

Talking to each other: Do we have what it takes?

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RANGING from nationwide public consultations to targeted forums and one-to-one engagement on Facebook pages, citizens now have at their disposal a rich palate of options when communicating with policymakers. Effective government- citizen dialogue should have at least three ingredients: authenticity, egalitarianism and informed participation.

Policymakers' proactive approach in reaching out to different pockets of the citizenry instead of relying on post-implementation feedback sessions unveils heightened authenticity on their part. Such an approach also promotes greater egalitarianism among the public who want to be heard when it comes to matters close to their hearts.

Professor Beth Noveck from New York Law School has written about the death knell for the "closed model" of decision-making. In this model, although citizens may still have their say, they are thought to "lack the ability to make informed decisions on complex policy matters".

Instead, she advocates problem-solving to be distributed or shared across public, private and people sectors - which seeks to reap maximum benefits from diverse viewpoints.

Such a model is reflected in the growing recognition among our ministers that policy formulation should be more inclusive.

As for citizens, those ideas that have surfaced from Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) suggest that Singaporeans neither lack conviction nor imagination when it comes to recommending solutions to the problems that plague Singapore today.

However, as Singapore transits to a more inclusive model of distributed problem-solving, there is a need to ask: To what extent is there informed participation which underpins the quality of policy criticisms and suggestions in both the offline and online spheres?

To what extent do concerned citizens understand the pros and cons of a certain policy? Are they aware of the trade-offs that come with their suggestions? What implications do their suggestions have, not just for themselves but for Singapore over time, say, in the next 50 years?

These questions need to be asked if feedback is to serve as constructive input. Input to a productive dialogue between the state and citizenry should not merely be a cacophony of differing views as it is anathema to effective collaboration.

Just as policymakers evaluate trade-offs when implementing policies, it is imperative for the public to bring clarity of thought and purpose to their dialogue with the state.

Several thought leaders, as well as members of the public, have called for greater policy transparency. Some others have upped the ante and called for a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) - similar to legislation elsewhere that provides public access to historical archives, information relating to national security, law enforcement, and correspondences within ministries.

FOIA proponents argue that citizens should be armed with relevant facts and statistics so they can engage policymakers in an informed manner. They also dispel misconceptions of the Act as a legislation that provides the public with blanket access to all government information.

On the part of the Government, efforts in sharing information on policy and administrative matters are not wanting.

Its first-stop portal data.gov.sg provides convenient access to publicly available data, and facilitates research and analysis. It is a gargantuan endeavour which brings together more than 5,000 data sets from 50 government ministries and agencies.

A Web crawl done by the Institute of Policy Studies earlier this year found close to 200 online sites serving government ministries, statutory boards and organs of state. Thus, from the Government's perspective, information is not only readily available to the public, but also easily accessible.

Still, in spite of the copious supply of information, the public continues to lament the lack of transparency. A discernible climate of scepticism and distrust persists.

Thus, as the public and the state take a closer step towards a more collaborative and symbiotic relationship, it is time to revisit the fundamentals and ask ourselves if we have what it takes for both sides to talk to each other and not at each other.

To help answer this question, let me offer these points for consideration: Is the current array of publicly available information published by the Government sufficient? If not, what is lacking? If the Government were to consider an FOIA for Singapore, what form should it assume?

Or, instead of implementing an FOIA which places the burden of information provision on the Government (the asked party) rather than the citizen (the asking party), are there specific areas where the Government can do better when sharing data?

Only when we get the fundamentals right can we live out the promises of a meaningful conversation.

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A longer version of this article can be found at the IPSCommons blog (<http://ipscommons.sg/>).