We’re growing in a place that has no ventilation, no natural light. This is as hard as it gets!

The coronavirus pandemic has uprooted most aspects of daily life, and much of the economy built around it.

We have to adapt to cater to the needs of the user.

But some start-ups are finding opportunities in crisis by sowing the seeds for a new future.

We look at 50 years into the future and you try to imagine a snapshot of what the world looks like.

To get a sense of how that might play out, I’m in Singapore speaking to three fast-growing

start-ups to hear how they’re building businesses for a post-pandemic world.

When the novel coronavirus emerged at the start of 2020, it set off alarm bells in Singapore.

As one of the countries hardest hit by the 2003 SARS outbreak, Singapore was placed on

a heightened state of alert within weeks and social restrictions were tightened.

That prompted a run on supermarkets amid concerns about food shortages in the Southeast Asian city state.

But even before the pandemic, agriculture technology start-ups such as Ben Swan’s

Sustenir were working on a solution.

Sustenir’s vision is to actually grow a more resilient future.

What we do is we grow incredible products that not only taste better than conventional

farming, but is actually 100% clean, free of pesticides, and it’s actually more nutritious as well.

The ex-engineer launched his vertical farming start-up in Singapore in 2013 to address food

scarcity issues with a more sustainable approach to mass agriculture.

But the pandemic has put those concerns directly under the microscope, says Ben.

A lot of Singaporeans became a lot more aware about where their produce was coming from,

a lot more concerned about the safety of their products.

I think for the Singapore government, it was very much about the food resilient system that they’ve built.

Relying on neighboring countries, but when the border shut down what do we do?

So, there’s big focus now on how do we get our productivity up?

Food security is a rising concern for countries as weather pattern changes disrupt crops,

while a growing global population adds stress to food supply chains.

Today, less than 10% of Singapore’s nutritional needs are produced in the land-scarce country,

which is smaller than New York City.

The country hopes to raise the figure to 30% by 2030 through smart land use and technology,

including investments in deep-tech start-ups like agri-food.

All the agencies have really collaborated and come together to help companies like Sustenir

do the things that we’re doing today. When we think about R&D, it’s very expensive.

We, as a business, want to focus on bringing great products, but we also have to think

about how do we further improve the way that we’re growing, so that we can think about

bringing down our cost and also broadening our product mix.

Ben is optimistic that could also mean positioning the company and the country as a leading food innovator.

Because our system can literally retrofit into any building in the world, we do want

to be, eventually, in every major city across the world.

Maybe even one day we could consider exporting certain produce into our neighboring countries.

Start-ups play a critical role in Singapore’s economy.

So when the pandemic threatened to uproot the ecosystem, the government unveiled more

than $200 million in funding to support promising start-ups.

I've come to BLOCK71, the symbolic birthplace of Singapore’s start-up scene, to hear from

one of its rising names, cashback platform ShopBack.

ShopBack is a shopping assistant.

We build tools to help users to find great deals, save time and get rewarded with cashback.

Somebody goes through our application, we send them to the merchant portal, and whatever

they buy we get paid a commission, which we share with the user as cashback.

This is real cashback they can cash out to their bank accounts.

Since launching in 2014, the Singaporean start-up has grown steadily, providing $115 million

in cash back to over 20 million users across Asia Pacific.

But when the pandemic hit, the business had to respond to changing consumer habits quickly.

I think users are not cutting their spending, they are just more mindful of how they spend.

And they are also unsure where they can spend on when offline options are no longer available.

So that’s where we introduce what are new possibilities in this new norm.

So it’s all about helping users to shop smart in different ways.

That included getting more businesses online amid lockdown measures nationwide.

In a recent study, nine in 10 small and medium-sized businesses in Asia Pacific said they are more

reliant on technology due to the pandemic.

Shopback, which earns a commission from its affiliate merchants every time a sale is made,

added 500 new retailers between April and June, expanding its list of 4,000 brands including

Taobao, Amazon and Expedia.

Merchants are increasingly more mindful of their marketing spend, and that’s where

our pay-per-sale model resonates with them.

You can see this from the uplift in new merchants joining us.

And in the first half of this year, we have driven slightly under $1 billion in sales

for our merchants, which is actually more than the same period in 2019.

That’s fascinating.

A thriving start-up system requires good infrastructure, such as seamless connectivity and fast internet speeds.

Even before the pandemic, internet penetration rates were rising across the globe.

But with more people working from home and under lockdown, that trend has been exacerbated,

putting a strain on networks.

That’s something laser communications company Transcelestial aims to fix.

Transcelestial is trying to solve the issue of internet connectivity globally.

The Singaporean start-up's wireless devices transmit data via light, which co-founder

Rohit Jha says is a more efficient and cost-effective alternative to laying traditional fiber optic cables.

Light, in very technical terms, has nearly 1,000 to 1,000,000 times bigger capacity to

carry data and information.

That could help improve internet connectivity, especially in emerging markets.

At the end of 2019, 3.6 billion people were not connected to the internet,

or 46 percent of the global population.

What if we could build something which could transmit the highest amounts of data,

like a fibre, but wirelessly.

So it takes like less than 10 minutes to set up and can be nearly infinitely scalable in

terms of information.

And that’s how this device came about.

Yeah, so you culminated in this?

This is kind of like the size of a small shoe box. It weighs less than three kilograms.

It’s capable of replacing those very expensive fibers on a city level or on a country level.

As the push toward 5G heats up, fast and reliable connectivity is especially crucial for business.

While Singapore ranks as a global leader for internet connectivity, much of Southeast Asia

is still catching up.

By 2025, the region is expected to account for almost a third of global 5G deployments.

Rohit wants to make sure that coverage is evenly distributed.

We do one gigabit and 10 times faster, which is 10 gigabits.

That product is aimed directly at the 5G market.

That will help bring 5G ahead by at least six to eight months or even a year.

To drive that vision, four-year-old Transcelestial closed a $9.6 million funding round in July,

co-led by the Singapore government investment arm EDBI and venture capital firm Wavemaker Partners.

That came even as global funding has shrunk this year.

Most of the investors that we got are people who looked at long-term horizons, and that’s

the conversation I have with investors when we actually do initial stuff.

I think that was quite helpful, right, looking up to stable investors who understand

that we are in for the long-term.