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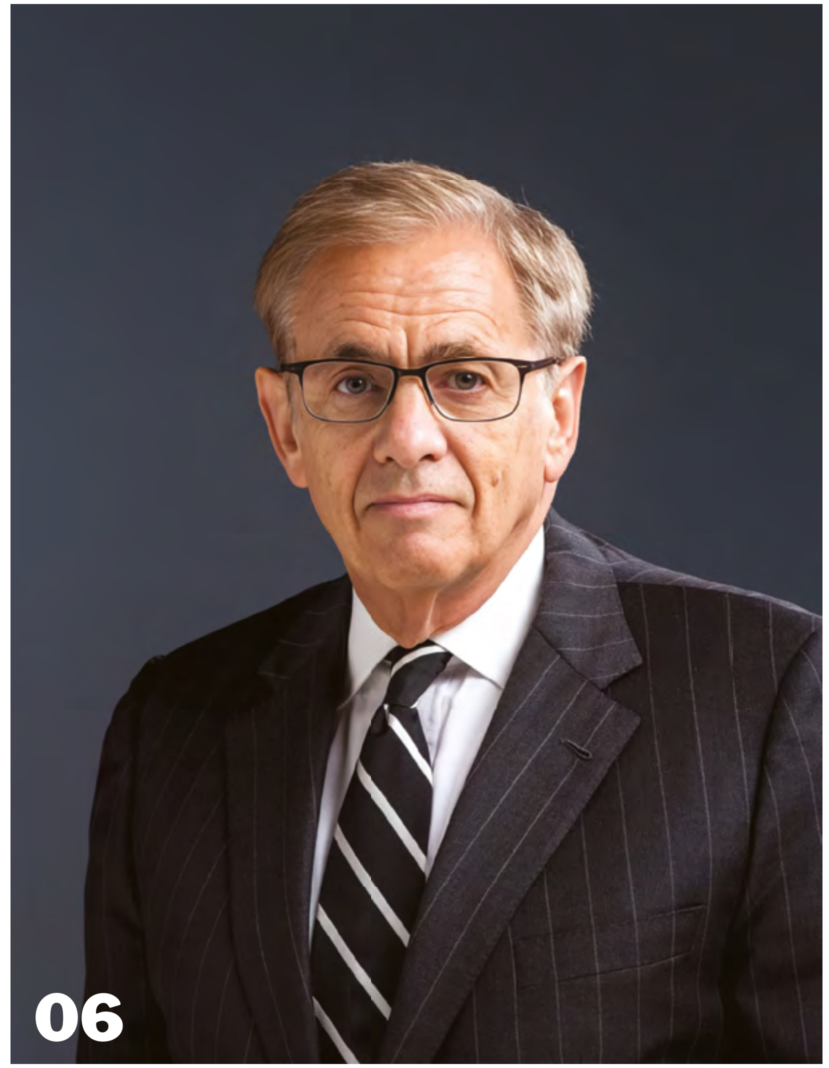
THE IMPACT IMPERATIVE

Why impact has become a test of institutional design, purpose and credibility

Contents



Durability matters more than drama in embedding change into the fabric of an organisation.

– Michael Rich, President Emeritus of RAND Corporation

Impact is not an add-on to strategy, nor a retrospective narrative assembled after the fact.

– Scott Fritzen, Editor-in-Chief, Asian Management Insights

FROM THE EDITOR

The Age of Impact

Across Asia—and increasingly around the world—we are entering what can only be described as an age of impact. Organisations are no longer judged solely by what they produce, but by what changes as a result. Growth remains important, but it is no longer sufficient. Stakeholders—investors, policymakers, partners and the public—are asking a more demanding question: what difference does your work make, and how do you know?

This shift is not a passing trend. It reflects a deeper redefinition of performance. Impact is not an add-on to strategy, nor a retrospective narrative assembled after the fact. It is increasingly expected to be designed for, measured, communicated and, crucially, evidenced. Across sectors, we see a convergence around three expectations: clarity of purpose, discipline in execution and credibility in demonstrating outcomes. Together, these are reshaping how organisations operate and are held accountable.

This issue of Asian Management Insights explores how that shift is unfolding across Asia's distinctive institutional, economic and social contexts. What emerges is not a single model of impact, but a set of evolving practices: often pragmatic, sometimes contested and always shaped by real-world constraints.

One theme that runs through the issue is the growing centrality of measurement as a driver of change. Edmund Malesky describes how Vietnam's Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) uses systematic, credible measurement to reshape behaviour at scale. By grounding assessment in the lived experience of firms and making performance visible and comparable, the PCI has helped turn governance from an abstract aspiration into a competitive, evidence-based process—one that influences reform, investment decisions and policy priorities over time. In a different vein, Robert Klitgaard reminds us that measurement is never neutral: it shapes incentives, behaviour and ultimately outcomes. The challenge is not simply to measure more, but to measure in ways that illuminate rather than distort, and that strengthen accountability without encouraging performative responses.

A second theme is the movement from commitment to integration. Sustainability, long treated as a parallel agenda, is increasingly embedded within core decision-making. As Helge Muenkel of DBS reflects in our conversation, sustainability must become "the cake itself, not the icing on the cake"—fully integrated into risk management, capital allocation and organisational incentives. This reflects a broader shift: impact is not achieved through isolated initiatives, but through the alignment of systems, incentives and everyday decisions. Across several contributions, we see organisations grappling with what it means to move from statements of intent to sustained, system-level change.

A third theme is the rise of credibility as the new currency of impact. In a crowded and often noisy information environment, organisations are no longer rewarded for activity alone. They are expected to explain outcomes clearly, acknowledge limits and ground their claims in evidence. As the Practitioner's Guide in this issue makes clear, the test of impact is not visibility but explanation: the ability to connect intent, action and consequence in ways that stakeholders can trust. This marks an important transition—from communication as promotion to communication as accountability.

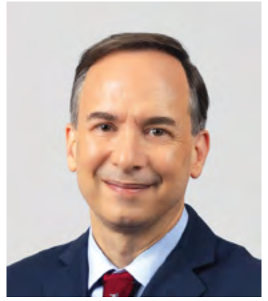
These themes are reflected across the contributions in this issue—from governance reforms and measurement systems to corporate strategy, sustainability transitions and organisational practice. Taken together, they point to a broader transformation. The age of impact is not defined by a single tool or framework, but by a change in expectations. It is an era in which organisations must operate with greater intentionality, where performance is judged over longer horizons and where credibility depends on the disciplined linking of purpose, action and evidence.

This issue also introduces several new features that reflect our editorial direction. Impact Spotlight highlights concrete cases of researchers or organisations translating ideas into measurable change, while In Motion tracks emerging developments shaping the impact agenda across sectors. Both bring readers closer to practice—to what impact looks like as it unfolds in real time.

At Singapore Management University, these questions are not only analytical but institutional. As we continue to develop our approach to being a high-impact university, we are learning alongside the organisations and leaders featured in these pages—working to better align research, education and engagement with meaningful societal outcomes in ways that are rigorous, credible and contextually grounded. This publication is part of that broader effort: a space to convene ideas, share emerging practice and contribute to a more informed conversation about impact in Asia and beyond.

Before closing, I would like to acknowledge the remarkable stewardship of this publication by Dr. Havovi Joshi and her team. Over a run of 27 issues, they have built Asian Management Insights into a thoughtful and distinctive platform for ideas that matter to Asia's leaders. It is a privilege to build on that foundation, and I extend my warmest congratulations and thanks for their dedication and vision. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the members of the previous Editorial Board for their contributions over the years.

As we take the magazine forward, our ambition is to deepen its role as a forum for understanding how organisations can create meaningful, lasting value in a complex world. The age of impact presents both an opportunity and a challenge: to move beyond aspiration towards disciplined, evidence-based contribution. It is a demanding standard—but one that, increasingly, defines what it means to lead.



PROFESSOR SCOTT FRITZEN
Editor-in-Chief
Asian Management Insights
sfritzen@smu.edu.sg

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BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR IMPACT

For organisations to drive real change, they must treat impact as a strategic commitment and reshape internal structures to support it.

In a time where organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate their value to society, leaders need to create the conditions to make impact visible and credible. Drawing on his tenure as President and CEO of RAND Corporation (2011-2022), Michael Rich offers insights on the principles and challenges of leading an impact-centric organisation.

RAND is well-known in Asia but not always well understood. How would you describe it?
RAND is a non-profit and nonpartisan research institution dedicated to ensuring that the most important policy problems are addressed with the best possible evidence. Its mission statement is straightforward: to help improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis. It performs policy analysis and technical assistance for numerous public-sector and philanthropic clients globally; operates a fully accredited graduate school; and maintains an independent, self-initiated research programme funded with donations and other discretionary resources. Its core values are quality, or rigour, and objectivity, reinforced by detailed and transparent standards that guide its research and analysis. RAND's research products are made available online for the general public, which is a practice the organisation has long maintained.

When you became president in 2011, after a quarter-century in other senior leadership positions, you made increasing the impact of RAND's research your overarching priority. Why?
As I read the RAND mission statement, it contains a means and an end. Research was the means; impact was the end. In other words, research was what RAND did, but it wasn't why RAND existed. We had long been outstanding in meeting the specific objectives of individual projects, but the research often fell short of achieving its maximum possible impact. Sometimes the reasons were beyond our control, but not always. I thought that there was more we both could and should do.

When you were leading RAND, making impact more explicit was not simply a communications decision—it was a strategic and managerial one. What does it actually mean, in practice, for an executive to put "impact" on the leadership agenda?
Making impact a strategic priority means embedding it in decision-making, governance procedures and human-capital management policies—not treating it as a communications exercise. It means asking:

What difference is our work making, for whom and how do we know? That translates into adjusting incentives, aligning resources, investing in required new capabilities and ensuring the organisation's formal structures, informal networks and external partnerships are all guided by the same overarching mission-driven priority.

In complex organisations, not everything that matters can be measured. Where did you find leadership judgment mattered most—especially when evidence was incomplete, impacts were indirect or time horizons were long?

Many dimensions of an organisation's performance can be measured quantitatively, and others can be described qualitatively. But the most consequential shifts—especially those tied to significant long-term strategy changes—rarely show up clearly in early data.

The hardest question is whether the organisation's overall orientation is truly changing in line with a new strategic direction. That generally requires aspirations, priorities, structures and behaviours to evolve together. Orchestrating that evolution is where leadership judgment matters most. But, early signals are often indirect, subtle and incomplete: changes in decision-making patterns, in how resources are allocated, in what people prioritise and talk about in the background and aspirations of new employees. In those moments, leadership judgment is critical—interpreting weak signals, assessing whether behaviours and decisions are genuinely evolving and determining if the organisation is moving in the intended direction or merely complying at a surface level.

RAND's shift toward becoming more impact-centric unfolded over more than a decade. Looking back, what were the hardest change-management challenges—cultural, professional or incentive-related—and what lessons do they hold for leaders trying to steer long-horizon change today?

The hardest challenge was initiating and sustaining change without the forcing function of a crisis. In the absence of urgency, we had to answer—again and again—"Why this shift?" We linked the move toward impact not to fashion or external pressure, but to mission and long-term relevance. That required consistent leadership messaging, reinforced by visible alignment in resource allocation, promotion decisions and strategic investments. Words alone would not have sufficed.

A second challenge was uneven readiness. For some parts of the organisation, becoming more impact-oriented required modest refinement; for others, it demanded a fundamental shift in mindset, capabilities and incentives. That meant investing in new skills, tools and professional development—and exercising more patience than I initially expected.

Finally, we had to reconsider how we defined and assessed progress. Not every dimension of impact or institutional transformation lends itself to precise measurement. We learned to balance rigour with realism—using quantitative metrics where appropriate, while also valuing qualitative evidence and credible interim indicators. And, we learned not to inadvertently devalue important achievements that, while short of ultimate impact, represent important enabling steps to that impact, such as an innovative methodological breakthrough.

The broader lesson is that durability matters more than drama in embedding change into the fabric of an organisation.

> Impact that isn't grounded in quality, strong methods and objectivity just doesn't last. Our influence flows from our credibility. If we weaken that, we weaken everything.

Executives often worry that emphasising impact can lead to instrumentalism or pressure to show results prematurely. As a leader, how did you think about protecting rigour and credibility while still pushing the organisation to be outward-facing and influential?

I've always understood the tension, but I've never really seen impact and rigour as opposing forces. At an organisation like RAND, impact that isn't grounded in quality, strong methods and objectivity just doesn't last—and can actually do harm. Our influence flows from our credibility. If we weaken that, we weaken everything.

So for me, the issue was never choosing between impact and rigour. It was figuring out how to integrate them thoughtfully. Rigour was non-negotiable—our research standards, peer review, transparency and analytic independence stayed firmly in place. At the same time, we pushed ourselves to think more deliberately about audience and timing: Who needs this work? When does it matter most? How do we make it accessible and useful without diluting the evidence or masking risks and uncertainties?

We tried to be clear about what the evidence shows—and what it doesn't. We saw impact as something that builds over time through measured contributions, not splashy headlines.

In the end, rigour wasn't a constraint on being more focused on impact; it was what made that possible. By staying anchored in our core values, we could expand our reach and relevance without compromising what makes the work useful and credible in the first place.

You helped bring the concept of "truth decay" into public conversation—highlighting declining trust in facts, expertise and institutions. More than a decade on, how has that challenge evolved, and why does it matter even more for leaders operating in the Age of Impact?

One reason I chose the term "truth decay," rather than referring to a "post-truth era" or "post-fact era," is that those phrases imply a fixed end state—as though society had crossed a threshold and could go no further. "Truth decay" captures something more dynamic and corrosive: an ongoing erosion of the role of facts, data and analysis in public life.

The core features of "truth decay" we identified more than a decade ago—the blurring of fact and opinion, the growing volume and influence of opinion over evidence, declining trust in institutions and deepening disagreement about data and scientific consensus—remain very much with us. In many respects, they have intensified, particularly with the rapid rise of AI-generated content that can amplify misinformation at scale. At the same time, progress in addressing the structural drivers of these trends has been limited.

That evolution matters profoundly. Impact depends on the ability to anchor decisions in shared facts, credible analysis and constructive debate. When the information environment is fragmented and trust is fragile, even the most rigorous work can struggle to gain traction. It becomes harder to conduct civil discourse, build durable coalitions and sustain the broad public support necessary to tackle complex, long-term challenges.

> Positioning an organisation around impact is not a branding exercise; it is a direction choice that should reshape priorities, resource allocation, incentives and talent.

In this sense, truth decay raises the bar for organisations committed to evidence and impact. Producing high-quality analysis is no longer sufficient. Leaders must also reinforce norms of transparency, methodological rigour and institutional integrity to re-earn public trust. In an era where confidence in expertise cannot be assumed, credibility is not simply a virtue—it is a strategic imperative.

What should leaders in Asia take from the RAND experience and where should they resist importing models developed in Western political, institutional or funding contexts?

Some leadership fundamentals translate well across regions: a clear and compelling mission statement, widely embraced core values, a culture of teamwork and peer review and a commitment to transparency that invites external scrutiny. These have been central to building institutional credibility and earning the trust of decision-makers across the political spectrum in the countries where we operate.

However, models developed in Western political and funding environments reflect specific institutional assumptions—about governance, regulation, philanthropy and public accountability—that do not always hold elsewhere. Importing them wholesale can create misalignment or unintended friction.

The more reliable approach is to adapt principles, not replicate structures. Leaders in Asia are best positioned to interpret what will resonate within their own political, cultural and institutional contexts.

If you were advising today's CEOs, university presidents or public-sector leaders embarking on an impact agenda, what is the most common leadership mistake you would warn them against—and what would you urge them to focus on instead?

The most common mistake is treating a focus on impact as a communications strategy rather than a strategic commitment. Positioning an organisation around impact is not a branding exercise; it is a directional choice that should reshape priorities, resource allocation, incentives and talent.

That shift requires meaningful adaptation—often the development of new capabilities, new partnerships and new ways of gauging success. It may also require letting go of activities that no longer align with the mission. Without those operational changes, "impact" risks becoming a slogan rather than a standard.

Real impact grows from clarity of purpose, disciplined execution and credibility earned over time. Storytelling has its place—but it should reflect substance, not substitute for it.

THE IMPACT IMPERATIVE: BUILDING UNIVERSITIES AND INSTITUTIONS THAT DEMONSTRABLY MATTER

Why impact has become a test of institutional design, purpose and credibility.

by
Scott A. Fritzen

Impact follows incentives and institutional design.

In dispersed-authority institutions, change rarely comes from full consensus—or from top-down declarations.

The strongest impact strategies treat public value as advantage, not compliance.

The university has never been more powerful—or more embattled. Research output has expanded sharply. Global collaborations span continents. Elite institutions, once concentrated in the West, have taken root across Asia, the Middle East and beyond. Universities anchor innovation districts, train professionals and generate discoveries that shape modern life. By the conventional measures long used by the academy to evaluate itself—publications, rankings, enrolments, revenue—higher education, taken as a whole, is thriving in many contexts.

And yet, as higher education scholars Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt argue in *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*, higher education finds itself at a crossroads that recalls nothing so much as the upheavals faced by the newspaper, music and film industries when digital disruption arrived. Those industries, too, were enormously productive right up until the moment their business models became untenable. The lesson, Levine and Van Pelt argue, is pointed: institutions that wait passively for transformation to play out on someone else's timetable often find that it arrives on worse terms than for those that act while they still can.[1]

The pressures on universities today are diverse and structural, not merely cyclical. In some countries, political polarisation and declining public trust have turned higher education into a cultural battleground. In others, financial models are under strain as tuition regimes stagnate and public subsidies tighten. Demographic shifts threaten enrolment growth. Concerns about research integrity have unsettled confidence in parts of the scientific enterprise. Artificial intelligence now reshapes research workflows, challenges assessment models and raises sharp questions. What is the distinctive value of campus-based education when generative tools can produce essays, code and analysis on demand?

These pressures vary by country and institution, and there is no single global pattern to the challenges, let alone a coherent mandate for reform. International rankings still reward publication counts and research income. Disciplinary prestige continues to shape academic careers. Universities operate within a field of competing signals—prestige, revenue, public scrutiny, social expectations—rather than a unified call to change.

Nonetheless, one thread runs through otherwise disparate contexts: universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate, more convincingly and systematically, the value they create for society. This expectation is also being articulated explicitly in international discourse. UNESCO's World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) 2022, for example, frames higher education as a public good and calls for transformation aligned with wider societal needs. Parallel movements to reform research assessment (such as DORA and CoARA) are pressing institutions to value a broader range of contributions, including forms of societal influence that sit beyond journal-based metrics.

When trust in higher education is lost for a significant share of the population, as in the United States, the stridency can reach a deeply dysfunctional point of no return. The tone may be more measured elsewhere, but the expectations are no less real. Governments want clearer returns on public funding. Students and families compare outcomes with growing transparency. Employers want graduates equipped for rapidly evolving industries. Communities expect visible contribution to local challenges.

Such pressures are driving what might be called the impact turn: a growing recognition amid universities, echoing broader signals across sectors (as explored throughout this issue), that societal contribution is becoming central to institutional legitimacy and that this recognition has architectural implications for how universities and other institutions organise themselves. The shift tends to appear in three ways, with reform-oriented universities:

- Reorienting key delivery strategies in core mission areas such that research, teaching and engagement more logically and intentionally connect to valued societal outcomes.
- Pursuing more systematic, co-produced partnerships beyond campus—with policymakers, employers, industry and communities—rather than relying on influence to flow indirectly from academic excellence alone.
- Investing in the capacity to demonstrate public value more credibly, through improved information systems, structured case studies and more strategic communication.

Taken together, these shifts signal not a rejection of the research university model but a recalibration of it, at least among universities drawing attention for attempting to make impact more visible and meaningful. To see what the impact turn looks like in practice, it is useful to examine three arenas—research, workforce alignment and community engagement—using well-known examples of university reform to illustrate developments.[2]

RESEARCH WITH PATHWAYS OF USE

The impact turn is often misread as a call for research to sacrifice rigour in favour of immediacy or instrumentality. The more consequential shift, however, lies elsewhere: it is the insistence that rigour itself include serious attention to use. To ask how research may inform policy, shape practice or enter public deliberation is not to dilute standards. It is to expand them.

This reframing treats the movement of knowledge beyond the academy as something that can be anticipated, structured and assessed—rather than left to chance. Impact is not an afterthought appended to publication. It is a pathway that can be designed, supported and, over time, strengthened institutionally.

This logic is increasingly visible in Asia as well. For instance, Hong Kong's system-wide University Grants Committee incorporated an explicit impact component into its 2020 Research Assessment Exercise, requiring universities to submit impact case studies demonstrating how research has contributed to wider societal benefit, and publishing a curated selection of these cases.

Two contrasting levers illustrate how this logic can be embedded. One operates internally, through reforms that align expectations and incentives within an institution's operating model. The other functions externally, through system-wide frameworks that compel institutions to develop impact capability whether or not they would have done so voluntarily.

The RAND Corporation

Few organisations have operationalised the pathways of use more deliberately or systematically than the RAND Corporation, an American non-profit global policy think tank. Though not a university, RAND offers a close analogue: it houses deep disciplinary expertise, peer-reviewed scholarship and champions independence—with an explicit institutional mandate to influence public decision-making, making it a useful reference point for universities seeking to make impact more deliberate.

Under President Michael Rich's leadership [Editor's note: See Rich's *At the Helm* interview in this issue], RAND made becoming "impact-centric" its overriding institutional imperative, embedding impact across strategy, performance review and internal evaluation. RAND articulated a three-tier framework applied to all research projects: address issues at or near the top of the policy agenda; ensure findings reach key decision-makers; and, where feasible, contribute directly to changes in policy or practice. Researchers were prompted early in the project lifecycle to identify intended users, understand policy windows and clarify what meaningful influence might look like.

Importantly, this was not framed as a departure from analytic rigour but as its extension. Project proposals were expected to articulate plausible impact pathways alongside methodological design. Senior leadership tracked not only publications and contracts, but documented instances of policy engagement and uptake. Internal review increasingly asked: who needs to hear this finding and what would make it legible? The aim was not to guarantee policy wins, given how difficult attribution can be in complex governance systems. It was to build a culture where relevance and influence were discussed explicitly rather than treated as incidental.

Over time, RAND invested in systems to capture and narrate impact more systematically, producing structured impact stories that traced the arc from research question to decision-maker engagement to observable change. This documentation served multiple purposes: strategic learning, external accountability and internal signalling about what counted. The result was an organisation in which

To ask how research may inform policy, shape practice or enter public deliberation is not to dilute standards. It is to expand them.

the expectation of public relevance was not left to individual inclination, but embedded in hiring, evaluation and leadership messaging.[3]

System-wide reform in the UK

If RAND illustrates what internal design can accomplish, the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) shows what happens when impact expectations are enforced through external incentives. Since 2014, between 20–25% of public research funding allocation has been linked to the demonstrated capacity of universities to translate scholarship into social and stakeholder impact. Universities submit detailed case studies explaining how specific bodies of research influenced legislation, professional standards, industry practices or public understanding. These submissions are reviewed by expert panels and linked to funding outcomes.

