Our Singapore Conversation: Bridging the Great Affective Divide

Introduction

Singapore's first state-organised, national scale public engagement exercise, *The Next Lap*, took place in the late 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the Singapore government has organised four more public participation exercises at the national level, all of which have followed critical political, social or economic 'focusing events'. The two most recent engagement exercises, Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) in 2012 and SGfuture in 2015, were designed to be "markedly different" from previous national consultative engagements in their authenticity, inclusivity and emphasis on building mutual trust between government and citizens.[1]

Some viewed OSC and SGfuture as attempts to address a perceived disconnect between Singaporeans and the government, which was run by the People's Action Party (PAP). The PAP had enjoyed uninterrupted political dominance since forming Singapore's first self-government in the 1950s, and had seen Singapore through independence from Malaysia in 1965. Known for its pragmatic stance on policy and politics, the PAP's primary goal in Singapore's formative years had been to solve the material needs of the country's citizens through rapid industrialization and economic growth.[2] While Singapore had achieved a significant economic transformation under one generation of PAP leadership, some felt that economic growth had come with a cost: limited political democratization and freedom of speech as well as consensual politics.[3] In 1994, Singaporean novelist Catherine Lim coined the term 'Great Affective Divide'[4] to encapsulate Singaporeans' growing sense of alienation from the PAP Government's "uncompromising commitment to economic imperative".[5] Furthermore, many Singaporeans had expressed unhappiness over government policies in the early 2000s that they felt were misaligned with public sentiment, particularly regarding issues such as congestion in public transport, Singapore's heavy reliance on foreign workers and rising home prices.[6] The PAP experienced its worst ever electoral

1 Khoo, Melissa, and Lai Fong Yee. "Redefining Engagement: Lessons for the Public Service from Our Singapore Conversation." Ethos, May 2014, pp8.

2 Beng-Huat, Chua. "Pragmatism of the People's Action Party government in Singapore: a critical assessment." Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science (1985): 29-46.

3 Ho, Khai Leong. "Political consolidation in Singapore: Connecting the party, the government and the expanding state." Management of Success (2010): 67-79.

4 In Lim's 1994 political commentary piece, the term refers to Singaporeans' lack of "affectionate regard" for the PAP government and feelings of alienation that she argued stemmed from the PAP's leadership style, which Lim described as 'deficient in human sensitivity and feeling—"dictatorial", "arrogant", "impatient", "unforgiving", and "vindictive".'

5 Lim, Catherine. "The PAP and the people–A great affective divide." The Straits Times 3 (1994).

6 Low, Donald. "What Went Wrong for the PAP in 2011?"." Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus.

performance in the 2011 general elections, garnering only 60.1 per cent of the popular vote.[7]

OSC and SGfuture aimed to regain Singaporeans' trust through encouraging civic participation and by building social capital. In the process of conducting public engagement exercises that were different from previous ones,[8] OSC and SGfuture organizers had to negotiate numerous policy dilemmas, the process of which had bearing on bridging the 'Great Affective Divide'. This case study explores how OSC and SGfuture attempted to differentiate themselves from previous public engagement exercises, the challenges both exercises faced, and what came afterward.

Negotiating OSC Policy Dilemmas

OSC's intended outcomes were not immediately apparent. In his 2012 National Day Rally speech, Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat introduced OCS' guiding principles: to "reaffirm, recalibrate and refresh". Most importantly, OSC had to be as inclusive as possible, and keep Singaporeans at the heart of its concerns.[9] Apart from these, no deliverables were articulated at the onset. In the OSC's concluding report, entitled *Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation* (2013), Heng admitted to having been nervous about such an open-ended style of engagement.[10] The OSC Secretariat, staffed by public servants across the Whole-of-Government[11] and tasked with running the engagement exercise, had to learn on the fly and adapt to the uncertainties of the public's response as they had no standard operating manuals or similar previous experiences to rely upon.[12]

The committee-style public engagement discussions of the past had been characterised by clear agendas and hierarchies. But OSC wanted to take a different approach to public engagement, which meant that its organisers had to negotiate several new policy dilemmas: scope, credibility, format, process and outcome.

Scope

One of the OCS' initial challenges was the *scope* of engagement: whether or not OSC participants would be truly representative of Singapore's citizenry. Upon learning the identities of the OSC committee's 26 members in September 2012, netizens were quick to voice their disappointment in the fact that none of these members were opposition Members of Parliament. However, Heng highlighted that members of the committee were neither functional representatives nor advocates of particular groups

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7 Ibid.

8 Khoo and Lai, Ethos, pp8.

9 "Reaffirm, Recalibrate and Refresh". The Straits Times, 25 January 2016.

10 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013.

11 According to the Singapore Civil Service College, the "Whole-of-Government" approach refers to the coordination of multiple government agencies to respond to crises, address "wicked problems", or simply to improve public service on the whole. See "Reviewing Whole-of-Government Collaboration in the Singapore Public Service", Civil Service College Singapore, https://www.cscollege.gov.sg/knowledge/ethos/issue%209%20jun%202011/pages/reviewing-whole-of-government-collaboration-in-the-singapore-public-service.aspx, and "Singapore's Whole-of-Government Approach in Crisis Management", Civil Service Singapore, https://www.cscollege.gov.sg/Knowledge/ethos/Ethos%20Issue%2016%20December%202016/Pages/Singapores%20Whole-of-Government%20Approach%20in%20Crisis%20Management.aspx.

