Singapore's Experience

Initiatives to promote e-Participation

UN Expert Group Meeting

"E-Participation: Empowering People through

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)"

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Singapore embraces the challenges of a highly fast paced world with increasing digital connectivity as an opportunity to better deliver public services, and connect with citizens and businesses. No longer relying solely on manual transactions, the government is able to connect with its citizens through online platforms and social media. In this article, efforts taken to strengthen people engagement and process feedback, while using ICT as an enabler to build a digitally inclusive society will be discussed.

Realising the importance and benefits to be borne by setting up good ICT infrastructure, the Government developed various masterplans that were put in place since 1980s that helped to build a well connected society. Consequently, the household broadband penetration rate was 104.8% as of Dec 2012[1] while the mobile penetration rate was 151.8%. Internet and computer usage among the population were 71% and 72% respectively in 2011[2]. The usage demographics revealed that 96% of those age ranges 15-34 years accessed the internet while 15% of those age 60 years and above had used the internet in that year.

Based on data gathered from the government agencies[3], approximately three percent of the resident population has some form of disability. The elderly population aged 65 years and over has risen from 7.2% to 9.3% between the years 2000 to 2011[4]. These population segments tend to lack the knowledge, find difficulty to, or do not see the need in using ICT in their daily lives, much less interact online with the government.

E-Participation is generally defined as "ICT supported participation in processes involved in government and governance". Citizens can participate in government

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[1] http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/Facts-and-Figures/Telecommunications/Statistics-on-Telecom-Services/Statistics-on-Telecom-Services-for-2012-Jul-Dec

[2] http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/Facts-and-Figures/Infocomm-Usage-Households-and-Individuals#4

[3] Source: MOH's Child Development Unit statistics 2006 – 2011; MOE data on school-going cohort 2005 – 2010; and MOH's National Health Surveillance Survey 2001

[4] Source: the author composed based on the data from Key Demographic Indicators 1970 – 2011, Statistics Singapore at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/popnindicators2012.pdf

policy making via online social networking and other platforms where their views are sought. They can also contribute ideas and ways to improve service delivery through crowdsourcing platforms and events. Some examples will be shared in this paper to provide an overview while focusing on how the urban poor, elderly and people with disabilities are enabled to use existing e-participation methods, given that most people in Singapore already have the means and knowledge to interact with the government using such channels.

Building upon the recommendations of the UNDESA Expert Group Meeting on "Promoting People's Empowerment in Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Decent Work for All" held in 2012[5], this paper will focus on two enablers, namely improving access and knowledge to empower and promote e-participation, and narrowing the digital divide. It is difficult for citizens to engage in existing e-participation channels without ICT access and knowledge. This is enabled through infrastructure development and resource availability. On the government end, steps have been made to ensure that government content is readily available on electronic channels, empowering users with the knowledge to utilise e-participation channels.

NATIONAL MASTERPLANS

The digital infrastructure and digital economy experience in Singapore was made possible through careful planning and long term strategies such as the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA)'s 10 year masterplan iN2015[6], which aims to build an infocomm-savvy nation where lives are enriched through infocomm. A key strategy is to build a next generation digital communication infrastructure, known as the Next Generation Nationwide Broadband Network (NGNBN), to prepare the nation to meet the demands of digital technologies and develop an infocomm driven economy. The NGNBN deployment, which has exceeded 95% coverage since mid-2012[7], will eventually provide a nationwide ultra-high speed broadband access of 1 Gbps and

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[5] http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/csocd/2013/egm-empowerment-final.pdf

[6] http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/iN2015-Masterplan

[7] http://www.mci.gov.sg/content/mci_corp/web/mci/pressroom/categories/parliament_qanda/minister_s _responsetopqonngnbnrolloutcoverage.html

more to all physical addresses including homes, schools, government buildings, businesses and hospitals. To ensure nobody is left behind during this digital progression, ongoing programmes are conducted to equip needy students, engage the elderly and empower people with disabilities to gain access to and benefit from infocomm.

