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**Future-Ready Society Conference 2024:
Learning Journey 2 — Citizens' Assemblies, Panels and Juries**

By Tay Yi Xuan

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series is a partnership between the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC) and Tote Board. As part of this series, learning journeys serve to introduce novel ideas to spark dialogue across the people, private and public sectors. These discussions are a prelude to the annual flagship Future-Ready Society conference, which aims to explore future trends, emerging issues and untapped opportunities along with insightful responses and solutions to address pressing societal challenges.

The second learning journey titled "Citizens' Assemblies, Panels and Juries" took place on 18 July 2024. Moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow and head of Policy Lab at IPS, the session featured presentations from two international experts who highlighted the transformative potential of citizens' assemblies in fostering inclusive decision-making and community empowerment. Following that, a local practitioner and researcher shared insights on similar approaches done in Singapore.

The Role and Transformative Potential of Citizens' Assemblies

Ms Claudia Chwalisz, Founder and CEO of DemocracyNext, began her segment by introducing different models of direct democracy.

Deliberative democracy seeks to involve small but representative groups engaging in in-depth discussion, aiming for thorough consideration of diverse perspectives to achieve consensus. In contrast, participatory democracy focuses on breadth, seeking to get a general sense of public opinion from large numbers of people. While each model has its distinct advantage, one can complement the other towards creating a more inclusive and responsive governance system.

Ms Chwalisz then delved into the key components of citizens' assemblies, an approach anchored in deliberative democracy. The first component — sortition — involves a two-stage participant selection process that combines random selection with stratified selection, to create a diverse and representative participant pool. This diversity ensures that the assembly reflects the community. Following that, a group-building stage fosters trust among participants at the outset, which is essential in facilitating meaningful and productive discussions. The most

substantial phase — deliberation — comprises in-depth learning from experts and grappling with various perspectives from a broad array of stakeholders affected by the issue. This phase aims for consensus, typically requiring a 75–80 per cent agreement for a recommendation to be endorsed.

Highlighting a growing global trend towards deliberative democracy, Ms Chwalisz described several case studies across the world, emphasising the flexibility in adapting citizens' assemblies to various scales and contexts, from city-level issues to broader institutional reforms. The 2023 Citizens' Assemblies in Bonn and Dresden, for instance, deliberated on ways to make the cities' museums more relevant and welcoming public spaces for social dialogue. Elsewhere, the Irish Citizens' Assembly brought about significant policy changes such as the 2018 abortion referendum and the 2019 Climate Action Plan, while the Parisian Citizens' Assembly developed a Citizen Bill on homelessness, which was enacted by Paris City Council in 2024.

Overall, Ms Chwalisz stressed that citizens' assemblies play a pivotal role in fostering a new kind of democratic future. By prioritising representative voices and thorough deliberation, these assemblies can effectively enhance democratic engagement and decision-making. She also highlighted the exciting possibilities for integrating technology to further enhance these democratic processes. Concluding her presentation, she issued a call to action, introducing the Assembly Guide developed by DemocracyNext and encouraging the audience to utilise this valuable resource for implementing citizens' assemblies within their own communities.

Inclusive Neighbourhood-Based Children's Parliament in India

Ms Swarnalakshmi Ravi, Programme Coordinator for South Zone at PRATYeK, NINEISMINE, a child-led advocacy initiative for the rights of all children, delivered a presentation on the value of children's parliaments.

Drawing from her personal journey from participant to global advocate for children's welfare and inclusive education, she outlined the fundamental principles of neighbourhood parliaments, which include both children's and adults' parliaments. These include: 1) maintaining numerical uniformity to ensure a proportionate parliament size representative of the community, 2) keeping the parliament size manageable to facilitate communication, 3) allowing for the recall of participants who do not participate meaningfully, 4) emphasising subsidiarity by organising parliaments at the most local level, and 5) integrating similar issues and stakeholders to avoid unnecessary conflicts and duplications. Altogether, these principles are essential in enabling equitable representation and effective discussions and solutioning at the local scale.

Central to neighbourhood parliaments is the concept of sociocracy, which focuses on consent decision-making, where decisions are made when no one has a paramount objection. This approach involves organising participants into small circles, allowing them to discuss and justify their opinions, ensuring all perspectives are considered. Communication between circles also ensures alignment across the parliament, and leaders are elected by consent to foster inclusivity and collaboration.

