

Covid-19 has shown what's possible through partnerships

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When Singapore's Covid-19 cases were rising quickly in March last year, and more spaces were needed to quarantine people, a group of organisations came forward to work with the Government on solutions.

There was no leader among them, no well-laid plan to follow, but in three days, they transformed the Singapore Expo Convention and Exhibition Centre into an isolation facility with 950 beds.

Recounting this at a roundtable on Monday, Mr Tan Chong Meng, group chief executive of PSA International, described this as one of the first collaborations that pointed the way forward for such private-public partnerships that led to the formation of the Alliances for Action (AfAs).

"It wasn't one of a single leader and a band of people who knew what they were doing and standing by there... waiting for something to happen," said Mr Tan, who is also co-chair of the Emerging Stronger Taskforce, formed to chart Singapore's economic recovery post-Covid-19.

"It was people who came together without a script, but with help from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Manpower and so on, formed a plan together... that taught us that we can be resourceful and we can collaborate."

The first AfAs were industry-led alliances convened by the Emerging Stronger Taskforce to work closely with the Government and act on key growth opportunities quickly and nimbly. But the "start-up" approach taken has also been applied to the social issues top on people's minds, which emerged from the ongoing Emerging Stronger Conversations public engagement exercise.

Mr Tan was speaking at The Straits Times roundtable on Singapore Together through alliances, organised in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah, who helps guide the conversation series, said at the roundtable: "You could say it's a new name for partnerships. At the end of it, when we've talked with Singaporeans, when we've exchanged ideas and come up with things that we want to do, somebody has to carry it out.

"And we want to be nimble, we want to be quick, so you don't want heavy ponderous machinery to push it forward, but you want people who are in the different groups, in the different sectors - being the domain experts - being able to come up with strategies, implement them and working together with the Government."

There are now 19 AfAs covering economic, social and cross-cutting issues, on topics such as robotics and digitalising the built environment, digital literacy and access, work-life harmony, and the well-being of low-wage workers.

And more may be formed.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research and senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, told the roundtable that there has been a change in the model of cooperation between the Government and Singaporeans.

And the AfAs are an expression of this on the ground.

Dr Koh noted that in the early days of Singapore's independence, the Government defined the goals and people were happy to follow its lead. As society matured, there were more public consultations to get the input of citizens and civil society in policymaking. This evolved over the years, and people were asked about their vision for Singapore in exercises such as the Remaking Singapore Committee and Our Singapore Conversation.

Then in 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and his fourth-generation group of ministers launched the Singapore Together movement to get Singaporeans to play a role in policymaking.

Dr Koh said: "Citizens were followers at one stage, then they were petitioners: Can you please do this, can you change that? And now citizens are partners."

"I think that's where a lot of civil society activists want to see that relationship between state and society. So this is a good place to be, it says something about the maturity of the Government, but also the maturity of citizens, and being able to work together because sometimes they don't always agree either."

Referring to AfAs, she said: "This is the growth stage of this process of everyone putting together what resources they have, what connections they have, lending each other trust, and then doing something they all care passionately about."

Ms Melissa Kwee, chief executive officer of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, said: "It really could involve anything, from the very, very concrete, like the super fast sprint to just get the prototype out, to the more hairy problems that are going to require a whole-of-society kind of community response."

To her, the alliances are also a good platform for leaders to create spaces where different groups, sometimes at loggerheads, can work together more effectively.

"We have to confront the challenges squarely... and quit the blame-and-shame game, but see everybody as part of the solution to how we move forward," she said.

Mr Tan, meanwhile, said the dynamism and agility of the process let industry groups and businesses work quickly on prototypes that can then be tested even as regulations and policies are being set.

Summing up, the panellists said they hope the alliances would provide the platform for people to contribute in their own way.

"Everyone should know that you can make a difference, and there is no idea or contribution that's too small," said Ms Indranee.

"Our strength has never been in large resources, in huge land. Our strength has always been in our people, the ideas, and the Singapore spirit, and that's what Singapore Together is all about."