The Agencification of Sustainable Development in Hong Kong: Issues and Challenges for Policy Design and Implementation

Maria Francesch-Huidobro
Department of Public and Social Administration
City University of Hong Kong
maria.francesch@cityu.edu.hk

Abstract

Hong Kong’s sustainable development policy has been driven by a problem-solving, conventional command-and-control approach through a process dominated by ‘administrative rationality’. This has given an overriding power to the role of government through the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), essentially, a pollution control agency. But the work of EPD has nevertheless being heavily influenced by other actors inside and outside the bureaucracy in the policy process. Initially implemented as part of a broader environmental protection and control schemes through the 1989 White Paper on Pollution in Hong Kong—A Time to Act, sustainability was more widely applied to policy design and implementation after the publication of the ‘Sustainable Development in the 21st Century Study’ (SUSDEV 21) in 1997. This prompted the establishment of the Sustainable Development Unit (now Division) in 2001 under the Environment Bureau and also the appointment of the Council for Sustainable Development, a high-level advisory body, and the establishment of the Sustainable Development Fund in 2003. This paper analyses the development of sustainable development policy in Hong Kong and the impact of recently established agencies on policy design and implementation. The paper draws conclusions about how this process of agencification is unfolding and how it affects the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government.

Key Words: sustainable development, agencification, Council for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Unit, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has become one of the most widely used terms in the language of contemporary policy making. The past 40 years have seen major changes in the approach to economic growth, development and environmental protection. Three international conferences serve as landmarks: the United Nations Conference on Human Environment, Stockholm 1972, was the first major discussion of environmental issues at the international level, and it later resulted in the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The agenda touched on virtually all aspects of natural resources but the focus was the threat to the natural environment
posed by industrial pollution and economic growth. The Stockholm Conference took place after two decades in which the world’s population increased from 2.5 billion to 3.7 billion. Policy makers and scientists in developed countries, on one hand, expressed fears that the population explosion would lead to serious environmental problems, mass starvation and social breakdown. This view was, on the other hand, rejected by developing countries. They argued that poverty posed a greater threat to human welfare and the environment and that for them economic growth was not the problem but the solution. Thus began a divisive difference in attitude – with economic growth and environmental protection being assigned conflicting roles.

During the 1980s, a new paradigm emerged which appeared to reconcile these conflicting objectives. In 1987, the World Commission on the Environment and Development published *Our Common Future*, better known as the Brundtland Report. The report defined the concept of sustainable development, in which environmental protection, social equity, and long-term economic growth are seen not as incompatible but as complementary and mutually dependent. Solving environmental problems requires resources that only economic growth can provide, while economic growth will falter if human health and natural resources are damaged by environmental degradation. The publication of the Brundtland Report set in motion a process that culminated in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. UNCED emphasised integrated strategies to promote human development through economic growth based on supportable management of the natural resource base. The Rio action plan, *Agenda 21*, thus reaffirmed the Brundtland Report’s message: socio-economic development and environmental protection are intimately linked and effective policy-making must tackle them together.¹ Twenty years after Rio, world leaders gathered again in the Brazilian city. The Summit’s agenda was filled with challenges like alleviating poverty in a sustainable way, managing globalisation for sustainable development, improving governance and strengthening institutional mechanisms for sustainable development, and finding the political will to gather financial resources to pursue sustainable development. The Summit is expected to result in two types of outcomes: a political declaration of fully negotiated issues agreed by all targets, and a plan of implementation.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to analyse the way in which the Hong Kong Government has been going about incorporating sustainable development to the policy-making process with emphasis on changes in institutional arrangements since 2001. From the perspective of policy analysis, it is important to understand the rationale behind setting up a particular policy. The political climate of the time, the available expertise, the shift in administrative and political culture and the global and social values of a locality are factors affecting the setting up of a distinctive policy. At present, the Hong Kong Government has not as yet adopted a strategy for sustainable development. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that a combination of problems, policies and politics are forcing the concept onto the government agenda.

The paper is organized as follows. The second section provides the context through a brief analysis of the history of sustainable development in Hong Kong. This is followed in section three by an analytical framework proposing a way to look at policy design for sustainable development in the city. Here I revisit the analysis I made in 2004 (Francesch, 2004), when the concept of sustainable development was being incorporated to the policy making process in

¹For further discussion on Agenda 21 see www.unep.org
Hong Kong. I find that a mix of the Pluralist, Corporatist and Agenda Setting approaches to policy-making focusing on the primacy of groups is still very valid in understanding policy design for sustainable development. To substantiate this argument, I analyse how interest groups and “functional constituencies” are influencing the decision-making process. Section four then brings the discussion to an analysis of the implementation of sustainable development by looking at changes in institutional arrangements, arguably, prompted by the desire to coordinate action within and outside government in achieving sustainable development. The fifth section reaches some conclusions…

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HONG KONG

In Hong Kong, cultural and socio-economic factors are such that the values and concepts related to sustainable development are presently appreciated by only a few, even within the government. This is not surprising when considering that historically the Hong Kong Government has based its policies on the “positive non-intervention” principle and its population has a strong focus on the commercial development of “a borrowed place, in a borrowed time” (Dimbleby, 1997; Environmental Resources Management Ltd, 1998). Thus, the very idea of proposing policies that take into account future environmental and social conditions, at the expense of possible present growth, is generally considered radical. The main government initiatives in sustainable development have grown out of its own recognition that broad – but in no way comprehensive – array of policies, infrastructure and legislation that focus mainly on pollution control and not on prevention, were not working. In fact, pollution and environmental degradation were appreciably worsening in Hong Kong.

The concept of sustainable development was introduced in Hong Kong in the second review to a ten-year plan presenting a comprehensive scheme to control pollution (Environmental Protection Department, 1989, 1998). The 1989 White Paper “Pollution in Hong Kong: A Time to Act”, first revised in 1993, was subsequently revised in 1998 calling for examination of the sustainability of Hong Kong’s way of life. The fourth and final review of 1998 was entitled “Sustainable Development: a Green Future”. Yet despite the government’s efforts to raise public awareness about the concept, this is still not well understood by the community. Indeed, it is far from appreciated by decision makers and by anyone playing a role in the planning process.

Since the publication of the White Paper, the Hong Kong Government has invested large sums of money to correct past environmental and unsustainable abuses and prevent future damage. For instance, the “polluter pays” programme was introduced in 1995. The scheme put in place legislation to charge for the treatment and disposal of sewage and chemical waste. Measures were also introduced to adopt more stringent vehicle emissions control in line with international standards. In 2001, the government announced its intention to introduce a dumping fee by which companies are to be charged HK$125 a ton for waste dumped into landfills (Chan, in SCMP, 6-04-2001).

Susdev21
Under the HK$40 million consultancy project Sustainable Development for the 21st Century (SUSDEV 21) the government studied how a framework integrating environmental, economic and social policies and plans could be formulated. The study was done in 1997 in two stages.
Stage 1 was public consultation and collection of views on the concept to come up with guiding principles, values, and indicators. Stage 2 created a computer based model of sustainable development indicators with the purpose of assisting all government departments in their decision as to whether a proposed project or policy is sustainable or not. The finalised Revised Version of Topic Report 6 (TR6) was released in January 1999 with the final version of the report available since February 2001. TR6 presents the Guiding Principles, Indicators and Evaluative Criteria proposed for the computerised sustainable development system, the Computer Aided Sustainability Evaluation Tool (CASET). It incorporates comments received from Departments and Bureaux and a number of stakeholders on the first version and revised versions of TR6 (dated 28 August and 7 December 1998 respectively). The guiding principles, and associated indicators and evaluative criteria, cover economic, social and planning, and environmental issues.