12 Khoo and Lai, Ethos, pp8.

or interests; rather, they were selected for their individual perspectives and experiences.[13]

In all, 47,000 Singaporeans from over 40 private and non-profit organisations participated in over 660 dialogues. An additional 4,000 Singaporeans participated in an OSC Survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).[14] The survey was designed to be demographically representative of the national population in terms of gender, ethnicity and age, and its findings were used to direct dialogue in the later phase of OSC.

Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and OSC committee member Kenneth Paul Tan said that he later understood that the OSC's attempts at inclusiveness were rooted in its desire to engage the 'silent majority'.[15] While the OSC committee's membership was slightly contentious given the "unmistakable exclusion" of those with contrarian views, Kenneth Paul Tan argued in his book *Governing Global-City Singapore* (2017) that the large number of OSC participants, coupled with the exercises' open-ended nature, enabled a demographic makeup of participants that was, to a degree, reflective of the increasing diversity of Singapore's larger population[16].

Credibility

A second challenge was convincing critics and detractors of the credibility of OSC's process. In the worst-case scenario, according to Kenneth Paul Tan, OSC could have become an "ideological instrument"[17] used by the PAP establishment to "[plaster] over exploitative or unsustainable practices, class antagonism, and other inequalities".[18] As a platform for engaging the views of the "silent majority",[19] OSC was a means for the state to protect the majority's moderate interests against the "vocal minority's" sectarian interests. However, Kenneth Paul Tan argued that the silent majority was an invented ideological construct that depicted the majority of Singaporeans as having authentic and conservative values and opinions that were drowned out by the "articulate, agitated and shrill tones of the vocal minority". Claiming to speak on the majority's behalf enabled the PAP government to "scapegoat" its opponents as the vocal minority, avert a legitimation crisis by "retaining nominally its democratic credentials" and avoid change, he wrote.[20]

Further complicating matters was the government's release of its 2030 Population White Paper in January 2013, in the middle of the OSC exercise. While the white paper assured citizens that they would retain a key stake in shaping the overall shared vision of Singapore,[21] many Singaporeans still felt that the government was insensitive to the

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13 Phua, Charles, and Yvonne Guo. Our Singapore Conversation: Bridging the 'Great Affective Divide. NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. 2013.

13 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp148

15 "Biggest success may lie in nurturing habit to speak up, listen." TODAY, 14 August 2013.

16 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp148

17 "Biggest success may lie in nurturing habit to speak up, listen." TODAY, 14 August 2013.

18 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp147

19 "Biggest success may lie in nurturing habit to speak up, listen." TODAY, 14 August 2013.

20 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp147

21 Singapore. Ministry of Trade and Industry. A sustainable population for a dynamic Singapore: population white paper. Singapore, 2013.

struggles of ordinary people.[22] Additionally, the White Paper's release caused Singaporeans who had invested time into OSC to doubt both the authenticity of the OSC process as well as the government's sincerity.[23] Freelance photographer Shawn Byron Danker, who had participated in two OSC sessions, said he felt that the white paper gave the OSC "a black eye"– "bulldozing" through public opinion, instead of listening and responding as OSC was supposed to have been doing.[24]

Nevertheless, OSC had achieved two things: first, it demonstrated that that Singaporeans could articulately express divergent views; second, it made more salient the ideological, moral and political lines that divided Singaporeans. This, Kenneth Paul Tan argued, made it unlikely for the OSC to be "straightforwardly propagandistic" given the OSC's cognizance of the dangers of aggravating already cynical Singaporeans. The OSC had to show explicit signs of taking citizen perspectives into account, and making changes as a result of engagement.[25]

Format

The OSC committee had to design a format of engagement that facilitated closer interaction between government representatives and citizens. Public dialogues facilitated by the OSC Secretariat took multiple forms in order to construct an inclusive and iterative experience.[26] For example, former Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob held an inter-generational conversation in which members of the Malay-Muslim community shared their aspirations for Singapore. A dialogue facilitated by Nominated Member of Parliament Janice Koh gathered 52 members of the arts community to discuss their visions for a thriving Singaporean arts and cultural scene. Singaporeans residing overseas were not excluded from the exercise. The OSC Secretariat worked closely with the Overseas Singaporean Unit to facilitate dialogues in countries such as Japan, Korea, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Members of the wider community also organised their own ground-up dialogues in a variety of formats and settings. These included "Kopi-Talks"—chat sessions at coffee shops—held by the National Taxi Association to engage cab-drivers during their lunch breaks,[27] sessions conducted by volunteer welfare organisations in various Chinese dialects to engage the elderly demographic, and even an exhibition in which schoolchildren expressed their hopes for Singapore through art.[28] In all, dialogues were held at 70 different locations.[29]

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22 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp124

23 Ibid. pp145

24 "S'pore dialogues 'have influenced policymaking'". The Straits Times, 26 March 2013.

25 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp148

26 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013, pp4.

27 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013, pp42

28 "Redefining Engagement: Lessons for the Public Service from Our Singapore Conversation" Civil Service College Singapore. Accessed December 13, 2017. https://www.cscollege.gov.sg/Knowledge/Ethos/Ethos%20-%20Issue%2013,%20June%202014/Pages/Redefining%20Engagement%20Lessons%20for%20the%20Public%20Service%20from%20Our%20Singapore%20Conversation.aspx

29 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp144

OSC also made efforts to connect with the online community, making extensive use of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and OSC's official website to host multi-media content. These platforms featured updates on OSC's progress as well as reflective questions. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health, in partnership with the Singapore Government's feedback unit, REACH, organised two live web-chats in conjunction with dialogues on the theme of healthcare.

Process

OSC had to distill the general and open-ended discussion about what Singaporeans wanted to see in 2030 into meaningful data and perspectives that could be translated into future policy implementations. To navigate this challenge, the OSC committee divided the process into two phases.