Launched in 2011, the eGov2015 masterplan[8] builds on the foundations of the iN2015 masterplan. The eGov2015 masterplan's vision is "To be a Collaborative Government that Co-creates and Connects with Our People" highlighting a mindset change by the Government in adopting a collaborative approach to public service delivery. Three areas of action, namely co-creating for greater value, connecting for active participation, and catalysing whole-of-government transformation formed the main thrusts of the masterplan.

Singaporeans are increasingly going online to express their personal views on many issues via popular social media platforms such as Facebook and discussion forums, as well as the official engagement platform. As such, the Government has worked on widening and deepening its e-engagement efforts to tap on the wisdom and resources of the netizens through e-Participation on policy feedback, idea contribution and general issues. Online consultation is one way that connections are made with the public. Besides that, the government gathers feedback through focus group discussions, meet-the-people sessions and other traditional means of engagement with the citizens. Participation is not limited to inputs on policies, but provides opportunities for citizens to suggest new ideas on how to better deliver services to the public. In the subsequent section, details on how crowdsourcing tools have been applied to receive ideas and suggestions for improvement will be discussed.

In addition to iN2015 and eGov2015 masterplans, the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth (MCCY) has developed the Enabling Masterplan 2012-2016 with the vision for an inclusive Singapore where every person with disability can maximise his potential, and is embraced as an integral member of society. Co-

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[8] http://www.egov.gov.sg/web/guest/egov-masterplans/egov-2015/vision-strategic-thrusts

designed with the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), and IDA, the plan aims to enable the delivery of coordinated and integrated social services through Volunteer Welfare Organisations (VWOs), and help Agencies adopt ICT to enable them to maximise productivity and improve service delivery.

Since most children have access to ICT from a young age, the school curriculum is heavily embedded with ICT components to equip them with ICT skills that will bring about more self directed questioning and learning. Currently, into its third ICT masterplan[9], the Ministry of Education seeks to build and strengthen competencies for self-directed learning, tailor learning experiences according to the way that each student learns best, encourage students to go deeper and advance their learning, and enable students to learn anywhere.

WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT E-PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

The online platform REACH[10] (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry@Home) was launched in response to a growing need to keep Singaporeans who were located all over the world to remain in touch with current issues happening locally. Overtime, the platform evolved to increase channels of interaction as well as accommodate new response methods, such as quick polls. Alerts on new e-consultation exercises for citizens via social media channels were introduced to encourage participation. Agencies who wish to use REACH as well as their own social media channels are provided guidelines, and can seek consultation to facilitate adoption of best practices. Most recently, the Budget 2013 engagement exercise was conducted via REACH and it received more than 1,000 inputs[11]. In addition to facilitating and driving citizens to give feedback about the Budget 2013, the relevant Agencies also respond to the feedback and validate them by emphasising how it had positively influenced policy making.

In November 2012, the Ministry of Manpower conducted a public consultation exercise to review the Employment Act. The proposals were put forth and feedback

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[9] http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2008/08/moe-launches-third-masterplan.php
[10] http://www.reach.gov.sg/
[11] http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2013/feedback.html

was solicited. After the exercise, the responses were collated and the suggestions implemented were documented on the REACH portal[12]. Another example is the consultation on proposed amendments to the Casino Control Act. A highly controversial topic, fit focused on how to better adopt strict social safeguards to avoid potentially negative effects of the casinos. After a four week long consultation, the authorities received about 40 letters through REACH, suggestions and views from the media, and suggestions via closed-door consultations with special interest groups. All these inputs served as materials for consideration of further action[13].

Government ministries and agencies are encouraged to utilise popular social media channels such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and LinkedIn to connect with the public. In order to ensure the best performance, guidelines are provided to enable agencies who wish to participate in two way conversations with the public. As of December 2012, the ministries and agencies have established 227 websites, 60 microsites, 229 Facebook pages, 92 YouTube channels, 86 Twitter accounts, 20 blogs and 59 mobile applications. Newer platforms such as webchat and Facebook Chat are also used to facilitate online participation.

