

Detailed Notes

National Youth Dialogue Session 6 - Together, We Make Singapore

Date/Time: Wednesday, 24 May 2023, 6 to 9.15pm

Organisers: National Youth Council (NYC), Global Shapers Community (Singapore Hub)

Venue: National Gallery Singapore Supreme Court Terrace

Attendance: 146 youth participants (physical and virtual)

The session started with Minister Edwin Tong sharing his opening remarks, followed by a panel dialogue and group breakout discussions. The groups then reconvened for a large group share back.

INTRODUCTION

1. The moderator and host, Mr Tan Kuan Hian, Vice Curator of Global Shapers Community (Singapore Hub), welcomed participants to the sixth session of the National Youth Dialogue. He introduced the panellists:
 - i. Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth & Second Minister for Law
 - ii. Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies; and
 - iii. Ms Woo Qiyun, Environmental Advocate, The Weird and Wild

OPENING REMARKS

2. Minister Tong said the “Together, We Make Singapore” engagement was the latest in a series of youth dialogues focused on critical success factors for Singapore’s development.
3. Minister Tong said that multilateral cooperation was no longer a priority for many countries and had given way to “friend-shoring” (trading primarily with countries seen as allies).

4. Minister Tong said it was important for Singapore to remain open and inclusive to overcome international and domestic challenges. He said that nation's future success relied on how Singaporeans could remain united in values and identity yet diverse in practices, cultures, and customs.
5. Minister Tong said youths were crucial to Singapore's social compact and looked at issues differently. He said that as part of the Forward SG movement, the Government sought to provide more opportunities for youths to be involved in policy co-creation to ensure that youths had a direct stake in shaping Singapore's future.
6. Minister Tong said that youth panels would be set up for youths to co-develop policy recommendations with the Government. He said the Government would provide youths with information to study national issues and opportunities to engage diverse stakeholders. He said that some policy recommendations may be tabled at Parliament.
7. Minister Tong said two to three youth panels would be set up this year and encouraged youths to co-develop policy recommendations with the Government or participate in youth panel engagements.

Minister Tong's full speech can be referenced [here](#).

PANEL DIALOGUE

8. Three videos and participants' responses from interactive boards were utilised to segment the panel dialogue along the topics of:
 - (i) Issues youths are concerned about;
 - (ii) Involving youths in policy-making; and
 - (iii) Youths' interest in working with the Government.

Topic One: Issues that youths are concerned about

9. Interviewees from the video “What issues are youths concerned about?” said they were concerned about inequality, social compact, race and religion, the rising cost of living, mental health, and education.
10. Participants indicated the top issues they were concerned about via the interactive board: (i) Cost of living, (ii) Education pathways and opportunities, (iii) LGBTQ+ and equality between men and women, and (iv) Environment and sustainability.

Participants commented (via Slido) that they were concerned with issues such as cost of living, housing, LGBTQ, environment and sustainability and asked what topics were appropriate for youths to be involved in.

11. Dr Soon said that the issues raised by youths supported a study conducted by the [Institute of Policy Studies](#). She shared that youths were concerned about a wide range of issues, and their diverse concerns was motivated by their differing aspirations, values and what they deemed important in society.
12. Ms Woo said that while she advocated for issues such as the environment, equality, and jobs, she was also concerned about areas not usually on the top of mind of youths. She said that the issues youths were interested in were often interrelated, and youths would invest more time and effort into issues they were concerned about.
13. Minister Tong said that participants’ responses on the interactive boards reflected the complexity of issues that youths grappled with today. He said that although youths were less experienced, their experiences were no less relevant and encouraged participants to share their perspectives. He cited the SG Mental Well-Being Network as an example where youths suggested additional help-seeking avenues (e.g.: by sending messages should there be difficulty in seeking face-to-face help) and said that implementing alternative options resulted in increased help-seeking.

An on-site participant asked how the Government would ensure that Singaporeans were not left behind as society matured and moved up Maslow's hierarchy of needs towards self-actualisation.