The first phase, which went from October 2012 to February 2013, consisted of open-ended group conversations aimed at generating diverse views on and ideas for an ideal Singapore. Discussions were conducted by citizen-volunteers in the hopes of encouraging OSC attendees to be authentic and sincere in their participation. Twelve broad Singaporean perspectives were distilled from the first phase of OSC dialogues. These perspectives encompassed common themes that emerged from the OSC Secretariat's interactions with participants and its review of notes taken from dialogues, emails and Facebook messages.

The second phase, which went from March 2013 to June 2013, was a mix of public dialogues and ministry-led thematic dialogues on topics such as housing, education, healthcare and jobs. Phase two dialogue topics were derived from the OSC survey's findings as well as the 12 perspectives distilled from phase one's dialogues. For example, survey data revealed that Singaporeans saw "pace of life" as more important than "career pursuits".[30] Following this finding, a dialogue was held at Singapore Management University in March 2013 to explore the topics of "*kampong* [village] spirit", ageing and helping the disadvantaged.[31] Phase two dialogue topics also related to policy areas that the various ministries were reviewing at the time.

This two-phase approach enabled the OSC committee to gather general sentiments first, and then focus discussion on pertinent citizen concerns. At the end of the second phase's directed discussion, the OSC articulated five core aspirations that Singaporeans believed should guide society's progress. Singaporeans wanted opportunities (to make a good living and pursue their aspirations); purpose (to live in a community that cherished national heritage, shared memory, and communal spaces above economic achievement); assurance (that housing, healthcare, transport and other basic needs would remain affordable regardless of life's uncertainties); spirit (to be a society that prioritized family and shared values, and upheld the dignity of every Singaporean regardless of background); and trust (the growth of mutual understanding among

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30 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. 12 Perspectives Arising from Our Singapore Conversation so Far. Singapore, 2013.

31 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013.

other Singaporeans, and the ability to engage with others in a constructive, open and sincere manner).[32]

Outcome

At the outset, OSC had seemed like an "impossible mission"[33] with no concrete deliverables and the mammoth task of distilling the open-ended conversations of thousands of people into something tangible that could eventually inform policy. But the process of distilling the OSC dialogues into 12 perspectives and five core aspirations ended up leading to numerous positive intangible outcomes.

One of these outcomes was the creation of social capital. Kenneth Paul Tan proposed that the exercise was an opportunity to build trust—not so much citizen trust in the government, but rather the government's trust in its citizens. This desire for the government to have more trust in Singaporeans was highlighted in *Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation*:

"As citizens, we sometimes feel that the government could trust us more. At the end of the day, we may not always agree with the government's decisions. But we would like to have more information to make an informed assessment, and to arrive at conclusions of our own."[34]

Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation, 2013

OSC's creation of opportunities for collective story-telling also helped generate social capital. In an "imagined community" such as the modern Singapore nation, Kenneth Paul Tan wrote, social capital is generated when members of the community feel as if they possess an intimate knowledge of one another.[35] OSC enabled its participants to weave their personal narratives into The Singapore Story—both activating their imagining of a common destiny, as well as reinforcing their sense of belonging, a common national identity and a shared value system. Significantly, OSC, in the context of Singaporean public discourse, was a shift in the national narrative from "threats" confronting Singapore's survival to the "aspirations" of its people, resulting in a new vocabulary for policymakers that included terms such as "myth", "values" and "identity".[36]

Policy Changes After OSC

Several major policy shifts were informed by the Singaporean perspectives and aspirations that were articulated in OSC. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2013 National Day Rally speech highlighted three policy areas slated for major changes: housing, healthcare and education.[37]

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32 Ibid. pp4

33 Ibid. pp24.

34 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013, pp39.

35 Tan, Governing Global-City Singapore, pp132

36 Kuah, Adrian and Lim, Seok Hui, "After Our Singapore Conversation: The Futures of Governance." in Ethos, May 2014.

37 "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally 2013 (English)." Prime Minister's Office Singapore. November 05, 2014. Accessed 25 September 2017. http://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-rally-2013-english.

Housing

House prices in the years preceding OSC had risen at a rate exceeding the growth of Singaporeans' median incomes due to factors such as rapid economic growth, a liberal immigration policy and the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.[38] In 2011, members of the lowest income groups faced the steepest decline in housing affordability since 2009, with the lowest-priced Housing and Development Board (HDB) public flats being estimated to cost 10 years of their annual income.[39]

The OSC survey asked Singaporeans to rank their priorities. The survey found that public housing, along with public healthcare and job security, was frequently one of the top three priorities across all demographics of Singaporeans.[40] Public housing was a particularly prominent concern among Singaporeans who earned less than $5,000 a month.[41] During the dialogues, some participants called for flexibility in HDB policies, particularly for families going through breakups, while others expressed their concern for the vulnerable cash-poor asset-rich elderly. The majority of dialogue participants sought the Government's assurance that the price of housing would remain affordable in the future.[42]

One policy implemented after OSC to address the issue of housing affordability concerned the Special CPF Housing Grant (SHG). In August 2013, the HDB announced that it would raise the SHG income ceiling from $2,250 to $6,500 for families who were first-time buyers of HDB flats. The grant was also extended to cover families who were first-time buyers of four-room flats in estates that have been built within the last 20 years. Previously, the grant had only been applicable to first-time purchasers of two or three-room flats. Additionally, the income ceiling for singles buying two-room Build-to-Order (BTO) flats was raised from $1,125 to $3,250. Then Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan called these changes a major shift, and said that the raise in income ceiling to $6,500 was "as good a level as one can set".[43] In November 2015, the SHG income ceilings for first-time buyer families and singles were raised to $8,500 and $4,250 respectively.[44]

Healthcare

Healthcare had been another key concern raised in OSC. Middle-income Singaporeans were becoming increasingly anxious about losing their incomes and homes as well as falling ill.[45] Dialogue participants called for the government's assurance that healthcare would remain affordable and easily accessible, especially as the country faced an aging

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38 Low, Donald, and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh. Hard choices challenging the Singapore consensus. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014. pp106

39 Yahya, Faizal. Inequality in Singapore. Singapore: World Scientific, 2015, pp150.

40 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013, pp17.

