



**C**arrie Lam argues that successful civic engagement can build trust in government and remove citizens' sense of remoteness from policy formulation – factors that are often the causes of social tension. For this to happen, governments must be highly committed to engage, and have the patience and stamina to allow engagement processes to play out. Mrs Lam is the Chief Secretary for Administration in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. She joined the Administrative Service in 1980 and served in various positions, including Director of Social Welfare, Permanent Secretary for Planning and Lands and Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs, before resigning from the civil service in July 2007 to take up a political appointment as the Secretary for Development.

# *The Case for PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT*

*by Carrie Lam*

Given the growing emphasis on transparency and accountability, the HKSAR Government in recent years has been under pressure to adopt a new approach to policy-making – one which attaches greater importance to citizen involvement. Consulting the public only when government solutions are formulated is no longer viable or adequate.

Apart from making the government accountable to the people, there is a much stronger case for civic engagement because of the high degree of autonomy guaranteed under the One Country, Two Systems principle since Hong Kong's reunification with the Mainland of China. We have witnessed the emergence of many more civic organisations focusing on different aspects of life and operating on a wide spectrum of social strengths, with some being more action-oriented while others are research-based. Rapid

communication through a more pervasive media also meant that if the government did not proactively engage, we would soon end up losing the agenda. The lack of effective intermediaries between government and citizens, such as political parties, has also given rise to a greater need for the government to take the lead in engaging with the people. Several high-profile and successful cases of people power at work are indeed timely reminders of the case for civic engagement.

Given Hong Kong's tight land situation (some 60% of our 1,100 square kilometres of land are preserved as country parks, wetlands, etc. for public enjoyment), development and conservation are sensitive issues that could easily cause a major public row if not

handled properly. In recent years, there were widespread social movements relating to harbour reclamation, heritage conservation and major infrastructure. How to strike the needed balance for progressive development – one which meets Hong Kong’s economic, housing and social needs while respecting sustainability and conservation – was a major challenge in my five-year tenure as Secretary for Development in the Third Term of the HKSAR Government. As the Chief Secretary for Administration in the Fourth Term of the HKSAR Government overseeing a much wider policy portfolio, such tasks are even more daunting.

The challenge of civic engagement lies in finding new ways of encouraging citizens to be meaningfully involved in public policy-making, and play a role in the institutions and processes through which decisions affecting their lives are made.

Traditionally, we consulted people through the Legislative Council, the District Councils, Area Committees, relevant government advisory bodies and professional groups. But these institutions may not provide

us with a comprehensive coverage of stakeholders, let alone the public at large. We have thus moved on to creating task-based interactive groups to help identify the areas for change and the options to choose from and, ultimately, build consensus.

For example, in the early 2000s, a civic organisation successfully initiated a judicial challenge against the HKSAR Government on its harbour reclamation works, which had strained relations between the government and the public considerably. This prompted a group of academics and professionals to form a group to facilitate dialogue between the parties. This eventually led to the formation of the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee to provide a forum for rational discussion and to build partnership. This was succeeded by a high-level Harbourfront Commission with the Secretary for Development as vice-chairman. After several years of consensus building, the Commission recommended the establishment of a statutory Harbourfront



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Authority in Hong Kong to advise the HKSAR Government on the holistic and strategic development of the Victoria harbourfront and its associated water-land interface, play an advocacy role and promote Harbour Planning Principles and Guidelines. The proposed Authority would also implement projects in a holistic manner – from planning, design, development, to operation and management. This was readily welcomed by the government.

It is worth noting that at every stage of the Commission's existence, leaders of civic organisations, including the one which took the government to court, were represented. Accommodation of advocacy-based civic groups helps build trust and removes that sense of remoteness from policy formulation – both of which are often the causes of social tension.

Urban regeneration was another concern. In a city like Hong Kong where old buildings (and we have 4,000 buildings over 50 years of age, many of which are not adequately maintained) have to give way to new ones to improve living conditions and optimise land use potential, compensation, rehousing and clearance are ready candidates for social tension. In response to changing community sentiments towards urban renewal, a two-year,

three-stage (namely, envisioning, public engagement and consensus building) public engagement process was initiated in mid-2008, leading to a new urban renewal strategy promulgated in February 2011, entitled “People First – a district-based and public participatory approach to urban renewal”. Innovative compensation options like “flat for flat” and “demand-led” redevelopment initiated by the owners of old buildings were embedded in the new strategy, taking account of views expressed during the civic engagement.

The two exercises above share some common success factors. They include a high level of commitment from the government to engage; an open mind in stressing that there are no “no-go” areas; daring to appoint independent critics to task-based committees; allowing sufficient time to go through the engagement with little rush; and finally, patience and stamina.

Looking ahead, civic engagement is by itself not a panacea for effective governance. The real test lies in implementation. Governments have to continuously look for ways and means to strengthen their ability to execute the outcome of civic engagement, and to create opportunities for citizen participation in some of those policy solutions.