Phase three expected to be calibrated, cautious, say experts

Gradual changes a good approach, they say, warning against full reopening too quickly

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Singaporeans can expect to move into Phase Three reopening in a calibrated and cautious manner, as the current restrictions are being eased in the different stages of the current Phase Two, or, unilaterally The Straits Times, as the two phases are held on same restrictions.

An Associate Professor Jooi Car, director of the Centre for Population Health Sciences at Nanyang Technological University's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, said that the lack of a clear-out difference shows effective policymaking in action, as changes are more likely to be accepted when introduced incrementally and gradually, helping to ensure that the public understands the measures and remains calm.

Pandemic response planning went beyond past a "heads-up" system, Prof Car said. "There is a lot of effort given to detail the kind of measures that need to be contemplated in these phases, but more importantly, it is also about the wider strategies to achieve the best outcomes."

Phase two reopening of the Singapore economy came into force on June 1, in which, among other things, allows most businesses and social activities to resume, with safeguards in place.

WHAT PHASE THREE COULD BE
With further easing of restrictions in the past few weeks, such as allowing the numbers of people at weddings and the lifting of border restrictions to visitors from Australia, excluding Victoria, and many have wondered if Singapore has finally entered phase three.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, however, cautioned that it would be "silly" to give such as incremental changes a name, asserting that Singaporeans cannot expect to be back to normal until the end of the pandemic.

"Instead, we are calling the big overall phases as one, two, and three, like signposts that we have reached major milestone points in our journey. Cautionary relaxation is necessary as conditions that have enabled us to reenter recurring several waves, and other starting lockdowns, in case of Spain and Britain, or full national lockdowns, like Israel," he said.

Teasing out expectations, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said that one should not anticipate substantial relaxations of measures in phase three, and expect the entire suite of activities that were previously barred to return.

Rather, phase three in Singapore will remain with a certain degree of precautions to allow economic and social activity to carry on.

"We always have to consider the impact of a possible second, or even third outbreak, and whether the allowed activities will substantially amplify this spread. This is the line we hope to have to determine Singapore's stable state," Prof Teo cautioned.

He remained optimistic about travel, and is for unrestricted travel to resume, especially to places where the Covid-19 situation is very similar to or better than Singapore's.

"Non-essential examples include New Zealand, France, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. Of course, this list cannot be static and needs to be regularly reviewed and updated," he said.

With much still unknown about the coronavirus, phase three would also depend on the expected duration and impact of any of the local or international flare-ups.

Prof Car explained: "As more businesses adapt and create new ways of operating, workers adapt to new modes of working, new research is ramped up and new technologies evolve to prevent, de-tect, diagnose and treat the diseases...we will then know what our new normal or phase three would look like."

He called for society to be resilient and nimble, to be able to transform and adapt, depending on the threats, the mechanisms and knowledge that are available at that time, citing as an example, the vaccination on young children in the UK last month following a better understanding of the virus.

Professor Paul Tambyah, president of the Asia Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious, said that policy decisions guiding the nature of phase three should take into consideration the pandemic's trajectory, and the bigger picture.

"There has to be a balance between health risks and that of social isolation versus the benefits of preventing transmission of infection. Personally, I think a lot of people would like larger family gatherings to be allowed, and the risks could be mitigated with some risk reduction measures - for example, voluntary testing," Prof Tambyah said. As part of the latest round of pandemic restrictions easing, free music during worship services will remain, which Prof Tambyah said would help to stress test the system.

"If these go off well, then perhaps that can be expanded to concerts and theatres. Churches and religious worship services have opened to greater community engagement without any problems reported, so hopefully the same will be extended to concerts, theatres and sporting events," Prof Tambyah said.

RETURNING TO NORMAL?
But scores of late-night curry making at nightclubs, pubs and bars will likely have to wait even after Singapore enters phase three, experts said.

Prof Teo said that since these activities take place in enclosed spaces, crowded settings and with exposure to close contacts for a long duration, they are considered quite high risk and should not be permitted regardless of the phases.

"What we see in New Zealand, Victoria state in Australia, Hong Kong and Vietnam serve as stark reminders that even when there are extended periods of zero community transmission, maintenance of caution and discipline is very important, and that resumption rapidly within a couple of weeks... Howard Flanders' quip is relevant here... Is the behaviour of the public really on the range of activities that are allowed?" Prof Teo cautioned.

"It is do be said, if the activities are resume, very careful evaluation of the safety management procedures must be in place, especially to ensure that promotions in tourism happen smoothly, and to properly enforce the execution of these measures."

DORSET ORANGE
Prof Teo noted that Singapore has been in Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) Orange since Feb 1, and thought the current rules and regulations are much more nuanced, with different activities for different levels of risk.

He stressed the importance of clear communication to inform individuals on what they need to do to protect themselves and the community.

Prof Cook suggested that the DORSCON framework would also likely have to be updated and reassessed after the pandemic has subsided, as there seems to be a "misalignment between the risks and responses earmarked on the DORSCON framework and what actually happened."