Future-Ready Society Conference Series 2024: The Future of Citizen Participation and Collective Intelligence

By Tay Yi Xuan, Flora Yuting Du, Dolphie Bou and Joscelyn Chong

Introduction

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series is part of a tripartite partnership between the Tote Board, the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC), and Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). Following the inaugural conference in 2023 on the "Future of Empowered Communities", the second instalment took place on 1 October 2024, centred on the "Future of Citizen Participation and Collective Intelligence". This year's theme is particularly timely given the recent Forward Singapore exercise that has marked a new phase in the nation's journey towards participatory governance — from engagement and consultation to co-creation.

The conference sought to explore critical questions: How might policymakers engage meaningfully with citizens? As more citizens take on active roles to co-create solutions, how do we reconcile the diversity of opinions and values at play? What are the conditions for mass participation to result in collective wisdom, and when does this turn into mob rule? Through a series of panel discussions and interactive dialogue sessions, policymakers, practitioners, academics and experts from various disciplines shared their insights on these pressing topics, enriching the ongoing discourse surrounding effective governance and civic engagement.

Professor Cheong Koon Hean, Chair of LKYCIC, delivered her welcome remarks for the conference.

Professor Cheong Koon Hean, Chair of LKYCIC, delivered the welcome remarks. She began by highlighting the innovative nature of the Future-Ready Society programme, which fosters a tripartite plus (3P+) partnership that unites the people, public, private and academic sectors to collaboratively address societal challenges.

This collaboration not only expands the collective knowledge base but also facilitates the creation of new community-based initiatives and the testing of future solutions. The programme comprises two key components: the Knowledge Partnership, focused on identifying potential challenges and opportunities, and the Impact Fund, which supports the piloting of novel initiatives to enhance citizen well-being and future readiness. Since its launch last year, the programme has achieved significant milestones, including 30 impact fund proposals from community partners, eight ongoing research projects under the knowledge partnership programme and five pilot projects in development.

Professor Cheong concluded by underscoring the importance of the conference theme, stating, “Together, we can shape a future where every citizen has a voice and where our collective intelligence drives progress.”

Research and Insights 1: The Future of Collaboration

Research Assistant Professor and Head of Urban Psychology Lab at LKYCIC Dr Samuel Chng speaking at the first research and insights segment on the future of collaboration.

In the conference's first presentation, Dr Samuel Chng, Research Assistant Professor and Head of the Urban Psychology Lab at LKYCIC, reflected on the aspiration towards a future-ready society — one that is prepared for whatever the future has in store, be it forecast or unpredicted. He emphasised that members of such a society are aware of the values, policies and societal features they desire and are committed to realising that future.

Dr Chng then outlined the Future-Ready Society programme's objectives, which aim to bridge research and practice through evidence-based methods, action-driven research and meaningful partnerships among the people, public, private and academic sectors (3P+). He described the programme's two components: the knowledge partnership, which includes ongoing projects like "The Future of Non-Profit Sector in Singapore", exploring the motivations and challenges faced by non-profit leaders, and "Building Child-Friendly Neighbourhoods in Singapore", focusing on creating more inclusive environments for children. The impact fund supports initiatives such as "participatory budgeting", where residents develop and vote on ideas for new neighbourhood programs, and "citizens re-assembled", a polling exercise designed to facilitate meaningful discourse on issues that have divided views.

Dr Chng concluded with a call for participants to be involved in the programme and to play a part in shaping and building a future-ready society.

Panel 1: How Can Citizens Participate Meaningfully in Singapore?

From left to right: Dr Carol Soon, Mr Adrian Liew, Ms Lim Weilin and Dr Harvey Neo speaking on Panel 1 of the conference.

The first panel, moderated by Dr Harvey Neo, Professorial Research Fellow at LKYCIC, explored the theme "How Can Citizens Participate Meaningfully in Singapore?"