Ms Ravi further highlighted various examples of neighbourhood parliaments and bottom-up governance. For instance, the Kudumbashree model in Kerala, India is a women's collective that has empowered women to start small businesses and participate in local governance, contributing to community development. Similarly, PRATYeK's NINEISMINE campaign in India supports children's parliaments and advocates for allocating 9 per cent of the country's GDP to children's education and health. Other examples include sociocratic governance models in Rojava and Utrechtse Heuvelrug in the Netherlands, characterised by high civil participation in policy decision-making processes based on consent. The World Children's Parliament is another success, with recommendations presented at the United Nations. Beyond governance, sociocracy has proven effective in the corporate sector — with research in Austria showing 38 per cent higher efficiency in companies using sociocracy, and in education where children from schools in USA that adopt sociocratic methods, such as the Rainbow Community School, outperformed their peers in reflective judgement.

In concluding, Ms Ravi emphasised that traditional governance models often fall short of meeting our evolving needs, especially in complex and challenging times. It is thus imperative that we adopt new, inclusive, and transparent approaches — to which, mutual leadership, between governments and citizens, both adults and children alike, is central to this transformation. By integrating diverse perspectives, we can build a more holistic and representative decision-making process, ultimately creating a more effective and responsive governance system for our future.

Situating Citizens' Assemblies and Children's Participation in the Local Context

Drawing from her experience in participatory approaches involving children and youth, Ms Lin Xiaoling, Director of the Research and Advocacy Department at the Singapore Children's Society, discussed the challenges of creating a participant pool that accurately represents the broader community of children and youth. Reflecting on Ms Chwalisz's sharing, Ms Lin expressed optimism in the potential of sortition in preventing self-selection to include a more diverse range of voices.

Ms Lin also alluded to the relevance of the Lundy model of children participation, noting that a significant challenge in effective children participation lies in achieving true influence. Linking this to Ms Ravi's presentation, she observed that adults often doubt children's maturity and ability to contribute meaningfully to decision-making. Sharing counter examples, she emphasised the richness of children's experiences and insights, especially regarding modern issues like cyber safety and AI technologies, underscoring the importance of including them in decision-making processes.

Echoing Ms Lin's sentiments, Dr Carol Soon, Principal Research Fellow at IPS, highlighted the tendency for adults to underestimate the capabilities of children and youth, an observation from her past experiences conducting citizens' panels with young people. She agreed with the value of sortition, as discussed by Ms Chwalisz, and noted its principles have been applied in various citizens' panels convened locally with government agencies.

Dr Soon further underscored the crucial role of trust in citizens' assemblies and panels. For one, building participants' trust in the process is essential to encourage active participation,

requiring clear communication about the intent and objectives of the engagement. On the other hand, establishing trust among participants is also vital for meaningful engagement, necessitating transparency in the participant selection and a focus on recognising diverse perspectives towards a common goal.

Highlights from the Question-and-Answer Segment

Question: What are the key motivations of government bodies in convening citizens' assemblies?

Ms Chwalisz outlined two primary reasons why government bodies would convene citizens' assemblies. First, from the public administration perspective, these assemblies provide a means to tackle complex issues or political deadlocks by generating new ideas and gaining legitimacy for action. Second, from the political standpoint, citizens' assemblies present a means to re-illuminate public voice and engender agency, particularly in response to rising dissatisfaction towards autocratic trends.

Question: Is decision-making based on voting in citizens' assemblies due to the large group of participants involved, and by extension, is decision-making by consent limited in scale?

Ms Chwalisz explained that decision-making by consent is impractical in large citizens' assemblies. Nevertheless, the extensive deliberative process, which can span several months and is marked by deep discussion and respect for differing views, often leads to strong understanding and support for the final outcomes.

Question: How do we get adults to trust children in decision-making?

Drawing on personal anecdotes as well as the documentary *Power to the Children*, Ms Ravi emphasised that although adults may initially hesitate to involve children in decision-making, giving them the chance to participated actively often leads to thoughtful engagement and effective problem-solving. This involvement helps showcase children's abilities and gradually builds respect and trust in their contributions, encouraging a more inclusive approach to decision-making.

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