

Citizens' panels have improved perceptions of govt engagement efforts: IPS study

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SINGAPORE - A new process to involve the community in coming up with solutions to policy issues has improved perceptions of the Government's willingness to partner citizens in policymaking, an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study has found.

The citizens' panel concept - one of the new ways public agencies are engaging Singaporeans under the SG Together movement - can also be tapped to deliberate on difficult and sensitive topics, said the study, which was released on Wednesday (May 19).

This can include issues such as the sharing of roads between cyclists and motorists, or gender and identity issues, said Dr Carol Soon, a co-author of the study, at a virtual media briefing.

At the same time, more can be done to ensure that groups like the lower-income are represented at these discussions, and to improve neutrality and minimise any conflict of interest, said the study, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth to analyse how the engagement process was carried out in Singapore.

It is also co-authored by Mr Sim Jui Liang, a former research associate at IPS.

Direct outcomes and impact on citizen engagement

The citizens' panel process, which is based on the Citizens' Jury process invented by American political scientist Ned Crosby in 1971, has tackled three topics so far, all between 2017 and 2019: diabetes, recycling, and work-life harmony.

The study, which included survey findings as well as observations by the co-authors at all three citizens' panels, found that the panels' recommendations led to direct policy outcomes.

For instance, the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment - which was then known as the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources - has started work on supporting four pilot projects that emerged from the Recycle Right Citizens' Workgroup.

One is to put in place a deposit refund scheme, where consumers can get a refund when they recycle an empty bottle or container. In March, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu announced that such a scheme for beverage containers will be legislated by 2022.

The process also resulted in changes in the participants' attitudes towards policymaking, and led to higher levels of trust in the Government's intention and desire to work with citizens to solve policy problems.

Participants who took part in the panel on recycling and work-life harmony were more likely to agree with the statement that the Government is committed to partner citizens to build a future Singapore after the panel wrapped up.

There was 5 per cent and 10 per cent increase respectively for the two panels, the study found. This question was not asked for the panel on diabetes.

Participants' perceptions of whether the Government seriously considered their suggestions at public engagement sessions had also improved after the panels. But the panel on work-life harmony was an exception - there was a 2.8 percentage point drop in the proportion of people who agreed with the statement after the panel wrapped up.

Dr Soon, who is head of the IPS' society and culture department, said on Wednesday that the complexity of work-life harmony, unlike the other two more straightforward topics, may have contributed to the slight drop.

Another possible reason is that several ministries were involved in the citizens' panel process for work-life harmony, unlike the other two.

"Participants' exposure to the different ministries and their considerations or priorities might have led them to recognise the complexities involved and the trade-offs within government that have to be made," she said.

Suggestions for improvement

While the panels were designed with diversity in mind, those from the lower-income group or who had less education were often under-represented, the study found.

This is an issue that has also been faced in other countries such as Australia, which have also used such panels to get citizens involved in the policymaking process, said Dr Soon.

To overcome this, sufficient time must be allocated to recruitment, said the study. Organisers can also reach out to vulnerable segments, such as low-income families and seniors by working with community organisations.

An honorarium can also be given to participants so that low-wage earners can be assured that their participation would not result in lost income.

If the topic that is being tackled is more complex and multi-faceted, more time will have to be allocated to discussions, the study found.

Just about one in four of the participants in the panel on work-life harmony agreed that they had enough time to discuss the topic, compared with three in five who agreed for the other two panels on the relatively more straightforward topics of diabetes and recycling.

This could be due to the complex nature of the topic, which required more time and space for participants to explore and agree on what work-life harmony means, and how to measure if it has been achieved, before they could even proceed to coming up with solutions.

While the panels that have been held in Singapore have been led by government agencies, Dr Soon suggested that it may be worth considering commissioning a third party to design and manage the entire process, including recruitment, selection and convening the sessions.

Alternatively, an oversight panel, comprising members who are chosen for their knowledge of the topic and lack of conflict of interest in any outcome, can also be appointed to oversee and review the process to minimise bias.

"We've seen through the three panels that, clearly, the Government is anything but monolithic and homogeneous. Some agencies have a larger appetite for contestation of ideas and so-called more extreme positions that could be held by members of the public... It might be good to have, for instance, a more distanced or neutral party to oversee the

recruitment and the design process to ensure that there is fairness and parity for all," said Dr Soon.

About the Citizens' Panel

Unlike the one-off group discussions seen in previous engagement exercises, such as Remaking Singapore and Our Singapore Conversation, the citizens' panel process took place over four sessions and explored ideas in a more in-depth and rigorous manner.

The concept has also been used to tackle difficult topics such as abortion, which was discussed in Ireland, as well as the construction of nuclear reactors in South Korea.

The panels comprised:

- The Citizens' Jury on the War on Diabetes convened by the Ministry of Health (November 2017 to January 2018) which involved 76 participants.
- The Recycle Right Citizens' Workgroup by the then Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (September-October 2019). A total of 48 people were recruited, but four dropped out.
- The Citizens' Panel on Work-Life Harmony, which involved the National Population and Talent Division, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Social and Family Development and IPS (September to November 2019). It had 55 participants.

Participants were provided with information kits and briefings before the start of the panel discussions.

Government agencies involved in leading the panels also responded to the needs of participants during the process, such as by connecting them with experts during the process.

This allowed for participants to go beyond their personal experiences to think about constraints such as budget, sustainability and trade-offs.

Many participants also embarked on their own research to test out the viability of their ideas.