The progress in mobile technology and the high penetration in Singapore today offer unprecedented opportunities for the Government to provide innovative and engaging crowdsourcing tools via mobile apps to allow citizens to provide feedback to improve their living and working environment quickly and conveniently. For instance, the mGov@SG portal was launched in June 2011 to help the public access these government mobile services easily. There are currently more than 180 m-Services listed on the portal, including popular ones such as Snap@MOM launched by the Ministry of Manpower which offer the public another channel to provide feedback on safety issues observed. Photographs captured on smartphones can be sent to the relevant participating workplaces for remedial action, with the aim to create a safer work environment at all workplaces and reduce workplace injuries.

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[12] Summary of responses to key feedback from public consultation on proposed amendments to employment act
https://www.reach.gov.sg/Portals/0/EConsult/89/Summary/Response%20to%20EA%20Public%20Consultation%20Feedback.pdf
[13]
https://www.reach.gov.sg/YourSay/EConsultationPaper/tabid/103/Default.aspx?ssFormAction=[[ssEConsult_PAPER]]&pid=[[62]]

IDA also has a citizen engagement programme which provides consultation services to agencies that require assistance in the harnessing of social media and crowdsourcing tools. Innovation workshops are offered to spark new perspectives and innovation to better engage citizens using social engagement technology, as well as to help identify feasible ideas for implementation. Customised consultancy and assistance with user experience design and technical implementation are also available upon request. In order to speed the process of development, agile application development has been utilised to help the agencies develop and deploy their ideas for citizen engagement as quickly as possible. This trend of rapid prototyping increases the relevancy of the services offered as well as greatly reduces development time. One example of the efficiency is the National Library Board's micro site 'Suggest a book', which enables anyone to contribute suggestions for books to be added to the library.

INITIATIVES TO NARROW THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The overall strategy to bridge the digital gap among those in need is based on the "Many Helping Hands Approach" (MHHA). Since Singapore's founding, the vision has been to "develop self-reliance in a society that is robust, yet compassionate and caring" through the government's partnership with "concerned citizens, corporations, community organisations, religious groups and family members" in helping the disadvantaged[14]. The initiatives mentioned in this section comprise a mix of government funded programmes, VWO efforts with partial funding by the government, as well as partial assistance schemes.

a. **ACCESS**

   Infrastructure. Understanding the importance of infrastructure to serve as the foundation of a digital city, Singapore embarked on a long term plan to roll out the Next Generation National Infocomm Infrastructure, which includes broadband and wireless. The Wireless@SG[15] initiative enables residents to enjoy free Wi-Fi up to 2Mbps in public areas throughout the island. The nationwide broadband

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[14] http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/gov/950310074254.htm
[15] http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/Infrastructure/Wireless/Wireless-at-SG

network (NGNBN) has also been set up to provide high speed access for households and businesses.

Access to e-Services. For residents who wish to interact with the government, but do not have the relevant device or internet access, they can visit any of the 26 Citizen Connect Centres located strategically in Community Centres islandwide to access e-Services[16]. There are officers to provide them with guidance, if needed. IDA also works with popular centres for the elderly to place infocomm hotspots onsite, to provide the elderly easy access, free of charge. To date, there are 100 silver infocomm hotspots islandwide[17] to serve these users.

Platforms. There are a variety of online channels where information is made available, mainly on website platforms. However, with rise in mobile phone usage in developing and developed countries, it becomes an important source of engagement. Currently, the Singapore Government offers more than 300 mobile services on various platforms, from the latest smartphone applications to the simple SMS-based applications. For agencies and ministries who continue to engage the public via SMS channels, they are able to utilise a WOG service to enable users to receive reminders or provide feedback through text messages. Some examples include the Emergency Short Messaging Service (SMS) Helpline by the Police Force, feedback channel to the Land Transport Authority on transportation issues, and receiving e-Alerts from the Housing Development Board on public housing matters.