Since sustainable development principles are broad, their delivery focuses on specific issues. This may be done through indicators of which SUSDEV 21 proposes 39. Additional indicators proposed by the public were rejected by the Administration because information about them was not available or they were too specific or irrelevant (Environmental Resources Management Ltd., 1999). Furthermore, at the Legislative Council meeting of 27 January 2000, officials said that Bureaux and Departments were asked to propose indicators that fit their agendas and where the Administration already had existing programmes (Legislative Council, 2000). The CASET described in Annex B of the consultation document is at present a useful yet limited in its purpose tool to assess a specific policy’s or project’s sustainability. Since CASET has been programmed as a Microsoft-compatible software application, it has been made available to the public at a price. This has also enabled to do modelling by the private sector, in turn enriching models and insights overall.

SUSDEV 21 also proposes setting up a Council for Sustainable Development (CSD) and Sustainable Development Unit (SDU). In February 2001, the Government made a proposal to the Legislative Council to provide directorate support to lead the Unit that was then set up in April 2001. Three directorate posts were proposed at the Administration Wing of the offices of the Chief Secretary for Administration and the Financial Secretary. The SDU was established under the Administrative Wing of the Chief Secretary for Administration’s Office on April 2001. Its mandate is to institute a system of sustainable impact assessment so as to integrate the concept in policy initiatives, to sustain the discussion started after the publication of SUSDEV 21, and to provide support for the CSD. The 18-member Council, headed by the then Chief Secretary, Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, was appointed by the Chief Executive in late February 2003 after three years it was first proposed. In May 2003, the government announced it was to launch, through the CSD, a consultation on formulating a sustainable development strategy with the intention of drawing a Local Agenda 21 (Chan and Cheung in SCMP, 5-05-2003).

The Council’s remit is “to provide expert advice to the Government and keep the public regularly informed about its work, so we can build a better understanding of the concept of sustainable development...[and] encourage the community to put the concept of sustainability in practice” (CSD, 2012, n.p.). The remit seems vague and non-descriptive of specific powers. After the establishment of the Council, all bureaux and departments are required to include in their submissions to the Chief Secretary’s Committee (CSC) or the Executive Council a statement on
the sustainability impact assessments of major policies and programmes (Chief Secretary for Administration’s Office, 2001).

An area that is often discussed in the context of sustainable development and that is not addressed in SUSDEV 21 concerns moral values and public participation. In the body of literature on sustainable development we find that scholars believe that mere utilitarian considerations or even an aesthetic approach to respect for the surroundings cannot be a sufficient basis for genuine education on ecology. Rather, solid ethical convictions involving self-control, responsibility, justice and ultimately love ought to be present (De Torre, 1999). Public participation is an issue because unless problems are examined in a cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary arena, development will continue to be dictated by partisan considerations.

Besides SUSDEV 21 and in line with international trends to place environmentally friendly and sustainability into corporate management, the government is placing emphasis in promoting the introduction of Corporate Green Management and appropriate Environmental Management Systems such as ISO 14000. Despite the government’s efforts and the validity of the schemes in place, the initiatives that were started by the government have now largely been taken up by the private sector. Interest groups made of citizens from a broad spectrum of society and the professions have taken the challenge convinced that “the commitment to the human and social development of peoples is the radical challenge which mankind is called on to face on the threshold of the third millennium. On this, in fact, depends the sense and credibility of technological and scientific progress, which purports to be at the service of humanity” (Farri, 1998: 43).

**IESI**

Before the government made plans to commence the SUSDEV 21 study, the Centre for Urban Planning and Environmental Management (CUPEM) of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) had received a grant of HK$1.5 million from the Environmental and Conservation Fund (ECF) to develop an initial set of indicators (Barron and Steinbrecher, 1999). The purpose of the study was to assess how sustainable Hong Kong’s present development plan was and how it might be made more sustainable in the future. The Initial Environmental Sustainability Indicators (IESI) published in March 1999 was thus the first systematic review of sustainability for Hong Kong, albeit mainly focusing on 7 indicators of environmental sustainability (Barron and Steinbrecher, 1999).

**Beyond Susdev 21 and IESI**

In his 1999 Policy Address, the Chief Executive made a renewed commitment to adhere to the concept of sustainability in the policy process in Hong Kong. In the institutional framework the two specific directives were to set up the Council for Sustainable Development (CSD) that would provide expert advice, and the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) with the task of assessing the “sustainability impact” of government decisions and provide analysis, as discussed above. The programme was estimated to cost $30 billion in the next 10 years. The plan also included support for the environmental protection industry (Policy Address, 1999). Moreover, the Commission on Strategic Development, set up in 1997, released its first report at the beginning of 2000 “Bringing Vision to Life” (Commission for Strategic Development, 2000). Among its many recommendations it outlines a plan for Hong Kong to be the Region’s first sustainable city.
In cross-boundary cooperation the Hong Kong Guangdong Joint Working Group on Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection agreed to hold its first meeting on June 8 (Environment and Food Bureau Press Release, 11-05-00). The second meeting was held in February 2001 were the work progress of eight special panels was reviewed (Environment and Food Bureau Press Release, 22-02-01) subsequent meetings have been held till 2012. All these initiatives have created multiple fora for debate on long-term planning issues and sustainable development. Since then interest groups have suggested that to become a first world city, Hong Kong needs to take a broader and much longer-term vision of development.

Given Hong Kong’s history, it is not surprising that the main activity in introducing sustainable development that was started by the government has been taken up by the market and civil society sectors. Hong Kong is not a sovereign state and as such cannot be a signatory in its own right to international conventions, protocols, and the like. However, prior to 1 July 1997, agreements entered into by the United Kingdom were mostly extended to Hong Kong as a British colony. After the transfer of sovereignty, the PRC has taken a similar approach but in a different capacity. It must be added however, that nothing prevented Hong Kong from enacting any of these protocols, conventions or treaties into legislation and, thereby, effectively ratifying or being able to enforce their provisions in their own right. This was done, for example, for the Montreal Protocol, the Basel Convention and the London Convention, to name a few. However, Hong Kong has not necessarily been as quick to implement these agreements as sovereign states have been. For example, the PRC was the first country in the world to draw a local Agenda 21 in 1994, but Hong Kong still has no government-led definitive plans to do likewise.

Hong Kong’s economic success has been well documented in the Government’s own annual reports and in the academic literature (Berger and Lester, 1997), though on the environmental front Hong Kong is not doing as well. The HKSAR experienced in 2000 one of its worst air pollution readings (March 29 Air Pollution Index hit 174), there is wide-spread noise pollution, poor environmental hygiene, arguably, precipitated the spread of the SARS virus in 2003, and Hong Kong is facing in 2012 a serious waste disposal problem. Despite a good number of environmental laws and regulations and a well-staffed Environmental Protection Department (EPD), it has been increasingly difficult to maintain the quality of the local environment in the face of a growing problem of cross-border pollution and major on-going capital projects.

The fact that the government follows an environmental management approach based on pollution control rather than on prevention and long-term goals, and that the business community and the population at large have only a basic notion on sustainability, shows that the challenges that Hong Kong faces are both great and fascinating. While intending to give a background of the socio-economic and political development of Hong Kong, the major studies and directives that have set the concept of sustainable development in the government’s agenda have been discussed. From these studies one concludes that the concept is being debated in various fora but a strategy has not yet been put in place. Furthermore, looking at the policy actors may provide insights into the chances of sustainability to succeed in Hong Kong.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Policy-making may either be analysed in its organisational or political context. The organizational context focuses on the interaction between organisations and actors inside the bureaucracy. It studies the formal bureaucratic framework and how decision-making takes place within it. The political context studies the interactions among the various political actors and how interests are achieved through bargaining power.