Ms Lim Weilin, Senior Director at REACH, began by discussing the agency's role in facilitating two-way communication between the government and citizens on critical issues such as cost of living, job security and social mobility. She highlighted REACH's tailored engagement strategies, which incorporate feedback from advisory panels representing diverse community sectors and employ a mix of in-person and digital formats, including dialogues and interactive theatre. Notable initiatives include interactive Telegram chats for feedback and the Singapore

Model Parliament, a flagship youth programme that engages participants through workshops and discussions with political leaders.

Mr Adrian Liew, founder of OPPi, focused on how participatory polling and technology can bridge opinion divides. He emphasised that effective platforms should be citizen-driven, collaborative, transparent and scalable — drawing insights from successful digital participation tools around the world. Additionally, Mr Liew highlighted the importance of creating user-friendly civic engagement tools that enable citizens to express their opinions freely and foster common ground. He illustrated this with a use case in a neighbourhood renewal programme, where residents discussed and voted on proposed architectural designs, showcasing how emergent polling can enhance resource allocation in alignment with community priorities.

Dr Carol Soon, Principal Research Fellow and Head of Society and Culture at IPS, described the significance of citizen panels in improving public engagement in decision-making. These panels involve multiple sessions over weeks or months, allowing participants to deliberate on policy issues and formulate recommendations. Dr Soon emphasised the importance of diversity, fairness and knowledge exchange in fostering constructive citizen participation. She highlighted the empowering effect on participants, many of whom gained a deeper understanding of policymaking and felt more confident in their roles as active citizens.

The panel wrapped with a lively Q&A session, where panellists addressed topics such as inclusivity, the balance of diverse opinions, and the building of trust between citizens and government. They shared practical strategies to navigate these challenges, emphasising the need for innovative tools and methods to foster meaningful participation and prevent having participants walk out from engagements feeling more divided than ever. Ultimately, the panellists agreed that the benefits of meaningful citizen participation significantly outweigh the drawbacks, advocating for continuous improvement in engagement strategies to ensure a more inclusive and effective democratic process.

Research and Insights 2: Bringing Everyone Along, Even Those Who Don't Get Along

Founder & Director of Crowdsense and Action Fellow under the Future-Ready Society programme Mr Lewis Liu sharing on the second research and insights segment.

Mr Lewis Liu, Founder and Director of Crowdsense and an Action Fellow under the Future-Ready Society programme, discussed his project, Citizens Re-Assembled, in his presentation titled “Bringing Everyone Along, Even Those Who Don't Get Along”. This initiative aims to enhance dialogue between citizens and the government, fostering a community of active participants while utilising government insights and various engagement methods. Mr Liu highlighted the project's goal of enabling citizens to develop policymaking skills and encouraging the government to adopt a collaborative approach to fill knowledge gaps.

He outlined three key reasons for these efforts: first, complex issues require the engagement of diverse stakeholders across society; second, encouraging citizen buy-in on policies that significantly impact their lives is crucial; and third, that there is a growing demand for greater citizen involvement in decision-making processes. The project is planned to span one to two years, focusing on a core group of 30 to 50 citizens engaged over multiple sessions, with the flexibility to include a wider audience. Government involvement will be essential for providing subject matter expertise and perspective.

Mr Liu concluded by inviting participants to engage with the initiative as it begins to identify a specific policy issue to address.

Panel 2: Sharing Decisions on How to Spend Money

From left to right: On Panel 2 of the conference were Mr Wee Keng Boon, Ms Karen Lee, Mr Vincent Ng and Dr Suhaila Zainal Shah.

The second panel, titled “Sharing Decisions on How to Spend Money” and moderated by Dr Suhaila Zainal Shah, Research Fellow at the LYKCIC, examined the roles of participatory budgeting and participatory grant-making in fostering citizen involvement in public fund allocation.

