

It's a shame going green can be a hassle in Singapore

Decisive policies and user-centric design can make the sum difference that takes us into a greener future



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"Our choices today will determine our future." This timely reminder was articulated by Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu at the United Nations' COP27 climate conference this week.

In the face of international hesitancy over climate commitments, it is encouraging to see Singapore make a bold pledge to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

But while these big, hairy and audacious goals are often seen as the remit of governments, the vision of a greener Singapore can be realised only if Singaporeans embrace greener habits.

These include recycling correctly, making greater use of public transport or electric vehicles, and switching from paper-based to digital payments.

GETTING MORE TO RECYCLE

Under the Zero Waste Masterplan, Singapore aims to raise the national recycling rate from 60 per cent in 2019 to 70 per cent in 2030, and the domestic recycling rate (the amount of household waste recycled as a proportion of total household waste) from 17 per cent in 2019 to 30 per cent in 2030.

The latter now seems an ambitious stretch target, when the domestic recycling rate fell to a mere 13 per cent in 2020 and 2021.

Unlike countries such as South Korea, Switzerland and Germany, Singapore has not mandated household waste sorting or recycling. Instead, the focus has been on educating the public and making recycling convenient through a single-stream collection system.

While three in five households now make the effort to recycle regularly, according to a 2021 survey conducted by the National Environment Agency (NEA), many are not doing so correctly. Contamination and the inclusion of non-recyclables render about 40 per cent of what is placed in recycling bins unrecyclable.

The Extended Producer Responsibility approach which Singapore plans to roll out could be a game changer, by making producers responsible for the collection and end-of-life management of their products.

The first phase of this approach for packaging waste will feature a beverage container return scheme come 2024. Consumers may claim a deposit refund built into the cost of canned and bottled beverages by returning empty beverage containers to a designated return point.

How can we make this convenient for people? The number of return points matters, as does location. If reverse vending machines are deployed, these should have intuitive user interfaces for ease of use.

The ongoing public consultation will hopefully yield useful ideas



A collection point for electronic waste. Amid global hesitancy over climate commitments, it is encouraging to see Singapore make a bold pledge to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, says the writer. But while these goals are often seen as the remit of governments, the vision of a greener Singapore can be realised only if citizens embrace greener habits. ST FILE PHOTO

on how to make it hassle-free for people to recycle.

Beyond pre-packaged beverages, similar incentives could be introduced for other items that are properly recycled through household collection points.

While some countries have introduced taxed garbage bags along with strict laws governing refuse disposal, it is also possible to reward recycling that is done correctly. Creative, low-cost solutions that add convenience – possibly leveraging technology or mobile apps – could boost take-up rates.

The recycling bins that the NEA intends to distribute to each household in 2022 could help by bringing recycling instructions upstream, into the home.

This way, people have information on hand on what can and cannot be recycled, instead of being reminded only by signs on the neighbourhood collection bin when they have already bagged their recyclables.

ENCOURAGING ADOPTION OF ELECTRIC VEHICLES

Besides promoting use of public transport, accelerating the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) is also important in reducing transport-related carbon

emissions. For a long time, adoption of EVs has been held back by the lack of a comprehensive EV charging infrastructure.

This chicken-and-egg problem arises because there is little incentive for building owners or commercial providers to install charging points with so few electric vehicles plying the road, and conversely there has been muted interest in electric cars due to a dearth of charging points.

But the tide has begun to turn. In the first nine months of 2022, EV registrations accounted for over 10 per cent of all new car registrations, nearly three times the adoption rate in 2021.

Last year, the Government announced a target of deploying 60,000 charging points islandwide by 2030, up from an earlier target of 28,000.

New laws announced this month under the Electric Vehicles Charging Bill will require new buildings and those undergoing substantial renovation to install a minimum number of EV charging points, equivalent to about one in every 25 parking spaces. This could be the needed push to bring electric vehicles fully into the mainstream, rather than adopted only by a handful of environmentally conscious road users.

Even so, user design considerations should be factored in to make EV charging more convenient. For instance, co-locating fast-charging stations with hypermarkets and retail amenities would allow EV owners to do their shopping while their vehicles are charging, making for a more seamless experience.

The number, location and type of charging points should be informed by a good understanding of user patterns and habits.

Over time, there will be a two-way interplay whereby infrastructure shapes usage patterns, while the latter directs investment in the former.

REPLACING CHEQUES WITH DIGITAL PAYMENTS

Digital payments can play a part in reducing paper waste by cutting down the use of cheques. According to the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), the volume of cheque transactions has declined almost two-thirds from 61 million in 2016 to less than 24 million in 2021.

This reduced volume also means that the cost of processing cheques is set to rise steeply, providing greater incentive to eliminate cheques altogether on top of the need to reduce waste.

At the recent Singapore Fintech Festival, the MAS released a consultation paper to study the possibility of eliminating all corporate cheques and terminating central cheque clearing by 2025.

Such a target focuses the mind to generate creative solutions to overcome the last-mile barriers, instead of accepting the lingering need for some businesses to make paper-based payments.

Individuals, however, will be given a longer runway to switch to other payment methods, given the acknowledged concerns and obstacles facing some groups, including seniors.

The sticking points among end users include unfamiliarity with digital payments and a lack of trust in online banking transfers.

At the same time, it is important to adopt a user-centric approach to better understand the pain points faced by those who continue to rely on cheques, and to devise suitable interventions for them.

After all, it is important not to hinder people from receiving aid or to inadvertently create digital exclusion. In 2020, the Solidarity Payment (a Covid-19 support measure) was still issued through cheques for the minority who had not registered bank accounts with the Government.

What might help is personalised guidance on e-payment methods and how to protect oneself against phishing or fraud. Tweaks to system design to make e-payments easier and more convenient may also move the needle.

BRINGING ABOUT DESIRED CHANGE

Over the years, there has been progress in climate-action policy goals, but not as quickly as one might have hoped – whether due to lack of public awareness, the difficulty of changing deep-seated habits, or “chicken-and-egg” problems.

So it is heartening that of late, more ambitious targets have been set, and decisive steps taken, to address these issues. Regulation and financial incentives should be paired with user-centric design and behavioural nudges to bring about the desired change.

It will take a combination of ambitious target-setting, regulation, incentives, public education and user-centric design to move us more quickly into a sustainable, digital and inclusive future.

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