When a quarter of public research funding is contingent on impact performance, institutional behaviour adjusts.[4] A complex balance sheet of progress and challenge has emerged after more than a decade of implementation. Preparing REF submissions has required universities to invest in professional impact officers, improved data systems and closer tracking of external engagement. At the same time, the process has raised transaction costs, concentrated attention on research rather than teaching and broader engagement and, at times, incentivised performative responses. It remains difficult to determine empirically to what extent the REF has increased the overall production of societally impactful research, as opposed to primarily improving the documentation thereof.[5]

Despite these caveats, the structural significance of the REF is clear. It has normalised the idea that translating research beyond publications is legitimate academic work—and it made that legitimacy consequential. Where influence was once treated as incidental, it has become something to organise for. There is little doubt that the result is a *more engaged* higher education sector.

Across these examples, what marks the impact turn in research is not a retreat from rigour but an extension of rigour to pathways of use. Impact does not follow reliably from excellence alone. It becomes more likely when institutions treat uptake as an organisational capability and adjust their internal architecture accordingly.

BEYOND RESEARCH: EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT REWIRED

The same logic is increasingly visible in education and community engagement. For much of the twentieth century, universities relied on an implicit contract with labour markets: provide rigorous education and employers will recognise its value. In more volatile labour markets shaped by technological change and AI-enabled automation, that assumption has weakened. Students and governments scrutinise employability, mobility and return on investment more closely. Employers want graduates who can not only master disciplinary content, but also apply it in dynamic environments, collaborate across boundaries and adapt to evolving technologies.

Again, the question is not whether universities value employability or engagement in principle. The question is whether those aims are built into the institution's design or left to individual initiatives and patchwork programmes.

Northeastern University's cooperative education model

Northeastern University offers a distinctive example of how one institution has responded vigorously and innovatively in this domain. Its long-standing "cooperative education model" integrates extended, paid months-long work placements into degree programmes at scale. Students graduate having spent roughly a third of their degree programmes working in professional environments alongside their academic studies.

The value this creates flows in multiple directions. Students earn competitive wages during co-op placements, reducing the debt burden of a degree while building professional networks before graduation; many receive full-time offers from their co-op employers. Employers gain access to a talent pipeline already tested under professional conditions, reducing the costly uncertainty of graduate hiring. Northeastern, meanwhile, turns demonstrable graduate outcomes—tracked systematically, not inferred from reputation—into a strategic differentiator at a moment when the employment value of a degree faces unprecedented scrutiny. The university grew from a regional commuter school into a nationally ranked university in large part because this model created durable, reciprocal value for every party involved.[6]

The point is not that every university should replicate Northeastern's approach. It reflects particular institutional history and decades of investment in employer relationships. The point is that workforce alignment becomes far more credible when it is designed into programmes, supported by sustained employer relationships and measured through outcomes rather than asserted through reputation.

Arizona State University's public engagement model

Arizona State University (ASU)'s "New American University" model provides the most ambitious illustration of this commitment, pursued at extraordinary scale. Under President Michael Crow, ASU explicitly rejected the traditional equation of excellence with selectivity, arguing instead that a public research university should be measured by whom it includes and what it contributes.[7] ASU has grown to become one of the largest universities in the United States by enrolment while simultaneously increasing the proportion of low-income and first-generation students—all while improving graduation rates.

ASU's community engagement model is among the key features of the model—shifting from episodic service to sustained partnership that leaves durable capacity behind. Community-based projects are institutionally supported at scale rather than dependent on individual faculty champions. Long-term partnerships with local organisations in the Phoenix metropolitan area connect research and teaching to regional challenges in sustainability, public health and workforce development. Faculty receive support in embedding community engagements into curricula; and crucially, outcomes are evaluated for both student learning and community benefit.

Impact becomes more likely when institutions treat uptake as an organisational capability and adjust their internal architecture accordingly.

Engagement of this sort does not scale on goodwill alone, requiring scaffolding that most universities have not yet built: dedicated partnership offices, funding streams that support multi-year engagement, promotion systems that recognise externally engaged scholarship alongside traditional publications and data systems that track sustained outcomes for community partners. Without these structures, engagement risks remaining episodic and dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than institutional design.

AGAINST THE GRAIN: WHY REFORM IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

It would be misleading to suggest that most universities have ignored the impact imperative. On the contrary, service-learning initiatives are now widely recognised as "high-impact" educational practices; community engagement offices have proliferated; mission statements routinely invoke societal contribution; and few institutions would dispute that research and teaching should leave durable value beyond campus. The more difficult question is why the gap between aspiration and delivery persists so widely. The answer is not primarily a deficit of intention. It is a function of governance and incentives.

Brian Rosenberg, president emeritus of Macalester College, makes this case with unusual candour in '*Whatever It Is, I'm Against It*': *Resistance to Change in Higher Education*. Rosenberg's diagnosis is structural. Shared governance—the power-sharing arrangement between governing boards, presidents and faculty that is the constitutional DNA of most Anglo-American universities—requires consensus before action. "Anyone who studies organisational change will tell you that consensus is the enemy of change," he writes. "Most transformational change happens or originates with a smaller group of people. That's antithetical to the way shared governance works."[8] A reform that requires the approval of faculty senates, curriculum committees, accreditation bodies and department chairs is a reform that will move slowly, if at all.

Rosenberg argues that tenure compounds this inertia: once awarded, faculty members are, "frozen in place for as long as they choose to be."[9] And the incentive problem runs deeper still, because higher education has no internal constituencies reliably incentivised to push for transformation. Faculty identify with their disciplines rather than their institutions. Administrators are rewarded for stability. External rankings reward prestige and research volume more reliably than societal outcomes. In such a system, universities may adopt impact language and even build impact units while leaving the core determinants of behaviour untouched.

This is why success stories tend to share certain features. ASU, Northeastern and similar institutions typically began their reform journeys when they had less to lose from change than inaction. They were led by presidents who achieved unusual longevity in office and genuine strategic authority, willing to act before full consensus materialised.

A pessimistic read of Rosenberg's work suggests that crisis may be a more common catalyst than persuasion. More constructively, however, he implies that leaders who recognise the design problem can still shift institutions—but only by aligning governance, incentives and resources around the change they claim to want.

ORGANISING FOR IMPACT—AND WHY IT MATTERS BEYOND CAMPUS

Once the impact turn is framed as an organisational design problem, a familiar failure mode becomes easier to name. Indeed, aligning research, education and engagement around societal contribution is an organisationally demanding commitment. Adding expectations for impact without adjusting structures risks what Rosenberg calls reform theatre—an institution can hire impact officers, publish an impact strategy and commission reports about community engagement without changing a single promotion criterion that shapes the day-to-day choices of researchers and teachers.

Singapore Management University's Office of Impact

Recently established but building on longstanding commitments to external engagement, Singapore Management University's Office of Impact illustrates both the promise of this agenda and the early-stage complexity of institutionalising it. Still in its formative phase, the office is less a finished model than an experiment in structural alignment. Its strategy combines several strands: revising faculty promotion and performance appraisal criteria to more explicitly recognise demonstrated societal impact; developing structured impact case studies as both learning tools and external signals; strengthening pathways for faculty engagement and co-production with societal partners; and improving the systems by which research insights are translated and made visible beyond academic journals. The aim is not to layer impact activity on top of existing structures, but to adjust the incentives and scaffolding that shape how academic work travels outward.

The challenges ahead may be considerable, but they are broadly predictable. Impact unfolds over years, whereas performance reviews are annual. Attribution is diffuse while disciplinary norms remain powerful. Engagement requires collaboration across schools and administrative units that operate with distinct priorities and rhythms. None of these tensions are signs of failure; they are features of the institutional design Rosenberg describes. Whether such reforms take root will depend less on rhetorical commitment than on sustained attention to incentives, evaluation processes, partnership infrastructure and resource allocation—a gradual recalibration rather than a dramatic pivot.

The broader relevance of the impact imperative extends beyond higher education. Corporations face parallel tensions as ESG expectations intensify: publishing sustainability reports is considerably easier than aligning executive incentives and capital allocation with environmental and social goals. Philanthropic foundations grapple with measuring systems change without distorting grantee behaviour. Governments oscillate between performance metrics and broader notions of public value. In this wider landscape, universities are both subjects and exemplars—under pressure to demonstrate value while convening the expertise needed to shape societal debates about what value means. The lesson is not that universities have solved the problem. It is that some are demonstrating, concretely and at scale, that it is worth attempting, both for the value created for stakeholders and for their long-term legitimacy and credibility.

CONCLUSION

The impact turn is a recalibration that a small number of universities are pursuing with a systematic approach, and that many more are contemplating but struggling to initiate or scale. Levine and Van Pelt frame the historical stakes clearly: higher education is entering a period of disruption as profound as any since the Industrial Revolution, and institutions that adapt on their own terms will fare better than those that wait to be remade by others. Rosenberg supplies the counterweight: the likelihood of rapid, widespread reform is low, given how systematically universities are designed to resist it.

Both perspectives are right at once. The evidence from institutions such as ASU and Northeastern suggests that more impact-oriented models can be built and sustained. The harder question is how many universities and institutions will have the leadership resolve, institutional positioning and willingness to experiment that such change demands,[10] and what discernible shifts in the wider ecosystem will follow. In a world where legitimacy increasingly hinges on visible, credible societal contribution, the cost of not finding that combination is rising.

SCOTT FRITZEN
is Vice President (Impact) at Singapore Management University. He served previously as President of Fulbright University Vietnam, and in various leadership positions at New York University, NYU Shanghai, the University of Washington, the University of Oklahoma, and the National University of Singapore. His scholarly work, including *The Public Policy Primer: Managing the Policy Process* and *The Conundrum of Corruption: Reform for Social Justice*, focuses on public management reform and anti-corruption policymaking.

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STANDING FIRM ON SUSTAINABILITY

As priorities evolve, sustainability continues to shape key business decisions for organisations.

Helge Muenkel, Chief Sustainability Officer at DBS, speaks with editor-in-chief Scott Fritzen about the shifting sustainability landscape and DBS's unwavering stance.

In recent years, the language around ESG and sustainability has become more contested—economically, politically and even culturally. From your vantage point as a bank operating across Asia, how do you think this reflects deeper, structural change in the sustainability agenda?

I am struck by the fact that the term "sustainability" has become more contested. In the Western world—across Europe, the UK and the US—sustainability was often seen as centred around climate action, in that climate action was top priority. But this is a narrow view; it neglects the social and economic dimensions of sustainability, and the impact climate action may have on people beyond the environment.

This resistance we see in the Western world is driven largely by a failure to clearly communicate the benefits of sustainability. Organisations struggle to create an emotional connection and communicate its relevance to the public. Sustainability is seen, instead, as something that comes at the expense of people's needs.

I believe that sustainability, at its core, is about improving people's lives—the lives of people that live today and the lives of people that will live tomorrow. It is a human-centric definition of sustainability that considers intergenerational fairness, which is important to meet all people's needs, and is a definition that is dominant across Asia.

In recent years, I have observed two main trends. The first is this paradigm around economic competitiveness, energy security and geopolitics. It appears to have caused sustainability to be reprioritised and downgraded. In the US, for instance, the current administration has changed a lot of the rules to make sustainability less relevant.

The second trend is often called the "electrotech revolution", a term coined by global energy think tank Ember. It creates a business case for transitioning to low-carbon technologies—which makes simple business sense. It is transforming energy and industrial systems at speed, driving great progress on decarbonisation globally.

These two trends appear to have caused a "perception-reality" gap amongst the public: Because sustainability is put lower on the priority list, people believe that progress has stalled. But, looking at the facts, the world has made remarkable progress on clean technologies.

Much of early ESG efforts focused on disclosure and reporting. Where do you see the real frontier now in how sustainability information influences capital allocation, pricing and strategic decisions?

The foundational things we have done—assessing our position, building capabilities and crafting potential decarbonisation pathways, all of which we disclose publicly—are important for sustainability but not the essence. The ability to make informed decisions from measured results is important, but, more critically, we need systems thinking. An individual actor having a net-zero target, be it corporate or government, is fundamentally flawed. It is fundamentally flawed because we are all part of systems, and the actions of other actors will influence the efficacy of our climate strategies.

There are two examples that can illustrate this. The first is a workshop I organised in December last year. This was jointly conducted with the International Energy Agency, and involved individuals from the Indonesian government, the state-owned power utility Perusahaan Listrik Negara (PLN) and key actors within the battery energy storage systems (BESS) ecosystem. We brought everyone together to discuss how to expand BESS in Indonesia at scale and at speed. It was essential that major groups involved in BESS were present at the workshop, because no one actor can enact change alone. That is systems thinking and action.

The second example is in Singapore real estate. We brought all relevant actors into a room—real estate companies, policymakers, the Prime Minister's Office, financial institutions—and we facilitated discussion between them on the barriers to transitioning to net-zero.

This is the new frontier: systems thinking and systems solutions, focussed on action at speed and scale. No bank or organisation can truly achieve net-zero without engaging the system. I believe this is something that organisations deeply care about now and is accelerating progress in sustainability.

DBS often speaks about credible transition pathways. What distinguishes a transition plan that DBS is willing to back from one that remains aspirational or symbolic?

Actions matter, not words. You could have a well-crafted plan that aligns with the Transition Plan Taskforce, who develop comprehensive frameworks for climate transition plans, but the key element is action. The critical questions a banker would ask a corporate include: What is your overall strategy and what is the capital expenditure plan linked to it? How do you translate all these ideas and plans into meaningful action? That is ultimately the gist of the matter.

Credibility comes from action, not ambition or lukewarm thoughts. It comes from consistent execution and discipline. We have to ensure our clients, especially those with whom we have established long-term relationships, are walking the talk. That, to me, is the absolute crux of the matter.

Many sustainability frameworks were initially developed in Western contexts. What are the distinctive challenges and opportunities you see for sustainability and impact in Asia's economic and institutional landscape?

If you look at the world broadly, you will see very different approaches to sustainability. In Europe, they apply the stick, pushing for sustainability through heavy regulation, including the use of carbon pricing. The US, prior to the Trump administration, used a carrot, encouraging sustainability with markets-driven incentives and legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

In Asia, I see a very pragmatic middle ground; regulations and incentives are utilised when they are most helpful. The word "pragmatic" is not meant to be an out-of-prison card, nor is it meant to slow down action. People in Asia simply have a very practical perspective on sustainability, and do not get lost in dogmatism.

But perhaps the larger challenge is more between developed and developing markets, rather than between Asia and non-Asia. There are structural issues that are faced by emerging markets broadly, not only in Asia. A US pension fund investing in a renewable energy project in Laos, for example, would normally not happen, simply because the sovereign rating of Laos is too low. There are challenges around risk-return profiles of projects, FX conversion into local currencies and so on. There are ways to address these, but it is often complex.

At a wider level, more countries are defining their own pathways, not being dictated by what the West is doing. The Paris Agreement acknowledged this, with its fundamental principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" of various countries to address climate change.

From your experience, what internal governance structures and incentive systems matter most in ensuring that sustainability is integrated into core business decisions rather than treated as a parallel agenda?

There are three main elements to this. First, sustainability needs to be fully integrated within the organisation. In the context of a bank, it means sustainability is a core part of the risk management process and decision-making. It is fully incorporated into sector and client account management processes. It needs to be the cake itself, not the icing on the cake. For instance, if sustainability does not affect decisions in risk management, then it is not risk management, but merely commentary.

The second element is governance. Good governance ultimately means having clear rules and consequences. In a bank, friction is intentional: The front office unit and the risk unit will often disagree, as they have fundamentally different job functions. But the rules of the road and consequences should be laid out clearly, so that there is consistency across all departments.

Finally, key performance indicators (KPIs). It is important to set the right KPIs, and, to some extent, it is an art rather than a science. Behaviours within organisations change when the right KPIs are set because they are linked directly to renumeration. It is critical to set KPIs in a transparent manner to ensure clarity and alignment across different areas of an organisation such that everyone marches into the same direction. In our sustainability reports, we include what we call the group scorecard. The group scorecard is a collection of all KPIs that has direct oversight of the CEO. The percentage of ESG on that group scorecard is key to cultivating sustainability within and integrating it into an organisation.

At a time when some organisations are retrenching or softening their sustainability commitments, DBS has maintained a clear stance. What underpins your confidence in that stance?

We have always looked at sustainability through three lenses. The first is that we see it as a societal responsibility. Our mission statement is to be the "Best Bank for a Better World", and that latter part encapsulates sustainability. The statement is not just a marketing slogan. It was the outcome of our annual leadership conference, and everyone present wanted more than just working towards strong financial returns. This really spoke to the strength of organisational culture and purpose, and these are fundamental to our strong stance on sustainability.

The second and third lens are paired together, and these are risk imperative and business opportunity. Sustainability is a risk imperative because the physical implications of climate change are already very visible, seen in drastic weather changes and catastrophes. Asia also has the largest insurance gap in the world: Munich RE reported that in 2025, natural disasters in the Asia-Pacific caused damage of nearly US$80 billion, but only about 12% of it was insured. Indeed, less affluent communities are often hit hardest by natural disasters.

Conversely, economic systems are transforming. Sustainability triggers business transformation, and businesses that embrace those trends are being turned upside down. Sustainability is both a risk imperative and a business opportunity because the financing needs are strong. This is something that we at DBS firmly believe in.

Looking ahead at the next five to ten years, how do you expect the relationship between finance, sustainability and societal impact to evolve? What role do you believe banks like DBS will be expected to play in that future?

I think we are increasingly recognising that sustainability issues do not occur in isolated blocks. Often, I am asked why I speak more about climate action than the social aspects of sustainability. My belief is that climate action is social, because people's lives will be affected, and it is linked with finance and economics.

There is also a greater understanding of the interdependencies within the sustainability framework. The United Nations' (UN) Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), for example, offer a holistic view of this: even if not all targets are met, the SDGs are integrated, and efforts towards select goals can help fulfil others.

It can be said that DBS is taking an integrated approach, incorporating climate action into financial and business decisions. I am particularly optimistic around decarbonisation of climate action, because the data from China and India show that we are making significant progress on that front. On the social dimension, the challenges that are most critical to us include ageing societies and rising income inequalities, and generative AI may aggravate these issues further.

How do you think about talent and capability building for sustainability within a large bank like DBS? What advice would you have for someone thinking about corporate sustainability as a potential career path?

There is a growing demand for individuals to help tackle all sorts of sustainability issues, and not just environmental sustainability. At DBS, we hire people from various academic backgrounds because we want different perspectives, and because sustainability is a such complex problem that requires a multidisciplinary approach. We recently introduced a Sustainability Graduate Program at DBS in 2025 to give a holistic view of the inner workings of a bank, and we invited graduates, both in finance and not, to join it.

On defining a career path, my advice would be to focus less on specific job functions and more on skills. What are the skills that will be important in the future? Though job roles and titles are always changing, the underlying skills necessary will remain. I read a book by David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialised World*, and it compared specialisation against broadening skills. The author uses the example of Tiger Woods, who began his golf career at a very young age. It was thought that he was an excellent player because he specialised early. But Roger Federer, a world-class tennis player, played a variety of sports before going pro. So it is extremely important, especially for young people, to broaden their horizons and learn new skills, to remain intellectually curious and open to trying new things. AMI

by Lisa Ng, Benny Chew, Julian Lai and Siti Naqiah Amrun

WHY COMPLEX RISKS DEMAND MULTIDISCIPLINARY ACTION: LESSONS FROM INFECTIOUS DISEASE PREPAREDNESS

The A*STAR Infectious Diseases Labs offers a model for how organisations can move from ad-hoc crisis response to sustained, shared preparedness.

"*Disease knows no borders.*" The phrase sits on the lips of many researchers, politicians and public health professionals that it has become a truism. As true as it is banal, infectious disease outbreaks rarely stay confined to the health sector. They spill over into the workforce at large, inducing supply chain snags, swaying public confidence while serving as a litmus test for institutional coordination, whether regionally or globally.

Such outbreaks also expose systemic risks. Expertise exists, often in abundance, but it is fragmented. For decades, scientific discovery, data analysis, clinical response, policy decisions and industry execution have tended to advance in parallel rather than in tandem. The cost of this fragmentation only becomes clear under pressure. In an interconnected world, the next outbreak is not a question of if, but when. Preparing for this future requires an ecosystem that brings diverse disciplines together before crisis strikes.

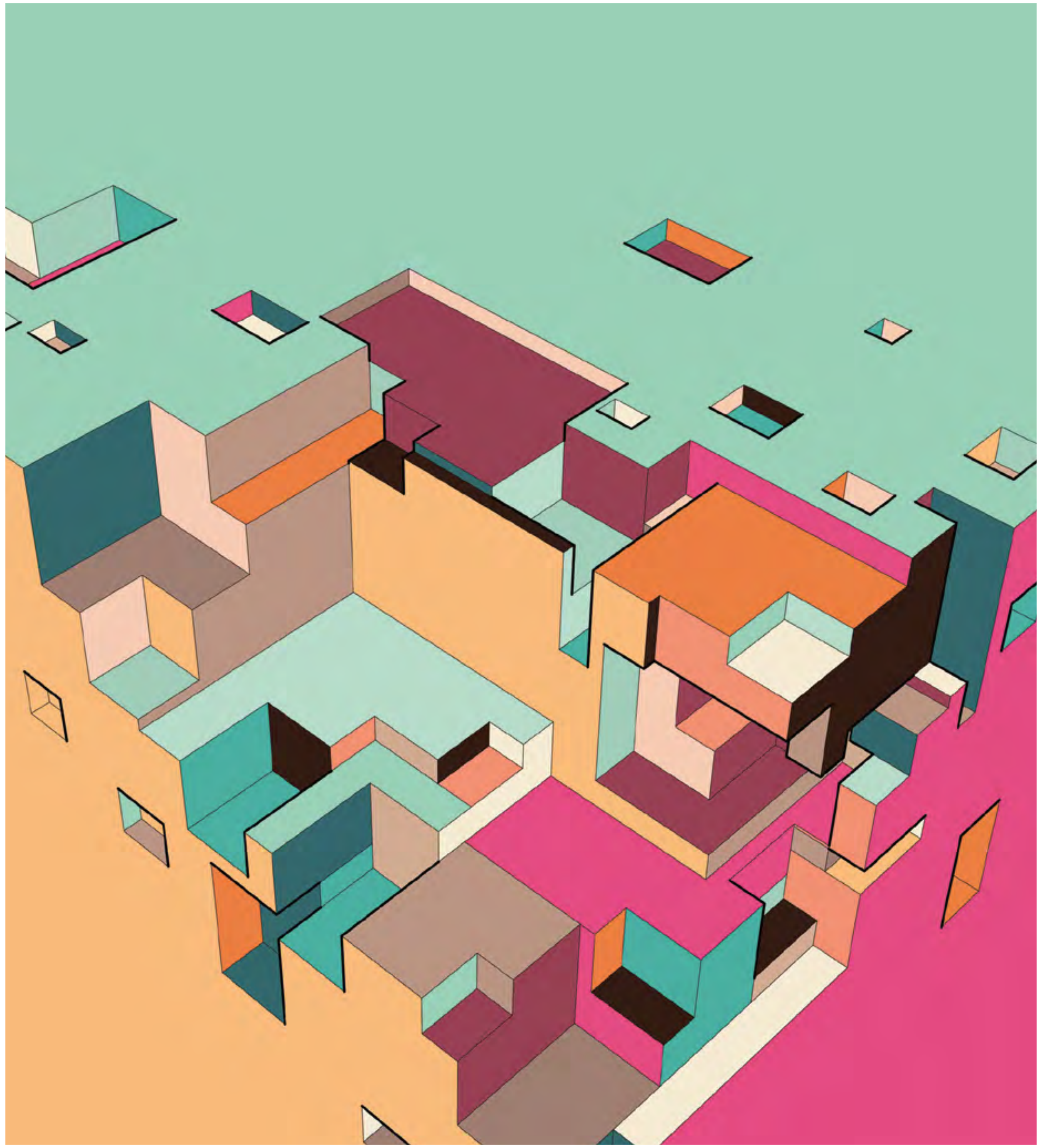
That was the impetus for establishing the A*STAR Infectious Diseases Labs (A*STAR IDL) in April 2021. Set up in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, A*STAR IDL was built with a clear mandate—to create pandemic preparedness that is proactive, coordinated and multidisciplinary by default. From the onset, A*STAR IDL integrated capabilities across biological sciences, data and computational methods, clinical research and translational sciences. By working closely with hospitals, industry and public health agencies, it sought to close the gaps that typically emerge when research policy and response efforts are siloed.

