vulnerable to rising sea levels and temperature increases. There is also the risk of higher levels of tropical diseases and declining rice yields resulting from global warming.

What do you see happening at the upcoming Copenhagen summit? Is it realistic to expect a post-Kyoto treaty, with concrete measures to address global warming by limiting greenhouse gas emissions?

World leaders are meeting in Copenhagen, in December, where they are expected to negotiate a global deal to put a cap on pollution emitted into the atmosphere.

But frankly, I believe Copenhagen will not solve the issues and create a binding regime. We are way too late. The United States is not likely to have completed its legislation on cutting carbon dioxide emissions, although President Barack Obama supports this cause. The developing countries and large emitters like China and India will not commit until the US is on board.

I think Copenhagen can help with a general statement, with national plans being inked and broad mechanisms agreed upon. Leaders will try to meet the deadline, but I think they will have to work past the deadline for more concrete measures to be agreed on. We have to look to a post-Copenhagen scenario even as we hope for last-minute improvements.

What role do you see Singapore adopting at the negotiations?

One thing I believe we need to think about is our position on the international stage. If we're talking about achieving a deal where the US, India, China and the South-east Asian countries need someone to bring these players together, Singapore could help shape a deal. We do not want the big countries to just make decisions and then pressure Singapore to take steps that we cannot.

What do you think of Singapore's sustainability blueprint released earlier this year, which stresses national targets for pollution standards and energy efficiency over the next 20 years?

I think it is quite modest. People have the right to expect more from Singapore. We have management, good engineering and technology and even export some environmental services like water treatment and recycling. We have also always prided ourselves on our development despite a lack of natural resources.

But we need to realise that the green parameter is shifting - and there is an extra dimension that we should consider.

This boils down to emissions.

We should view carbon emissions as a constraint, like the shortage of water, land and clean air. Then we would find innovative ways to minimise such emissions. The world is moving towards being carbon neutral. Carbon markets are thriving in places like London and China. We should have our slice. After all, we are an energy trading hub, and one of the world's leading futures trading hubs.

Given the constraints we face, what are our successes so far?

It is clear some countries can do more than others. With limited land and territorial sea, Singapore does not have space to deploy wind power and tidal turbines. It is also debatable how much we can get from solar energy using present technology, because of the excessive cloud cover here. Such technology is also too expensive now.

Energy efficiency has been the first attempt. If you look at water, it has been a success story. We are a technological leader, far beyond abstract technologies limited to the laboratory. Companies like Keppel and Hyflux are aggressively going out there to sell their technology in areas such as desalination and water filtration. We can do the same for energy-saving and low carbon technologies.

How should Singapore conduct its own negotiations at the summit?

We need to be progressive but not automatically accept cuts to our own emissions. It has already been shown that when we voluntarily made the move from oil-based energy to gas, we cut our energy intensity by a third or more. In terms of energy use, we are already quite lean.

Yet at the same time, we have to show that we are trying our best in terms of the technology we can access, the financial resources at our disposal, and a full understanding of the gravity of the situation for us.

How do you see Singapore addressing climate change going forward?

We could be at the start of something. Perhaps we have not done as much as some hoped because of a certain sense of realism, but the paradigm is changing as we learn more about the technologies and policies we need.

For example, a Norwegian company has put money into manufacturing solar panels here and this helps us understand solar energy. Our car pricing policy has had some green effects. But we need to watch technology, policy and really push in this direction. We can be optimistic. It could be in Copenhagen or in the wake of that that Singapore will take on more and more as we realise what we can do without harming our economy or making promises that we cannot realistically keep.

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Document STIMES0020091009e5aa0003k