



Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong spoke recently on initiatives to drive the Unite Pillar under the Forward Singapore exercise. One of the questions raised today is: Given the increasing prevalence of technology adoption in public engagement, how can the benefits of technology be exploited while minimising its pitfalls? PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

# Nimbleness needed to engage citizens

Regardless of the topic, public engagement that involves citizens as solutioning partners is confronted with two perennial questions. Can citizens be effectively engaged on complex issues and how can technology be exploited while minimising its pitfalls?

**Carol Soon, Nandhini Bala Krishnan and Beverly Tan**

Policy problems are becoming increasingly complex and “wicked” in nature. Spanning from environmental sustainability, social mobility, gender equality and national identity, they tend to elicit different, oftentimes conflicting views, of what needs to be done. As such, traditional means of problem-solving where the government takes the lead are becoming glaringly inadequate. Instead, many governments, including the Singapore Government, are adopting a more collaborative approach towards policymaking. The Forward Singapore exercise, launched in

June, is the most recent example of this.

On Sept 25, the Ministry of National Development kick-started the first session of its Our Public Housing Conversation to hear from citizens from various walks of life. Earlier in August, the National Trades Union Congress launched a year-long citizen engagement exercise to chart the way forward by hearing from Singaporeans their employment needs and aspirations.

Regardless of the topic, public engagement that involves citizens as solutioning partners is confronted with two perennial questions. Can citizens be effectively engaged on complex issues, especially technical ones? Given the increasing prevalence of technology adoption in public engagement, how can we exploit the benefits of technology while minimising its pitfalls?

## ISSUES TOO TOUGH FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

Past efforts saw the Government engaging members of the public on a wide range of issues. Citizens’ panels and work groups stemming from the Singapore Together movement and Alliances for Action catalysed the momentum for cross-sector partnerships. The first author had worked with different agencies on citizens’ panels to tackle different issues. More recently, the three of us had convened a youth panel that developed recommendations on improving mental well-being among youth in Singapore.

While important, the topics addressed have not been too technical. While there were knowledge gaps among participants when it came to issues such as managing diabetes, recycling right and creating the conditions for better work-life harmony, resources made available to participants helped fill in the gaps.

On the other hand, technical topics may be harder for people without domain knowledge and expertise to grasp, not to mention to dissect and deliberate on.

However, lessons can be gleaned from how public engagement on technical issues has been designed elsewhere. For instance, in

Australia and Japan, groups of citizens have been convened to tackle topics such as pension schemes and compulsory third-party insurance, topics many would have thought would be beyond the grasp of laypeople given they require technical knowledge.

What was done was scoping the objective for the jury on the pension scheme and designing the engagement to take place over several phases.

In 2011, the Japanese government considered privatising the pension system. Given the complexity of the topic, organisers of the poll did not design the entire process with the aim of having participants to form consensus on the decision the government should take. A two-day deliberative poll involving over 120 participants was held. At the plenary session, various experts specialising in the topic were invited, and participants could freely ask any questions they wanted on the topics.

Before the deliberation exercise, almost 70 per cent supported privatising the pension system in a pre-survey. However, after learning more about the possible impact of privatisation, the majority chose the option of

**By being nimble and tailoring the engagement process to suit the issue, the contributions of citizens and relevant stakeholders can be better integrated. Citizens can be involved and give input at the level that is suited to the issue. In other words, there is no one way to design the process.**

paying more for a public pension system to be funded by increased consumption tax.

In the case of the third-party compulsory insurance, democracyCo, an Australian organisation, convened a representative jury comprising everyday residents to determine the desired objectives of an improved insurance scheme. The next step involved stakeholders working with the government, an independent actuary and scheme designer to develop four options based on the desired outcomes identified in the first phase. The jury was then reconvened to discuss the four options and decide on the one that best met the objectives they had laid out.

By being nimble and tailoring the engagement process to suit the issue, the contributions of citizens and relevant stakeholders can be better integrated. Citizens can be involved and give input at the level that is suited to the issue. In other words, there is no one way to design the process.

## LEVERAGING ONLINE TOOLS WHILE AVOIDING PITFALLS

The pandemic has moved in-person meetings to the online space, including the Government’s engagement of citizens. For example, in 2020, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth organised the fully online Citizens’ Workgroup for Singapore Citizenship Journey. Similarly, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has also conducted the citizens’ panel on youth mental well-being early this year virtually.

What lessons did we learn? When it comes to breaking down complex and technical topics and ideas, how can we leverage online tools to sustain engagement? What are some innovations we can consider adapting to the current design?

Initially, we were concerned about how the lack of in-person interactions would affect the level of participant bonding and involvement. However, online platforms can add an additional layer of fun, interactivity and

collaboration. For example, we saw that participants tapped on the interactive features of online platforms, such as the use of emoji reactions, to express themselves. Participants also made use of collaboration tools such as Google Docs and Google Slides to brainstorm and discuss in real-time.

These can be especially useful when discussing difficult or sensitive issues. For example, participants can easily conduct their own research on-the-spot and simultaneously post questions that they might have on virtual boards and conduct online polls. In a physical setting, this process might be more tedious and take up more time.

More importantly, the online set-up was less intimidating especially for soft-spoken participants or those who wanted to contribute to the discussion as they could share their views through the chat function. Some participants who may feel overwhelmed by the amount of technical jargon or complex nature of certain topics may also feel more comfortable raising their questions online, especially if they are brainstorming in bigger groups. Hence, it is important to leverage the different features and tools of online platforms to create an inclusive and interactive environment for all participants. For inclusive participation, building participants’ competencies with various online tools is essential.

Despite its obvious benefits, technology is a double-edged sword. During in-person sessions, it is easier to gauge the participants’ level of interest and engagement. But, in an online setting, participants may have unstable Internet connections or can choose to turn off their cameras, which may affect their participation. However, from our experience, we find that this can be tackled through occasional nudging and reminders on the roles and responsibilities of participants when it comes to contributing.

Additionally, due to participant fatigue, it was not feasible to conduct multiple full-day sessions with participants, as with an in-person engagement. In our case, the youth panel was split into seven sessions, each lasting three hours, significantly less time than previous in-person engagements that lasted four full days. This meant that we had to include more structure in the discussions and follow up with participants in between sessions on their progress. A possible way to overcome this is to explore hybrid engagement models – comprising both online and in-person participation. Through this, it will also allow participants the chance to meet and mingle with fellow participants and feel more connected to the process. Such connections can be sustained offline as well as they continue working with one another.

While it is impossible to design a perfect engagement strategy, there are valuable lessons to be learnt from what has been done in the past. As the Government continues with the Forward Singapore engagement, it should remain nimble and adapt the process for different issues and purposes.

• Carol Soon is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. Nandhini Bala Krishnan and Beverly Tan are research assistants at the same institute. They convened the Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Citizens’ Panel on Mental Health.