41 Singapore. REACH. Full report of the OSC Survey Singapore, 2013.

42 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013.

43 "HDB raises income ceiling for Special CPF Housing Grant." TODAYonline, 28 August 2013.

44 "First-Timer Applicants." HDB. Accessed 25 September 2017. http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/new/first-timer-applicants.

45 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. 12 Perspectives Arising from Our Singapore Conversation so Far. Singapore, 2013, pp12.

population and increasing life expectancy. Participants also requested better short-term assistance to weather "shocks in life".[46] According to OSC Committee member Lim Ru Ping, many elderly participants in her sessions felt that existing MediShield[47] and Medisave[48] policies were too inflexible. Her elderly participants complained about their lack of control over their finances, especially since they were worried about both large medical fees and smaller but recurrent healthcare expenses.[49] The OSC survey also revealed that public healthcare had been the topmost concern for Singaporeans who earned above $5,000 in monthly income.[50]

Following the conclusion of OSC, the MediShield Life Review Committee was convened in November 2013 to conduct a comprehensive review of Singapore's existing healthcare financing schemes and examine the possibility of a shift towards a universal, lifelong MediShield scheme that covered all Singaporeans and permanent residents. Further public engagement initiatives organised by the committee involved over 1,200 participants via online channels and focus-group discussions.[51] These exercises suggested that Singaporeans preferred an insurance policy that offered universal and lifetime coverage,[52] particularly since advances in healthcare enabled more Singaporeans to live past 92—the maximum coverage age under MediShield. After considering the various perspectives, the committee proposed a comprehensive list of recommendations.

In November 2015, MediShield Life replaced MediShield. Unlike Medishield, Medishield Life provided lifetime coverage for all Singaporean citizens and permanent residents, including those previously ineligible for Medishield insurance due to their pre-existing medical conditions. Significantly, Medishield Life provided higher claim limits and lower co-insurance than Medishield. For instance, the new policy removed the lifetime claim limit so that individuals who had previously accumulated medical bills exceeding Medishield's claim limit of $300,000 could still have insurance coverage.

According to the Medishield Life Review Committee report, the impetus behind this shift was the aspirations of Singaporeans that had been raised through OSC: an affordable and inclusive Singapore where citizens could age in dignity. To help fulfil these aspirations, the government attempted to provide better risk pooling

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46 Ibid.

47 Medishield was a national health insurance scheme launched in 1990 to provide Central Provident Fund members and their dependents coverage against large hospitalisation bills. It was a non-compulsory, opt-out scheme priced by age groups. According to the Medishield Life Review Committee, 93% of the Singaporean population was insured under Medishield at the end of 2013. However, there still existed a small group of Singaporeans who were unable to attain coverage because they were either older than the maximum coverage age of 92, or had pre-existing medical conditions, or lapsed in their payment of Medishield premiums.

48 Medisave is a national savings scheme implemented in 1984 to help Central Provident Fund members and their dependents finance their future medical expenses. A portion of each members' monthly salary is contributed to a Medisave account, which can be utilised to for a range of medical payments, such as medical care (acute, rehabilitative or end-of-life), outpatient treatment, treatment of approved chronic conditions, preventive screenings, as well as hospitalisation expenses. At the time of writing, unemployed persons or self-employed persons earning below $6000 in Net Trade Income need not contribute to their Medisave account, and therefore would not be able to finance their medical expenses through this scheme.

49 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013. pp33

50 Singapore. REACH. Full report of the OSC Survey Singapore, 2013.

51 Singapore. Ministry of Health. MediShield Life Review Committee Report. Singapore, 2015, pp3

52 Ibid. pp44

mechanisms: affordable health insurance policies that protected individuals from large and unexpected medical fees.[53] In his parliamentary speech announcing the Ministry of Health's acceptance of all the Medishield Life Review Committee's recommendations, Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong asserted the influence of OSC on this policy shift.

"During Our Singapore Conversation, Singaporeans expressed support for greater collective responsibility, to come together as a community and as a nation, to provide help to those who meet with unexpected shocks. It is for these reasons that we decided to embark on MediShield Life…Indeed, MediShield Life is a bold move to strengthen collective responsibility… MediShield Life is one major plank of our strategy to improve the social safety net for Singaporeans and build a more caring and inclusive society. At the same time, we will strengthen our efforts to manage healthcare costs, so as to ensure healthcare remains affordable and sustainable in the long term. Every citizen plays an important role in this, by leading a healthy lifestyle and making healthcare decisions wisely."[54]

<div align="right">Gan, 2014</div>

Education

Another key concern for Singaporeans at OSC had been education policy. As highlighted in *Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation*, many Singaporeans felt that education was "becoming too high a stake at a young age" due to the mechanics of streaming as well as societal perceptions and expectations on students. In an overseas OSC dialogue, 34 students from the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom called for a broader definition of success beyond the traditional courses of specialisation, and for safety nets for those who choose alternative educational pathways.[55] In a keynote address, Heng quoted an OSC participant:

"Our education system is seen in three digits. Each child is known by three digits – his PSLE T-score; each primary school by the PSLE T-scores of its top student; and each secondary school by its PSLE cut-off point!"[56]

<div align="right">Heng, 2013</div>

Lee first announced the government's intent to change the PSLE scoring system[57] in his 2013 National Day Rally speech. In July 2016, the Ministry of Education (MOE)

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53 "Opening Speech by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong." MediShield Life. 2014. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/medishield-life/resources---faqs/press-room/opening-speech-by-health-minister-gan-kim-yong.html. pp24

54 "Opening Speech by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong." MediShield Life. 2014. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/medishield-life/resources---faqs/press-room/opening-speech-by-health-minister-gan-kim-yong.html.

