

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BY THE HON. CHOY SO-YUK, JP



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Hong Kong is a beautiful place. There is so much to be proud of, but for how much longer?

This is a question every single one of us should be asking – every single day of the rest of our lives. In the absence of any serious initiative from the government we have no choice but to ask this question. More important, we have to ensure that in whatever we do, we shall make a personal contribution to the sustainability of the beauty of Hong Kong – our home.

The “we” I refer to are the professionals and the managers – including those in the bureaucracy - who make up the core of the middle-class. In any society



these are the people who make the difference. It is upon their planning, their decisions and their execution of those plans and decisions that have a lasting impact on our common home. Wittingly or otherwise they decide whether we will have sustainable development.

First, what is sustainable development? How and why has the term gained such currency? What have we done so far?

Sustainable development is not something new. Ancient man was far more aware of





his place in the natural world than many of us today. Thus many ancient cultures embody a sense of sustainable development, people were taught to leave things in nature in the way they found them. Primitive man instinctively knew his place in the sun, hence the practice of leaving the land to lie fallow after one season's planting. Now we destroy the land by using chemicals, in the process creating more and more serious problems for our health. Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring* in 1962 is credited with awakening the world to the perils of

environmental decay. Other publications followed, notably Paul Erlich's *Population Bomb* in 1968 and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, which in 1972 drew attention to global development issues. That same year the United Nations convened the *Conference on the Human Environment*. This was followed in 1976 by *Habitat* which further debated the need for a changed approach to development. In 1987 the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* popularised and defined the term 'sustainable development'. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (commonly referred to as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro produced Agenda 21, a major resolution that sets out a blueprint for sustainable activity across all areas of human endeavour. It recommended that each country or place should formulate its own Local Agenda 21 for the 21st Century. Many countries have since put in place such a plan, China being among the first to do so. Implementation remains problematic in many places; it will take time to resolve many issues.

Sustainable development is not just about the environment, as many Hong Kong people seem to think.

It is almost impossible to give attention to the environment when there are more pressing socio-economic problems to consider. We must, therefore, consider this issue in its totality and in a global as well as regional way. In fact, the subject is so vast that when UNESCO was designated the lead agency in 2002 for promoting the Decade of Education for Sustainable

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Development (2005-2014) by the UN General Assembly, its task was divided into: quality education, overcoming poverty, gender equality, health promotion, HIV/AIDS, environment, water, rural development, sustainable consumption, human rights, cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge, media, peace and human security, governance, climate change, biodiversity, disaster reduction, sustainable urbanization, corporate responsibility and market economy.

Against this backdrop what is our government's track record?

In 2003 it set up the Sustainable Development Council, chaired by then Chief Secretary Donald Tsang who has since passed it on to the new Chief Secretary Rafael Hui.

Before that the government had a Sustainable Development Unit within the bureaucracy. The Unit has drawn up a set of criteria for sustainable development assessment of major government projects.

But, of course, there are assessments and there are assessments. It is all a matter of commitment. Under the Basic Law we are a separate entity as far as this subject is concerned. This means we set our own agenda. But until now we have no Local Agenda 21. There is no sign whatsoever that anyone, including the two-year old Council wants to draw one up.

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Local Agenda-21

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There are many other indications of the direction in which the government is going. Nothing illustrates this better than its decision on the Tamar site. It is going ahead with putting the heart of the administration into this site. It has no plans to allow the Legislative Council to take a fresh look at it in spite of a real public consensus that the site should either be a park, a cultural park or a stepping-stone to the total reconstruction of the city. The Tamar site, as everybody knows by now, is in the heart of our very congested central business district. To accommodate the inevitable jump in vehicular traffic following the implant of a new administrative centre, a new bypass must be built. To accommodate this bypass the harbour must be reclaimed yet once again. As everyone knows, our harbour is rapidly becoming only a broader version of a nullah. Does anyone wonder why parts of our harbour, as at Aldrich Bay in Shau Kei Wan, now have a terrible stench hanging over it? We are inflicting a slow death – death by a thousand dumps – on our once magnificent harbour. And yet a solution that would benefit the present and future generations is at hand. The government can move its entire administration, the

legislature and the Supreme Court to the old Kai Tak Airport site and thus allow the re-development of our entire city. This would not only create a huge multiplier effect on our economy for a generation or two, it would also ensure sustainable development in the properly defined sense of the term. The government wants a sports complex at Kai Tak instead. As people here and in many other parts of the world will testify, sports complexes on the scale envisaged by the government stand empty most of the time. They only come alive during national games. Just look at our existing stadiums.

The government is equally “transparent” in the redevelopment of the West Kowloon site. There is unanimous agreement on creating a real cultural centre.

But we shall be getting a property project in the guise of a cultural complex, which is what the government had planned all along. Remember our high-tech-hope-of-the-future, Cyberport? Now, that’s a real pricey property development unblemished by messy factories.





At West Kowloon we shall be getting a very pricey roof undoubtedly to squash those two “durians” on the Singapore waterfront.

Neither the professionals nor the people at large agree with the government as far as these projects are concerned. Yet the government is going ahead with them. The government’s short-sightedness is beyond doubt; generations to come will pay the price for this. The government says the community is divided. That is true: the government and a tiny group of people with vested interests in those projects on one side, the people and the professionals on the other. Like the Tamar site it is not as though there were no alternatives. There are alternatives and they have been put up, not in

any off-handed manner but presented by professionals after thorough study.

