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Making Hong Kong a Sustainable World City

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As I look around me, I see many friends, but especially Jimmy Leung, a former colleague who worked with me on the Commission for Strategic Development and other projects when I was at the Central Policy Unit. It was there where we, together with other colleagues at the Unit, supported members of the Commission in developing the concept of Hong Kong as a world city.

We are proud to say that Hong Kong is on its way to becoming a “world city,” if not one already. Tonight, I would like to add the word “sustainable.” Hong Kong needs to become not just a world city but a “sustainable world city.” I’ll spend the next few minutes explaining what I mean, but I should quickly point out that I did not invent this phrase.

In fact, other great cities are finding that it is important not only to become first class world cities but sustainable cities as well. The phrase “world city” implies bringing together the hardware and software to attract human capital and investment. The assumption is that a “world city” focuses on growth and competitiveness. Growth and competitiveness are vital, but they are no longer seen as enough to make a city sustainable in a broader sense.

Sustainable development has led to a new kind of thinking about cities, especially how to shape them in such a way that they leave a positive legacy for the future. There is no magic formula for this. The questions and the answers are different for each city. It is an approach that weaves together issues of competitiveness and community development, economic growth and nurturing the environment. Yet every city’s starting point is different and so, of course, the objectives of sustainable development will be different as well.

In London, earlier this year the mayor, Ken Livingstone, described his vision of making the British capital a “sustainable world city.” This was based on three themes – strong, diverse, and long-term economic growth; social inclusiveness, so that all Londoners can share in its future success; and fundamental improvements in London’s environment and use of resources. Closer to home, Taipei has also called for the development of a “sustainable world city,” based on smart growth.

Hong Kong, too, has the opportunity to frame its objectives in this manner. Hong Kong is not London or Taipei, and it is not New York or Beijing. For Hong Kong, the challenge of sustainable development centers very much on the element of social inclusiveness or

participation. We need a way to get the whole city excited about the future and pulling together. As we all know, there has been a great deal of contention over urban issues in the last few years. Some of the current issues include the bidding process for the West Kowloon cultural hub and management of our conservation areas. On the whole, the debate has been healthy, in the sense of generating new ideas and allowing the expression of a variety of opinions on the way forward. We are not, however, pulling together, and this has created all sorts of challenges for the community as a whole.

I am not going to dwell on these issues except to point out that governance is virtually impossible when government is challenged at every step. The answer lies in establishing appropriate institutions. We need to create new links between government and the rest of the community. Such links should serve not only to communicate back and forth, but to build networks of common interests.

This sort of institutional framework, of course, is only a beginning. We must use it to make Hong Kong a place where all residents and visitors feel the greatest possible sense of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual well-being. We must build on our assets in order to leave a legacy for future generations. And we must do so in a way that preserves our natural environment, including our air, water, and open spaces.

At the Council for Sustainable Development, we are trying in a very small way to realize some of these ambitions. We needed an institutional framework that would bring in multiple stakeholders, focus on specific issues of wide interest to the community, and along the way educate the community in the concept of sustainable development. We needed a framework that included the government as a stakeholder and that would influence policy outcomes. We could look at the way this had been done before – notably through the government’s five hundred or so advisory committees – but also improvise.

In the end, much of what we have done centers on the approach of public engagement, also called public deliberation or in some circles deliberative democracy. Although there are many variations, the basic concept is an open-ended invitation to the public to participate in a structured debate, moderated by neutral facilitators. Instead of testing out pre-determined principles, the public engagement approach asks people to look more deeply at issues. Some new ideas will come out. There will be differences of opinion. But the approach allows the public to look at issues the way policy makers do – from a perspective of competing interests and priorities, resource limitations, political and social impacts, and all the other complex trade-offs of any modern society.

Since July, we have been running our first program of public engagement. Its focus is to develop a sustainable development strategy for Hong Kong in three areas – solid waste management, renewable energy, and urban living space. In many ways, we have been overwhelmed by the response. Hundreds of Hong Kong residents and citizens have participated in our engagement program. Perhaps next time around, as the community gets more familiar with the idea of sustainable development, we will have thousands, not hundreds. But the people who have come forward have been impressive in their sense of

civic responsibility, their thoughtfulness, and their willingness and ability to deal with complex issues.

They have also shown that they are ready to take risks to adopt more radical solutions in the three areas. Without going into great detail on the responses, I can tell you that in the area of urban living space, our participants showed a clear preference for urban revitalization, where possible. They talked about revisiting population projections to provide a more sensible basis for planning. Many wanted a new approach to the New Territories that would allow for a middle ground of development options, between very high density new towns and very low density villages. Participants were also very much in favor of policies on sustainable building design, with standards on building height and development density, and were relatively neutral about whether these should be implemented through regulatory intervention or incentives.

Sustainable development is still a relatively new concept, but it is one that Hong Kong must learn to take seriously. It will require changes in mindset all around. The adjustments will be different for each sector, and amount to one very simple thing – learning not only how to talk to each other, but how to listen to each other.

Governments should view sustainable development as a way of incorporating community wisdom in their policies. From a corporate perspective, sustainable development involves putting into practice the “triple bottom line.” This means that companies need to take into consideration the social and environmental impacts of business decisions along with the financial bottom line, and recognize the role of communities beyond shareholders and management.

For civil society, sustainable development implies going beyond advocacy. Nobody is arguing for an abandonment of principles. But as civil society in Hong Kong gains in capacity and maturity, inevitably it will understand that there are multiple perspectives on issues that need to be considered as we meet the challenges of our community.

In order for Hong Kong to become a sustainable world city, these three sectors must learn how to work together. I should note that although we talk about “three sectors,” this is a convenient way to say that we are one community, with different roles and perspectives but many common interests. The question is how to bring together all parts of the community to focus on these common concerns. The Council for Sustainable Development is one of many possible models. We are attempting to serve as a bridge, by providing a way for multiple stakeholders to contribute to a sustainability strategy for the city. We have done this by opening up a wide public dialogue on an initial three topics, and developing a highly transparent means of bringing the results of our public engagement to government.

Ultimately, in order for the Council to have credibility, it will need to produce some real outcomes in terms of policies. I should emphasize that the role of the Council for Sustainable Development is to develop broad strategy, and that it will be up to the government and Legco to arrive at policy details and implementation. All of us involved

very much hope that the government will take action on the recommendations of the Council, once our engagement is completed. But we also recognize that it will require changes in mindset and life style in the whole community, in order to achieve our goals.

I hope you will take away with you tonight a sense that you as individuals can help build sustainable development in Hong Kong. At the Council, we have been working hard to engage all levels of society, from our Legislative Council and District Councils to the administration, business, professionals and of course the grass roots. We are asking the entire community not only to participate but to be our ambassadors, championing sustainable development in their lives and work places. We need you to be our ambassadors, too, to take these ideas into your work and practice as planning professionals. Hong Kong already aspires to be a world city. It will take an extra leap of imagination to make it a sustainable world city, but if we do it together, I am sure we can succeed.

Thank you.