

Country Report: Singapore

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Social Accountability through Citizen Engagement and Participation

Introduction

1. Singapore has a developed free-market economy, and its success depends in no small part on the nation's reputation for economic, social and political stability.
2. According to the World Bank's World Governance Indicators (WGI) country data report for Singapore 1996-2011, Singapore scores well on five of the six aggregate governance indicators, consistently scoring above the 90th percentile for political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. However, one category, Voice and Accountability, stands out with a percentile rank of just 42.7. Clearly, there is still significant work to be done, and the Public Service has a role to play in that regard.
3. The Singapore Public Service employs about 130,000 officers in 16 Ministries and over 50 Statutory Boards, of which the Civil Service employs about 77,000 officers. The Civil Service is organised into four sectors – economics; security; social; and government administration and strategic planning.

New Operating Environment

4. Singapore's social landscape has changed significantly over the years. The citizenry has become more affluent, educated, technologically savvy, and globally connected. Citizens have expressed a greater desire to be involved.
5. A face-to-face survey with 1,048 respondents aged 15 years and older was conducted by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts between November and December 2011. In the survey, 75% of respondents indicated that it was important to them that the Government should always consult the public and take their views into consideration in the decision-making process. There was a preference for broad-based engagement, where as many stakeholders as possible are consulted on as many policies as possible. 45.1% wanted the Government to engage as many people as possible, while 35.7% felt that only the relevant stakeholders should be consulted.

Why Engage?

6. Public engagement aims to promote positive plurality and a more resilient society by fulfilling citizens' aspirations to be heard, and encouraging conversations amongst stakeholders. In addition to making public agencies accountable to their stakeholders, it inculcates a sense of ownership in citizens, as it lets them have an appreciation of trade-offs, and allows them to be part of the solution-seeking process. The Public Service can reap superior public outcomes from effective, genuine public engagement.

Improve public policy results and productivity by harnessing community resources

7. The Government does not have a monopoly on ideas, and on its own cannot deal with complex global and domestic challenges. Tackling them effectively will require the concerted efforts of all stakeholders in society. Experiences in Singapore and elsewhere have shown that tapping on the public for ideas and energies can guard against group-think, optimise resources, improve public policy results and raise productivity. Similarly, leveraging on the information, ideas and resources held by citizens can drive more innovative ideas to tackle complex policy challenges and improve the quality of public service.

Meet citizens' aspirations and increase legitimacy of outcomes

8. Citizens are becoming more socially and politically active. There is an increasing number of people who are vocal and willing to step forward to voice their views. They want to work together with the Government to define policy problems, set agendas for discussion, explore policy alternatives and devise solutions together. In some instances, they want to walk every step of the process with the Government.

9. Public engagement elevates public discourse as it encourages debate, leading to broader consensus on Government initiatives. When the public is involved in decision making, the resulting decisions are more legitimate because the process is open and transparent and the public has provided input. Additionally, decision outcomes are less likely to meet resistance and delays, since public engagement has already helped anticipate and address concerns in advance.

10. Hence, public engagement not only brings in citizens' expectations as policy inputs, but can also help to manage their expectations in the process. This is because public engagement helps citizens to see a broader picture of the issue and understand the challenges faced by the Government, which would in turn make them more sympathetic towards our policy constraints and be more open to making compromises. In the end, the final policies are endorsed more strongly, or at least receive less criticism.

Strengthen Singaporeans' sense of belonging

11. The engagement process deepens citizens' stake in the country and in their fellow countrymen's wellbeing. It gives citizens the opportunity to "own" the policy. Similarly, when people face a common problem or crisis, the need to confront shared challenges can strengthen the connections between them.

12. For example, the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 created the need for cooperation between the people from all sectors of society – not only to deal with a new infectious disease but also to revive confidence in their ability to do so. The experience of confronting SARS together actually made our people feel more like members of an integrated society and increased their confidence in the country's strengths as a community.