55 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013. pp12.

56 "Keynote Address by Mr Heng Swee Keat." Speeches. 25 September 2013. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/keynote-address-by-mr-heng-swee-keat--minister-for-education--at-the-ministry-of-education-work-plan-seminar-2013--on-wednesday--25-september-2013-at-915am-at-ngee-ann-polytechnic-convention-centre

57 Introduced in 1960, the Primary School Leave Examination (PSLE) is a national examination administered annually by the Singapore Ministry of Education and taken by all final-year primary school students. PSLE results are released in the form of grades. Each candidate obtains a "T-score" to indicate their performance relative to their cohort. Pupils must attain a certain T-score in order to receive admission to secondary education. To de-emphasise competition and promote

announced that the PSLE would be scored in wider bands instead of T-scores from 2021 onwards. The new scoring system would also reflect the individual performances of each student, rather than their performance relative to their peers.[58] Acting Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng revealed that the MOE had taken into account input from initial rounds of public engagement during the OSC exercise, which sparked subsequent focus group discussions with other educators and other stakeholders, in creating this significant change to the PSLE.[59] OSC had revealed a "preference for a more holistic education system" among Singaporeans, and the MOE hoped for the changes to help the country move away from an over-emphasis on academic performance.[60]

Negotiating SGfuture Policy Dilemmas

In November 2015, SGfuture was launched against the backdrop of the nationwide SG50 celebrations, the passing of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and the PAP's landslide victory in the 2015 General Elections. While it had been framed as a continuation of OSC, SGfuture was different from OSC: it focused on giving Singaporeans opportunities to turn their aspirations into reality.[61] SGfuture engagement sessions were designed to be "springboards" for Singaporeans to participate in national movements, either as volunteers for their chosen social causes, or as initiators of ground-up projects that aimed to benefit the community.[62] To facilitate citizen participation in these national movements, the government also launched Our Singapore Fund (OSF), a fund totaling $25 million to support these ground-up initiatives; and SG Cares in collaboration with the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Center (NVPC), a volunteerism movement that aimed to link Singaporeans with the organisations that tackled their chosen social cause. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) took the lead in coordinating SGfuture engagement activities across the government agencies.[63]

In her 2016 speech at the SGfuture launch, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu credited OSC with helping to articulate Singaporean aspirations, and said that the next phase, SGfuture, would help bring action into reality.[64] Fu also highlighted the intent of SGfuture in parliament:

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holistic learning, the Ministry of Education in 2012 ceased the tradition of announcing the names of each cohort's top PSLE scorers. Furthermore, PSLE result slips in 2013 no longer listed each cohort's highest and lowest T-score. Despite this and other measures, many OSC participants expressed concern that the PSLE system sorted children too finely, overemphasized academic performance, created increased reliance on extra tuition classes, and subjected children to high levels of stress. Prime Minister Lee in his 2013 National Day Rally speech acknowledged that a one-point difference in T-score made all the difference in secondary school posting, and this was a distinction that was "meaningless and too fine to make".

;See "Primary School Leaving Examination." National Library Board Singapore. 2016. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-07-08_114217.html.

;and Keynote Address by Mr Heng Swee Keat. 25 September 2013.

58 Keynote Address by Mr Heng Swee Keat. 25 September 2013.

59 Singapore Parliament Debates (Hansard). "Teacher's Feedback for New PSLE Scoring System", Volume No:94, Sitting No:25, 10 October 2016

60 "Changes to the PSLE Scoring and Secondary O–ne Posting." Ministry of Education. 2016. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/psle/.

61 Singapore. SGfuture Committee. SGfuture Report. Singapore, 2015.

62 Ibid.

63 "A shared endeavour to strengthen national pride and identity, speech by Ms Grace Fu." MCCY Speeches. April 14, 2016. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.mccy.gov.sg/news/speeches/2016/Apr/shared-endeavour-to-strengthen-national-pride-and-identity.aspx.

64 "SGfuture dialogue sessions launched to engage youth on Singapore's future." Channel NewsAsia, 29 November 2015

"…engaging citizens will take on new urgency for Government, to grow a strong society and a robust social compact. The series of SGfuture engagements represents a major step towards promoting citizen engagement across all of government. We hope it will jumpstart the building of whole-of-government capacity in citizen engagement, extending and expanding citizen engagement efforts in years to come."[65]

Fu, 2016

Scope

Compared to OSC, which had drawn over forty thousand participants, SGfuture was held on a smaller scale, with 121 engagement sessions involving 8,300 Singaporeans.[66] The relatively smaller participant pool led to concerns about the formation of "echo chambers"[67] during discussions. Walter Sim wrote about the possibility that SGfuture discussions could have amplified certain views while obscuring the views of the "silent middle ground".[68] Sim also observed that participants in his dialogue sessions came from similar backgrounds or had similar interests, whilst others were partners or affiliates of the SGFuture organisers.

