

OUR SINGAPORE CONVERSATION

Efforts to get views of diverse groups

Latest exercise vastly different from previous sessions to engage the people

Rachel Chang

The Government was just one participant in the national conversation, said Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) committee members and chairman Heng Swee Keat, as they pointed to efforts to reach out to Singaporeans from all walks of life.

This made the process remarkably different from past engagement exercises, with marginalised voices being drawn out, and diverse groups coming together.

Of the 47,000 who attended OSC dialogues, 4,000 went to sessions organised by community associations and voluntary welfare or-

ganisations, and participants included taxi drivers, the families of prisoners and the disabled.

For theatre practitioner and committee member Kuo Jian Hong, 46, the inclusion of "people and voices in places that are not obvious" was important.

Another committee member, Singapore Management University law professor Mahdev Mohan, 34, said that the format of small group discussion, as opposed to a townhall style where people face a policymaker, put people at ease and allowed them to speak freely.

Ministers were only peripherally involved in the sessions.

If they were present, they roved from group to group and listened in on discussions.

Entrepreneur Stanley Chia, 26, said that "in townhalls, only a few vocal ones stand up and ask questions". "So it was radically different in that sense."

That the OSC became the place where scientists met artists, or the young and the old interacted, impressed Singapore Muslim Women's Association board member Noorul Fatha As'art, 35.

"We tend to be (in) silos in our respective communities," she said, adding that the OSC has taught "respectful disagreement".

Mr Heng, who is also Education Minister, said he hopes that the habit of deep and respectful conversation continues.

At a press conference last Tuesday to mark the end of the national conversation and the launch of its newsletter, Reflections, he also repeatedly urged Singaporeans to refrain from judging the exercise by how much impact it had on policymaking.

It did not want to imitate previous engagement exercises like 2003's Remaking Singapore, he said.

That concluded with a list of policy recommendations like the five-day work week.

This time, the committee has distilled five core aspirations from the extensive discussions, and these will guide policymaking in future (see graphic).

Mr Heng added that rather than discrete pieces of legislation, the OSC's policy imprint has been broad and intangible, shaping the real-time drift of policymaking.

For example, a pilot of five Min-



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istry of Education kindergartens, designed for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, was announced in February after OSC sessions showed him "how children from low-income family have difficulties in catching up".

The Reflections newsletter has taken pains to illustrate this, with two timelines running parallel to each other.

One marks the milestones of the

OSC process, which comprised more than 660 dialogues; the other lays out policy changes that have occurred through the year as a result, such as new Housing Board flats for singles, and the free off-peak MRT travel pilot.

"Policymaking is not something where you stop mid-stream and say, well, since we are going to have the conversation, nothing gets done and therefore let's finish the

conversation, then let's debate what should be done," Mr Heng said. "It is an ongoing, iterative process."

Some 60,000 copies of Reflections will be distributed to the public.

The newsletter is also available online at www.oursconversation.sg/reflections

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Participants at the first citizens' dialogue of the Our Singapore Conversation engaged in a discussion last October. Participants welcomed the small group discussions, which put people at ease and allowed them to speak more freely. This was in contrast to townhall-style sessions where people face a policymaker.

5 CORE ASPIRATIONS

Distilled from extensive discussions with citizens during the Our Singapore Conversation, these will guide policy-making in future

That OPPORTUNITIES abound

- For good jobs in a strong competitive economy
- In a society where Singaporeans with different passions and ambitions can realise their potential regardless of background
- In a labour market where all job types are respected and individuals are not judged on qualifications or lack thereof

That lives are lived with PURPOSE

- In a community that celebrates achievements beyond the economic, and preserves its shared spaces, memories and heritage
- In a society that assesses success in a broad way and appreciates the need for Singaporeans to live balanced lives with time for families
- As a people who come together and start ground-up initiatives for their community

With a sense of ASSURANCE

- That basic needs like housing, health care and transport will always be within reach
- That there is adequate support to buffer against shocks, illness and retrenchment
- That public housing is "home first, then asset", and there is peace of mind about retirement savings

A strong SPIRIT

- Of common values of respect for the elderly, the disabled, those with special needs, ex-offenders and others who may be at the margins of society
- That includes "kampung spirit" and a sense of togetherness in communities
- Of taking care of the disadvantaged and helping every Singaporean live with dignity