In order to assess how the concept of sustainability is finding its way into the policy process (design and implementation) in Hong Kong, the political perspective seems more relevant than the organisational perspective. Outside the bureaucracy, the debate on sustainability is taking shape through the interaction of various political actors pushing for action and, through the bureaucracy, lobbying and bargaining with concerned parties. Moreover, approaches to policy-making treat actors as key explanatory variables to any particular policy. In order to understand how the concept of sustainable development is brought into the policy-making process in Hong Kong, it is necessary to analyse how actors influence the process. In the Hong Kong context, I propose that a mix of the Pluralist and Corporatist approaches to policy-making focusing on the primacy of groups is the most appropriate. To substantiate this argument, it is important to look at how interest groups and “functional constituencies” are influencing the decision-making process.

Lindblom’s research helps provide a clear understanding of the limitations of rationality and the reality of the policy process. He rightly argues that policy-making cannot be entirely rational in the sense that all variables and options are taken into account before the best solution is chosen (Lindblom, 1977). This is because human beings operate with bounded rationality. In practice, when making a decision, we are not so much led by its objective suitability to a problem, but are constrained by its adequacy to the place, time and people involved in that decision. This occurs to individuals as well as to groups of persons.

**Pluralism**

This approach looks at the political arena in its broadest sense. The pluralistic approach focuses on groups and not individuals (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). It looks not only at the forum where actors from the formal government structure play a role, but also where all other stakeholders, from the plethora of interest groups, participate. The appeal of the theory is that it looks at the policy process beyond the confinement of formal bureaucratic structures. In fact, pluralism is based on the assumption of the primacy of interest groups in the political process. Pluralists do not believe that all groups have equal access to government and are equally capable of influencing decisions (Smith, 1990), though these groups are characterized not only by being numerous and flexible, but also by membership moving across the board. This type of arrangement facilitates reconciliation and co-operation among groups.

The guiding principle of this theory is that no single group dominates the policy process and every group has power for as long as it is sufficiently determined to participate in the process. This leads to the conclusion that policy formulation is influenced not only by those that are formally vested with authority within the executive or legislative arm of the government, but also by everyone else. The next conclusion drawn from here is that, although institutions set limits to action, they are never as powerful as to impede others outside them to act. The limitation of this
theory is that it explains how the policy process should take place but not how it should be done; the role of government is unclear. Is the government a “messenger” registering and transmitting demands placed upon it by all those concerned? Is it simply an arena where various groups meet and bargain? Reality shows that even in the most perfectly participatory societies, there are groups that dominate the process. This brought the emergence of Neo-pluralism (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). This modified approach recognises, for example, that in modern capitalist societies, business groups are more powerful than other interest groups for the mere fact that economic growth and the functioning of the private sector is based on businesses confidence and therefore they attract more attention from government than other groups.

Overall, the basic limitation of the pluralist analysis of policy making is that it overemphasizes the role of interest groups while underestimating the equally important role of other factors in the policy-making process. It specifically overlooks the interests of government as one more group, of international organizations, and of trends and ideologies of a particular place and time.

Its applicability to Hong Kong, a modern, capitalist, and traditionally noninterventionist state is limited by the colonial tradition and the dominance of the business community. Nevertheless, as the government moves towards a more consultative manner of handling the planning process, the pluralist approach seems adequate and its basic tenets serve well the purpose of analysing which groups of actors influence the incorporation of the concept of sustainability to the policy process.

Moreover, the influence of interest groups is desirable as a basis for sustainability. The latter calls for long-term planning; horizontal, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral participation; vertical integration; new governance; legislation that ensures environmental protection and management of growth; public awareness; a three-way partnership between the state, market and civil society; targeted inward investment and promotion of the environmental business sector (Ng, 2000).

But, how much are interest groups influencing the policy process? At present in Hong Kong policies are mostly set by people vested with formal authority, acting in a timely manner, sharing particular sets of values of specific interest groups. This is contradictory to sustainability that calls for consensus building and long-term strategic planning. Loh argues that to make Hong Kong truly sustainable we need to reinvent politics. “The Government needs to provide institutions and forums for the creation of a strong citizenry who together can be better informed about what choices they have for their advancement. People and Government need channels to deliberate and make public choices rather than depend on elitist solutions from those who think they have all the answers. Hong Kong desperately needs a political system that befits a World City” (Loh, 1999, n. p.).

But this new order does not come easily. There are challenges that planners and public officials face today in governing the SAR. First, there is the challenge of the structural-institutional set up of the political system whereby differences among groups with contrasting views are being intensified. Second, there are the socio-cultural characteristics of the SAR that are more complex than in the previous decade because of age, ethnic, demographic and socio-economic changes (Lai, 1996). Also, there is the historical challenge upon the existing political system and the emerging of a new environmental paradigm which favours collective action to search for a sustainable way of living (Inglehart, 1990). Studies carried out recently also support this paradigm shift toward an environmentally-friendly approach to development. Therefore the
pluralist approach is becoming more and more relevant in analysing policy-making in Hong Kong.

**Corporatism**
Corporatism can be best understood in contrast with pluralism. Pluralism is a theory explaining that a multitude of groups exist to represent their own members’ interests, and where groups come together freely, and membership is voluntary and detached from government interference. Corporatism, by contrast, is a system of ‘functional constituencies’ of groups that are not free forming, voluntary or competitive. They are neither autonomous as they depend on government for recognition and support in return for a role in policy-making. Corporatism includes in its agenda two issues cast aside by Pluralism: the role of government and the relation between government and the various groups (Schmitter, 1982). Corporatists believe that policy is shaped by this interaction between the government and interest groups recognised by the government; interaction is institutionalised and mediated by the state. This approach argues that close cooperation between the state and interest groups makes good and coherent policy.

The limitation of this theory is that it is too simplistic as how to explain policy outcomes based on the factor of linkage between the state and groups. It does not explain either how the government recognises some groups only. In the Hong Kong scenario, this approach serves to analyse how the traditional business groups affect public policy decisions. Policies, devised both, by the colonial government and the more recent SAR administration have been influenced by organised interests groups known as “functional constituencies” (Basic Law, 68 and Annex II). Nevertheless, as the policy process takes more stakeholders on board and moves into a wider consultative forum, corporatism is being constrained by pluralism.

**Agenda Setting**
A series of ideological, political and social factors determine which problems gain access to the official agenda and will be considered for resolution. In Hong Kong, the recent emergence of a more vocal, knowledgeable and louder voice demanding solutions to environmental degradation and piecemeal planning is the result of some of these determinants. This trend may increase the impact of a growing number of people steering the policy process who are knowledgeable of environmental and sustainable ideologies. It may also be due to a shift in the economic base from manufacturing to services that creates a more sophisticated population demanding higher quality of life and the use of Internet as a means to bringing minds alike together and access the policy process. All of this is shifting, albeit in small proportions, the government agenda.

Besides the more general socio-economic changes mentioned above, more specific reasons may be the cause of changes affecting Hong Kong’s policy process in the past 25 years, namely the establishment of the Environmental Protection Department in 1986; the appointment of Chris Patten as the last Governor of Hong Kong and his blueprint for political reform in 1992; the election to the Legislature of members with “green agendas” from 1992; the direct elections of 1995; the handover in 1997 and the subsequent Asian economic crisis at the end of 1997; the deterioration of local air quality; the signing of global agreements on the environment and sustainable development; and the effect of directives set in the Policy Address since 1999. The interest of policy analysts is not only how agendas are set and how alternatives are screened out, but also the policy decision itself. After the sustainable development policy has been in the
global agenda for several years and in the Hong Kong administrative and community circles for a few years, there is enough favourable and adverse feedback to push the policy towards new directions.