Efforts to Engage

13. Reaching out and engaging citizens have been an increasingly important facet of the Singapore Public Service. One of its early efforts was the setting up of the Feedback Unit in 1985, with the aim to give Singaporeans a forum to understand major policies, ask questions, make suggestions and generally participate in working out a solution. As part of a more consultative Government, The Feedback Unit channelled views on national policies and issues from the people to the Government. The Unit, which was subsequent renamed REACH in 2006, now also helps to drive public consultation and engagement between the Government and the people, and this helps to alleviate the load of public service agencies in the public consultation process.

14. Singapore 21 was also another initiative of the Government's early efforts, to involve the public in playing a part towards building a better nation and overcoming challenges of the next century. In 1997, the then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the Singapore 21 Committee, with the role to strengthen the "heartware" of Singapore in the 21st century and gather Singaporeans from all walks to life, to discuss issues they faced as individuals, families, communities and as a nation. Recently, a new exercise known as "Our Singapore Conversation" has been launched to engage Singaporeans on the future of Singapore. The idea to have a national conversation was first shared by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Message in August 2012. It aims to tap on the diverse views and experiences of citizens from all walks of life in thinking through the next phase of Singapore's development, and in the process, to also forge stronger ties amongst Singaporeans.

15. Over the years, many public agencies have on their own continued to undertake varying levels of public engagement, ranging from information sharing, feedback gathering and public consultation, to customer involvement in service design, service delivery and implementation.

Efforts to inform better

16. Public issues are becoming more multi-dimensional and complex, and public agencies have been exploring different ways to provide objective information to members of the public, in a clear and concise manner that would help the public understand complex information. Over the years, different strategies have been adopted to explain different policies to different audiences, including the use of eye-catching infographics and comic strips to present and communicate complex matters and information quickly and clearly. Mass media platforms such as television commercials and programmes have also been used to weave in policy information, in order to reach out to a wider audience.

17. Some agencies have also started efforts improving their written correspondences to the public. As society matures and citizens become better educated, members of the public have increasingly expressed unhappiness about the quality and type of government replies, which they feel do not adequately address their concerns and needs. Hence agencies are putting emphasis on delivering messages in a way that their audience can appreciate and understand.

For example, the Work Pass Division from the Ministry of Manpower has embarked on a journey to redesign at their written communications such as application forms, correspondences to various stakeholders, and website content. More of our agencies are moving on the same track to communicate with the public better.

Efforts to consult more and earlier

18. Public consultation has been a key priority in the policy formulation process as the public becomes more interested in playing a part in shaping government policy and having their views heard in the process. Respective agencies have conducted consultation on issues such as retirement schemes (CPF Life), review of medical insurance scheme, and means-testing at hospitals. These issues were close to the hearts of many Singaporeans and steps were taken to ensure that the views of the various stakeholders were heard and considered in the policy formulation process.

19. The amendment to the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA) in March 2009 is an example of a multi-prong and multi-tier engagement conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH). The key amendments were to include older organ donors under the Act and allow paired matching of living donors to increase the availability of organs and thus save more lives; and to make provisions for allowing reimbursement for altruistic living donors for their costs or expenses reasonably incurred in association with donation. Consultation exercises involving various key stakeholders before, after and through the policy formulation process were conducted on this emotive issue. Views from public, local and international medical community were sought to ensure that the final policy was socially acceptable as well as in line with the prevailing medical ethics. The former Minister of Health, as the public face of the public engagement strategy, openly discussed and sought public views on the organ transplant issue starting as early as July 2008. As new policy areas and various views and plans had to be deliberated and reviewed, MOH took a more transparent view and shared the various possible solutions to the problem openly at the various forums and through media channels. The support for the amendments has been positive. The local and international medical and ethics community (including the World Health Organisation) has come out in support of Singapore's steps to protect the welfare of organ donors.

20. Other than consulting on policy specific issues, the Singapore Public Service is also open towards seeding ideas from the community and non-government organisations (NGOs) to consult on issues that affect our surroundings and natural environment. Recently, the Government has embarked a series of public consultations to seek feedback and ideas on climate change-related issues. The feedback gathered from these consultations will contribute towards the development of the National Climate Change Strategy 2012 to tackle climate change related issues and Government's approach to addressing climate change in Singapore.

