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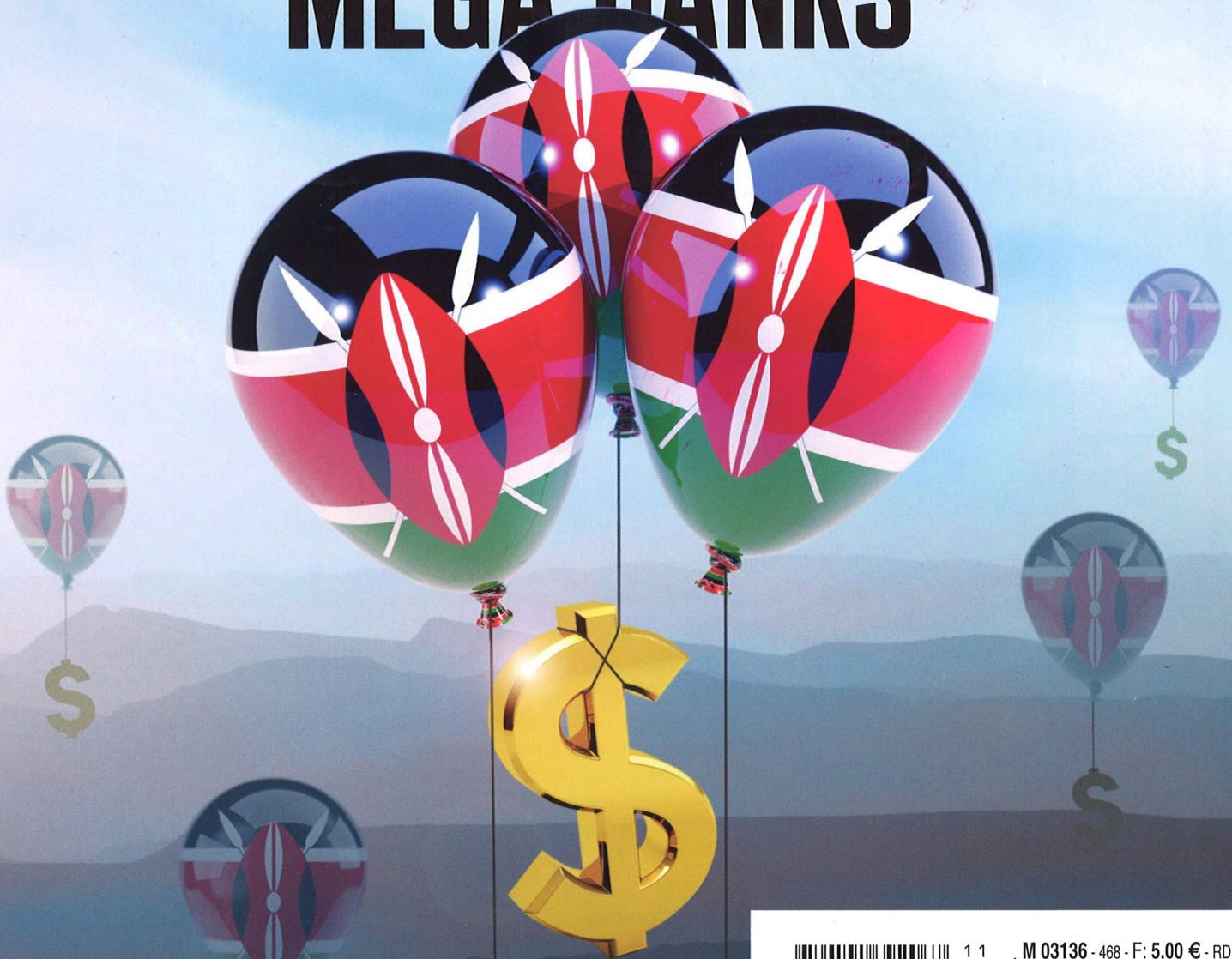
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Africa-Singapore Special Report

A blooming partnership

The Africa-Singapore relationship, from virtually nothing, has flowered beautifully over the past two decades as Singapore, acknowledged at the development champion of the world, has offered its unique expertise to the continent.

Africa, on the other hand, is also becoming an important market for this dynamic Asian Tiger economy as it grapples with the negative fallout from the current US-China trade war and political uncertainties in Europe. Singapore's recent flurry of activity in Egypt following President Abdel

Fattah Al Sisi's visit is a case in point.

Singapore, unlike most of Africa's other development partners, has been where Africa was in the 1960s and was faced with almost exactly the same development challenges. Yet it has managed to overcome its obstacles and is today regarded as perhaps the most successful 'self-made' economy in the world.

This makes Singapore a particularly valuable partner for Africa – its development model is not just airy theory but underpinned with solid

performance and delivery – exactly what African countries need. Many countries have established strong relations with Singapore, but there is still a lot of work to be done to sensitise even more countries to the opportunities Singapore offers.

African Business has been very much part and parcel of this blooming bilateral relationship since the first Singapore-Africa Business Forum in 2010 through its annual Special Reports acting as a major channel of communication between the continent and the Asian super economy.

Anver Versi



Overview

The Africa–Singapore relationship, which has been gaining momentum over the past decade, saw a spike in interest over the past few years as Singaporean Ministers and agencies have raised their profile on the continent and there has been an equal surge of interest from African leaders and the business community. Overview by Johan Burger.

Singapore – a respected, admired brand

With the creation of the Republic of Singapore in 1965, Africa was not high on the priority list of the Singapore government or the Singapore business community. However, over the last decade or so, the continent has become a region of interest for the Singapore government. Having said that, a number of Singapore corporates, and SMEs for that matter, have been active in Africa for quite a while longer.

Whereas the Singapore government initially hesitated to venture into Africa, its position has changed over the last few years. An increasing number of government ministers have visited the continent, including Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, when he was still Deputy Prime Minister, in 2018. This is an important development as the Singapore business community tends to take its cue from the government, all the more so since Africa is viewed as a continent with significant risks.

Singapore government institutions focused on supporting its business community to venture abroad are also expanding their presence in Africa. Enterprise Singapore (ESG) (formerly International Enterprise Singapore) now has, in addition to offices in South Africa (serving Southern Africa from Johannesburg) and Ghana (serving West Africa from Accra), a formal presence in Kenya, where it will be serving East Africa from Nairobi.

ESG has also beefed up its management presence in Africa with a Regional Group Director for Sub-Saharan Africa, Rahul Ghosh. According to Ghosh, Singapore is also looking at Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda and Tanzania, for growth. Egypt has taken on a new relevance following the visit of the North African country's

President, Abdel Fattah Al Sisi in 2015 (see pages 80–81).

The expansion of ESG's footprint in Africa is an important development. As a government institution reporting to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, its growth in Africa is a clear sign of the increasing importance of the continent for the Singapore government, and of its willingness to support its business community in Africa.

As part of its mandate, ESG has been hosting the bi-annual Africa–Singapore Business Forum (ASBF) since 2010. This development has subsequently led to the creation of the business-oriented NTU–SBF Centre for African Studies in Singapore.

ESG and the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) are also taking groups from the Singapore business community to many overseas destinations, including Africa, to expose Singapore business executives to the abundant opportunities available on the continent.

At another level, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) collaborated with the Central Bank of Kenya to launch the Afro-Asia Fintech Festival in July 2019, and signed a Fintech Cooperation Agreement to boost collaboration in the fintech space.

Another Singapore government company, CrimsonLogic, started working with Rwanda in 2014 to develop and support its e-government competence.

In Singapore itself, Singapore Cooperation Enterprise (SCE) and the Civil Service College support the training and development of many government officials and business executives from Africa. These officials are interested in learning best practices in the field of governance, housing, transportation, water management and leadership, to name but a few.

