

PARTICIPATORY FORESIGHT

There has been a growing recognition that the practice of foresight can be more inclusive and that citizens can play a bigger role in re-imagining the future. Over the past few years, various initiatives across the Singapore government have sought to engage not just stakeholders of public policy, but also citizens. How does Government involve citizens in envisioning the future? What are some challenges and future prospects?

Vernie Oliveiro¹ discusses an emerging, system-wide capability that the Singapore government has been developing over the past few years: participatory foresight.

Envisioning the Future with Citizens

Futures is a growing discipline, with practitioners building expertise by undergoing academic training, participating in conferences and acquiring membership in professional bodies. Despite this strengthening professionalism, futurists themselves are concerned that the lack of diversity in their ranks leads them to envision disproportionately optimistic futures.² In the public sector, the recognition of the limits of expert foresight is growing alongside efforts by governments to harness the collective capacity of a society to create greater public value.

In this context, many governments and private institutions have been growing their capabilities in participatory foresight which involves citizens in envisioning the future. Indeed, Aaron Maniam, a former Head of CSF, notes that participatory foresight confers important advantages. First, it gives futurists “more ideas to work with”, which is especially crucial since “futures isn’t about prediction, but gaining a better understanding of our mental models and assumptions today”. Second, it is a “powerful way to alleviate biases” and question our adherence to simplistic metrics and ideologies.³

Besides creating more robust futures, participatory foresight arguably creates more democratically legitimate visions of the future. The UK Government Office for Science argued, in its “Future of Cities” project, that the deliberations that underpin participatory foresight help to facilitate “greater buy-in for future decisions”. Civic engagement also helps to foster stronger relationships and trust across a governance system, strengthening a society’s ability to work together to achieve shared goals for the future. Additionally, participatory foresight allows cities to go beyond “generic objectives of ‘liveability’ and ‘competitiveness’” and develop futures with a “deeper appreciation of local characteristics”.⁴

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² Rose Eveleth, “Why Aren’t There More Women Futurists”, *The Atlantic*, 31 July 2015.

³ Aaron Maniam, “A Letter From My Future Self on Citizen Foresight, Why and How?”, *openDemocracy*, 28 April 2017.

⁴ United Kingdom Government Office for Science, *Future of Cities: Foresight for Cities* (2016), p. 19.

In this vein, the Singapore government has been strengthening its capabilities in participatory foresight. The past few years have seen several efforts to engage citizens in envisioning the future. One of these was *Our Singapore Conversation* (OSC), which took place over 2012 and 2013. As then-Minister for Education and Chair of the OSC Mr Heng Swee Keat noted, this was an opportunity for Singaporeans from all walks of life to come together and ask, “Where do we want to go as a country, as a people?”⁵ Another initiative, using a rather different format, was the *Future of Us* Exhibition which took place from December 2015 to first quarter of 2016. The exhibition capped a year-long celebration of 50 years of independence for Singapore by looking forward to the future. It was an immersive, multi-sensory experience which presented visitors with different possibilities for Singapore’s future. Visitors were also invited to share their dreams for the future as well as what they might do to achieve them.

Lest there be the impression that only the government has been occupied with such efforts, private institutions too have been experimenting with participatory foresight. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a public policy think tank, conducted the PRISM project in 2012. It used scenario planning methods to ask Singaporeans how they would govern themselves in 2022. This then manifested as Action Plan Singapore in 2016 exploring futures in three areas: Longevity, Innovation and Skills.

Diverse Methods Foster Inclusivity

To say that Singaporean society is diverse might be an understatement. While Singapore has four official languages, its people speak many others. The Pew Research Centre ranks Singapore as the most religiously diverse country in the world.⁶ Besides the three main ethnic groups of Chinese, Malays and Indians, Singapore is also home to significant minorities of Filipinos, Caucasians, Eurasians, Arabs, Thais, Japanese and other communities.⁷ This is in addition to differences in income, age and values. Singaporeans are also increasingly interested and active in various causes such as supporting the arts, enabling the disabled, saving the environment, advocating gender equality and preserving our heritage.

Given the diversity of Singaporean society, it was important to organisers of OSC and the *Future of Us* Exhibition that participants from across Singapore’s many communities could participate in these events. To do this, organisers were deliberate about designing outreach and engagement in a way that would encourage participation from members of various communities.

