Promote sharing as one way to reduce waste, combat climate change

Carol Soon and Nadzirah Samsudin

For The Straits Times

Being environmentally friendly has become an existential to-do. At the G-20 summit held in Osaka this year, world leaders pledged to tackle climate change using clean technologies. At home, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in his National Day Rally speech several initiatives to safeguard Singapore from the impact of climate change. They include the requirement for new developments to be built at least 4m above the mean sea level. Other government efforts include setting up a new Climate Science Research Programme Office to strengthen climate science capabilities in Singapore. The private sector is also stepping up its efforts to combat climate change. Supermarket chain FairPrice has begun its “No Plastic Bag” trial at selected stores to encourage shoppers to use their own bags. McDonald’s is testing more sustainable approaches by removing plastic straws and single-use plastic items for a month at 10 outlets here. Members of the public too are doing their part. According to two household recycling surveys conducted between June last year and February by the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) and the National Environment Agency, about 60 per cent of Singapore households recycle regularly, although many are not recycling right.

Recycling is part of the “waste hierarchy” adopted in several countries – the other components include reducing and reusing. Digital technology has made it possible for people to share their possessions through collective consumption of goods and services. What are citizens doing on these fronts, and what can be done to help them do more in using less? Early this year, the Institute of Policy Studies conducted a study, funded by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, on the sharing landscape in Singapore. We conducted a series of focus group discussions with users, non-users and innovators of a wide range of sharing initiatives. The discussions provided important insights into Singaporeans’ participation in sharing initiatives. In general, people associate sharing with the pooling and distribution of resources, for reasons such as saving money and reducing waste. Sharing also means caring – towards residents who live within the same locality and towards people who share similar interests.

Our study also found that people share because they care for the environment. Sharing is environmentally friendly – initiatives such as Lendr (an online peer-to-peer platform where people can rent or lend merchandise) and Shazaa (an umbrella sharing initiative) reduce the need for people to own assets. The Singapore Really Really Free Market provides a platform where goods and services are shared at no cost, and Repair Kopitiam generates a second life for products through repairing and reusing. In so doing, sharing promotes sustainable consumption and generates less waste in the long run.

Several barriers impede people from participating in sharing. The first is the entrenched culture of consumerism in Singapore. People would rather possess items, even if they use them infrequently. Our study also found that some Singaporeans feel embarrassed to share. The second barrier is the lack of familiarity among Singaporeans with the practices and norms of sharing, such as being considerate of other users’ needs and taking only what is needed. Other barriers include the inconvenience of sharing (such as inaccessible locations) and prior negative experiences with sharing. Several things can be done to encourage people to overcome those barriers, promote sharing and enhance the ethos of reduce and reuse. They include educating people on the value of sharing, making sharing “trendy” and inculcating positive norms to prevent the misuse of sharing initiatives.

More could also be done to raise awareness of sharing initiatives, especially those less known, operating on a smaller scale. For example, developers of ground-up initiatives can leverage social media to publicise their work, or work with residents’ committees and community centres to promote their initiatives. Support from the Government is also critical – when the Government supports and endorses an initiative, it signals what is desirable and undesirable behaviour. Hence, the latest slew of policy measures announced to combat climate change are an important policy direction to awaken public consciousness and encourage citizens to adopt environmentally friendly practices in their daily lives.

According to LabGov, city co-founder Christian Iaione, co-creation between the government and citizens could help solve issues or problems faced by citizens.

In his speech Building Our Future Singapore Together, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat spoke about how the Government will partner Singaporeans in new ways to implement solutions. One way this could be done is through a citizens’ work group, such as the upcoming one convened by MEWR. The panel will involve around 50 Singaporeans from diverse backgrounds to develop strategies to improve the way households recycle waste.

In the fight against climate change, every individual action counts. Sharing is a collective movement with positive ripple effects on the community and the environment that we can all contribute to.

stopin@spf.com.sg

Carol Soon is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and working with the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources on the citizens’ work group. Nadzirah Samsudin is a research assistant at IPS.