It is interesting to note that Singapore has been maintaining a healthy trade balance with Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The average exports to SSA amounted to \$5.75bn over 2010–2017, with the average imports over the same period amounting to \$1.55bn. This left Singapore with an average annual trade surplus over that period of \$4.2bn. One explanation for this state of affairs is Africa's inability (or unwillingness) to add value to its commodities before exporting. Crude oil, for example, is exported from Nigeria to Singapore where it is refined and then imported back to Nigeria.

Business presence in Africa

The scope and scale of the many opportunities for the Singapore business community in Africa are growing due to a number of factors – such as Africa's expanding population (2.4bn by 2050), a strongly developing consumer class and a rapid urbanisation (urban population will increase from 40% to 50% over the next few years).

Over the past few decades, Singapore corporates such as Indorama (petrochemicals), Olam (food processing), PIL (shipping and logistics), Tolaram (diversified, including food and construction), and Wilmar (food processor) have been very active on the African continent.

Some of them, such as Olam, actually had their origin in Africa. Olam started in Nigeria in 1989, and currently has a presence in 25 countries on the continent. Its business ranges from sesame seeds, coffee and cocoa to palm oil (see pages 86–87).

Tolaram has also been active in Africa for quite a few decades, and is currently teaming up with global giant Kellogg to manufacture and distribute Kellogg noodles in Egypt, Kenya and South Africa.

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Tolaram attracted Kellogg's attention through its immense success in growing and developing its Indomie noodle business in Nigeria, as well as its distribution footprint by means of Multipro, a distribution business selling food products throughout Nigeria. Kellogg bought 50% of the latter company for \$450m in 2015. Tolaram is also involved in developing the industrial park and the port of Lekki in Lagos, the economic capital of Nigeria.

Surbana Jurong (SJ), home builder, city designer and infrastructure improver, increased its presence in Africa significantly when it merged with SMEC

in 2016. SMEC, an Australian-based company at the time, had a strong presence in Africa. Among its other projects, it is involved in the massive infrastructure projects in Egypt (see page 80).

Other companies that have lately identified Africa as a market with great potential, include the likes of Asiatic Agriculture Industries (fertiliser and pesticides), Top International Holding (mining and trading) and Vega Foods (food exporting).

Smaller companies include Poultry East Africa Ltd, a poultry meat producer in Rwanda started by Singapore entre-

preneur Shumei Lam and her late father.

Another Singapore entrepreneur positioning itself in East Africa, is Red Dot Payment. In 2018 it signed a memorandum of understanding with Finserve Africa, a mobile virtual network operator in Kenya and subsidiary of Equity Bank (one of Kenya's success stories), to facilitate international e-payments for East African merchants.

Below: President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya and Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam of Singapore meet at the Afro-Asia Fintech Festival in Nairobi in 2019.



THE SCOPE AND SCALE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE SINGAPORE BUSINESS COMMUNITY IN AFRICA ARE GROWING

Overview



Various smaller entrepreneurs are also targeting Africa with unique and niche products. Gozem is a Singapore-based company with ride-hailing services in Togo and Benin (West Africa), and plans to expand into 15 more African markets within the next five years (see page 88).

The future

From an initial very low level, the interest in Singapore in Africa over the past decade has grown substantially. There is a growing awareness of the many opportunities in Africa as a market as well as a source of resources.

With a population that relies heavily on mobile phones for communication, mobile money platforms are used extensively in Sub-Saharan Africa (north of South Africa). E-commerce opportunities are growing and will continue to do so. Singapore (and ASEAN, for that matter) can also learn from the African experience regarding the levels of financial inclusion. Kenya has increased its level of financial inclusion from 40% in 2010 to 80% by 2017 by tapping into the benefits of mobile money platform, M-Pesa.

The number of startups in Africa is growing significantly as well, but they are struggling with funding challenges. As such they present good opportunities for private equity and venture capital companies. A prerequisite is that these

companies do their homework well before they get involved in Africa.

Africa's food imports are around \$35bn annually and set to grow to \$110bn within the next few years if nothing is done. It has immense infrastructure challenges (estimated to require between \$130bn and \$170bn annually), spanning transport (road, rail, ports, airports), housing, water and energy. With Singapore's proven technological competence, its corporates are well-suited to support the African continent in developing itself.

Africa has realised that it needs to add value to its products and commodities before exportation. This will hopefully create more job opportunities and lead to import substitution and greater revenues for the continent. Singapore serves as a great role model in this regard.

Africa has embraced renewable energy and energy from waste, such as has happened in Singapore. The latter issued a contract in 2015 for the building for its sixth waste-to-energy (WTE) plant.

Africa has started this with the building of the Reppie plant in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and a WTE plant in Cape Town in South Africa. The continent can learn from the Singapore experience and replicate this model of energy generation. Africa has a waste problem as it is, with millions of tons of waste generated daily, creating massive ecological problems.

Above: In Nigeria, a representative of Olam demonstrates a new data app to a farmer. Olam is one of a number of Singaporean corporates that are active across Africa.

In 2015, the Kenyan High Commissioner to Singapore said to a group of Kenyan executives that in 1965, Kenya and Singapore were at the same level of development. Her question to the group was what had happened and how does Kenya play catch-up?

This is a question many African governments should ask themselves. They should also ask how they can tap into the experience, knowledge and technology of Singapore to develop their governance, competence and economies in the same way Singapore has done.

Singapore, as a very open economy currently struggling with growth due to the negative impact of the trade war between the US and China, could do much worse than going to Africa.

The Singapore brand in Africa is respected and admired. The continent is ready to participate as a source of commodities (including value-added) and as a market for value-added products and services. The Singapore government is seemingly positioning itself to embrace Africa to a greater extent. We can expect the business community to increase its footprint accordingly. ■

In Conversation

Singapore's political, cultural and economic ties with Africa have been steadily increasing over the past decade and are primed to accelerate over the next one.

We want to be part of Africa's growth agenda

Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam

Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies, Singapore

What is the level of the diplomatic relationship with Africa and how can this be improved?

Our engagements date back to 1964, even before our independence, when Singapore's then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited 17 African countries for 35 days on a single trip.

These relations have deepened over time through regular bilateral visits and programmes such as the biennial Singapore-Sub-Saharan Africa High-Level Ministerial Exchange Visit (AHL-MEV) and capacity building programmes in Singapore organised by the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

I have had the privilege of making official visits to several countries in Africa in the last three years, most recently Kenya in July 2019, and will be visiting Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire in November.

We also welcomed President Uhuru Kenyatta to Singapore in September, to discuss how we can each help our continents come closer together. We also want our diplomatic ties to be built on solid areas of cooperation in trade and investment.

While there has been considerable expansion of Singapore investment into Africa since 2008, are you satisfied with the volume of commerce between the two?

Compared to 10 years ago, we now have an increasing number of Singapore companies doing business in Africa, complementing growing trade relationships.

Through my visits to Africa over the years, I have seen how our companies are also engaging in a wider range of economic activities, including Fintech.

We are now making a concerted effort to contribute to Africa's growth, which is underpinned by growing economic diversification, a young workforce, rapid ur-

banisation and greater political stability.

We also hope more African companies will look to Singapore as a gateway to Southeast Asia and the wider Asian region, given our strategic location and connectivity in this fast-growing region. For instance, Sahara Energy and Export Trading Group (ETG) have set up their Asia Pacific headquarters in Singapore to access the opportunities in the region.

Do you have training and other outreach programmes towards Africa?

Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosts different programmes under the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP), where we have shared with our African colleagues on topics including economic planning and development, education, social cohesion, and building public institutions.

Since the SCP began in 1992, more than 10,000 African government officials have participated in its various programmes. We also offer domain-specific programmes by specialised government agencies. For example, our Maritime and Port Authority offers an annual Port Management Programme for officials from port authorities that are keen to study our experience.

Could you outline the sectors in Africa in which Singapore has the greatest interest?

Singaporean companies have strong expertise in ICT, offshore and marine, and urban solutions, and are exporting some of these capabilities to Africa. Ascent Solutions, for example, utilises IoT, in the form of a smart lock, to track and secure cargo, which proved useful and effective especially in the transporting of cargo through landlocked African countries.