⁵ Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education, at the National Day Rally on 26 August 2012, [http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/bt_files/NDR_Speech_Heng_Swee_Keat.pdf], accessed 7 June 2017.

⁶ Pew Research Centre, *Global Religious Diversity* (April 2014), Appendix I.

⁷ Singapore Department of Statistics, *Census of Population 2010: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language, Religion*, Table 7: Resident Population of Other Ethnic Groups.

To this end, OSC dialogues took place in several languages (e.g. English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew) to enable people to deliberate in the languages they were most comfortable in. Dialogues also took place in different modalities. There were centrally-organised, facilitated dialogues conducted mostly in English with Singaporeans from a cross-section of society. These sought to bring together diverse perspectives. There were also ground-up dialogues organised by the People's Association, trade unions, volunteer welfare organisations and interest groups targeted at specific communities. These helped participants to voice their concerns and hopes on issues that were especially pertinent to their communities.

In addition, the OSC Secretariat provided support in the form of resources (e.g. sample facilitation plans and information kits) and logistics (e.g. venues and refreshments). The OSC secretariat also organised dialogues in different formats, including dialogue sessions held at food centres aptly named "Kopi Talks". As then-Director of the OSC Programme Office Melissa Khoo observed in an interview, such events allowed dialogues to happen "where conversations were already taking place." All of these methods helped to broaden the reach of the OSC to include as many groups as possible to ensure representation of diverse voices.

Similarly, the *Future of Us* Exhibition adopted a variety of means to attract diverse groups to the event. To enhance accessibility, the exhibition was kept free of charge. Organisers also prepared additional resources to help various groups get the most out of their experience. For example, they worked with the Early Childhood Development Agency to tailor the exhibition experience for pre-schoolers, developed a series of programmes, and prepared resources for teachers, facilitators and students. They also collaborated with different organisations in society to bring various groups to the exhibition; organisers worked with Temasek Cares and the National Council of Social Services to reach out to children with special needs, with the National Trades Union Congress to reach out to workers, and with media such as the newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao*, the radio station *Oli*, and the television channel *Suria* to reach out to the Chinese, Tamil and Malay communities respectively.⁸

In both OSC and the *Future of Us* Exhibition, technology helped to enhance access. Those who could not attend OSC dialogues could take part online via platforms such as Facebook and the OSC website. The Ministry of Health partnered *Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home* (REACH), the government's e-engagement platform, to organise two live webchats in conjunction with the dialogues on healthcare. The internet also broadened the exhibition's reach with the organisers seeing over 13.2 million social media interactions and collecting an additional 481,651 "dreams" and commitments both online and onsite.

These past efforts show that the key to ensuring diverse and inclusive participation in participatory foresight is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Engagement formats can be adjusted to suit the preferences of particular groups. Community partners such as media,

⁸ "The Future of Us", Report, 2016, pp. 9, 26, 29, and 34.

schools, unions and welfare groups can help to reach out to specific communities. The key is to customise processes to enhance the quality of experience for each group.

Fostering Authentic Engagement: Design and Processes

Authentic engagements in participatory foresight help participants to contribute views and foster a sense among participants that they are being heard and that their perspectives matter. To this end, the first phase of OSC was, as Khoo describes it, “free-ranging, broad, open-ended and messy”.⁹ That is, rather than prescribing what issues participants should discuss, participants were free to raise any issue and contribute any perspectives they had about Singapore’s future. It was only in phase two that the OSC secretariat organised dialogues on the specific issues related to housing, education, healthcare and jobs. These themes were identified from the topics which dialogue participants themselves seemed most interested in discussing. Ultimately, this process yielded perspectives about the future that were grouped under five key aspirations for Singapore’s future:

- i. Opportunities so that Singaporeans can make a good living and fulfil their potential;
- ii. The ability to live lives of Purpose, so that Singaporeans can celebrate diverse achievements and cherish heritage, memories and communal spaces that helped to bind us together;
- iii. Assurance that basic needs such as housing and healthcare are affordable and accessible;
- iv. A society of Spirit anchored in common values, compassion for the less fortunate and togetherness; and
- v. Trust so that Singaporeans can work together to build our common future.

