

# Government Response in Addressing Social Issues through Direct Engagement: Best Practices from Singapore

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**Abstract:** This research aims to provide important guidance for the Indonesian Government in responding to pressing social issues. With a primary focus on delineating the level of responsiveness exhibited by the Singapore Government towards such issues, this research utilizes a methodological framework that includes qualitative content analysis and a critical discourse approach. This approach is crucial in understanding the nuanced aspects of responsiveness. The results of this study confirm that the Singapore Government demonstrates a high level of responsiveness, characterized by transparency and a relaxed approach to community engagement, a very important component in addressing social issues. This research provides invaluable insights for the GoI and catalyzes it to formulate more productive strategies to address social challenges. The implications of these findings resonate across the socio-political landscape, strengthening the interaction between government and society. This, in turn, paves the way for the implementation of policies that are inherently more inclusive, ultimately leading to improved quality of life.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social problems represent a significant malfunction within a society's institutional framework, demanding prompt attention from the relevant stakeholders in the community (Kallen et al., 1989). In the intricate tapestry of social life, myriad challenges emerge, ranging from escalating unemployment and poverty levels to surges in criminal activities (Aliya, 2022). Additionally, issues like pervasive traffic congestion have become increasingly prevalent (Wijayanti, 2022), further exacerbating the strain on urban environments. Furthermore, the specter of injustice and social inequality looms large, casting a shadow over communities worldwide (Tutesa, 2020). Left unaddressed, these pressing issues can potentially erode the overall quality of life for citizens within a nation.

Central to mitigating the impact of social problems is the government's responsiveness. The government's role as the overseer of policy formulation, system organization, and public service provision places it at the heart of tackling these issues (Loong, 2013). Its effectiveness in responding to social problems is pivotal in shaping the outcomes for affected individuals and communities. A government's ability to swiftly adapt and implement measures is paramount in curbing the harmful effects of these societal dysfunctions. In this context, a proactive and agile government plays a vital role in alleviating immediate concerns and laying the groundwork for long-term social stability and prosperity.

Recognizing the urgency of this matter, it becomes imperative for governments to prioritize strategies that address social problems at their roots. This involves a multifaceted approach encompassing policy refinement, resource allocation, and targeted interventions. Moreover, fostering open communication channels with various stakeholders, including communities, NGOs, and experts, is instrumental in understanding the nuanced challenges at hand. By adopting a collaborative and inclusive approach, governments can forge partnerships that amplify the impact of their initiatives, ensuring a more resilient and equitable society for all.

The Singaporean government has garnered recognition for its exemplary approach to addressing a spectrum of social issues through an astute public service response (Hastuti et al., 2023). At the forefront of this response is a proactive engagement with the community, characterized by swift and direct outreach efforts. While not novel to Singapore, this method has been an integral component of the policy-making landscape since the nation's inception (Yan, 2016). It underscores a fundamental commitment to inclusivity and an understanding that meaningful change is most effectively driven through collaboration and dialogue with those directly impacted by these issues.

Community outreach in Singapore takes on various forms, all tailored to the unique needs of the diverse populace. One significant aspect involves deploying customized communication policies designed to resonate with specific segments of society. This targeted approach recognizes that a one-size-fits-all strategy is insufficient in navigating the intricate web of social challenges. The government can foster a deeper connection with communities by tailoring messages and interventions, facilitating more effective problem-solving.

Moreover, Singapore places great emphasis on facilitating national conversations as a means to address societal concerns. These forums serve as platforms for open dialogue between citizens, experts, and policymakers, creating a space for exchanging ideas, perspectives, and potential solutions. Such initiatives empower individuals to voice their concerns and enable the government to gain invaluable insights into the complexities of various issues. Through these conversations, policy decisions are refined and fine-tuned to better align with the evolving needs and aspirations of the population.

Another noteworthy approach is the concept of co-creation, which stands as a testament to Singapore's commitment to inclusivity in policy development. This entails active collaboration between government agencies, communities, and stakeholders to jointly craft solutions that are effective and reflective of the unique circumstances and aspirations of those affected. By leveraging various parties' collective expertise and experience, co-creation ensures that policies are more robust, equitable, and ultimately more likely to yield positive outcomes.

Through its dedicated branch REACH, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology has played a pivotal role in conducting direct outreach initiatives. This was carried out with the Our Singapore Conversation program, which sought to engage citizens in meaningful dialogues about their concerns and aspirations. Furthermore, this collaborative effort extended to the Department of Statistics Singapore, leveraging census data to gain comprehensive insights into the demographic landscape.