Sembcorp Marine and Keppel Offshore & Marine have successfully delivered Floating Production Storage and Offload-

ing (FPSO) vessels and jack-up rigs to support operations by oil and gas majors operating in Africa.

Surbana Jurong and its subsidiary, SMEC, are present in 24 African countries where they provide consultancy services for infrastructure projects, masterplan development and property management services.

But we have also succeeded in areas that Singapore is less known for. Asiatic Agricultural Industries, a Singapore-headquartered company specialising in crop protection, has been providing its solutions to several African countries, including Ethiopia and Ghana.

Singapore companies have also established brands which have become household names in Africa. Singapore-headquartered Tolaram manufactures a range of house brand food products and detergents in Nigeria (e.g. Minimie Chinchin snack, GoodLife Majik fruit drink and Hypo bleach), while Repi Wilmar produces soaps and detergents in Ethiopia.

Africa has the fastest rate of urbanisation in the world. How can Singaporean expertise support the continent in this movement?

We would certainly be happy to share our experiences of policy-making with Africa, and explore ideas with partners on the continent to address urban development challenges within their local contexts. We developed public housing for over 80% of our population, to provide quality and affordable homes, and also to promote social integration of our different ethnic groups.

Our companies too have worked with African partners to support their urbanisation efforts. Surbana Jurong was involved in the development of the masterplan for Kigali in Rwanda, which has

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become the foundation for the city's development.

Singapore construction companies, such as Well&Able and Archicom have commenced projects in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire respectively. Singapore-based startup, gridComm, is working with South Africa and Rwanda to implement smart street lighting solutions, which help to reduce electricity and maintenance costs.

What support can Singapore, based on its own history, give Africa in its industrialisation efforts?

The basic principle behind what happened in East Asia was not peculiar to electronics, or light manufacturing like textiles. It was the principle of clustering, or what economists called agglomeration economies. There are many benefits from concentrating on a certain area of activity: productivity growth, building skills that will be transferable from one firm to another, and diffusing technological innovation across the whole cluster. As more firms cluster together, they attract more suppliers and customers than a single firm could achieve alone. Economies of agglomeration can be exploited.

Even with a different set of industry specialisations, Africa can build on the same story of skills development, and working on cluster economics.

Our Singapore companies would be keen to be part of the African production ecosystem, and contribute to its development. Singapore companies such as Olam, Wilmar and Tolaram, have processing facilities in African countries.

Given that Singapore has a vibrant innovation industry, how can Singapore companies complement Africa's digital boom?

This year, the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Central Bank of Kenya co-organised the first Afro-Asia Fintech Festival, to bring together Fintech players from both continents to explore collaborations and spread innovative solutions.

African tech companies can also consider regional tech events like the Singapore Week of Innovation & Technology (SWITCH), to market their solutions. The number of African companies participating in SLINGSHOT, a Startup Challenge at SWITCH, will grow by three times from 107 startups in 2018 to 379 startups (to date) in 2019.

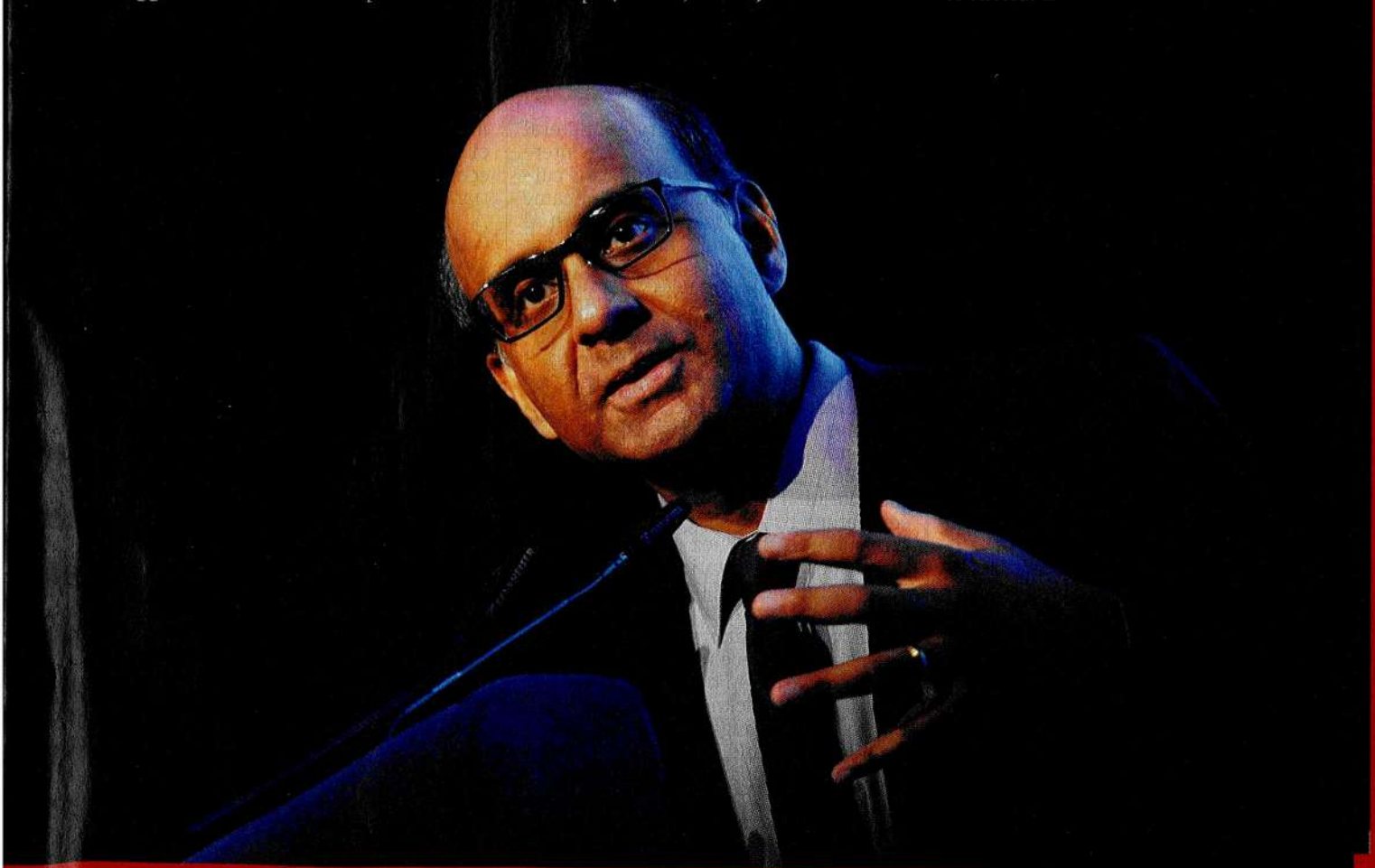
How ready are Singaporean companies to take advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)?

With the AfCFTA, I definitely see more opportunities for Singapore companies that are currently operating in Africa, but many businesses are still unfamiliar with how they can tap on this. I hope that there would be more outreach efforts by the African Union or the AfCFTA Secretariat to help companies better understand how they can fully harness the AfCFTA.

What should Africa do to encourage more Singaporeans – entrepreneurs as well as tourists – to visit various African countries?

Africa has a huge potential to be plugged in the changing global value chains. Tourism, both business and leisure, is another untapped sector with potential.

In 2017, Ethiopian Airlines established a direct flight to Singapore, making it the third airline connecting Africa and Singapore. I look forward to working with the African governments on the policy front to promote greater tourism flows and I encourage the private sector players to work together to enable travels to Africa. ■



In Conversation

The visit by Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi to Singapore in 2015 has given this old established relationship a new economic vigour and relevance as Egypt sets out on its massive development programme. Anver Versi was in conversation with Egypt's Ambassador to Singapore.