The OSC secretariat also took an iterative approach to designing the dialogues in order to foster high-quality conversations. For instance, organisers had initially planned to start each dialogue with a video to sensitise participants to Singapore’s changing operating context. They did this to provide information that they believed would enhance the quality of deliberations. However, they soon realised that this approach had to be adjusted as participants found the video too prescriptive – it appeared to many that the organisers were trying to pre-emptively shape discussions. Organisers subsequently did away with the video in favour of a more free-flowing format. Similarly, organisers also experimented with different group sizes for dialogues. Through running trials with public officers, they eventually arrived at an optimum number of participants for small group discussions. In both these cases, arriving at the best possible design required trial and error, a willingness to learn and adapt, and to prioritise participants’ needs and perspectives over pre-conceived ideas about what might work.

⁹ The first phase of OSC took place from October 2012 to February 2013 while the second phase took place from March to June of 2013.

Authentic engagement was also something that Gene Tan strove to achieve with the *Future of Us* Exhibition. As Creative Director of the exhibition, he was particularly concerned about fostering a sense of optimism and agency about the future. While the exhibition aimed to present information on existing plans and research by agencies, he said in an interview, “I didn’t want to just have a convention hall where you have exhibits from different agencies”. Indeed, he had prepared for the exhibition by reading the histories of several countries, including Singapore, to learn how nations are made.¹⁰ His research led him to realise that just as the nations of today came to be as a result of a series of decisions, similarly, the future too was not set, and would be made by the actions and choices of today’s citizens. As Tan explained, “The past was not inevitable. We had to go through all these things to achieve what we are today. We did not get here buoyed by good fortune. There were lots of choices that were made.” As such, he wanted the exhibition to similarly highlight the fact that people had choices to make about the future.

The exhibition was designed to be an immersive experience of possible futures from 2030 and beyond. Rather than static displays, these futures were personified in the lives of four Singaporeans. Exhibition spaces gave attendees a better sense of what the future might mean for individuals on a personal level whether at home, in school or at the office, as well as in areas such as healthcare, transport and the environment. Even the venue for the exhibition—Gardens by the Bay—reflected the twin requirements of imagination and will to realise the future.¹¹ This multi-sensory experience of possible futures sought to prompt attendees to reflect on the choices and decisions they might make to experience possible futures.

The exhibition was ultimately successful in engaging Singaporeans about the future in a way that appealed to their emotions and sense of agency. After experiencing the exhibition, three quarters of visitors reported having ideas about the future of Singapore, while 9 in 10 Singapore citizens reported that they felt they had a place in a future Singapore and that they were inspired to contribute to a better Singapore.¹² Tan noted, in an interview, that as visitors penned down their dreams after experiencing the exhibition, “many people, especially kids, said ‘I want to do X, so I can do Y’.” He noted, among the many dreams collected, that “there was a lot of input [from visitors] about how the future was not just for themselves, but what they could do for the country, for other people.”

Participatory foresight designed with authenticity in mind delivers several positive outcomes. Firstly, by eliciting diverse views from the community, it challenges the biases and mental models of elite practitioners. Such engagement can also strengthen individuals’ commitment to the process and willingness to play a role in bringing about the futures they envision. That is to say, authenticity in participatory foresight helps to engender a genuinely collective visioning of the future.

¹⁰ “The Future of Us Exhibition: Going Back to the Past to Look Into the Future”, ST, 9 November 2015.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² “The Future of Us”, Report, 2016, appendix III.

Deepening System-Wide Capabilities for Participatory Foresight

Moving forward, Singapore has room to build capabilities throughout its governance system for participatory foresight, the successes of exercises like OSC and the *Future of Us* exhibition notwithstanding. Organisations in the public, private, and people sectors can benefit from the collective intelligence of Singaporeans as they chart their paths forward in increasingly uncertain times. Participatory foresight in Singapore can also be strengthened by supporting citizens' abilities to think creatively and critically about the future. There are three keys areas in which capabilities can be further developed.

