

**Hong Kong as a Sustainable City**  
**Comments to the Commission on Strategic Development, Executive**  
**Committee**  
**By Dr. Edgar Cheng**  
**Nov. 28, 2005**

I am happy to see that the first question to be considered by this Committee is whether our development model is “a comprehensive, balanced, stable and sustainable one that promotes the well-being of the people.” This is question that should be in our minds as we review all the many other issues that confront our city. We need the mindset of sustainability when we look at the big picture as well as when we look at particular situations, when we consider the abstract as well as the concrete. The fact that sustainability takes precedence on this list of important questions reflects the commitment to this concept on the part of the Government of the Special Administrative Region and its leaders. We are further assisted by the support and commitment of the Central Government to sustainable development, despite the fact that the terms of reference for most of the mainland are those of a developing economy, while Hong Kong’s status is that of a middle-income, even a wealthy economy.

As we consider how to build a sustainable city, we need to remember that the way we in Hong Kong use the term, “sustainable development,” has some specific connotations.<sup>1</sup> Our definition of sustainable development is at least a modest manifesto that we need to balance the goals of economic growth, social equity and a healthy environment, and that the community needs to be engaged in this process.

Sustainability, of course, is not just about process. It is also about asserting values. The kind of values I am talking about can be learned but not imposed. So there will be times when members of the community will take a stand that may not immediately be shared by the Government, or the Government will take positions that are not shared or understood by the community. The important thing is that these positions should be based on reasoned, logical arguments and presented in a civil fashion, in a context where multiple points of view are permitted and welcomed. In the next phase of the Council for Sustainable Development, we will adopt a structure to assert values on issues of current interest. In other words, we plan to serve as an interlocutor in the community when there are questions about the sustainability of some of our practices. For example, we will be asking whether our current population policy fits current needs, and whether more needs to be done to manage air quality.

These are both issues where the Government has worked hard and produced substantial results, but where the community has demanded more. Our role will be to evaluate these community demands and see whether we can make sensible and constructive recommendations on the basis of them.

Here, we in the Executive Committee, have been asked to review a wide number of issues relating to Hong Kong's development, and the opportunities and challenges it faces. Each of these questions probably deserves its own task force and structured way of engaging the community in charting the way forward. But if Hong Kong wants to be a sustainable city and have sustainable growth, we also need to identify priorities for sustainability, which will also flow into and invigorate the economy, social system and administration.

How can we look beyond our immediate problems to anticipate the problems of the future? As we set our priorities for sustainable development, we must somehow develop the ability to view the present as though we were looking at the past, and could see the strains in the system that would eventually lead to worse problems. If we were to take this perspective, very likely the most significant patterns would ignore the boundaries between Hong Kong and the mainland. We would see resource issues that affected Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta equally, particularly those of air and water quality. Both air and water disregard political boundaries, and even if we try to insulate the water we take from Guangdong by building longer and longer pipelines, we still are affected by the quality of water in Guangdong through the fruit and vegetables we eat. Over the last quarter century, Hong Kong factories have been a major factor in the deteriorating air quality of the Pearl River Delta, which, when the wind blows from the north, is just as serious a problem as if we generated the pollution within the territorial confines of Hong Kong.

We might also look back and wonder why we did not do more to ensure that infrastructure – roads, highways, bridges, power lines and pipelines – were not organized along a rational model to minimize the impacts to health and quality of life. There may be more than one solution to such problems. Take the planned Hong Kong-Zhuhai Bridge, for example. One way to alleviate air pollution from higher levels of traffic would be to incorporate a light rail line in the bridge. Another way might be to introduce incentives and enforcement for reduction of auto emissions, such as have revolutionized transportation in California. If the auto fleets of Hong Kong and China were based on fuel-cell cars, we would not have to worry about the impact on air quality of a new bridge or many new bridges.

With regard to Hong Kong's local issues, too, we must learn to think as though we had the benefit of hindsight. But many, if not all, of our problems and our opportunities will increasingly have a regional focus, and we must quickly acquire the tools and institutions to deal with them.

Thank you.

---

<sup>i</sup> Hong Kong's vision statement for sustainable development is for "Hong Kong to be a healthy, economically vibrant and just society that respects the natural environment and values its cultural heritage. By engaging the community in the process of building a strategy for sustainable development, we aim to ensure that Hong Kong will be a city for all to share and enjoy, for this and future generations" (June 2003).