

Tripartism In Singapore

A STEWARD LEADERSHIP APPROACH TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

(COVID-19 CASE STUDY)



A collaboration between **Stewardship Asia Centre** and **Tripartite Collective**

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Preface

Stewardship Asia Centre (SAC) published “Tripartism in Singapore: A Stewardship Journey” in 2020. The report aimed to provide insights into the concept of tripartism in the Singapore context and identify the traits of success that underpinned the country’s model of labour relations between employers, employees and the government. The report also highlighted the nexus between stewardship and tripartism at multiple levels, from organisational policies, sectoral initiatives to country-wide measures and schemes.

A landscape study was initially conducted to establish the definition and origin of tripartism. This was followed by research into how Singapore cultivated an ecology for tripartism to flourish throughout the historical development of harmonious labour-management relations. Based on research findings and interviews with over a dozen leaders from the government, employer groups and trade unions, the report discussed the trajectory of Singapore’s key tripartite initiatives and policies.

THE KEY DEVELOPMENTS OF TRIPARTISM IN SINGAPORE INCLUDE:

- Labour law reform from the 1960s to the end of the 1970s to build the foundation of tripartism based on a collaborative rather than a confrontational approach.
- Modernisation of the labour movement by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in 1969.
- Launch of the National Wages Council (NWC) in 1972, the first tripartite platform that marked the institutionalisation of tripartism in Singapore.
- Introduction of SkillsFuture in 2015 to support Singapore’s next stage of economic advancement by providing lifelong learning and skills development opportunities for Singaporeans.
- Incorporation of the Tripartite Alliance Limited (TAL) in 2016, a company limited by guarantee funded by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the NTUC and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF), to continue promoting the adoption of fair, responsible and progressive employment practices, and also handle disputes and mediate employment issues.

The 2020 report further illustrated the link between tripartism, stewardship practices and sustainable economic development, through five case studies. These are:

- The Hydril Strike
- Leadership in Crisis
- Bus Contracting Model
- Banking on Tripartism to Advance
- Sustainability in the Maritime Industry

After distilling from these case studies and interviews, the report highlighted how Singapore put in place the building blocks integral to the country's tripartism model, which ultimately led to the protection and sustainability of its main resource – the people of Singapore. As an enabling mechanism, tripartism has forged a long-term harmonious labour relationship among the key stakeholders, guided by stewardship values. The case studies further showed how the lexicon of tripartism is deeply entrenched in both the business and political arenas, built under unique circumstances in Singapore's tumultuous history.

The report also noted the challenges that the Singapore tripartite model may face in the coming years. These include disruptions such as automation and climate actions, the rise of the non-traditional workers, changing composition of labour union membership and growing labour market disparity.

Despite these challenges, tripartism – a framework that took shape during Singapore's riotous years – remains relevant today because it fosters communication, builds consensus, and co-creates value and ownership among key stakeholders. These factors are evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of the report's publication in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was at an early stage, and its impact was not apparent. The pandemic would later advance to become a global crisis, closing borders, forcing lockdowns, disrupting economies and changing the way of life. More than two years later, economic activities are starting to resume, and life is gradually returning to normal.

For Singapore, the disruptions caused by a virus outbreak such as COVID-19 have further amplified the importance of stewardship in the tripartite model of building a resilient and compassionate business ecology that considers the needs of all stakeholders. Tripartism rooted in stewardship values is brought about by steward leadership, where everyone, driven by genuine desire and persistence, works towards creating a collective better future.

In this 2022 COVID-19 case study report, the focus is to illustrate how the principle-based tripartite mechanism, enabled by steward leadership, is crucial for stakeholders to respond swiftly in crisis management, obtain buy-in and feedback on new measures, and execute difficult decisions to navigate the pandemic crisis. The report showcases steward leadership in action and how leaders, anchored in stewardship values and purpose, are essential to ensure the smooth functioning of tripartism, especially in times of crisis.

Executive Summary

This report, “Tripartism in Singapore: A Steward Leadership Approach to Crisis Management (COVID-19 Case Study)”, explores how Singapore harnessed tripartism to navigate the COVID-19 crisis. It bolsters the 2020 report by providing an additional case study on the importance of tripartism and steward leadership during times of crisis.

Tripartism, at its core, seeks to create a positive-sum value for all stakeholders with a win-win-win outcome for governments, employers and unions. Stewardship is creating value by integrating the needs of stakeholders, society, future generations and the environment. It is an outcome brought about by steward leaders who have the genuine intent and persistence to create a collective better future. The nexus between stewardship and tripartism is evident with the common objectives of driving inclusive, resilient and sustainable growth.

This report illustrates how the various tripartite partners, guided by steward leadership, served as essential channels in disseminating information from the government, providing bottom-up feedback to policymakers, and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on employers and employees in Singapore. The report also discusses the implementation of COVID-19 advisories and provides insights into consensus-building amidst the uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

The case study offers a glimpse of work done behind the scenes during the pandemic, with examples of tripartism steward leadership in action. The tripartite leaders shared insights into the key priorities in tackling the initial impact of COVID-19 and the challenges in balancing the needs of both workers and employers. The tripartite partners drew on their experiences and stressed the key takeaways: trust and mutual respect, the importance of building social capital in peace time, developing Singapore’s existing ecosystem of help schemes, and embracing flexibility. The management of the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the collaborative spirit of the tripartite partners to navigate multi-level disruptions, reinforcing Singapore’s strong foundation of industrial relationships.

