

Annex A: Transcript of Interview with Minister S Iswaran at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting at Davos 2019

To attribute to Mr S Iswaran, Minister for Communications and Information, Singapore

What is the significance of announcing this Model AI Governance Framework at the World Economic Forum in Davos? How does this position Singapore in the global stage?

To provide some context to why we are focusing on Artificial Intelligence, or AI, as you may know, there is a large emphasis on the Digital Economy and Digital Trade. These are underpinned by the many technological shifts that are already taking place, such as robotics and data analytics. These are areas where the government is already working with the industry and companies to see how we can help them adopt these technologies and enhance their competitiveness.

Now, we have to look ahead beyond what is happening today, and even tomorrow. AI is a frontier technology that combines both data and analytics. In order to take AI to the next level, we need to see how technology can be applied to different industries.

This is important to us as it is the future. It has the potential to affect many sectors in very profound ways. We want to make sure that Singapore is prepared for that in terms of our capabilities, technology investments, as well as our regulatory requirements.

On this front, we have been working on several AI initiatives:

- We have established an Advisory Council on the Ethical Use of AI and Data. This is chaired by former Attorney-General Mr V. K. Rajah SC and some very senior people from the industry;
- We have also launched AI Singapore in an effort to work with industry to apply AI to industry problem statements and see how we can get different solutions. In other words, practical AI applications;
 - This includes initiatives that work on training our people at different levels of AI capabilities;
- We also have work going on in terms of research through the establishment of a Research Programme on the Governance of AI and Data Use at the Singapore Management University, in terms of the ethics and governance pertaining to AI

We have a spectrum of (AI) initiatives taking place. As such, I think the launch of the Model AI Governance Framework is an important step in the right direction. What it basically does is to take these broad principles and ethical considerations, and translates them into some very practical measures in four specific domains. This is to help guide businesses in terms of

- I. Internal AI governance structures and measures;
- II. Risk management in autonomous decision-making;
- III. Operations management; and
- IV. Customer Relationship Management

All of these things have to be addressed. This is what our Model Framework is about. Why are we launching it and announcing it at WEF in Davos? Two important reasons:

Firstly, Davos is a gathering of global industry leaders and leaders from the government. It is a place where Singapore always has a certain mindshare in terms of our ability to contribute to cutting-edge development and governance of policies, and how we are able to think into the future in collaboration with the industry. By announcing the Model Framework in Davos, we have the opportunity to both underscore Singapore's continued role in that context, as well as invite global feedback on what we are doing.

The other aspect to why we are announcing the Model Framework in Davos is that we are working with WEF's Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (C4IR). This is important as the WEF-C4IR is a key partner in terms of the development of the framework. More importantly, this is a way we can propagate the Model Framework to the business community and get feedback.

This is not a set of prescriptive rules. That is an important thing to remember. This is a Model Framework for companies to use. I think that AI technology is too new and too nascent to have very firm rules. But this is a good collaborative approach to try and shape the principles that will govern it.

What has been the response to the Model Framework so far?

I think the response has been quite favourable.



Firstly, from the WEF participants themselves. I think the WEF participants welcome this as it is an initiative to frame a set of issues around AI which everybody is concerned about. The fact that Singapore is offering thought-leadership on this is something that is welcomed.

Secondly, the way we are going about launching the Model Framework is different from some other efforts in this regard. The key differentiating factor is that we have been working in collaboration with industry and we are taking a more open approach. In other words, the industry and the government are working together as partners to come up with some of these measures and frameworks. The industry then applies it. This is an iterative process that allows us to better understand the shape and constraints of this technology and therefore what could eventually become a set of rules and regulations governing them.

Has Singapore done other frameworks that are similar?

I think we work around different things. For example, in the area of data protection, we have the Personal Data Protection Act and a Commission that works on it. We have also developed various advisories on how data should be collected, how it should be kept and safeguarded, and how it can be applied.

But I think what differentiates the work we are doing with AI is that we are truly very much at the forefront in terms of the innovation in the technology, as well as the governance of the technology. That is why I think this is a bit more challenging, but also one that we should be seriously focused on.

Why might countries like the United States or Japan be interested in adopting such a framework?

I think one of the questions is really around how – and this is again one of Singapore's key value propositions – we are a small, open economy. We are pro-business. We are also keen to engender a rules-based, norms-based trading and economic environment globally. Therefore, when we propose some of these ideas, they tend to be seen in that context. It is more objective as opposed to some certain other jurisdictions that – maybe because of their size, or because of what is presumed to be their larger agenda or objective – the response from more neutral players can be different.

Do you think that such a new framework would make it less attractive for private sector organisations to set-up base in Singapore?

The key point to note is that this is a framework. It is not a rule or a regulation. This is basically an outcome from industry consultation that we have had. So in a way, the industry has already helped shape this, and that they should already find most of the Model Framework – if not all of it – well within the bounds of what they have already thought are important areas for them to focus on.

The Model Framework then takes it a step further in terms of practicality. My own sense of it is that the Model Framework is certainly based on the soundings we get. I do not think that the industry will be deterred from doing things out of Singapore because of this. On the contrary, I would say that we might even be able to come out as one of the jurisdictions with sound approaches to data management and the governance of AI and other frontier technologies. In this case, more companies would want to be associated with us.