This integrated model offers valuable insights beyond the health sector. A*STAR IDL's experience demonstrates how multidisciplinary collaboration, when embedded in everyday systems, can strengthen readiness long before crisis erupts. For organisational leaders, outbreaks are less a medical problem and more a resiliency stress test of coordination, decision-making and trust. The question, then, is how organisations can design ecosystems where such collaboration is possible before a crisis forces it into being.

Preparedness is an organisational design problem, not a crisis response mode.

Multidisciplinary initiatives only compound when the right enabling conditions are in place.

For organisational leaders, outbreaks are less a medical problem than a resilience stress test.



TACKLING SYSTEMIC RISKS IS INHERENTLY MULTIDISCIPLINARY

While a simplified narrative suggests that a pathogen emerges, spreads, mutates and is eventually contained, the lived reality is far more complex. It interacts with healthcare capacity, economic resilience, public trust, supply chains, information systems and governance structures.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that outcomes were shaped as much by policy decisions, institutional coordination and communication strategies. Addressing such risks therefore requires an integrated, cross-sectoral approach—one that recognises interdependencies across systems and enables timely, coherent decision-making beyond traditional disciplinary or organisational boundaries.

The pandemic was also a data problem. Case numbers, testing rates, hospital capacity and later vaccination uptake had to be tracked and interpreted in real time. Epidemiological models informed policy decisions on border controls, workplace closures and school reopenings. The usefulness of these models depended not only on technical sophistication, but on data quality, interoperability and the speed at which insights could be shared across agencies and jurisdictions.

Human behaviour quickly proved just as consequential. Most of us are familiar with the fast-changing public health policies enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic: wearing masks, distancing from one another and adhering to vaccination schedules. Misinformation, as well as disinformation, pervaded alongside the disease, infecting risk communication and eroding trust in institutions. Even the most carefully designed interventions faltered when they failed to account for how people perceived risk, authority and fairness.

Policy and governance frameworks influenced every aspect of pandemic response. Governments had to balance public health advice with economic and social considerations. Regulatory systems shaped the speed at which diagnostics were approved, therapeutics and vaccines deployed and international data shared. Businesses, in turn, faced the dual challenge of adapting to evolving regulations while safeguarding workforce well-being, ensuring operational continuity and maintaining stakeholder confidence.

The pandemic underscored how infectious disease risks sit at the intersection of many systems. This complexity is not unique to COVID-19. Other challenges such as antimicrobial resistance, vector-borne diseases and respiratory diseases share the same hallmark. They evolve across biological and social boundaries, and their consequences ripple through healthcare systems, economies and communities.

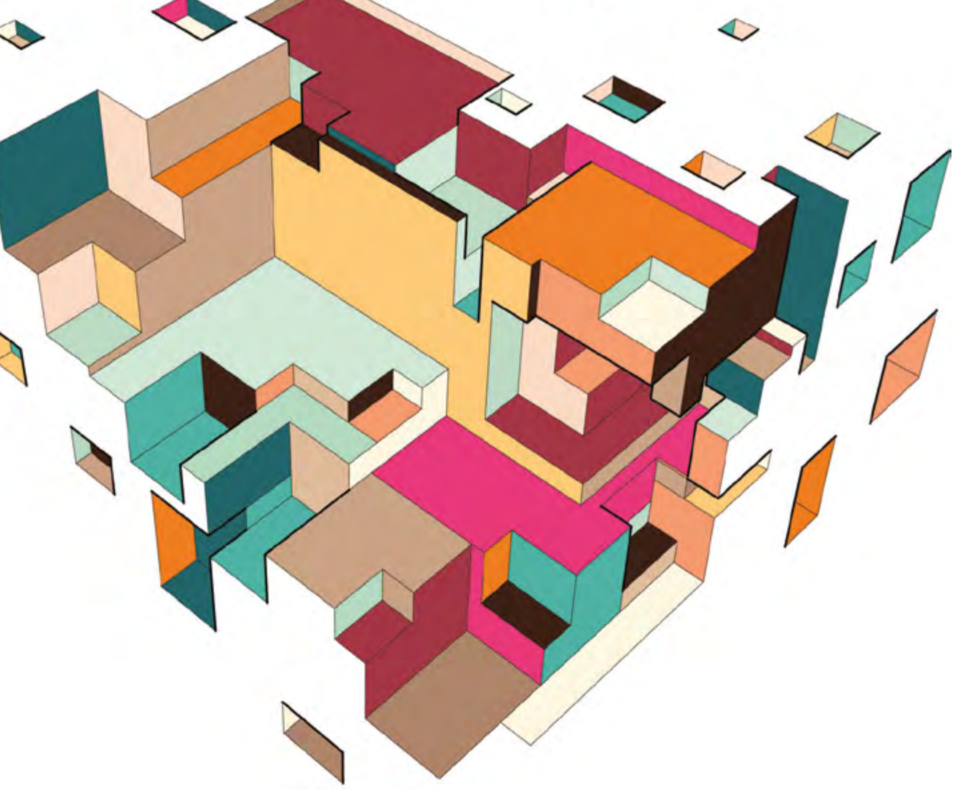
It is this reality that underpins A*STAR IDL's modus operandi. Its core focus areas of respiratory diseases, vector-borne infections and antimicrobial resistance are guided by a cross-cutting emphasis on pandemic preparedness, reflecting problems that cannot be addressed through silos. Each demands collaboration across disciplines and sectors, sustained over time to become effective.

A WINDOW INTO A*STAR IDL'S MULTIDISCIPLINARY ENGINE

A*STAR IDL was established with this clear intent. Infectious disease threats move quickly, cut across domains and demand translation into action. Research capability therefore had to be integrated and not sequential. Decisions about resourcing, infrastructure and partnerships followed from this premise.

A*STAR IDL's research focuses on three main areas: pathogen and disease biology, pathogen evolution and drug resistance, and infection and immunity. These expertise areas are organised around core research themes, allowing teams to address common problems across diseases and methods while reducing handoffs and aligning early on research questions, data needs and downstream use.

Shared infrastructure that links discovery, testing and deployment is a strategic cornerstone of this approach. High containment facilities enable the safe handling of high-risk pathogens and support readiness in both routine and emergency settings. Complementary in vitro and in vivo infection models support the study of disease mechanisms and the evaluation of therapeutic and vaccine candidates. Another key enabler is the pathogen flow platform, connecting discovery, preclinical work and translational development through a coherent pipeline for samples and data. This reduces fragmentation and delays, especially during outbreaks. Together, these platforms and capabilities are designed



For organisational leaders, outbreaks are less a medical problem and more a resiliency stress test of coordination, decision-making and trust.

as common infrastructure that multiple teams and partners can access, averting duplication and accelerating progress.

Additionally, A*STAR IDL was structured to treat partnerships as a core capability from the beginning, working closely with academic institutions, clinical institutions, foundations, industry and public sector agencies to achieve common goals. Each player contributes to a piece of the larger puzzle. For instance, industry contributes scale-up and product development capabilities, while clinical partners ensure relevance to patient care and public health. At the same time, public agencies provide pathways into policy and population-level deployment.

These relationships are formalised and long-term. Clear governance, data and material sharing arrangements and intellectual property frameworks allow collaboration to continue beyond individual grants or crisis moments. Over time, this fosters trust, lowers transaction costs and enables faster coordination in moments of urgency, giving first responders a "first mover advantage".

WHAT GETS THE GEARS OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS GOING

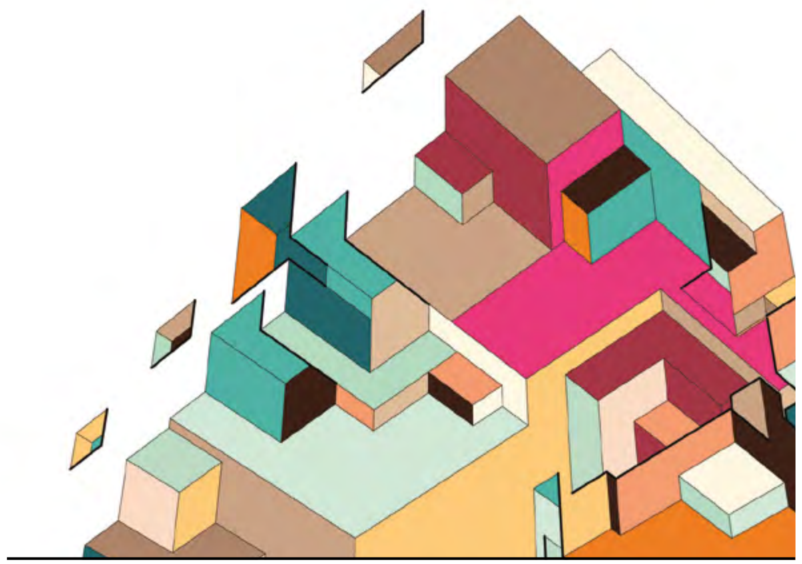
Though multidisciplinary collaboration is widely endorsed, many initiatives still struggle to deliver sustained impact even after assembling diverse expertise and securing initial funding. A*STAR IDL's experience shines a light on the modular facets of multidisciplinary work that come together to enable success over time. Across its work, four enabling conditions consistently determine whether multidisciplinary efforts compound—or stall.

A first building block is a clear and shared purpose. At A*STAR IDL, pandemic preparedness and outbreak response function as organising goals that guide decisions from research priorities to platform investment and partnerships. This framing helps align contributors from different disciplines and sectors around outcomes that matter beyond individual projects.

Purpose, however, needs an operating environment. Shared, integrated platforms—such as high-containment laboratories, infection models and pathogen flow systems—give teams a common way of working. They reduce duplication, standardise workflows and allow partners to plug in without renegotiating foundational capabilities each time. For collaborators, this lowers the cost of engagement and shortens the path from idea to execution.

The third condition is governance and trust. Formal agreements on data and material sharing, intellectual property

Even the most carefully designed interventions faltered when they failed to account for how people perceived risk, authority and fairness.



and decision rights create clarity and reduce friction. At A*STAR IDL, memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and strategic partnerships are designed to sustain collaboration in the long run. Gradually, this consistency fosters trust, which can make all the difference when speed and collective response are paramount.

A fourth enabler is talent pathways that keep expertise moving across boundaries. Joint training programmes, visiting appointments and academic ties allow talent to move between institutions and disciplines. A*STAR IDL's partnerships with local institutions such as the Duke-NUS, National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), as well as international universities such as Zhejiang University, Tsinghua University, Institut Pasteur, Oxford University and The Rockefeller University, support this exchange, ensuring that skills and perspectives circulate and flourish.

Just as important is recognising what does not work. Collaborations built solely around short-term grants often prioritise outputs over outcomes. Without aligned incentives or shared ownership, partners revert to familiar silos once funding cycles end. The result is activity without continuity and impact—and progress that does not compound.

The experience of A*STAR IDL demonstrates preparedness as an ongoing, shared responsibility through its investments in multidisciplinary teams, shared platforms and long-term partnerships.

Anticipating influenza through AI and RNA platforms

Seasonal influenza vaccines are typically developed based on predictions of which strains will circulate months later. When these predictions fall short, vaccine effectiveness wavers. The problem is structural—influenza evolves rapidly, while vaccine design, testing and manufacturing remain predominantly reactive.

How can vaccine development move upstream, from reacting to dominant strains to forecasting how the virus is likely to evolve? Doing so requires computational analysis at scale to pinpoint conserved viral targets, while biological systems are required to rapidly test and translate those insights into viable vaccine candidates.

A*STAR IDL's partnership with Apriori Bio brings these capabilities into a single workflow. Apriori Bio contributes its Octavia™ AI platform, which analyses extensive viral sequence data to predict evolutionary trajectories and identify stable antigenic targets. A*STAR IDL provides self-amplifying RNA vaccine technologies, high-containment laboratory infrastructure and expertise in virology and immunology to rapidly test and refine these AI-designed antigens.

The work is integrated in nature, merging computational design, biological validation and translational considerations from the outset to reduce delays and redesign later in the process.

The collaboration enables faster prototyping of vaccine candidates against likely future influenza variants, shortening response times when new strains emerge. For preparedness, this is a shift from reactive to anticipatory design. When risks evolve faster than traditional development cycles, resilience depends on multistakeholder partnerships that combine advanced analytics, deep domain expertise and execution capabilities within shared platforms.

Building regional capacity through shared networks

Pathogens circulate through travel, trade and migration, often emerging in one setting before spreading rapidly across regions. For those operating in Asia, preparedness therefore depends not only on domestic capabilities, but on the strength of regional surveillance, research and response networks.

However, many parts of the region face uneven access to advanced research infrastructure, genomic surveillance and specialist training. This creates blind spots in the early detection of threats such as antimicrobial resistance and vector-borne diseases. Addressing these gaps requires sustained capacity building and trusted partnerships that enable data, skills and insights to flow freely across borders.

A*STAR IDL has pursued this through long-term collaborations with regional and global partners. An MoU with Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU) Nepal in 2025 focuses on joint work in antimicrobial resistance, respiratory and vector-borne diseases. The partnership emphasises shared training, talent exchange, workshops and collaborative research, strengthening local and regional capabilities. In parallel, A*STAR IDL's MoU with the Wellcome Sanger Institute (Parasites and Microbes Programme), also established in 2025, connects Singapore-based research to global expertise in genomics and AI-driven pandemic preparedness, addressing health challenges from antimicrobial resistance to genomic influences on respiratory tract infections. A Master Research Collaboration Agreement with the Institut Pasteur, signed in 2025, underscores a shared commitment to tackling global infectious disease challenges, including the roles of ageing and the microbiome in infection. Complementing this collaboration, a Joint Forum convened in 2024 strengthened ties with the Institut Pasteur and regional members of the Pasteur Network, including Hong Kong, Cambodia, South Korea and New Caledonia. More recently, a research collaboration agreement signed in 2026 with The First Affiliated Hospital, Zhejiang University aims to enhance preparedness for emerging vector-borne diseases through the application of artificial intelligence.

These collaborations improve early detection, data sharing and scientific readiness across regions. Beyond public health, stronger regional health systems contribute to the stability of supply chains, labour markets and cross-border operations, underscoring the importance of investing in shared capacity and networks as a strategic necessity.

THE CASE FOR ACTION

Infectious disease risk is multidimensional and involves various stakeholders. Treating it as a specialist issue, addressed only during crises, can leave organisations exposed to disruptions that would quickly compound.

One implication is the value of integrating diverse expertise earlier in decision-making. Leaders that rely on escalation under pressure often discover that coordination costs are highest when time is most constrained. Embedding multidisciplinary perspectives into planning, risk assessment and scenario development creates space for alignment before uncertainty becomes urgent.

Another implication concerns how organisations approach external relationships. Transactional engagements may suffice when conditions are stable, but they offer limited flexibility when circumstances change. The experience of A*STAR IDL suggests that longer-term partnerships, anchored in shared infrastructure, data and governance, offer greater resilience. These relationships allow organisations to adapt together rather than negotiate from scratch amid disruption.

Preparedness is not a technical problem to be delegated; it is a leadership choice about how an organisation is designed, governed and connected. It is rarely the result of a single initiative or the responsibility of any one actor. Taking a page out of the infectious diseases book, organisational leaders who treat preparedness as part of core risk management are better positioned to navigate crises with greater finesse—drawing on multidisciplinary capabilities to anticipate uncertainty, absorb shocks, adapt to change and steer their organisations through periods of volatility. AMI

A*STAR IDL was structured to treat partnerships as a core capability from the beginning, working closely with academic institutions, clinical institutions, foundations, industry and public sector agencies to achieve common goals. Each player contributes to a piece of the larger puzzle.

A*STAR INFECTIOUS DISEASES LABS (A*STAR IDL), established in April 2021, aims to be a leading research institute of infectious diseases in antimicrobial resistance, respiratory and vector-borne diseases. A*STAR IDL brings together multidisciplinary infectious disease expertise to drive cutting-edge translational research for Singapore's national preparedness and defence against emerging infections. Building on strong biomedical research capabilities and a globally connected scientific network, A*STAR IDL focuses on innovative technologies in infectious disease detection, intervention and prevention with a pathway to impact on health and economic outcomes.

by
Edmund J. Malesky

FROM INDEX TO IMPACT: HOW VIETNAM'S PROVINCIAL COMPETITIVENESS INDEX SHAPES GOVERNANCE, INVESTMENT AND REFORM

Why business leaders should watch Vietnam's subnational reform experiment closely.

★ *The Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) provides a comparison of economic governance across Vietnam's provinces, highlighting both development trends and the business environment.*

★★ *Measurement of reform through feedback from local firms lent credibility and transparency to the index, making it a powerful tool for advocating policy change.*

★★★ *As Vietnam's challenges evolve, the PCI is expanding beyond provincial benchmarking to assess national reform resilience and governance quality.*

Vietnam is in the middle of one of the most ambitious subnational governance restructurings in Asia. To streamline public administration, reduce duplication and improve service delivery, the government has embarked on a sweeping programme of provincial and administrative mergers.

Sixty-three provinces are being consolidated into 34;[1] commune boundaries redrawn; local leaders replaced with centrally rotated appointees; and bureaucratic hierarchies compressed with the removal of the district tier of government. For Hanoi, the stated objectives are clear: leaner government, better governance and a stronger foundation for long-term growth.

For business leaders, however, the near-term implication is less straightforward: heightened institutional uncertainty at the level that often matters most. In Vietnam, provincial governments shape the day-to-day operating environment. They issue licenses, allocate land, oversee inspections, provide local services and infrastructure and interpret national regulations in practice. When provinces merge, firms will want to know which administrative norms will prevail, whether reform-oriented practices will be preserved or diluted and whether service delivery becomes more efficient —or simply more centralised, slower and less transparent.

These are not academic concerns. Investors making long-term commitments—building factories, developing industrial parks or integrating Vietnamese suppliers into global value chains—must form expectations about how local institutions will function five, ten or even 20 years from now. Administrative restructuring without credible measurement leaves firms navigating reform by rumour and anecdote.

Vietnam, nonetheless, is unusually well equipped to manage this transition. For more than two decades, it has maintained a uniquely granular and trusted tool for tracking subnational governance performance: the Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI). As provinces merge and administrative boundaries shift, the PCI offers something rare in emerging markets—systematic, longitudinal evidence on how local governance actually affects business operations.

Indeed, many of the PCI's recommendations over the past two decades encouraged the very streamlining and pro-private sector reforms that the government is now advancing. As PCI authors have long maintained, they aggregate the voice of Vietnam's nearly one million private, small and medium-sized enterprises to strengthen their voice in policymaking. The radical reforms are a sign of the project's remarkable success in this endeavour.

Today, the PCI is entering its most consequential phase. Originally designed to measure differences in provincial economic governance, it has evolved into a central reference point for policymakers, investors and business managers alike. As Vietnam consolidates its provinces and intensifies its anti-corruption campaign, the PCI provides a critical lens for understanding where reform is real, where it is rhetorical and where long-term opportunities lie.

WHAT IS THE PCI AND WHY SHOULD EXECUTIVES CARE?

The PCI is an annual, survey-based assessment of economic governance across Vietnam's provinces. It is not a compliance checklist nor a perception index. The PCI is built from firm-level experience—how local rules are applied in practice, not how they are meant to work on paper.

Unlike perception indices or compliance checklists, the PCI is grounded in the lived experiences of firms. Each year, 10,000 domestic and foreign private enterprises, selected through random sampling, answer detailed questions about how provincial governments actually behave: how long it takes to register a business, how predictable regulations are, how easy it is to access land, the quality of the local labour force and business support services and whether informal payments are required to get things done.

