

Seizing the opportunity to move Singapore forward

Building on previous national conversations, Forward SG has the potential to create significant value through both process and content



Terence Ho

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Last week, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong launched Forward Singapore (Forward SG), a year-long national conversation which aims to harness the views of Singaporeans to shape the nation's future and renew its social compact.

Like previous national conversations, Forward SG is intended to foster trust and collaboration between the political leaders – in this case DPM Wong and his fourth-generation leadership team – and the citizenry. Coming after Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) and the Singapore Together Emerging Stronger Conversations, which covered familiar ground including national identity, opportunities and social support, it may be tempting to dismiss Forward SG as just more of the same.

However, I would argue that Forward SG, if done well, can create significant value through both process and content. This requires stakeholders to approach it with an open mind and a constructive spirit. A few bold process innovations could also set Forward SG apart and generate greater impact.

THESE ARE THE ISSUES IN PROCESS

Some may be sceptical that such an exercise can yield major policy breakthroughs, either because most issues have already been discussed exhaustively, or because existing policy paradigms are simply too entrenched to be reshaped. While unrealistic expectations could set up Forward SG for failure, low expectations and ambition will not help either. Regardless of the novelty of ideas that emerge, national conversations like Forward SG recognise the intrinsic value of gathering Singaporeans from all walks of life to talk about issues that matter to them.

Charting Singapore's future is a collective endeavour. It is important for citizens to have a sense of shared ownership of this process. Authentic conversations are therefore crucial. Participants must feel that their views are being heard – that their perspectives matter, and that they are not just there to make up the numbers. It is also useful for participants to hear, first-hand, the views of fellow citizens which may be different from their own. As conversations among citizens, and not just between citizens and the State, they can broaden perspectives and promote mutual understanding among societal stakeholders.

It is best not to pre-judge the output of these conversations. Policymakers should keep an open mind, fully prepared to revisit assumptions as they take in the views of different segments of the population. Likewise, citizens should be prepared to have their views and assumptions challenged by fellow participants.



As is often said, no one has a monopoly of wisdom in today's complex world. Approaching Forward SG with a spirit of openness and good faith will enable all to get the most out of the exercise.

NATIONAL UNITY AND RENEWAL

The themes to be covered under Forward SG have been organised into six pillars. These topics may be evergreen, but this is because they are vital for national unity and renewal, on which Singapore's continued success depends.

The focus on how to build a Singapore that "benefits many, not a few" – in the words of DPM Wong – is particularly pertinent, given the driving forces, like technological change and global competition, that tend to accentuate inequality and increase

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for jobs and opportunities. Hence, an important part of the national conversation should be on how Singapore can benefit most from openness and immigration, while helping Singaporeans to feel secure and valued in their homeland.

DEEPENING THE CONVERSATION

I expect Forward SG, like previous national conversations, to encompass a range of discussion settings and interfaces – both in-person and online, to draw out different groups of Singaporeans and reach as many as possible.

Taking some risks could set Forward SG apart from previous conversations. For instance, without compromising privacy, conversation transcripts could be released, beyond carefully curated

precarity among vulnerable groups.

Conversations on shared values bear repeating, as Singapore itself is evolving in terms of the composition of the polity, the life experiences of citizens, as well as the influences and ideologies permeating society.

This also makes it critical to re-evaluate and refresh Singapore's concept of meritocracy and the mutual obligations among citizens and the State, which are prerequisites for social cohesion and national unity.

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It is therefore appropriate that the economy and jobs, along with education and lifelong learning, are among the pillars of Forward SG. Economic strategy is closely intertwined with citizens' aspirations and efforts, and cannot be left to economic committees and the business sector alone.

Singapore may have come far since independence, but it is important not to lose the pioneering spirit that has propelled the country from Third World to First. For similar reasons, Amazon, a highly successful firm, exhorts employees to adopt a "Day 1" mentality: to treat every day like it is the first day in a new start-up.

This entails a willingness to test out new ideas and try out new ways of doing things. For a country like Singapore, it is also about openness to talent from abroad. Immigration can revitalise cities with fresh ideas and energy, but could also be disconcerting for locals who may fear competition

summaries or extracts. Different ways of presenting synthesised data, such as mind maps, word clouds or straw poll results, could also give the public a richer flavour of the discussions.

The reflections that emerged from past national conversations have informed policymaking. For instance, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged the input of OSC at the 2013 National Day Rally, where policy moves to provide greater assurance to Singaporeans in areas such as housing and healthcare were announced. Likewise, the Emerging Stronger Conversations identified concerns and priorities that resonated with Singaporeans, such as mental wellness and sustainability, while providing opportunities to turn ideas into action.

To take the conversations under Forward SG a step further, one possibility is to have participants form working groups to flesh out policy options. Others could then join in the debate, challenging these policy proposals, refining them further or suggesting alternatives. This will enable interested participants to think deeper about issues and consider the trade-offs inherent in national policies.

Where possible, the Government could provide data to facilitate the deliberations of these groups. Participants would not, of course, have access to the full set of government data, which includes firm-level and individual data, for reasons of confidentiality and national security.

Nonetheless, the policy options developed through the conversations could be a valuable resource for the government to work with. This would require public agencies to be confident, both in the rigour of their policy thinking, as well as in the maturity of citizens, to engage in policy co-creation.

The test-bedding of ground-up solutions, pioneered by the Alliances for Action under Singapore Together, should also continue under Forward SG. This will deepen the partnerships among the public, private and people sectors in bringing about positive change in Singapore.

Forward SG promises to build on the ideas and aspirations expressed by citizens in past conversations, and will certainly leverage past experience for best practices in citizen engagement. It is my hope that it will also break new ground, both in process and content, to take Singapore forward.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

Terence Ho is associate professor in practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He is the author of *Refreshing The Singapore System: Recalibrating Socio-Economic Policy For The 21st Century* (World Scientific, 2021).