Al Sisi visit was the turning point

HE Mohamed Abulkheir – Egypt's Ambassador to Singapore

Some high quality reproductions of various ancient Egyptian icons – sphinxes, pharaohs and so on – occupy pride of place in HE Mohamed Abulkheir's office in central Singapore. "Organisations, schools and so on are always asking to borrow these when teaching about Egypt," he says.

This is hardly surprising. Interest in all things Egyptian, especially ancient Egypt, is as keen in Singapore as it is elsewhere in the world and ensures a steady stream of tourists to the North African country.

What did come as a surprise was when Ambassador Abulkheir told me that Egypt and Singapore had celebrated 50 years of bilateral relations in 2016. "Egypt was among the first counties to establish diplomatic relations with Singapore – just one year after its independence in 1965."

Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was then Egypt's charismatic leader and a very strong supporter of independence movements, warmly welcomed the fledgling state of Singapore to the free world and ushered its entry into the Non-Aligned Movement.

The embassy was established in 1966 and has become one of the major planks in the island nation's diplomatic platform. Another surprise was the deep relationship between the Al Azhar University in Cairo and Singapore's Muslim community.

"Thousands of them have studied at Al Azhar," said Ambassador Abulkheir. "Many became religious teachers and community leaders in Singapore. The relationship has recently been intensified to face the rising threat of religious ex-

tremism and terrorism – and to counter extremist interpretation of Islam and spread its true teachings.

The significance of this relationship was underlined when His Eminence, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Dr Ahmed Al Tayyeb visited Singapore in 2018.

Turning point

For most of the half century of bilateral relations, there was a constructive interaction in the political, economic and cultural fields, but "the turning point came in 2015 when President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi visited Singapore," said Ambassador Abulkheir. "This was the first ever visit by an Egyptian head of state."

President Al Sisi's visit set into motion a flurry of activity. His visit was reciprocated in 2016 by that of the then President of Singapore, Tony Tan, to mark the 50th anniversary of relations.

There were several delegations from both sides, including that of Dr Sahar Nasr, Egypt's Minister of Investment and International Cooperation who was accompanied by Admiral Mohab Mamish, Chairman of the Suez Canal Economic Zone, upon the invitation by Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Koh Poh Koon. They gave a presentation on the different incentives and potentials available to invest in Egypt.

This scaling up of bilateral interest reflects Egypt's acknowledgement of the effectiveness of Singapore's unique development model and its exceptional skills in infrastructure and urban planning.

Egypt has embarked on a massive infrastructure development project, includ-

ing the Suez Canal Economic Zone and the new administrative capital city which is expected to take the pressure off Cairo.

Egypt will lean on Singapore's experience in shipping and logistics to establish the Suez Canal Economic Zone as a regional hub and will look to Surbana Jerong's vast experience as urban planning consultants to develop a 33 sq km integrated economic city in Kom Oshim, close to Cairo. It will include factories, schools, housing, hospitals and a vocational training centre.

Singapore is also home to some of the world's biggest investment houses and Egypt, according to the Ambassador, is pulling out all the stops to make this North African country a magnet for inward investments.

Egypt, registering 5.6% growth last year, is projected to become one of the world's three fastest growing economies over the next decade. "The new investment code which came into force in 2017, provides more incentives and protection for investors," said Ambassador Abulkheir.

In addition to generous tax and regulatory incentives for investors in the economic zone, the country's geographical location will provide "a gateway from Asia to North and West Africa and Europe through the Suez Canal," said the Ambassador. The Singapore based Pacific International Lines (PIL) has already opened a logistics centre in Egypt and is considering expanding it.

New areas to explore

Among other attractions for investors, said Ambassador Abulkheir, is not only

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MANY MORE SINGAPORE COMPANIES ARE LIKELY TO SET UP SHOP IN EGYPT OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS



Egypt's population of around 100m, but market access other free trade areas such as member countries of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) block; countries like Tunisia and Morocco as part of the Agadir Agreement, the European Union and with the rest of the Africa once the African Continental Free Trade Area kicks in.

With the emphasis now solidly on the economic and developmental aspects, several areas of cooperation with Singapore have opened up. These include in public administration, water resource management, port management, education, civil aviation, vocational training, IT, e-governance and upgrading small and medium enterprises.

These are the areas that Singapore has excelled in and has been able to export to other countries in the ASEAN region as well as in Africa.

Attracting business

With the rapidly expanding scope of the bilateral relations and an increase in the frequency of mutual visits, many more Singapore companies are likely to set up shop in Egypt over the next few years.

Some prominent companies already active in the country include Olam which produces and exports dried vegetables and onions and is looking to expand its operations; BW Gas, a Norwegian-Singaporean outfit provides a floating gas platform; Meinhardt engineering company is expanding its regional office in Cairo; the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) is looking into the management of important ports, including a dry port at Sixth of October City outside Cairo.

Tourism is vital to Egypt's economy and although it has taken a knock following the political upheavals in 2011 and 2013, visitor numbers are increasing. Ambassador Abulkheir would like to see more tourism in both directions. He thinks that in addition to the attraction of ancient Egyptian civilisation, Egypt could become a hub for religious tourism given its Coptic and Islamic heritages. He is encouraged to see that Egyptian tour organisations are now offering packages to Singapore and believes this area will grow.

Old partnership reinvigorated

Although Egypt's relationship with Singapore goes back to the very beginnings of its life as an independent nation, it is over the last five years that a new economic energy has entered the equation. It has given a new life and vigour to the old partnership – one that both entities will welcome as coming at just the right time. ■

Interview

Guillaume Kavaruganda, Rwanda's second High Commissioner to Singapore, completed his four-year tour of duty in September this year. He talks to **Anver Versi** about the importance of this bilateral relationship to Rwanda's development agenda.

Singapore is a great model for countries like Rwanda

Guillaume Kavaruganda – Rwanda's outgoing High Commissioner to Singapore

When and why did Rwanda open an embassy in Singapore?

The High Commission of the Republic of Rwanda was officially opened in 2008, following the establishment of diplomatic ties between Rwanda and Singapore in 2005.

Besides the primary mission to strengthen bilateral relations between Singapore and Rwanda and enhance cooperation on the international stage, other key components of our mission are to promote bilateral trade and investment as well as foster technical cooperation and capacity building in areas critical in our development journey.

As the second High Commissioner to be posted to Singapore, I began my duty here four years ago in July 2015.

What do you see as your principal responsibility in Singapore?

My primary responsibility was to ensure strong and results-oriented bilateral relations in political, economic and technical cooperation between Rwanda and Singapore.

In that regard, the High Commission acts like a one-stop centre to facilitate and coordinate the above-mentioned cooperation.

Can you outline some of the main trade, development and diplomatic relations between the two countries?

Singaporean institutions have worked with Rwandan counterparts to develop technical capacities in crucial areas that include investment promotion, public service, aviation, good governance, TVET, ICT, social security and health.

In trade and investments, Rwandan exports to Singapore have grown in the

last five years from a few hundred thousand US dollars to to \$35m in 2018.

Standing at zero in 2008, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from Singapore to Rwanda has grown and reached about \$200m and steadily rising. Tourism has also been increasing at an average rate of 32% annually since 2015.

During the last six years, Singapore and Rwanda have formalised cooperation by signing bilateral agreements that include the Bilateral Investment Treaty for Mutual Promotion and Protection of Investments, the Bilateral Air Services Agreement and the bilateral agreement on the 'Avoidance of Double Taxation', as well as several inter-institution technical cooperation agreements in areas like Technical Cooperation, TVET and Air Accident investigations, to mention a few.

What would you say is Singapore's most important contribution to the development of Rwanda?

Singapore is a good model for countries like Rwanda that seek rapid economic transformation and the beauty of it is that Singapore is willing to share her best practices with countries that wish to understand and partner with them.

Over the years, Rwanda and Singapore have had technical cooperation in many areas that are crucial in Rwanda's development journey. Singapore has also help promote Foreign Direct Investments by signing the Bilateral Investment Treaty and Double Taxation agreements with Rwanda.

