

OUR SINGAPORE CONVERSATION

A future of participatory policymaking?

MAHDEV MOHAN



Community engagement is easier said than done. Informing Singaporeans of our options, rights and obligations, and inviting our feedback, is an important first step. But it can prove illusory if information flows in only one direction — from officials to citizens.

In 1969, American urban planner Sherry Arnstein warned in her semi-

nal article, *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, that people can become disenchanted if information “is provided at a late stage in planning, (with) little opportunity (for them) to influence the programme designed ‘for their benefit’”.

Meetings between officials and community representatives can “be turned into vehicles for one-way communication by the simple device of providing superficial information, discouraging questions, or giving irrelevant answers”. Public town hall sessions, too, can devolve into a sham

● Mahdev Mohan is an Assistant Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University and a member of the Our Singapore Conversation Committee.

if people are “perceived as statistical abstractions and participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire”.

As a member and participant of the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) process, I can say with confidence that the OSC took heed of Ms Arnstein’s warnings. The process was guided by the notion that public participation in national policymaking is a two-way street — citizens should hear what officials have in mind and correspondingly be heard, with an assurance that their views will be taken into account.

It was open to all who wished to participate and reached out to an array of Singaporeans here and abroad. The OSC did not engineer or circumscribe the ambit of citizen dialogues with officials and among citizens in person, but broadly asked Singaporeans what their aspirations and concerns for the future are and how they would like the Government to respond.

CONSTRUCTIVE IDEAS, COMMON ASPIRATIONS

In the course of OSC dialogues, I was struck by the constructive ideas that fellow Singaporeans expressed on how policymakers could go about formulating and implementing national policy.

Constructive and specific suggestions were advanced, for instance, for why the inclusion of congenital and neonatal conditions into MediShield coverage, providing for paternity leave and permitting single Singaporeans access to Housing and Development Board property should be adopted. Broader calls, too, were made that the Government provide a stake for Singaporeans in our shared future through strengthening trust and accountability between officials and citizens.

At OSC Committee meetings, we candidly examined these views and ideas, the tone and direction they set for participatory policymaking in Singapore, the concrete steps that government ministries must consider and, significantly, even options that should not be pursued.

Results of the OSC have been distilled into five core aspirations in a recently published report entitled *Reflections*, which sets out participants’ qualitative experiences, anecdotes and ideas. Importantly, it stays clear of grand narratives for how Singapo-

“Whatever one’s view of the OSC may be, its legacy will depend on how and whether it is used by policymakers, employers and society in planning. The next step should not be to return to fashioning official boards, committees and task forces within bureaucratic frameworks.

reans ought to behave and what they should accept in order to succeed.

Eschewing the dichotomy of “success” and “failure”, “winner or loser”, it notes that Singaporeans desire to have and should be given the opportunity to take different paths and at different paces to pursue their ambitions, life choices and potential.

Reflections also adds quantitative weight to observations which may seem intuitive at first blush, but can pave the way for policymakers and civil servants to be more responsive. For instance, it reflects a desire expressed during dialogues that the Government should “share the reasons behind policies and create or enhance spaces for ongoing interactions” with Singaporeans.

Various ministries — National Development, Health, Transport, Culture, Community and Youth and Education — have responded to ideas raised in the course of the OSC and have further promised to continue to take a leaf from its schema, going forward.

GOVERNMENT’S NEXT STEPS?

But now comes the harder part.

To give effect to this ethos of community engagement, or perhaps even participatory policymaking with Singaporeans, the Government’s next steps at its highest levels must set the tone. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally speech on Aug 18 will certainly be closely followed.

Concerns about affordable and well-managed public housing, healthcare and transport pervaded the OSC dialogues. In the days to come, Singaporeans will undoubtedly look to the Government for substantive ways in which we can be assured that we will have the support required to withstand unexpected difficulties. We may wonder, for example, if types of social welfare support, such as unemployment

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

A future of participatory policymaking?

● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

insurance or universal health coverage, will be made available.

We may ask how future policy decisions strengthen or are leavened by past commitments. In his Budget Speech 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam referred to how the OSC process contributed to several budget initiatives.

Singaporeans may wonder if aspects of the OSC dialogues can signal “participatory budgeting”, whereby Singaporeans’ priorities — health-care financing and housing subsidies — are respected and help determine how public money is spent.

We may also ask what opportunities will be provided for us to enjoy a balanced pace of life, have an education system that does not overburden our children at an early stage and allows us to pursue our ambition to contribute to Singapore in as many ways as we wish to.

THE PEOPLE TAKING OWNERSHIP

Our gaze, however, should not be fixed on the Government alone. We should also consider how civil society organisations, volunteer groups and other community-led initiatives can take ownership for and build upon as-

pects of the core aspirations detailed in Reflections.

Drawing upon the OSC’s emphasis on community participation, I hope that these initiatives will negotiate and, where appropriate, work in partnership with the Government to preserve our national heritage, shared spaces and collective memories that are emblematic of our country.

It is humbling that many Singaporeans enjoyed the OSC dialogues. Undoubtedly, some will ask if the OSC was a token exercise meant to co-opt or placate Singaporeans. Others may have preconceived views about the efficacy of a joint official-citizen committee which they are unwilling to change.

Nonetheless, whatever one’s view of the OSC may be, its legacy will depend on how and whether it is used by policymakers, employers and society in planning. The next step should not be to return to fashioning official boards, committees and task forces within bureaucratic frameworks — but for policymakers to move forward knowing, as Ms Arnstein wrote, that “after the ground-rules (for community-government partnership) have been established through some form of give-and-take, they are not subject to unilateral change”.