

AGENDA 7

Sustainable Community Development

Sustainable Development is a very broad concept that can be applied to the city's different facets and aspects. According to the Sustainable Community Plan launched by the British Government in 2003, "Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equal opportunity and good services for all". In a word, sustainable community development generally refers to a community that takes into account economic, environmental and social development with a long-term perspective while at the same time being a residence unit where people can live healthily and happily.¹ The existing economic development models of most countries are criticized of being "non-sustainable" for not only causing damages to the environment but also leading to destruction of precious cultural assets and expansion of wealth gap. To combine the development of society, environment and economy, attention should be directed to hardware such as construction of residences, buildings and transport, as well as software like protecting the environment, preserving the culture and even maintaining neighborhood relationships etc. Although sustainable development often refers to environmental improvement, it also values eliminating poverty and injustice. Sustainable community development attaches great importance to satisfying the present and future community needs, views residents as companions and adopts long term perspective and broad-based participation in the course of planning the community, formulating policies and making and implementing decisions on all levels.

Major Trends

1. Urban development and community renewal is the inexorable trend

Hong Kong has been changing drastically, but with a focus on economic development in the past few decades, a number of old communities were razed to the ground under the guideline of "economic development being of overriding importance", such as Lee Tung Street of Wan Chai, Sham Shui Po District etc, arousing lots of social conflicts. From the demolition of the old Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, to the recent incident of Tsoi Yuen Village and anti-express rail, Hong Kong citizens showed their keen interests on the urban development. Currently in planning and implementing the city's development, there is few channel for citizens to participate. Forcefully implementing these plans will easily highlight social contradictions and create conflicts.

With the continuous implementation of Hong Kong's urban development plan, in the near future, large-scale infrastructure construction and urban renewal programs will successively take place in different areas including Kowloon City,

¹ Ng Mee Kam, Chan Hai Ying(2005), <A Citizen's Guide to Sustainable Planning in Hong Kong>, Community Participation Unit, Department of Architecture, CUHK, Centre of Urban Planning and Environmental Management. The University of Hong Kong.

Kwun Tong, Central and Western District, West Kowloon and the High Speed Rail project. However, these development programs tend to overlook the lifestyle and community economic activities of the original residents. As a result, implementation of the plans would ultimately force the citizens to change their lifestyles, destroy the resident network and local economy in the area, which in the long run hinders the community's sustainable development.

2. Sustainable community development brings opportunities

Since the government has decided to plan and implement various urban development programs in the next ten years, it should adopt new thinking and new methods to enhance community development by enabling people from all walks of life in the community to communicate and exchange thoughts, reaching a consensus with understanding. An approach of "bottom-up dialogues with equal and responsible participation" should be advocated to achieve "truly" sustainable community development.

Concerns

1. The existing community network and community assets are suffering from destruction

Community network is a key element in preserving sustainable community development. By strengthening it, residents can improve their capability to solve problems. A sustainable and effective community network is established through close contact and daily interactions. Since most residents in the area has been living there for quite some time, they hold certain acquaintance and sense of belonging towards the community. The networks are thus all the more important as community assets. But in the case of forced removal for urban renewal, the existing neighborhood relationships and community network will break down. For community building and sustainable development, it is crucial to deliberate on how to preserve the common experiences they share in the community so as to retain the original community network.

2. A lack of bottom-up community participation will deepen the distrust between people and the government

Under the existing policy, Hong Kong citizens have little chance to participate in community development because the government adopts a top-down and economy-oriented model when developing large-scale construction and community development programs. This puts citizens and professions involved in a passive and disadvantaged position and gives people a feeling that the government is "steamrolling" people into its plan, as evidenced in the recent Tsoi Yuen Village and Express Rail. The government's ignoring attitude towards the old community's native culture, lifestyle and community network is undoubtedly a disguised form of accelerating the differentiation and disharmonization of the community and the major cause of disintegration. What's more, it widens the distance between the general public and the government and creates mutual distrust, adding to the negative comments on the urban development and hindering the progress and achievements of social development.