The overarching aim of these outreach endeavors was to foster deeper citizen participation, ultimately leading to the establishing of a more inclusive government.

The impact of this concerted outreach strategy on Singapore's societal landscape has been profound. Today, the quality of life in Singapore has witnessed substantial improvement compared to previous years. This transformation can be attributed, in part, to the implementing of various government programs. Noteworthy among these are the public housing initiatives highlighted by Deng et al. (2013), which have significantly eased, as elucidated by Chien (2014), support for household programs housing accessibility for citizens across the socioeconomic spectrum. Additionally, support for household programs, inspired by Chien (2014), has provided critical assistance to needy families, further bolstering societal stability.

The integration of multi-modal transit systems, as researched by Lam and Toan (2006), stands as another testament to the government's proactive approach to addressing social issues. This holistic transportation strategy has enhanced connectivity and Evidently, contributed to a more seamless and efficient urban living experience. It is evident that these interventions, born out of direct outreach efforts, have played a pivotal role in surmounting the social challenges that once burdened Singaporeans.

As a result of these concerted efforts, Singaporeans now enjoy a substantially improved quality of life. They not only benefit from a high level of education but also have access to superior healthcare facilities and a more readily available housing market. With reduced unemployment rates and enriched human capital, as noted by Quah (1984), the citizens of Singapore stand on a more solid foundation for personal and professional advancement. This positive shift is underscored by the encouraging results of polls conducted by the Ministry of Communications and Information Singapore, demonstrating a growing sense of trust and satisfaction between the citizenry and their government.

**Table 1.** Quality of Life in Singapore

Aspek	% Good / Very Good	% Neutral	% Poor / Very Poor
My overall quality of life	69	21	10
Relationship with my family	72	21	7
Relationship with my friends	64	26	9
Able to manage my physical health	64	24	12
Able to manage my mental health	62	26	12
Able to do activities/hobbies that I enjoy	62	25	13
Able to have a healthy work-life balance	58	29	13
Able to meet my financial needs	58	26	15
Able to access care support for my family	58	32	10
Relationship with my neighbors	53	38	10
Able to contribute to society	50	38	12

Source: Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information, 2023.

In this research, the author is interested in conducting research on the Singapore Government's response which is recognized by the community as responsive to solving social problems. In the context of this research, the process of handling social problems that are solved is a problem that has a connection with the Singapore Government survey program such as: the problem of limited housing for the community, the problem of

spending on community needs, and the problem of community transportation access. To measure the quality of the Singapore Government's public service response, the author uses the theory of public service quality dimensions by Levine (1990) which consists of:

- a) Responsiveness, interpreted to measure the responsiveness of public service providers to the aspirations of the community.
- b) Responsibility, interpreted to measure how much responsibility public service providers have in carrying out public services for the community without violating established regulations.
- c) Accountability, interpreted to measure the level of conformity between service activities organized with external parameters in society such as values and perspectives that are developing.

This theory is used by the author because it relates to the Singapore Government's public service principles which are focused on the CARE Framework, namely Courtesy, Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Effectiveness (Saxena, 2011). This research aims to focus on examining the responsiveness of the Singapore Government in dealing with social problems in Singapore with the hope that this can be replicated or applied to the performance of the Indonesian Government to produce good output for the Indonesian people.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research presents a discussion using a qualitative content analysis method with a critical discourse approach (Sagena et al., 2023). The data sources used are secondary data in the form of dissertations, theses, journal articles, and videos for the last ten years regarding direct outreach (Mahmud, 2011) which were collected for six months using documentation techniques (Arikunto, 2010) to explore more broadly and specifically the content of a content/media based on context (the social situation of the document or artifact under study), process (how the content of the message in the document is actually created), and emergence (gradual formation of the meaning of a message through understanding and interpretation) (Bungin, 2004).

This study focuses on the text, which deals with representation, relation, and identity that looks at cohesion, coherence, grammar, and diction in the content (Fairclough, 2010). Thus, researchers can understand the meaning of the text critically about what the Singapore Government's response is in dealing with social problems through direct outreach (Ahmad, 2018).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research conducted by the author illuminates a critical facet of governance in Singapore: the government's responsiveness in addressing social issues through direct outreach initiatives. By delving into various data sources, the author has meticulously examined and analyzed the multiple dimensions contributing to this responsiveness. Through this comprehensive review, the author has sought to elucidate the representations, relations, and identities that underlie the government's approach to tackling societal challenges.