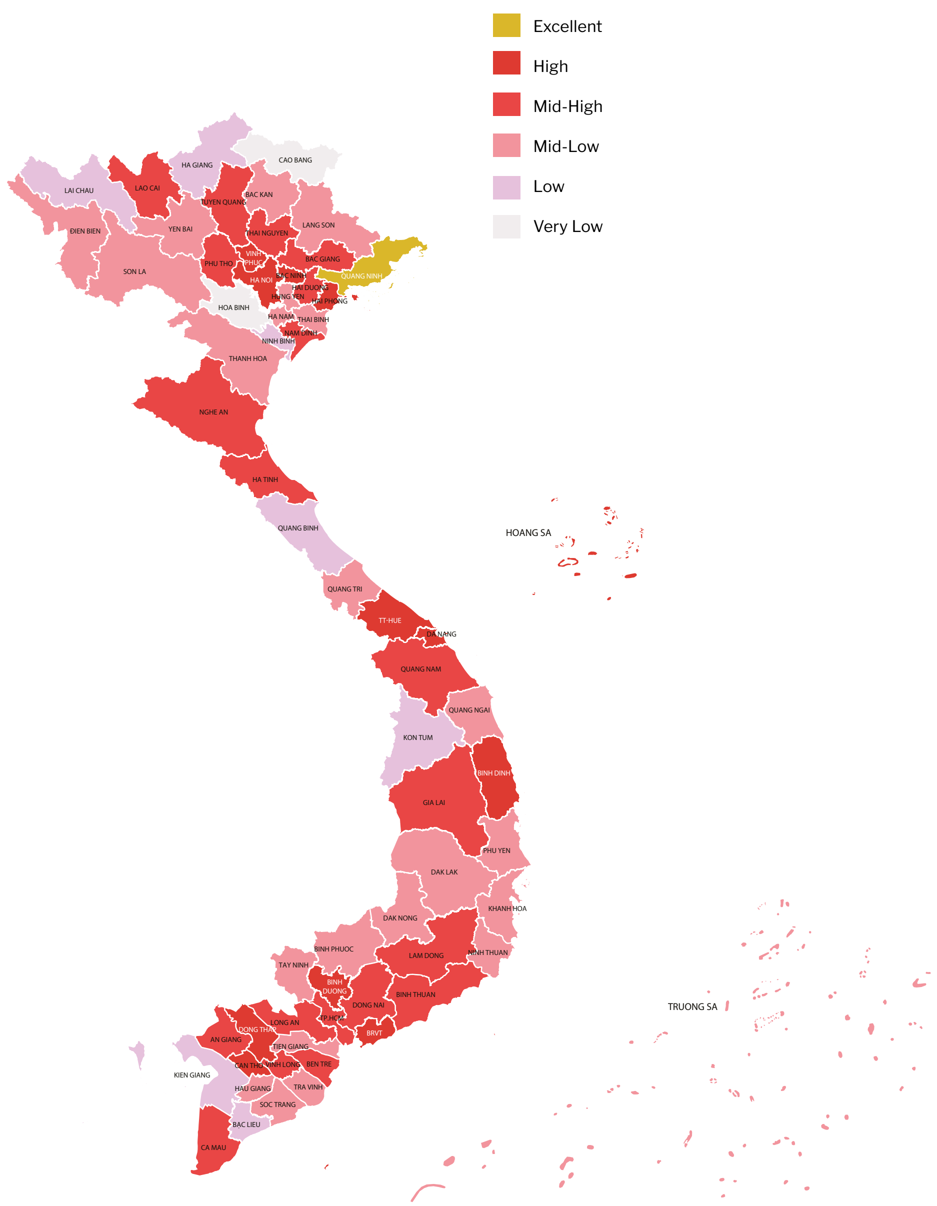


FIGURE 1: Map of Vietnamese PCI Rankings

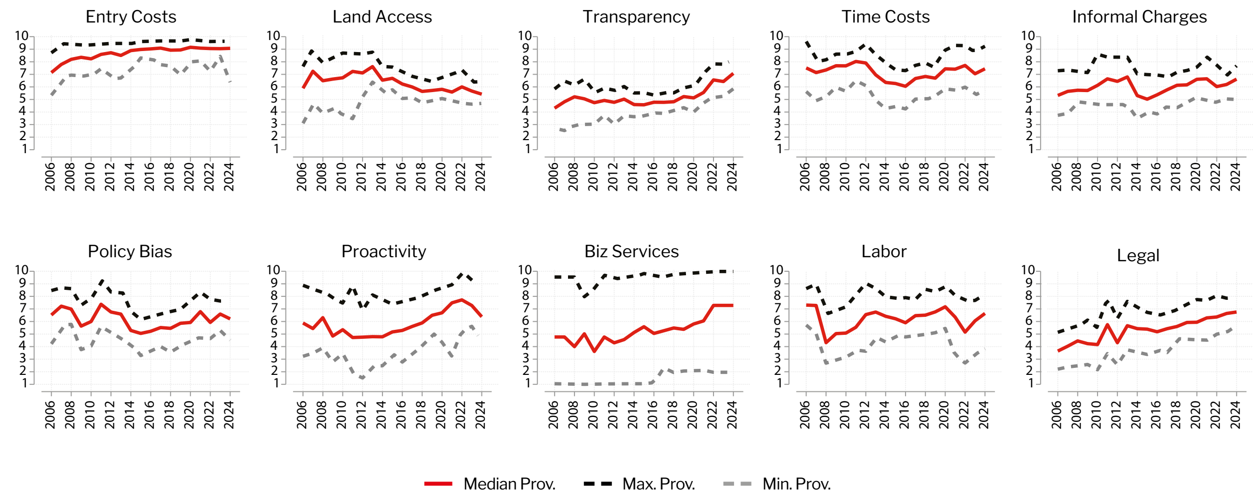


FIGURE 2: Changes in 10 PCI Sub-Indices over Time

The PCI aggregates these responses into a composite score and ranking built from multiple sub-indices (refer to figure 1). These cover issues that matter directly to business strategy: entry costs, transparency, time burdens, informal charges, legal dispute resolution, labour training and—critically—the proactivity of local leadership in solving problems for firms. A high-performing province is not simply one with good laws on the books, but one where officials use their discretion to facilitate, rather than obstruct, private-sector activity (refer to figure 2).

For executives, the value of the PCI lies in three areas. First, it provides a comparative map of subnational risk within Vietnam. Differences between provinces can sometimes be as consequential as differences between countries, especially when it comes to transparency of business information and exposure to informal charges (the Vietnamese euphemism for bribery).

Second, it offers insight into the trajectory of reform. Because the PCI is published annually and uses a consistent methodology, it reveals whether governance improvements are sustained or short-lived. This is supplemented by an annual business thermometer that charts the willingness of private firms to expand over time (refer to figure 3).

Third, it functions as a signalling device. Provinces that take the PCI seriously tend to be those where leadership is responsive, reform-oriented and attentive to investor constraints and concerns.

In an era of provincial mergers, those signals matter even more. As administrative units combine, historical PCI performance can help firms anticipate which governance practices are likely to dominate—and where integration risks may be higher. Measurement does not eliminate uncertainty, but it can materially reduce blind spots at the point where investment decisions are made.

As Vietnam consolidates its provinces and intensifies its anti-corruption campaign, the PCI provides a critical lens for understanding where reform is real, where it is rhetorical and where long-term opportunities lie.

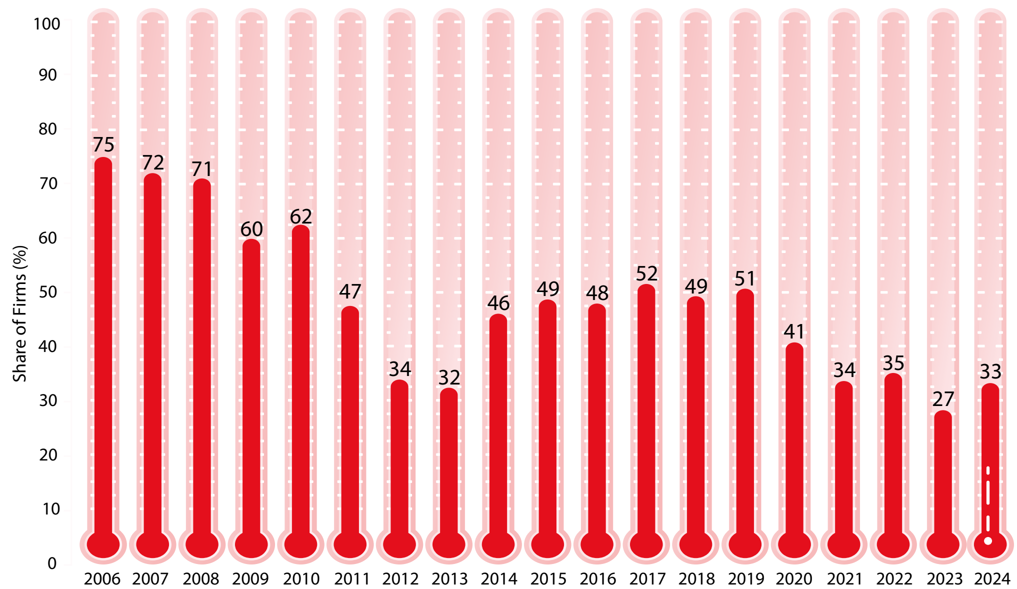


FIGURE 3: PCI Business Thermometer over Time. Question A. 10 "Which statement best characterises your firm's investment plans over the next 2 years?" The illustration represents the percentage of businesses that selected "Plan to increase the size of operations" or "consider increasing the size of operations."

WHY WAS THE PCI CREATED? A TOOL TO SOLVE VIETNAM'S DECENTRALISATION DILEMMA

To understand why the PCI matters today, it helps to revisit the problem it was originally designed to solve. Since the launch of the Đổi Mới reforms in the late 1980s, Vietnam has pursued a distinctive model of decentralised economic governance. While remaining a unitary state politically, it delegated substantial authority over economic administration to provincial governments. Provinces gained discretion over licensing, land allocation, taxation, inspections and the implementation of national laws.

This decentralisation helped fuel rapid growth, but it also created wide variation. Some provinces embraced private enterprise, streamlined procedures and courted investors aggressively. Others remained cautious, opaque or openly hostile to domestic private firms, often ideologically favouring state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or being captured by connected business conglomerates. National legislation, which drew heavily on international exemplars, often looked impressive on paper, yet its local implementation differed dramatically across the country.

By the early 2000s, that divergence had become a binding constraint on further development. Businesses complained that success depended less on national policy than on provincial interpretation and implementation. Technocratic reformers inside the system lacked credible data to diagnose where implementation was failing. Investors, meanwhile, had little systematic information to guide location decisions beyond informal networks.

The PCI emerged as a response to this implementation gap. Rather than measuring decentralisation itself, it measured what decentralisation produced: variation in the quality of economic governance. Its purpose was diagnostic and practical—to identify bottlenecks, highlight best practices and create incentives for provincial leaders to improve.

Crucially, the PCI reframed reform as a competition. By publishing provincial rankings, it introduced reputational stakes into local governance. Provinces could no longer rely on national averages or legal formalities as cover. Performance became visible, comparable and contestable.

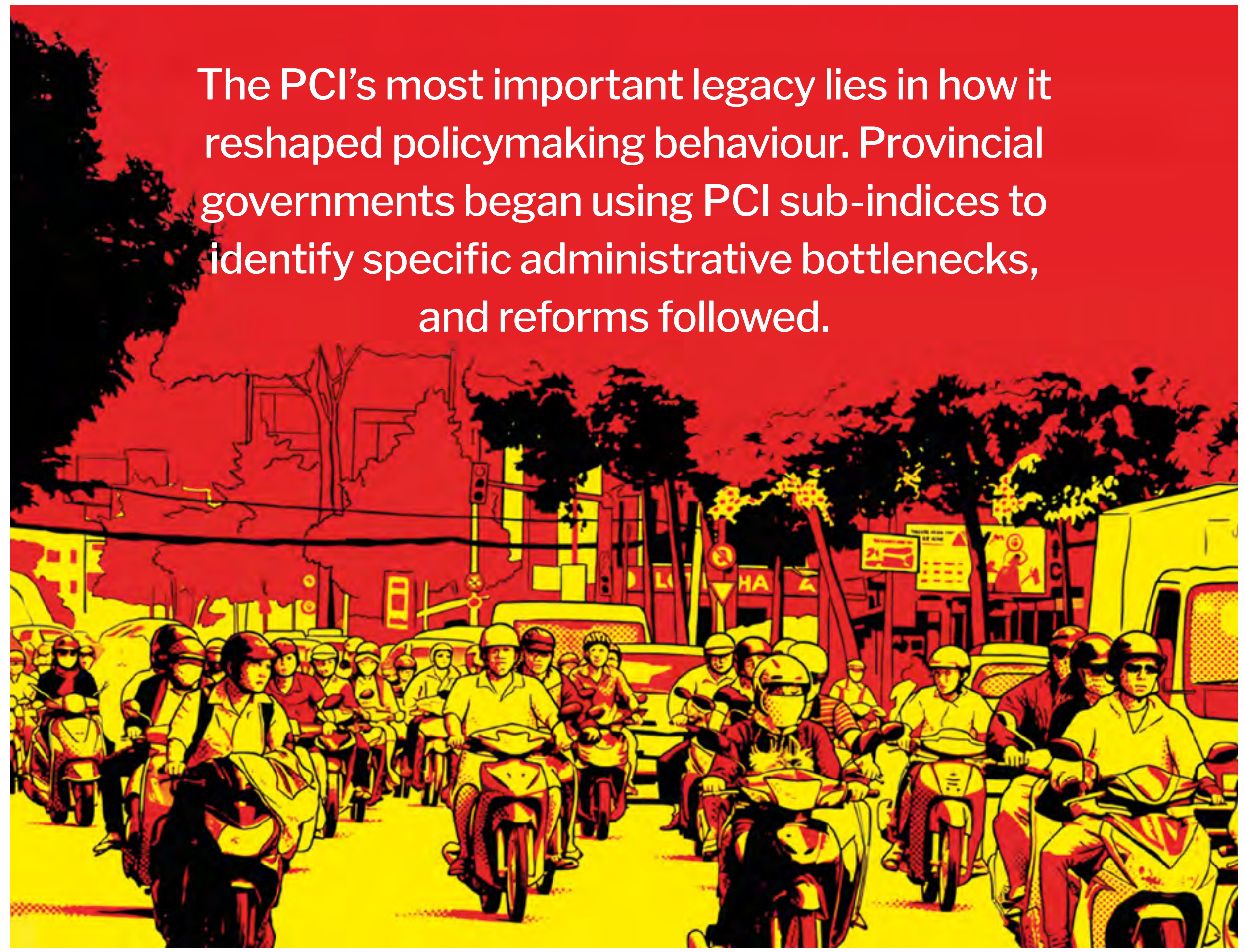
THE ARCHITECTS OF THE PCI: AN UNLIKELY COALITION

The success of the PCI rests not only on its methodology, but also on the coalition that built and sustained it. The index emerged from collaboration among international donors, Vietnamese institutions and development practitioners who understood both technical measurement and political realities.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided long-term support but resisted the temptation to control the agenda. The Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) played a central role, anchoring the PCI within a domestic business institution rather than a government ministry. This gave the index credibility with firms and a degree of insulation from bureaucratic resistance. VCCI also provided a vocal and brave advocate, using the PCI to argue for numerous domestic reforms on national legislative drafting committees, party commissions and within the halls of local government. Their belief in the tool and boundless energy in deploying it in policy debates contributed to its widespread acceptance by Vietnamese authorities.

The Asia Foundation contributed early political economy insight, helping design a tool that could survive in a one-party system. Development Alternatives Incorporated (DAI) later supported the PCI's expansion and institutionalisation, ensuring methodological rigor while deepening engagement with provincial governments.

One design choice proved especially consequential: the PCI focused primarily on domestic private firms rather than foreign investors. In doing so, it amplified the voices of small and medium-sized enterprises that were most affected by local governance failures and least able to navigate them informally. This constituency became a powerful, if indirect, source of pressure for reform.



WHEN MEASUREMENT MEETS POWER: CONTROVERSIES AND PUSHBACK

From the beginning, however, the PCI generated controversy. Provincial leaders objected to rankings that placed them near the bottom, especially in the years preceding party congresses when they were eligible for promotion and were forced to defend their accomplishments. Some questioned the survey methodology; others argued that businesses misunderstood regulations or exaggerated problems. In several cases, provincial officials publicly criticised the index in national media.

These disputes were not signs of failure so much as evidence of relevance. The PCI mattered precisely because it challenged official narratives. By documenting informal charges, time burdens and regulatory opacity, it exposed aspects of governance that were widely known but rarely quantified.

Over time, the nature of the controversy shifted. Initial resistance gave way to strategic engagement. Provinces began commissioning studies to understand their scores, launching PCI task forces and issuing action plans aimed explicitly at improving performance. What began as defensiveness evolved into competition.

When measurement tools align with local incentives and deliver actionable insights, they can outlive their creators.

The PCI survived these tensions because of its transparency. Methodology was published, data and statistical scripts shared[2] and findings debated openly. Intensive efforts were made to describe the methodology in ways appropriate for public consumption, and the PCI research team visited dozens of provinces per year to learn how to use the index to benchmark and track reforms over time. Media coverage amplified its influence, turning technical results into public benchmarks and even deploying the PCI data in investigative reports on public corruption scandals or leadership debates. In this environment, dismissing the PCI became harder than responding to it.

HOW PCI CHANGED POLICY AND INVESTMENT

The PCI's most important legacy lies in how it reshaped policymaking behaviour. Provincial governments began using PCI sub-indices to identify specific administrative bottlenecks, and reforms followed. Many provinces streamlined business registration, reduced inspections, expanded one-stop shops and early investments in e-governance. Over time, all 63 provinces began issuing annual action plans outlining how they intended to improve their performance and assigning dedicated staff to drive implementation.

These changes also produced measurable results. Survey results documented declines in the proportion of firms paying informal charges, alongside reductions in the time managers spent navigating bureaucratic procedures. While corruption did not disappear, its most routine and predictable forms became harder to sustain—particularly where provinces tightened processes and made administrative discretion more visible.

At the national level, PCI findings informed broader regulatory reforms and reinforced the political case for improving the business environment. Central resolutions explicitly referenced provincial benchmarking, especially in regard to private sector development and anticorruption efforts, effectively integrating the PCI into cadre evaluation and promotion systems.

For investors, the PCI became a practical tool.[3] Multinational firms used it to shortlist locations. Embassies and trade missions cited it in investment promotion. Aid agencies incorporated it into monitoring frameworks. In a system where formal political competition is limited, the PCI functioned as a market-relevant accountability mechanism.

A RARE SUCCESS STORY: PCI'S INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the PCI is its institutional trajectory. Many donor-funded governance tools fade once external funding ends. The PCI followed the opposite path.

Initially embedded within a large USAID-funded competitiveness programme, it gradually became a standalone initiative managed directly by VCCI as part of an aid localisation effort for highly successful aid projects.[4] Over time, contracting shifted from donor intermediaries to direct agreements, signalling growing domestic ownership.

The most telling moment came when Tan Hiep Phat, a private Vietnamese firm, stepped in to fund the PCI after USAID was closed by the Trump Administration.[5] A leading domestic company's decision to finance the index reflected its perceived value—not as an abstract governance exercise, but as critical economic infrastructure.

This evolution illustrates a broader lesson for business leaders and development practitioners alike: when measurement tools align with local incentives and deliver actionable insights, they can outlive their creators.

THE NEXT PHASE: PCI IN A CONSOLIDATING, RISING VIETNAM

Vietnam today faces a new set of challenges. Provincial mergers will reshape administrative authority. A sustained anti-corruption campaign is altering bureaucratic incentives. Politburo Resolution 68 stipulates that billions of household businesses must be formalised to support productivity growth. Integration into global value chains demands higher regulatory predictability.

In this context, the PCI's role is expanding. Beyond benchmarking individual provinces, it will be increasingly used to track how mergers will affect service delivery, whether reforms survive leadership transitions and how governance quality evolves as Vietnam approaches upper-middle-income status.

For executives, this makes the PCI more—not less—relevant. It offers a way to distinguish genuine institutional improvement from transitional noise. It highlights provinces where reform capacity is embedded rather than personality-driven, and provides early warning signals when consolidation undermines, rather than enhances, local governance.

WHY MEASURING GOVERNANCE IS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Vietnam's development success rests not only on reform, but on its willingness to measure reform honestly. The PCI transformed decentralisation from a source of opaque risk into a field of visible competition.

As the country consolidates its provinces and deepens its integration into the global economy, this capacity for measurement becomes a strategic asset. For business leaders, the lesson is clear: institutions matter—but data that reveal how institutions function matter even more.

In Vietnam, the PCI shows that transparency, local ownership and strategic dissemination can reshape governance incentives even in politically constrained environments. For executives making long-term bets in Asia, that is a story worth watching closely. AMI

EDMUND J. MALESKY
is Professor of Political Economy at Duke University, leader of the Provincial Competitiveness Index research team with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry since 2005, Scientific Director of VinUniversity's Green X Center, and founder and former chair of the Executive Council of the Southeast Asian Research Group (SEAREG). His research in international political economy focuses on foreign direct investment, trade and anticorruption policies, with work published in leading political science, economics and management journals. He is the author of three books: *China's Governance Puzzle*, *Incentives to Pander* and *The Politics of Foreign Direct Investment*.

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by
Robert Klitgaard

BOLD AND HUMBLE IN THE AGE OF IMPACT

How collaboration—supercharged by AI—can turn purpose into performance, and performance into accountability.

Leaders must learn to lead across boundaries as the most pressing challenges of today cut across government, business and civil society.

When accountability is high and scrutiny is sharp, leaders must be both bold and humble to chart the path forward while earning trust.

Artificial Intelligence can be used by leaders to enable collaboration, but it does not replace human judgment.

A BAR, A TEST AND A WARNING

If partnership were a place, it would be a warm bar: good talk, new friends and a sense that something useful might happen before the last call. It is a pleasant image—and also incomplete.

In the Age of Impact—a time where legitimacy and trust increasingly depend on demonstrable outcomes—the bar certainly has a bouncer. The bouncer's name is accountability. You can't just talk with no substance anymore. You need to show what changed, for whom, at what cost and with what side effects. In the literal and broader sense, expectations are rising globally, and Asia is no exception. Corporations are asked to justify social value. Philanthropies talk about systems change. Universities are pressed to be catalysts, not cloisters. Governments, too, are expected to deliver results and processes for verifying them. "Impact" is no longer a buzzword for annual reporting; it is becoming a governing demand.

On many of the issues society cares most about, collaboration is needed across the public-private-citizen divide. So, here is the test: can we collaborate across sectors quickly enough to match the pace of problems? Can we do it well enough to create real value, not just good vibes? And can we do it honestly enough that impact metrics illuminate rather than decorate?

A warning follows, especially for people who love dashboards. Metrics can make us wiser—and they can make us worse. Measure the wrong thing and you will get more of it. Measure the right thing badly and you invite gaming. Measure only what is easy and you neglect what is vital. The Age of Impact does not merely demand measurement; it demands judgment.

That is where leadership comes in.

THE AGE OF IMPACT: WHY COLLABORATION IS NO LONGER OPTIONAL

Think of a public health goal: a clean-energy transition, a safer city, better schools, more trustworthy procurement or climate adaptation. None of these can be achieved by government alone—or, for that matter, by business or civil society alone. In each case, collaboration matters, because each kind of institution brings different strengths. Government can set rules and fund services. Business can bring investment, logistics and innovation. Civil society may provide legitimacy, local knowledge and reach. Impact happens when these capabilities align—not when institutions sit in separate silos and send polite memos.

There is a pragmatic reason collaboration is rising now: many high-impact problems are multi-causal and multi-owner. Government often lacks agility and local knowledge. Markets alone tend to underprovide public goods and underprice harms. Civil society can seldom scale on its own. The fastest gains come from combining strengths and compensating for weaknesses.

There is also a political reason: trust is scarcer. Citizens doubt institutions; institutions doubt one another; and everyone doubts the motives behind everyone else's "purpose". Collaboration, then, is not just a technical arrangement. It is a trust-building enterprise.

But let us not romanticise. Collaboration has real costs—not only monetary costs, but also opportunity costs: time, coordination burdens, conflicts, mission drift and capture risks. Partnerships are desirable only when their benefits to society outweigh their costs. The Age of Impact doesn't erase those costs; it simply makes the alternative of working alone less plausible.

BOLD AND HUMBLE: THE TEMPERAMENT IMPACT DEMANDS

In the book *Bold and Humble*, I analyse the theoretical literature on public-private-citizen collaboration and study five success stories from Asia.[1] The cases covered a range of high-impact partnerships: a cultural festival, STEM in high schools, urban beautification, rural development and a remarkable cross-cutting methodology called the Performance Governance System.

Each case achieved meaningful impact through carefully designed collaboration. And each had a leader who was both bold and humble.

"Bold and humble" sounds like a paradox because it is. The leaders we most need now combine professional will with personal humility.

They must be bold in their vision and analysis: *We can't do what's needed on our own. We have to combine forces with other agencies, businesses and civil society. That means leaving our comfort zones. It means working across the usual boundaries of government, business and citizen groups. And it means leading in a particular way—enabling all of us to work better for a common cause.* This is anything but business as usual for leaders in government—or in business or civil society, for that matter.