Nevertheless, challenges exist. The continual success of tripartism hinges on how the government, employers and unions tackle changing trends. As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, flexible and digital, companies need to adapt to be more resilient and agile. As long as the tripartite partners continue to sustain the foundation of strong industrial relationships, driven by a shared desire to create a collective better future for all, the report posits that tripartism will continue to play a crucial role in Singapore in a post-COVID world.

Introduction

3.1 Tripartism in Singapore

Tripartism has been described as the process by which governments, employers, and workers contribute to setting workplace standards and protecting workers' rights (Simpson 1994). The hallmark of an efficacious tripartism is the advancement of an environment that enables and realises decent work for all, made possible through effective social dialogue among the tripartite partners. An effective tripartite environment promotes sound industrial relations, social justice, liveable wages, decent working conditions, sustainable enterprises and inclusive economic growth.

Even though the concept of tripartism originated in Europe during the post-war years, it was the establishment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1919, immediately after World War I, which institutionalised and strengthened the concept of tripartism and the practice of social dialogue in many countries (ILO 2019). As defined by the ILO (2019), social dialogue is the democratic process in which people who are affected by workplace decisions have a say in the decision-making and implementation procedures. It takes many forms, including negotiation, consultation and information exchange between and among governments, employers' and workers' organisations on issues of common interests. It could also manifest as collective bargaining between employers' and workers' organisations for the purpose of dispute prevention and resolution. Social dialogue is postulated to be a strong driver of stability, equity, productivity and sustainable growth as it can help enhance working conditions and contribute to economic performance.

Along this vein, the Singapore model of tripartism has developed and evolved over the years, not only to keep pace with the dynamic macroeconomic trends but to build a competitive economy and inclusive society. Under this model, there is a three-way collaboration among the Singapore government, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), which represents workers, and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF), which represents employers from all sectors of the economy. It is developed upon the principles of co-ownership (stakeholder recognition), fair play and fair shares (stakeholder alignment) and productivity increase (achieving stakeholder goals). In other words, the efficacy and collaborative nature of this tripartite relationship can be seen as unionists "helping to make a bigger cake" rather than fighting for a bigger slice of the same small cake (Ang, Toh & Ong 2020).

The success of Singapore's tripartite model reflects the quality and unison in the leadership of the stakeholders. The robust and independent representation of NTUC and SNEF in formulating and communicating national labour policies and their consistent political will, trust, commitment and participation in tripartite institutions, such as the National Wages Council (NWC) and Tripartite Alliance Limited (TAL), fulfilled the preconditions for sound social dialogue. These prerequisites of effective social dialogue and tripartism helped foster an enabling environment for inclusive economic growth and a sustainable business ecology.

3.2 The Nexus between Tripartism, Stewardship and Steward Leadership

Tripartism is centred on the higher-value purpose of building an inclusive society that takes care of the welfare of its stakeholders. It is a prosocial stance that forges a long-term harmonious industrial relationship, mitigating tensions that threaten the fundamental pillars of a nation's well-being. It also nurtures a conducive business environment, strengthening the social contracts for responsible and sustainable value creation, thus enhancing the resilience of governments and organisations to tackle exogenous and endogenous shocks over the long run.

Stewardship is defined as creating value by integrating the needs of stakeholders, society, future generations and the environment. Achieving a collective better future for all stakeholders requires steward leaders who embrace and practise stewardship values. These values are explained below:

Interdependence

Central to the stewardship framework is the awareness that the world is an interconnected system. This concept is apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where no one is safe until everyone is safe. Steward leaders see the world as an integrated web where the success of each constituent is linked to other constituents. Looking beyond a zero-sum game, they develop a collective better future, and in the context of tripartism, this means a positive outcome for the government, employers and employees.

Long-term View

Steward leaders strategise for the long-term and are willing to forego short-term gains if quick wins jeopardise future growth. The creation of sustained value for current and future generations

has always been central to tripartism. This is exemplified in the tripartite partners' actions to forge long-term harmonious industrial relationships to mitigate tensions that threaten the fundamental pillars of Singapore's economic and societal well-being. It is also manifested in their emphasis on adopting inclusive approaches to foster and promulgate sustainable practices to ensure the resilience of businesses amid disruptions.

Ownership Mentality

Steward leaders imagine an inclusive, better future and take proactive responsibility to create it. Fundamental to tripartism is the co-ownership by the government, the union and employer groups to build a competitive economy and inclusive society for Singapore. During recessions, unions and workers accept wage cuts or wage freeze to help employers ride through hard times. Employers have also been fair, paying back workers when the economy recovered.

Creative Resilience

Steward leaders make learning, reflecting and tenacity a habit. Rather than giving up, they seek innovative solutions to challenging problems. The process of consensus building to resolve a major crisis, especially one with the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, is never smooth sailing. It calls for persistence to find innovative solutions through participatory and integrative dialogue structures across key actors at the national, sectoral and organisational levels.

Stewardship Purpose

Based on the above values, steward leaders adopt a purpose larger than themselves. By focusing on a purpose beyond personal or single-sided gains and being motivated by a goal to create a win-win-win future, steward leaders never give up. Similarly, the tripartite partners are focused on a higher stewardship purpose of building a collective better future for multiple stakeholders, society and future generations.

