

Observers on Our SG Conversation's next lap

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POSTED: 14 Aug 2013 8:21 PM

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SINGAPORE: As the Our Singapore Conversation process comes to a close, observers are saying that the community should now take the initiative to start conversations of their own.

The year-long dialogue sought to get a consensus among Singaporeans about the kind of future they want for Singapore.

Those whom Channel NewsAsia spoke to say the process has changed the way the government approaches consultation.

66-year-old Lim Guay Huay never expected the call to take part in the Our Singapore Conversation process.

She was among the 47,000 people involved in the engagement, and she says she found it useful and wants to see more of such sessions.

Mdm Lim was a participant of the labour movement's Our Singapore Conversation.

There is a general consensus that the process should be an ongoing feature of Singapore society.

The Our Singapore Conversation is a tool not just for citizens to raise concerns but also a way for government to listen and for all sides to acknowledge the differences in opinions, even if consensus cannot be reached.

Eugene Tan, Associate Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University (SMU), said: "Some may not like the open-endedness but I think for a conversation like the OSC, I think it's important for it not to be prescriptive.

"The process becomes important where people would feel that even if they do not agree with the outcome and the recommendation, there is a sense that their views were taken into account, there was an attempt to explain why their views cannot be taken on board.

"While outcomes are important, let's not let the outcomes make us blind to how the process is equally important in terms of trying to engender a consensus, in terms of trying to get people to understand what are some of the key concerns on the ground and where is the government also coming from."

Future-Moves' risk consultant Devadas Krishnadas said this new model of consultation could mitigate potential conflicts before they escalate.

He said: "You will always have issues that are difficult to predict from a start position and when new issues arise, they arise out there in the community, they arise out there in specific interest groups and the government gets to hear about them at a point where people get very upset or they are unhappy.

"So it's far better when these specific interests groups or when people are coalescing around a particular issue of concern; they form conversations and they form platforms to render coherent their concerns and views; they throw up community leaders that then can engage the government to say, 'look, these are the things we are concerned about'."

He added: "Today, what we try to avoid is a situation where the absence of dialogue means that issues boil up and get pent up and then erupt in unhappy ways and unconstructive ways...

"So dialogue has now gone from something that happens at the margin to a mainstream way in which the public engages the government. It's not only legitimate, it is the preferred model of interaction."

Moving forward, observers say the conversation should move from one that's initiated by the government to one where communities, professional bodies and interest groups initiate the engagement.

Accounting firm KPMG is an example of how professional bodies got involved in the engagement.



Publication: Channel NewsAsia

Date: 14 August 2013

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It was the first private sector organisation to host a session under Our Singapore Conversation.

The firm says taking part in the process gave its staff the opportunity to exchange views on their concerns about Singapore.

Meanwhile the OSC Secretariat says the process has been a "valuable learning journey".

It says that it will share learning points across government agencies.

It adds that agencies should continue with the OSC process, especially when there are major issues which benefit from this style of dialogue.

Mr Devadas Krishnadas said: "Senior civil servants and the mid-tier civil servants need to understand that their role is also changing, that they can't stay behind a sort of barricade of bureaucracy and institution and say 'throw your ideas over the wall, we'll deal with them and we'll throw something back'.

"They've got to be prepared to forward engage. They've got to be prepared to listen early. They've got to be prepared to live with some messiness and noisiness in this space and that's important and useful feedback into the policy making processes."

All eyes will now be on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally on Sunday when he is expected to touch on and announce some policy tweaks to the top three concerns raised during the Our Singapore Conversation process.

These concerns are on housing, healthcare and education.

- CNA/ir