The reciprocal waiver of entry visas has also opened doors for trade, capacity building and business exploration between our two countries.

In what areas would you say you would like more activity from Singapore in the development of Rwanda?

We hope to improve the people to people relations by encouraging more Singaporeans to visit Rwanda and also establish cultural exchange programmes.

What can Rwanda in particular, and Africa in general, learn from Singapore's remarkable success?

Like Rwanda, Singapore places her citizens at the centre of their policies to ensure ownership of government programmes and place citizen welfare at the centre.

Do you think Singaporean companies have sufficient knowledge of African markets or can more be done, for example in demonstrating the advantages of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement?

The African Continental Free Trade Area was timely. It provides a huge opportunity for intra-African trade while providing a larger market for international trade partners. This will no doubt play a major role in Africa's transformation.

Bilaterally, there is significant progress in creating awareness of Rwanda in Singapore, although there is always room for improvement.

In 2015, we had about 240 Singaporean visitors to Rwanda; this increased to over 400 in 2017 and we expect about 520 in 2019. This hints on the progress being registered in promoting Rwanda in Singapore.

On the other hand, the Government of Singapore has contributed significantly to this effort by sending out dozens of government and business missions to all corners of Africa. Therefore, I would say

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the trend is good, we only need to build on it to achieve more.

Regarding business, there wasn't a single Singaporean-owned business in Rwanda by 2010; today, there are over 30 large, medium and small Singapore-owned companies registered in Rwanda.

Do you anticipate an intensification of the bilateral relationship over the next five or so years?

Definitely so. Rwanda and Singapore signed the Bilateral Investment Treaty and Bilateral Air Services Agreement

Guillaume Kavaruganda and his wife, Mdm Alda Ntezilizaza, greet Tan Sam Chin Siong, now Singapore's Minister of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Social and Family Development, as he arrives at the Rwanda High Commission in Singapore.

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT FROM SINGAPORE TO RWANDA HAS REACHED ABOUT \$200M

when Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam visited Rwanda last year, which will pave the way for deeper bilateral cooperation with particular emphasis on investment and aviation-related services in the near future.

2020 will be an exciting milestone for Rwanda, as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) will be held in Kigali on 22 June 2020. It is a recognition of Rwanda as a valued contributing member on international affairs, and we look forward to welcoming world leaders to Kigali. ■



In Perspective

My African journey

By **Venkataramani Srivathsan**

My first venture into Africa was in the early 1990s when I went to Nigeria to take up an assignment with Olam, which back then, was a start-up agri business company.

Looking back over the last 25 plus years, Olam of course, has grown to become a global agri-business giant, and Africa as a continent, has gone through a silent transformation in almost all spheres. What was once called the 'Dark Continent' has now become the 'Continent of the Future'.

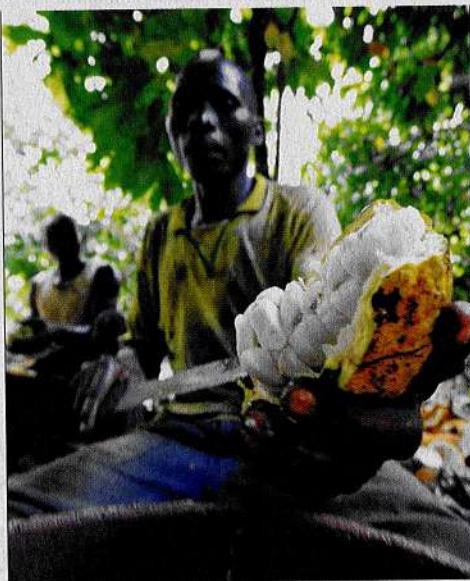
Those were the days when most of the African countries were still under some form of dictatorship. I still remember the annulled elections (1993) in Nigeria, the genocide in Rwanda, civil war in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) and so on.

But as we entered the new millennium things started changing at a rapid pace. Nigeria moved into civilian governance in 1999 and today almost the entire continent has civilian rule under democratically elected governments. Political stability is a given thing now. Yes, there are still some challenges but they are a significant minority.

Africa has always been known for its rich resource base and most of the African economies are dependent on these resources. In other words, it was the extractive sector that dominated the GDP of many countries. Africa remained one of the largest importers of food.

The global financial crisis and the sudden spike in food prices came as a rude wake-up call for many countries. Food security became an important agenda for almost all the African countries. They also started focusing on diversifying their economies from being just a single resource-based extractive one to a more diversified, value-added one. Of course this is easier said than done.

The food security issue had also turned the priority spotlight on developing agriculture. African agriculture is characterised by smallholder farmers. There are anywhere between 32-35m smallholder



Above: A cocoa planter in Côte d'Ivoire, a country that has doubled its crop in 20 years.

farmers in the continent, with many of them having less than one hectare of land on which to carry out subsistence farming.

Transforming agriculture

While in many African economies agriculture accounts for less than a third of GDP, more than 50% of the rural population is employed in the sector. This clearly points to the astonishingly the low productivity levels of farmers.

But transforming the agri landscape is a long haul endeavour. It requires not only policy intervention but also a lot of investment in agri-related infrastructure requiring billions of dollars.

The starting point is of course is to have a long-term vision backed up by consistent policies that attract private sector investments. Here I would say it's been only a partial success so far – or we can call it work in progress. But there are some stand-out success stories also.

Côte d'Ivoire is one such example

where, despite all the challenges the country has had in the last decade, the agriculture sector has grown significantly. In fact, Côte d'Ivoire is one of the continent's fastest-growing economies, mainly fuelled by agricultural growth and the infrastructure spend by the government.

For instance, in the last 20 years the country has been able to more than double its cocoa crop to over 2m tonnes, more than quadruple its cashew crop to more than 750,000 tonnes and so on. I believe that there is a valuable lesson to be learnt from the Ivorian success story for other African countries.

Opportunities in infrastructure

The infrastructure gap continues to remain a huge challenge in most parts of Africa. There are varying estimates on the quantum of investment required. The African Development bank estimates that Africa needs in excess of \$100bn per annum of investment in infrastructure for the next few years.

Infrastructure includes everything from developed land, roads, railways, ports, electricity, storage and so on. This deficit of course also creates a huge opportunity. One has seen the successful emergence of public-private partnership models in developing infrastructure.

Gabon is a stand-out example. The development of the special economic zone in Nkok, Libreville and the two ports there have dramatically increased the value-added exports of wood products and minerals from Gabon. Here again other countries can follow the Gabonese model in developing their Infrastructure.

I will not be doing justice if I don't mention the stupendous growth of the telecom sector in Africa over the last 20 years. Mobile telephony has changed the lives of millions of Africans and one can see the impact even in the remote hinterlands of countries like DRC.

Here again countries like Kenya have gone to the next level with mobile money transfers and the like and have created a huge financial inclusiveness. Many other

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countries are now catching up. This is vital to create a vibrant and inclusive financial sector.

The African digital landscape is also growing fast with countries like Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria trying to take a lead. But compared to the rest of the world this is still at a nascent stage. But I am confident that it won't be long before Africa catches up with rest of the world as it happened in mobile telephony.

Given its 54 countries, intra-African trade has always been a huge opportunity for the continent and there are indeed several regional trade blocks like ECOWAS in West Africa, SADC in Southern Africa, COMESA spanning Eastern, Central and Northern Africa and the five member East African Community.

But intra-African trade is still minuscule compared to its potential. The regional trade agreements have also been only partially successful. One of the main reasons is the lack of infrastructure (no pan-African rail/road networks for example) as well as lukewarm political will.

Fortunately, I see this changing. For the first time last year, many African leaders came together and signed the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), a groundbreaking achievement.

With the bigger African economies like Nigeria and South Africa also endorsing this earlier this year, the future for intra-African trade looks bright. Of course the devil is in the detail and the countries have to iron out their individual treaties. Also the success of this treaty depends upon the development of robust pan-African connectivity (rail, road, sea and air). But the start has been very encouraging.