Policy dilemmas concerning the scope of future public engagement exercises had not changed since OSC. SGFuture organisers still had to consider new means of reaching new networks of citizens as well as the needs of the 'silent majority'. Kenneth Paul Tan warned that Singapore was at risk of sliding into authoritarian populism, in which stagnant social and political mobility would cause the elite to lose motivation to excel and the masses to become "disillusioned with and disengaged from" the system. To avoid this situation, he recommended that the government embrace change as well as develop a greater capacity for engaging and including a diverse public through more "empathetic" modes.[69]

Format

SGFuture organisers took several new approaches to engagement in SGFuture. For example, one session organised by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and facilitated by Minister for Manpower Lim Swee Say took the form of role-playing, with participants taking on the roles of job-seekers and potential employers to help them better understand how mismatches in the job market occurred. At the end of the session, Lim informed participants about government efforts to resolve some of the real-life frustrations that emerged from the exercise.[70]

At the time of writing, SGFuture organisers faced the challenge of devising new formats of engagement that were less resource-intensive without sacrificing the quality of conversation and ideas generated. The large amount of resources involved in

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65 Speech by Ms Grace Fu, 2016

66 "About SGfuture." SGfuture. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.sg/sgfuture/About-SGFuture.

67 Sim, Walter. "Is it just an echo chamber?" The Straits Times, 21 February 2016. Accessed 16 January 2018. http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/is-it-just-an-echo-chamber.

68 Ibid.

69 "Resisting authoritarian populism: Lessons from and for Singapore." TODAY, 22 May 2017

70 "SGFuture dialogue: Plenty of jobs, but few takers - why?" The Straits Times, 6 March 2016

the execution of OSC's engagement sessions meant that future sessions of a similar scale would not necessarily be feasible. During OSC, 203 volunteers were enlisted to facilitate 660 dialogues of 1645 hours of conversation in total.[71]

A possible solution to this dilemma could be to expand the use of online engagement platforms to help the government reach Singapore's 'digital natives'. A study on political engagement in Anglo-American democracies found that young people were the least likely demographic group to be engaged in public participation.[72] Another study indicated that "being connected" to the internet was positively correlated with political participation in youths from the Netherlands.[73] However, organisers of future engagement sessions hoping to use online engagement platforms would have to consider that older generations might not necessarily be willing to adopt new technological products or services,[74] which could limit the online reach of future engagement exercises. Furthermore, founding director and CEO of Australian digital public engagement organization Bang the Table Matthew Crozier warned against using Facebook as a platform for government community engagement. Crozier argued that Facebook is hardly the ideal "neutral space" for a community to discuss important issues or for collecting "reportable and measurable outcomes", as algorithms shape Facebook users' preferences and decisions by controlling their access to information. [75]

Credibility

The official SGfuture website featured numerous successful community-led initiatives born from the dialogues and supported by OSF.[76] According to NUS Associate Professor of Sociology Tan Ern Ser, the government's acknowledgement of feedback from SGfuture participants, particularly when this feedback then led to policy change, was a key part of demonstrating its sincerity in listening to the citizens. It was also important for the government to explain its considerations of the trade-offs as well as the basis of its decisions, particularly when policy diverged from popular suggestion.[77]

Former Nominated Member of Parliament and Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said he believed "more and better engagement" conducted at various societal levels from grassroots to national, and in both formal and informal settings, would help convince the middle ground of passive citizens that such exercises were the government's sincere attempts at citizen engagement, as opposed to "one big 'wayang'".[78]

However, developments at the time of writing may have negative implications on the government's future attempts at sincere engagement. One example was the

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71 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013, pp3.

72 Martin, Aaron J. Young people and politics: political engagement in the Anglo-American democracies. London: Routledge, 2014.

73 Bakker, Tom P., and Claes H. De Vreese. "Good News for the Future? Young People, Internet Use, and Political Participation." Communication Research 38, no. 4 (2011): 451-70. doi:10.1177/0093650210381738.

74 "The Big Read: Feeling lost in a digital world, some elderly shun technology." TODAY, 28 July 2017

75 "7 Reasons Why Facebook Is NOT For Government Community Engagement." Bang The Table. 11 December 2013

76 "Project Showcase." SGfuture. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.sg/sgfuture/Project-Showcase.

77 "After the dialogues: The road ahead." TODAY, 21 February 2016

78 Ibid.

'Wayang' is a Javanese term referring to a traditional form of puppet theatre, but is also used in colloquial Singaporean speech to mean an act of pretence

controversial 2017 presidential elections, in which the candidacy of the elections was reserved for members of the Malay minority race. The Constitutional Commission, an impartial body tasked with reviewing the presidential election system, had invited the public to submit their feedback about this matter. But in November 2017, a bill to amend the Singapore constitution regarding the Presidential Election system was passed in parliament,[79] despite the majority of Singaporeans—59 per cent, according to a survey conducted by Singapore-based market research consultancy Blackbox[80]—feeling such change was unnecessary.