Steward Leadership Compass

Values and purpose aside, stewardship excellence and success also require leadership that is driven by genuine intent and persistence. Tripartite leaders with a stewardship mindset champion the values and purpose they espouse. The practice of tripartism in Singapore reflects steward-leaders acting in concert at the national level. At SAC, we advocate the practise of steward leadership through the Compass® as follows (Peshawaria 2020):



- 1 Integrate the four stewardship values (Interdependence, Long-term View, Ownership Mentality and Creative Resilience) with your personal and organisational values.
- 2 Based on these values, articulate your stewardship purpose to create a collective better future for a variety of stakeholders, society, future generations and the environment
- 3 Together the values and purpose form your Steward Leadership Compass®. Ensure everything you do during both calm and turbulent times is aligned to and governed by the Compass.

In conclusion, the nexus between tripartism, stewardship and steward leadership is in the shared principles and values underlying their objectives. Tripartism focuses on employers building harmonious ties with the workforce and the government to enlarge the economic pie for each stakeholder. Tripartism, driven by steward leadership and stewardship values, can have significant multiplier effects that lead to a win-win-win collective better future.

3.3 Data Collection

This report draws from literature review and interviews with leaders from the government, employer groups and trade unions who are active participants in tripartite engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. It illustrates how tripartite collaboration – driven by stewardship values and a principles-based tripartite mechanism – is the key to responsive crisis management and attaining a win-win-win outcome for all stakeholders.

The main approach of the case study is to encapsulate the quick response mechanisms that the government, employers and unions representatives established to preserve jobs and businesses while working to address longer-term challenges such as upskilling and reskilling. It also outlines the key events and measures implemented to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Singapore's economy, business ecology and workforce.

The interviews recount the concerns and challenges of stakeholders from different perspectives and illuminate the tripartite partners coming together to navigate roadblocks and explain their collective position to other stakeholders.

By applying the steward leadership lens, the report further examines the pivotal roles of the various tripartite partners in providing timely guidance to employers and workers to help ensure the successful implementation of COVID-19 measures and advisories.

The report concludes by highlighting the challenges and providing projections about the future of tripartism in a post-COVID Singapore.

Tripartism in Times of Crisis

4.1 Tripartism in Action: Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic globally and locally

The reach and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were unprecedented, extending beyond a health crisis and affecting the social and economic spheres significantly. At the height of the pandemic, the ILO Director-General Guy Ryder (2020) urged governments to collaborate with employers and trade unions directly to devise practical solutions to protect jobs and keep workers safe.

Bipartite and tripartite social dialogue

At the onset of COVID-19, many countries exercised peak-level social dialogue, defined as bipartite or tripartite conversations that involved governments and organisations of employers and workers, to achieve specific and visible process outcomes to offset the impacts of the pandemic (ILO 2020). An ILO study conducted in 2020 revealed that 133 out of 187 ILO member states made extensive use of peak-level social dialogue as a governance tool from mid-March to mid-June 2020 to shape emergency measures for mitigating the socio-economic impacts in the early months of the pandemic. Singapore is a member of the ILO. Around half of these 133 states utilised tripartite social dialogue to consult on measures for stimulating the economy and boosting employment, such as fiscal and monetary policies for rescuing businesses and jobs. More than 50 countries relied on both tripartite and bipartite

social dialogue to shape measures that support business continuity, jobs and incomes and protect workers at the workplace. A total of 177 guidelines, agreements or other outcomes were reached across all regions during the early months of the pandemic. They had been essential for designing tailor-made solutions and ensuring effective implementation of these solutions.

The ILO (2021) conducted a follow-up global study of social dialogue activity from February 2020 to January 2021. This study found that governments, employers' organisations and trade unions reached 381 outcomes, such as joint statements and agreements, in response to the crisis. Though most outcomes dealt with emergency responses and short-term measures, there was a shift in focus towards recovery responses that considered future-of-work trends. These include innovative policies and laws regulating remote work to support business digitalisation, protecting "gig workers", and extending social protection for women, youth, and the self-employed.

The studies underlined the significance of bipartism and tripartism in facilitating the design and implementation of social, economic and labour policies globally.

The following section examines specifically the critical roles played by the tripartite partners in Singapore during the pandemic.

Singapore's tripartite initiatives to mitigate local disruptions

Singapore's economy recorded a full-year GDP contraction of 5.8 per cent in 2020 – its worst recession since independence in 1965. The economy struggled to deal with both supply and demand shocks caused by a slowdown in major economies, global travel restrictions, supply chain disruptions, and the circuit breaker measures domestically from April to June 2020 (Rahmat, Ong & Thong 2021).

The magnitude of the economic and social impact of COVID-19 was felt across sectors, leading to the Great Jobs Loss. More than 190,000 jobs were lost between Q4 2019 and Q3 2021. Unlike previous downturns, COVID-19 affected the Singapore economy through five transmission channels during the earlier phases of the pandemic (Tan 2021). These five channels were:

- A sharp drop in international visitor arrivals and air travel, severely impacting the tourism and aviation-related sectors.
- The introduction of domestic Safe Management Measures (SMMs) and a drop in domestic consumption, affecting consumer-facing sectors such as retail, trade and food and beverage services.
- Weakened consumer demand and supply chain disruptions, dampening the performance of outward-oriented sectors like wholesale trade.
- The negative spill-over to other sectors such as commercial real estate.
- Manpower disruptions in sectors with a high dependence on migrant workers, such as construction and marine, as a result of outbreaks in dormitories, border restrictions and SMMs in workplaces.

The government drew on every available resource and rolled out four fiscal packages to battle the country's worst economic crisis since independence. These were the Unity, Resilience, Solidarity and Fortitude Budgets, putting aside almost S\$100 billion to support workers and businesses to counter the pandemic's impact.