**Actors in the Policy Process**

Actors in the policy process may be either individuals or groups. Although primary actors are usually easily identifiable, each particular area of policy has a specific set of actors (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). In the context of bringing about sustainability to the policy process, actors can be identified, both, within the machinery of government and in the society at large. For the sake of clarity, policy actors have been divided here into six categories: government officials, legislators, interests groups, citizens, research organisations, and the media. What follows is an attempt to analyse their role in the current Hong Kong political arena and assess how their mindset and position influences the inclusion of sustainability in the policy process. A point was added to this section on the role the Pearl River Delta Region plays as an additional “actor” in the policy process.

**The Executive Council and the Administration**

When speaking about the government, reference is made to the Executive Council (ExCo), the bureaucracy in general – also called the Administration, and the agencies involved in planning and environmental protection in particular. ExCo and the bureaucracy are in theory the key players in the policy process having a great deal of control over the political agenda. This is not only because of their constitutional authority but also because of counting on unmatched resources. Their assets range from access to and control over information, to control over fiscal resources, professional expertise, and command over the introduction and passing of laws in the Legislature (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). ExCo has a prominent but powerless role when it comes to the day-to-day making of policy process. The civil service still has monopoly over the everyday formulation and implementation of public policy but their work is secretive, thus difficult to evaluate as such (Scott, 1999; Francesch-Huidobro, 2011, 2012). It has been argued that the introduction of the, so called, “accountability system” in July 2002 altered the distribution of power within the executive transferring it from the bureaucracy to the Chief Executive and his politically appointed Principal Officials (Burns, 2003). In its first years of existence, the POAS has proven more of a hindrance than an asset in policy formulation, notwithstanding the dissatisfaction the performance of individual Principal Officials has brought about.

The bureaux and departments playing a direct role in planning and environmental policy areas are the Environment Bureau (EB) with its Environmental Protection Department (EPD), the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) with its Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), and the Development Bureau (DB) with its Buildings, Drainage Services, Electrical and Mechanical Services, Lands, Planning and Water Supplies departments. There are also other departments that in one way or another have a planning or environmental role like the Highways, Marine, Transport, Territorial Development and Works Departments, and the various advisory bodies created to address specific planning and environmental issues, namely the Advisory Council of the Environment (ACE), the Town

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2 In July 2003 two of the Principal Officials, the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for Security, resigned from their posts after weeks of unprecedented public demonstrations.
Planning Board (TPB), the Chief Executive Commission on Strategic Development (CECSD), the Hong Kong Guangdong Joint Working Group on Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection and the proposed Council for Sustainable Development.

These agencies generally have a clear vision but face a problem of translating this vision into policy. In particular, the EB is just a bureau among hundreds of other agencies, so if they come into conflict with other bureaux or departments and short-term economic benefits are at stake, these benefits may come up on top (Forster in Cook et al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999). Cheng argues that the public should be allowed to have a voice since it has the right to know what is going on (Cheng in Cook et al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999). Kim Salkeld, former Deputy Secretary for the Environment and Food Bureau, explains that Government surveys have shown that there is a high level of public understanding of the environmental problems, and there even seems to be a willingness to pay more to bring about improvements. It is, Salkeld argues, the transfer of attitudes to politicians that seems to be the problem. Interest groups have always had more voice than the public in LegCo and a lot depends on how strongly the public feels and reacts about an issue (Salkeld in Cook et al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999). Here, the government’s environmental agenda seems to be at fault since there has not been a clear framework. Although there seems to be heightened awareness about the environment, it is still difficult for people in the government to make the hard choices; each issue is treated very narrowly: economic considerations, social consequences. The wider and longer-term public interest is generally not being thought through. All sides must make their pitch, argues Salkeld, but with a view to improving the interests of Hong Kong, the wider and longer-term consequences must be considered (Salkeld in Cook et al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999).

Attitudes within the government are slowly changing, though, with green groups and parts of the private sector being given more of a voice. But still the government’s environmental policy lacks direction and appears too scattered. The administration has a sequential agenda; everything it does has to fit a specific and sometimes very narrow legislative framework, often failing to see the big picture (Cheng in Cook at al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999). It is argued that in many cases the government does not know what the environmental impact of its policies would be: it tends to devise new plans and only when it releases the plans does it conduct the environmental impact assessment (Loh in Cook at al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999).

Moreover, the EPD does its part when it comes to industrial pollutants in trying to educate offenders. However, it does not take a leading role until public opinion is right behind it; it gets a generous budget but it moves very slowly; EPD commissions costly studies which circulate within EPD and other departments but which the general public rarely sees (Baillie in Cook at al., *SCMP*, 31-01-1999). Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this otherwise common pattern. For example, in tackling the development of Long Valley, the EPD disapproved the EIA submitted by the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC). KRC had proposed a spur line to cut across Long Valley – a wetland and unique bird sanctuary. The Corporation had to eventually build the spur line underground.

A sustainable community requires sustainable laws, and that means changes in policy and legislation. Before 1 July 1997, there were two mechanisms to change legislation: one was a government bill, the other a Private Member’s Bill (a bill proposed by an individual member of
the Legislative Council). Article 74 of the Basic Law states that “members of the Legislative Council may introduce bills in accordance with the provisions of law and legal procedures”. Bills that do not relate to public expenditure or political structure or the operation of the government may be introduced individually or jointly by members of the Council. The written consent of the Chief Executive shall be required before bills related to government policies are introduced” (Basic Law, 74). This de facto restricts the introduction of Private Member’s Bills, since it is difficult to define what pertains or not to government policy.

Currently, Private Members’ Bills have become virtually impossible to get through, so the strength for policy change must come from within government. However, the relationships between the Executive, the Legislature and the bureaucracy have become strained, piecemeal, uncoordinated and at times dysfunctional. It appears that each of the branches of the government pursues its own agenda. Moreover, the Executive Council and the civil service develop their own policy agendas and have ceased to act in a co-ordinated fashion (Scott, 1999). Scott suggests that the reasons for this are grounded in “factors behind the formal power arrangements embedded in the Basic Law … and in the domestic politics of the transition”. This, among other consequences, affects the coherence in formulation and implementation of public policy.

For a sustainable, strategic, long-term and all-embracing policy, co-ordination and communication are fundamental. Interaction between various policies, strategies, plans and programmes is of crucial importance to successful long-term planning and implementation. At present, within the government, planning is divided among many bureaux and departments. The PLB has been responsible overall for the establishment of sustainable policy. One of its dependent departments, the PD submits its policy recommendations and is in-charge of implementation. For example, the PD has been coordinating the SUSDEV 21 study.

After the abolition of the two Municipal Councils, the Environment and Food Bureau (EFB) was established on 1 January 2000 (further divided into two bureaus in 2005). Although the new administrative arrangements seem to offer better co-ordination of policy, it is still too soon to say how it would work to steer the process for sustainability. In a press report, the then Secretary for EFB, Lily Yam, expressed that other government bureaux and departments with whom she must liaise do not seem to want to know about implementing measures to improve the air and the water quality. Yam affirms that negotiating with other government departments is a real challenge because they spout the right words but are less keen to implement environment-saving measures. In order to improve this situation, in May 2000 Yam set up an Air Pollution Control Taskforce that comprises policy secretaries or other senior staff from the departments of Transport, Finance, Economic Services, Planning and Lands, as well as the EPD (Tacey, SCMP, 14-05-2000). The most recent progress report was presented to the LegCo Panel on Environmental Affairs last November 2000.

Traditionally in Hong Kong, the tendency when deciding a specific course of action is to stress the economic necessity and keep the costs low. Social costs and other indirect costs that are not perceived as tangible are often ignored (Tacey, SCMP, 14-05-2000). This manner of acting is opposed to what sustainability advocates: a holistic approach to problems and planning. Therefore, there appears a conflict between a new demand for quality of life and the traditional
economic considerations. This mindset is very much part of the Hong Kong government culture that is perceived to be driven by the more traditional stream of the business community.

