



Welcome Address by Vice-Chairman, Dr Chew Tuan Chiong
ASIA PACIFIC FORUM AGAINST DRUGS
(“APFAD-WFAD @ SINGAPORE 2019”)

7 NOVEMBER 2019, 9.10 AM

Guest of Honour, Minister for Manpower and 2nd Minister for Home Affairs, Mrs Josephine Teo;

International President, World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD) and Co-Chairman of APFAD-WFAD, Mr Esbjorn Hornberg;

Director, Central Narcotics Bureau, Mr Ng Ser Song;

Colleagues and Distinguished Guests

1. A very good morning. Welcome to the inaugural Asia Pacific Forum Against Drugs that is co-organised by Singapore’s National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) and the World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD). To all international delegates, a very warm welcome to Singapore.

2. Before I begin, our Chairman of NCADA, Mr Hawazi, sends his apologies for not being able to join us due to his diplomatic duties.

3. But as I entered the room, I am heartened to see so many likeminded participants gathered in Singapore, from all across the world. In fact, I understand that we have friends from 18 countries with about 200 delegates with us today.

4. Notwithstanding the rich diversity of culture, language and practices, I believe that all of us share a common goal. Over the course of the conference in the next two days, I’ll like to

encourage everyone to record and share what we have learnt, and on your own your social media accounts, caption “Towards a #DrugFreeWorld”. Because, *this* is our call to action, this is a united call and we are only as strong as we are unified.

Purpose of such a platform

5. Why are we here today? To give substance to the common goal of A DrugFree World, we started the Asia Pacific Forum Against Drugs in 2015, to create a networking and thought leadership platform for the anti-drug community. This is the platform to share best practices, lessons learnt, and an opportunity to update each other on local and global developments, even as they unfold. As we work towards our common goal and forge a stronger anti-drug community, let us use this platform to amplify our voice. Raising the prominence of the Drug-Free message is worth every effort.

Significance of the collaboration with WFAD

6. NCADA had two successful runs of the Asia Pacific Forum Against Drugs, in 2015 and 2017 respectively. This year, we decided that it is timely to scale up and collaborate with an international partner in the form of WFAD.

7. Together, we believe that we can better reach out to our Asian and Pacific counterparts, pool resources and collectively emphasise the urgency and the need to focus on the preventive drug efforts in this part of the world.

8. After all for drug prevention efforts to be truly effective, it is clear that close international collaboration is vital.

Significance of Singapore’s Zero-Tolerance Stance – Our Strengths & Vulnerabilities

9. I am sure many of you are aware that Singapore has very busy borders, being a major transportation, trading and tourism hub. Our central location places us in proximity to illicit drug

manufacturing hotspots. Which is why, for many years, there has been a firm national consensus of the Government and the people that we take a tough stance towards drug trafficking and drug abuse. In fact, for travellers to Singapore, you would be greeted by an announcement about the severe penalties for drug offences in Singapore!

10. Allow me to highlight briefly the significance in our national drug-control strategy, which focuses on Prevention, Enforcement, Treatment and Aftercare. This is not unique, and it is not fool proof as a strategy as much as we endeavour to make it to be. But this drug-control strategy expresses the close partnership between the Singapore government, NGOs, and the community, without which, it could not be effective. The Singapore model demonstrates how this tripartite configuration can and must work hand in hand.

11. Unfortunately, we are now sailing into headwinds. The pro-drug narrative and very shrewd tactics to convert non-drug users to pro-drug advocates is alarming. It is therefore critical for Singapore to maintain our zero-tolerance stance, as this undergirds our strengths and vulnerabilities as a small nation.

Socio-Political Significance of the nexus between civil society and state

12. A zero-tolerance stance is not always the most popular position to take, however. But why are we so serious? Some might ask. Well, as mentioned, Singapore is a small island City-State with a total land area of only 721.5 square kilometres, with a relatively large population of 5.8 million people. The zero-tolerance stance has worked well with us so far. It is the sweet spot between state involvement and civil society activity. This nexus allows the national strategy to work, strikes a fine balance between economic and social needs and most importantly, it protects the vulnerable sections of society.

13. In our case, NCADA as an advisory council to the Home Affairs Ministry on drug abuse matters, works and serves as a conduit, connecting government and the community. It is our goal as NCADA to generate a public resonance with the anti-drug cause, to build awareness and create public advocacy. In other words, we try to create mindshare amongst our people, and we hope that

one day, our Drug-Free vision for Singapore will be realised together with you; not just here, but throughout as much of the rest of the world as possible.

Dichotomous Significance of Liberal Ideology and Value Consensus in Asia

14. Even as we contend with many social causes and concerns today, such as climate change and rising inequality, the world drug situation is indeed demanding increasing attention. The strategy we have adopted has worked so far, but we know not to be complacent.

15. We are ill at ease when we see pro-drug lobbyists advance and gain ground, be it over territories, in pop culture and even in social media. In our nationwide drug perception survey, we found that young people had increasingly liberal attitudes towards drugs. They were more willing to experiment with what they perceived as, in inverted commas - ‘softer drugs’, in order to experience something new, or even to quote an anonymous young University-going survey respondent, “*to find out what it feels like to be high*”. In other words, we are seeing a growing number of young non-drug users being tempted and falling into a vulnerable category.

16. Suffice to say, we are entering an ideological war, a war that we’re not prepared to lose; in fact a war that we *cannot* afford to lose, or we will create a negative ripple effect in society. We need to appeal to higher human values, that we laud in collectivistic cultures. Why risk and give up your pursuit for success, family bonds, and ultimately, happiness, in exchange for a moment of indulgence?

17. We are now in the midst of developing a fresh anti-drug narrative, and my colleague, Ms Elaine Loo, who leads our media campaign, will be sharing more about NCADA’s efforts later today.

Conclusion

18. Finally, it is my hope that you leave this Forum with a greater understanding of different countries’ experiences and approaches to drug prevention and community action. To this end, let

me urge you again to take every opportunity to ask questions, participate in the panel discussions, network during breaks and take away as much as you can from all the speakers and delegates over the next day and a half.

19. To our foreign guests, especially first-time visitors to Singapore, please also take in the sights and sounds of Singapore. If you don't already know, we're hosting this event in the rather iconic integrated resort, Marina Bay Sands, featured quite prominently in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*. We are also next to the breath-taking Gardens by the Bay, a filming location for the Golden Globe and Emmy Award-winning HBO sci-fi series, *Westworld*.

20. That's a little advertising for Singapore. On behalf of the organising team, I hope that all visitors thoroughly enjoy your stay here.

21. With that, I thank you all for your gracious presence here with us, and once again, welcome to APFAD-WFAD 2019.

22. Thank you.