As a primary source of information, the text serves as a window into the government's actions and policies. It provides valuable insights into the strategies, programs, and initiatives implemented to engage with the community directly. By scrutinizing these textual resources, the author has been able to discern patterns and trends that shed light on the government's overarching responsiveness. This includes the language used in official communications, the framing of policies, and the specific measures taken to address pressing social concerns.

Furthermore, the research underscores the interplay between the government and the various stakeholders involved in the direct outreach process. This dynamic relationship is pivotal in understanding the effectiveness of the government's responsiveness. The author delves into how the government collaborates with communities, organizations, and other relevant actors to design and implement targeted interventions. This collaborative approach enhances the government's ability to identify and address specific needs and fosters a sense of shared ownership in resolving social issues.

The research also delves into the identities that emerge from the government's responsiveness. It explores how the government positions itself about the citizens it serves. This includes examining the narratives and discourses that shape public perception of the government's role in addressing social problems. By analyzing these identities, the author gains valuable insights into the underlying values, priorities, and philosophies that inform the government's approach.

In sum, the research conducted by the author provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the responsiveness of the Singaporean government in dealing with social problems through direct outreach. The author meticulously examines data sources and reveals the representations, relations, and identities that define this responsiveness. This research not only contributes to a deeper scholarly understanding of governance in Singapore but also offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance their responsiveness in addressing societal challenges.

### ***Representation***

The Singaporean Government's approach to social issues is a powerful representation of its commitment to responsive governance. This approach transcends mere rhetoric and represents a tangible and concerted effort to engage with its constituents meaningfully. Direct outreach is particularly noteworthy in the governance context, as it embodies a departure from traditional top-down methods and ushers in a more inclusive and participatory model. The government's willingness to listen and respond is emphasized, placing a premium on the voices and concerns of its citizens.

The government acknowledges the nuanced nature of social issues, acknowledging that these challenges are woven into daily life for many Singaporeans. By reaching out directly, the government recognizes the need for tailored solutions and targeted interventions informed by the experiences and perspectives of those affected. This representation serves as a testament to the government's adaptability and willingness to evolve in response to society's dynamic and changing needs.

Direct outreach also embodies a form of symbolic representation, signifying the government's role as a facilitator of dialogue and collaboration. It reinforces the idea that



governance is not a one-way street but a reciprocal relationship between the government and the governed. Through direct engagement, the government positions itself as a partner in pursuing collective well-being, nurturing a sense of shared ownership in resolving societal challenges. This is stated in the sentence statements in several data sources, including:

Yee Lai Fong - *Schema Emergence from Prototyping in a One-year National Citizen Engagement Initiative in Singapore*

- Prototypes are "representations of design ideas created before final artifacts exist,"
- The goals were to strengthen trust between the government and the people of Singapore; engender ownership among citizens over Singapore's future; and build constituency for change. In addition, three desired outcomes were articulated – (1) people – understand citizenry's needs and aspirations; build common understanding around priorities and choices; (2) policy – reaffirm what is good and relevant; refresh and innovate on new areas; and (3) capability – build new capabilities in public engagement.
- ONC marked a pivotal point in redefining citizen engagement in Singapore

Source: Fong, 2015.

Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) is a prototype dialogue initiated by the Singapore Government, symbolizing the government's commitment to inclusivity and responsiveness. OSC represents a departure from conventional top-down approaches, emphasizing a more interactive and reciprocal dynamic between the government and its people. It stands as a testament to Singapore's dedication to fostering a culture of open dialogue and collaborative decision-making, recognizing its citizens' collective wisdom and input.

The term "pivotal point" is significant in this context, as OSC is not just one among many initiatives but a central and transformative catalyst for citizen engagement in Singapore's future. It serves as a linchpin where citizens' aspirations, concerns, and ideas converge with the government's policies and vision, marking a substantial shift in governance dynamics.

The term "pivotal point" underscores that OSC is not a transient endeavor but an enduring and foundational component of Singapore's governance framework. It signifies a sustained commitment to nurturing a culture of engagement and collaboration, positioning citizen participation as a cornerstone of the nation's progress. This designation also implies that OSC holds the potential to be a touchstone for future dialogues and initiatives, setting a standard for meaningful citizen-government interaction.

Melissa Khoo & Yee Lai Fong - *Redefining Engagement: Lessons for the Public Service from Our Singapore Conversation.*

- The OSC Secretariat, with broad representation from across the Public Service, formed the nucleus of the OSC movement.
- As a conversation among Singaporeans, OSC was about peer-to-peer connections, and expanding common space, through dialogues that focused on important priorities.
- The OSC marked a pivotal point in redefining public engagement in Singapore

Source: Khoo & Fong, 2014.