When evaluating specific policies, public officials look at costs and then at other considerations. Depending on the nature of the service or the works, more or less weight is given to each aspect. Civil servants have for the greater part of their career been functioning in accordance with a framework that they are familiar with and that has proven to be both efficient and effective (Tacey, SCMP, 14-05-2000). When faced with the challenge of expanding that framework or changing it all together, peoples’ natural tendency is to resist what they perceive as troublesome. The EPD gets a lot of the criticism for asking people to adjust to new ways of thinking and of doing things. There is clearly a need to modify the mindset and values of civil servants when it comes to long-term, presently intangible but strategic benefits both in broad policy decisions and in operational decisions.

The different government departments tend to restrict their concern to their traditional areas of responsibility and their agendas. For instance, problems such as air pollution that cut across the departmental structure tend to be handled poorly because the departments contributing to the problem, such as the Transport Department (TD), tend to rely on other departments like the EPD whose task is to clear it up (Barron in Ehrlich, SCMP, 14-05 2000). He advocates the setting up of an “interagency” and supports the government’s plans for a Council on Sustainable Development, but thinks that there is still a need for more interaction between departments, more community involvement and a more open public arena: “The highest human cost of the present short-sighted planning will be paid by future generations” (Barron in Ehrlich, SCMP, 14-05-2000).

The existing structure derives from the colonial model where a generalist bureaucracy made almost all policy decisions. As a substitution for political life, an extensive net of advisory bodies was created to institutionalise public consultation. By absorbing community leaders as occasional advisers to the system, it made politics outside the administration almost unnecessary. Yet, the existing consultative process is a sounding board system for the bureaucracy to seek the endorsement of already determined policies. This system stifles debate and innovation. The alternative would be a system that will catch a wider net of appointments within the community with a more transparent appointment process and where consultation takes place before decisions are taken.

In summary, at present, within the government machinery, they are constraints that impede government officials from putting sustainable development at the centre of policy-making. These constraints are mainly the civil service culture, and the lack of cross-departmental communication. Creating a structure to ensure sustainability will facilitate cross-department and cross-discipline decision-making presently a weak area within government. Educating government officials on the importance of long-term planning and strategic thinking would certainly be the way by which the bureaucracy would be a more relevant actor in setting the agenda for sustainability.

*The Legislature*
Under the Basic Law, the main function of the Legislative Council (LegCo) is to enact laws and to monitor public expenditure rather than to hold the executive accountable. To substantiate this, one needs to look at two Articles of the SAR Basic Law. While Article 64 calls the government of the SAR to abide by the law and be accountable to the Legislative Council of the Region, Article 73, in describing the powers and functions of LegCo, makes no mention about how it might hold the government accountable. In this context, the Legislature can only have a very limited influence in the decision-making process in general and in setting up the political agenda in particular. The main responsibility of the Legislature is to review the appropriateness of legislation formulated and proposed by the Administration. Furthermore, besides the limited powers accorded to it, issues of environmental, economic and social sustainability are not seen by the majority of legislators as matters of priority. This may be due, arguably, to the fact that politicians tend not to look at issues in a long-term fashion, but they are preoccupied with gaining support for issues that people want to be solved now.

Moreover, given the fact that the concept is new and so far there has been very little public education about it, legislators also find themselves poorly informed, and only a few have taken the initiative to think of sustainability as a concept worthy of consideration. Nevertheless, the situation is changing.

On one hand there are voices in the Legislature calling for a greater role in monitoring the government’s work. Leong introduced a motion in 1998 bringing up some of the constraints LegCo faces in holding the executive accountable: lack of policy briefing to the relevant panels on bills introduced by the administration, last-minute lobbying by civil servants on measures not discussed previously, contracts made and requests for funding sought without figures being presented in full (Leong Speech, 1998). Loh also called in her alternative policy address of 1999-2000 for a constitutional convention. On the other hand, there is also a growing awareness about environmental sustainability. The Environmental Affairs Panel has achieved prestige by setting the precedence of inviting representatives from across the board to make deputations on controversial government proposals. This has been the case with proposals to burn clinical waste at a retrofitted facility in the Chemical Waste Treatment Centre (CWTC) (LegCo Environmental Affairs Panel, 5-05-2000) or with the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report on the Disneyland Project development at Penny’s Bay. Both cases prompted the administration to rethink their proposals and hold further public consultations. This *modus operandi* is far from ideal and does not keep with the concept of sustainability wherein consultations ought to be made before the process starts. It also delays decisions unnecessarily because at the start legislators are not given sufficient information and time to debate. Nevertheless, it increases the role of the Legislature in holding the administration more accountable.

In sum, the Legislature, on the whole, is neither influencing the policy process in general, nor introducing the concept of sustainability into the government agenda in particular. This may be due to both the dysfunctional relationship between the Legislature and the Administration and the limited powers accorded to the Legislature in the Basic Law, discussed above. Nevertheless, there are a few individual voices within the Legislature that are advocating the concept. Their voice is, arguably, an echo of environmental groups, other NGO’s, academics and a new generation of planners.
In Hong Kong, policy-making is very much the prerogative of the Administration. However, business coalitions on the environment, political parties with green platforms, pressure groups and environmental NGO’s are arguably playing now a more significant role in the process and especially in setting up the political agenda. The advantage of these groups is that they develop good knowledge of their area of concern and their expertise is sometimes utilised by legislators and bureaucrats. Their limitation lies in their small membership numbers, and their limited financial resources.

**Business**

Although the business sector has not been pro-active in environmental protection in Hong Kong and remains largely focused on short-term profit, there are sections of the business community that have been interested in protecting the environment. The main initiatives have come from two environmentally focused collective business groups that represent mostly large foreign owned companies: the Private Sector Committee on the Environment (PSCE), a group of several hundred large local companies and banks set up in the late 1980’s, and the Business Coalition on the Environment (BCE) a group of mostly, but not exclusively, international chambers of commerce, some large local chambers and the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce (HKGCC). The PSCE is a major contributor to the Centre of Environmental Technology and through it, makes significant contribution to training initiatives in the environment. The BCE, set up in 1998, has acted as a discussion group and has sponsored a number of public seminars and events to raise awareness mostly in the area of environmental issues in business. In 2000, the two groups merged to form the Business Environment Council (BEC) aiming at devising strategies for cost effective environmental management.

Mottershead argues that although companies connected to these groups have environmental policies and in many cases have adopted local and international codes of conduct, nevertheless they have not considered environmental issues at the operational level on a day-to-day basis. Many do not have environmental managers and if they do, they are unlikely to be at the board level. Furthermore, they mostly do not produce environmental reports, do not account for the environment in their bottom line and have no definite environmental objectives and targets against which they measure themselves. Although they make donations to NGO’s they do not enter into partnerships or seek their opinion in proposed developments (Mottershead, 2000).

There are reasons for this traditional non-inclusive partnerships: in some cases NGO’s have shown lack of expertise, they have been confrontational, and they are not inclined to a more cooperative type of partnership. Despite these facts, business coalitions have taken the lead in the recent developments against environmental degradation. This is noticeable in the policy area of air pollution where the business community is particularly affected in terms of having difficulty in attracting staff to work in Hong Kong and is moving headquarters elsewhere.