At the same time, those who lead collaboration must be humble in how they work with people inside and outside their organisations. Resistance is common, especially at the beginning. Partnering pushes each party beyond familiar routines, introduces uncertainty and can even trigger a kind of culture shock: *It looks like extra work—and why? That's not our job.*

Effective leaders understand and anticipate that resistance. They listen, learn and then make the case in practical terms: how collaboration helps individual teams do their work better, not just how it serves the institution's mission.

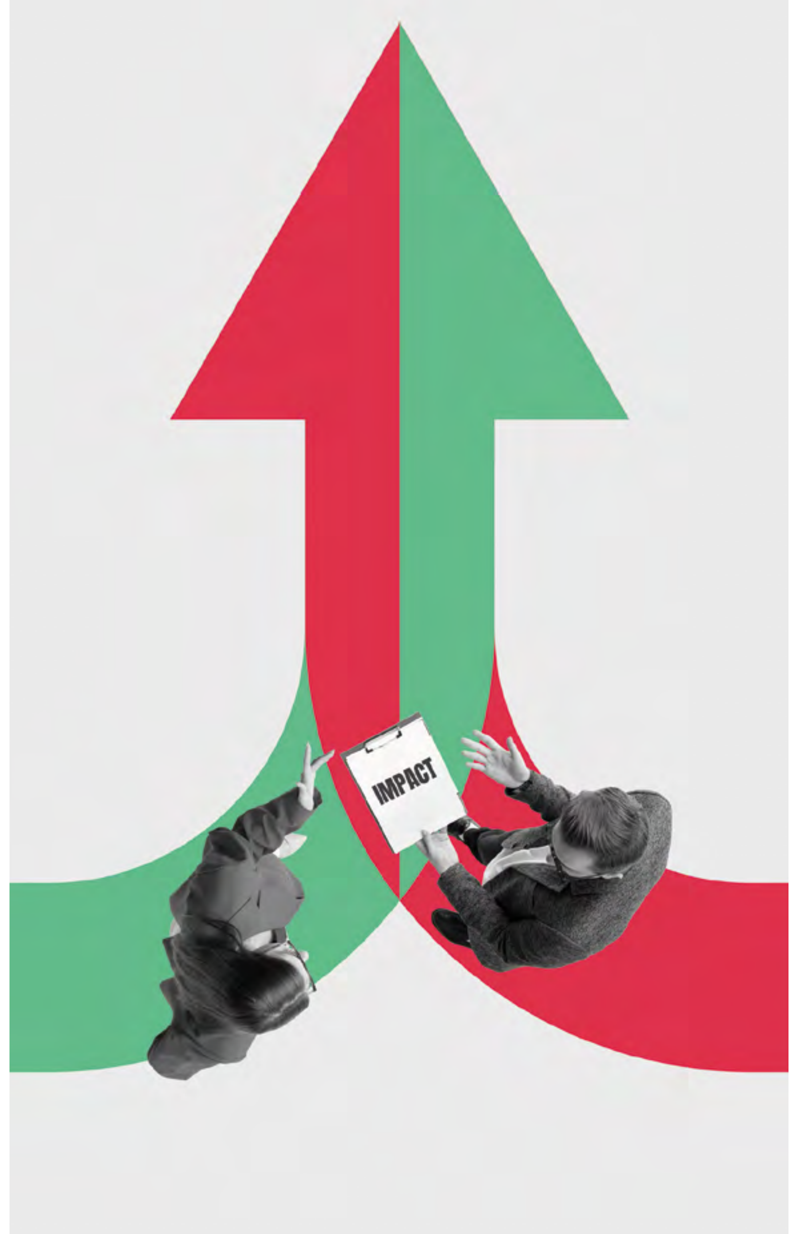
Leading collaboration is not about giving orders. It takes humility to recognise when we can't tell people what to do—not the recipients, not our colleagues and employees, and certainly not counterparts in other agencies, companies and civil society organisations. In these cases, leadership is not just about declaring a glorious purpose or showing how working together will help the country or the citizens. It is about participatory leadership, where eventually all the partners get to see how they—and others—can make a difference on a shared problem, and how collaboration can help each partner according to their institution's goals and metrics.

FIVE QUESTIONS THAT TURN PURPOSE INTO PERFORMANCE (AND PERFORMANCE INTO ACCOUNTABILITY)

The impact agenda forces a healthy question: what changed? But change rarely emerges from inspiration alone. Leaders need a sequence of questions that is practical, repeatable and portable across contexts.

Here is a five-step playbook for leading innovation across the public-private-citizen divide.

"Impact" is no longer a buzzword for annual reporting; it is becoming a governing demand.



1. What is the problem or challenge?
2. What goods and services are required to meet the challenge?
3. What institutions might provide those goods and services?
4. How might those institutions partner effectively?
5. How can leaders mobilise supply, demand and resources?

This may look obvious. Good. Obvious frameworks are often the most usable—especially under political pressure and time constraints. The five steps do four quiet things that matter for impact.

They begin with clarity, not slogans. "Purpose" without a problem definition becomes a branding exercise.

They force attention to capabilities—who can do what, and at what cost. The goods and services required for impact can be specified, improved and monitored.

They make partnership a design choice, not a moral posture. The question is not "Are partnerships good?" but "Which partnership design fits this problem?"

And they lead naturally to accountability because each step implies hypotheses that can be tested. If we claim the problem is X, we should be able to show evidence. If we claim institution A can deliver service B, we should be able to specify and monitor its performance. If we claim a partnership will reduce costs or widen access, we should measure those claims.

Notice what the five steps do not promise. They do not promise a final solution. Many public challenges are perennial precisely because they cannot be "solved". Impact is often the art of moving a stubborn system several degrees in the right direction—and then defending the gains.

ACCOUNTABILITY AT THREE LEVELS: CHECKS FOR HONEST IMPACT

A practical way to keep collaboration honest is to evaluate it at three levels.

First, accountability for each partner. Are the partner's own goals and constraints respected? Are they better off joining than walking away? In business language: is there a clear value proposition for each partner? In public language: is there a mandate and legitimacy?

Second, accountability for the partnership as an entity. Does the collaboration itself function—clear roles, decision rules, conflict resolution, data-sharing protocols and a cadence of review? A partnership can fail even when each partner is competent, simply because the "space between" them is unmanaged.

Third, accountability for public purposes. This is the Age of Impact's central demand: are we actually achieving the outcomes that justify the effort? And can we show it credibly?

If you build all three into your design, you reduce the temptation to perform "impact theatre"—busy activity plus glossy reports, with little change on the ground.

PARTNERSHIPS WITHOUT ROMANCE: BENEFITS, COSTS AND THE COORDINATION FOG

Before we celebrate collaboration, we should ask three key questions.

First: why is this partnership good for each partner? Partners join for reasons—some noble, some practical, some political. If those reasons are ignored, resentment blooms. A partnership that works for society but not for its partners will not last.

Second: what does the partnership cost? Leaders often downplay the "transaction costs" of collaboration. These include money and staff time, of course. They also include slower decisions, blurred accountability, mission dilution, reputational contagion and opportunities for cronyism. In the Age of Impact, add a new cost: data risk. Sharing data can make impact measurable; it can also make systems vulnerable.

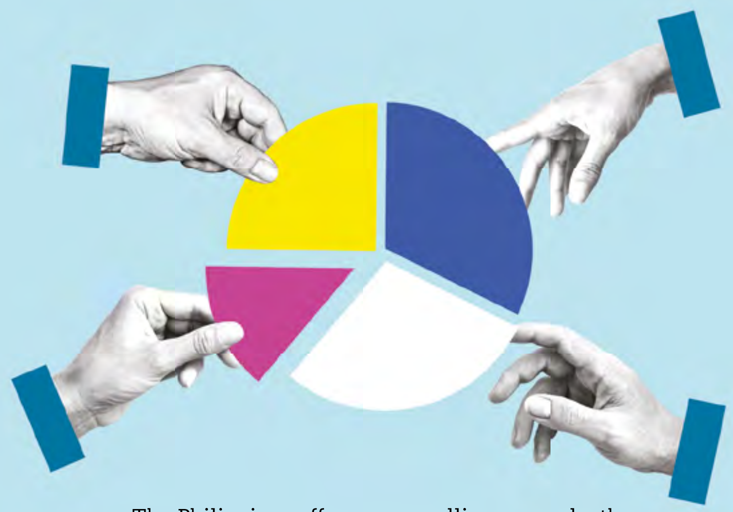
Third: are we using words like partnership to conceal ignorance? Robert Chambers, a pioneer of participatory development, once remarked that when experts lack understanding of a problem or system, they reflexively recommend more "coordination". The joke stings because it is true. "We need better collaboration" can be a way of saying: *we don't know what is happening*.

A small parable captures the danger of naive synergy. The beautiful dancer Isadora Duncan once teased the curmudgeonly Irish playwright and polemicist George Bernard Shaw at a dinner party, "Oh, Bernard, we should have a child together! Imagine your brains and my body!" To which Shaw replied, "What if it should be the other way round?" Partnerships sometimes fail for the same reason: each side expects to import its strengths and export its weaknesses.

A useful discipline is to write an explicit partnership ledger before you sign anything. On one side: the benefits to the public and to each partner. On the other side: the costs and risks. Then decide whether the ledger balances.

> The leaders we most need now combine professional will with personal humility.

THE PHILIPPINES' PERFORMANCE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM: WHEN COLLABORATION BECOMES A HABIT



The Philippines offers a compelling example: the Performance Governance System (PGS), developed and championed by the Institute for Solidarity in Asia (ISA). ISA begins with a deceptively simple proposition: governance is a shared responsibility. If that is true, then performance must be shared too—in goals, in monitoring and in accountability.

The PGS invites local governments and national agencies to collaborate with the private sector and civil society to articulate a shared vision of success, formulate measurable strategic objectives and key performance indicators, and align resources and priorities to fulfil those objectives on an agreed timetable. It is a disciplined way to turn "purpose" into a management system.

The PGS adapts the balanced scorecard approach to public purpose. It helps public organisations clarify mission, values and vision; build strategy maps; create governance scorecards; and institutionalise review and learning. The ethos is blunt and practical: measure things that matter, not just things that are convenient to measure.

ISA launched the PGS in 2004 with eight "dream cities". The word "dream" matters. A shared vision does political work. It gives disparate actors a common reference point and makes trade-offs less personal. Over time, the PGS spread beyond the initial cities because it was not a one-time project; it was a way of collaboration.

One of the PGS's methods is a process of staged accreditation. ISA certifies five stages of achievement: Initiation, Compliance, Proficiency, Institutionalisation and Island of Good Governance.

The stages are not merely labels. Each requires specific performance targets, verified by ISA reviewers. To be deemed an "Island of Good Governance," an institution must demonstrate transformation and sustainability, with breakthrough results for citizens validated through external audits. Proof is required that governance reforms led to those breakthroughs—not just that outcomes happened to improve.

This matters for the Age of Impact because it connects performance to credible accountability. It also makes a subtle point: impact systems take time. Moving through the stages may take four to six years. In a world addicted to quarterly results, that is a courageous claim.

For corporate leaders, the lesson is not "copy the PGS." It is this: impact claims gain force when they are tied to routines—shared targets, regular review and credible verification—rather than glossy narratives.

Levels of Collaboration

The PGS also shows that collaboration is not one thing; it is a set of mechanisms.

First, within government, the Office of Strategy Management (OSM) functions as the internal vanguard of collaboration—developing accountability mechanisms across departments while offering technical guidance so that activities align to the vision.

Second, cross-departmental task forces translate strategy into action. Vision-Aligned Circles (VACs) carry out high-priority activities with roughly six-month deadlines, with members devoting about one-fifth time to these shared responsibilities. VACs meet weekly to review progress. They are extra work—but when they succeed, they generate commitment, excitement and results.

Third, across sectors, the Multi-Sectoral Governance Council (MSGC) provides a platform to engage private and civil society actors, bridging gaps between citizens and the political process. The MSGC advises and supports reforms—and also takes on concrete projects consistent with the strategy. Two principles are crucial: it is self-propelling, and it persists beyond a mayor's term. That is institutional humility: the reform is designed to outlive its champions.

A good system like the PGS is helpful but not sufficient. Leadership also matters.

Mandaue City

Bold and Humble details the inspiring story of Mandaue City in the Philippines and how the PGS became lived practice.

After a few years in office, Mayor Jonas Cortes had made progress—raising revenues, fighting corruption—yet he felt virtually alone, taking on one initiative at a time. Seeing the PGS in action elsewhere convinced him that transformation required governance to become a shared responsibility in the community.

Once the vision was sharpened—“By 2020, Mandaue City is the primary source of high-quality manufactured consumer products”—the reform turned inward. Staff were surveyed not only on skills and working environment but on the emotional undercurrents: politics, affiliation, trust. The results made it clear that mobilising employees would require more than memos.

Here the PGS used an unexpected tool: experiential education. The OSM team trained together at an outdoor adventure camp, then immersed the city’s employees in the same programme through the #iammandaue Transformation Programme. The goal was to build a team with the trust and understanding needed to fulfil the city’s vision. The programme linked intangibles such as culture, buy-in and motivation with tangibles such as intellect, logic and performance.

Back at City Hall, the weekly meetings of VACs and Vision-Aligned Partner projects became the heartbeat of the new habit. When teams struggled, the OSM offered guidance. When teams succeeded, the success created its own momentum.

And then came external accountability. ISA awarded Mandaue “PGS Proficiency Status” and invited the city to apply for Island of Good Governance certification. To receive that three-year renewable status, Mandaue needed to achieve two breakthrough results, have progress audited by a third party and submit results to an international panel at a public review. The city was certified in 2015. It was later feted at the APEC Summit and recognised as a low-carbon model town.

The point is not to admire trophies. It is to see how a system can make collaboration measurable, and measurement credible, without turning public purpose into sterile accounting.

AI AND THE NEW COLLABORATION EQUATION: HIGHER NEED, LOWER COST

AI is often discussed in terms of productivity, disruption and risk. All true. But for the Age of Impact, its most important effect may be simpler: AI changes the transaction costs of working together. It does so in two ways—first by reshaping how we collaborate with one another, and second by challenging us to learn how to collaborate with AI itself, without outsourcing judgment.

Why does AI increase the need for collaboration? Because many AI problems are inherently cross-sector. Data governance, model oversight, labour market transitions, misinformation and cyber risk are not “owned” by any single institution. Even purely corporate AI deployments spill into privacy, fairness, legitimacy and political stability.

Why does AI lower the cost of collaboration? Because many collaboration barriers are informational and procedural. People do not share the same facts. They do not speak the same dialect. They cannot quickly draft and revise shared documents. They struggle to explore scenarios and trade-offs at speed. Used well, generative AI (GenAI) can help with all of these—if treated as a tool for sensemaking rather than a machine for certainty.

Here are five practical uses of GenAI, mapped to the five-step playbook:

1. **Shared diagnosis at speed (Step 1).** GenAI can summarise competing accounts of the problem, surface disputed assumptions and propose what evidence would settle disagreements. Used well, it helps a group argue about the right things.
2. **Decomposing goods and services (Step 2).** It can translate a big aspiration into the concrete goods and services that must exist for success: what must be delivered, to whom, at what quality, at what unit cost.
3. **Matching institutions to tasks (Step 3).** It can generate option sets for which institutions have comparative advantages, including “unusual suspects” that a single sector might overlook.
4. **Partnership design drafts (Step 4).** It can draft governance structures, roles, escalation paths, risk registers and incentives—then help teams stress-test those drafts against likely failure modes.
5. **Impact measurement support (Step 5).** It can propose indicator menus, draft dashboard mock-ups and suggest learning questions that keep measurement from becoming a ritual.

There is, however, a second collaboration equation—between leaders and AI itself. If we treat AI as an oracle, we invite errors with confidence. If we treat it as a junior analyst, we can move faster while keeping judgment where it belongs.

But each use has a shadow. GenAI can hallucinate. It can reflect biases. It can create false consensus—polished prose that sounds like agreement. It can even enable accountability laundering: blaming the model for choices leaders made.

So a rule for the Age of Impact: use AI to widen the option set, not to outsource judgment. Use it to surface assumptions, draft alternatives and test scenarios—then decide like a human being, with consequences owned by humans. In other words, keep the critical faculties switched on—and keep your sense and sensibility intact.

THREE HABITS OF BOLD AND HUMBLE IMPACT LEADERS

The high-impact playbook is being rewritten across the world, including Asia. The best drafts, I suspect, will be written by co-authors: leaders from government, business and civil society. Three habits can keep the writing honest.

1. Say the purpose plainly. Name the problem, the people affected and the change you seek.
2. Design the partnership for friction, not fantasy. Write the ledger of costs and risks. Clarify governance. Decide how you will handle conflict. Build accountability at three levels: each partner, the partnership and public purposes.
3. Use AI to accelerate learning—without surrendering judgment. Let AI help you see, draft and test. Then decide like a human being.

Yes, let partnership be a warm bar with good talk. But in the Age of Impact, let it also be a convening with data, case studies, policy frameworks and an imaginary news story of our success five years hence. Leaders must be bold enough to insist on results, humble enough to learn and share credit and disciplined enough to build collaboration that endures. And yes—the bouncer stays.

ROBERT KLITGAARD
is a University Professor at Claremont Graduate University. His 16 books include *Controlling Corruption*, which helped launch the global anti-corruption movement; *Choosing Elites*, which is included in The Harvard Guide to Influential Books; and *Tropical Gangsters*, named one of The New York Times’ Books of the Century. He is also the author of *Bold and Humble: How to Lead Public-Private-Citizen Collaboration, with Five Success Stories*, on which this article is based.

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by
Sabine Benoit

THE COST OF SILENCE: WHEN DECISIONS ARE SHAPED BY CONFIDENCE, NOT EVIDENCE

From wellness myths to financial hype, the real risk is not just misinformation—it's misinformed decision-making. When confidence becomes a proxy for credibility, strategies and sensibility drift. Here's how leaders can raise the evidence bar and institutionalise independent challenge.

) Decisions guided by the confidence of faux experts, rather than robust evidence, can create substantive risks for organisations.

)) Although academics can provide expert guidance, there are gaps preventing their voices from being heard.

))) Universities should develop strategies to make expertise easier to access and encourage academics to contribute to public discourse.

In 2024, a woman and her newborn child died after attempting an unassisted 'freebirth' in nature, a practice promoted by wellness influencers who positioned natural birth as empowering while dismissing medical expertise as fearmongering and interventionist.[1] Charismatic online personalities, often with no qualifications, can persuade large audiences to see experts—in this case, obstetricians, midwives and evidence-based prenatal care—as obstacles rather than safeguards.

Health is an especially stark arena for this problem, but it is certainly not the only one. Misinformation also circulates around sunscreen and "natural" sun protection, despite repeated debunking by institutions such as the Skin Cancer Foundation[2] and Stanford Medicine.[3] The same pattern appears in finance: "finfluencers" can deliver confident opinions with the sheen of authority, encouraging decisions that are poorly anchored in evidence. In Indonesia, two such influencers, Doni Salmanan and Indra Kesuma, were reported to have played roles in schemes where followers lost substantial sums while they benefitted.[4,5]

In Singapore, too, financial content often blends investing tips with self-optimisation language—promising to "unlock your superpowers" or "fast-track personal transformation"—despite thinly substantiated evidence, no credible guarantee of results and often hefty price tags. In the process, evidence, uncertainty and trade-offs are compressed into catchy, confidence-heavy narratives.

THE RISE OF "CONFIDENCERS": THE RISKS LEADERS CANNOT IGNORE

These incidents signal a larger problem: the information landscape is shaped by social media, and it rewards what is clear, fast, emotionally resonant and 'loud'—not what is careful, conditional and evidence-led. Over time, decisions will be driven by those who sound the most convincing rather than those with credible claims.

Call these people "confidencers": individuals who can project authority with charisma and strong narratives. They are not limited to influencers: salespeople, consultants and vendors can also be confidencers.

Across these cases, the same misattribution occurs: visibility is treated as credibility, even though reach and engagement are weak proxies for integrity, competence or societal impact.

A useful way to understand this pattern is to follow the incentives. For example, influencers monetise attention; their success depends on engagement, not accuracy. Algorithms often reward controversy over nuance and evidence. Consultants are paid to provide direction under uncertainty; confidence is part of the product, and there is an understandable pressure for decisive recommendations. Sales teams are rewarded for persuasion and conversion: balance and caveats may not be the priority. When managers base their decisions primarily on those voices, they risk building strategies on foundations optimised for engagement and contracts rather than evidence. None of this implies bad faith; it is simply how incentive systems shape communication.

Academic experts, in contrast, are socialised into a different discipline: claims are expected to be contested, limitations are documented and reputations are built (or lost) on accuracy and evidence. That does not automatically make academic voices "right"—academia has its own blind spots and biases—but it often produces a healthier default posture for high-stakes decision-making: *show your working, name your uncertainty and separate what you know from what you suspect.*

WHY ACADEMIC EXPERTS ARE NOT HEARD MORE

In my experience, organisations struggle to incorporate academic expertise for reasons that are often about translation and alignment.

First, there is a perceived confidence gap. Academics are trained to be cautious and measured, because research results are rarely bulletproof. Even when the evidence is strong, academic papers often end with a long list of limitations, acknowledging the flaws of their research. For managers, that candour can be mistaken for hesitancy, when it is more accurately a form of intellectual honesty.

Second, there is a communication gap. Academic knowledge often arrives in forms that are hard to act on quickly: long papers, specialised language and arguments structured for peer scrutiny rather than executive decisions. Many scholars are not trained to produce crisp "decision-ready" outputs on demand—one-page syntheses, trade-off statements or clear options with conditions. Even when they have the substance, many are neither comfortable nor trained to deliver elevator pitches.

And then there is a scope gap. Leaders and policymakers must integrate across different domains, ranging from strategy and finance to delivery constraints and stakeholder expectations. Academics, by design, tend to specialise, "digging deep into narrow wells". That depth is valuable, but it can make it harder to zoom out to the systems level where many leadership decisions are made.

Finally, there is an incentive gap. In most universities, publishing, grants and academic recognition remain the primary currencies. Academics often do not have incentives to share their expertise with the general public. When time is scarce, what gets measured and rewarded tends to win.

The cumulative effect is predictable: organisations default to the voices that are easiest to access, easiest to understand and easiest to act on—especially under pressure. But that convenience can be expensive. How then can we overcome these gaps?

> Confidencers, who project authority with charisma and strong narratives, are treated as credible, even though these are weak proxies for integrity, competence or social impact.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS AND THE PUBLIC CAN DO TO PREVENT "CONFIDENCE CAPTURE"

One starting point is scrutinising the source. In an overloaded information environment, source credibility becomes an important filter. Who is making the claim? What is their track record? Do they have incentives to exaggerate certainty or oversell applicability to your context?

Next, we should scrutinise the evidence in a way that is proportionate to the decision. Not every decision requires a literature or peer review, but higher-stake choices—particularly those affecting health, finances, safety or the wellbeing of others—should trigger a higher evidence bar. What type of data substantiates the claim? Who collected it, analysed it and over what timeframe? What are the limitations of the research? An opinion is not a fact, and credibility rests on whether claims can be checked, not merely asserted. In this regard, academic work is often useful precisely because it is designed to withstand scrutiny.

It also helps to get comfortable with calibrated language. We do not need academics to sound like salespeople; we need clarity about what is known, what is uncertain and what would change the recommendation. The academic "yes, but" mindset is not a weakness; it is often the beginning of good governance.