14. Minister Tong said that Singapore moving up Maslow's hierarchy of needs reflected the country's progress. He said the Government provided additional support for the bottom 20% in education or social policies. He said that while social transfers had been implemented over the last 10 to 15 years to ensure equality, Singaporeans needed to remain united to navigate an uncertain future.

On-site participants asked how youths would be assured that they could share their thoughts without fear of consequence and how the Government would ensure that involving youths in policy-making would strengthen Singapore's social compact rather than creating more divisive views.

15. Minister Tong said the youth panels had to balance different views and perspectives. He said that while youths were free to develop a policy recommendation, it was also important to understand how these recommendations would impact the intended and unintended audience by engaging diverse stakeholders.
16. Dr Soon said that in her experience designing citizen panels (a process of bringing people from diverse backgrounds together to co-create solutions for specific policy problems), it was essential to create and maintain a safe space for discussion so that participants did not feel "cancelled" for sharing insights perceived as radical. She said the playing field had to be levelled to allow participants an equal opportunity to contribute.
17. Ms Woo said it was also important to convey to youths that their voices and experiences were valued, which would assure youths who might feel that they did not deserve to be on such a platform.

Topic Two: Involving youths in policy-making

18. Interviewees from the videos addressed the following questions: (i) “What is your perception of efforts to involve youths in policy-making?” and (ii) “Do you know how you can share your views?” with the following perspectives:

- Respondents said the Government did not view them as a priority in policy-making as there were not many youth-specific policies;
- Respondents said that youths had to be willing to participate in various Government platforms and contribute constructively for the policy-making process to be effective.
- Respondents said that while the Government organised forums and discussion panels for youths to share their views, publicity efforts could be enhanced to create more awareness of how they could participate.

Mr Tan asked Ms Woo on how she became an environmental advocate and her experience working with the Government.

19. Ms Woo said that she started advocating for the environment by creating an Instagram account, “The Weird and the Wild”, on social media in 2017 as she noticed a shortage of available information on consultation platforms and a lack of awareness on how youths could participate. She said that it was the responsibility of different stakeholders, such as the Government and civil society, to provide access to information (e.g.: workshops on how to write letters), which would result in greater citizen participation.

Mr Tan asked the panellists what modality was best suited to engage youths.

20. Dr Soon said there were no one-size-fits-all methods to engage youths as the type of modality depended on the engagement objectives and target audience. She said there were different hierarchies of civic engagement ranging from listening to implementing ideas. She said that it was important to close the loop to maintain trust between Government and citizens regardless of modality.

21. Minister Tong encouraged participants to explore different avenues to share their views, such as by writing to their Members of Parliament. He said citizens should feel empowered to speak up while the Government must be open to criticism.

An on-site participant asked how the Government would ensure that youths' voices were equally prioritised across ministries.

22. Minister Tong said that the youth panels was an initiative led by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and had received support across the whole of Government. He said each youth panel topic would involve partnering with ministries and agencies to provide support.

Topic Three: Youths' interest in working with the Government

23. Interviewees from the video "Are youths interested in working with the Government, and how?" shared various responses, from wanting to be involved to being uncertain how they could contribute. They suggested that the Government should inform youths of the outcome of suggestions provided to close the loop.

24. Participants suggested via the interactive board ways youths could have a bigger say in national issues, including leveraging virtual modalities (e.g.: live or reel formats on social media) and engaging youths where they were situated (e.g. schools and within their constituencies).

Mr Tan referred to an interviewee in the video who said that the Government had ample resources such as data and manpower. He asked the panellists how youths might value-add to the youth panels.

25. Minister Tong said that it was not possible for the Government to have all the solutions to issues that Singapore faced. He said that the youth panels was a process of exchanging information and ideas, and even if the Government and youths eventually decided to keep certain policies as is, it would still be

important for discourse to occur. He said that the success of the youth panels was not limited to resulting in a policy shift, as exchanging ideas on a level playing field through a constructive platform was equally valuable.

26. Dr Soon said youths could value-add to the youth panels by sharing their lived experiences, which would complement the convening ministry or agency's data. She said that conversely, participating in youth panels could value-add to youths as gaining a deeper knowledge of policy-making and trade-offs would increase youths' confidence in contributing to Singapore's future.