The author emphasizes the significance of Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) as a manifestation of the Singapore Government's "peer-to-peer" approach to engaging with its citizens. OSC represents the government's intent to establish an open and reciprocal connection with citizens, transcending rhetoric and involving their perspectives in

policymaking. It vividly illustrates Singapore's dedication to fostering a culture of open dialogue and participatory governance.

The phrase "pivotal point" further emphasizes the importance of OSC as a transformative and foundational element in the government's engagement with its citizenry. It signifies a critical juncture where citizens' aspirations and concerns align with the government's policies and vision. OSC not only hears the voices of its citizens but actively integrates their input into the decision-making process. The term "pivotal point" reinforces the notion that OSC is an enduring and fundamental component of Singapore's governance framework, fostering a culture of engagement and collaboration with citizen participation at its core.

### **Relationship**

Segara's concept of "relationship" is crucial in understanding media representations, which involve both formal and informal interactions (Lawelai et al., 2022; Sadat et al., 2022). The Singapore Government's relationship with its citizens is open and receptive, embracing community aspirations and fostering candid exchanges.

This approach contrasts with rigid communication methods, suggesting a more relatable government. Direct outreach is a key medium for this open and informal relationship, allowing for a personal exchange of ideas, concerns, and feedback. This approach allows the government to gauge the community's needs and aspirations better.

The informal nature of this relationship-building process signifies a departure from traditional top-down governance models, promoting a more collaborative and inclusive approach. Engaging with citizens on a peer-to-peer level acknowledges the value of their perspectives and experiences, fostering trust and mutual respect, reinforcing the idea that governance is a collective endeavor.

Yee Lai Fong - *Schema Emergence from Prototyping in a One-year National Citizen Engagement Initiative in Singapore.*

- *In the past, public engagement tend to focus on informing the public about policies and selling their benefits ... whereas, the key change now is that we spend a lot more time, really, just to understand what people's preferences and needs are. And I think that's helpful because then it helps us to do better product design. The second part is that there is also the process of education, because people then realize that different people want different things*
- *Engagement in the past typically tends to be confined to specific topics or policies that needed to be reviewed ... whereas the ONC was much more open-ended, we didn't go out with any specific policies that needed to be reviewed or anything like that. It was very much more ground-up*

Source: Fong, 2015.

The use of the sentences "...the key change now is that we spend a lot more time, really, just to understand what people's preferences and needs are..." and "...the ONC was much more open-ended, we didn't go out with any specific policies that needed to be reviewed or anything like that..." constructed in the text above, shows that the relationship between the Singapore Government's response to the community through direct outreach is an open relationship and shows closeness.

The Singapore government's approach to outreach initiatives through Non-Profit Community Organizations (ONCs) is unique. They do not strictly enforce policies, valuing community perspectives and inputs without a specific agenda. This approach fosters a

strong relationship with the people, demonstrating readiness to listen and adapt to changing needs.

By understanding people's preferences and needs, the government ensures policies and programs reflect their wants and needs. This open and friendly approach also fosters trust between the government and the people, demonstrating respect for individual and group perspectives. This fosters collaboration and the creation of effective and sustainable solutions.

Melissa Khoo & Yee Lai Fong - *Redefining Engagement: Lessons for the Public Service from Our Singapore Conversation*.

- *OSC served as a shared experience that took participants out of their comfort zones in a way that — from an organisational development perspective — is conducive to bringing about transformative learning*
- *From the perspective of citizen participants, the OSC process expanded the common space for Singaporeans from across all walks of life to come together and talk about issues that matter to their shared future.*

Source: Khoo & Fong, 2014.

The use of the term "shared experience" implies that there is a sense of mutual understanding and common ground in the relationship fostered by the Singapore Government's response. It suggests that both parties, the government and the community, have a basis for relating to one another, possibly stemming from a shared context or set of circumstances.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the phrase "talk about issues" emphasizes the informal nature of this relationship. It indicates that there is an open and candid dialogue between the government and the community, where they engage in discussions about various concerns and topics. This informal approach indicates a willingness on both sides to communicate openly and address issues in a collaborative manner.

Douglas O'Loughlin - *Managing Complexity with Courage, Conflict and Engagement*

- *Our Singapore Conversation was a good start to this type of engagement, and provided evidence that our citizens are willing to engage with us, and that we can all handle differences of opinion for the sake of co-creating more robust policies and better shared outcomes*

Source: O'Loughlin, 2014.

