

The way forward for state-society ties

Three principles should guide state-society relations: the responsibility to engage, to compromise, and to act.

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This year has been a year of focus on state-society engagement.

In August, the Prime Minister conveyed how his government has heard the people in the year-long public engagement exercise called Our Singapore Conversation (OSC).

Apart from the omnibus policy review process of the OSC, the Government has also engaged civil society activists on a range of issues - from animal welfare where the rules have changed, to harassment this week where better laws may be formulated.

When we look at the voluntary and civil society landscape and how the Government has responded to it, we can discern significant developments.

In May 1998, when the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its first national conference on civil society, all applications to register a society went through a slow track with no responsibility by the Registry of Societies to explain its decision if they were denied. There was no such thing as the Speakers' Corner, much less any consideration of whether or where one could organise a demonstration. Mention migrant workers and you might think of the Marxist Conspiracy. If you wanted to write and stage a play, you had to answer to the police.

In terms of their standing with the Government, the "helping hands" voluntary welfare sector and grassroots network under the People's Association were the "welcomed half"; the "thinking heads" of independent groups, who added public advocacy to their service, were adversaries.

This year, some rules relating to civil society have changed - but it has not been a linear progression towards liberalisation or a free-for-all. The picture is more diverse and complex; regulation has become more nuanced with more room for free play but tighter in areas that the Government is most concerned about - activism around civil, political and animal rights; governance, and some would add, the media, given the recent attention-grabbing rules on online news sites.

Nonetheless, many groups have found instances of productive engagement with the Government where input was sought - policies were changed and programmes introduced to the benefit of broader society.

In the area of the arts and expression, while public consultation on censorship rules is not new, there is greater use of citizen advisory councils to consider and deliver decisions on a wide range of issues. There are schedules of organisations and artists qualified by their track record that get "green lane" approval for their work ostensibly from the Media Development Authority, not the police. The once-proscribed form of Forum Theatre is now widely used.

In the area of nature and heritage conservation, a moratorium was placed on the redevelopment of Chek Jawa, a unique wetlands ecosystem which nature lovers hope will remain for a long time to come. Nature advocates have regularly given input on Singapore's national green and sustainability plans, and although regrettably the moves to save all of Bukit Brown were unsuccessful, government plans were adjusted.

Women's, migrant workers' and human rights groups have managed to make an impact too. Think of the dismantling of gender quotas in medical school, the introduction of the domestic maid's day off rule amidst public outcry, the new more compassionate regime in recognising the rights of injured migrant workers.

This week, advocates against the death penalty celebrated the court's decision to spare a drug courier the gallows because judges now have discretionary power to impose life terms in place of mandatory death sentences previously.

In this year's conference on civil society held by the IPS, former Nominated Member of Parliament Walter Woon said there will be a need for deeper and more meaningful engagement between civil society and Government, and a need to entrench civic virtues in Singapore for four reasons.

First, Singapore is going to be a more crowded city. Second, there will be a greater diversity of interests even within civil society; third, technology, especially online media, will amplify that diversity; and fourth, political contestation will increase as education develops the populace's nose for issues of fairness and justice.

Given those trends and the lessons from the journey of successful civil society-Government engagement mentioned above, three key operating principles appear to be even more critical for the future of governance in Singapore.

Rules of engagement

First is the responsibility to engage.

How can this process be further institutionalised in Government as well as among the public and civil society? Many may not know that the Government already has a protocol that requires civil servants to vouch that all new policies and legislation have benefited from public consultation before they are presented to the Cabinet for decision-making.

However, the rationale, skills and language of engagement have to be more deeply embedded into how the Government operates. A larger corps of public-sector leaders have to be given the mandate to do the day-to-day engagement on the nitty-gritty of ground-up concerns, not wait for government ministers to weigh in.

With increasing diversity of interests across society, there will be contests over achieving different definitions of the public good. It is good that people are at liberty to make their own lifestyle choices, while upholding traditional family and cultural values. It is good to conserve our heritage, and also good to make room for new homes and roads where we can.

Both government and non-government platforms are needed to mediate among multiple stakeholders. The good practice of the multi-channelled OSC, where there was interaction among members of the public as well as between them and government leaders, has to be reinforced.

Implicit in that process is the second principle - the responsibility to compromise.

Again, the multitude of stakeholders and public-sector leaders have to trust that each is well-intentioned until proven otherwise.

They need an "intercultural" approach to engagement, with all sides trying to appreciate the value system, organisational culture and motivations of the other, in order to identify what is non-negotiable and areas where there can be give and take.

This has to apply to intra-civil society conflict too. Finally, all sides will need equal access to the information that is relevant to the issue at hand.

The spirit of compromise and the art of agreeing to disagree in an agreeable manner will be needed. "The brat response", as Professor Woon termed it, of being fixed in a position until one gets one's way, should be rejected.

So, while new rules and laws may be needed to guide our public life, and the courts and general elections can serve as final arbiters in the worst case, it is the "habits of the heart" that must lead in state-society engagement.

This is what another public intellectual Kwok Kian Woon has called "soft law" - the civic virtues of reasoning, discretion and humility. Humility reminds us that our decisions can only be contingent on the context and best available knowledge at hand. We must then leave those who follow to do better.

The third principle is the responsibility to act.

This is what emerged in the many stories of activists over the past decades - neither the Government nor civic activists were obdurate in their positions, nor only waiting for the other to act.

Just do it

Last year, a leading civil society organisation Aware mounted its "End All Violence to Women" campaign and asked opinion-makers to mobilise their own networks to call out crimes of spousal abuse.

This year, Catholic social agency Caritas' new campaign on poverty aims to engage the broader public to do what they can for the poor, in their own way.

The Lien Foundation has gone ahead to pilot new forms of pre-school education that help disadvantaged kids level up rather than wait for some national curriculum to arrive.

Riding on social networks and civic action, civil society and the state together can make more progress in reducing litter and illegal parking in private neighbourhoods, wiping out dengue, enhancing cross-cultural interaction at workplaces, and calling out bullying at school.

The petitionary culture of always asking "what is the Government doing about it" has to be reduced as it diminishes us as a people. Rules, laws and other government action may be necessary but insufficient to produce the pro-social behaviour we need.

In fact, in some areas, peer-to-peer action would be far more effective - whether it is to disavow the flaming of a public intellectual for his call for cautious discussion on the recent hijab issue, or to reject the strategy of hacktivists like Anonymous threatening to bring down government websites, ostensibly to protest against the curbing of online media. We can tell perpetrators that they do not do these acts on our behalf and remind them of Gandhi's maxim, "the means we employ are the ends in the making".

The responsibility to engage, the responsibility to compromise and the responsibility to act - these are the habits that have to be more broadly propagated to take us on a clear evolution towards a progressive, civilised and inclusive society.

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. A detailed report of the Conference on Civil Society 2013 can be found online at IPS Commons.