Additionally, the tripartite partners assisted urgently in job recovery. In response to COVID-19's impact on the economy and labour market, the National Jobs Council spearhead the national effort to bring together jobs and skills opportunities under the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package to support local job seekers. As at end-February 2022, more than 188,000 local jobseekers have been placed into jobs and skills opportunities under the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package. The Government also introduced the Jobs Growth Incentive to support businesses to expand hiring of locals (Seow 2020).

The unions also played their part in managing and executing the NTUC Care Fund and Training Fund¹ for Self-Employment Person as well as Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme. SNEF helped administer the Enhanced Work-Life Grant to provide funding support for employers to implement Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), which were essential during the heightened SMMs.

Simultaneously, the various tripartite institutions stepped up their efforts to manage employment issues. While the NWC usually convenes on an annual basis, the NWC convened an unprecedented four times in two years across 2020 and 2021. The NWC also convened earlier than usual in March 2020 (just before the Circuit Breaker) to release the NWC Guidelines 2020/2021 to provide guidance to employers on how best to respond to the developing COVID-19 situation, by taking immediate steps to sustain businesses and save jobs before the worst was to come.

¹Fund comprises the Government's \$84 million SEP Training Support Scheme and a \$4 million top up from the NTUC Training Fund.

As SMMs forced businesses to pivot online, agencies under TAL had to make adjustments to digitally serve the community of employers and employees. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) organised webinars to guide employers on responsible cost-saving measures and fair retrenchment exercises, while the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM) piloted an Online Dispute Resolution process and a Phone Advisory option, which allowed disputes to be resolved without having to meet in-person. Other agencies like the Workplace Safety and Health Council (WSHC) shifted their engagement platforms online to conduct e-forums and webinars (TAL 2021).

To reinvigorate the labour market, NTUC, with the support of SNEF and Trade Associations and Chambers, initiated the Job Security Council (JSC) to better match retrenched workers with job vacancies. The initiative received a tremendously positive response with more than 4,000 companies from a range of industries — including multinational corporations (e.g. Rolls-Royce and GE Aviation), startups and small and medium enterprises — forming an ecosystem of companies to take in skilled workers who were displaced from other firms (Cheng 2020). At the time of writing, more than 10,000 companies form the JSC's network, with more than 32,000 workers having secured new jobs through JSC.



Tripartite Leaders Retreat 2022

4.2 The Steward Leadership Approach to Tripartism and Crisis Management During COVID-19

In examining the approaches undertaken to tackle the COVID-19 impact, the tripartite partners had to resolve several challenges while balancing the needs of both workers and employers. In this process, the tripartite partners embodied the values of Steward Leadership as they developed help schemes and created initiatives to combat the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. We look at the associations with the four values on the Steward Leadership Compass in greater detail below:

Interdependence

While differences may exist behind closed doors, the tripartite partners remained united and focused on the common goal of preserving jobs and businesses. Amid the uncertainties caused by the volatile nature of the virus, the partners needed to look beyond a zero-sum game to come up with a solution that would create a win-win-win for all stakeholders. Any decision-making would also need to be fast. The approach has to be pragmatic and based on mutual agreement, recognising the interdependency of the different constituents in the economy. This reciprocal approach adopted by the tripartite partners was made possible because of the accumulation of trust capital among the partners, built painstakingly over the years through open communication and mutual understanding.

Long-term View

The tripartite partners called upon employers to take a long-term view of their business by providing wage support to employees even when their operations were affected by SMMs that were necessary to control the pandemic. This long-term view also guided tripartite discussions as unions and employers were both prepared to make short term sacrifices to preserve jobs and capabilities for long term growth.

NWC, one of the key tripartite initiatives that played a pivotal role during the pandemic, continued to take a long-term approach when formulating recommendations and assisting the workforce. The NWC, in its various guidelines issued across 2020 and 2021, called on employers to adopt and implement the Flexible Wage System (FWS) to increase the flexibility of their wage structures and position their businesses for the long run. As the COVID-19 situation developed, the FWS proved to be a sustainable means of cutting

costs to save jobs rather than cutting jobs to save costs, creating a longer-term win-win situation to help organisations sustain competitiveness by retaining their employees.

Ownership Mentality

Since the start of the pandemic, the tripartite partners have formulated over 20 advisories to assist businesses and employees. Each tripartite partner took ownership to quickly disseminate information from the advisories to their respective stakeholders to ensure a successful implementation. When faced with roadblocks, the unions and employer organisations conveyed timely feedback to the government, facilitating a bottom-up approach to fine-tune the various measures and subsequent advisories. An example of a pivotal advisory is one regarding the COVID-19 vaccination at the workplace. MOM, NTUC and SNEF held substantial discussions on developing vaccination guidance for employers, making adjustments gradually in alignment with the national position. The partners took a phased approach to guide employers in adjusting their HR policies, encouraging employees to get vaccinated and advising on work arrangements for unvaccinated employees. In taking proactive responsibility to develop guidance, the partners helped boost the overall vaccination rate at workplaces to more than 98 per cent. They also fostered communication and consensus-building that would eventually translate into trust capital. This trust resulted in employers and employees following the advisories even though they were not mandatory or legislated.

Creative Resilience

A conventional response by companies during economic downturns is to retrench workers. However, this measure is a last resort in Singapore. During the 2008 financial crisis, to avert massive unemployment, a consensus was forged among the tripartite partners in response to MOM's call to "cut costs to save jobs, not cut jobs to save costs". The idea was that once workers were let go, it would be tough to rehire and retrain again, making it even more difficult for businesses and the economy to rebound. Instead, companies should strive to keep their workers and upskill them such that they emerge from the downturn with a workforce equipped to meet demand when the economy recovers.