Finally, organisations can institutionalise independent challenge rather than leaving it to individual judgement. Build routines that bring in domain experts like academics early, invite counterarguments and stress-test assumptions through external advisors, structured reviews or "red team" exercises—where a designated group is tasked to probe weaknesses, surface failure modes and argue the strongest case against the proposal. The aim is not to slow decision-making, but to reduce the risk that confidence becomes a substitute for evidence.

WHAT UNIVERSITIES CAN DO TO MAKE EXPERTISE EASIER TO USE

Universities also have agency here. If the ambition is societal impact—real-world change, not just outputs—then expertise must be made more accessible and applicable to the organisations that need it.

University leaders can treat societal impact as a leadership agenda, not an optional add-on. For instance, Singapore Management University's (SMU) 2030 strategy, "Shaping Impact, Transforming Lives," is a testament to the centrality of societal impact at the institutional level.

Universities can shift scholarly culture and incentives so that engagement, translation and public contribution are not merely applauded but meaningfully recognised. Much university work is funded by taxpayers. A credible impact agenda makes the "give back" logic operational: not by turning academics into marketers, but by rewarding those who translate knowledge responsibly and effectively. It requires a shift in academics' mindsets, often triggered by a change in how success is measured.

Universities should also build impact skills as a professional capability. Translation is a craft: writing for non-academic audiences, framing evidence for decisions, communicating uncertainty and working across disciplines and stakeholders. In my role as Associate Dean at SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, I have launched an "Impact Upskilling Series" to support colleagues interested in strengthening their societal contribution. Done well, this kind of investment helps academics stay rigorous and evidence-led while extending the reach of their expertise beyond the university.

SILENCE IS TOO COSTLY

The price of silence is not only the misinformation amplified by social media. It is also the wasted resources and missed opportunities driven by confidence and charisma over reliable insights and rigorous testing.

In an era where anyone can sound like an expert, genuine expertise becomes a competitive advantage—but only if organisations build the habits and structures to access it, interpret it and apply it. The goal is not to replace confidence with caution. It is to pair confidence with evidence, and to make sure decisions are shaped by what is most accurate, not merely what is the loudest.

SABINE BENOIT
is a Professor of Marketing (Practice) and Associate Dean (Impact) at Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. She specialises in retail technology, and her work has been published in leading international journals. She has also collaborated with several companies for her research. Sabine is enthusiastic about making her research accessible to non-academic audiences, publishing her content on platforms like YouTube and LinkedIn.

For a list of endnotes to this article, please visit https://smu.sg/SMUAMIMar2026 or scan the QR code below.

by Steve Loh
and Janna Wong

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING IN DEEPENING SOCIAL IMPACT

Institutes of higher learning do more than generate knowledge. At their best, they connect partners, evidence, policy and capability to make social impact more credible, cumulative and durable.

1. *Social issues often affect society at large, requiring coordinated efforts between different stakeholders.*

2. *Institutes of higher learning provide a shared space to enable partnerships and foster understanding of issues.*

3. *Research and expertise from institutes of higher learning then bolster capabilities for sector actors to address social issues directly.*

Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) have outgrown their traditional role as solely centres that confer knowledge and credentials. Increasingly, they function as civic anchor institutions—helping societies translate knowledge into action, and action into learning. Social impact is rarely achieved through one-off projects; it relies on an operating rhythm that connects partners, evidence, policy, delivery and capability over time. Strategically positioned at the intersection of research, society and public decision-making, their reach extends into policy, industry and community. They are thus primed to be powerful drivers of social impact.

The process through which IHLs facilitate social impact can be described as a four-stage cycle. It begins with convening cross-sector partners around shared goals. IHLs then help define and frame complex problems so interventions target the right constraints. Once the direction is determined, evidence is generated to inform policy and programme design, with evaluation of what works (and what does not). IHLs then build the capacity to sustain change. Each stage strengthens the next, creating a reinforcing loop of learning, action and improvement.

ENCOURAGING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION[1]

Social issues seldom suffer from a lack of opinions. They affect society broadly, its effects rippling across different sectors with varying intensity. They tend to spark intense debate among stakeholders, as they often hold divergent viewpoints. Yet it is from these differing opinions that the most effective solutions are born—nuanced approaches to complex issues require a range of perspectives. Cross-sector collaboration is essential, but often difficult in practice. Differences in organisational culture, shifting priorities and funding constraints can easily create friction between actors, pushing them back into silos and limiting their ability to adapt or respond to emerging needs.

This is where IHLs come in. Because cross-sector collaboration is both essential and difficult, IHLs have increasingly stepped into a convening role—bringing stakeholders into dialogue on more equitable terms. As neutral intermediaries, they help bridge divides between stakeholders and align philanthropic capital, public budgets and local knowledge around shared, place-based goals rather than fragmented, short-term projects. Done well, convening is not simply about "bringing people together"; it is about creating the conditions for joint problem-solving, including trust, shared language and workable governance.[2]

A prominent example is the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative.[3] A collaborative effort between Bloomberg Philanthropies, Harvard Business School and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, the initiative combines peer-reviewed research with applied training and curriculum development. Researchers, students and city residents are brought together to support municipal leaders in tackling real-world problems. Since 2017, the initiative has supported 9 cohorts of mayors and senior city officials, equipping them with the skills, networks and tools necessary to respond to rapidly evolving social issues. Through the initiative's innovation track alone, 57 towns and cities across the United States have since participated, engaging 604 public-sector employees and over 4,700 residents.

Through initiatives such as these, IHLs can act as social incubators: not as the "owners" of solutions, but as institutions that help diverse actors co-create and scale them.

DEFINING AND FRAMING SOCIAL ISSUES

Every solution to a social ill begins with a problem statement—which often determines which solutions or innovations are pursued. The same social condition can generate very different interventions, depending on whether it is treated as a skills deficit, a labour-market failure, a health issue, a housing constraint or an access problem. Poor problem statements narrow the option set too early; a well-framed one clarifies what must change, for whom and under what constraints. Poverty, for example, if framed as a lack of education, naturally points to education as the solution. However, if available data finds that it is, instead, the result of a weak labour market, it demands a very different set of interventions.

IHLs can strengthen problem definition by slowing down the rush to solutions and introducing evidence-informed sense-making.

The Impact Economy Policy Labs held at the London School of Economics' Marshall Institute illustrates this.[4] The Labs provide a neutral setting for participants to discuss issues on relatively equal footing—encouraging openness, trust and collaboration. While the Labs bring together diverse actors, their distinctive contribution lies in how they approach problem definition.

Rather than beginning with a predetermined problem definition, sessions start with a shared exploration of complex social challenges. Frontline practitioners bring delivery realities, policymakers contribute institutional constraints and grassroots leaders offer lived insights that formal processes can overlook. Participants have described this approach as "unusual and refreshing," particularly when compared to conventional policymaking, where complex issues are often addressed in isolation or only after solutions have already been formulated.

By deliberately creating structured spaces to re-examine assumptions, initiatives such as the Impact Economy Policy Labs enable stakeholders to revisit and redefine social issues from multiple vantage points. In doing so, policies and interventions are more likely to target root constraints, reflect social realities and be supported by a broader sense of shared responsibility.

GENERATING RESEARCH THAT INFORMS PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERVENTIONS

With problems clearly defined, IHLs can contribute with where they are strongest: producing and curating sound evidence that informs policymaking and intervention design across domains such as health, education, climate and social welfare. Through systematic data collection, rigorous testing of interventions and careful evaluation of outcomes, IHLs provide policymakers, service providers and funders with reliable insights into what works, what does not and why. In an era marked by misinformation and polarised debate, this evidence-based knowledge is essential for strengthening the credibility, effectiveness and accountability of public policy and social programmes.

In Singapore, IHLs have invested heavily in advancing our understanding of social change within ageing populations over the past three decades. Institutions such as the Duke-NUS Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE)[5] and Singapore Management University's (SMU's) Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)[6] have built a robust body of evidence on ageing and later-life wellbeing. ROSA's Singapore Life Panel, comprising over 12,500 active participants and nearly 900,000 surveys completed over the past decade, supports a more holistic view of ageing that extends beyond clinical health to include social connection and psychological well-being.

This depth of longitudinal data can shape policy deliberation and programme design, providing clear evidence to facilitate discussion on overlooked issues. In January 2026, Singapore's Minister of Health Ong Ye Kung discussed the issue of loneliness and psychological distress among socially isolated older persons, citing a CARE study from 2018. Evidence of this nature can sharpen parliamentary debate and help agencies and service providers refine targeting. Related work by IHLs may also have contributed to the design and scaling of initiatives such as the Silver Generation Office,[7] the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and more than 200 Active Ageing Centres—each delivering outreach services to nearly 30,000 socially isolated older persons.[8]

IHLs can also spark national conversations on social issues, including age-related inequality. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), for instance, has highlighted rising experiences of ageism in the workplace among those aged 51 to 65, contributing to debates surrounding the Workplace Fairness Bill (2025), which seeks to protect workers from discriminatory practices, including those based on age.[9] Taken together, these efforts underscore the importance of building rigorous bodies of knowledge to better inform, refine and galvanise social impact initiatives and policy change across multiple stakeholders.

Increasingly, research is conducted in close partnership with practitioners and policymakers. When IHLs collaborate directly with those designing and delivering programmes, it creates feedback loops where evidence, funding and policy reinforce one another for long-term, systemic change. A study conducted in collaboration with SMU's Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI) and The Food Bank Singapore, for example, found that 10% of households experienced food insecurity in 2019, with significant implications to physical and mental health. The study recommended addressing misalignment of food support resources through geographic mapping and better multi-sector coordination.[10] It was also cited in parliamentary debates on the Food Safety and Security Bill in 2025. This is a useful pattern: In translating research into operational recommendations, IHLs enable the implementation of evidence-backed solutions for policy and delivery actors.

INSPIRING LONG-TERM, STRUCTURAL CHANGE

IHLs can also help charities, funders and governments move beyond surface responses to social problems by analysing underlying causes and system dynamics. Using systems thinking, longitudinal data analysis and participatory research, IHLs can support shared theories of change and meaningful indicators of success. This alignment ensures that day-to-day programmes and interventions contribute to longer term structural outcomes rather than short-lived gains.

From this systems-level vantage point, IHLs are well positioned to support the design and testing of more creative, context-sensitive solutions that challenge existing processes and social practices. Across Asia, this has translated into concrete health innovations led or enabled by universities. At the University of the Philippines, the Programme for Social Innovations and Entrepreneurship in Health (SIHI) has, since 2017, spearheaded initiatives such as the National Telehealth System, Partners in Leprosy Action and the Inter-Island Health Service Boat Project, expanding access to healthcare in underserved communities.[11]

Similarly, in Thailand, Mahidol University's Faculty of Public Health fosters innovation by convening national hackathons that surface solutions from emerging scientists. One such innovation, Cow Eco+, a traditional medicine-based digestive, has demonstrated great potential in reducing methane emissions from dairy farms—an important source of global greenhouse gas emissions.[12] These examples illustrate how systemic, creative interventions are often made possible by the analytical rigour, interdisciplinary expertise and experimental capacity embedded within IHLs.

Nevertheless, social impact does not stop at well-designed interventions. Lasting, structural change depends on continual learning. IHLs deepen impact when they provide rigorous evaluation that tests assumptions over time and feeds findings back into programme design. Through this continuous feedback loop, IHLs help ensure that interventions remain relevant, effective and responsive to changing social conditions. This is where impact assessment functions less as a verdict and more as a learning mechanism.

LCSI, for instance, has published impact assessments for the corporate sector, including *Impact Assessment of Uniqlo's 'Neighbours Helping Neighbours' Pilot Programme* (2025)[13] and *Impact Assessment of Employment at Telunas Resorts: A Case Study* (2025). These studies go beyond measuring success or failure; they surface limitations, generate actionable recommendations and use insights to refine programme design. In this way, impact assessments become not an endpoint, but a feedback structure that enables continuous improvement and helps scale what works towards long-term systemic change.

Social impact does not stop at well-designed interventions. Lasting, structural change depends on continual learning.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Finally, as civic anchor institutions, IHLs create social impact by strengthening the capabilities of non-profit and public-sector partners. Through training, technical assistance and leadership development in areas such as data literacy, governance and organisational strategy, they help local organisations move from delivering programmes to building sustainable, high-impact institutions capable of addressing complex social challenges at scale.

The Marshall Institute's 100x Impact Accelerator programme is one example.[14] Designed as a philanthropic cooperative, the programme brings together capital, mentoring and a shared commitment to systemic change. Through a structured 12-week programme, it supports a new generation of "social unicorns", that is, early-stage organisations with the potential to create positive impact at the scale of billions. Participants are guided in refining their scaling strategies, strengthening leadership capacity and articulating their impact, while also gaining a platform to connect with philanthropists, funders, governments and the media.

The programme spans eight key research and impact priorities, from climate and health to education, social cohesion and democratic resilience. Several Asian organisations have gone on to sustain meaningful impact through the Accelerator, including Taleemabad, a Pakistani initiative which strengthens school curricula; Karya, an Indian initiative that has created ethical digital work opportunities for over 30,000 rural women; and Labhya, an Indian non-profit that has supported education quality programmes reaching 2.4 million children and 150,000 teachers across more than 22,000 schools.

In Singapore, LCSI is currently involved in training and consultancy for 24 charities over 2 years to build their impact measurement and innovation capabilities supported by the Tote Board. This illustrates a broader point: philanthropic capital can be channelled through IHLs not only to fund programmes, but to strengthen the impact sector's capacity to measure, learn and improve.

Capacity building also happens through education itself. As evidence has accumulated on climate risk, social inequality and ethical failures across sectors, themes such as sustainability, ethics and social responsibility have moved from the margins to the core of many curricula.

By integrating research findings back into pedagogy and curriculum design, IHLs strengthen capacity at its source: the people who will go on to lead institutions, design policies and deliver services. In this way, educational innovation becomes a form of capacity building in its own right, closing the loop between research, practice and the preparation of the next generation to sustain and extend social impact.

THE CYCLE OF IMPACT

In sum, IHLs can be said to be engines of social change. From convening diverse stakeholders and framing complex social issues to generating rigorous research, translating evidence into interventions and policy, and building the capacity of both organisations and students, IHLs operate across a continuous cycle of impact.

The strategic value of IHLs is that they can hold this cycle together. They can connect partners, evidence, implementation and education in ways that individual charities, agencies or funders often cannot sustain alone. In a world of increasingly interconnected and complex challenges, IHLs are uniquely positioned to turn ideas into action—and action into lasting change. AMI

STEVE LOH
is the executive director of Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI), Singapore Management University. LCSI provides research and evidence-based thought leadership, impact consulting and capacity building to government, foundations, philanthropists and non-profits with the goal of bettering practice and policy at scale.

JANNA WONG
is a research consultant at LCSI.

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by Julian Tang

THE IMPACT REPORTING PLAYBOOK: CREDIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY BEYOND THE LAUNDRY LIST

Ditch the proverbial laundry list and build impactful reports with evidence of change that leaders, partners and the public can trust and act on.

1. *Impact reporting is now a credibility test, because stakeholders expect organisations to explain outcomes clearly and meaningfully—grounded in real evidence rather than polished activity lists.*
2. *The SHARE framework prevents overclaiming by keeping reporting prioritised, contextual, measured, data-responsible and genuinely informative for the reader.*
3. *Impact reporting works best as a repeatable habit—built on clear intent, empathy for the reader, calibrated claims and a coherent narrative—rather than a last-minute, reactive effort to satisfy stakeholder demands.*

During a board meeting, a member asks a familiar question: "*So, what changed?*"

The team has slides on programmes launched, partnerships signed, papers published, people trained, communities reached. Numbers and figures abound, but the question remains up in the air. Activities are not the same as outcomes and a discerning audience can swiftly tell fact from fluff.

That gap is where impact communications sits. For years, many organisations treated it as a discretionary exercise—something churned out hurriedly, even haphazardly, when donors and grantors demanded it, when regulators insisted, or when the public asked how funding was used and what it achieved.

That posture is out of line with today's expectations. Stakeholders are constantly bombarded by claims and polished narratives, and generative AI has made generic—and hyperbolic—content highly accessible. In response, readers increasingly seek out evidence of impact. They want a coherent account of what an organisation set out to change, what it did and what actually moved the needle. On top of that, limits and trade-offs matter as much as achievements.

It is through impact communications that organisations meet these expectations. Explaining outcomes with clarity, it connects intent with action and action with consequence, providing the foundation upon which credible impact reporting is built.

FROM VISIBILITY TO EXPLANATION, NOT PROMOTION

Impact communications shifts the focus from visibility—a cornerstone of general, corporate communications—to explanation, concentrating on making outcomes intelligible. It is a structured way of answering a small set of questions that stakeholders care about, even when they do not phrase them explicitly:

- What did you set out to change?
- What did you do, and why that approach?
- What changed, for whom, and over what timeframe?
- What did you learn, and what will you do next?

Such reporting links actions to tangible social, environmental or economic outcomes. Crucially, it makes the organisation's logic visible. A strong impact report guides the reader through key messages early, then provides detail for those who want to go deeper.

This definition matters because "impact reporting" is often mistaken for adjacent practices, the main one being ESG disclosures. While it is essential and increasingly mandatory, ESG reporting focuses on risks, governance and performance across environmental, social and governance domains. Impact reporting answers a different question: what outcomes did your work produce beyond your balance sheet and operational metrics?

Impact reporting is also not about listing corporate social responsibility initiatives, which may fail to clarify what changed as a result. It should not be confused with marketing communications, nor is it a substitute. Storytelling has a role, but impact reporting is not a promotional genre. Narratives instead provide the stage for impact, grounding in context an organisation's actions and outcomes. An impact report's credibility depends on restraint, with a careful balance of language and claims, and a transparent handling of data and limitations.

Moreover, impact reporting differs from the annual report. Annual reports provide a broad snapshot of financial performance and operational health. Impact reports are more targeted: they focus on outcomes and broader consequences, often using case studies and qualitative evidence alongside metrics.

NO LONGER A "NICE-TO-HAVE"

Many will ask a reasonable question: What problem does impact reporting solve that existing communications do not?

While it is by no means a replacement for general, corporate or marketing communications, all of which serve important roles within an organisation, impact reporting alleviates three pressures that have intensified across sectors.

Firstly, building trust increasingly depends on proof standards. Stakeholders are sceptical of broad claims because they have seen too many of them. They look for specificity, consistent logic and evidence that is presented with honesty. Impact reports are often the first place where an organisation's credibility is tested, because the content sits directly at the intersection of purpose and proof.

In addition, a clear organisational strategy is upheld by explicit outcomes. Impact reporting is often framed as outward-facing communication, but it also functions as a strategic tool internally. What organisational leaders choose to measure and communicate shapes what people treat as success. When impact is opaque, organisations tend to optimise for outputs (projects completed, beneficiaries reached, number of engagements). A well-crafted impact report takes it a step further, helping teams see progress as something that unfolds over time rather than a singular change. It keeps people grounded in what has moved, what has not—and why—thus strengthening alignment, morale and a sense of purpose.

Lastly, in an era defined by crowded information environments, increasingly saturated with "AI slop", clarity stands out, and it can influence funding, partnerships and decision-making. Organisations that can explain and defend outcomes with clarity become easier to work with. That matters for funders deciding between proposals, for partners assessing whether collaboration will pay off, for regulators evaluating credibility and for talent determining whether purpose is real or performative.

> An impact report's credibility depends on restraint, with a careful balance of language and claims, and a transparent handling of data and limitations.

The **SHARE** framework for good science communications practices ensures narratives are cohesive and meaningful, striking the right balance between brevity, authenticity, empathy and value.

FIGURE 1: The "SHARE" Framework, developed by Ernest & Kin, ensures narratives are cohesive and meaningful, striking the right balance between authenticity, empathy and value.

SHARE: THE QUALITY BAR FOR IMPACT REPORTS

Many organisations do not struggle because they lack effort. They struggle because their reports sprawl, their claims outrun their evidence or their documents read like collections of unrelated achievements. The "SHARE" framework, developed by impact communications consultancy Ernest & Kin, is a useful quality bar because it addresses the most common failure modes directly.

Streamlined: Cut to the chase. Remove unnecessary sub-narratives, rhetorical questions, metaphors and elaboration.

A streamlined impact report does not try to cover everything. It prioritises what matters most, puts key messages early and guides the reader logically. It resists the organisational instinct to include every project to avoid internal disappointment.

Editorial test: If the report were half its length, what would remain? The answer is close to your real impact story.

Holistic: Treat reporting as a whole-of-organisation effort and show the ecosystem that makes impact possible.

Impact is rarely produced by one team alone. It is shaped by partners, policies, infrastructures, communities, and sometimes, competing forces. Holistic reporting shows how these elements interact. It also avoids the credibility trap of claiming sole credit for outcomes that were co-created.

Editorial test: Does the report acknowledge where impact depends on others, and does it make collaboration visible?

Authentic: Measured language, no hyperbole, no superlatives, no fluff.

Authenticity builds trust. Strong impact reports include challenges, uncertainties and areas still in progress. They do not avoid uncomfortable truths. They do not present setbacks as "opportunities" in glossy language. They treat the reader as capable of nuance.

Editorial test: Would a sceptical stakeholder say this sounds honest, or sounds curated?

Responsible: Empathetic and attentive to the audience's priorities, pain points and aspirations.
Responsible reporting is partly about evidence and ethics, and partly about respect. It anticipates what the audience needs in order to interpret claims correctly. It also handles data integrity seriously with clear methodologies, ethical sourcing, privacy protection and careful framing of sensitive information, especially in healthcare and human-centred work.

Editorial test: Does the report make it easy for readers to interpret the data without misreading it?

Educational: Informative and aspirational to leave the reader smarter about the world and the issue.
Impact reports often over-focus on the organisation and under-explain the problem. Educational reporting provides context. It shows what is at stake, why the work matters and what might happen if nothing changes. This is where impact reporting becomes more than accountability; it becomes public value.

Editorial test: After reading, does the audience understand the issue better, or only the organisation better?

A useful way to present SHARE is to pair each principle with the failure mode it prevents:

- **Streamlined** prevents the laundry list.
- **Holistic** prevents isolated storytelling that ignores systems and partners.
- **Authentic** prevents inflated claims and credibility loss.
- **Responsible** prevents misinterpretation and ethical shortcuts.
- **Educational** prevents reports that read like internal newsletters.

A SIX-STEP PROCESS THAT LEADERS CAN USE

The most common reason impact reporting fails is not lack of intent. It is a process problem. Teams scramble late, assemble whatever data is available, then write backwards from that pile. This "last-minute compilation" should be averted and an approach akin to writing a graduate thesis should be adopted—with continuous documentation, revision and records that create coherence. The following six steps are designed to be applicable across sectors.

Step 1: Clarify intent, audience and the decision you want to shape
Writing for stakeholders as a generic group guarantees vagueness. Be specific:

- Who is the primary audience: board, funders, partners, staff, policymakers, communities, the public, or a combination of two or more?
- What decision or behaviour should the report influence: funding confidence, partnership readiness, recruitment, policy support, internal alignment?
- What is the appropriate format: standalone report, integrated report section, thematic publication?

