

Emerging Stronger Conversations: Bringing together voices to build more resilient society

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Straits Times, 28 September 2020

"When I come home every night, I'm dirty and smelly. But it doesn't mean I don't contribute."

"Please do not forget the disabled. We are among the last, the lost, and the least."

"Be kinder and more loving; respect one another for who we are."

These are just a few of the voices of Singaporeans who took part in the Singapore Together Emerging Stronger Conversations (ESC) over the past three months. The Straits Times spoke to facilitators, participants and observers.

WHAT ARE THEY?

Open to citizens and permanent residents, the conversations allow participants to share their hopes and plans for a more caring, cohesive, and resilient post-Covid-19 society.

They are part of the broader Singapore Together movement, where the Government and people partner each other to co-create policy solutions.

There have been 11 virtual sessions and SG Together ESC surveys on two apps, LifeSG and OneService, with more to come. More than 1,000 Singaporeans have participated to date. Held over Zoom, each ESC lasts around two hours and involves 40 to 50 people. Those interested can sign up online.

Separately, there is an Emerging Stronger Task Force chaired by National Development Minister Desmond Lee and PSA International group chief executive Tan Chong Meng. It comprises 15 industry leaders from sectors such as banking, healthcare and technology. Taken together, under the Singapore Together movement, the ESC and the task force will explore both the social and economic future of post-pandemic Singapore.

WHY NOW?

Globally, trust in democratic institutions has taken a beating.

According to American think-tank Pew Research Centre, an average of 64 per cent of people surveyed across 34 countries do not believe that elected officials care about what ordinary citizens think.

One solution is to create more room for public deliberation. Countries such as Canada and Ireland have formed citizens' assemblies to discuss thorny issues ranging from abortion to climate change.

In Singapore, this engagement takes the form of citizens' panels, focus group discussions and townhall meetings, among others, said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow and Society and Culture Department head Carol Soon.

The ESC is the latest arrow in the quiver. A Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) spokesman cited four reasons for these conversations: the growing complexity of challenges; a more diverse Singapore society with different views on issues; the need to build a sense of ownership; and to grow trust among Singaporeans.

"It made sense to bring people together to reflect on what we're going through, what we've learnt about both the high points and vulnerability of Singapore society, and reimagine the kind of future we want coming out of Covid-19," said the spokesman.

HOW IS IT DONE?

To help anchor their thought process, participants are asked to reflect on a series of photos depicting the lived experiences of Singaporeans during Covid-19. After a small group sharing session on Zoom, they record their proposed solutions and actions on an online bulletin board. The proposals are further discussed within the larger group.

Political office-holders make brief remarks at the start and end of each session. They join in on some of the breakout discussions and note the various perspectives, but do not facilitate the conversation.

As key themes emerge from the conversations, Singapore Together Action Networks, which are partnerships involving people from the Government, community and businesses, are formed to create and deliver solutions. Four networks have been formed: to help disadvantaged students; support vulnerable families; address youth mental well-being; and boost the capabilities of social service agencies.

The final number and composition of networks will depend on the issues raised and actions needed.

HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT?

Some observers said it is not clear how this differs from other national conversations, such as the Next Lap (1991), Singapore 21 (1999), Remaking Singapore (2002), SGfuture (2015) and the biggest one, Our Singapore Conversation (2012).

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said previous conversations, too, were about building a shared future. "They are about consultation, catharsis, conversing and collaboration."

But the nature of discourse has changed due to the severe economic, social and political disruptions brought about by Covid-19, said National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser. "Issues such as the digital revolution and inequality are now rendered more visible and urgent by the pandemic." There are new concerns, like the emergence of a "lost" generation at risk of permanently diminished prospects, he added.

IPS' Dr Soon said that unlike earlier top-down initiatives, Singaporeans who participated in recent citizens' panels did not just provide feedback, but worked with one another to test solutions for specific policy problems.

Citing IPS' work with ministries, she said that after a Citizens' Jury was formed for the war on diabetes in 2017, the authorities announced they would support 14 of its 28 recommendations,

and explore 13 others. Since then, several participants have implemented ideas such as healthier cooking classes at community centres, and started discussions with partners such as community development councils.

The ESC is a continuation of this new mode of engagement, Dr Soon said. "It is heartening to note that the conversations will complement the partnerships that government agencies will organise and support."

She suggested having a clear feedback loop, where policymakers get back to participants on their review of what was tabled and the next steps needed. There could also be follow-up sessions and work groups, as two hours may not be long enough to air diverse views, deliberate and reach agreement.

MCCY told ST that it is not wedded to the idea of delivering a fixed number of recommendations by a certain date. "We want to be able to discern what people are saying and where the interest is, because for an action network to work, citizens must want to take part. It's not just a feedback mechanism to the Government," said the spokesman. "It is more organic - I would even use the word 'messy'. That's the nature of things in this era of complexity."

WHO IS INVOLVED AND WHAT'S NEXT?

Former Nominated MP Walter Theseira, an economist at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said government-initiated dialogues cannot be a replacement for dialogues that segments of the public may want to have on their own terms. "The civil rights movement in the US is a good example; climate change movements today are also important," he said.

SMU's Associate Professor Tan cited the self-selecting nature of the ESC, with individuals signing up online.

Former Nominated MP Anthea Ong shared this concern, pointing out that many of the participants are professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs). There also needs to be assurance that the ideas will be heard, or acted on, in the Singapore Together Action Networks, she said.

She asked the Government to consider tapping civil society and community agencies as facilitators. "They are experts in gathering ground feedback by creating safe and dignified conversations, and can be the best allies in making such national conversations a truly unifying platform," said Ms Ong.

But former NMP and political observer Zulkifli Baharudin argued that it is possible to have an inclusive conversation, even if not everyone is represented. Task force members should act as "custodians", he said, by speaking up for interests beyond their own and showing empathy.

The MCCY spokesman said that the voluntary nature of the ESC allows discussions to remain as open as possible. "We don't want to curate it by only inviting certain groups of people."

Going forward, said the spokesman, government agencies will reach out to other segments of the population to conduct a deeper dive on specific issues.

While the success of the ESC remains to be seen, it is clear that the pandemic has intensified social divides and created pressure for more inclusive politics and effective governance.

Observers say one silver lining of the pandemic may be that it opens just this sort of window for lasting change. But momentum is essential, said Mr Zulkifli, otherwise people will lose interest. "Once you start a movement, it must have a consistent, perpetual energy that can be felt in the community."

NUS' Dr Tan urged the authorities to be bold and "willing to retire sacred cows". "Let's push boundaries to the furthest extent possible, avoid motherhood statements, and set measurable goals that meet the needs of Singaporeans," he said.

"I believe good ideas and well-thought out recommendations would bloom. After all, we do have intelligent, patriotic Singaporeans involved in these conversations."