



Lee Kuan Yew
Centre for
Innovative Cities



Future-Ready Society Conference 2024: Learning Journey 3 — Participedia

By Dolphie Bou

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 third learning journey, titled “Participedia”, was held on 13 August 2024 and moderated by Dr Harvey Neo, Professorial Research Fellow at LKYCIC. [Participedia.net](https://participedia.net) is a global network and crowdsourcing platform for policymakers, civil society organisations, practitioners and researchers with an interest in public participation and democratic innovations. The session featured insights from Dr Patrick Scully, who served as Participedia’s managing director from 2011 to 2021, and Dr Paul Emiljanowicz, Participedia’s current managing director. Together, they provided a comprehensive overview of Participedia’s origins, evolution, current focus and future direction, highlighting the importance of inclusive and innovative approaches to participatory democracy. The session concluded with a break-out and Q&A segment, where participants had the opportunity to delve into the nuances of implementing democratic innovations in Singapore’s unique context and how Participedia could be adapted for this purpose.

Introduction to Participedia: Taking Stock of Ground-Up Democracy

Dr Patrick Scully opened the session by outlining the origins of Participedia, a platform created in response to growing concerns about the effectiveness of democratic processes.

Founded 15 years ago by political theorists Dr Mark E. Warren and Dr Archon Fung, the project emerged from the hypothesis that societies worldwide are undergoing a transformation of democratic governance, potentially as revolutionary as the development of representative, party-based democracy. This shift is driven by the rise of numerous new channels for citizen involvement in government, many of which operate outside the more visible and traditional politics of electoral representation. These channels have empowered citizens to become more

vocal and better organised, enabling them to resist and challenge policies that do not represent their true interests. In other words, while elected governments gain broad mandates through the electoral process, electoral democracy alone does not provide sufficient legitimacy for governing specific policy areas. The key research question that spurred the development of Participedia was thus, “What kind of participatory democratic innovations work best for specific purposes and conditions?”

In its early stages, Participedia operated on a rudimentary Mediawiki platform built by the founders with the help of a Stanford graduate student, serving as a proof of concept and securing further funding. In 2010, the project received two consecutive grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, totalling CA\$2.5 million. During this phase, the project expanded rapidly, involving partnerships with 23 universities, four non-governmental organisations (including the World Bank), 30 co-investigators and 25 collaborators. The focus was on building a global network of researchers and practitioners to catalogue and compare participatory political processes. Key activities included teaching, training, mentoring, refining data models, improving user interface (e.g., enabling automatic translations of data models into 11 languages), ensuring quality control, and enhancing communications and knowledge mobilisation.

Dr Scully concluded his segment by providing a practical guide to navigating Participedia, highlighting its main features, such as cases, methods, organisations and collections; and offered insights into how information is structured and organised on the platform to support its mission of disseminating knowledge on democratic innovations.

Transition to Participedia Phase 2: Decolonising Knowledge

Next, Dr Paul Emiljanowicz detailed Participedia’s transition into its second phase, which focuses on revitalising and “re-enchanting” democratic innovations globally. A key objective of this phase is to address knowledge-building asymmetries, with a particular emphasis on integrating non-Western frameworks into the discourse.

One of the most significant developments in Phase 2 is the expansion beyond participatory governance to include seven new clusters each concentrating on different aspects of democratic innovation: human and political rights, democracy across borders, digital democracy, democratic representation, democratic accountability, indigenous cluster and quantitative cluster. Although this cluster model is designed to be decentralised, the core team systems and programming remain in place to support the mobilisation of knowledge generated by each cluster’s work. Dr Emiljanowicz shared that the added benefit of such a decentralised cluster model lies in its flexibility, which enables teams to operate semi-independently across different regions, methods and thematic areas. Moreover, this approach enhances collaboration and collective intelligence, while embracing the pluriversality and diversity of incorporating different ontoepistemic and sociopolitical contexts into the knowledge base. The new model therefore reflects a broader ambition of developing a greater appreciation for non-Western frameworks in understanding governance and ideating democratic innovations.

Notable projects within these clusters include efforts to decolonise democratic innovation and initiatives focused on teaching, training and mentoring. These projects are further complemented by experimental activities in democratic innovation and partnered pilot projects. For instance, deliberative exercises using civic technology, such as [Green Belt Pol.is](#), are being used to facilitate environmental discussions, while initiatives like [Demo.Reset](#) and the [Design Jam](#) in Bogotá, Colombia, are fostering collaboration among practitioners from the Global South to prototype solutions to shared challenges.

Wrapping up his segment, Dr Emiljanowicz outlined Participedia's future plans, which include strengthening and expanding existing substantive areas, collaborating with practitioners to bolster frontline democracy work, and amplifying communications to increase awareness of Participedia and its resources, outputs and programming.

Discussion Points from Break-Out Rooms

Following the sharing session, participants were divided into four smaller groups to discuss questions prepared by the speakers. The key discussion points have been summarised below.

Question: Where do you see democracy happening in your professional work or in your everyday life as a citizen?

Participants observed the implementation of democratic innovations at varying levels within their workplaces. In sectors such as healthcare, for example, some participants noted how feedback from dementia patients and caretakers have been used to develop more targeted programmes. A participant who was an urban planner also incorporated democratic innovations into the strategic planning of cities.

However, on a personal level, some participants expressed concerns about voicing their opinions in the workplace, attributing this hesitancy to the broader political context in Singapore. They pointed to the example of governance in Singapore, whereby strong state intervention has, on one hand, successfully safeguarded the well-being of a majority of the population; but on the other, it has contributed to a citizenry that relies heavily on the government to initiate and eventually solve their problems rather than taking direct action. Participants shared that they believed some of this culture has also permeated into their workplace, where "groupthink" could suppress individual expression.

Question: What hopes and/or concerns do you have about the potential for expanding & strengthening the role of participatory governance?

A recurring theme was the challenge of balancing citizen participation with the ability to act on their input. Participants expressed worries that engaging citizens without delivering tangible outcomes could lead to disillusionment and decreased participation. They also highlighted the difficulty of reaching diverse, often hard-to-reach populations, such as the elderly and those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, which poses a significant barrier to achieving truly inclusive democracy.

In response, Dr Scully emphasised the importance of clearly understanding the goals behind seeking citizen participation. He noted that the scale and depth of participation are often

constrained by factors. These range from the availability of financial and labour resources required to set up participation channels, to ensuring participation is representative of the target population. While stressing that there is no simple formula for this process, based on his experience as a practitioner, Dr Scully suggested that the focus should be on clearly communicating one's goals throughout the process. When inviting participants into the conversation, it is crucial to be transparent about the purpose of their input, the extent of their influence on decision-making, and why some inputs may not ultimately be accepted. Communicating the justification behind the final outcome is equally important for participants to feel that their input and contributions have been thoroughly considered.

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