How to use big data to develop a smart city

That's what thought leaders will discuss at round-table next week

By Lester Hio

Singapore has already laid down the basics of collecting data, but more needs to be done on mining and analysing the data collected, says Prof Chan, who is chairman of Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities and ambassador-at-large. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

SINGAPORE must step up its game on how to collect and utilise big data in order to achieve its goal of being a smart city, says the chairman of a research centre focusing on how to improve urban development.

Starting the conversation on how to harness the potential of large amounts of data is what Professor Chan Heng Chee, who heads the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC), intends to do next week.

The centre, which is part of the Singapore University of Technology and Design, will hold its first round-table of thought leaders on innovation in cities in Singapore on Monday and Tuesday.

In an interview with The Straits Times, Prof Chan, who is LKYCIC chairman and ambassador-at-large, said the focus of the discussion will be how big data can aid in the development of smart cities such as Singapore.

Big data refers to the collection of large amounts of data that requires specialised tools to track, store and analyse.

Prof Chan said Singapore has already laid down the basics of collecting data, but more needs to be done on mining and analysing the data collected.

She cited the example of existing data on travel patterns, where information on people movement and peak areas of congestion can be tracked.

However, the data is useful only if it ensures that the transport system works efficiently, that is, if buses and trains come on time, or if commuters are given updates on how to avoid congestion, she said.

Big data first came into the national conversation about three years ago. Now, Prof Chan believes that learning how to effectively mine and analyse such large amounts of data is essential for Singapore's Smart Nation project.

The project, launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last November, aims to turn Singapore into a country where people's lives are enriched by technology.

"Big data has been around the past few years, but now people are talking more about social behaviour and policy, and how data relates to people," said Prof Chan. "How do you use it to serve people? How do you make life much better and easier for people, whether it's about ageing, dealing with their health, or educating and moving them?"

These are some of the questions that will be posed to an international panel of scientists, business leaders and policymakers at the round-table, which is titled "Data. Social Behaviour. Policy."

Speakers include Dr Steven Koonin, who was chief science officer in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2012, Mr Steve Adler, IBM's chief information strategist, and Dr Jong Sung Hwang, head of the Korea Big Data Centre at the National Information Society Agency in Korea.

The closed-door round-table will have an audience of about 70, comprising academics, bureaucrats, and representatives from organisations such as public transport operator SMRT, the new Smart Nation Programme Office, Keppel Corp and DBS Bank.

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