

Getting community engagement right



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By Chirag Agarwal -
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Following the latest SGfuture public engagement exercise, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu said that Singaporeans had expressed a desire to be more involved in the next phase of the country's development. The Government is also thinking about how it can change the way it engages Singaporeans.

Currently, the Government's primary form of citizen engagement to discuss and develop sound public policies is through its website, Reach. While it is easy to access, using the Internet can be impersonal and may exclude citizens who are not comfortable with using technology or voicing their opinions online.

At Meet-the-People sessions, on the other hand, Singaporeans tend to discuss individual grievances or municipal matters with their Members of Parliament rather than deliberate national issues.

With the success of the Our Singapore Conversation and SGfuture exercises, more permanent avenues should be established for Singaporeans to help shape policies and solve problems facing their community.

These could be townhall meetings that encourage public deliberation early in any policy development. It could also include participatory budgeting — where citizens are asked to help decide how to spend a portion of a town council's budget, including government grants for local infrastructure development.

The recent public forums organised by Reach to discuss the Elected Presidency, as well as one on the economy and jobs in Singapore, are steps in the right direction. Singaporeans should make the most of these opportunities to engage with the Government.

While Singaporeans generally have high levels of trust in the Government, businesses, the media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), according to the 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer — which measures public trust in institutions — these levels differ across society.

There is a double-digit gap in trust between the “informed public” (72 points) and the “mass population” (62 points), and between the “high income” (67 points) and “low income” (50 points) populations in Singapore.

It would be most unfortunate if, for instance, a divisive ultra-nationalist politician was able to pander to citizens’ insecurities and take advantage of this gap in trust.

It is a phenomenon currently witnessed across Europe, for example in the lead-up to Brexit; in the United States, with the rise of Mr Donald Trump; and even in Australia, with the revival of Ms Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.

In response, not only must governments aim to be more inclusive, they must do so by becoming more participatory so as to meet the aspirations of better-educated and informed citizens who want to be more involved in the governing process.

The benefits of engaging citizens are threefold. First, governments seldom have all the answers to the problems they are tasked to deal with. Furthermore, the public service, like any other organisation, can suffer from groupthink, which can restrict the options considered. Using the wider public as a resource may allow a government to overcome these limitations.

Second, regular engagement prompts citizens to think about their civic duties and examine the trade-offs involved in policymaking, instead of just stating their wishlists. Interactive engagements also mean citizens are more likely to accept an outcome even if it is not to their liking.

In 2012, the Mayor of Denver, Colorado, Michael Hancock, facing a potential US\$94 million (S\$130.6 million) budget shortfall, used the opportunity to introduce a participatory budget process to close the gap. Citizens not only selected the projects they would like to see funded, they were also given a chance to add to that list. They were then presented with the same trade-offs that the Mayor would face given the budget constraint. This placed them in a problem-solving mindset and forced them to prioritise how they would spend the limited amount of money.

Third, engagement and closer interaction with its citizens can improve the legitimacy of a government.

A study conducted in 2013 on public perceptions in England and Wales showed that local civic participation by citizens — for example, attending a public meeting set up by the government to discuss policies or tackle crime by volunteering with the police — improved the legitimacy of the government in the participants’ eyes, regardless of their general opinion on policy outcomes. Those engaged believed they had, at least, received a fair hearing and a chance to participate in the decision-making process.

This is not to say community engagement is easy. Communities are not necessarily homogenous or coherent. They do not necessarily speak in one voice like formal institutions. The views in a community are diverse, and it is important not to generalise based on the views of the organised few that are easier to reach. Community engagement can also be hijacked by a third party such as an NGO or business as they are more organised.

Furthermore, communities may not think about the collective interests of society as a whole, something the government is tasked to do. They may suffer from the prisoner’s dilemma, where they protect their interests rather than cooperate for the greater good.

All this makes engaging any community very tricky. Government agencies conducting public consultations must discern vested interests from public interest.

Also, if the government asks, must it then listen? One way to tackle this is for government agencies to conduct public consultations as early as possible, rather than get stuck debating a “yes” or “no” decision. Officials should also make clear what the government is expecting out of the engagement so as to manage citizens’ expectations.

Engaging the community is fraught with difficulty but, if done right, can help build a vibrant democracy in Singapore where all of us can play a part in shaping the country’s future.

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