Deliverable: a one-page intent brief with audience, purpose and scope.

Step 2: Map what matters most
Focus is the hardest part, because it requires exclusion. Identify the outcomes that matter most to your mission and to stakeholders, and engage stakeholders where possible, recognising relevance and the value of dialogue in shaping messaging. Use practical constraints to force prioritisation. Two useful prompts:

- If you had only ten pages, what outcomes would you keep?
- Which three to five themes best represent what you are genuinely trying to change?

Deliverable: a shortlist of material impact themes, with a rationale for why these matter.

Step 3: Build an impact inventory
This is where seriousness becomes tangible. Gather evidence across three layers:

- Outputs: what you delivered (services, programmes, innovations, publications, deployments).
- Outcomes: what changed for people, systems or environments over a defined timeframe.
- Limits and unintended effects: where targets were missed, trade-offs emerged or consequences were mixed.

Strengthen the inventory using these strategies:

- Contextualise metrics against targets over time, and against benchmarks where useful.
- Include perspectives from partners and those affected, not just internal voices.
- Consider independent review where appropriate to strengthen accountability.
- Use careful data practices, including privacy and ethical sourcing.

Where possible, look for baseline-and-follow-up patterns, or plausible comparisons that help interpret change. Avoid claiming full causality when the evidence supports contribution; readers accept contribution language when it is explained clearly.

Deliverable: an impact inventory that lists each theme, the evidence available, the data gaps and the stakeholder perspectives needed.

Step 4: Build the narrative spine and guide the reader
A strong impact report is written with the reader in mind. The author must guide the reader rather than forcing them to hunt for key messages. For each theme, use a consistent structure:

- Context or background: what problem you are addressing and why it matters.
- Approach: what you did and why that strategy was chosen.
- Change: what shifted, supported by data and lived experience.
- Learning: what did not work as expected, what you would adjust, what comes next.

It is crucial to use clear language, avoid overstatements and place key findings early, while letting details sit behind summaries for readers who would like a deep dive.

Deliverable: a narrative outline per theme, with evidence embedded and claims calibrated.

Step 5: Design for reach and reuse
Impact reporting should not end as a PDF only. Reports can instead be repurposed into a range of materials that support awareness, recruitment, fundraising and partnerships. The key is to keep the evidence core consistent while tailoring formats for different audiences. Consider a small set of "derivative products":

- A short web summary for general readers
- A partner deck focused on outcomes and collaboration opportunities
- An internal version that reinforces staff motivation and focus
- Visual assets that translate data into understandable patterns

Use data visualisation carefully—every chart should have a clear purpose, and captions should provide enough context for the visual to stand alone.

Deliverable: a distribution plan, including audiences, formats and how assets will be reused without fragmenting the message.

Step 6: Maintain momentum
The strongest impact reports are born out of routine efforts, supported by a governance structure:

- Executive sponsor to signal importance and resolve trade-offs
- Cross-functional working group spanning strategy, operations, finance, programme leads and communications
- Clear ownership for data integrity, narrative development and stakeholder engagement

To make impact reporting sustainable, build a realistic cadence. Annual reporting works for some organisations, while others benefit from thematic or biennial impact reports with lighter interim updates. The key is continuity, whereby progress is tracked over time, with comparisons done against prior periods and learning documented. At the end of each reporting cycle, treat the process as a feedback loop:

- What data was difficult to obtain, and why?
- Which outcomes remain poorly measured?
- Where did stakeholder feedback reveal misalignment or blind spots?
- What priorities need refinement as conditions change?

Maintaining this momentum ensures impact reporting becomes more than a publication cycle, but instead a management habit that strengthens decision-making and accountability.

WHAT IT MEANS TO TAKE IMPACT SERIOUSLY

Impact reporting answers a simple but critical question: Does what you do matter? It is important to acknowledge that the question rarely arrives in that exact form. It appears as due diligence from a partner, scrutiny from a policymaker, scepticism from a community or a board's demand for clarity. It also appears internally, when staff want to know whether their work is producing outcomes that justify the effort.

Leaders can choose to be reactive and let others define the organisation's impact through fragments, assumptions or external narratives. They can also choose to be proactive and build the capability to explain outcomes with discipline, honesty and evidence. Ultimately, a strong impact report kills two birds with one stone: it serves as an internal tool that clarifies priorities and strengthens resource allocation, while beaming an external signal of credibility that cultivates trust, partnerships and long-term relevance.

In a world awash with noise and superlatives, the organisations that cut through the static will be those that can show—clearly, ethically and without exaggeration—what has changed because they exist.

THE FOUR NON-NEGOTIABLE QUESTIONS

Every credible impact case study must be able to answer these clearly and convincingly.

1. Why this problem?
What *systemic* or *societal* issue does this work address—and why does it matter beyond the discipline?

This forces clarity on:
- The real-world relevance of the problem
- Who is affected, and at what scale
- Why the issue is not merely "interesting" but *consequential*

If the answer only makes sense to peers in the field, it is not yet an impact case.

2. Why now?
What has changed that makes this work timely, necessary or actionable *at this moment*?

This might include:
- Policy windows opening
- Technological readiness
- Regulatory or market shifts
- Social or environmental urgency

Without "why now", the case lacks urgency and risks sounding retrospective or speculative.

3. Why this approach?
What is *distinctive* about the way the problem is being addressed?

This is where you demonstrate:
- What others have tried—and why it was insufficient
- What is genuinely different (not just incremental)
- Why this approach overcomes previous constraints or failures

This is often the weakest part of many cases, yet it is where credibility is earned.

4. Why you (or this team/institution/organisation)?
Why is *this* group uniquely positioned to deliver the impact?

This is not about prestige or track record alone. It is about:
- Strategic combination of expertise
- Access to stakeholders, data, environments or infrastructure
- Trust, relationships or legitimacy built over time

In short: *what makes success plausible, not aspirational.*

THE CREDIBILITY QUESTIONS (OFTEN OVERLOOKED)

Once the four core questions are addressed, you can usually push cases further with these:

5. What changed—and for whom?
Impact is about *change*, not activity.

Be explicit about:
- Who benefited
- What shifted (behaviour, policy, practice, capability, outcomes)
- Whether the change is direct, indirect or enabling

6. How do you know the change occurred?
Evidence matters—especially outside academia.

This could include:
- Policy citations
- Adoption or uptake
- Behavioural shifts
- Independent validation
- Measurable outcomes (quantitative or qualitative)

Anecdotes alone are rarely sufficient.

7. What would not have happened otherwise?
This is the counterfactual question.

It distinguishes:
- True contribution from
- Convenient association

If the impact would likely have happened anyway, the case needs reframing.

8. Why is this worth investing in or scaling?
This is where impact meets strategy.

Address:
- Sustainability of the impact
- Transferability or scalability
- Long-term value (social, economic, environmental, institutional)

This is especially important for funders, partners and policymakers.

A quick stress test

If an impact case study cannot clearly answer:
Why this problem, why now, why this approach, and why you—with evidence that something meaningful changed, it risks becoming a laundry list of outputs, not a case for impact.

JULIAN TANG
is Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Ernest & Kin, a Singapore-based science and technology communications consultancy. He works with universities, research institutes and public-sector teams across Asia-Pacific to translate research, programmes and partnerships into credible impact narratives—grounded in evidence, strategy and controlled storytelling.

This article is based on a whitepaper, The Art of Impact Reporting, written by Ernest & Kin. For more information, visit https://smu.sg/SMUAMIMar2026 or scan the QR code below.

BRINGING BACK DIGNITY WITH INCONTINENCE CARE

After a decade-long career in consumer brand MNCs, Nivedita Venkateish began her own business to help seniors tackle urinary incontinence.

AIRE, an adult diaper brand that began as a personal solution for founder Nivedita Venkateish to support her grandmother, has since grown into a leading senior care brand in Singapore. Today, AIRE is available at more than 100 points of sale nationwide and recently expanded into Malaysia. Speaking with Erin Lee from SMU's Office of Impact, Nivedita reflects on her entrepreneurial journey, the importance of taking a consumer-first approach and why the silver economy deserves far more attention than it currently receives.

What drove you to take a problem you noticed in your family and turn it into a business?

It stemmed from frustration with what was available on the market. The products were poorly designed: the materials were rough, absorption was inadequate and most were not tailored to Asian body sizes.

From a brand perspective, the brands on the market were almost farcical in how they spoke to seniors. Having worked in consumer-facing roles at companies such as Diageo and Kraft Heinz, and at an agency building brands for Unilever, I feel very passionately about brands and their role in how consumers see themselves. There is a need to have choice and that is the basis of the consumer product goods industry. If we have a dozen choices of body wash or shampoo, why is it that something like incontinence, something so intimate and affects you every day, has so few choices? Why isn't there a product which really align with seniors as they are today?

Those two factors gave me the courage to give this a go, and as I was just laid off from Meta at the time, I decided to take a bet on myself.

I didn't think AIRE was going to become a full-fledged business. Over time, we see how our products make a genuine impact on our consumers, not just in function but in how they see themselves. Since launching in 2023, we have nearly 100 different points of sale across online and physical channels such as FairPrice and Sheng Siong. We have closed two rounds of funding led by DSG Consumer Partners, with additional support from AngelCentral and Wing Vasiksari, and recently crossed seven figures in annual revenue. This year, our focus is on doubling down on that growth.

How did your experience in companies like Kraft Heinz and Diageo shape the way you develop your products and engage your customers?

I think my training in consumer goods helped me in the early days, especially in learning how to talk to customers and how important customer inputs are in product development.

During my time at an agency which served Unilever, there was an almost obsessive focus on understanding exactly who your customer is, what kind of messaging resonates with them and what they look for in a product. When we started AIRE–and because I was bootstrapping it from the outset–I wanted to be certain there was a real, unmet need before launching anything.

This involved running multiple focus groups and interviews, as well as volunteering at senior community groups to better understand their lived realities. When it came to product development and branding, we were doing primary research and blind testing to see the features that were most important to them. What was it that resonated with them? What did they look out for in a product? Everything we have done has been consumer-first, and it is a very strong retail principle which shaped my earlier career that continues to guide me today.

On top of that, my background gave me a head start in understanding how supply chains and retailers operate. These are insights I would have arrived at eventually, but my experience at Kraft Heinz and Diageo allowed me to get there faster.

Having run AIRE for the past two years, what's something that people may find surprising about creating and marketing products for seniors?

There are many misconceptions around how people talk about seniors. Even the term itself is not very descriptive—age alone tells you very little. One thing that often surprises people is just how diverse this cohort is. There are seniors who have just retired, who enjoy travelling, who are active and who participate regularly in community groups. Lumping everyone together as "those over 65" flattens that diversity and misrepresents how varied their lives and needs actually are.

Another common misconception is that seniors do not have strong opinions about consumer products, or that they are simply coasting through their sunset years. I believe that to be entirely untrue. In Singapore, seniors are among the most affluent cohorts, with disposable income they are actively choosing how to spend. Across Asia Pacific, and particularly in Singapore, the silver economy is estimated at US$4.6 trillion: It's a sunrise industry.

Senior consumers are discerning and opinionated about what they want and do not want. Just recently, while collecting product feedback, we spoke with a 70-year-old wheelchair-bound customer who had brought along samples of products he had purchased in Japan. He walked me through what he liked about those brands, what he preferred about ours compared to the market leader and where he felt we could still improve. There is a level of involvement, a level of autonomy that people tend to gloss over.

A third surprise is how digitally engaged many seniors are. Not everyone over 65 is equally social media savvy, but the trend is apparent. Increasingly, seniors are using platforms such as TikTok and Shopee to research consumer products, and many are comfortable being on camera. We recently partnered with a 'granfluencer', Grandma Chris, who is in her 80s and regularly does livestreams and affiliate videos on TikTok. She also attends AI classes three times a week. Seniors are not withdrawing from the world—they are learning, experimenting and engaging, including on social media.

Was it challenging to convince others, especially VCs and investors, that seniors had these very diverse needs and personalities?

Oh, absolutely. Since we launched AIRE, a recurring question was, "Why do we need another adult diaper? It's not like the market doesn't have any." We even had investors saying things like, "No one in my family has incontinence, so I don't think it's a real problem." That view overlooks the fact that this is the fastest-growing category within personal hygiene. Incontinence affects around 400 million people globally—more than the population of the United States. But when people do not encounter the issue in their own circles, there is a tendency to assume it does not exist.

With venture capital, we were able to demonstrate real growth. Today, we are the number two brand on Shopee in Singapore and one of the top-performing brands at NTUC, largely because we differentiated both our product and brand around what consumers actually want. I think investor perspectives are shifting as a result. Growth signals product-market fit, and with that comes a clearer recognition of both demand and opportunity.

Everything we have done has been consumer-first, and it is a very strong retail principle which shaped my earlier career that continues to guide me today.

How do you think AIRE has changed the conversation around adult incontinence?

It would be arrogant to claim that we have fundamentally shifted public discourse, but we have made a deliberate effort to help normalise the topic. I tend to think about this across three pillars.

The first is on a community level. We work with active ageing centres and community service organisations, as well as take part in events organised by the People's Association and NTUC Health to destigmatise incontinence. We highlight how common incontinence is and share exercises that can help manage your pelvic and bladder health. Through these interactions, we are able to get people to talk about incontinence, ask questions and peel away this layer of shame around the topic. That is one thing we're very proud of, and even though it's very resource intensive, we will continue doing it.

The second pillar is on shelf. Having a physical presence at markets like FairPrice, along with being present online, was super important to us; being physically present means that you're going to where your consumers are shopping. It is expensive, especially for a D2C startup brand, but it was an area we really wanted to invest in and differentiate ourselves with. With a product like ours, it is often thought that the shelf would be very clinical, dated and dull. We wanted to inject a sense of energy, excitement and consumer delight, such that our products weren't hidden away in the back shelf, but were pulling customers in. In doing this, we were also able to change the conversation around incontinence.

The third pillar is normalising the conversation online. We try to shine a spotlight on seniors and mirror their personalities using our social media and brand content. We have Gen Z kids and seniors doing TikTok reels together, and our brand material involves visuals like a skydiving grandma. All of this highlights the energy, curiosity and personality that seniors have. It shows that, even if a person has incontinence, it doesn't mean they are lesser; they are just as human and just as capable.

Does AIRE have plans to go beyond adult incontinence products? Are there other issues faced by seniors that you would like to help solve and bring awareness to through AIRE?

We have many ideas, whether it's skinceuticals or functional food. But our focus right now is to make sure we are building based on our experience and expertise. We want to broaden our incontinence portfolio, because even though we have adult diapers and adult pull-up pants, there's a lot more we can do in that space. How can we innovate on the current incontinence solutions, in both what we have as well as what's available in the market? Can we bring a sustainability angle to our products? There is a whole world of things we could do, especially with our overall mission of being the most loved brand for senior consumers, but we have limited capital and resources, so we're just focusing on incontinence for now.

AIRE began as a way to support your grandmother. In your opinion, why do you think it's important for businesses to design products and solutions with silver consumers in mind?

It's primarily for two reasons. The first is social: it is simply the right thing to do. Seniors are a significant and relevant demographic, yet they are often overlooked. If we are willing to design brands in our own likeness, or for people who look like us, there is no reason we should not do the same for our parents or grandparents.

The second, and arguably more important reason, is that it is good business. In Singapore, one in four people will soon be over the age of 65. Senior consumers are also highly loyal if you earn their trust. It is a market which is begging for innovation and ripe for disruption.

That said, it is not without its challenges. There are deeply ingrained perceptions around ageing and senior-focused products. But when you remove those blinders, you will find that there is a huge white space opportunity, one where innovation is going to be valued.

Currently, AIRE is growing its presence beyond Singapore into Malaysia. Could you tell us about your progress and the reasons behind expanding to Malaysia?

Yes, it's a very exciting phase for us! We have been fully set up in Malaysia since February. One reason why we prioritised Malaysia was strong inbound demand from consumers. We had customers purchasing our products in Singapore and bringing them back to Malaysia, as well as others reaching out directly via WhatsApp asking when we would be available locally. That demand made the decision more straightforward.

The second reason was the relative ease of expanding from Singapore into Malaysia. There are established cross-border processes, and Enterprise Singapore was instrumental in connecting us with partners who could support our entry. We are also taking an omnichannel approach. Our Shopee Malaysia store is already live, and we are seeing organic demand come through.

In addition, we will be launching with one of the largest retailers in Malaysia, alongside pharmacies and wellness stores. Given the scale of the Malaysian market, these retail partnerships give us a much broader footprint than when we first launched in Singapore.

What advice would you have for budding entrepreneurs, especially those that aim to tackle social issues with their innovations?

The first is to take it to market. When I speak to people about starting something, many spend a long time in the idea phase. My biggest learning has been that once you put something out into the world, you gain far more information—real learning and genuine feedback—from consumers and partners.

The second thing is that, especially if you come from a corporate background, you have to be comfortable with a high degree of day-to-day uncertainty. You have to find creative ways to do more things with fewer resources and support. You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves, and you have to have faith, because these things take time.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE HOUSING AFFORDABLE?

Professor Phang Sock Yong's body of work has shaped conversations around housing affordability both in Singapore and abroad—helping policymakers manage land, supply, finance and market rules as one integrated system.

Housing looks, on paper, like another line in a household budget. But in reality, it serves more like a door to opportunity. It influences whether workers can move up the career ladder, whether children can attend better schools, whether families can get easier access to healthcare and community support and whether older adults can age with stability and dignity. When housing becomes unaffordable, downstream consequences, such as the loss of mobility, confidence and some measure of social cohesion, begin to rear their ugly heads.

The scale of the gap between aspiration and reality is not in dispute. A staggering 80% of cities worldwide do not offer affordable housing options for the majority of their populations.[1] Across Asia, affordability pressures crop up in different guises: land constraints in dense metropolises such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen; rapid urbanisation and informal settlements in cities such as Jakarta and Delhi; and limited public-sector supply in markets where private development tends to follow profit rather than need. The United Nations estimates that by 2030 around three billion people—about 40% of the world's population—will need access to adequate housing, translating into the demand for roughly 96,000 new affordable and accessible units every day.[2]

Housing is often framed as a moral imperative. Indeed, a roof over one's head is a basic, human need. But morality alone does not resolve the practical question of how to govern housing without letting it become a permanent source of instability. Housing sits where land scarcity meets finance; where household wealth meets political legitimacy; where infrastructure planning meets everyday life. It is shelter, it is also an asset. It is private, yet its effects spill over into the public domain. When policy design is weak, housing markets tend to reverberate with shocks rather than cushion them.

Singapore is, by almost any measure, an improbable counterexample. Six million people occupy about 735.7 km^2. Land is not just scarce—it is, in any conventional sense, exhausted. And yet the Urban Land Institute, a global non-profit research and educational organisation, has identified Singapore as one of the few major Asia-Pacific cities where homes remain broadly attainable, with a median price-to-income ratio below five.

However, that does not mean that Singapore is free from housing anxiety. Public debate over waiting times, resale prices and high-profile "million-dollar flats" has snatched headlines in recent years. But the debate itself is revealing. Affordability is not a problem solved once and for all, but a situation that requires constant monitoring as well as management.

Over several decades, Professor Phang Sock Yong's research at Singapore Management University (SMU) in housing affordability has helped make that task of maintenance clearer in its difficulties as well as practical in the possible solutions available. In particular, it answers the question of how housing affordability relies on the coordination of land, supply, finance and infrastructure; how rules matter as much as subsidies; how the political economy of housing wealth complicates every reform; and how cities can fund affordability without leaning only on taxes on labour and capital. It is important to note that, as with many other policies, housing policy does not usually move through one clean causal chain. Influence is most visible where ideas actually travel—government knowledge products, advisory channels, multilateral policy forums and overseas reform debates—shaping how policymakers define the problem, what tools they treat as legitimate and how they test what might translate to their own context.

WHEN HOUSING BECOMES A BARRIER, CITIES INHERIT THE COSTS

Most housing debates start with prices. They should, instead, begin with constraints. In many cities, demand can surge. Population growth, rising incomes, easier credit and global capital flows can lift purchasing power quickly. However, supply responds slowly, land assembly takes time and planning approvals can move at a glacial pace. What's more, construction capacity is finite and infrastructure has to be sequenced. These snags create the trap whereby purchasing power rises faster than homes can be made, and price becomes the balancing mechanism.

That is why demand-side assistance, while often necessary, is also risky when deployed in isolation. It is politically attractive because it is immediate and visible—it puts money in households' hands. Yet in constrained markets, subsidies and grants can be capitalised into higher prices. When extra purchasing power arrives faster than homes can be built, part of the benefit is shared with incumbent owners and developers through price increases. Some households still gain, but the market can reset upwards for everyone else.

The problem intensifies once homeownership becomes widespread. Housing then doubles up as wealth: as a retirement asset, a buffer against shocks and an asset in the context of intergenerational transfer. Here lies the central tension of modern affordability politics. Measures that improve entry for first-time buyers may be read by existing owners as threats to their respective balance sheets. A city can promise cheaper entry, but it cannot easily do so while also preserving the wealth expectations that have built up around housing over several decades.

Globalisation deepens the dilemma. Housing markets become layered, as a regulated segment meant to preserve affordability sits alongside a more open segment exposed to global capital. Residential property becomes a preferred store of value in a world of mobile money. In such contexts, "let the market decide" is not a neutral stance. It tends to privilege housing's wealth function over its (more fundamental) social function.

In response, households move to areas that are more affordable, in turn creating longer commutes and weaker access to various services. Similarly, employers feel the pinch of labour mismatches—especially in central and specialised districts—and this trickles down, resulting in an erosion in productivity and liveability.

SINGAPORE: A CASE IN POINT

In the early 1960s, as Singapore moved toward self-governance and then independence, one urgent challenge was a severe shortage of decent housing. Large parts of the island's housing stock were dominated by *kampongs* (traditional Malay villages), squatter settlements and overcrowded shophouses. Structures were often unsafe and sanitation was poor. Barely one in 10 of residents lived in government flats.

> Housing sits where land scarcity meets finance; where household wealth meets political legitimacy; where infrastructure planning meets everyday life. It is shelter, it is also an asset. It is private, yet its effects spill over into the public domain.

The state responded with a speed that is difficult to reproduce in most democracies today. On 1 February 1960, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was formed with the mandate to build at scale. Within a decade, the percentage of residents living in HDB flats rose from 9% to 35%. By 1980, it reached 67%. Today, close to 80% of Singapore's resident population live in HDB estates, and around 90% of resident households own their homes.

The expansion reflected a deliberate architecture that linked land, supply and finance. In particular, land and planning were treated as affordability tools. Land acquisition powers, state land ownership and the ability to plan and release land for high-density housing allowed supply to be delivered at scale.

Supply delivery was anchored in an institution designed to build across cycles. HDB built most of the city's housing stock over decades—seven out of 10 dwellings over the past half century.

Finance was also built into the system. The ability to use Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings, Singapore's social security savings system, for downpayments and mortgage servicing widened access to ownership and reduced reliance on external capital markets, particularly during the early decades. Importantly, housing finance was designed as part of the affordability architecture instead of being regarded as a separate market problem.