In an effort to ensure that benefits outlast the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government offered financial subsidies and extended the Jobs Support Scheme to the hardest-hit sectors such as aerospace, aviation and tourism. To preserve core capabilities and manage the excess manpower from these sectors, workers from affected companies were redeployed to other areas under the temporary redeployment programme. Traditionally, applications were required for workers to change employers. However, these processes were streamlined due to the urgency to redistribute excess manpower to other sectors that were short-handed, such as healthcare. This resulted in aircrews being redeployed to hospitals as Care Ambassadors, aerospace maintenance personnel sent to manage dengue fever cases, and hotel employees redeployed to supermarkets and as Safe Distancing Ambassadors (SDAs) patrolling hawker centres. This seamless redeployment showcased the creative resilience of the tripartite leaders, who innovated beyond conventional measures during an unconventional situation.

They pressed on despite the challenges, quickly adapting to resolve any challenges. All parties kept good faith in ensuring that employers adapted and workers remained employed, thus deepening mutual trust.

Stewardship Purpose

In his 2021 National Day Rally speech, PM Lee Hsien Loong stressed that Singapore needed to change gears for the workforce and economy to emerge stronger from the COVID-19 pandemic. He added that strategies should be focused on generating new growth, new jobs and prosperity for the future rather than drawing down the country's reserves continually to stay afloat (Lee 2021). He further emphasised that: "Economic growth is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It must be inclusive growth that benefits all Singaporeans, so that we can all fulfil our aspirations, and see our children live better lives than ourselves." This signalled the shared stewardship purpose among the tripartite partners. They not only have to balance the needs and aspirations of their constituents but to create favourable outcomes for all Singaporeans and their future generations. The practice of tripartism in Singapore reflects tripartite partners as steward leaders acting in concert at the national level. The successful implementation of the COVID-19 measures is also evidence of the efficaciousness of tripartism in Singapore.

Tripartism: The Challenges Ahead

Singapore's model of tripartism has helped the nation navigate the COVID-19 crisis effectively. However, this will not be the last disruption. One such challenge is in the area of future-of-work. As workers' expectations and profiles change, unions and employers must deal with more complex issues beyond bread-and-butter matters, such as reskilling and upskilling. Drawing insights from the interviews with tripartite leaders, businesses have been urged to re-evaluate work processes and create a conducive learning environment by collaborating with tertiary institutions to enable lifelong employability. There is also the difficulty of capturing the views of an increasingly diverse workforce, which include gig workers and freelancers.

In the 2020 report, non-traditional workers such as freelancers and self-employed individuals, were identified as a challenge to tripartism as these individuals may not have been captured under the tripartite set-up. However, the government has since worked closely with NTUC to introduce measures, such as the NTUC Care Fund and Training Fund for Self-Employment Persons and Self-Employed Income Relief Scheme, to help these individuals tide through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Engagement with NTUC platforms workers association, Feb 2022

As movement restrictions eased, all workers were allowed back in the office. Still, hybrid work styles and Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) are likely to stay. Such new ways of working may pose challenges in the workplaces and mental well-being of workers. Challenges such as diversity, equity and inclusion, fairness and sustainable arrangements are issues that will require the tripartite partners' close attention (Kropp & McRae 2022). The introduction of Tripartite Standard on FWA is promising, but concerns remain about the sustainability and ambiguity of hybrid work arrangements. The move to legalise the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFE) will give the authorities a wider range of options to ensure fair treatment at the workplace (Kurohi 2021).

The onset of COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of the workforce in various countries, and Singapore is no exception. The accelerated adoption of technology-enabled solutions in the workplace could exponentially increase the already rising rate of job displacement (Cheng 2018). This has created a paradoxical situation whereby organisations are set to reduce their workforce due to technology integration over the next few years. Still, some plan to expand their workforce for the same reason, thus widening the mismatch between skills and jobs (Phua 2020). This presents a challenge and an opportunity that the tripartite partners will undoubtedly have to work closely to develop innovative measures to resolve such a disruption.

Despite the challenges ahead, Singapore's unique tripartism framework is expected to continually play a vital role as a consensus-building and problem-solving mechanism to ensure the nation's economic growth and well-being. The tripartite partners have exemplified steward leadership values with a shared purpose of nation-building and ensuring sustainable economic prosperity. With each crisis management, the tripartite partners' synergistic relationships, underpinned by stewardship values and purpose, will serve the nation well in the years ahead.

Case Study: Tripartism and COVID-19

The Tripartism Booster: Protecting workers and companies from pandemic pains

It was March 2020, and rumours had started to spread that a lockdown in Singapore was imminent to curb the rapid spread of COVID-19, following the trend set by numerous countries around the globe.

This would go down in Singapore's history as the first time people's movements were controlled. With over 3.64 million resident workforce² here, Mr Then Yee Thoong, Divisional Director of the Labour Relations and Workplaces Division at the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), was worried.

In a matter of days, business operations across sectors could soon be crippled. With no work for them, would workers be put on no-pay leave or retrenched? Would employers be able to pay retrenchment benefits? He expected a medley of disputes to arise.

Right on cue, as if to warn him that his worst fears could soon be realised, he received a call from then Manpower Minister Josephine Teo. "Are we ready?" she asked.

Over at the labour movement, anxiety was also building up. When tourism started to tumble with the closure of international borders, a meeting between hoteliers, the hotel association, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union (FDAWU) was urgently scheduled.