Mr Tan said that while the youth panels' process was valuable, it might be difficult to avoid sentiments of them being a "talk shop" if policies remained unchanged. He asked Ms Woo what would make youths feel that the engagement was meaningful even if nothing changed.

27. Ms Woo said that the process of providing feedback was iterative and youths often did not expect changes to happen immediately. She said that change did not result from feedback alone and certain moves, such as the plastic bag charge, which took years of advocacy before taking place.

28. Ms Woo said that the Government did not have a monopoly on good ideas, consultative processes or implementing projects. She encouraged youths to advocate for issues they cared about within their own time, space, and resources.

On-site participants asked how recruitment for youth panels would reach apathetic youths and a diverse audience.

29. Dr Soon said youths could be apathetic due to a lack of awareness of available opportunities for civic participation. She said the recruitment process had to be inclusive, creative, and exhaustive.

30. Minister Tong said that humans were tribal by nature and ensuring diversity was a constant work in progress. He said that the Government could not tell

Singaporeans to make friends but could create spaces and occasions for diversity to develop organically, such as through volunteer platforms or having different schools conduct their co-curricular activities together for students to interact and socialise.

An on-site participant asked how the Government would choose the youth panel topics.

31. Minister Tong said that the Government would continue to conduct dialogues with youths on what issues they were interested in, and the issues youths could best contribute towards to determine the topics of the youth panels.

PANELLISTS' TAKEAWAYS

32. Minister Tong encouraged youths to remain positive and confident about Singapore's future. He said that despite challenges such as global inflation, he remained optimistic because youths were active, invested and involved in addressing issues facing Singapore.
33. Dr Soon said that when thinking about the issues that Singapore society faced, youths should not limit their ideas to what policy-makers would usually do. She encouraged youths to think about how they or their peers could develop fresh ideas and solutions.
34. Ms Woo encouraged youths to share their views on issues they cared about.

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND LARGE GROUP SHARE BACK

35. The participants discussed the three issues: (i) Understanding what makes involvement meaningful; (ii) Understanding youths' preferences in engagement approaches; and (iii) Ensuring diversity and inclusivity in breakout groups, and selected facilitators summarised their group's discussions at a large group share back.

Understanding what makes involvement meaningful

36. Participants said that regular follow-ups and updates on suggestions from the Government were meaningful ways for them to understand the policy-making process.
37. A facilitator said youths hoped the Government would acknowledge their concerns and insights.

Understanding youths' preferences in engagement approaches

38. Participants said that the Government's call for policy inputs would appear intimidating to those with limited exposure to policy. They said that youths could be provided additional support through learning opportunities on issues.
39. Participants said it was important to have youths as role models to look up to as a form of "affirmative action". They said recognising youths' contributions would assure fellow youths that they could achieve similar accomplishments and suggested having youth representation in Parliament.
40. Participants suggested having smaller group sharing sessions to exchange views with policy-makers and other stakeholders, as informal settings would create a safer environment for youths to provide feedback.
41. A facilitator suggested holding Meet the People sessions in schools to understand youths' concerns.

Ensuring diversity and inclusivity

42. Participants said that communications channels were often skewed towards English speakers, and Singaporeans who did not speak English or those with less education might face decreased accessibility of channels to share their concerns. They called for the language used in dialogues to be simplified and less jargonistic (use fewer technical terms) to make the conversations more inclusive for all participants.

43. A facilitator suggested curating dialogues to cater to specific groups to ensure inclusivity and selecting venues that took into consideration Singaporeans who were time-poor or financially less well-off. He suggested reaching out to where youths naturally were, such as neighbourhood multi-purpose courts, working through schools/institutions, or a “catch-all” approach to gather a randomised group of youths to examine an issue.

44. A facilitator said that youths who cared about certain issues were self-selected. He said that apathetic youths should be encouraged to care about national issues for self-development. He suggested leveraging schools to nurture civic participation from an early age.

CLOSING

45. Mr Tan thanked the participants for their time and encouraged them to partner with the Government through the Young ChangeMakers grant, Youth Action Challenge (YAC) Season 5, and in the youth panels.

Notes recorded by the National Youth Council Youth Engagement Team