

## **S'poreans want to step up to make a difference: Panellists**

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Amid the diverse themes covered in the ongoing Emerging Stronger Conversations, social inclusion has emerged as one of the key issues, showing that Singaporeans are a caring people, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah said yesterday.

In fact, some 19 partnerships have been formed between non-governmental organisations, regular Singaporeans, companies and public sector agencies as a result of the mass engagement exercise.

These collaborations, known as Alliances for Action (AfAs), seek to drive change in areas such as mobilising corporates to be a greater force for good, caregiving, work-life harmony, and digital literacy and access.

Taking stock of the conversation series at a roundtable on Singapore Together Through Alliances, organised by The Straits Times in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Ms Indranee said: "The conversations tell you something about Singaporeans: We are obviously a caring people, we have a lot to say about everything, we don't shy away from highlighting the gaps, but the overall sense was a sense of wanting to help out, wanting to build a better place."

Launched in June last year, the conversations are meant to chart a course for Singapore as it recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic. Nine months on, more than 17,000 Singaporeans have shared their ideas and views.

And the AfAs are a key outcome.

"What AfA basically means is chiong together. That is an easy way of remembering it," quipped Ms Indranee, using the Singlish term for "charge together".

Elaborating, the minister - who guides the conversations along with National Development Minister Desmond Lee - added: "At the end of it, when we have talked with Singaporeans, when we have 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 a heavy ponderous machinery to push it forward. 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."

In fact, this spirit of partnership emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, three other panellists at the roundtable noted, citing how people and groups came together to work with agencies to tackle some of the challenges.

Ms Melissa Kwee, chief executive of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, cited how when Covid-19 infections surged in foreign workers' dormitories, groups that had been "at loggerheads" before, such as employers, non-governmental organisations, community groups and trade associations, came forward to work with the Government to help solve the problem.

She also said the conversations have spawned an AfA on corporate purpose that seeks to develop a national framework to guide companies in doing good.

Another panellist, Mr Tan Chong Meng, group CEO of PSA International and co-chair of the Emerging Stronger Taskforce, believes that such alliances are also the best way for Singapore to tackle the key economic challenges that have arisen.

The AfAs have brought together companies, agencies and organisations which were previously kept in their own "verticals", he noted. Collaboration has allowed them to have a better idea of one another's perspectives and plans, as they work on complex issues.

"Policymaking often tries to get to a more perfect answer than is rarely available at a given time," said Mr Tan. "This approach gives us more agility. And if virus X comes, I think we will be more able to cope with anything that is thrown at us."

Some have wondered if the AfAs are really just talk shops.

To this, Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research and senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said many partnerships are at a nascent stage, "so they are also learning by doing".

On a broader scale, they represent progress in terms of how citizens work with one another and the Government, she added, saying that Singaporeans have been content to follow the lead of a strong government at the start, but now want to play a larger role.

"Citizens were followers, then they were petitioners: Can you please do this, can you change that? And now citizens are partners. I think that is where a lot of civil society activists want to see that relationship between state and society," she said.

"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."