

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AT OPENING OF SIWW-WCS-CES

“Liveable and Sustainable Cities,
Beautiful and Endearing Homes”

Excellencies

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very happy to join you this evening to open not just one event, but three events – Singapore International Water Week, World Cities Summit and CleanEnviro Summit. There is one common theme which links these three together – how to develop liveable and sustainable cities, and to build for ourselves beautiful and endearing homes, and enduring homes too. I think these are timely and appropriate themes for us to focus on.

The world is becoming urbanised on an unprecedented scale. Already, cities account for more than half the world’s population and more than 70% of our global output. And by 2050, by the middle of the century, we can expect another 2.5 billion people to move from the countryside into the cities. It is a process which is driven by the emerging economies, and particularly in Asia. In China alone, 320 million people will move into the cities by 2050, more than the whole population of the USA today. And in India, even more - half a billion will come in. So it is a tremendous time of change, and a tremendous opportunity for development, for progress, because cities can be a better habitat for the world’s population. They are economically dynamic, they are culturally diverse, and they can also be environmentally-friendly. Not always their reputation, but in fact, when you have large numbers of people, cities can be more environmentally friendly. But to do all this it needs proper planning, efficient administration, public support to make the cities work, including public support for policies to protect the environment, otherwise the cities will strain the resources and degrade the environment.

So the challenge is to ensure a high quality environment, a high quality of life for the city dwellers, where they can live, work and play. And every country is preoccupied with this problem. Each faces its own challenges - countries like China and India have to manage big rural populations; low lying cities like Bangkok or Jakarta or Amsterdam have to worry about climate change and geography. But for all the variations, most cities share similar broad objectives - to generate vibrant economies, create good jobs, provide a safe and secure environment for its residents, deliver good public services, whether it is waste disposal, clean and reliable water, or public transport; and to make all these individual pieces work, to have effective governance so that the system as a whole functions well. And that is why all of us are here today, to share our experiences and to learn from one another.

For Singapore, sustainability and reliability and liveability have always been important. We are a small country of 700 km²; the city is nearly the whole country. We are about half of Greater London, or one third of Metropolitan Tokyo. We have no resources, and are dependent on imports for necessities like water and energy.

From the outset, we set out to develop Singapore as a liveable and sustainable city. We integrated nature into our “Garden City”. We protected our natural areas, created nature reserves, built parks and gardens, cleaned up rivers and waterways. We managed the consumption of scarce resources. Water, which is a strategic vulnerability, we turned into a strength. We expanded our water catchments, built new reservoirs, priced water fully so that people would have an incentive to save the water and to use it prudently. And we imposed water conservation charges, so that when you turn on the tap, you are conscious that it is costing you something. We developed NEWater technology, to reuse water, so that every drop can be circulated more than once.

For energy too, we took a hard-headed approach. We decided that we could not afford fuel subsidies. We priced energies fully, whether it is electricity, whether it is gas, whether it is petrol. Although for low-income families, we provided rebates, to help with their utility bills. We diversified our sources of energy – we are building a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal, so that we can import LNG from all over the world. We piloted green technologies. For example, we are building one housing precinct, Treelodge@Punggol, which will

harness solar energy for lighting common areas, which will have green roofs, with plants on the roof, to bring down the ambient temperature and to have common facilities which are made from recycled materials. So with systematic, structured strategies, we have tried to make Singapore liveable and sustainable. In the next phase, our aim is to build a “City in a Garden”, to bring green spaces and biodiversity to our doorsteps.

Our efforts to do these things and to improve our liveability have achieved some recognition. We were ranked 25th overall globally in Mercer’s Quality of Living worldwide survey last year, and the top Asian city. In terms of environmental sustainability, the Siemens’ Asian Green City Index ranked us top last year. But rankings aside, Singaporeans and visitors can feel and enjoy this high-quality living environment for ourselves and for yourselves.

Marina Bay, where we are, is a good example of this transformation. Not so very long ago, this was at the mouth of a highly polluted Singapore river. In the 1970s, we decided to turn it into new city centre. This used to be ocean - we reclaimed the land, sewered up the whole city, shut down pollutive industries, cleaned up the Singapore River. We built Marina Barrage, turned the saltwater into freshwater, so that it can be used for potable purposes. We built Gardens by the Bay, a green amenity in the heart of the new downtown. Not as big as Hyde Park or Green Park in London, or Central Park in New York, but we hope with its own attraction and charm, and giving a distinctive character to our downtown. This will be a place that all Singaporeans can be proud of, identify with, and think of when we think about home, about Singapore.

It is not easy to transform a city. It needs long-term planning, careful execution, disciplined implementation and enforcement, because it is easy to sacrifice long-term objectives, environmental objectives, or urban planning objectives, for short-term advantage. It is difficult to rally political support for the right choices. Enforcing planning norms is not easy, acting against polluters is equally hard, and pricing resources like water and electricity which affect the lives of millions of people, is even harder. So our efforts to make Singapore our best home will never end. We have a population which is growing and we are now more exposed to beautiful cities elsewhere. Our expectations are higher, and there are more interests to balance, one against the other.

We may be a densely populated city, but we are determined to continue improving Singapore so that our people live comfortably and pleasantly, and so that this becomes one of the jewels in the tropics. We are building new and upgraded housing estates. We are improving our public transport – more train lines, better bus services. We are integrating more green spaces and blue waters into our surroundings. We have just opened Gardens by the Bay, but beyond such iconic attractions, we are making every corner of Singapore better, so that every township has its little parks, every region has its destination parks, offering something different. Active, beautiful waters, natural environments, an ecosystem of flora and fauna, a place where Singaporeans can go, can get a respite from the pressures of city life, can take in natural surroundings, and yet can feel that here, we are in Singapore.

So half of Singapore is green, which is quite remarkable for a city which has one of the highest population densities in the world. But while we improve our infrastructure and our greenery, we are also strengthening our social capital – integrating Singaporeans and newly arrived immigrants and foreign workers, preserving ethnic harmony, building a more compassionate society. This is what we have to do to make Singapore the best home for us all, and this is what we will do year after year, continuing to improve as we raise our standards step by step.

We have much to learn from other cities. This year New York was the Winner of the World City Prize. New York demonstrates how strong leadership and community participation can transform even mature cities and make them something distinctive. Conferences like the World Cities Summit, Singapore International Water Week and the CleanEnviro Summit are valuable platforms for us to learn and for all of us to exchange notes. The International Water Week will discuss “Water Solutions for Sustainable and Liveable Cities”, the World Cities Summit will examine integrated urban solutions, the inaugural CleanEnviro Summit will explore solutions to address environmental and waste challenges faced by Asia’s growing cities.

We are happy in Singapore to make a modest contribution to this international discourse. The Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) will release a Liveability Framework to share Singapore’s experience and our Urban Redevelopment Authority and CLC will launch a book “Cities in Transformation” to share the transformations of the World City Prize Laureates and Special Mentions.

I hope these experiences will prove useful to you, and we look very much forward to learning from others too.

So I wish you all fruitful discussions and an enjoyable stay, and I hope beyond your conference, you have a chance to visit our city, see what it looks like, see how things turn out in action, and particularly to visit our new Gardens by the Bay – it just opened, and it is not bad. So I wish you all the best in making our world a more sustainable and liveable one for all our humanity.

Thank you very much.

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