Held together by TRUST

- That open, sincere and constructive engagement from civic-minded citizens on national issues is welcomed by the Government
- That the Government shares the reasons behind policies and more data
- Between diverse groups of Singaporeans with different desires, who nonetheless want mutual understanding, empathy, compromise and give-and-take solutions

ST GRAPHICS

OUR SINGAPORE CONVERSATION MILESTONES

Aug 26, 2012	Sept 8	Oct 2	Oct 13	Nov 3	Nov 4 to Jan 31	Feb 1, 2013	Feb 13	Feb 14 to March 1	March 2	March 3 to April 12	April 13	April 14 to April 19	April 20	May 14	June
Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announces the decision to start a national conversation at the National Day Rally	26-member OSC committee announced	First dialogue at Yuhua Village Market and Food Centre with senior citizens	First public dialogue organised by OSC secretariat at National Library	First overseas ground-up dialogue with Singaporeans in London		Ministry of Health begins dialogue on health-care issues	End of Phase 1		Start of Phase 2 on the themes of home, heart and hope		Ministry of Education begins dialogue on education issues		Ministry of National Development kicks off dialogue on housing	Final public dialogue organised by OSC secretariat	Ministry of Manpower dialogues on lifelong learning and giving Singaporeans fair consideration for jobs
PHASE 1								PHASE 2							

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Several policy announcements in the past year were a result of the OSC process, with most coming after the first phase ended in February	Jan 22 Ministry of Health announces extension of MediShield coverage to congenital and neonatal conditions	Feb 25 Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam refers to a common set of aspirations and a common vision of the future that Singaporeans want which emerged in the OSC, during his Budget speech	March 11 Ministry of National Development announces that singles earning up to \$5,000 per month can buy new two-room flats	March 12 MOH announces intention to review health-care financing	March 13 Ministry of Education highlights areas for recalibration in the education system. These include centring holistic education on values	March 15 Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth announces free entry to all national museums and heritage institutions	April 16 Ministry of Transport announces free off-peak travel for a one-year trial period from June 24 to reduce peak-hour train congestion

ST GRAPHICS

RESPONSES TO REFLECTIONS

LEARNING TO DISAGREE, RESPECTFULLY

"We've been very, afraid to say as Singaporeans 'I do not agree with you, but however, let's look for something common that we can work on together'. I think this OSC has managed to provide a platform... for us to begin this process of learning together as a country how to disagree respectfully and yet at the same time, gain through all these different ideas."

Dr Noorul Fatha As'art, 35, assistant director at the Ministry of Health's Non-Communicable Diseases Branch



TOUCHED BY YOUNG PEOPLE'S PASSION

"One of the things that struck me is how we always think Singaporeans are really good at complaining and people that came to a lot of these conversations will start with complaining - which is great, get it off your chest. But it always goes to 'So, okay, you have an issue with this. What do you think we should do?' It's that pro-activeness. And I was very touched by some of the ideas and passion that were articulated by especially the young people that came to the conversation."

Ms Kuo Jian Hong, 46, artistic director of The Theatre Practice



NOT THE TYPICAL POLICY PAPER

"Looking at the final report, the first thing that hits me is how different this is from a typical policy-oriented report and that's a good thing. It's a diversity of colour, texture, nuance and spirit. I think that's what's been captured so far."

Assistant Professor Mahdev Mohan, 34, law academic at Singapore Management University



GROWING AS A SOCIETY

"We realised that policy changes are very difficult and it's not an easy process. And what OSC presented was a very organic way for us to engage citizens, and I am very encouraged by where our country is going. I believe that we are growing as a society and a lot of youths want to be involved."

Mr Stanley Chia, 26, managing director of an educational enterprise



ST PHOTOS: ASHLEIGH SIM

The following is an extract from Our Singapore Conversation committee chairman Heng Swee Keat's foreword in its newsletter, Reflections, which marked the end of the one-year exercise

Spirit of listening and speaking up continues

What future do we want? How do we get there?

These questions kept me up for many nights after the Prime Minister asked me last August to start a national conversation with fellow Singaporeans.

All around us, I see the world growing more complex, with challenges coming fast and furious, and our needs growing ever more diverse. How, in such a world, can any one group of people have the answers to everything?

