



Responding to COVID-19: BRITACOM PERSPECTIVE, 2 June 2020

Script of speech

Mr. Ng Wai Choong, Commissioner of Inland Revenue, Singapore

Thank you, Chairman. Greetings from Singapore.

The COVID-19 situation has provided some useful lessons for tax administrations, as we have had to cope with lock-downs and working remotely. Jurisdictions are now at various stages towards a safe reopening of their economies, but we should not simply be going back to business-as-usual. We should instead seek to accelerate our efforts in three areas.

The first area is digitalisation. This includes both services that we provide to taxpayers, as well as our internal processes. All taxpayer services should be available digitally so that transactions can be done online. Helpline services too. In Singapore, while we have call centres and online chat services to answer taxpayer queries, some taxpayers are still more comfortable with face-to-face interaction. We thus started piloting video chat assistance, so that such taxpayers can still get the service from the comfort and safety of their homes. Similarly, we should move towards a paper-less and digital office. Due to COVID-19, we have had to scale up telecommuting quickly. We now have more than 90% of our staff working from home. But this was achieved with some quick fixes and work-arounds, and the situation is not ideal. Going forward, we intend to improve our systems to make working from home even more seamless, so that telecommuting will be an integral part of a new way of working.

The second area that we should redouble our efforts in is nimbleness, so that we can quickly adapt to new situations and demands. This requires our people, systems and processes to be more agile, supported by pervasive digitalisation. For example, many tax administrations have been called upon at very short notice to administer new government schemes to support businesses. In our case, to preserve jobs, we had to quickly implement a new scheme to disburse cash grants to businesses based on their wage bills. Leveraging our digital payment infrastructure, we were able to do so within 2 months. As we revamp our IT system, we hope to build in functionalities that will enable us to further reduce the turnaround time to implement new schemes.

The third area that we should accelerate on is tax administration reform. At a time when businesses and households are reeling from the effects of COVID-19, tax authorities should see how they can support economic recovery by easing compliance burden and providing greater business certainty. For example, taxpayers with cross-border transactions could be affected by



restricted travels, and would like certainty on their tax positions under the tax treaties. Treaty partners should adopt a collaborative approach and ensure no unintended tax consequences. Another area would be how we can give greater tax certainty to businesses and ease their cash flow concerns by, for example, quicker or more timely resolution of their international disputes.

If tax authorities can accelerate efforts in the three areas to be more digital, agile and business-friendly, we can better navigate the post-COVID 19 environment and contribute to economic recovery. BRITACOM can play a useful role by sharing best practices and enhancing collaborations across jurisdictions.

Thank you.

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