3. The problems of poverty and elderly residents are being neglected

Social development should take into consideration the needs of economy, environment and society. Sustainable community can provide people with a healthy and happy life. Looking at the advanced cities in Europe and America, one finds the emphasis constantly put on involving citizens' participation, improving residents' well-being and utilization of community resources. By contrast, the bulldozing way of reconstruction in Hong Kong fails to bring new energy into the aging community. Instead, it exacerbates problems of poverty and negligence of elderly. It is evident that the government has failed to uphold the ideal of “sustainable development” and still lacked comprehensive and detailed planning in urban development which in turn arouses disputes.

4. Small-scale economies break down within the community

With the disappearance of old communities, cheaper residences are reducing in number. Rent for small stores in old communities is relatively cheap. Once the old communities are razed, these stores will be difficult to survive and the store owners and staff will lose livelihood, which further worsens the poverty problems in the old communities. Therefore, during the process of community development, it is necessary to fully involve the stakeholders for establishing a consensus so that the lifestyle and local economy can be preserved and sustainable development can ultimately be achieved.

5. Ideals of protecting the environment and preserving the culture failed to be enforced

During the process of urban renewal, the government did not show enough respect to environmental protection and cultural preservation. The reconstruction puts up large and tall residential buildings and shopping malls while putting improvement on air quality and elimination of pollutants in a secondary place. The increase in number of folding screen buildings is a clear evidence. Although cultural preservation policies have been introduced by the government, old trees cut down and ancient buildings demolished are still frequent sights.

Challenges Ahead

1. Until now, the government subsidies for community service and development mainly takes the form of short-term mode with a perspective limited to economic self-sufficiency. It deviates from the concept of sustainable development, and is a roadblock for the community to achieve sustainable development.
2. The economy-oriented and top-down urban development model makes the authority overlook various stakeholders, especially the lifestyle, opinions and appeals of local stakeholders.
3. When there is a lack of citizen participation, it is easy for citizens to develop opposition and conflicts against the authority, which will further trigger

disharmony of the society.

4. With insufficient opportunities for community participation, citizens will be helpless and feel less in control of their own lives. They have a stronger sense of powerlessness as well as negative feelings, which would intensify social conflicts.
5. There is an increased demand of the citizens for government reform and democratic participation.

Challenges for social welfare sector and social workers:

1. Various service operators and social workers are exhausted in meeting quantified service indicators and writing new service bids,. They are out of line with the community or even social incidents, and are unable to give proper responses.
2. Social workers undermine or belittle their roles as advocate while stress the "microcosmic" intervention approach. This in turn weakens their roles in leading social development and reform.
3. The young generation's active interests in the social affairs is a positive phenomenon. Social workers wish to organize youngsters to become concerned for the society but they have little understanding of the young generation participating in the social movements. For example, are they willing to be organized? What are their opinions of organization etc.
4. Reaching consensus with the various stakeholders in the society on the issue of community development needs a long period of mutual communication.

Possible Actions

1. The urban planning and renewal requires a concept of sustainable development that take full account of social, economic, cultural and environmental development.
2. We should Increase transparency to make the community development plan more adapts to people's needs. The government should report to the public in detail on the future community development and give ample time and space for participation. More efforts should be made to help public opinions from the lower level to reach high authorities and involve various stakeholders in participation. We should establish cooperation across professions and build a platform for participation of various stakeholders.
3. On the social welfare and social work:
 - ◆ Set up "dialogue platforms on community development" in small areas of each community to call on social workers from different service units to collectively get involved in community and society affairs and to participate in planning for community development.
 - ◆ Develop deeper reflections and discussions in the sphere of social work

education and sector including Hong Kong Council of Social Service, Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union, Hong Kong Social Workers Association and Social Workers Registration Board and the like. Examine social worker's role and responsibility in advancing sustainable community development, reposition their role as "social work advocates", proactively motivate and assist residents to participate in social affairs.

- ◆ Regular contacts between social workers and various stakeholders reduce differences and develop common grounds to resolve divergences and build solidarity to foster community development.

How do you think about the themes/topics above? Are there any other themes left out that you would like to raise? What are other issues or problems related to this Agenda that you think should be explored and discussed?

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