Ms Toh Hwee Tin, Director of Industrial Relations at NTUC, thought back to her experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Believing that an avalanche of retrenchments

would soon happen, she set out to convince companies to save jobs by cutting wages first. A whole deck of slides was prepared for precisely this purpose, but it had been overtaken by events.

"The hotel owners told me they did not want to look at our slides! Rather, they wanted to focus on how to preserve jobs," said Ms Toh. An MOU was signed on the spot where the different parties agreed that redeployment would be the first line of defence.

Raging Infection: Diagnosing Manpower Symptoms

The world was spinning for the tripartite partners (government, unions and employers), as COVID-19 was a global health crisis like no other – not even the SARS or H1N1 (swine flu) pandemics came close in magnitude.

SARS was eradicated from Singapore in four months in 2003 with 33 deaths, while the cases of H1N1 were largely mild during the 2009 pandemic with 18 reported fatalities. As for COVID-19, three months after the first case was detected in Singapore, the virus went viral despite an intensive contact-tracing operation. At the time of writing, the world is currently in its third year of the pandemic, albeit in a far more manageable state.

The unprecedented crisis caused great uncertainty. "Before the circuit breaker and the escalation of the COVID-19 situation, our prior experience from SARS and H1N1 has been that

²Residents refer to Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents, Summary of Labour Force 2021.

within six months or less than a year, we would tide it over and declare the outbreak resolved,” said Mr Edwin Lye, Assistant Executive Director at the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF).

“Hence, initially some of our response was to ride it through, that it would be a short speed bump. But when we hit the Circuit Breaker, we realised that those prior experiences could not be used and that we had to rewrite everything.”

As the tripartite partners scrambled to diagnose the manpower symptoms that emerged – from remote work to retrenchments – they also had to come up with new protocols on the fly.

Going Viral: The Great Jobs Loss

Eventually, the pandemic led to the Great Jobs Loss. More than 190,000 jobs were lost between Q4 2019 and Q3 2021 – the biggest job loss in the history of Singapore, though buffered by the non-resident workforce that continued to contract due to border restrictions. The overall employment decline was higher than even during the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, 2001 dot.com bust and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and 1998 saw employment drop by 42,100, while the dot.com bust in 2001 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and 2009 claimed 79,500 and 13,800 jobs respectively (Chua & Leong 2021).

In this crisis, severely hit sectors were aviation, hospitality, Food and Beverage (F&B), retail and construction. With borders shut and people made to stay home, planes were grounded, shops were shuttered and businesses that thrived on tourism saw revenues plummet. Companies also had to endure multiple start-stops caused by changing SMMs and dining regulations, and disruptions to international supply.

As with previous crises, Singapore yet again swooped in with a rescue plan to counter a sudden recession. To keep the economy afloat, the government offered COVID-19 relief packages to workers and employers in 2020 and 2021 to the tune of nearly \$100 billion, or almost 20 per cent of Singapore’s GDP.

Despite the financial bailout, the biggest challenge for the tripartite partners over the last three years (from 2020 to 2022) had been to balance the needs of both workers and employers.

- **Employers:** In the early days, SNEF was bombarded with a three-fold surge in queries from employers, to about 600 a month. Many were grappling with excess manpower, wondering if they should cut jobs or wages.
- **Unions:** Workers were naturally worried about losing their rice bowls, including foreigners. When the Malaysian government announced sudden measures in March 2020 to restrict movement, including banning overseas travel, many who used to daily commute across the Causeway to work here found themselves homeless overnight. There was also the issue of employees’ mental wellbeing. The NTUC had their hands full.
- **Government:** One challenge for MOM was operationalising the guidelines introduced by the Multi-ministry Task Force Tackling COVID-19 to businesses and the unions. Even the Job Support Scheme, which provided wage support for local employees as part of COVID-19 relief, became contentious. There was the question of whether companies had to disburse all the money to workers. But what if the business was barely staying afloat as revenue had hit zero but overheads remained?

This resulted in many long meetings that lasted past midnight and even through weekends. Hours could go into fine-tuning a particular paragraph. But the tripartite partners knew that they were all in the same boat. “Our mindset was that we needed to

look at the issues at hand objectively and to solve them without sinking the boat. We took a problem-solving approach and were not driven by emotions and ground politics,” shared MOM’s Mr Then.

While there were expected disagreements behind closed doors, the tripartite partners remained united in their objective of preserving jobs and businesses.

Pandemic Pivots: Challenges and Solutions

Together, the tripartite partners would formulate some 20 advisories over three years on a wide range of topics, including retrenchment benefits, salary, leave, vaccination and mental well-being of workers. Hundreds of frequently-asked-questions (FAQs) were also created for smaller issues. In comparison, just one to two advisories were released during SARS and H1N1.

Beyond the advisories, a key plank was the NWC, comprising tripartite representatives. It was urgently convened, right before the circuit breaker, to address concerns from all parties. The unions were determined on protecting workers and SNEF had to safeguard the interests of employers, but there was an unspoken understanding that neither could survive without the other.

This common ground was captured in the NWC 2020/2021 guidelines, published on 30 March 2020. It recommended that employers focus on training and upskilling workers, management to lead by example when cutting wages, and retrenchments to be considered as a last resort. Meanwhile, workers were urged to support their employer’s cost-cutting measures to save jobs, and the unemployed should take advantage of training support schemes to upgrade their skills.

The tripartite council would re-convene again in August 2020 to further mitigate the impact of COVID-19, providing updates on how to minimise

retrenchments and encouraging the implementation of the Flexible Wage System as the pandemic dragged on. There was no one-size fits all solution, as the pandemic affected industries differently.