21. Efforts to engage has seen some successes and benefits reaped through public consultation, when carefully managed and planned. There is scope to consult more to tap on the collective ideas from the public. Consultation should also be done earlier, to give the public and the affected stakeholders sufficient time to air their views.

Efforts to build consensus

22. The Singapore Public Service is also beginning to partner the public in deliberating alternatives and coming to a consensus on the preferred solution. For example, LTA adopts a community approach to forge consensus and formulate mutually-agreeable solutions with the stakeholders. This approach has been applied towards solving local issues, such as illegal parking in private estates.

23. While it is not always easy to get citizens themselves to understand the broader national considerations and appreciate why certain trade-offs must be made, the goal is to forge shared ownership of the final outcome and not result in social conflict.

Efforts to co-create

24. The Singapore Public Service also explores opportunities to collaborate with our citizens to co-create outcomes and processes. For example, the Community in Bloom programme is a joint programme by the National Parks Board and Peoples' Association, to foster a love for gardening throughout Singapore and to promote community bonding. Launched in 2005, the number of community gardening groups has grown from 80 in the public housing estates and 4 in private estates to 205 and 40 respectively. Most of these community garden projects were initiated by community groups such as the public housing estates, educational institutions, and non-government organisations.

25. The 'Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters' (ABC Waters) programme under PUB, the national water agency, is also another successful initiative, where people are brought close to water so that they can better appreciate and cherish this precious resource. PUB engages the grassroots, schools and residents early in the planning process, to gather their views and ideas, and to encourage them to organise and participate in activities in and around the projects to transform Singapore's drains, canals and reservoirs into beautiful streams, rivers and lakes.

26. Not all programmes aimed at co-creating outcomes with the people were initiated by the Government. 'Be the Change!' is a youth-driven initiative led by a Youth Organising Committee to collect the thoughts and aspirations of young people on how to make Singapore a better place to live, work, learn, play and give, and to provide a platform for them to translate their ideas into reality. Youths will take the lead in spearheading the ideas, and work towards engaging their peers to follow through. This initiative was supported by the National Youth Council and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. There is a growing community of active youth today, who should be given the space to contribute to nation building.

27. The Singapore Public Service is keen to explore more opportunities to co-create with our citizens to encourage social innovation, community bonding and in the process, improves outcomes.

Leveraging on technology

28. The Singapore Public Service also aims to be a collaborative government through leveraging technology to co-create solutions and connect with the people. Through the enabling power of infocomm technologies, the Public Service strives to build an interactive environment where the Government, the private sector and the people work together seamlessly to co-create greater public service value and promote active public participation. Today, citizens and businesses can access more than 1,600 online services and more than 300 mobile services provided by the Government.

29. In recent years, with the increasing popularity of smart phones and the corresponding prevalence of mobile data plans, the possibilities of m-services have expanded greatly. Agencies have been quick to tap on this potential and have rolled out several m-services that are exclusive to the smartphone market. This has allowed the agencies to provide more complex m-services to the customers that were previously not available due to the technological limits of the SMS system. Some examples are (i) mobile@HDB, to allow easy access to housing services on the move; (ii) Library in your pocket, to provide library services for people on the move; (iii) iHealth Sg, which is a comprehensive guide to all healthcare facilities in Singapore. Riding on the high smartphone penetration in Singapore, the Public Service will continue to deploy more feature-rich and innovative mobile services. Customers can look forward to an enhanced mobile experience while accessing information from, and transacting with, the Government on the move.

30. With the desire to improve e-service delivery, the Public Service is always exploring the creation of useful e-services, including personalised e-services offered at the whole-of-government level. To this end, the Government will be deploying a one-stop trusted platform called OneInbox for the delivery of government electronic correspondences to individuals and subsequently, to businesses.

31. With the rising popularity of social networking, Government can more easily tap on the collective intelligence of the crowd. As such, the Government is going beyond its traditional role as a service provider, to also serve as a platform provider to encourage greater co-creation of new e-services. For instance, members of the public will be able to readily look for and download publicly available government data from data.gov.sg, which can be used for research purposes, as well as to encourage the development of innovative and impactful applications.