Mr Vincent Ng, Founding Member of A Good Space, opened the session with reflections from his time in New York City, where he participated in a participatory budgeting exercise involving US$5 million of the city’s budget. He shared key takeaways, such as the importance of scaffolding citizen engagement, the role of community-based organisations in empowering residents to shape local projects, and the need for better support systems to help citizens generate innovative ideas. Underscoring how participatory budgeting can foster a greater sense of ownership among citizens, he suggested adapting elements of the New York model in Singapore, such as establishing Borough Assembly Committees to evaluate proposals and fostering collaboration between government bodies and grassroots organisations.

Following this, Ms Karen Lee, Director of Partnership Lab at the National Youth Council, highlighted the importance of engaging youth in decision-making through participatory grant-making. She discussed initiatives like the Youth Action Challenge and Young Changemakers, which empower young people to pitch ideas, receive grants and lead projects that make a difference in their communities. These initiatives also include mentorship and workshops where youth can learn from industry experts, as well as a participatory budgeting component where the broader youth community votes on which projects receive additional funding. Ms Lee concluded by emphasising the need for inclusivity in grantmaking processes, reaching out to a broad spectrum of youth through both physical and online platforms to foster greater

participation and highlighting the capacity of young people to contribute meaningfully to society.

Mr Wee Keng Boon, General Manager of EM Services and Action Fellow of the Future-Ready Society programme, capped the panel by outlining plans for Singapore's first participatory budgeting project at a town council. He explained how the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme already engages residents in decisions about infrastructure upgrades and explored ways to expand this model through participatory budgeting. Mr Wee acknowledged challenges and opportunities of engaging a diverse range of residents in decision-making, particularly through door-to-door outreach and innovative voting mechanisms. The goal is to ensure that town upgrades reflect community needs while fostering a sense of ownership among residents, transforming the relationship with the town council from transactional to collaborative.

During the Q&A session, participants explored key topics such as the long-term sustainability of participatory budgeting and grantmaking projects, criteria for measuring project success, and the role of participatory budgeting in promoting community ownership. The value of learning was also stressed, with the idea that projects not meeting expectations should be viewed as opportunities for growth rather than as failures. Collectively, the panellists underscored the essential importance of inclusivity, continuity and flexibility in ensuring the success of participatory budgeting initiatives.

Panel 3: From Citizen Science to Citizen Social Science — Collective Mapping of Social Needs and Community Assets

From left to right, Mr Dominic Soon, Mr Steve Loh, Associate Professor Natalie Pang, Mr Lenard Pattiselanno and Dr Justin Lee speaking on Panel 3 of the conference.

The third panel focused on “From Citizen Science to Citizen Social Science — Collective Mapping of Social Needs and Community Assets” and was moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Head of Policy Lab at IPS. His session began with a presentation demonstrating how technology and social design can mobilize diverse contributions to create a "Supermind" that exceeds individual capabilities. Comparing citizen and social science, he stressed the unique challenges posed by the latter’s value-driven nature. He ended his presentation by reflecting on possible solutions and processes for shifting towards more solutions-focused networks between various stakeholders in the social service sector.

Associate Professor Natalie Pang, Head of the Department of Communications and New Media at National University of Singapore, highlighted the necessity of integrating both community and expert knowledge to create impactful solutions. She raised concerns about misinformation stemming from the decline of professional knowledge due to the rise of participatory internet platforms. Challenging conventional notions of expertise, she underscored the value of indigenous knowledge, which is often overlooked by outsiders. Associate Professor Pang advocated for a broader recognition of diverse knowledge sources to inform more effective decision-making.

Mr Lenard Pattiselanno, Senior Director of Community Leadership and Partnerships at NVPC, shared insights from CoLabs, an initiative designed to tackle complex social issues by engaging diverse stakeholders, including experts and service users. He reflected on the challenges faced during the “action” phase, particularly in achieving alignment and moving towards tangible outcomes. Mr Pattiselanno stressed the significance of including an issue owner or community partner from the outset, as their early involvement is crucial for fostering ownership and driving meaningful change with the community.

