

An air of Consensus

Edgar Cheng

Hong Kong is caught in the fast lane of global change. Like many elsewhere, we have too little time to reflect on the journey or the destination. Last weekend, the Council for Sustainable Development began a process meant to break that cycle, by inviting the community to reflect on the issue of air quality.

Air has no borders. It is both local and global. It affects our health and welfare as well as that of our neighbours. Air pollution is as much an issue of self-discipline as it is one of public policy and inter-governmental co-operation. In many ways, air quality is emblematic of the gains, losses and strains of globalisation. We are all vulnerable. We share an opportunity to make things better. It is this opportunity that brings us to the concept of "sustainable development".

Most of us in Hong Kong are familiar with the phrase. The government embraced sustainable development as an objective in the 1999 policy address. But do we know what it means? And if we have an idea, do we know how to put it into practice?

The fact is that we are not the first community to ask these questions, and by now there is a great wealth of global wisdom on the subject. Among the earliest and clearest definitions was former prime minister of Norway and director-general of the World Health Organisation, Gro Brundtland. In her 1987 report to the United Nations, *Our Common Future*, she wrote that sustainable development was "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

And yet, putting sustainable development into practice is specific to each community. There are no universal solutions. Sustainable development is firmly local, even while it draws inspiration from the global community. And while the logic and the vision may be easy to understand, it is far from easy to build institutions based on the concept.

For its part, the Council for Sustainable Development has developed an engagement process aimed at moving beyond rhetoric to practice. It focuses on participation at every level. This reflects the importance of learning from all sectors, as well as the need to build a consensus

from the bottom up on issues as important as air quality. The initiative for consultation does not need to come from the top; we are open to ideas and intelligence from the community. It differs from the usual models of consultation used by our government, in which policy bureaux table ideas and invite opinion.

Right from the beginning, in 2003, we articulated a sustainable development vision for Hong Kong through this multilayered, bottom-up approach. We have conducted formal public-engagement exercises on subjects from population policy to municipal waste. We have been pleased with the responsiveness of our community to this approach, which has built a consensus around some of the more difficult issues facing our policymakers.

Now we are turning to one of the most difficult issues of all, air pollution. Our public engagement will ask people to look at ways that we, as a community, can exercise self-discipline to clean up our air. That self-discipline includes, on a policy level, new government initiatives - an air pollution alert system, road pricing mechanisms, and obligatory energy conservation measures. By bringing these issues before the community, the council is seeking not to impose a vision, but to raise questions, and examine the implications. How much pain are we willing to accept to improve air quality? What will be the benefits, and how do we weigh them against the costs?

The concept of sustainability needs to be instilled in people's minds - it must become second nature. In other words, public engagement on these issues does not equal practising sustainable development. But it is a vital tool in developing solutions and creating a platform for action.

At the heart of the council's process is consensus building: it requires maturity, because it needs parties to listen, understand, find common ground and work out compromises. It comes with the message that there are no absolutes, only choices, and these are driven by policy objectives.

Consensus is fundamental to successful democratic societies. Public engagement is one way of helping the community to understand the importance of accepting responsibility, as individuals and as members of all the many organisations, companies and government departments. It captures a new spirit growing in Hong Kong; one of involvement, caring and understanding. Imagine the city's potential to harness such qualities towards the good of all.

Edgar Cheng Wai-kin is chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development

21 · 9 · 2007

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