Website accessibility. IDA introduced a set of Web Interface Standards (WIS) for government websites to comply with in 2004. Under the Web transformation strategy programme[18], government agencies are required to adopt a set of mandatory standards and recommended guidelines when designing their websites and online services. These guidelines include catering to the needs of

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[16] http://www.ecitizen.gov.sg/Topics/Pages/Citizen-Connect-Centre.aspx
[17] http://www.ida.gov.sg/Collaboration-and-Initiatives/Initiatives/Store/Silver-Infocomm-Junctions-and-Hotspots
[18] http://www.egov.gov.sg/egov-programmes/programmes-by-citizens/website-transformation-strategy-wts

the disabled by adopting World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Financial assistance. For families who cannot afford a computer or broadband, especially households with children attending school, they can leverage the NEU PC Plus Programme which offers students and persons with disabilities from low income households the opportunity to own a brand new computer and subscribe to internet access at an affordable price[19].

b. **KNOWLEDGE**

Content availability. Since 2006, Government content and e-services have been placed online as much as is deemed reasonable. As a result, citizens are able to access public information easily. The eCitizen portal (www.ecitizen.gov.sg) has been revamped to provide cross-agency, citizen-centric information and services that further help citizens to transact and interact with the Government as a whole.

Knowledge training. The Silver Infocomm Initiative (SII) aims to bridge the digital divide among senior citizens by addressing their differences in educational background, language and infocomm competencies. The SII includes programmes that provide access to IT training and computer resources, and engage senior citizens in various Silver Infocomm events such as Silver Infocomm Day. To enable the disabled to participate in society and live a more meaningful life, the Infocomm Accessibility (IA) Centre set up a pan-disability training facility to provide industry-relevant infocomm training and IT-related apprenticeship. To date, over 5,000 training places have been provided for people with physical, sensory and developmental disabilities[20]. This empowers them with the potential to contribute on online government platforms more easily.

International Collaboration. Recognising the importance of bridging the digital divide, the government collaborates in various projects and initiatives with International Organisations and inter-government collaborations such as the 2012 APECTEL project: "ICT Application for People with Special Needs", where

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[19] http://www.ida.gov.sg/neupc
[20] http://www.iacentre.org.sg/infocomm-accessibility-centre/our-achievements/

countries were brought together to learn and exchange information, establish an international network of practitioners, policy specialists and provide a platform for NGOs to share and translate relevant operational plans, and detailed actions for innovative solutions to meet all possible needs of the seniors and people with special needs[21].

CONCLUSION AND MOVING FORWARD

Singapore will continue to harness the value of data and fuel co-creation to encourage greater e-participation. One such effort is via Data.gov.sg[22] which was launched in 2011 as a first-stop portal to access publicly available Government data. The portal encourages the development of applications by the people and private sector, and facilitates analysis and research by academics and researchers. To date, more than 8,000 datasets from 62 agencies are available to the public, with approximately 45% in machine-readable formats. More than 110 apps have been developed using the data since the launch of the portal. The "Harnessing Data for Value Creation" Call-for-Collaboration in partnership with nine agencies was called in May 2012 to help developers bring their ideas to fruition. Public sector agencies were invited to share "problem statements" so that the private sector could co-create solutions to the problems. To encourage participation, incentives in the form of prizes or publicity were used. In 2011, Ideas4Apps was launched to encourage people to generate ideas for apps that the public would find useful. Following its success of more than 700 submissions, the next step was to launch a competition for actual app submission. Consequently Apps4SG was launched in April 2013 to seek innovative apps that used Government data creatively to improve the way people live, play, study and work in Singapore. The National Environmental Agency (NEA) held a Clean & Green Hackathon in April 2013 and garnered 200 participants, 3000+ hours of volunteer time, and 21 prototypes of solutions using datasets released by the NEA.

The e-Participation journey continues to be a work in progress as engagement channels and approaches continue to evolve along with citizens' changing

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[21] http://publications.apec.org/publication-detail.php?pub_id=1374
[22] http://www.egov.gov.sg/egov-programmes/programmes-by-citizens/data.gov.sg

preferences. With the basic internet infrastructure set up and government data made available online, e-Participation is expected to grow as it becomes an integral part of delivering government services and interaction with the public.