We also see countries like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire which together produces about 67% of world cocoa coming together and agreeing on a pricing mechanism which ensures that the cocoa farmers get a fair share of the price (guaranteed minimum) irrespective of the volatility in the world cocoa prices.

These developments clearly show that African leaders have started thinking beyond their borders (beyond nationalist sentiments). I am confident this will transform the way in which Africa engages with the rest of the world.

In nutshell I can safely conclude that the 'darker side' of the continent is fast vanishing, if it has not already gone, and the future looks very bright. ■

Venkataramani Srivathsan, popularly known as Sri, is Olam's Managing Director and CEO, Africa and Middle East. The views expressed here are the author's own and do not represent those of Olam.

INTRA-AFRICAN TRADE IS STILL MINUSCULE COMPARED TO ITS POTENTIAL... FORTUNATELY I SEE THIS CHANGING



Profile

Enterprise Singapore is a Singapore government agency that works with local companies to enhance their competitiveness through building capabilities, encouraging innovation and accelerating internationalisation. **Anver Versi** reports.

ESG: Championing Singapore enterprises

When we met at the offices of Enterprise Singapore (ESG); G. Jayakrishnan (pictured) sounded a tad worried. The China-US trade war and the seemingly unending series of protests in Hong Kong were clouding his usually sunny disposition.

Jayakrishnan is ESG's Global Markets Director, Middle East and Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia and what makes him happiest is when world trade and investment is flowing smoothly and evenly, washing up against Singapore on its journey.

Trade is Singapore's life blood. Over the years it has provided this island nation, situated at the tip of SE Asia, with the world's third highest per capita GDP in purchasing power parity terms – around \$100,000 – for its population of a shade less than six million.

Singapore's 2017 GDP is around \$375bn “and the ratio of trade to GDP is around 300%” says Jayakrishnan.

“It's going to be a challenge,” he says. “Exports have taken a hit over the last couple of months.” Worse, any global slowdown affects everybody and the volume of trade tends to taper down. Bad news for Jayakrishnan.

But he brightens up. Things could have been worse and after all is said and done, Singapore is still doing pretty well. It rode the 2008 global financial crisis and came out stronger and leaner.

But worrying is part of the job description for Jayakrishnan and other ESG directors. It makes them plan ahead to mitigate possible downturns. Trade is so important to Singapore's continuing prosperity that they take no chances.

In a nutshell, ESG supports committed Singapore companies regardless of

SINGAPORE'S RATIO OF TRADE TO GDP IS AROUND 300%



their growth stage to find new markets, promote new ventures, take the first step into foreign soil, and a lot else.

ESG was created in 2018 with the merger of International Enterprise Singapore and SPRING Singapore to champion enterprise development. The agency works with Singapore companies to build capabilities, innovate and internationalise. It also supports the growth of Singapore as a hub for global trading and startups.

In his introduction to the agency's 2018-19 annual report, Peter Ong, Chairman of ESG, describes this as a pivotal moment in the country's economic development journey.

“Working together with partners, we have supported tens of thousands of committed enterprises to upgrade, innovate, scale up, and access overseas market opportunities through our services in advisory, capability building, business matching, global networking and more.”

It is precisely to mitigate risks of getting caught up in situations such as the current China-US trade war and its often negative ripple effects that Singapore is constantly exploring new opportunities in different global markets as well as diverse sectors. Part of its work is to encourage Singapore companies to make the leap of faith and venture into territories other than the more familiar ones closer to home in Asia. Africa for example.

“With our small domestic market, it is imperative for enterprises to venture beyond our shores to achieve scale. However, going into new, unfamiliar territories can be challenging and comes with a certain level of risk,” adds Ong. “We will help Singapore companies to surmount these challenges and manage their risks by building the necessary capabilities and

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connecting them to in-market support networks.”

Extensive support system

This support system includes 36 ESG overseas centres, three of them in Africa – Accra, Johannesburg and Nairobi. These regional centres play a critical role in identifying trade and investment opportunities and facilitating market entry and expansion across the continent.

Between 2008 and 2018, total trade in goods between Singapore and Africa increased by a compounded annual growth rate of about 1.8%. Total trade in 2018 was \$9.23bn. Singapore’s stock of investment into Africa stands at about \$17.5bn.

One of the drivers of this growth has been the biennial Africa-Singapore Business Forum which has grown in size and scope with every event. The next one is scheduled for 2020 and Jayakrishnan thinks it will be the biggest ever.

Jayakrishnan believes that in addition to the more traditional areas such as logistics, urban planning and manufactured exports, the digital space in



Above: Delegates networking at the opening of ESG's Nairobi overseas centre in June 2018.

Africa is becoming an increasingly attractive area for Singapore companies. It has helped 10 local digital companies to move to Africa over the past two years.

Some of the companies that have started operations in Africa include Capital & Credit Risk Manager (CCRMManager), a fintech firm launched in 2017. South

Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Egypt are its core markets.

The *Business Times* reported that the platform had seen transaction volume of more than \$1bn since going live, and that chairman Tan Kah Chye had said that it “would be a fairly realistic aspiration” to have Africa make up as much as one-fifth of revenue by 2022.

Other Singapore fintech firms entering Africa, according to *Business Times*, include Global eTrade Services (GeTS), a subsidiary of state-owned government e-solutions firm CrimsonLogic, startup Trade Finance Market, Red Dot Payments and several others.

For these and a host of other companies making the leap to Africa, ESG is the steady hand ensuring that the landing is soft. For those who often wonder just what makes Singapore such a successful country, one needs only consider the likes of Jayakrishnan and his team who seem to be perpetually chasing down any and every opportunity to make the country's companies as competitive as is humanly possible. ■

Enterprise Singapore

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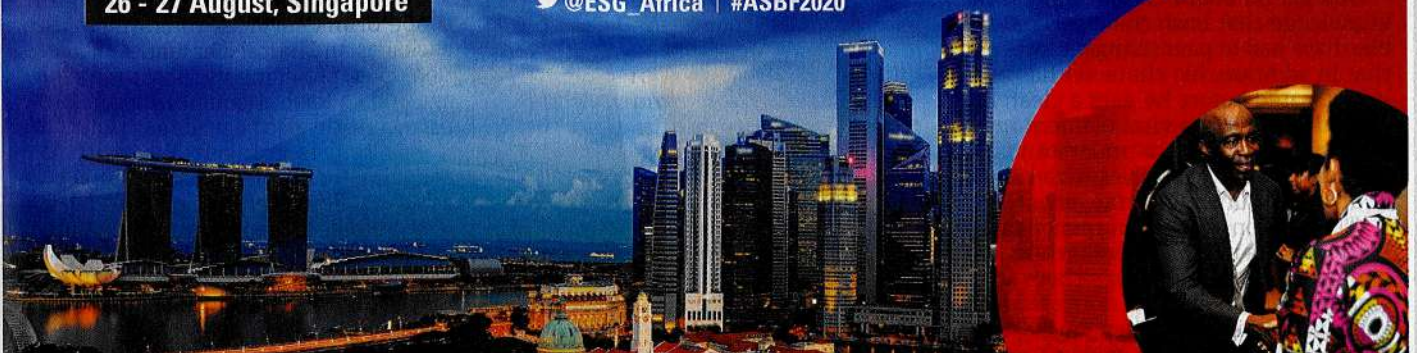
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In Conversation

Thanks to an initiative by a Singapore-based entrepreneur, the moto taxi, ubiquitous in West Africa, has joined the digital age and is winning grateful new customers by the hour. Raphael Dana talks with **Anver Versi**.

Moto taxi on demand

Raphael Dana – co-founder, Gozem

Raphael Dana wants to do for the humble African motorcycle taxi what Uber has done for the standard taxi. His company, Gozem, already operates a fleet of slick-looking motorbike taxis – linked on a smartphone app – in Benin and Togo.