Challenges

32. As the Public Service strives to improve the ways it interacts and accounts to the public, it has built its capabilities and expertise in addressing some fundamental issues of engagement. These include the management of public expectations, balancing individual and national interests, and commitment of resources.

Managing expectations

33. In light of the public's increasing desire for their views to be heard, there also comes a need to manage the public's expectations. There should be a mature set expectations and processes of consultation between the Government and the public.

Public consultations cannot take in every single comment that was made and public expectations should be placed within this context. Even with a mature and well-executed process of public consultation, full consensus on policy details might not be achievable.

Individual interests versus national interests

34. While the Government as a whole wants to listen to citizens more and address their concerns, public officers have to grapple with practical issues they encounter in the course of their work. The Public Service has to strike a balance between satisfying individual concerns and demands, and safeguarding national interests.

35. One recent example involves the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and residents of a condominium. While building a new underground section of the national railway network, LTA had to build a launch shaft near a residential condominium. The residents of the condominium raised concerns about the safety of drivers and pedestrians due to the location of the shaft, and the condominium's management committee held a major exercise to petition the relocation of the shaft. Despite LTA's efforts to engage the residents through a dialogue session, the session ended in a stalemate, and as LTA's decision was to push ahead with its work, the residents were left unhappy and disappointed.

36. Altercations between public agencies and citizens (individually or in groups) reveal a growing trend to protect personal interests at the expense of others, which has been given the ignominious moniker: Not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) syndrome. For example, there had been repeated instances of resistance to public service and community projects, such as plans to set up nursing homes or eldercare centres in housing estates. Residents would voice their concerns and displeasure, such as a possible drop in their property value, and even put up petitions to overturn the plans.

37. Citizens are increasingly outspoken in a bid to "protect" themselves against certain Government decisions. However, accountability extends not just to Government, but to citizens as well, and public agencies have to learn to handle this properly.

Sincere engagement and resource commitment

38. Beyond passive "listening", it is critical that agencies act on the feedback given to them. A willingness to listen that does not translate to real policy changes undermines the credibility of the authorities and breeds cynicism in the public. It is therefore important for the Government to ensure that sincerity is shown, and action taken, in its efforts to listen to the ground.

39. Public agencies must also ensure that the public is kept updated about the status of ongoing reviews, as well as explaining which inputs were considered, and why some were not. An increasing amount of resources might be required to ensure successful engagement between the public and the Government.

Developing a Whole-of-Government (WOG) strategy

40. Against the backdrop of a population that is more vocal and demanding of any government plan that has an effect on them, the Singapore Public Service has to continue to do much better in its engagement efforts and incorporate public perspectives into policy and service delivery. To push WOG strategy and to level up public engagement efforts, three key thrusts were identified:

- i. Creation of a Public Engagement framework;
- ii. Setting up of a Public Engagement Network; and
- iii. Development of relevant tools.

I. Public Engagement Framework

41. The Public Engagement Framework outlines four different modes of public engagement for agencies to consider, with the aim of achieving more robust policies and social resilience. As shown in Diagram 1, these four modes are Inform, Consult, Build Consensus, and Co-create, and can be applied to either policy formulation or implementation, or even when agencies are still trying to identify the purpose of engagement.

42. The four modes do not exist in a linear continuum; it is important to carefully consider the purpose, intent and desired outcome of each public engagement exercise in alignment with the objectives of the political leadership, before deciding on the appropriate mode of engagement. The framework recognises that there is no “one-size fits all” solution when it comes to public engagement, but all public agencies need to level up on more sophisticated public communications.

