

**Third South-South Study Visit to Singapore**  
**Skills and Knowledge for Sustained Development in Africa (SKSDA)**

June 21-27, 2009

**Welcome Address**

by Yaw Ansu

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Honorable Minister Balaji (Senior Minister of State, MFA);

Honorable Ministers, Distinguished Heads of Delegation and delegates from Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania and Rwanda;

Esteemed friends and representatives from Singapore partner institutions and organizations;

Colleagues from the World Bank,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you to this third study visit to Singapore. I wish to begin by thanking the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for graciously hosting us and for supporting this effort to foster Africa-Asia exchange under the Memorandum of Understanding which it signed in 2006 with the World Bank's Africa Region Human Development Department. With this support, as well as that of the Norwegian Government through its trust fund placed at the World Bank, we have been able to bring to Singapore a cumulative total of some 115 officials from ten African countries, including those present here today; these participants were accompanied by some 55 World Bank staff and nearly 30 guests comprising speakers, journalists and representatives from partner organizations. They have all come to participate in joint learning about the remarkable economic and social progress over the past few decades in our host country and in the Asia region generally.

Let me also express my appreciation to the distinguished participants in this study visit. You have all travelled long distances to be here and many of you have had very little rest since arriving. I am also aware that each one of you has important portfolios of work that cannot be left untended for long periods. Yet you have chosen to make yourself available for the week, to

devote yourself to learning about the role that skills and knowledge could play in Africa's sustained development.

Finally, I wish to thank our partners in Singapore for making this program possible. International Enterprise Singapore, an agency of the Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, is our collaborator for all three visits. Thank you for your constancy in this partnership! We are very happy to appreciate our joint work in designing the program with our newest partner, the Singapore Civil Service College. Needless to say, the maturation of the program culminating in the third visit reflects the impact of our collaboration on the previous two visits with the National Institute of Education, the Institute of Technical Education and Nanyang Polytechnic. We greatly value the continued support of these institutions and also look forward to other agencies and entities with which we will come into contact in the coming week.

One may ask: why return to Singapore again and again? To put it bluntly, what lessons can Africa learn about development from this small country, given the big differences in history, demography, geography, politics and so on? As an African myself, I can understand how this question might arise. Africa is indeed a world apart from Singapore. Despite the gratifying evidence in a number of these countries of faster growth in the decade leading up to the current unexpected crash of the global economy, Africa is still the place where most of the world's bottom billion lives—in chronic economic and physical insecurity. African policy makers thus grapple with very fundamental questions and challenges, for example:

- How do you break into today's global marketplace and compete successfully?
- How do you attract investments and leverage it to climb the technological chain?
- How do you expand productive employment opportunities for the growing number of young people entering the labor force year after year?
- How do you, in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural society, make all groups feel they have a stake in the common good?
- How do you prioritize among competing claims on public resources to create and sustain a climate for growth and poverty reduction?

These are enormous questions for which there are no ready-made answers. Yet I am reminded of the story of Singapore in its early days and how well it fits the image of the Little Engine that Could, a child's story about persevering against giant odds and overcoming them to deliver the goods. Fifty years ago, Singapore was a British colony doing a slow business in entrepôt trade, with a per capita income no higher than that of the capital cities of even the poorest countries in Africa today; and the country faced some of the same problems familiar to Africa: joblessness, ethnic conflicts, riots and the daily grind of a hand-to-mouth fight for survival. No-one could have imagined the transformation of the sleepy fishing village into today's cityscape; and no-one could have thought it possible for the country to join the ranks of developed nations, let alone to find itself among the world's top performers in competitiveness, in governance, in the quality of its labor force, and so on.

Veterans of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have produced a book entitled "The Little Red Dot" which refers to Singapore's small position on the map of the world. Yet if you read this book, you would be inspired by these officers whose efforts contributed to building the nation and enabled the little red dot consistently to punch above its weight. The country has certainly defied the odds and indeed attracted thoughtful reflections by various commentators on the lessons from its experience. Singapore policy makers are the first to point out the unique circumstances of their country's development. We from the outside must therefore distill and take stock of the lessons and see how the underlying principles might inform our own efforts in development.

With regard to the specific topic of this study visit, two books have inspired me, as Director of the Human Development at the World Bank, to continue supporting study visits to Singapore. The first is entitled "Heart Work" which contains chapters by veterans of the Economic Development Board, the agency formed to spearhead Singapore growth strategy. It tells the story of how the smart policies designed and implemented by dedicated men and women to respond to enormous challenges helped transform the country into one of the most skills- and knowledge-intensive economies in the world today.

The story goes deeper than a matter of policies and implementation, however. I also came to know about a second book, entitled "Dynamic Governance" which explains the institutional

mechanisms used in Singapore to achieve what can only be characterized as astoundingly successful economic management through the ups and downs of the past four to five decades. The main theme of the book is summarized in three phrases; look ahead, look across and look again. It encapsulates the discipline of scanning the horizon for changes in conditions that might require policy adjustments, of learning from others and collaborating across silos, and of ensuring that out-dated policies are systematically and unreservedly tested and renewed to retain their continued relevance.

Today's global economic crisis makes the lessons we may discover in Singapore during this study visit even more pertinent. Singapore has been hit hard by the crisis, with its GDP projected to decline by more than 8 percent in 2009 by some estimates. No-one knows how long or how deep this global recession will be, but we are impressed by the proactive efforts of the Singapore government to save jobs and businesses and to encourage a deepening and a diversification of skills in the workforce. Indeed, this focus on skills is a constant feature of the development strategy of this country over the past 40 to 50 years. As a result of a sustained effort over the decades, the country has one of the world's best ranked education and training system. It is a system that gives students a solid foundation in the early grades, one that offers them multiple pathways for educational progress and transition to the workforce, one that ensures a strong match between what the system graduates and what employers require to run competitive businesses, and finally, one that truly encourages life-long learning through its workforce development efforts.

Our first two study visits—in both of which I participated—have only whetted our appetite to learn more about the ingredients behind Singapore's successful approach to skills development, an issue that presents difficult challenges in most other countries and certainly in the African countries represented among us today. While the specific policies and programs used in Singapore may be inappropriate in the very different contexts in our societies, we can nonetheless seek to understand the principles behind them and reflect on how those principles might be infused into the interventions adapted to our own circumstances.

For the World Bank, this type of reflection is an important part of the knowledge exchange that it is positioned to foster. The idea of a knowledge Bank is indeed among President Zoellick's six top priorities for the institution. I am thus very grateful to the Singapore government for making it possible for the World Bank Africa Region to contribute to this institutional priority. I am particularly happy that our effort is responding to feedback from our partner countries from past study visits. They have placed a particularly high value on the sharing of experiences and knowledge exchange with development practitioners that these study visits foster and facilitate. The rich program that we are about to enjoy in the coming week promises to provide plentiful opportunities for interaction, both with veteran Singaporean practitioners and among us participants as well. It is my hope that all of us in the program will leave this place feeling a little more equipped and a little more inspired to do our jobs in helping to advance Africa's development agenda.

On this note, let me wish us all a fruitful time together. Thank you very much.