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Week's top letter #1: Ground engagement should go beyond formal channels



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The recent focus on ground engagement between civil servants and citizens is odd not because of its importance in the context of increasingly complex governance demands, but because it may have been assumed that this should be or is already the norm (Go out and engage S'poreans, minister urges public officers; Nov 22).

Central to policymaking is an understanding of the problems and how they are perceived by the individuals affected by them, and these interactions with constituents are especially important if the politicians and civil servants hail from different demographic or socioeconomic backgrounds and therefore, have dissimilar perspectives and life experiences.

More importantly, given that conversations can emerge organically among citizens, ground engagement does not always have to occur through formal or government-sanctioned channels.

Recent movements such as Our Singapore Conversation, SGfuture, and Youth Conversations - in addition to the more regular outreach efforts of the national feedback unit - guarantee access to specific communities who may already be plugged in, further facilitating discussion around predetermined issues. Yet, this also means others may be excluded.

The challenges for the Government include reaching out to more diverse participants, allowing these participants to set the agenda and taking into account the discourse which happens outside pre-established platforms.

Ensuring the regularity and sustainability of these endeavours will likewise be demanding, especially if engagement is seen as an additional obligation on top of a politician's or civil servant's roles and responsibilities.

Instead, they - and their constituents - will benefit if regular outreach is weaved into the fabric of their day-to-day work, to the extent that they seek out interactions to weigh views against other forms of evidence.

Walking the ground, in other words, does not have to happen within a structured context, and should come naturally to those who design policies for the ground.

Well-meaning representatives will even move beyond echo chambers or ivory towers to seek out those with contrasting standpoints and vehement disagreements for a more holistic evaluation of the collective.

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