Motorbike taxis – or moto taxis – are becoming ubiquitous in many African cities. They can cut through traffic jams and they are cheap. They are regulated to carry only one pillion passenger at a time so you can escape the crush of bodies in the traditional taxi vans.

But getting hold of one of these nifty personal transporters when you want them and where you want them is another matter altogether. You can only stand on the roadside and hope that one of them that is free comes along; or walk to where a cluster of them are parked – if you know where that is.

The result is that the connection between the potential customer and the taxi service provider is often hit or miss leading to frustration on the one side and loss of revenue and wastage of time on the other.

But not anymore if you happen to live in Benin or Togo. You simply call up the bike taxi on your smartphone app and in a flash, your bike rider, kitted out in the Gozem livery, complete with a mandatory helmet, has pulled up smartly.

You get on board comfortable in the knowledge that both the rider and the bike have had to pass stringent tests and that in addition, his character has been investigated before he gets a clean bill of health. This is a vital element in an area where people are understandably reluctant to put themselves in the hands of unknown, unvetted strangers.

"The response has been tremendous," Raphael Dana told me over lunch in Singapore. "The demand was there – we simply filled a need."

Dana and his co-founder, Emeka Ajene established the company only in 2018 and



Above: A Gozem moto taxi picks up a passenger in Lomé, Togo.
Below: Gozem co-founder Raphael Dana.

they already have 1,600 drivers on their books. The inspiration came from SE Asia where the moto taxis are now not only very much part of the urban transport landscape, but the sophisticated use of digital technology has made them a very efficient, safe and affordable mode of travel.

Grab and Gojek rule the roost. At last count, Grab had 710,000 drivers, 36m users and was worth \$11bn; Gojek had 400,000 drivers, 33m users and was worth \$10bn. Africa, Dana reckons, can be bigger.



Life changing

Dana is a Swiss national residing in Singapore but he has deep African roots. His father was Tunisian and they had a family home in Togo. He cut his business teeth setting up the first internet company in Bangui, CAR, before selling it off. He worked in IT, learning the ins and outs of apps and found himself in Singapore.

But the lure of Africa was still there. On a visit to Benin, he saw a proliferation of moto taxis but the operations were haphazard compared to the slickness he has observed in SE Asia. The idea clicked – why not bring the business model from Asia, which has a lot more in common with Africa than the West, to West Africa? With his technical expertise with apps, the pieces fell into place and Gozem was born. But this, he says, is just the beginning. Douala in Cameroon and Libreville in Gabon are next on the list. His team is already on the ground, collecting data. Several more West African countries have also been earmarked.

Besides the convenience and efficiency of the system, safety, for drivers and passengers is paramount he says. Drivers are all insured and have to undergo mandatory training, including road safety. They must carry two helmets, one for themselves and one for the passengers. "This can save many lives – too many people die in accidents because they don't have safety features such as helmets."

He is also working on expanding the scope of his services to transporting packages and parcels, essential medication, food, providing the 'last mile' linkage and so forth. He hopes that in time, payments can also be made electronically.

"Gozem is going to be very life-changing for people," he said. "This new access to digital services can solve many of the problems people are facing now."

For the thousands of moto taxi passengers in Benin and Togo who can now summon their favourite mode of transport at the touch of a button, life has already changed for the better. ■

In Conversation

Singapore's unique development experience is in high demand in all emerging markets – not least in Africa, as the CEO of SCE tells **Anver Versi**.

Exporting Singapore's experience

Kong Wy Mun – CEO, Singapore Cooperation Enterprise (SCE)

Singapore does not do things by halves – whatever policy decision it arrives at is vigorously implemented by dedicated agencies and departments. Singapore Cooperation Enterprise (SCE) is a case in point – it was set up in 2006, by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to lead public sector collaboration projects with foreign countries.

"It was Singapore's response to the increasing number of requests from a multitude of foreign governments interested in our development experience," says Kong Wy Mun, CEO of SCE (pictured).

The agency, he says, works closely with Singapore's 16 Ministries and over 60 statutory boards to scope out and tailor possible solutions to match the needs of foreign governments, and help meet their development objectives. "SCE also serves as the focal point of access to expertise from Singapore across its public agencies," he adds. "You can say we are a single window of access for foreign partners who are interested in Singapore's public sector expertise."

It is an integral arm of Enterprise Singapore, the government agency championing business development and supporting the growth of Singapore as a hub for global trading and start-ups (see pages 88-89). The aim is "to build long-term partnerships with foreign governments and also generate economic spin-offs for Singapore's private sector."

It has a wide reach in Asia and a growing presence in Africa. "Our African chapter began in 2008 when a delegation from Rwanda visited SCE and several agencies here. We reciprocated by sending a team of SCE project managers and urban planning experts to Rwanda, and this was followed by a visit to Singapore by Presi-



dent Paul Kagame who witnessed a signing of an MoU in seven priority areas including urban planning of Kigali City."

This was the start of a beautiful friendship. Rwanda opened an embassy in Singapore and a host of other collaborations and consultations followed from the MoU. This includes the reforming of the social security fund, vocational training, institutional capacity building, and advisory services on its civil aviation airport.

Word spread about the efficiency of the projects taken on by SCE and its partners, and a host of other African countries began to be interested in adapting Singapore's public sectors expertise for their own countries. Some of the ongoing projects include:

Benin: Urban master-planning advisory services and design of the City of Innovation and Knowledge.

Burundi: Urban master-planning advisory services to guide the development for the capital city of Bujumbura.

Djibouti: Implementation of a pilot electronic single window trade facilitation platform.

Gabon: Master-planning and design of a university complex in Libreville; consultancy on master-planning of the new airport city.

Guinea: Master-planning and urban design of the Kaloum region; capacity building programme in public administration for senior government officials.

Kenya: Design and implementation of the Kenyan Electronic Single Window System (KESWS); review of SEZ bill and identification of inconsistencies with proposed framework;

benchmarking of tax and other incentives against competing countries.

Mauritius: Technical advisory, delivery management, operation readiness and transaction management services on setting up a Light Rapid Transit (LRT) system for the country; advisory services on water sector reform; implementation and provision of services for the deployment of a smart-card based electronic identification system.

Morocco: Financial advisory services on strategic development of Casablanca Finance City for the Moroccan Financial Board.

Namibia: Implementation of e services to facilitate starting a business in Namibia for the Ministry of Industrialisation, Trade and SME Development.

Nigeria: Training programmes in urban planning and building code control for the Lagos State Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development.

Republic of Congo: Master-planning advisory services for the Special Economic Zones of Oyo-Ollomobo and Pointe Noire for the National Agency for Infrastructure Projects (DGGT); advisory services to jointly develop an Industry Skills Training Centre.

Seychelles: Conducted a feasibility study of a single electronic window for trade facilitation and tax system.

Tanzania: Urban master-planning advisory services for Arusha and Mwanza cities for the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Developments.

Zanzibar: Consultancy in developing action plans in tourism and advisory on investment framework; strategy for the Zanzibar Social Security Fund ICT masterplan for the government of Zanzibar. ■

In perspective

Why I am an Afroophile

By **Ranveer Chauhan**

I am living my dream of actualising business opportunities in Africa, connecting people, supporting Africa research in the commercial-economic-political space and advising corporates interested in and invested in Africa.

I started my African journey when I took my first job at Olam International Ltd. in Nigeria in 1993 and it has been an exciting and very rewarding adventure all through.

A big part of this 26-year journey has been creating and managing businesses and large projects in Africa. I started by learning the ropes of supply chain in agri-commodities and went on to set up processing factories, creating and managing food brands, managing small-holder farmers and also setting up large plantations.

Even today, when I post any details of my trips to Africa, there are friends who reach out and ask me to take them to Africa; and there are those who ask me if it was true that I get paid for these wonderful adventures!