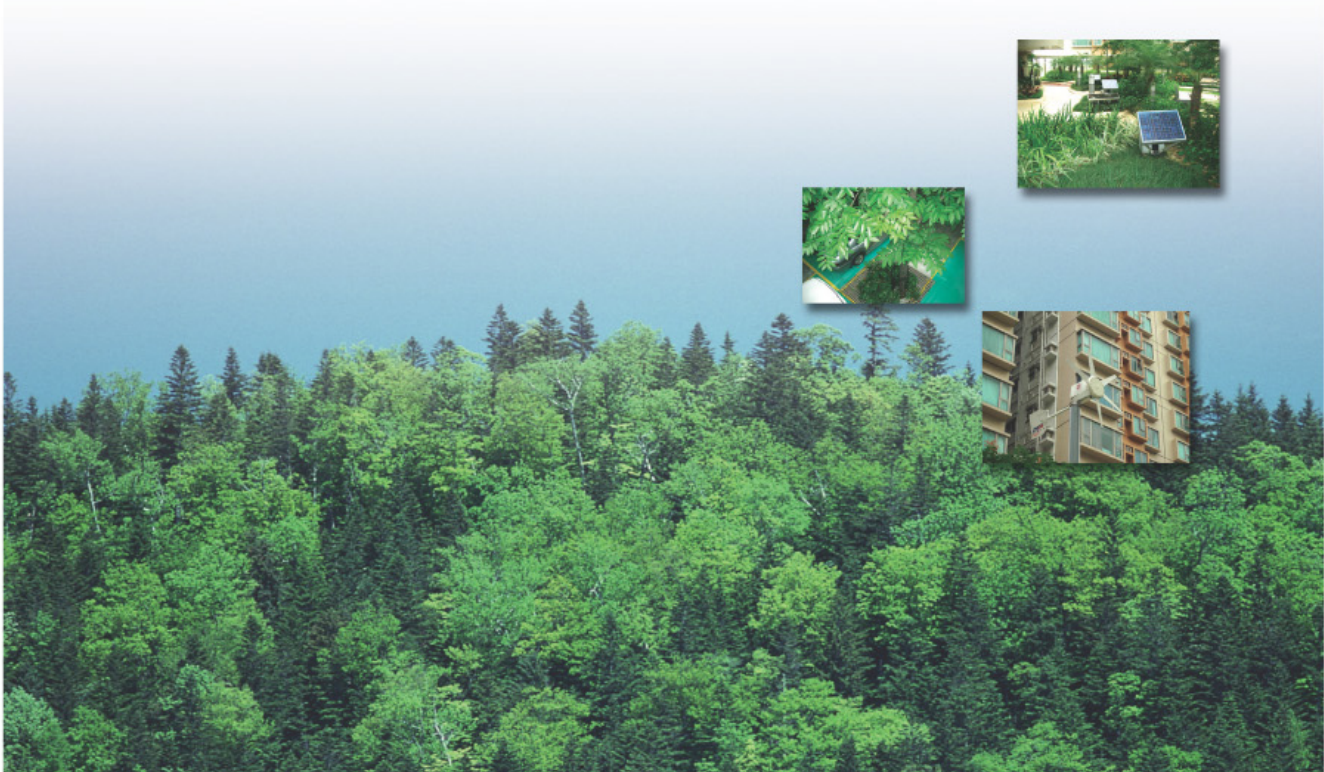
The government’s attitude is all of a piece with its treatment of our land, our harbour, our air, our total environment, and our people - lip service everywhere. We are supposed to have sustainable development assessments. But it is passive, so it is ineffective. In environment assessments elsewhere developers are required to collect data and provide alternatives. What do we have here? Non-binding promises by those who submit planning proposals.

If you want to build a road you merely fill up a form to say this will not be affected, that will not be damaged or moved. Nothing binding and at the end of it all, nobody cares even if serious damage is inflicted on the environment. Remember what happened on Lantau Island during the construction of Disneyland? Many boulders were illegally removed from a stream. If not for a public outcry the natural environment would have been permanently destroyed.

It is very worrying that many of the government's policies clearly show that

no thought had been given to sustainability. It is very painful to be able to see the consequences of these policies and the damage they will inflict on the environment, the biosphere, and our harbour. Absolutely no thought given to proper water management or treatment and to waste material production.

The government set up the Sustainable Development Council on 1 March 2003. Apart from a fund allocated to community projects and three studies on renewable energy, waste management and urban living spaces, coming up with three papers, the council has achieved little and done nothing to change attitudes towards the creation of sustainable development. There are no guidelines, no rules, and no laws requiring departments,



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developers and the individual to stick to in terms of sustainable development. In fact the government and the Sustainable Development Council go their own merry way. Neither has drawn up an LA-21. And those three papers produced by the council do not bind anybody, least of all the government, to do what is right. I doubt that anyone in the government has even looked at them seriously.

In spite of this cavalier attitude, we have much in Hong Kong to be proud of. Sustainable development cannot succeed without the rule of law, honest administration, and fair practices. There are many other areas in which people come to learn from us. Yet we tarnish Hong Kong's image by not coming up with our own LA-21. We cannot stand up and tell the international community that we are making an effort to play our part in the global effort to maintain sustainable development worldwide.

Must we always have huge demonstrations in the streets before someone says: "I hear you..."

If so, I'd be the first to cry: "Let's march!"