Even when the economy started to recover in 2021, it was uneven across industries, noted Mr Sim Gim Guan, Executive Director at SNEF. A level of flexibility was necessary in the updated guidelines. “For instance, companies still suffering were advised to continue with the earlier guidelines while those who were doing better were encouraged to start thinking about rewarding their workers,” he explained.

Below are some pain points that the tripartite partners had to resolve:

Excess manpower

As business in industries such as aerospace, aviation and hospitality slowed tremendously, workers from affected companies were temporarily deployed to other sectors. For instance, hotel employees were redeployed to supermarkets and as Safe Distancing Ambassadors (SDAs) patrolling hawker centres, while aerospace maintenance crews were redeployed to manage dengue fever. This was done in speedy fashion, sometimes taking just days.

“In the past we had to apply for workers to change employers, but this round, because of the severity and urgency, the tripartite partners understand that we needed to remove bottlenecks and bureaucracy,” said Ms Sylvia Choo, Director of Unions at NTUC, who represents workers in the aerospace and aviation sectors.

For those who could not be redeployed, they were sent for re-skilling under national skill-building programmes. There was also a collaboration with MOM to roll out the Training Fund for Self-Employed Persons (SEPs), to supplement their income and prepare them to be future ready through skills upgrading.

Local versus foreigner

There were cases of local workers complaining that their wage cuts were too high, wondering why companies did not differentiate between locals and foreigners. Employers, however, rebutted that they were trying to support all workers equally, shared Mr Hao Shuo, Director of Labour Relations and Workplaces Division (Operations Policy & Planning) at MOM.

Companies were encouraged to support all workers if they could, but if wage or job cuts were needed, it should be done objectively. For instance, if the business division that is hit most severely comprises largely local workers, naturally there was no escaping pay or job cuts for Singaporeans. The same principle extends to foreigners.

“Employers have to make the necessary wage adjustments based on the contributions of their workers, which could depend on who is working and who is not. While we sympathise with our locals who don’t have a fall-back plan like the foreign workers, we didn’t want to create more division at the workplace because of nationality or residency status,” explained Mr Hao.



NTUC National Ordinary Delegates Conference 2021.

Job Support Scheme (JSS)

With the JSS, the point of concern was how much should be given to workers. The initial perception by employers was 100 per cent had to be used as wage subsidy – which means given to employees in the event of wage cuts, so that they continue to enjoy the same salary. But some companies found it tough, as they needed the funds to survive instead.

Hence, in June 2020, an advisory was put out by the tripartite partners on salary and leave, with a paragraph noting that employers facing financial difficulties with poor business prospects will be allowed to use the JSS payouts to cover some fixed overheads.

That gave business the assurance that they had some leeway on how to use the JSS payouts to keep their business running. At the end of the day if the business fails, it is a lose-lose situation for both the business and the employees,” said Mr Lye from SNEF.

Vaccination Differentiated Safe Management Measures (SMMs)

This prohibits non-vaccinated workers from returning to the workplace, a prickly issue that the tripartite partners had to deal with sensitively – as vaccination is, after all, not mandatory. SNEF, for instance, engaged employers to understand the concerns of unvaccinated individuals and to detect hot spots – companies with a lot of unvaccinated individuals. Despite the upheavals and uncertainty, overall vaccination rates at workplaces grew to more than 98 per cent, which facilitated the implementation of vaccination differentiated guidelines.

Tripartism Playbook: Lessons Learnt

Eventually, the employment outcome over the last three years was better than expected – retrenchments were kept below the levels of previous crises and labour disputes were almost non-existent.

How did Singapore achieve this outcome and why did businesses work together with unions? The answer lies in understanding and seeing the role of companies and businesses through a stewardship perspective. There was a recognition that surviving the crisis depended on the collective success of all parties. The partners acted with a long-term view, working to keep as many businesses afloat and workers employed as possible, while training them to keep up with changes to the work landscape.

There are four key takeaways from how the tripartite partners handled the pandemic:

1

Trust and mutual respect is imperative

These are especially important when handling a national crisis. With these in place, legislation is not always needed to ensure things get done. For instance, employers and workers were following the advisories put out by the tripartite partners even though they were not mandatory.

“When COVID-19 hit us and we had to sit down and work on advisories, we could speak on behalf of each other. The unions could understand the employers’ perspectives and employers could also appreciate what the unions want... It wasn’t a case where a partner had to compromise on its position. All three parties came together to speak the same language and explain the collective position to the other stakeholders,” said Ms Cham Hui Fong, Deputy Secretary-General at NTUC.

Dr Tan See Leng, Minister for Manpower, added: “Singapore’s industrial harmony, economic

resilience and overall success are all built on the core principles of tripartism – fair play, shared productivity growth and “3 Wins” mindset. Beyond this, the trust and mutual understanding established amongst NTUC, SNEF and the Government is critical to ensure that the partners move as one, be it in battling crises or riding on opportunities. Such strengths have led us through many crises, and COVID-19 will not be the last fight. We must continue to work together to protect the interests of our workers and employers, push ahead for inclusive growth, and espouse the strong tripartism values that our pioneer leaders have built over the decades.”

Build up social capital in peace times

Due to the strong foundation of tripartism, issues could be resolved quickly. There were many informal phone calls and text messages that helped move things along on top of formal meetings. And this was made possible because the tripartite partners continued to strengthen their relationship during ‘peaceful times’, shared Mr Lye of SNEF.