**Political Parties**

In general, political parties in Hong Kong have limited resources and this may be the reason why they dedicate little efforts to research and development of policy proposals. Political parties with serious environmental agendas are few in Hong Kong. The then Citizens Party (CP), now Civic Party can be said to be the group commanding the highest level of expertise and contribution to the policy process. In the past years it has produced alternative policy addresses and alternative budgets. The CP resources may be more limited than those of larger political parties like the
Democratic Party (DP) and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), yet the CP has taken policy research as a matter of priority. This has been possible mainly by establishing partnerships with consultants and advisory groups and by tapping on a large pool of experts who have worked on a voluntary basis in policy research and advocacy. The CP’s role has been that of a facilitator of information to stakeholders interested in environmental and long-term planning issues, and of a lobbying group through which other groups have channeled their position to government. In recent years, other political parties have been putting environmental issues in their agendas. The (then) Frontier and Democratic Party (DP) were actively involved in recent discussions on dioxin emissions from incinerators and on the sustainability of genetically modified food (GMF). The Liberal Party (LP), traditionally a pro-business group, is also calling for more stringent measures in air pollution abatement.

Green Groups
Hong Kong has around a dozen environmental groups. Some like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature, are branches of international organisations that campaign on global, regional and Hong Kong issues. Others like ABetter Living Environment (ABLE), Green Peng Chau, Green Power or Green Lantau, are more grassroots and campaign on small-scale local issues. In comparison with other developed cities, membership of all these groups is small. Nonetheless, the government listens to environmental groups, though the groups feel that the government’s actions are merely symbolic (Foster in Cook et al., SCMP, 31-01-1999). Attempts have been made to include green groups into government decision-making: for example, the Advisory Council on the Environment (ACE), a government-appointed body of advisors has a nominal representation of green groups. Similarly, green groups’ representatives meet on a regular basis with the Director of EPD.

It must be noted that almost all of these groups focus their work on environmental matters without and so far have not looked at sustainable development issues. An exception to this is the Hong Kong Sustainable Development Forum (HKSDF); the Forum was formed in 1998 with the aim of bringing all the stakeholders together to discuss Hong Kong’s sustainable development issues through the process of consensus building. The HKSDF has actively participated in meetings to discuss with the Secretary for Environment the introduction of consensus building in the decision-making process in government departments. It has also presented its views on the Southeast Kowloon Development, expressing concern that the process of consultation used was not consistent with the principle of consensus building and therefore unlikely to result in sustainable development. Despite the limited resources of green groups and political parties with environmental platforms, these interest groups are influencing the political agenda and bringing the concept of sustainability to the policy process. Business groups, traditionally powerful government agenda setters, are being less influential because of a lack of a more proactive approach to environmental protection and sustainability.

Education: Citizens’ awareness
Public information is a cornerstone of sustainable development strategies. But there are barriers to public information like educational attainment, language, characteristics of the personnel disseminating information, isolation, costs, and so on. Involving stakeholders in sustainable development strategies and, when damage has been done, searching for solutions to environmental problems, is not a fixed goal but a process. Environmental citizenship, or a
citizenry that is environmentally friendly and conscious, is the culmination of the environmental education process, but it begins with the appropriate and wide information to the public about environmental issues. In the Hong Kong context, this affirmation begs answers to a number of questions: How easy is it for a member of the public to obtain environmental information? What are the predisposing and inhibiting factors to the acquisition of environmental information? Which agencies—local or international—are the most effective providers of environmental information? Is there a need for more interagency co-operation? In Hong Kong, it is not easy to reach out to environmental information since it is often nebulous, scattered and too overwhelming in quantity. Further questions need to be asked: Does the general public have easy access to information, do they know where to go? Do they have the confidence to ask for it? Do they have the ability to pay for it, if necessary? Other questions that require addressing in Hong Kong are: How many government agencies provide public environmental information and whether they are promoting green campaigns? Are there programmes to help people find and utilise environmental information? Are funds being allocated to environmental protection, and are there interests groups working for programmes to respond to the public’s demand for information. Environmental NGO’s may be viewed as the most reliable and objective sources of information although they too have their own interests to protect and axes to grind.

In the Hong Kong context, history has repeatedly shown that real environmental changes occur only when the public wants them. At the moment, few people are willing to make the hard decisions that will actually change the environment. In 1998, the Social Sciences Research Centre (SSRC) of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) conducted a survey on community attitudes to the environment. In March 1998, a total of 5,955 respondents aged 18 years old and above were interviewed. The results showed that people’s knowledge about various environmental protection groups is quite fair. Their knowledge about groups such as Greenpeace, Green Power and Friends of the Earth was particularly good. Yet, people did not seem to be fully aware of environmental protection activities. Only 38% of the respondents had heard of environmental protection activities like World Earth Day. At the same time, a large number of respondents agreed with the principles of environmental protection, and were willing to share the responsibility of protecting the environment. Over half of the respondents said that the environment at present was worse than 2 years ago and that their health condition had been affected by pollution. This is especially true for their opinion on air pollution, of which 91% of respondents said it was serious (Lee and Lau, 1998).

In January 2000, the Centre for Urban Planning and Environmental Management (CUPEM) of HKU, presented the Environmental Council Committee (ECC) with a study on environmental education for a sustainable future focusing on the vetting system for the funding of environmental education projects. The principal issue that emerged from the study was that although environmental education and community action initiatives in Hong Kong have been well-funded over the past five to ten years, the institutional structures and administrative procedures upon which the financial support system is based have failed to keep pace with the increasing demands imposed on the system. CUPEM’s view was that there had been little strategic guidance on what should not be supported, and insufficient emphasis on integration, co-ordination and the avoidance of duplication among the projects supported. Their research also indicated that there was limited evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of projects and insufficient emphasis on ensuring that the projects are well-designed and meet acceptable quality standards.
CUPEM recommended an upgrading of the vetting system to ensure that it functions more effectively and supports high quality projects that can make a substantial contribution to developing environmental awareness and environmentally responsible behaviour in Hong Kong (Hills and Kwok, 2000).

In terms of environmental education in general, it is clear that Hong Kong needs an overall strategy to guide the governmental and community initiatives. With the completion of the SUSDEV 21 study and the establishment of the Council on Sustainable Development (CSD), this seems to be a matter of urgency. The support of the general public for any sustainable development initiative will be needed and this will very much depend on their appreciation of the issue. Finally, Hills and Kwok recommended that the strategy that emerges from any educational problem should ideally address the following issues: (1) conceptualise environmental education in the context of Hong Kong; (2) specify guiding principles, overall objectives and targets; (3) review existing institutions and investigate the potential for creating a new centre for environmental education in Hong Kong; (4) identify, prioritise and formulate action programmes for environmental needs; (5) identify environmental education providers, determine building capacity and mechanisms for community level involvement (Hills and Kwok, 2000).

Despite a growing demand on the part of the community for greater quality of life, the Hong Kong population still relies heavily on government action to find solutions to environmental problems and to clean up the act. Moreover, citizens are not too willing to accept the “polluter pays” principle, but show consumption patterns and habits that are not environmentally responsible. The community at large is not driving the agenda for sustainability. At the same time, as mentioned above, public involvement and support area must for any sustainable measure to succeed. It has been argued that effective educational programmes will make the difference.

Researchers working in universities and think tanks constitute another set of societal actors. In the past years, universities in Hong Kong have shifted emphasis from their teaching and community service role to academic research. They usually have a theoretical interest in public problems but their studies may not be translated into usable knowledge for policy purposes. On the other hand, functioning think tanks which are independent organisations working in multi-disciplinary research intended to influence policy through maintaining sustained analysis and assessment of practical solutions to policy problems (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995), may have a notable impact on public policy.