Shifting the focus to data collection, Mr Steve Loh, Executive Director of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation at Singapore Management University, pointed to the importance of transforming insights into actionable solutions. Drawing from his experience with social workers and low-income families, he pointed out that the identity of those conducting surveys and the framing of questions are pivotal. Mr Loh contended that involving community members in the data collection process often yields more authentic results compared to hiring external consultants. He advocated for an asset-based community development approach, highlighting how collective intelligence, passion and ownership among community members can catalyse significant change.

Lastly, Mr Dominic Soon, co-founder of better.sg, discussed the importance of carefully curating and organising talent to address specific challenges. His organisation mobilises volunteers, primarily young people, who contribute their technical skills to various public benefit projects. In his work, he discovered that connecting the right volunteers with the appropriate expertise to relevant projects is essential, particularly when there is a structured process for pairing volunteers with experts and community partners. This strategic approach has proven successful in amplifying the impact of their initiatives.

The session wrapped up with a Q&A segment, where panellists discussed managing sensitive information and balancing expert input with community voices. They highlighted the need for transparency while protecting privacy and creating a psychologically safe space for

participants to speak freely, noting that trust is fundamental to fostering open and meaningful dialogue. By cultivating inclusive and respectful environments, knowledge-sharing becomes more effective. Ultimately, prioritising these elements enables communities to enhance engagement and achieve positive outcomes in civic participation.

Panel 4: Harnessing Collective Intelligence and Civic Participation

From left to right: On the last panel for the conference were Professor Zhang Weiyu, Ms Tan Li San, Ms Dawn Yip and Dr Dilum Wewalaarachchi.

The final panel, titled “Harnessing Collective Intelligence and Civic Participation”, was moderated by Dr Dilum Wewalaarachchi, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies’ Policy Lab.

Ms Dawn Yip, Coordinating Director at the Singapore Government Partnerships Office (SGPO) at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, opened the session by discussing the evolution of citizen participation in Singapore. She noted the transition from traditional feedback methods to a forward-looking, “feedforward” approach, emphasising the need to balance co-creation with consultation. This shift, she explained, has been influenced by factors such as complexity, diversity, efficacy and growing polarisation. Ms Yip also outlined multiple avenues for citizens to actively engage with their communities and the government, citing various SGPO-led initiatives as examples of this growing civic involvement.

Ms Tan Li San, Chief Executive Officer of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), addressed the need for the social service sector to adapt to the evolving needs of Singapore’s population. She pointed out the growing complexity of social issues, such as mental health and ageing, as well as the sector's manpower limitations. To tackle these issues, Ms Tan detailed NCSS's commitment to building a dynamic and sustainable social service ecosystem, prioritizing enhanced service delivery. She also discussed the vital role of collaboration,

capacity building among social service agencies, and preparing for future challenges such as climate stress on vulnerable communities, and noted the critical role of citizen participation in shaping these solutions.

Professor Zhang Weiyu, from the Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore and founder of CivicTech Lab, examined the role of technology in promoting civic participation. While she acknowledged the potential of technology to enhance civic engagement, she warned that it cannot replace the essential human relationships and trust that underpin meaningful civic life. Professor Zhang also highlighted the risk of digital tools excluding less digitally literate individuals, urging Singapore to prioritise inclusivity in technology to broaden citizen engagement. She pointed to the need for thoughtful citizen participation in technological decision-making, where UNESCO guidelines could be used as a model.

During the Q&A segment, the panellists explored the meaning and value of collective intelligence in citizen participation, stressing collaboration across sectors and stakeholders. They highlighted challenges like engaging underserved communities, balancing top-down approaches with ground-up efforts, and involving fresh participants beyond the usual active groups. Reflecting on past initiatives that fell short, the discussion highlighted the importance of adaptability and inclusivity. Authentic communication and trust-building were cited as crucial for successful civic engagement. Ultimately, fostering collective problem-solving and enhancing participation require intentional efforts to reach diverse voices and perspectives.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email futureready@sutd.edu.sg. Additionally, to stay updated on the latest development of our project, we invite you to visit our website at *https://futurereadysociety.sg/* and sign up for our mailing list.

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