Diagram 1: Public Engagement Framework

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK				
	INFORM	CONSULT	BUILD CONSENSUS	CO-CREATE
WHAT	Sharing of information, context and choices.	Gather public feedback on government analyses or proposals, and consider the public's perspectives.	Partnering the public in coming to an agreement.	Collective action for public value.
WHEN	Intent is to communicate rationale.	The issue is relatively well defined and the government is prepared to take on the public's input.	Issues are complex and controversial.	Leverage for change, bonding and innovation lie in the community.
HOW	Understand the public's priorities. Establish rapport. Listen well to feedback. Use mobile media and technologies. Use a range of platforms.	Make the process and the collective contribution visible to dispel the notion that decisions were made prior to consultation Identify the right people to consult and accommodate a plurality of voices Manage differing views and expectations Acknowledge and synthesise inputs Empower stakeholders with information and alternatives Use collaborative platforms and media technology	Create a safe space for discussion. Use scenarios to frame the context. Focus on collective good, not individual interests. Don't let more vocal groups capture the agenda. Promote constructive voices to add to public discourse.	Start with 'safe-to-fail' prototypes. Cultivate ideas and skills with platforms, training and tools. Value people and relationships as much as the programme. Pull small-scale disparate initiatives together where appropriate.
 Do not use this as a linear template for engagement. Do not take these methods as ends unto themselves.		 Do apply these four modes in any order and also simultaneously, as appropriate. Do take them as ongoing conversations and processes.		

Adapted from: Lena Leong, "Developing Our Approach to Public Engagement", Ethos issue 10, Oct 2011

43. Public engagement is a means towards the objective of more robust policy outcomes, as well as to develop a more mature State-Society relationship which can achieve greater accountability and strengthen social resilience. This is quite unlike previous strategies that have been pursued, such as quality service, which could be a goal in itself. Also, unlike service standards, for example, an objective benchmark cannot be set for public engagement, as the mode and conduct of public engagement is contextual. Even where there might be international case studies for best practices, public engagement must be tailored to the specificity of the Singaporean context.

II. Public Engagement Network – Learning through Best Practices and Experimentation

44. A Public Engagement Network was formed to articulate “*What does Good Look Like?*” for public engagement. The Network will re-examine the Public Service’s governance approach in public engagement, and work at evolving new and more relevant standards of practice to adopt in this changed societal landscape. Towards this end, it is a platform for mutual learning (on success and failures, challenges and trade-offs), brainstorming ideas and test-bedding public engagement strategies, and identifying new capabilities that might be needed. The network will also look at efforts to educate and manage public expectations.

45. The Network aims to engender sharing of best practices and encourage prototyping. Lessons will be documented, and shared with other agencies. These case-lets, roundtables and various platforms will help build knowledge capacity of agencies. The Network could also validate the Public Engagement Framework, refine it through discussion and learning and eventually set the rules of engagement for the WOG. This could be developed into a public engagement guide to provide a point of reference to our officers in the conduct of public engagement.

46. The Network has met for on several occasions to share experiences, examine past engagement exercises to codify lessons and strategies together.

III. Developing Methods and Tools

47. Effective public communication strategy and skills is the foundation for good public engagement, and training modules and curriculum on public communication and consultation are being developed for this purpose. These need to be reviewed in the context of a public engagement push to complement the Public Engagement Framework.

48. Public engagement programmes will target various segments of officers: Public Service Leaders, key personnel involved in public engagement (e.g. policy makers, communications and information officers), frontline officers, technical specialists, and general public officers. By reviewing curriculum and reaching out to these officers, the goal is to help officers understand when and how to develop public engagement strategies, and to train competencies required to perform public engagement.

49. The Public Service, through its training arm, the Civil Service College, will also collaborate with other relevant international bodies to bring in trainers and programmes to build local public sector capability in the skills required. However, the instincts and sensitivities needed to be honed for public engagement in Singapore will have to be developed and imparted by its own public officers, such as through sharing of ideas at the Network or at public engagement training programmes.

Conclusion

50. There is recognition that the Government needs to move beyond its traditional role as a provider of services to citizens, towards one in which the Government works with citizens to produce results of high public value. Public engagement should be a regular practice, where policy makers bring citizens' voices to the decision-making table. While efforts are stepped up to promote greater accountability and citizenry participation in policy and service delivery, internally, there is also a need to create an enabling environment for a sustained public engagement climate.