By the late 1960s, key elements of that architecture were already in place. The Development Charge was introduced in 1964, the Land Acquisition Act followed in 1966 and CPF housing use began in 1968. Together, these moves built the scaffolding for the long run: supply delivered on state and reclaimed land, financed through a domestic savings mechanism, supported by instruments that allowed the state to capture some portion of planning- and infrastructure-induced land value uplift.

That arc also explains why affordability becomes harder as cities mature. Once a city globalises, capital becomes more mobile, household aspirations rise and housing's wealth function expands. The system must then do more than house people. It must manage expectations, preserve legitimacy while remaining fiscally sustainable.

MAKING THE SYSTEM LEGIBLE: HOW SINGAPORE'S HOUSING MODEL IMPACTS POLICY PRACTICE ELSEWHERE

Indeed, cities cannot simply transplant what works elsewhere. Yet they still need ways to learn. They need frameworks that separate symptomatic relief from structural change, and that anticipate spillovers: how a fix in one part of the system shifts pressure to another.

Over several decades, Phang's research has found that Singapore's housing model has tended to contribute in three ways.

1. A usable map of the moving parts

A recurring contribution has been to frame affordability as integrated system design—land mobilisation, supply delivery, housing finance and market rules. The practical value of Singapore's housing model is in how it helps policymakers locate bottlenecks. It clarifies why subsidies inflate prices when supply is constrained, why supply targets fail when land release and infrastructure are out of sync and why "build more" can remain an empty slogan when institutions cannot build across cycles.

Several of Phang's publications were structured for cross-country learning, setting out Singapore's institutional pillars in portable form: land acquisition and land release; the HDB-CPF linkage; market interventions such as resale rules; and retirement equity tools.[3,4]

2. A disciplined view of finance: good intentions, bad dynamics

Housing finance is where good intentions often misfire. A financing innovation that widens access can inflate prices when supply is slow. A credit expansion can increase homeownership and simultaneously build fragility into household balance sheets. Meanwhile, a subsidy can relieve hardship and still push the market up.

Phang's research also evaluates both market failures and government failures in housing finance, and it has been useful precisely because it treats intervention as a design problem rather than a virtue.[5] It directs attention to second-order effects: credit dynamics, wealth distribution and the politics of asset-based welfare. That discipline becomes more valuable in late-stage global cities, where housing is both an economic good and a political symbol.

3. Fiscal realism: value capture as a foundation

In high-demand cities, the affordability question eventually becomes a fiscal one. How does a city pay for the infrastructure and subsidies needed to keep housing within reach?

This is where value capture becomes central. Land values rise due to collective growth and public investment. A portion of that uplift can be recycled into housing and infrastructure rather than accruing entirely as private windfalls. Singapore's case is notable for the long-run implementation of a value capture ecosystem—through land acquisition, development charges, land sales and related instruments.

One empirical insight that sharpened policy discussion is the idea of "budgetary recycling" within the housing system: the state sells land to housing agencies at market-reflective values, then returns subsidies to keep housing affordable.[6] In other words, land value is treated as a resource that can be converted into affordability.

FROM SCHOLARSHIP TO UPTAKE

Phang has seen her research travel internationally through housing finance discussions. In May 2010, the World Bank's global conference on housing finance in emerging markets included a session on lessons from Singapore's CPF scheme.[7] That setting was concerned with implementation: what a savings-linked housing finance model enables, what institutional conditions it depends on and what risks arise when those conditions are absent. It also reinforced a broader point that recurs throughout her work: housing finance only works when land release, supply delivery and market rules move in step with each other.

That same year, she also served on the Economic Strategies Committee subcommittee on Maximising Value from Land as a Scarce Resource.[8] It put land scarcity at the centre of Singapore's growth strategy—calling for integrated, long-term land and infrastructure planning, a calibrated balance between planning and market allocation, as well as a sharper focus on land productivity.

In Singapore, engagement with policy tends to be reflected through institutions. Between 2009 and 2014, Phang served as a member of the Advisory Board for the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC). In 2014, Phang was awarded the Medallion for Distinguished Service by the Ministry of National Development for her contributions as board member to the Urban Redevelopment Board and the CLC. She also served as a research advisor to CLC's Urban Systems Study publications. CLC publications are government knowledge products intended to consolidate lessons, document governance choices and communicate policy logic to both domestic and international audiences.[9,10] Participation in that process is one route by which her scholarship enters official framing—often shaping how policy tools are understood. Phang's engagement with CLC has continued since, including fellowship roles recorded on the CLC fellows listing as recently as early 2026.

As Singapore's housing experience drew attention abroad, uptake increasingly took the form of comparative policy dialogue. In 2019, Phang was invited to speak at a conference convened by Boston University's Initiative on Cities for housing commissioners from nine of the most expensive cities in the United States, focused on America's affordable housing crisis.[11] The interest was in what Singapore makes easier to see in any high-cost city: how quickly demand-side relief can be priced away when supply is constrained; how land and infrastructure choices shape affordability outcomes; and how rules determine whether housing behaves primarily as shelter or as wealth.

Over the next few years, that comparative interest showed up both in feasibility testing and in commissioned advisory work. From July 2020 to May 2021, Phang served as a consultant to the World Bank on Indonesia's National Affordable Housing Program. The context differs sharply from Singapore, but the core design questions were familiar: how to scale supply credibly, how to structure subsidies without inflating prices and how to align housing provision with infrastructure and labour-market realities.

City leaders would be wise to treat affordability as a condition to be maintained rather than a crisis awaiting a decisive fix.

In 2019, Hawaii's affordability pressures had led policymakers to examine whether elements of Singapore's approach could be adapted. Public discussion that year explored Singapore's housing system in Hawaii's context, and Phang was invited to give the keynote speech at the "Kick the Tires" Housing Conference organised by the Hawaii State Senate Housing Committee.[12] An implementation study in 2021 associated with the ALOHA Homes initiative cited Phang's policy working paper on Singapore's housing policies.[13] The value of this use case lay in feasibility testing: leasehold structures, the role of state land, affordability financing mechanisms and the institutional constraints that determine what can be transferred in practice.

Hawaii's engagement continued beyond that initial feasibility exercise. By 2024, the discussion had also entered transit-oriented development (TOD) and land value capture conversations, including through Hawaii's TOD Council reporting and related briefings.[14] This exemplifies how policy learning typically unfolds: jurisdictions rarely move straight from learning about a model to wholesale adoption. They test components—land, infrastructure and financing—before deciding what can be designed into their own systems. Put simply, context is vital.

In more recent years, Phang's work has continued to circulate through policy debate settings in cities facing acute pressures. In 2024, besides delivering a public lecture in Honolulu[15], she also delivered lectures in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane that contributed to Australia's ongoing debate on affordability and tax reform.[16,17] In 2025, she participated as a speaker and panellist at Seoul's Housing Forum, a platform designed to compare governance approaches and refine local policy options.

The applied advisory channel continued as well. From 2022 to 2023, Phang served as a consultant appointed by the Asian Development Bank to work with Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment. That work again brought the focus back to system design—how institutions fund and deliver infrastructure in ways that remain politically and fiscally workable over time.

WHAT CHANGED—AND WHAT CITIES NOW FACE

The most consequential effects of housing research tend to show up first in how governments think and decide, because that is where policy mistakes are often baked into the process. Over time, Phang's research has helped move affordability debates away from price headlines and toward system management: land release and planning responsiveness, delivery capacity across cycles, financing design and the market rules that shape behaviour. Once those pieces are discussed as well as applied together, it becomes harder to rely on single-lever fixes that perform well politically but leak pressure elsewhere.

It has also nudged policy learning in a more disciplined direction. Too much cross-city borrowing fails through mere surface imitation. The more useful question is feasibility: what institutional conditions must exist for a tool to work as intended, and what trade-offs follow from adopting it. That is why the most visible overseas engagements have not centred on copying Singapore's model wholesale, but on testing components—leasehold structures, the role of state land, value capture instruments and delivery institutions—against local legal, fiscal and labour constraints. In housing, sharper feasibility testing is a meaningful outcome. It reduces the risk of spending political capital on reforms that would go on to disappoint.

Another shift concerns fiscal realism. Sustained affordability requires funding housing provision and the infrastructure that supports it. In land-scarce, high-demand contexts, value capture offers a coherent logic and solution: planning decisions and public investment create land value uplift, and some portion can be recycled into public goods. Framing the issue this way does not remove contestation, but changes the conversation. Debate moves from whether value capture is acceptable in principle to how it can be designed credibly—whether through instrument choice, rate setting, safeguards or distributional consequences.

These shifts matter because the next set of affordability pressures will be harder to govern with yesterday's toolkit. Take infrastructure, for instance. When housing near jobs and services becomes expensive, households trade price for distance, and the cost returns as longer commutes, congestion and weaker access to services. Decarbonisation is another pressure. "Affordable" increasingly includes operating costs and climate resilience. Retrofitting older housing stock is expensive, but delay is costly too, through higher energy bills, heat stress and adaptation expenses that tend to fall hardest on those with the least room to absorb them. These issues, too, need to be managed.

City leaders would be wise to treat affordability as a condition to be maintained rather than a crisis awaiting a decisive fix. That maintenance depends on institutional capability: coordinating land, supply, finance and infrastructure; funding public goods at scale; and setting rules that can manage housing's dual role as shelter and wealth without pretending that the tension can be removed. The most consequential choices are often questions of sequencing—what is stabilised first, what is allowed to adjust and which trade-offs are confronted early rather than be left to markets to impose later. AMI

SOCK-YONG PHANG
is Celia Moh Chair Professor and Vice-Provost (Faculty Matters) at Singapore Management University (SMU). A leading authority on housing economics, she has published widely on housing finance, infrastructure and urban policy. Her 2026 book, *Greening the Housing Stock: Toward Net-Zero Cities in East Asia*, contributes to global debates on sustainable urban development. Her research has informed public policy in Singapore and internationally, including advisory work with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. She has served on several boards and government committees and received Singapore's Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2019, and SMU's Distinguished Educator Award in 2024.

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by
Christianna Sirindah Parr

WHEN PERFORMANCE IS NOT ENOUGH: MANAGING NGOS IN AN AGE OF DIGITAL MISTRUST

As NGOs lack formal authority, their influence depends on legitimacy, which can be contested at scale online. Leaders must treat social media as a governance decision, with clear scope, speaking authority and response protocols.

Perceptions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in digital environments increasingly shape their legitimacy and trust more than on-the-ground performance.

Although critical for NGOs to engage in online discourse, doing so risks exposure to controversy and mission drift, while avoiding engagement relinquishes narrative control.

Organisations should establish clear protocols for engaging with social media, ensuring consistent messaging and alignment with mission objectives.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a visible role in service provision for vulnerable communities, charity donation collection, management of community funds and the protection of environmental resources. The third sector is not simply a domain of charity; it is a consequential actor in resource allocation, community welfare and broader social outcomes.

Yet organisational leaders increasingly face a disconnect between what their organisations do on the ground and how they are perceived in public. A health organisation may deliver effective services while facing online accusations of foreign influence. An environmental group may work closely with local communities but become the target of digital campaigns questioning its motives. In online environments, reputations can shift quickly, often independently of performance.

Historically, NGOs have benefited from a presumption of goodwill: they are often viewed with a "warm glow"[1] and framed as "principled actors" who work across borders to help diverse populations.[2] Today, however, their influence depends not only on what they do and the lives they touch, but also on how they are perceived in digital spaces—particularly on social media and within the wider ecosystems of commentary and amplification that form around them.

For organisational leaders, both in NGOs and beyond, this is not an abstract communications challenge; it is a governance problem. How should organisations manage public narratives that are shaped by social media and, increasingly, misinformation? How much does online contestation matter if programmes continue to function effectively? And at what point does reputational damage translate into real effects on funding or access to policy spaces?

UNDERSTANDING LEGITIMACY

NGO performance is now mediated by digital perception: legitimacy can be challenged online regardless of results, so leaders must treat digital engagement and technology choices as governance decisions central to mission delivery. The practical questions are therefore: how should organisations manage narratives shaped by social media and misinformation, and when does reputational damage begin to constrain funding, partnerships or access to policy spaces?

For NGOs, legitimacy refers to their perceived right to operate and to participate in public decision making.[3] It underpins their ability to advocate, deliver services and participate in policy arenas. Unlike governments, which draw authority from elections, or firms, which rely on market performance, NGOs lack formal sources of authority. Their influence depends on whether they are seen as appropriate, credible and aligned with the values they claim to represent.[4]

This may sound a lot like trust, but the concepts are distinct. Trust concerns expectations about behaviour. It is often interpersonal or relational, built through repeated interactions and perceptions of integrity. Legitimacy, by contrast, is broader and more structural. For NGO leaders, legitimacy determines whether they are even allowed into the conversation; trust determines whether people believe them once they are there.

When legitimacy is questioned, trust becomes weaker. For NGOs, maintaining both requires not only effective performance, but careful management of how actions and intentions are perceived in public. For example, in environmental policy settings, NGO advocacy tends to matter most when civil society actors are widely accepted as legitimate participants in policy debates.[5] This legitimacy matters because NGOs lack formal authority: their impact depends on continued access to decision makers, partnerships and public acceptance.

Digital environments have fundamentally changed how the public assess legitimacy. Citizens increasingly encounter NGO work through social media feeds, AI-generated summaries and third-party commentary rather than direct organisational channels. Trust becomes shaped by perception as much as by performance.[6] Even where outcomes are strong and donor support remains stable, limited or uneven online visibility can create space for misleading narratives to circulate unchecked. The consequences can be immediate—and dire. Oxfam provides a stark example. Despite decades of humanitarian work, the organisation faced an existential crisis in 2018 when reports emerged of sexual misconduct by staff members in Haiti. Donations plummeted, government funding was threatened and celebrity ambassadors resigned.[7]

The episode also revealed a broader problem for NGOs: reputations often benefit from a presumption of virtue, which can reduce scrutiny relative to for-profit actors. When that presumption is disrupted, legitimacy shocks can cascade quickly, especially in digital environments where negative information circulates faster than organisational clarification or institutional accountability processes.

TRUST AND LEGITIMACY IN LOW-INFORMATION SETTINGS

Publics often assess NGOs in low-information environments. Few people read annual reports or track project outcomes systematically. Instead, evaluations are shaped by simple and visible cues such as who funds the organisation, how it appears in news coverage and what circulates on social media platforms.[8] For most citizens, it is far easier to recall the branding of an organisation like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and its iconic panda than to investigate its activities or financial disclosures.

Social media can intensify these dynamics. Exposure to social media appears to reshape how people evaluate institutions, often reducing confidence in governments while increasing perceived credibility of civil society organisations.[9] If so, legitimacy is being redistributed: attention and confidence may be shifting away from formal governance actors and towards NGOs and other civil society organisations.

This advantage, however, is fickle. Research on non-profit legitimacy shows that legitimacy is inherently fragile, continuously challenged by internal vulnerabilities and external pressures.[10] Structural factors such as weak roots and political restrictions can also undermine NGO legitimacy, especially when information is incomplete or contested.[11] High visibility may therefore be double-edged: it can confer legitimacy, but it can also amplify doubt, accelerate misinformation, and heighten reputational risk. In low information settings, the same platforms that promote NGOs can just as quickly expose them to suspicion and reputational risk.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CAN CHANGE LEGITIMACY AND TRUST

Social media alters how legitimacy and trust are built—and how they are eroded. In digital environments, legitimacy is shaped by online narratives and, at times, misinformation. This poses risks for organisations that rely on trust rather than formal authority, such as legal mandates or official government partnerships. Claims about funding sources, political alignment or alleged hidden agendas can circulate rapidly, while verifying or correcting them requires time and attention that most audiences do not invest. Even when allegations are inaccurate, false narratives often persist.

Public health NGOs offer a clear illustration of how indirect association can undermine legitimacy. During the search for Osama bin Laden, a fake vaccination campaign was reportedly used as cover for intelligence gathering.[12] Although humanitarian organisations were not responsible for the operation, the reputational consequences were severe. In parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, vaccination workers became associated with foreign surveillance and political interference. Polio vaccination rates declined, and health workers faced harassment and violence.[13] Trust that had taken decades to build was weakened not by organisational failure, but by suspicion and rumour, showing how misinformation can damage legitimacy even when NGOs are not directly implicated.

Environmental debates show how social media can distort public discourse and legitimacy. Research on environmental communication demonstrates how social media platforms can amplify misleading or polarising narratives about climate and environmental issues.[14] Other studies of climate change misinformation find that false or misleading content about environmental issues circulates widely on social media, reinforcing polarised views and reducing trust in expert voices.[15] Strategic disinformation campaigns have also used social media to sow doubt about environmental science and policy, portraying environmental action by NGOs as economically damaging or ideologically driven.[16] As these narratives gain traction, they shape who is treated as a legitimate participant in public debate and which arguments are considered acceptable.[17]

For NGO leaders, this creates a strategic dilemma. Engaging directly on platform terms risks oversimplifying complex issues and drawing organisations into polarised exchanges. Avoiding engagement, however, risks ceding narrative control entirely.[18] Over time, these pressures can deeply affect organisational behaviour and contribute to mission drift.[19] Staff time is diverted toward reputational defence rather than programmatic work, and public communication becomes reactive and cautious rather than mission driven.

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Research on non-profit social media use suggests that many organisations respond by limiting engagement. Social media is treated primarily as a broadcast tool focused on image management rather than dialogue.[20] While this approach may reduce immediate exposure to controversy, it can also constrain how NGOs build sustained relationships and legitimacy with the publics they serve.

WHEN TECHNOLOGY INTRODUCES NEW RISKS

New technologies can also affect legitimacy and trust in ways that organisations do not always anticipate. In 2023, Amnesty International faced significant backlash after publishing AI-generated images on social media to depict human rights abuses during protests in Colombia.[21] The stated intention was to protect the identities of protesters while drawing attention to violations. The response was swift and critical. Journalists, photographers and activists argued that the use of synthetic imagery blurred the boundary between documentation and fabrication in a context where evidentiary credibility is important. Amnesty International later removed the images.

This episode highlights a broader challenge for advocacy organisations. Legitimacy rests on claims to accuracy, authenticity and moral authority. Even when new tools are used transparently and with ethical intent, they can undermine trust if audiences perceive a departure from established norms. Social media can intensify this risk by encouraging rapid judgment and binary reactions rather than deliberation.

As AI tools become more accessible, organisations face new trade-offs between visibility and credibility. Technologies that promise efficiency can also introduce doubt about authenticity and intent. For NGO leaders, managing legitimacy increasingly requires anticipating not only what technologies can do, but how their use will be interpreted by sceptical publics.

WHAT GOOD SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE

Some NGOs have developed social media practices that reinforce legitimacy and trust. The emphasis is less on constant reputation management but more on purpose-driven use of social media supported by clear internal rules and governance. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) demonstrates this measured approach well. Their content prioritises field-based updates from medical staff, maintains consistent institutional voice across platforms and uses real-time reporting during humanitarian emergencies. MSF's social media strategies emphasise eyewitness accounts and visual documentation from operational zones,[22] reinforcing their authority on medical crises without resorting to sensationalism.

Social media platforms can amplify misleading or polarising narratives. As these narratives gain traction, they shape who is treated as a legitimate participant in public debate and which arguments are considered acceptable.

Save the Children has adapted to social media by shifting to completely digital campaigns before releasing their mission to traditional media. The organisation works selectively with influencers aligned with their mission, uses real-time field reporting during crises and coordinates messaging across platforms to maintain narrative coherence.[23] Their approach recognises that digital audiences often encounter content through shares and recommendations rather than direct follows.

A regional example comes from WALHI, the Indonesian Forum for the Environment. WALHI maintains an active presence on multiple platforms and has used social media effectively to document environmental violations and coordinate with local communities. During conflicts over palm oil development, WALHI used field documentation with a step-based advocacy process that moves from fact-finding to planning, to action and to evaluation. Their documentation of each step helps local issues travel credibly to a national and international audience.[24]

Across these cases, governance is important. Senior leadership sets boundaries, approves tone and defines acceptable risk. Social media teams are not left to manage crises in isolation. These organisations treat digital strategy as part of organisational mission, not a peripheral communications function.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

For organisational leaders, the central implication is that legitimacy and trust cannot be left to chance. Digital engagement requires governance: leaders need to establish clear protocols for how the organisation communicates online, who speaks on its behalf and where boundaries lie. Social media practices should reinforce the mission rather than chase attention. Trends and viral formats can be tempting, but when they dilute purpose or blur organisational voice, the reputational costs can outweigh short-term reach.

Leaders must also recognise that technology can introduce reputational risk. New tools are often adopted for practical reasons, but their use can reduce legitimacy if audiences interpret them as departures from established norms. Decisions about adopting digital or AI tools are therefore not merely technical choices; they are judgments about how the organisation wishes to be perceived and trusted. While the everyday use of AI in internal management may be relatively low risk, the explicit use of AI in public communications, imagery or advocacy demands higher scrutiny and greater caution.

Finally, digital strategy must be contextual. Practices that work in one sector or political environment may fail in another. Organisations operating in politically constrained settings face different risks than those working in more open contexts. Social media dynamics vary across countries, languages and issue areas. Strategies that travel poorly can unintentionally expose organisations to backlash or misinterpretation.

GUIDANCE FOR ORGANISATIONS STARTING THEIR DIGITAL JOURNEY

For small NGOs or those just beginning to build a social media presence, the primary challenge is deciding whether and how to engage at all. Social media is not mandatory. Many organisations operate effectively through direct relationships with communities and traditional print media. A decision to establish a social media presence should follow from mission needs and strategic goals, not from the assumption that visibility automatically creates influence.

When organisations do choose to engage with social media, starting narrowly is often more effective than spreading efforts thinly. Focusing on a single platform that works well with the organisation's primary audience reduces the risk of inconsistent messaging or social media abandonment. A reliable presence on a single channel typically builds more credibility than a fragmented presence across several.

Rules governance matters even more in smaller organisations. Limited capacity can make NGOs vulnerable to mission drift driven by online pressure. Leaders should decide in advance which topics fall within scope, who has authority to post and how criticism or misinformation will be handled. These decisions are far more difficult to make during a public dispute.

In resource-constrained organisations, documentation often matters more than entertainment. Treating social media as a record of ongoing work rather than a marketing tool can build legitimacy over time. Simple updates, photographs from the field and clear reporting of milestones are often sufficient. In these circumstances, high production value is less important than consistency and clarity in communication.

Relationships can also compensate for limited online followings. Creating or maintaining connections with journalists, researchers and local communities are often more valuable than social media reach alone. NGOs are already embedded in networks through their work on the ground; extending these relationships into online spaces through dialogue can increase organisational voice. Credible local sources are in demand, and trusted relationships often amplify messages more effectively than platform metrics.

Looking ahead, social media is likely to become more demanding. As AI-generated content becomes more widespread, the volume of misinformation circulating online will increase, making it harder for organisations to control how their work is represented. Small organisations cannot respond to every claim or trend. The central challenge, therefore, is focus; leaders must keep attention on mission objectives while navigating a crowded information environment so they can continue doing the work that matters.

CHRISTIANNA SIRINDAH PARR is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Singapore Management University. She received her PhD from the University of Washington. Her research examines environmental governance, civil society and legitimacy in Southeast Asia. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Public Policy* and *Global Policy*, and her commentary has been featured in The Washington Post.

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