

Young S'poreans need to keep asking hard questions on how the govt shapes policies

Soft truths to keep Singapore from stalling.

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FUTURE OF SINGAPORE: GE2020 PERSPECTIVES

Are there grounds for a young Singaporean to be optimistic about post-Covid-19 Singapore?

We invite Singaporeans to share their hopes and anxieties for our future, including their thoughts on leadership and pressing social issues that are close to the hearts of the younger generation.

Writing for Mothership, Kwan Jin Yao, a 29-year-old PhD student who runs a site dedicated to social service research, argues that individuals and communities can and should play a more active role when it comes to setting the agenda.

By Kwan Jin Yao

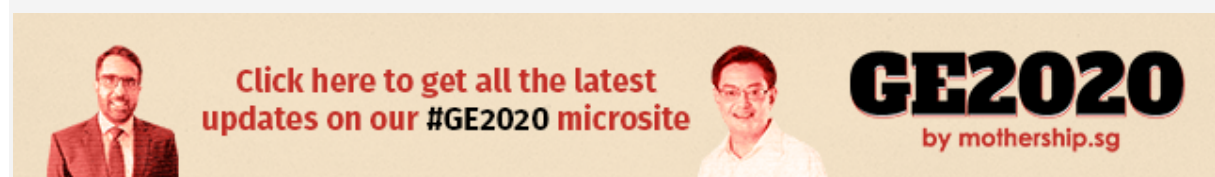
Amidst Singapore's first "Pandemic election", it is tempting to pen a laundry list of policies one wishes to see in a post-Covid Singapore. Like a personal manifesto of sorts.

I, would, for instance, prioritise issues of inequality and poverty, employment opportunities for graduating students and the precarious, as well as the climate and environment.

It would be an interesting exercise, yet one trapped within familiar but antiquated frames of political and civic engagement.

Because we still ask these questions: What do we expect the government or political parties to do for us? What are the policies changes we desire or the policy recommendations we moot? And what do we think will make the biggest difference?

But questions about how policies are shaped by the future government will be more important, because they bring attention to our disproportionate reliance on the government for policy directions. It also ignores our own potential to set the agenda.



The government of the day still yields legislative power. However, for young Singaporeans like myself, to recognise our collective ability to identify, prioritise, and achieve the policies we want, is to be able to set the terms of engagement.

Basically, we must evolve as passive participants into active agents.

As Rachel Ooi of the Mutual Aid Hub stressed: "A crisis is the time to think about structural change. This is an opportunity to really push for the society and economy that we want after all of this is over".

Ooi's view is one of many I interviewed on socialservice.sg. From activists, community-builders, social workers, volunteers, ground-up leaders, and researchers, I saw how policies can and should be shaped by communities and individuals.

From [mutual aid](#) to [mental health](#), the Majulah Universal Basic Income to the plight of migrant workers and [Singaporeans at the margins](#), how can we do better when formulating policies?

The Singaporeans I interviewed seem to agree on four related features:

#1: Centring on the lived experiences of the disadvantaged and the marginalised

The pandemic has exposed a number of gaps which require fixing.

Home-based learning and the fulfilment of basic needs have been difficult for [low-income families](#).

Elderly Singaporeans living alone struggled with social and emotional distancing during the physical distancing of the circuit-breaker.

And during the circuit breaker period, [victims of domestic and family violence](#) as well as [foreign domestic workers](#) have been trapped in the confines of their households (with many still facing difficulties today).

So far, individuals affected by these issues have had to rely on proxies or intermediaries to recount their struggles, even though their direct voices should be given primacy.

Hearing directly from the disadvantaged and the marginalised does not just mean just extracting their stories for public consumption or publication.

If they have the right resources and infrastructure, groups can have an impact in decision-making processes. We have seen these in numerous instances.

In 2015, for example, to illustrate the lack of – and importance of – cooking spaces in the dormitories as well as the poor quality of catered food, low-wage migrant workers demonstrated how they could whip up a nutritious group meal on a budget.

And in 2016, low-income families created a communication campaign to highlight challenges related to housing and healthcare, food insecurity, and persistent stigmatisation.

Such instances should be the norm, and not the exception.

#2: Activists, community-builders, and academics learning to take a back seat

In the framework for developing policies, we have not been able to effectively elicit the perspectives of some segments of our population, thus systematically excluding them.

Activists, community-builders, and especially academics, need to set their egos and personal agendas aside.

An effective approach should be truly consultative and inclusive. Underrepresented individuals should be able to participate meaningfully, without fear that their experiences would be undermined or objectified.

When the pandemic struck, social enterprise Society Staples jumped into the fray, designing initiatives around the needs of their community. Now, in designing future events, it continues to consult and engage with the community.

For academics, our expertise should be used to better design and moderate these discursive spaces. We know how to structure sessions and to ask the most effective questions. Describe the lived experiences of groups we research. And communicate these observations through theories and frameworks to advance knowledge.

Even before the pandemic, imagining ideological shifts was a challenge.

When discussing inequality and poverty in Singapore, us academics always fronted these discussions, through opinion pieces or commentaries, panels and quotes to the media.

Leading academics such as Ong Qiyen and Walter Theseira have continued to ask hard questions about the design of social welfare policies and interventions.

But to further engage the disadvantaged and the marginalised in public, the more constructive way forward is one that does not objectify, stigmatise, and stereotype.

#3: Creating and sustaining communicative channels with the government

During the pandemic, the communities and individuals I interviewed straddled between the ground and the government.

Without being prompted, they procured and fixed laptops for students, started initiatives to disseminate internship and employment opportunities, and created apps for F&B outlets looking to deliver.

“We all have roles to play when a crisis hits”, Advisory Singapore’s Mock Yi Jun told me, while FoodLeh’s Lim Yi Fan explained the mentality of building the app “as fast as we can”. He added: “Even if it fails, even if it dies off, you’re doing a part that is disproportionate to your own size”.

Others communicated government advisories to the elderly, [stressed the essential nature of mental health services](#), and asked for the government to protect the rights of foreign domestic workers. Ensuring the continuity of these communication channels is critical in a post-pandemic Singapore.

Friendzone’s Grace Chua shared: “Community and communication are deeply intertwined. You can’t create a community without communication”.

Along each step, the groups make sure that these issues are alive in the public consciousness.

A strength of these groups is their proximity to those in positions of power. In this vein, their responsibility is to bridge the experiences and policy solutions of the disadvantaged and the marginalised with action from the government.

Access will continue to be unequal. Yet, it is heartening to see more groups getting a metaphorical seat at the table – and have the ability to amplify their own voices.

#4: Increasing research and collaboration

Finally, the pandemic – like other imminent crises such as climate change – has revealed that policy problems and solutions are interconnected. That no one approach is going to be adequate.

Increased research and collaboration within and across different causes and organisations would first address this reality, and second ensure better information-sharing and coordination.

A panel I moderated on the future of social services for low-income youths and families spoke to this complementarity between research and advocacy too.

To sustain support and resources in a messier, more complex Singapore, we need advocacy to be more well-coordinated and robust. Organisations should not have to duplicate needs analyses and data collection.

Overall, mutual aid should continue to be an important feature.

And over time, we will hopefully peel away from our disproportionate reliance on the government to set policy directions. Shaping Singapore, in our collective image.

About the author: Kwan (also known as by his blog and Twitter handle @guanyinmiao), is an academic whose primary research interest revolves around children and adolescents from low-income families. He also volunteers with charities on research projects, and [runs a site dedicated to social service research](#).

Have an interesting perspective to share or a commentary to contribute? Write to us at news@mothership.sg.

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