Even as Africa marches ahead towards a progressively bigger economy and as modernisation sprouts up everywhere, the continent retains its old charm of the place of the exotic adventure. I recall the excitement in social circles in Enugu when one Mr Bhatia planned a land journey from Nigeria to India.

My friend 'D' regaled us with his account of the road journey from Pointe Noire in Congo Brazzaville, via the Sahara desert to the Mediterranean coast and thence to home for the vacation. My landlord 'S' in Mtwara told me how he and his friend set off from Tanzania towards Egypt on a couple of motorcycles – only for them to abandon the venture when one of the bikes crashed into a zebra somewhere along the way.

Africa still evokes those same images of adventure and of a free spirit in me.

Even as I built progressively bigger and stronger businesses in



Left: A worker spreads cashew nuts to dry. Ranveer holds fond memories of the cashew plantations of Guinea-Bissau.

Africa, I recalled with great fondness my travels from Dakar in Senegal to Bissau by road and getting a first-hand feel for the immense cashew plantations of Guinea Bissau.

Over the years, I have collected many more such anecdotes based on fascinating journeys in Africa.

Africa is not standing still

Why ever would I not be an Afroophile? The continent welcomed us as a family warmly. And I did not need any prompting from consultants to know whether Africa was open for business or not – it has been very open and welcoming from the start. The memory of the politicians and officials coming together to support and celebrate as we put up a simple cashew processing factory in Dimbokro still warms my heart.

But of course Africa has not stood still. Among other things, I have been a witness of how the old airports at Conakry, Abidjan and Dakar have given way to shining new facilities, and in the case of Dakar, a new airport at a fresh site.

When I first encountered a mobile phone in Nigeria in 1993, the revolution

had not yet reached India! I have been immensely proud of M-Pesa from Kenya. I have got used to treasury and banking managers in corporates telling me of the secure connections between their own books and the bank data – making banking reconciliations completely automated and 24x7 updated. I find Africa smart!

My expertise and passion lies in the world of corporate work and the business sector. My executive experience has been specifically in the agri-commodity and food sector, but my African context, networks and interests have a far wider and broader footprint.

I am passionate about participating in the African economic opportunities and have positioned myself, through my business and business networks, to have a broad view of the whole African space and to be able to participate in it.

The typical Singaporean focus, diligence and seamless public-private partnerships position us as a very strong delivery point for the partnership between Africa, SE Asia and the larger Asian world. I look at Singapore's business engagements with SE Asia, China, India, and I see the huge upside and growth in the African engagements. I see a great future for this space.

My work at the Centre of African Studies and the Africa Business group and my own corporate advisory practice is a fertile platform to grow Singapore's participation in the African economy and vice-versa.

It was by a lucky chance that I landed in Nigeria 26 years ago and became deeply involved in the agricultural sector of this continent. My fascination and engagement with the old continent continues to grow – I love Africa! ■

Ranveer Chauhan is Africa Advisor, SCE (Singapore Cooperation Enterprise), Chairman, Centre for African Studies (NTU-SBF-CAS) and Chairman, Africa Business Group, SBF (Singapore Business Federation).



The City

Jo Yeo takes you on a dazzling journey around the 'city of dreams'.

Much ado about Singapore

When it comes to visiting Singapore, globe trotters often set aside no more than a couple of days to explore the city-state. But the 'Little Red Dot', as locals affectionately call it, has a lot more to offer than the famous 'sailboat' hotel emblazoned on most postcards and travel sites. From bustling hawker centres and a tranquil island harkening back to Singapore's rural past, there is plenty to pack into one's itinerary for more than a week.

Crazy rich in culture

When Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* hit the box office last year (2018), Singapore was introduced to movie goers as an opulent society of extravagant taste.

This might seem true as one strolls along Marina Bay – the southern waterfront that is home to futuristic architectural feats: Gardens By The Bay, a man-made forest of super trees that dazzle in the dark; a lotus-shaped Art Science Museum; a double-helix steel bridge fashioned after a DNA molecule; and of course, the iconic Marina Bay Sands hotel with its equally recognisable rooftop infinity pool.

Yet to appreciate the contemporary trappings of the city is to understand only half of the Singapore story. The former British colony may have just celebrated its 54th year of independence in August, but this is also the year of its bicentennial – 200 years since British statesman Stamford Raffles first arrived at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula and founded modern Singapore.

In the 1800s, Raffles organised the local community according to ethnic divisions, which have since evolved into vibrant cultural enclaves.

Kampong Glam, the area set aside for the Bugis, Arabs and larger Malay-Muslim community, is a feast for eyes and tummy with Arab Street's carpet and lamp stores, Muscat Street's al fresco dining and above all, Masjid Sultan – the grand, golden-domed mosque that was built for the Sultan of the Johore-Riau-Lingga empire (and by extension, Singapore) in 1824.

Hipsters flock to the likes of Haji Lane, where trendy fashion boutiques line the



Above: Singaporeans eating durians. The pungent fruit is a great favourite in the city.

narrow alley and kaleidoscopic murals make for Instagram-worthy moments.

Just a stone's throw away is Chinatown, where the smoky aroma of bak kwa (savoury-sweet dried meat) wafts between red and orange lanterns. Down below, eager stall owners hawk quintessentially local knick-knacks. Handicrafts with orchid motifs? Check. Merlion singlets and Singapore Girl kebayas? Just name your size.

Further along in Little India, it is business as usual at Mustafa Centre, a labyrinthine, 24-hour shopping arcade that stocks everything from jewellery and toys to costumes and sundries at knockdown prices. Locals meander through Tekka Market in search of groceries like fresh herbs, hand-grated coconut and brilliantly coloured flower garlands.

Offshore and offbeat

Those itching to go off the beaten path can easily find spots that are far from the madding crowd. Haw Par Villa, a free Asian cultural theme park, is arguably Singapore's strangest offering.

There are the usual suspects like the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, the Monkey God and the Eight Immortals. Then there are the sunbathing mermaids doing handstands on each other, a woman with a body of a crab and even turtles having tea with deer.

If this proves too eclectic, hop over to Pulau Ubin, a boomerang-shaped island off the northeast coast. Unlike its oft-preferred cousin Sentosa, an offshore island that has been developed as a beach and adventure destination, Ubin pos-

sesses the bucolic charm of Singapore's early days.

Food, glorious food

When it comes to local cuisine, Singapore lives up to its reputation as a food paradise. Go for hawker centres like Old Airport Road, Maxwell and Chomp Chomp, where you can sample a plethora of classic dishes like carrot cake (not the orange dessert, but a savoury dish made from flour and radish), satay (grilled meat skewers drenched in crunchy peanut sauce), fried Hokkien mee (noodles soaked in rich prawn stock) and murta-bak (pan-fried bread stuffed with minced meat).

East Coast Park is generally good for seafood – the chilli crab and pepper crab are practically staples, and the stingray coated in sambal (a tangy, spicy sauce) will make you ditch any diet in a jiffy. Head over to the Katong area if you want to try Katong Laksa, the spicy curry noodle steeped in coconut milk that won over celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay.

Most Singaporeans live for durians, the spiky "king of fruits". For a gentle introduction to its pungent flavour, seek out a durian puff or some durian puree served with sago.

Moonlight in the city

To quote a famous Mandarin song by Singaporean singer Mavis Hee, the moonlight in the city illuminates dreams. Partygoers sway the night away at popular clubs like Zouk, an institutional nightclub known for impressive DJs and retro-themed nights, as well as Marquee, Singapore's newest and largest club – so large it has a ferris wheel, three-storey slides and even a mini-bowling alley.

Younger revellers hit the likes of Skinny's Lounge, a riverside pub with a karaoke room, and Hopheads, an underground watering hole with craft beer, beer pong, foosball, darts and one of the most boisterous dancefloors in town.

Whatever your proclivities and priorities, Singapore definitely has you covered in the day and pampered at night. Perhaps the only thing harder than choosing what to do is leaving the country. Chances are, like its scrumptious food, it will have you coming back for more. ■