In the environmental policy arena, some academics are committed to the environment and carry out fine research work. In 2000, the HKU Bulletin published a Special Report to commemorate Earth Day. Using the illustration of a tree, the bulletin listed research topics and areas of responsibility to which Faculties, Departments, Centres and Offices are contributing in the area of sustainability. Examples range from Urban Regeneration Strategy for Hong Kong jointly carried out by the Social Work and Social Administration Department and CUPEM; Electric Vehicle Research and Development by the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department and Research on Air Quality and Control by the Department of Community Medicine (HKU Bulletin, 21-04-00). Despite these efforts, it appears that unlike in other developed countries, it is not the academics the ones who are pushing for change on environmental issues in Hong Kong.
Hong Kong does not have many think tanks. Non-government think tanks are well established overseas but the think tank concept has not yet taken root in Hong Kong. From the point of view of financial resources, the government is in the best position to finance research on public policies. The Central Policy Unit (CPU) can be said to be the government’s think tank and is presumably well staffed. But its work is secretive and its role is to provide advisory service and act as the Secretariat for the Commission on Strategic Development (CSD) established by the Chief Executive (Ma, 1998). In March 1998, the CPU organised the Conference Sustainable Development: Opportunities and Challenges for Hong Kong. It is likely that the outcome of this conference triggered the inclusion of the concept of sustainability in the 1998 and 1999 Policy Addresses.

The government also allocates substantial funds to tertiary institutions for research but these funds are mostly used for academic purposes. From time to time, private organisations may fund research on specific topics, however these projects usually serve a particular view and interest of a sector in the society. Soon after the handover, an independent think tank, the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute (HKPRI) was established by 17 people from various businesses, academic and professional backgrounds. The primary purpose of the Institute is to participate in the long-term development of the Hong Kong and of the Chinese community. The Institute believes that rational policy research that takes into consideration the various views of the community can be employed as an instrument in this changing environment. The areas of research of the HKPRI focus mainly on social and educational issues.

In October 2000 an independent, non-profit, think tank was founded by Christine Loh, a former legislative councillor, and Lisa Hopkinson, an environmental researcher. The organisation aims at promoting civic exchange and participation in public life, undertake research and development of economic, social and political policies and practices, and integrate skills and expertise across disciplines. Both the leadership commanded by the team and the quality of research conducted by a small team of dedicated volunteers, are making an impact – albeit small – in the environmental sustainability discourse.

Given the little impact academic research organisations have in the policy process and that think tanks are relatively non-existent in Hong Kong, research organisations as a whole are not influencing the policy process. Nevertheless, there are a number of academics committed to long-term planning and sustainable development. There is evidence that, the IESI study mentioned earlier has been the most palpable contribution to bringing sustainability to the attention of public officials.

The Media
Although things are slowly changing, Hong Kong’s media normally only covers environmental issues when there is something tangible to report on, for example, a red tide crisis or high pollution readings. What is lacking is the provision of reports that are analytical and often controversial. In the past year, The South China Morning Post Magazine has published a series of informative reports on various aspects of pollution and most notably on 31 January 1999 on various aspects of sustainability. The Post Magazine also carries a regular column on pollution. These are good initiatives but the majority of the population read the Chinese press, leaving the
English press to inform those who may be already well versed in environmental issues. As such, the media has not contributed to setting agenda for sustainability, mainly because of its reporting on pressing environmental issues rather than having taken the initiative to produce analyses on these matters.

*The Pearl River Delta Region*

Although the Pearl River Delta (PRD) is not an actor *per se* its role in the overall sustainability policy of Hong Kong is significant and therefore it is relevant to analyse. Since the 1980’s the PRD has experienced unprecedented development. This issue in part to the fact that Hong Kong manufacturers have moved most of their factoriesto other cities in the Delta Region because of high property and labour costs in Hong Kong. Besides these changes, some of the more heavily polluting industries also shifted their manufacturing basis to the Mainland resulting in the importation of pollution across the border to the Delta Region.

Between 1994 and 1997, efforts have been made by the HKSAR government to put in place legislation to adopt more stringent pollution abatement measures such as the Air Pollution Control Ordinance, the Sewage Services Ordinance and the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance. However, the fact is that we share the same air and drink the same water as the rest of the PRD; authorities on both sides of the border have realised that joint development strategies have to be devised to further sustainable development of major cities across the Region. Laquian argues that greater integration of Hong Kong with the PRD Region will result in reduced competitiveness of the Hong Kong economy (Laquian, 1996). However, this ignores environmental protection and infrastructure coordination as critical factors to create a “win-win” scenario.

Early in 1999 the HK-Guangdong Joint Working Group (JWG) on Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection was set up. The JWG held its first meeting on June 8, and air and water pollution issues were high on the agenda. The meeting resulted in the setting up of eight special panels looking into areas like; motor diesel fuel specification, water quality protection, afforestation and conservation, etc. A second meeting was held in February 2001. The meetings are held close-doors so information on the agenda and work progress can only be obtained through official press releases. The then Secretary for EFB, Lily Yam, was quoted as saying:

- “On air quality, we have started a study on the sources of air pollution in the PRD. The study is proceeding as scheduled”.
- “The drawing up of an inventory on the sources of air pollution in the PRD should be completed by the end of [May 2001]. The data will be analysed and possible solutions will be discussed”.
- “On the quality of the Dongjiang water, the Guangdong representatives reiterated the commitment of the Guangdong government in preserving the water quality of the Dongjiang. In this respect, they would press ahead to complete the works connected with the construction of a closed aquaduct by the year 2003”.
- “…the Guangdong government has agreed in principle to release data relating to water quality in the Dongjiang to the HK government at regular intervals…” (EFB, Press Release, 22-02-2001).
Although these meetings are good fora for discussion, real change will depend on political leadership and on moving from focusing on “end-of-pipe-solutions” to proactive measures. An argument can be made that development in the PRD Region ought to be planned in an integrated manner. There is a growing realisation that cleaning up the act in Hong Kong and looking for more sustainable ways of doing things is not sufficient. Cross-border cooperation among the main cities of the Region is a must for significant improvements to be made. It is encouraging to see that authorities from both sides of the border are making taking steps to initiate dialogue and seek cooperation.

Summary
Although the bureaucracy is in principle the most influential actor in the process, its contribution to bringing sustainable development initiatives into policy making is restricted. The reasons appear to be that short-term economic benefits play the decisive role, that public dialogue is not fostered and each government agency pursues its own agenda without looking at long-term consequences of decisions, nor at policies affecting various departments. Because of constraints set in the Basic Law, the Legislature only has a limited role in influencing decision-making. However, the number of voices interested in environmental sustainability is growing and this may contribute to individual legislators supporting interests groups and being lobbied by them. Interest groups are increasingly playing a more decisive role in setting the agenda, and this has been the case with the recent action plan on air pollution. In particular, green groups and some political parties doing research in policy analysis have influenced the government agenda. This has been the case on issues ranging from the labelling of genetically modified food to considerations of alternative solutions to waste incineration.

The public at large is not playing a decisive role arguably, because of lack of information on the concept and on specific environmental initiatives. Individual studies carried out by researchers working at universities like IESI have contributed to the debate. The EPD and PD are using IESI as usable knowledge for policy purposes. Thinktanks in Hong Kong are scarce and their contribution is minimal. Finally, the media is an agenda setter and can put pressure on the government to find solutions to specific problems. However, in the case of the printed media, the provision of analytical in-depth reports is lacking specially in the Chinese language. The role of the PRD as an additional actor in influencing sustainability and the inclusion of the concept in the policy process is clearly crucial. At this stage it is not possible to assess how much joint discussions between authorities along the Delta Region will contribute to sustainable development. The fact that the Joint Working Group on Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection has been formed is a hopeful sign.

DOES AGENCIFICATION MATTER?

