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?

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Policy problems are becoming increasingly complex and “wicked” in nature. Spurring from environmental sustainability, social mobility, gender equality and national identity, they tend to entail different, oftentimes conflicting, views of what needs to be done. As such, traditional means of public engagement are becoming less effective. Government takes the burden of becoming more inclusive and inclusive, many governments, including the Singapore Government, are adopting a more collaborative approach to policymaking. The Forward Singapore exercise, launched in 2018, is the most recent example of this.

On Sept 23, the Ministry of National Development kicked off the first session of its Our Public Housing Conversation series. The event, which aimed to engage residents on issues such as rental issues, was held across 240 blocks of public housing. Earlier in August, the National Trades Union Congress launched a year-long citizen engagement exercise in which the way forward by hearing from its members on 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? How can we exploit the benefits of technology while minimising its pitfalls?

ISSUES TO TUG FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Post-effects saw the Government engaging members of the public on a wide range of issues, Citizen’s panels and work groups stemming from the Singapore Together movement and alliances for Action and the remuneration of community workers. The first author had worked with different agencies on citizens’ panels to tackle different issues. More recently, the theme of tax had concerned a youth panel that developed recommendations on improving mental well-being among young adults in Singapore. It is evident that public engagement, especially in the areas of housing and broader public policy, is becoming more inclusive and representative.

However, after learning about the possible impact of digitalisation, the majority chose the option of 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 given 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 seen a rise in online engagement, mainly in the form of public consultations. In 2020, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth organized for the first time to engage Singaporeans in a virtual form, the “Citizen Journey”. Similarly, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has also conducted the citizens’ panels’ youth mental well-being early this year virtually. What lessons did we learn? What comes when breaking down complex and technical topics into ideas, how can we leverage online tools to gain engagement? What are the possible pitfalls of this never-before-seen adaptation to the current design? Initially, we were concerned about how little of the person intervention would affect the level of participant bending and involvement, hence, online platforms can add an additional layer of feedback, interactivity and engagement. For example, we saw that participants nagged at the interactive features of online platforms, such as the use of emoji reactions, to express themselves. Participants also displayed a high level of collaboration in such as Google Docs and Google Slides, which helped them generate ideas in real-time.

There can be as many pitfalls as there are potential benefits when designing different online or in-person sessions. For example, participants can constrict our creativity and imagination, and simultaneously express our concerns that we may have missed out on insights from their peers. In-person events also provide more opportunities to have in-depth discussions and face-to-face interactions. Some online interactions have been overwhelmed by the amount of technical jargon or complexity of certain issues, which may be more conducive to engaging citizens in more structured online sessions, especially if they are facing the same challenges from the same groups. Hence, it is important to leverage the different features and capabilities of the platforms to create an inclusive and interactive environment.

For instance, the Citizens’ panels’ experiences with various online tools is crucial.

Despite all these benefits, technology is a double-edged sword. During in-person sessions, especially those involving public engagement, it is important to ensure that participants have access to the necessary tools and resources. In the case of online platforms, which may affect their ability to participate in the discussion, in-person events, we find that they can be done on some occasions and not others. While online might be the more convenient option, it is important to ensure that citizens are engaged and do not feel alienated or overwhelmed.

In the end, it is crucial to engage with our peers and partners in making the most of the opportunities that come our way. It is essential to be nimble and adaptable to change, while ensuring that the process is inclusive and engaging for all.

Source: The Straits Times, pB5

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu recently invited Singaporeans to join 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?