“The harmonious relations ensure that there were no gridlocks as all partners were able to see things from each other’s perspectives,” he added.

Mr Ng Chee Meng, NTUC Secretary General, said: “Tripartite cooperation has always been strongly linked to the development of Singapore’s politics and economy. Tripartism has helped boost Singapore’s economic competitiveness and promoted harmonious labour-management relations, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. NTUC and our tripartite partners have worked even closer during the pandemic to protect and uplift workers of various segments, pushing for training and transformation as we progress towards building a vibrant Singapore

2

workforce that is competitive and sustainable. I am confident that active tripartite collaboration can continue to help protect, enable and care for our workers, and cushion the impact on business, to make our vision of industry 4.0 and worker 4.0 a reality.”

3

Develop ecosystem of help schemes

While the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and many previous responses were not relevant, there were a few that were adapted to the circumstances. This includes training schemes with subsidies, which helped employers retain their workers and allowed workers to upskill in preparation for economic recovery, as well as cash grants to employers to retain workers. Both approaches were introduced during the 2008 financial crisis.

According to a report released by the Ministry of Finance in February 2022, the various initiatives introduced in the last two years have helped more than 378,000 workers secure training or employment opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Elangovan 2020).

4

Embrace flexibility

Some positive outcomes also emerged from the pandemic including the increased willingness of employers to implement flexible work arrangements. The Conditions of Employment 2020 survey conducted by MOM found that the proportion of firms offering at least one formal flexible work arrangement rose from 53 per cent in 2019 to 78 per cent in 2020 (Ng 2021).

In 2021, 73 per cent of companies that adopted flexible work arrangements said they were likely to continue offering them post-pandemic (Gan 2022). Today, one in four employees work in companies that have adopted the tripartite standard on flexible work arrangements.

The Future of Tripartism

The changing expectations and profile of workers – from the desire for greater work-life harmony to having more Professionals, Managers and Executives (PMEs) – will require the tripartite partners to continue to balance the needs and aspirations of its constituents, said Mr Hao from MOM.

Unions and employers will need to think beyond bread-and-butter issues to more complex issues like reskilling and upskilling. As Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat mentioned in his speech at SNEF’s 40th anniversary, the virus has accelerated global structural shifts – such as the digital revolution, environmental sustainability, and a premium on resilience. Going forward, what will be key is not just enabling lifelong employment but also “lifelong employability”.



SNEF 40th Anniversary 2021

Dr Robert Yap, SNEF President, said: “The COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of Tripartism in Singapore as the Government, Labour Movement and Employers worked together to cut costs and save jobs while transforming businesses and the workforce. With the worst of the pandemic behind us, we can focus our attention on manpower challenges brought by digitalisation, globalisation, climate change and demographic changes. Therefore, SNEF and our tripartite partners will have to work even more closely together to co-create a Singapore economy that is competitive, sustainable and inclusive, leveraging the industrial harmony and the strong foundation of mutual trust that we have built up over the years.”

For companies, it will not be business as usual after the pandemic. They will need to relook work processes and create a conducive learning environment, and this is something SNEF is encouraging through collaborations with tertiary institutions. The Federation is also advocating flexible wage systems where employers can reward employees in good times but in bad times, cut back on variable components.

As the profile of workers get more diverse, there is also the growing challenge of representing the

views of more groups, such as gig workers and freelancers. There are also some employer segments that might not be getting sufficient representation, such as small and medium-sized enterprises, even though they employ about 70 per cent of the local workforce.

“The question is how do we piece together the different perspectives and find a common landing, or the sweet spot,” said Ms Cham from NTUC.

WHAT IF

More failed companies, more retrenchments and even a strike or two – this chaotic scene would have played out in Singapore without tripartism.

While there was a spike in disputes during the early stages of pandemic, the majority of them were from individual workers. Only a few were collective disputes bought forth by the union. Only one dispute made it to the Industrial Arbitration Court and was settled through mediation.

In comparison, numerous strikes have occurred and continue to take place overseas in protest of various governments’ handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The more recent was in France, where thousands of teachers took part in the one-day strike in January 2022,

forcing the closure of hundreds of primary schools (Chrisafis 2022). Teaching unions said the government was failing children with a disorganised approach that provided insufficient protection against infection for staff and students.

Such strikes could have happened here too, if not for the tripartite partners who collaborated rather than confronted one another.

Summing up Singapore’s tripartite approach, MOM’s Mr Then said: “We don’t let emotions run wild. Despite the emotions on the ground, if you are able to articulate a reason and explain in an objective way, whether they are unionists, employers, workers or the government, they are always prepared to look from the other perspective.”

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ABOUT THE TRIPARTITE COLLECTIVE (TC)

Jointly set up by the tripartite partners, Ministry of Manpower (MOM), National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF), the Tripartite Collective (TC) aims to strengthen the spirit of tripartism in the community by fostering trust and socialising stakeholders to the values and benefits of tripartism. The TC will bring together members from the tripartite community, academic, legal and media communities to exchange views and ideas on issues faced by employees and employers. Through the exchanges, the TC seeks to build relationships and develop capabilities within the community to further the development of progressive workplaces. To achieve these outcomes, the TC will commission research studies, conduct open dialogues and sharing sessions, and organise capability development programmes.

ABOUT STEWARDSHIP ASIA CENTRE (SAC)

SAC is a non-profit organisation established by Temasek, dedicated to helping business and government leaders, investors and individuals activate stewardship practices through research, executive education and engagement. We define stewardship as creating value by integrating the needs of stakeholders, society, future generations and the environment.

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