First, deliberations about the future can be extended to consider not just the futures that citizens desire, but also what they can do to realise those futures. For example, the *SGFuture* dialogues, organised concurrently with the *Future of Us* Exhibition, focused on what citizens could do to realise their ideas about the future along four broad themes about Singapore in 2065.¹³ Several citizen-led initiatives emerged from the dialogues.¹⁴ Government also created Our Singapore Fund to support Singaporeans' efforts to strengthen national identity or meet social and community needs.

Besides providing resources such as funds and policy space, government can also help to create channels for citizens to realise the futures they desire. Several governments around the world have made use of Citizen Juries to help citizens deliberate about policy options and present recommendations. In some cases, agencies may bind themselves to follow the recommendations of the Citizen Jury.¹⁵ The informed, transparent and non-partisan perspectives of a representative group of citizens can be especially helpful in navigating contentious issues. This and other methods of participatory foresight can help citizens move from ideation to realisation of desired futures.

Second, improving participatory foresight in Singapore will require strengthening citizens' capacity to consider other aspects of the future besides the changes they want to see. These aspects include sensing emerging issues, identifying drivers of change, charting paths forward amidst tensions and trade-offs and imagining possible – not just desired – scenarios for the future. The key to doing this may in fact lie in designing immersive and experiential participatory futures that help citizens imagine themselves in different circumstances, as Tan managed to do with the *Future of Us* Exhibition. "Some visitors acknowledged that they need to figure out what's important, because we can't have everything", he shared.

¹³ There were (i) A Caring Community, (ii) A Cleaner, Greener and Smarter Home, (iii) A Secure and Resilient Nation; and (iv) A Learning People "The Future of Us", Report, 2016, p. 12.

¹⁴ See "OurSGFuture: Where Will We Take It?", Report (2016).

¹⁵ See Department of Environment and Primary Industries, Victoria, Australia, "Citizen Juries", Toolkit, 26 April 2013 [<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/toolkit/tool-citizen-juries>], accessed 19 June 2017.

Third, organising participatory foresight engagements needs to be strengthened across the governance system. The OSC and the *Future of Us* Exhibition were large, multi-agency, and national-scale exercises that required significant resourcing:

OSC involved around 47,000 Singaporeans in 660 dialogue sessions at 75 locations across the island. Its secretariat was aided by 120 facilitators, who had to be trained, as well as 83 note takers.¹⁶ In phase 2, when the relevant Ministries took over thematic discussions, significant resources were also deployed. The Ministry of Education deployed 400 principals, vice-principals, teachers and senior HQ staff to organise dialogues that included teachers, policy planners, academics, parents, students and employers.¹⁷

The *Future of Us* Exhibition had 389,161 visitors. The exhibition's core team of eight staff was augmented by 1,286 guides, volunteers and managers.¹⁸ Organisation was aided by the contributions of 152 partner agencies, including the Pioneer Generation Office, which supplied additional narrators; the Institute for Technical Education, from which interns that provided various exhibition services were recruited; and various public agencies, whose officers served as tour guide, duty managers and security providers.¹⁹

Given the significant commitment of resources necessary for large-scale engagement projects, it is unlikely that participatory foresight events of OSC-scale can be organised on a sustained, regular basis. Nevertheless, agencies may find it worthwhile to incorporate participatory methods in foresight with respect to specific issues, so as to generate more specific ideas.

Fourth, Government should track and encourage the cultivation of foresight engagements in the non-government sector. *IPS Prism* was but one such example of such engagement; it is likely that there will be more of such engagements from other non-government organisations in the years to come. This would enhance the diversity of perspectives about Singapore's future nationwide and elevate the practice of participatory foresight to an organic feature of society at large beyond being driven by Government alone.

Conclusion

Participatory foresight needs to be inclusive and authentic if it is to complement the expertise of professional futurists. Institutions can also benefit by engaging citizens as part of their foresight practice and developing citizens' ability and appetite for participating in foresight. Inclusivity, authenticity and capabilities can all be further deepened through innovative methods that enhance collective deliberation. Ultimately, stronger participatory

¹⁶ *Reflections of OSC* (2013), p. 3.

¹⁷ *Reflections of OSC*, p. 12.

¹⁸ "The Future of Us", Report, 2016, pp. 9-10, 14.

¹⁹ "The Future of Us", Report, 2016, pp. 59-61.

foresight in Singapore can help the government to chart new paths amidst a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future.