

**Public Participation and Sustainable Development in Hong Kong:
Institutional Issues -- a Personal View**

By Lily Shui

Sustainable Development (SD) entails a different modus operandi in the way public policy decisions are made. It requires Government to “think out of the box”, due to the complicated and interlocking issues of environment, economic development, and social justice. It is inherently a much more challenging task for any administrations. Not only does it call for integrated policy making, but fundamentally it calls for a change in government mentality, in their standard operating procedures, in the way political institutions are organized, and in the way we, as a community, make collective choices.

For governments today, the challenges are about institutional changes – about generating awareness, reaching consensus on values, building commitment, creating an environment with the right incentives, working on shared tasks. *“The emphasis is now on demand-driven processes rather than top-down agendas.”*¹

While not every place which embraces SD adopts a demand-driven or bottom-up participation process, enough countries and cities have found that a more participatory process makes sense, as SD involves the making of many value judgments on a collective basis. An example in making collective decision in Hong Kong is whether the polluter pays principle should guide waste management policies in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is in the process of deliberating on its options for sustainable solid waste management, and one suggestion is to collect from consumers and businesses a solid waste handling fee. Without tabling the major issues and a wide range of creative options for the community and letting them debate fully before reaching a decision, it may take years for the Government to decide whether to introduce a fee. A perfect example is our landfill charge, which took years before it is finally approved by the legislative body in Hong Kong. Thus, quality participation and discussion of policy is critical, as well as building a consensus among a wide spectrum of the community.

¹ Dalal-Clayton, B., Bass, S. (2002) *Recent Progress and New Thinking on Strategies for Sustainable Development*, London, International Institute for Environment and Development

While the Hong Kong Government accepts the need for community participation in the public decision-making process, it is about the scope and level of public participation and the government mentality that many in our society are at odds with. On a scale of six in the levels of participation, Hong Kong would be at level three –i.e. participants are being consulted through working groups and meetings to discuss policies only, but have no role in agenda-setting and more serious analysis.¹ In other words, in the opinions of many in Hong Kong, the government has yet to treat members of the community as equals or genuine partners in the participation process.

Many leaders in our community have commented on the inadequacies of the consultative or participative system in Hong Kong. Some point to a sense of futility due to a lack of feedback to their submissions from the Government; some point to government's tendency to rely on experts rather than trust its own people; and some point to a lack of suitable mechanisms for multi-sector participation and consensus building. In fact, in the past 10 years, many incidents reminded us of the very expensive costs of inadequate and failing consultations -- the famous court case over Long Valley, and the court cases over the proposed harbor reclamation projects immediately spring to mind.

Institutional issues are one of the key reasons why our city's progress on the path of SD has been so slow. In a survey of local academics, businessmen, environmental NGOs, government officials, legislative councilors, media practitioners, professionals and social group, the level of understanding in the concept of sustainable development was rated 5.2 (0 being poor, 10 marks being excellent). And the following received the highest ratings as the three biggest obstacles to promoting and achieving SD in Hong Kong:²

¹ Bass, S., Dalal-Clayton, B., Pretty, J. (1995) "Participation in Strategies for Sustainable Development", *Environmental Planning Issues*, no 7, International Institute for Environment and Development, London

² Hills, P. (2004), *Ecological Modernization and Environmental Policy in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong (in press)

- ✓ Lack of a sustainable development strategy and suitable policies;
- ✓ Lack of policy integration; and
- ✓ Lack of understanding.

To make faster progress, Hong Kong needs to address issues regarding the quality of governance—e.g. policy integration, effectiveness of institutions, and issues that relate to political will.

It is the former we are interested in discussing here. With the Sustainable Development Unit's launch of a new engagement process and the release of the Invitation and Response documents in July, we hope this is the start of a new era of consultation and public participation in Hong Kong with a new *modus operandi* in the government – at least among the SD-related institutions. Hong Kong society has had many unpleasant experiences with 'consultation' and 'participation' before. Entrenched departmental cultures and preferences, the traditional thinking of the government which sees consultation exercise as a chance to promote its policies and 'going through the motion' will not be sufficient to respond adequately to the demands of citizens in Hong Kong today. The government process must be more inclusive, it must be ready to engage, discuss, debate, and find solutions that are built on majority consensus, rather than take engagement or consultation exercise as a chance to "collect opinions" only. The traditional mode of consultation is just inadequate to meet the demands of a mature civil society like Hong Kong.

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