Conversations that make a difference

Citizens' panels offer a road map for how Singaporeans can confront difficult issues such as race, religion and inequality

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For The Straits Times

Then Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli (centre, in blue) at a focus group session on water at The Future Of Us exhibition in 2016. Participants gave ideas on how Singaporeans could be encouraged to conserve water. ST FILE PHOTO

Recently, several Singapore leaders have commented on the need to find common ground for sensitive issues like race and religion.

In Parliament, Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs Maliki Osman noted that cultural and racial differences must be addressed carefully even as society moves towards becoming more inclusive. Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong said it was important that young people be given the space to express their views on issues that matter to them, including diversity and social inequality.

Their views followed similar exhortations – by President Halimah Yacob in her speech at the opening of the 14th Parliament on Aug 24 and by government officials like Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam after the recent general election, for new ways to have difficult conversations.

These calls for conversations are not new. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Government adopted a more consultative approach and launched a series of initiatives to hear citizens' views on a wide range of topics. Remember the Feedback Unit?

Since then, public engagement has evolved into national public consultation exercises such as The Next Lap, Singapore 21, Our Singapore Conversation and segment-specific ones such as the SGfuture dialogue series and the Youth Action Challenge.

The Next Lap led to a 160-page report that mapped out broad plans to make Singapore a nation of distinction, and Singapore 21 articulated five ideas for the national vision.

Last year, at his Building Our Future Singapore Together dialogue, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said that in addition to people's views becoming more diverse, Singaporeans also want a change in how they are governed.

Hard talk

There is a Chinese saying (苦口良药), *ku kou liang yao*. It translates roughly into "effective medicine is bitter in taste".

In order for discussions on potential powder-keg issues to yield tangible outcomes – to change attitudes, behaviour and policy – they have to go beyond a mere rehash of concerns that have been articulated in the past.

Such conversations will be bitter because they will be hard and discomforting. But they are possible.

Since 2017, I have worked with different agencies on developing citizens' panels using deliberative principles. The panels tackled issues such as fighting diabetes, recycling right and improving work-life harmony.

I saw how conversations can be designed to engender impact at the policy and personal levels. More importantly, I witnessed how everyone can make a difference.

Citizens' panels have several key features. First, they have a clear task or purpose relating to a specific policy or decision. Second, they facilitate discussions and educate participants through interactive events.

Specialists or experts share resources and information, so that participants can craft informed views. Participants deliberate over multiple sessions that span several weeks, sometimes months.

Besides exchanging views, participants have to engage one another, assess trade-offs and arrive at a consensus.

Three principles

I believe they have succeeded because they are inclusive, fair and evidence-based. These three principles can help guide the difficult conversations Singaporeans will need to have in the future.

INCLUSIVENESS

Having participants able to offer a wide range of views is central to the citizens' panel process.

It does not mean large numbers of people as citizens' panels require more granular discussions among small groups, which can range in size from 40 to 70 participants.

Organisers take care to ensure there is diverse representation of demographics and experiences so that different views will be heard and considered.

"Inclusivity" is therefore prioritised over "representation" because recruiting a representative sample would require a much larger, randomly selected group.

The war on diabetes panel, for example, comprised people with different diabetic conditions, caregivers and healthcare workers. The last group was made up of doctors, nurses, psychologists, dietitians and a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner.

The citizens' panel on work-life harmony involved people in different occupations and from companies of different sizes, together with freelancers, retirees, homemakers and caregivers.

Bringing together people from disparate circumstances compels them to confront the difficulties faced by others that may be unknown to them.

This process also helps to moderate voices that are perceived to be "extreme" and those which tend to dominate a conversation.

I have observed that in a face-to-face setting, people are likely to practise some degree of self-moderation. While a person may hold strong positions at the start, the process of deliberating with others helps to cultivate introspection and empathy.

EQUALITY

To yield tangible outcomes, participants must also have equal opportunities to place their concerns and ideas on the agenda.

Process or, in this case, conversation design, is key.

Facilitators, whose importance is often overlooked, play a vital role. They make sure everyone participates. By eliciting as many views as possible and intervening only when necessary, facilitators create a level playing field among participants.

In the three citizens' panels I was involved in, small group discussions enabled deep dives into policy problems and the gathering of evidence, while collective or panel-wide activities allowed for feedback from other participants and consideration of issues that the group might have overlooked.

EVIDENCE-BASED

While citizens' panels are meant to be inclusive, they can easily lapse into an airing of personal and insular views. This can be avoided if accurate and relevant information is made available to all participants, according to political scientist James Fishkin, known for his work on deliberative democracy.

In the citizens' panels I was involved in, information kits were sent to participants prior to the start of the process.

The sharing of data that is not publicly available and discussions with subject matter experts at different junctures of the process made the conversations broader and more meaningful.

In the case of the recycle-right panel, the then Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources also organised learning journeys to the materials recovery facility.

Being exposed to relevant information helped dispel myths about issues and participants were compelled to examine their own assumptions. They also gained a better understanding of the concerns of organisations and individuals with direct experience of the subject matter.

The outcomes

So what were the outcomes of such conversations?

Besides policy recommendations, some of which have been set in motion, polls conducted before and after the panels found that the participants better understood the challenges involved in making policy trade-offs and learnt how to negotiate with one another and with external stakeholders.

They also developed empathy for those who are different from them, and became more confident of their ability to bring about change as citizens.

I find this last point particularly important.

Moving ahead in these challenging times, citizens must play a bigger role in shaping the kind of society they want, through conversations that are inclusive, process-driven and informed.

While the citizens' panel may not work for all issues, it certainly offers a useful road map for the tough journey ahead.

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