

COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Paper No. 08/03

Review of the Working of the Sustainability Assessment System

Purpose

This paper outlines the review findings pertaining to the working of the Sustainability Assessment (SA) System and proposed improvements to it.

Proposal

2. Taking account of feedbacks from the stakeholder groups and the review findings, we propose the following improvements to the working of the SA System -

- (a) we will require bureaux and departments to carry out SA of their new and major initiatives before public consultation and incorporate the assessment findings into the relevant consultation documents as appropriate. Exceptions to the requirement should be justified;
- (b) following from above, bureaux and departments should incorporate the requirement for SA into their planning or feasibility studies of new and major proposals;
- (c) for the purpose of SA, we will offer the 'checklist approach' as an acceptable alternative to the diverse social indicators built into the computer-aided sustainability evaluation tool (CASET); and
- (d) on the CASET itself, we will heed advice of the stakeholder departments and refine identified indicators, and update the baseline data and geographical

information system (GIS) maps embedded in the CASET by September 2003.

Considerations

Scope and objective of the SA system

3. We have instituted the SA System within the Government since December 2001, when all bureaux and departments are required to conduct SA of their new and major initiatives or programmes that may likely bring about significant or prolonged implications on the economic, social and/or environmental conditions of Hong Kong. Effective from April 2002, bureaux and departments are required to explain the SA findings in their submissions to the Policy Committee (PC) or the Executive Council (ExCo).

4. The SA System, developed under the Planning Department's Study on Sustainable Development in Hong Kong for the 21st Century (SUSDEV 21 Study), aims to -

- (a) raise awareness of the concept of sustainable development within the Government;
- (b) integrate sustainability principles within the Government decision-making process; and
- (c) identify cross-sectoral issues and scope out sensitive areas for joint departmental examination at an early stage.

5. In this regard, the SA System can also serve as a planning tool, and bureaux and departments have been encouraged to make optimal use of it at the early planning stage. For example, the SA System may be used for comparing or ranking different options for achieving an identified objective according to their respective sustainability implications. By controlling and refining the 'problematic' components of a proposal as revealed from the SA, the proponent bureau or department would be able to focus on these 'problematic' areas at an early stage and improve on its detailed proposal before this is finalized for formal presentation.

Guiding Principles and Indicators

6. The CASET is the computer tool developed under the SUSDEV 21 Study to guide bureaux and departments to conduct SA in a systematic and consistent manner.

7. The computer tool is built upon eight guiding principles and 39 sustainability indicators that align with the principles. These are set out at **Annexes A and B** respectively. The guiding principles and sustainability indicators represent the result of extensive public consultations conducted under the SUSDEV 21 Study and stakeholder group discussions convened by the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU). In undergoing the SA System, a bureau or department is required to assess the implications of its proposal against the relevant sustainability indicators, although it may also include non-quantifiable considerations outside the scope of the computer tool, where appropriate, and set out the full assessment findings in the SA report.

Role of Sustainable Development Unit

8. The SDU is tasked to promote the proper and effective use of the computer tool and the SA System, provide independent advice to the PC and the ExCo on the SA findings presented by bureaux and departments, and provide training and technical support to bureaux and departments.

Review findings

9. Although the SA System has been in full operation for about a year only, we have undertaken a review of the working of the System to identify possible areas for improvement.

10. Feedbacks from users in bureaux and departments indicated general acceptance of the SA System as effective discipline that helps enhance their awareness of the importance to plan for the long-term sustainability of Hong Kong and facilitate their integration of different sustainability principles in the proposal formulation and decision-making processes.

11. Notwithstanding the above, we have identified the following areas for improvement -

- (a) timing of SA – some bureaux and departments have not used the SA System to achieve optimal effects. As explained in paragraph 5 above, the SA System or the computer tool can serve as a useful planning tool if the assessment were applied and rehearsed earlier in the proposal formulation process;
- (b) public consultation – there was a general view among the stakeholder groups that the community should be presented with the SA findings to facilitate an informed discussion or effective public consultation on a specific proposal. We share this view which is in line with the principle of public participation enshrined in the concept of sustainable development; and
- (c) social indicators – notwithstanding the relatively large number of social indicators already built into the computer tool, they were found as inadequate or less than specific particularly for the society or social welfare related initiatives. We are also consulting the stakeholder bureau and department on the feasibility to enhance the public health related indicators to respond to growing concerns over such communicable diseases as the severe acute respiratory syndrome.

Proposed improvements

12. We propose that bureaux and departments should be required to conduct SA in the early planning process. Unless with justifications, bureaux and departments should present the SA findings in their public consultation documents to facilitate more focused or informed discussions on their proposals. Similarly, the requirement for SA should be set out in the context of major planning or feasibility studies associated with the formulation of new proposals.

13. As an alternative to the set of social indicators in the computer tool, we will offer to the proponent bureau or department the ‘checklist approach’, especially for those society or social welfare related proposals that require comprehensive evaluation with regard to social sustainability.

The proposed checklist comprises a set of guiding questions, set out at **Annex C**, that are built upon -

- (a) the three social related guiding principles under the SUSDEV 21 Study, namely, society and social infrastructure, health and hygiene, and leisure and cultural vibrancy;
- (b) four key social issues, including equal opportunities, safety net, self-reliance and community involvement, as outlined in the Chief Executive's Policy Address in 2000; and
- (c) feedback from the stakeholder bureau and department regarding the major public health related concerns about communicable diseases in particular.

14. The economic and environmental indicators, which users have generally confirmed as useful and effective, would remain unchanged, except that the waste indicator (i.e. quantity of municipal solid waste, public fill and construction and demolition waste requiring final disposal per capita) will be further divided into -

- (a) quantity of municipal solid waste requiring final disposal per capita; and
- (b) quantity of construction waste requiring final disposal per capita.

The proposed refinement should help distinguish reusable construction waste from municipal solid waste.

Updating of CASET

15. The SDU is committed to keeping the baseline data and the GIS maps embedded in the computer tool up-to-date. In this connection, we have collated updated data and information from the stakeholder departments as appropriate, and conducted two studies in respect of non-transport related noise and terrestrial habitat mapping. We will upload and

incorporate the up-to-date information into the computer tool by September 2003.

Training

16. The SDU has organized training courses and seminars for nearly 1,000 officers to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills for proper application of the SA System. Pursuant to the review and proposed improvements to the SA System as outlined in this paper, the SDU will organize further training sessions to introduce the detailed working and application of the improved System.

Consultation with Stakeholder and User Groups

17. For the purpose of the review, the SDU has consulted 17 stakeholder groups and nine user groups to date, as set out at **Annex D**, and taken their comments into account in formulating the proposed improvements to the SA System.

18. Notwithstanding the above, some stakeholder groups raised the feasibility to identify targets or benchmarks for gauging implementation of sustainable development in Hong Kong. Indeed, the same suggestion was made as a means to monitor the implementation of sustainable development strategy or its action plan. In this regard, we will work with the Strategy Sub-committee to explore possible ways to factor in the suggestion, especially when the Sub-committee may come to consider a monitoring framework for the sustainable development strategy.

Way Forward

19. Subject to Members' views and the SDU's on-going discussions with a few more stakeholder groups before mid June 2003, we will finalize the review findings and proposals for incorporation into the SA System by September 2003.

Sustainable Development Unit
Chief Secretary for Administration's Office
May 2003