

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

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 under 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 process, which is based on the Citizens' Jury process invented by American political scientist Ned Crosby in 1971, has tackled three topics so far, all between 2017 and 2019: diabetes, recycling and work-life harmony.

The study, which included survey findings as well as observations by the co-authors at all three citizens' panels, found that the panels' recommendations led to direct policy outcomes.

For instance, the Ministry of Sus-

tainability and the Environment – which was then known as the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources – has 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 at public engagement sessions had also improved after the panels. But the panel on work-life harmony was an exception – there was a 2.8 percentage point drop in the proportion of people who agreed with the statement after the panel wrapped up.

Dr Soon, who is head of the IPS' Society and Culture Department, said yesterday that the complexity of work-life harmony, unlike the other two more straightforward topics, may have contributed to the slight drop.

Another possible reason is that several ministries were involved in the citizens' panel process for work-life harmony, unlike the other two.

"Participants' exposure to the different ministries and their considerations or priorities might

have led them to recognise the complexities involved and the trade-offs within government that have to be made," she said.

But while the panels were designed with diversity in mind, those from the lower-income group or who had less education were often under-represented, the study found.

To overcome this, sufficient time must be allocated to recruitment, said the study. Organisers can also reach out to vulnerable segments, such as low-income families and seniors, by working with community organisations.

An honorarium can also be given to participants so that low-wage earners can be assured that their participation would not result in lost income.

If the topic that is being tackled is more complex and multi-faceted, more time will have to be allocated to discussions, the study found.

Only about one in four of the participants in the panel on work-life harmony agreed that they had enough time to discuss the topic, compared with three in five who agreed for the other two panels on the relatively more straightforward 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 if it has been achieved, before they could 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 commissioning a third party to design and manage the entire process, including recruitment, selection and convening the sessions to boost neutrality.

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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 55 participants. ST FILE PHOTO

Concept and process in exploring ideas

Unlike the one-off group discussions seen in previous engagement exercises, such as Remaking 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 (November 2017 to January 2018) which involved 76 participants.

- The Recycle Right Citizens' Workgroup by the then Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (September-October 2019). A total of 48 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 55 participants.

Participants were provided with information kits and briefings before the start of the discussions.

Government agencies involved in leading the panels also re-

sponded to the needs of participants during the process, such as by connecting them with relevant experts during the process. This allows for participants to go beyond their personal experiences to think about constraints like budget, sustainability and trade-offs.

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

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