Citizens’ panels build trust in Govt partnerships: Study

Process involving community in solving policy issues leads to direct outcomes, IPS study shows

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A new process to involve the community in coming up with solutions to policy issues has improved perceptions of the Government’s willingness to partner citizens in policymaking, an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study has found.

The citizens’ panel concept – one of the new ways public agencies are engaging Singaporeans outside the Singapore Together movement – can also be tapped to deliberate on difficult and sensitive topics, said the study, which was released yesterday.

This may include issues such as the sharing of roads between cyclists and motorists, and gender and identity issues, said Dr Carol Soon, a co-author of the study, at a virtual media briefing. At the same time, more can be done to ensure that groups like the lower-income are represented at these discussions, said the study, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth to analyse how the engagement process was carried out in Singapore.

It is also co-authored by Mr Sim Jui Liang, a former research associate at IPS.

The citizens’ panel concept, which is based on the Citizens’ Jury process invented by American political scientist Ned Crosby in 1974, has tackled three topics so far, all between 2017 and 2019: diabetes, recycling and work-life harmony.

In these studies, which included surveys as well as observations by the co-authors at all three citizens’ panels, the panels’ recommendations led to direct policy outcomes.

For instance, the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment – which was then known as the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources – had started work on supporting four pilot projects that emerged from the Recycle Right Citizens’ Workgroup. The process also resulted in changes in the participants’ attitudes towards policymaking, and led to higher levels of trust in the Government’s intention and desire to work with citizens to solve policy problems.

Participants who took part in the panels on recycling and work-life harmony were more likely to agree with the statement that the Government is committed to partnering citizens to build a future Singapore after the panel wrapped up.

There was a 5 per cent and 10 per cent increase respectively for the two panels, the study found. This question was not asked for the panel on diabetes.

Participants’ perceptions on whether the Government seriously considered their suggestions as public engagement sessions had also improved after the panels. The panel on work-life harmony was an exception – there was a 5 per cent point drop in the proportion of people who agreed with the statement after the panel wrapped up.

Dr Soon, who heads the IPS Society and Culture Department, said yesterday that a key factor in the promotion of work-life harmony, unlike the other two panels, was the lack of a designated leader touddles on topics of diabetes and recycling. This could be due to the complex nature of the topic, which required more time and space for participants to explore and agree on what work-life harmony means, and how to measure it if it has been achieved, and how they would proceed to come up with solutions.

While the panels that have been held in Singapore have been led by government agencies, the study suggested that it may be worth considering involving a third party to design and manage the entire process, including recruitment, selection and convening the sessions collectively.

The first meeting of the Citizens’ Panel on Work-Life Harmony in September, 2019. The panel discussions involved the National Population and Talent Division, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Institute of Policy Studies (September to November 2019). It had 51 participants. (FYL FENG)

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Concept and process in exploring ideas

Unlike the one-off group discussions seen in previous engagement exercises, such as framing Singapore and Our Singapore Conversation, the citizens’ panel process took place over four sessions and explored ideas in a more in-depth and rigorous manner.

The concept has also been used to tackle difficult topics like abortion, which was discussed in Ireland, and the construction of nuclear reactors in South Korea. The panels comprised:

- The Citizens’ Jury on the War on Diabetes convened by the Ministry of Health in November 2017 to January 2018 which involved 78 participants.
- The Recycle Right Citizens’ Workgroup by the then Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (September-October 2019). A total of 49 people were recruited, but four dropped out.
- The Citizens’ Panel on Work-Life Harmony, which involved the National Population and Talent Division, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Institute of Policy Studies (September to November 2019). It had 51 participants.

Participants were provided with information kits and briefings before the conversations. Government agencies involved in leading the panels also responded to the needs of participants during the process, such as by connecting them with relevant representatives. Deadlines for participants to go beyond their own individual expectations to think about constraints like budget and timelines were set.

Many participants also encountered their own research to test out the viability of their ideas.

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