In response to the outcome of a walkover victory that came about because only one candidate out of three had met the eligibility criteria, chief editor of sociopolitical blog *Consensus SG* Rio Hoe wrote that Singaporeans were "robbed" of the dignity of electing Singapore's first Malay and first female President.[81] While some Singaporeans viewed the election of Singapore's first Malay woman President more optimistically,[82] others such as Hong Kong Baptist University professor of media studies Cherian George said they felt the event demonstrated "the government's distrust of the people, its insistence on getting its way, and its lack of finesse in dealing with contentious issues."[83]

Process

There were several differences between OSC and SgFuture. Unlike OSC, which had been a deliberately open-ended process, SGfuture organised its engagement sessions into four specific themes: A Caring Community; A Cleaner, Greener and Smarter Home; A Secure and Resilient Nation; and A Learning People.[84]

Furthermore, while OSC had aimed to get to the heart of citizen concerns, SGfuture was framed as a platform for all Singaporeans to turn their ideas into reality.[85] During SGfuture, Singaporeans were encouraged to share their ideas in relation to the four themes and either initiate meaningful projects with the support of OSF, or volunteer for a social cause via the social movement SG Cares. Chan explained that this process was an attempt to bring together people from different backgrounds who had not previously been engaged, and that "new ideas and new ways of doing things" would emerge as a result of such a "serendipitous interface".[86] Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and Professor of Psychology at the Singapore Management

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79 "Elected Presidency: Amendments to Constitution passed in Parliament". Channel NewsAsia. 9 November 2017.

80 Black, David. Elected Presidency: Public Polling Insights. Blackbox Research. 21 October 2016. http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/09/EP-Forum_Session-1_S4_David-Black_211016.pdf

81 "Power and dignity: the true cost of the PAP's EP bargain." ConsensusSG, 11 September 2017.

82 An attempt had been made to solicit public feedback regarding this matter. The Constitutional Commission, an impartial body tasked with reviewing the Presidential Election system, invited the public to submit their feedback. Of the 107 submissions from various groups and individuals, the Commission invited 20 contributors to make oral presentations and clarifications of their views via public hearings. Apart from this, no other modes of public engagement took place.

83 George, Cherian. "The Singapore presidential (s)election: A monumental miscalculation." Mothership.SG. September 15, 2017. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://mothership.sg/2017/09/a-monumental-miscalculation/.
An excerpt from Cherian George's book, Singapore Incomplete (2017)

84 "About SGfuture." SGfuture. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.sg/sgfuture/About-SGFuture.

85 Singapore. SGfuture Committee. Our SGfuture, where will we take it? Singapore, 2016.

86 "What fresh ideas have emerged?" The Straits Times, 21 February 2016

University David Chan described SGfuture as a "ground-up and grounded action-oriented movement", facilitated by the government but driven by the people.[87]

At the time of writing, it was still unclear how the government could best gain an understanding of the core concerns of citizens on contentious issues such as race, sexuality, political censorship and democratization. The OSF FAQs noted that citizen-initiated projects of a certain nature would not receive funding: those that "create[d] misunderstanding in our multi-cultural and multi-religious society"; "[were] religious or political activities"; "advocate[d] for lifestyles, or have content held as objectionable by the general public"; or "undermine[d] the authority of any government or public institution."[88]

As of 2017, numerous impediments faced those who wished to organise public discussions about potentially controversial topics. In an interview with *Channel NewsAsia*, Ong Keng Sen, arts director of the Singapore International Arts Festival (SIFA), addressed the role of government censorship in stifling dissenting conversation.[89] Ong said that he had to allay officials' anxieties about SIFA's opening work, *Art As Res Publicae* ('art as public interest'), in 2017.[90] The work was meant to involve public discussants exploring the question "What is the 'intangible value' in an artwork?".[91] Officials feared that the issue to be discussed was "potentially dangerous", and questioned who was to be invited to the discussion. [92]

Ong also said he had to reassure officials about whether 'Becoming Graphic', a theatrical work, would feature content from Singaporean comic artist Sonny Liew's graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. Liew's novel, which won three Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards in 2017, had lost its National Arts Council (NAC) funding in 2015 on the basis that it potentially "undermined the authority or legitimacy of the Government and its public institutions". Though 'Becoming Graphic' did not feature Liew's graphics, Ong contended that official concerns "missed the point" of an independent festival originally intended to give value to art, citizen-led conversations and diverse views. [93]

Outcomes

SGfuture's final report made no mention of government-dictated outcomes or policy implementations. Rather, the report framed the role of the government as that of an "enabler" and "catalyst"; and focused on how government-facilitated, but ultimately citizen-driven dialogue had given birth to a multitude of community-enriching ground-up initiatives.[94]

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87 "2016: A year of looking to the future." The Straits Times, 17 December 2016

88 "FAQ." Our Singapore Fund. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.sg/oursingaporefund/faq.

89 "Ong Keng Sen 'embarrassed' talking about Singapore in front of international artists." Channel NewsAsia, 24 October 2015

90 "Ong Keng Sen disappointed after 4 years as Arts Fest director." The Straits Times, 12 September 2017

91 "Art As Res Publicae." Singapore International Festival of Arts. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.sifa.sg/theopen/programme/shows/art-as-res-publicae/.

92 "Ong Keng Sen disappointed after 4 years as Arts Fest director." The Straits Times, 12 September 2017

93 Ibid.

94 Singapore. Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) Committee. Reflections of Our Singapore Conversation: what future do we want? how do we get there? Singapore, 2013.