As mentioned earlier, the Hong Kong government has taken in effecting appropriate institutional changes in an attempt to coordinate actions within and outside government in achieving sustainable development. The model that is adopted in Hong Kong basically mirrors that of the European Union (EU), that is, the establishment of the Sustainable Development Unit within the government structure and an independent Council as advisory body.

Within the Administration: Sustainable Development Unit (Division)
The SDU was originally established under the Administration Wing of the Chief Secretary for Administration in 1 July 2001 and headed by the Deputy Director of Administration (D4 level). It is currently a division of the Environment Bureau headed by the Deputy Secretary for Environment who areas of responsibility are: (a) policy matters on the government sustainability assessment system, (b) consultancy on research in the sustainability field, (c) coordination with the Council for Sustainable Development, (d) drawing policies for the management of the Sustainable development Fund, (e) publicity and education (SDD, 2012, http://www.susdev.gov.hk/html/en/su/index.htm)

This is a type of agency with no administrative autonomy or legal independence but with some managerial autonomy (according to van Thiel’s classification, n. d.). Judging by the original ranking of the head of SDU, the person occupying this post should not only have a solid policy knowledge background but also should be able to relate in equal footage with senior level officials and resolve cross-sectoral issues when necessary. However, the major function of the Unit (now Division) has been that of managing and administering the process of sustainability assessments of government projects and proposals, specifically, that if applying the CASET tool through training and technical support, and providing an independent interpretation of sustainability evaluation reports submitted to ExCo or the Chief Secretary’s Committee. Its scope of work seems to be restrictive impeding the Unit’s engagement with the private and non-profit sector and political leaders. For example, nothing is mentioned in its remit of any proactive and strategies the Unit could adopt in further promoting strategic thinking for sustainability within the government so as to change the mindset.

There have therefore been questions coming from the Legislative Council on the real power of SDU in coordinating the work of policy bureau and departments. For example, whether SDU has sufficient power to monitor bureaux’s initiatives on sustainable development or request them to abandon policies should these not pass the sustainability impact assessment. These questions remain unresolved.

Outside the Administration: Council for Sustainable Development
The CSD was established to provide expert advice on sustainable development strategies and keep the public regularly informed about its work so as to build a better understanding of the concept of sustainable development and to put it into practice through policy design and implementation. This is a legally independent body with managerial autonomy or what is commonly understood in Hong Kong as a statutory body. Its remit includes: (a) advising government on the priority areas in promoting sustainable development; (b) advise on the preparation of the sustainable development strategy for Hong Kong; (c) facilitate community participation in the promotion of sustainable development, though, among others, the award of grants from the Sustainable Development Fund and promote public awareness (CSD, 2012: http://www.susdev.gov.hk/html/en/council/index.htm)

The CSD whose 21 members (including 3 ex officio policy secretaries) are appointed and report directly to the Chief Executive (CE),is mandated with monitoring progress by government towards sustainable development. Since its establishment in 2003, the CSD has met 29 times (last 7 June 2012) and has, surprisingly, been mainly engaged with steering public education
through publicity programmes (for example, on greening the built environment, air quality objectives, marine water quality, etc). More recently, the Council produced a broad brushed paper on climate change and energy saving strategies, arguably, in response to a public consultation by the government on a climate change strategy in 2010. The Council has also performed research tasks through its subcommittees (strategy subcommittee, education and publicity sub-committee) and its study and support groups (on climate and energy, built environment, air quality, population policy, solid waste, renewable energy and urban living). It counts also with an online resource center that includes information about school award programmes, funding, overseas and local Agenda 21, etc).

Questions have arisen from its role in contrast with that of the Advisory Council on Environment (ACE) which deals with the environmental implications of development in Hong Kong. The ACE is to advise government on appropriate measures to combat pollution and to monitor the implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment ordinance (EIA) while the CSD has a mandate that includes not only environmental but also social and economic issues of long-term developmental concern. Its impact seems to have been more on offering a forum for discussion and a source of public education rather than making any significant impact on policy design and implementation.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN HONG KONG

Hong Kong stands a good chance of making itself a leading city in sustainability. Present developments show that the notion of sustainable development is not only being considered conceptually but also put into effect in the design and implementation of some policy domains. Moreover, the city itself makes a good case for sustainable development: Hong Kong is small and densely populated; it depends almost 100% on imports of water and foodstuffs; the economy is open and dynamic. On the face of it, all these factors pose a real challenge to sustained growth. However, if Hong Kong can reduce impacts on the environment and integrate economic growth and social development, then it can set itself up as a model for other cities in the region that have similar populations and vibrant economies but have abundant natural resources. Although at present the HKSAR government approach to long-term planning seems reactive rather than proactive, in recent years the Administration has made good proposals aiming at integrating, for example, transport policies, energy resources, and urban planning. The decision to establish the Air Pollution Taskforce and the Council for Sustainable Development will facilitate joined and comprehensive planning across bureaux and departments. The future implementation of the SUSDEV 21 study will hopefully provide the framework for this kind of integration.

The government seems to have some plans to educate the public and make the concept understood in the community are there but need to be more aggressive as changes occur when the public wills them and with their support. In particular, education on sustainability is necessary to shift from the common belief that sustainable development hampers growth and is a cost. The government is beginning to take the lead and proactively come up with measures that will have a long-term and enduring effect in the development of Hong Kong. The Administration may find resistance from the traditional business community that strongly advocates “positive non-intervention” But to make sustainability a reality in Hong Kong, considering its present state of environmental degradation, the concept must be built into policies and decisions.
The government needs to develop a strategy – and not only a series of measures – that sets aside framework to direct and support development.

This paper argues that putting sustainability at the heart of every government department requires:

- Creating a powerful body that coordinates policy on sustainable development.
- Overseeing systems for integrating sustainability in each department’s policies and operations. Each agency may draw up its own strategies for improving sustainability performance.
- Creating an Environmental Audit committee to consider how policies and programmes of government and non-departmental public bodies contribute to sustainable development.
- Including sustainable development in the remit of new departments and public bodies.
- Revisiting appraisal systems that at present evaluate economic, environmental, social and regulatory aspects of policies separately, and consider these aspects together.
- Creating a White Chapter that would produce an integrated system of impact assessment and appraisal tools in support of SUSDEV 21. This ideally should cover impact on business, health, environment, special groups, etc.
- Exploring economic instruments such as charges and taxes that will deliver more sustainable development. This puts the “polluter pays” principle in place. Considering shifting taxes from “goods” to “bads” such as air pollution. Subsidies may also have a role to play like tax relief for goods.

A powerful tool for change can be to raise awareness of sustainable development through campaigns that are well managed and sustained. These can cover: energy efficiency, waste reduction, water conservation, links between transport and health, etc. Including sustainable development in school curricula should be the way forward. For education in sustainability, besides awareness, involvement is also necessary. Seeking peoples’ opinions on how development projects are to proceed and on how specific policies are to be formulated is a must.

Supporting research and development and measuring this against a benchmark set of good practices ought to come from government fund initiatives. Establishing advisory bodies like the Council for Sustainable Development (CSD) is a good initiative. The Council should not only consist of a body of people drawn from a variety of organisations and interests seeking to build consensus about ways of achieving sustainability, but also monitor progress on sustainability and build consensus on actions to be taken by all sectors to accelerate its achievement.

After 15 years of the establishment of the HKSAR, the moment in Hong Kong is right for firmly anchoring the concept of sustainability to the formulation and implementation of public policy. There are still many challenges ahead but there are also many positive signs. It is anticipated that the areas of neglect in our present environment and the crises that may emerge from them will continue to act as powerful catalysts for improvement; this can be seen in their policy domain, for example. Greater mobilisation for sustainability coming from actors outside the bureaucracy can be envisioned. A strong leadership coming from the policy networks within the EB and expanding across other bureaux and departments can be anticipated.
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