If we are to work together towards a future Singapore that stirs our passion and pride, we must get everyone involved.

That's why we decided to have Our Singapore Conversation (OSC). We aimed to reach out to as many Singaporeans as possible, from all walks of life. We also felt it was important to take the time to understand each other's perspectives and aspirations.

So we did our best to make this truly OUR conversation. If people wanted to talk in dialects, in their coffee shop, on any issue they cared about, we did our best to help that happen.

I don't mind sharing that I was nervous initially about such an open-ended style. After all, most of us were more familiar with very specific questions and hard deadlines.

Some threw cold water by asking, "Why spend all this time talking about things like what we hope for or what we value?", or "Why don't you deal with immediate issues rather than our future?" I think of it like this: If we are going to know how to make good policies, or decide on the hard policy trade-offs to come, we must first understand thorough-

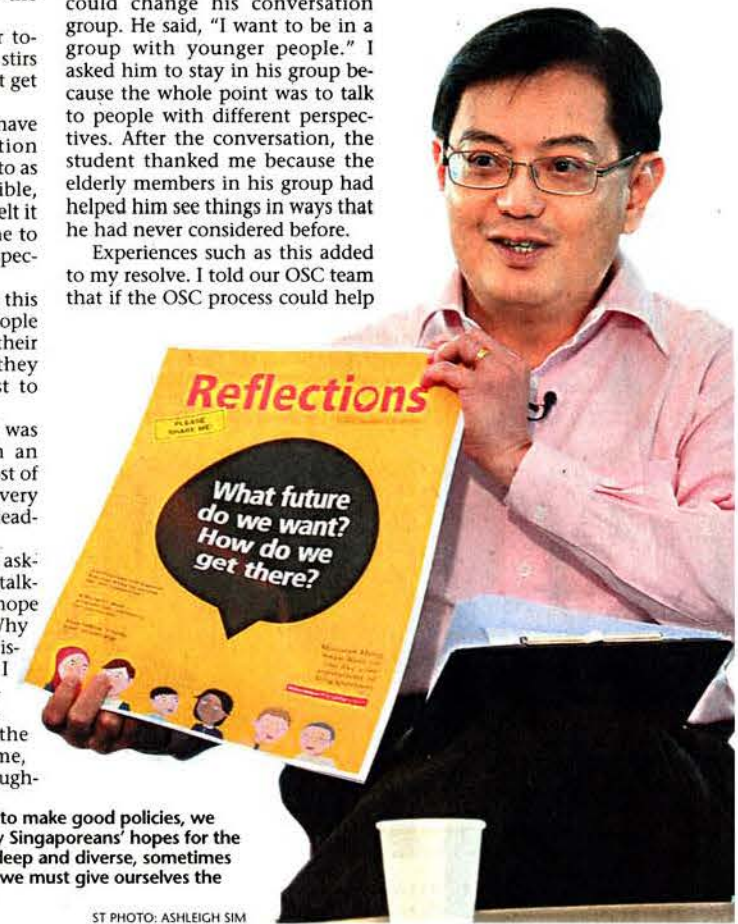
ly Singaporeans' own hopes for the future. As these hopes are deep and diverse, sometimes even in conflict with each other, we must give ourselves the chance to hear each other out. Just as importantly, Singaporeans will gain from hearing from one another.

Not everyone was comfortable with the OSC's diversity at first. At the first public dialogue, a 15-year-old student asked me if he could change his conversation group. He said, "I want to be in a group with younger people." I asked him to stay in his group because the whole point was to talk to people with different perspectives. After the conversation, the student thanked me because the elderly members in his group had helped him see things in ways that he had never considered before.

Experiences such as this added to my resolve. I told our OSC team that if the OSC process could help

Singaporeans to hear each other out, especially when their aspirations differ, then we would have achieved something valuable.

Our Singapore Conversation does not end here. The spirit of speaking up constructively and hearing each other out sincerely and respectfully continues, just as making Singapore our best home is a continuing work in progress.



Mr Heng says that to know how to make good policies, we must first understand thoroughly Singaporeans' hopes for the future, and "as these hopes are deep and diverse, sometimes even in conflict with each other, we must give ourselves the chance to hear each other out".

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