The most salient outcome of SGfuture was the collective impact of the various ground-up initiatives. The report featured 21 initiatives from the four SGfuture themes and their impact on their targeted communities. Some examples included Music for a Cause, which raised almost $20,000 in donations for five non-profit organisations, and The Food Bank Singapore, which minimised food waste by redistributing 60 tonnes of food.[95]

A less tangible outcome of SGfuture was a shift away from an emphasis on deliverables or policy-recommendations to a process-driven and straightforward approach to public engagement that cut to the heart of what mattered to Singaporeans. SGfuture's flexibility and adoption of new measures of success was an affirmation of this shift. In a *The Straits Times* interview, SGfuture co-chair Minister Chan Chun Sing said:

"We should also not try to measure it in terms of output or products, because the real success is not just the products but also the process, through which people feel that sense of ownership and engagement."*[96]*
Chan, 2016

Chan noted that SGfuture had helped create new norms of "co-creating" solutions.[97] This new approach to governance was increasingly relational, with policies and services being delivered *with* the public, rather than just *for* the public.[98]

Future public engagement could result in political transformation through evolution of the modes of engagement itself. Kenneth Paul Tan saw the OSC as a means of getting a "narcissistic state" to trust in its citizens who, "for decades have been infantalized and denigrated as ignorant, short-sighted, selfish and even malicious".*[99]* Lien Foundation chairman Laurence Lien said he felt that social capital and trust were necessary to enable a shift away from a "vertical relationship" between Singaporeans and the government, one in which citizens were overly reliant on government and the government feared "empowering" citizens or "letting go". SMU Professor of Psychology and Lee Kuan Yew Fellow David Chan said in a 2014 panel discussion on liveability in Singapore that he believed the government appreciated that it ought not to micromanage, but faced a problem of assessing which areas would benefit from the government stepping back.*[100]*

The Future of Public Engagement in Bridging the 'Great Affective Divide'

The policies implemented in connection with OSC were likely to have been a contributory factor to the PAP's landslide victory in the 2015 General Elections. Referencing a 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer survey, Tan Ern Ser said that many had attributed the PAP's electoral performance to the Pioneer Generation Package, MediShield Life and adjusted income ceiling for HDB eligibility—policies all influenced

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95 Singapore. SGfuture Committee. Our SGfuture, where will we take it? Singapore, 2016.

96 "Tapping the strengths of citizens 'a natural evolution'." The Straits Times, 21 February 2016

97 "National movement to encourage more caring S'poreans." TODAY, 9 August 2016

98 Khoo and Lai, Ethos, pp8

99 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp149.

100 Chan, David. Liveability in Singapore: social and behavioural issues. Singapore: World Scientific, 2015, pp34.

by sentiments gathered during OSC dialogue. Tan Ern Ser said there was some correlation between the rise in Singaporean trust in Government and the PAP's landslide electoral victory in 2015.[101] But the same survey conducted in 2017 revealed that only 69 per cent of the general population trusted in government, a 5 percentage-point decrease from 2016.[102]

Nevertheless, PAP's stronger electoral mandate in 2015—ostensibly due to growth in citizen trust—did not make policymaking any easier. Associate Dean for executive education and research at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Donald Low contended in his book *Hard Choices* (2014) that policymaking had grown more complex, uncertain and unpredictable.[103] Policy problems were increasingly interconnected, and citizens increasingly intolerant of government mistakes.[104] He cautioned against viewing the economy and society as machines "governed by stable and predictable causal relations". [105] Such approaches, he argued, were no longer useful.

Given the increasing difficulty of policymaking, author and associate director of the Economist Corporate Network Sudhir Vadaketh argued that Singapore's transformation into a "global knowledge capital"[106] required transparent informational flows for the emergence of diverse ideas.[107] According to Vadaketh, the PAP Government's traditional model of "benevolent developmental authoritarianism" was ill-equipped to serve as the basis of a knowledge-driven economy. In an open and globalised world in which knowledge exists in 'disparate pockets', free informational flows would lead to more optimal economic, political and social outcomes, he argued.[108]

Low also proposed that the Singaporean social compact should no longer center around primacy of growth. On achieving this ideological transformation, he wrote:

"The first step may well be for the PAP ministers to take a (big) step back, open up the space for policy and political dialogue, and see their role as that of a facilitator, convenor and aggregator (of ideas and diverse views). It means moving away from the model of elite governance centred on leaders sitting atop a vast government hierarchy to one of collective governance built on a distributed, non-partisan network of community activists, policy researchers, members of parliament, social workers, and, of course, civil servants. It means tapping the collective wisdom of citizens, and leveraging the tools of social innovation, co-creation, and crowd-sourcing."[109]

Low, 2014

101 "Trust in Singapore government rises after 3-year decline: survey." Yahoo Newsroom, 25 January 2016

102 "2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, Singapore." LinkedIn SlideShare. February 09, 2017. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanAPAC/2017-edelman-trust-barometer-singapore.

103 Low and Vadaketh, pp171

104 Ibid. pp172

105 Ibid. pp174

106 "Knowledge-Based Economy." Singapore Economic Development Board. Accessed 25 September 2017. https://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/why-singapore/about-singapore/values/knowledge.html.

107 Low and Vadaketh, pp189

108 Ibid. pp188

109 Ibid. pp185

Conclusion

The organisers of OSC and SGfuture took an approach to public engagement that resulted in both tangible and intangible positive outcomes for society. The tangible outcomes included policy shifts to address emergent citizen aspirations, as well as numerous community-driven initiatives to meet citizen-articulated needs. The intangible outcomes included the creation of social capital and trust, as well as a transformation in citizen-government relations.

In the context of 2017, the dialectical tensions of globalisation have prompted Singaporeans of the 21st century to consider whether their identities and values can be comfortably situated within the mainstream "static and clear-cut" [110] Singapore story. Singapore's increasingly complex social and economic realities necessitate a shift towards a more decentralised and networked mode of governance. These shifts should ideally involve public engagement exercises that channel diverse citizen viewpoints into meaningful policy change, and will require high levels of social capital and trust between Singaporeans and the State. In the future, bridging the 'Great Affective Divide' will require closer examination of past policy dilemmas in public engagement, and the application of lessons learnt to changing contexts.

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110 Tan, Governing global-city Singapore, pp 133.