The above statement shows that Our Singapore Conversation builds public responsiveness to governance-related issues, creating an open relationship between the government and the people, ultimately resulting in more robust and up-to-date policies. Through this initiative, the Singapore government seeks to listen to and understand the viewpoints and concerns of different segments of society. They strengthen the bond between government and citizens by holding open dialogues and facilitating discussions on various issues. This creates an environment where new ideas can emerge and innovative solutions can be considered.

In addition, Our Singapore Conversation also opens up space for greater participation from the public in the decision-making process. By directly incorporating people's perspectives, the government ensures that policies reflect the aspirations and needs of the people. This strengthens the legitimacy of policies in the eyes of the public, as they feel they have an active role in shaping the direction of government.



By building on this foundation of open and collaborative relationships, Our Singapore Conversation strengthens public policy and people's engagement and ownership of the decision-making process. This initiative results in more robust and relevant policies and enriches democracy by broadening citizen participation in shaping the country's direction.

### Identity

As expounded by Wijaya (2023), the concept of identity serves as a pivotal lens through which we understand the persona's development in the text. Within this framework, identity construction is intricately linked to the Singapore Government's responsive approach to addressing prevalent social issues. The text paints a portrait of a government that is acutely attuned to the needs and challenges faced by its populace.

Through their actions and policies, the Singapore Government emerges as profoundly committed to proactively tackling social problems. This resonates strongly with forming their identity as a responsive governing body. The government's agility in addressing these issues becomes a defining characteristic, illustrating a keen awareness of the dynamic nature of societal challenges.

This responsive stance underscores a commitment to adaptability and a willingness to engage with the evolving concerns of the community. By being attuned to the pulse of society, the government is acknowledging the complexities of modern governance and actively seeking to alleviate them. In turn, this responsive identity instills confidence and trust in the government's ability to navigate the intricacies of societal issues.

The text illuminates how the Singapore Government's responsiveness forms a central facet of its identity. This identity, rooted in its proactive stance towards social problems, not only shapes its public image but also resonates profoundly with the populace. It is a testament to the government's dedication to fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society. This is described in the sentence statements of each respondent in the video interview source:

#### REACH – *Reaching Out Your Thoughts (Last Episode)*

- *"Will give a nine."*
- *"I think they are doing a very good job. Nine."*
- *"I think I'll put it at eight. It's because the government has done really well. The assurance package especially, giving us different reliefs to be able to help offset the financial burden, especially of GST increases."*
- *"I would say the Government is doing a good job right now. So keep doing what they are doing. And hopefully things will be better improved."*
- *"I was quite happy with how the Government handled the whole COVID situation. So, thank you."*
- *"Thank you for taking care of the citizens. I think you guys are doing a good job. I think everyone should be grateful for what we have."*

Sumber: REACH Instagram, 2023.

The inclusion of phrases like "good job" and "really well," alongside the specific mention of "nine," underscores the positive reception of the Singapore Government's response to social issues by the community respondents in the interview. These expressions of approval and satisfaction indicate a high commendation for the government's efforts.

The term "good job" implies a commendation for a well-done task, suggesting that the community perceives the government's response as effective and commendable. Similarly, "really well" amplifies this sentiment, emphasizing a powerful endorsement of the government's actions (Lawelai et al., 2022).

Furthermore, mentioning "nine" adds a quantitative dimension to the evaluation, possibly indicating a high level of satisfaction on a scale. This numerical indicator strengthens the assertion that the community's perception of the government's response is highly positive.

These phrases and the specific numerical reference convey a strong endorsement from the community regarding the Singapore Government's responsiveness in addressing social problems. It signals effectiveness and a close alignment with community expectations, reflecting a harmonious and collaborative relationship between the government and its constituents.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research highlights responsiveness as a key factor influencing the quality of public services. Singapore has been an inspiring example, with its government demonstrating a remarkable level of responsiveness through direct outreach to its citizens. In the text analysis, the use of diction and clauses become important elements to assess the extent to which the Singapore government responds to the needs of the people. The findings of this study reveal that the Singapore Government's response to social problems tends to be open, informal and very responsive.

It is important to note that the representations, relations and identities of the Singapore Government's responsiveness are reflected very clearly through their actions. This allows for effective handling of social problems. The findings provide a concrete picture of how a government can deliver responsive and quality public services.

However, this study also has limitations, especially in terms of focusing on discourse practices and sociocultural practices in assessing the responsiveness of the Singapore Government. Therefore, it is hoped that future studies can build on this research, deepen the understanding of government responsiveness, and fill in the gaps that have not been met in this research. The conclusions of this study are an important driver for the Indonesian Government to improve and enhance the quality of public services, in line with the example set by the Singapore Government.

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