SPEECH BY MR HENG SWEE KEAT, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION, AT THE 2026 CREATE SYMPOSIUM ON CLIMATE, ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH, AND URBAN RESILIENCE ON 25 JUNE 2026 AT CREATE TOWER

Mr Peter Ho, Chairman of the CREATE Governing Council,
Distinguished leaders of our CREATE international partners,
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Welcome to Singapore, and welcome to the 2026 CREATE Symposium on "Climate, Environment, Health, and Urban Resilience".

2. CREATE is a unique international research collaboratory that brings together Singapore researchers and international researchers from globally-leading research universities and institutions in one place, to tackle complex problems through deep collaboration, interdisciplinary exchange, and innovation.

3. Since its inception, CREATE has focused on challenges that demand both scientific depth and cross-cutting expertise. Singapore offers an ideal platform for this work, and the solutions developed here can create impact both at home and internationally.

Symposium Theme

4. This year's symposium theme, "Climate, Environment, Health and Urban Resilience", is both timely and important. These are not disparate elements or concepts, but are intertwined in ways that critically affect how people live, work, and stay healthy worldwide.

5. Across the globe, environmental risks such as air pollution, unsafe water, and climate-related hazards continue to contribute to disease and poorer health and well-being worldwide.

6. Even in Singapore, which is often considered one of the healthiest nations globally, and where our resident life expectancy at birth reached an all-time high of 83.9 years in 2025, climate, environment, health and urban resilience continue to be key national concerns. As a compact and highly urbanised city with precious little in terms of natural resources, we expend much effort and resources in ensuring high air and water quality, and designing urban spaces and a built environment that is not just functional, but promotes liveability, well-being and good quality of life.

RIE2030

7. This symposium comes at a key time. In April, we entered into our latest five-year plan – Research, Innovation and Enterprise 2030, or RIE2030. Over the next five years, Singapore will invest S$37 billion to strengthen our research ecosystem and advance high-impact areas that matter to our future.

8. New in RIE2030, and in fact a first in our series of RIE plans to date, is our Grand Challenges, which are large-scale research initiatives to pull through coordinated research with the aim of addressing national strategic challenges. The first of these is our Grand Challenge in Maximising Healthy and Successful Longevity, which seeks to address critical scientific knowledge gaps through discoveries that could translate into novel, evidence-based interventions with potential for transformative impact.

9. The Grand Challenge will focus on brain health and physical function, and will also examine how social and environmental factors, including community interventions and the built environment could contribute to population health and well-being. Understanding these determinants is essential if we are to design effective interventions for healthier ageing across diverse living conditions.

10. At the national level, Singapore has made strong progress in advancing research at the nexus of health and environment.

11. Under the Urban Solutions and Sustainability domain, agencies such as the Housing & Development Board (HDB) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) are driving projects through the Cities of Tomorrow R&D Programme to better understand how the built environment affects mental health and quality of life, particularly for seniors, with further initiatives planned under RIE2030.

12. Complementing this, the Human Health and Potential domain adopts a life-course approach, from early childhood through to healthy ageing, through programmes such as the Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) study, and the National Precision Medicine (NPM) Programme's SG100K study, a national-scale genomics effort involving more than 100,000 participants, to better understand how genetic, environmental, and social factors shape health outcomes across our multiethnic population.

13. These efforts provide a good base on which we will build as we embark on our Healthy and Successful Longevity Grand Challenge and other national priorities in related areas.

CREATE's Programmes at the Intersection of Health and Environment

14. Against this backdrop, CREATE provides an important platform – and opportunity – to extend and deepen such work through international collaboration. The challenges at the intersection of health and environment cannot be solved by any single institution or country. CREATE is uniquely placed to support and enable the interdisciplinary collaboration that could contribute in a significant way to shared challenges in Singapore and beyond.

15. Let me illustrate by highlighting a few examples of such work in CREATE.

16. CREATE has seeded early capabilities in this area under the Health and Environment grant call. The awarded projects have explored emerging issues at the intersection of environmental factors and human health, laying groundwork that

continues to inform research today. For example, LightSPAN, a joint TUM and NUS programme, studies how optimising broad spectrum light exposure through targeted environmental and behavioural interventions can improve health across the life course. Broad spectrum light refers to natural sunlight or artificial indoor lighting that more closely aligns with the body's biological rhythms. Early results are already promising, with interim findings showing that such optimised light exposure might reduce myopic progression in children, while parallel efforts in older adults are tracking improvements in sleep quality and cognitive function. These outcomes, alongside strong community engagement and growing industry partnerships, point to the possibility of light exposure as a useful, simple, and scalable intervention for public health.

17. Another related Project is HEATS, which stands for Heat Exposure, AcTivity, and Sleep. Led by UC Berkeley and NUS, this project sits at the heart of today's symposium theme, directly examining how Singapore's warm climate affects the sleep, physical activity, and health of working-age Singaporeans. Through three interconnected studies, the team is not only measuring the impact of heat exposure but also developing practical cooling solutions and smartwatch-based nudging tools to help Singaporeans sleep better in warm conditions.

18. Crucially, the project has been developed in close partnership with key government agencies including Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE), Ministry of Manpower (MOM), Housing & Development Board (HDB), and Building and Construction Authority (BCA), providing clear pathways for its findings to be translated into real-world guidelines and policies.

19. The University of Cambridge also hosts the Health-driven Design for Cities programme. Known as HD4, this programme collaborates with NTU and NUS, and works with the SG100K team to study how Singapore's environment shapes behaviours, health risks, and long-term outcomes, while building practical tools for healthier and more liveable cities. Professor Nick Wareham, one of HD4's Programme Leads and one of our speakers today, will share insights on how environments shape

metabolic health and disease prevention at the population level in his presentation later.

20. These programmes generate knowledge that can inform Singapore's own policies and planning, while also producing insights and tools that are applicable to cities and communities around the world. This dual impact — local relevance and global reach — is precisely the kind of value that we hope to create through our research investments.

Conclusion

21. Let me conclude by expressing my appreciation to our CREATE partners for the strong partnership and collaboration that we have forged over the years. One of NRF's key areas of emphasis is to bring talent and ideas together, and to create conditions that are conducive to good research and collaborative endeavours.

22. Many of the challenges facing Singapore are also challenges that the entire world faces – be it climate change, pandemic or environmental degradation. In this time of conflict and tension, it is even more important for every one of us to come together to pool our expertise and resources to study these common challenges, and to propose practical solutions and transformative innovation.

23. My hope is that Singapore's small size and well integrated systems allow to us to bring all parties together, to explore solutions and provide platforms for test-bedding and translation.

24. Let us continue to collaborate across borders, bridge across disciplines, institutions, and national boundaries, to find solutions to real-world challenges. I trust that the discussions and partnerships that begin here today will help shape healthier, more sustainable, and more resilient communities in Singapore and the world.

25. Thank you for your commitment to this important work. I wish you a fruitful symposium and every success in our collaborations.