

Leadership by Academics

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Towards Sustainable Community Building: Mainstreaming Social Capital in Hong Kong



Recently, the UK government has introduced the concepts of “active community”, “community cohesion”, “local strategic partnership” and “sustainable community”. They all envision the building of a better and sustainable community for people to live and to work. It is safe, inclusive, well-planned, well-run, and offers equality of opportunity to all citizens. What is sustainable community building and why is it so important? What is the contribution from social capital?

Sustainable community building implies the following four pillars:

- Integrating policy and services or joined up action cutting across different fields;
- Balancing short-term gains and long-term impacts – improving the quality of life of current generation without compromising the quality of life of future generations (financial liability/ gain, life course development and early intervention);
- Building cross-sector consensus and collaboration through active partnership; and
- Strengthening capacity building and effective governance (leadership, network, trust, performance driven management).

Can community-building projects in Hong Kong achieve these criteria on sustainability? This paper reviews the shifting changes over the years on the approaches of NGO and the government towards community building and participation. Bridging social capital has been increasingly recognized as pivotal to facilitate different community sectors and groups to interact with each other and build mutual trust. In the past, we have plenty of experiences in promoting relationships and network within a specific vulnerable group, often in isolation from or in conflict with other community sectors. Now, there are more active efforts to promote collaboration that emphasizes seeking synergy, similarities, common interest and problem-solving. We are seeking partners rather than adversaries. Our focus is on the whole of the district rather than pockets of deprived areas. We tackle multi-faceted and cross cutting community issues, such as social exclusion and social investment through cross-sector joint-up actions.

Bridging social capital strategy has been championed by a number of project funds, including the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF). We become more aware of the need to seek holistic, long-term, cross-sector and empowering approach to community issues. There is an urgent need to build up a new culture, complemented by new knowledge and skills on engaging people and organizations in partnership, building trust, learning transfer and collective problem-solving. In essence, social capital is well placed to advance the creation of sustainable communities.



Joe C. B. Leung, JP, is Head and Professor, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong (2001-07). His research and publications focus on social welfare reforms both in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. His research areas include social security, care of the older people, community organization, and social work education. As the principal investigator, he has been commissioned by the Social Welfare Department to review social service provisions, including family services, community development projects and the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices, and by the Central Policy Unit, on three projects related to the population policy. Currently, his study on Long-term care financing in Hong Kong (2004) and the impact of social assistance on social exclusion in China (2006) have been financed by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council. He was a member of the Social Welfare Advisory Committee of the SAR government (1998-2005) and a member of the People’s Political Consultative Conference in Anhui (2003-07). He is an advisor to the China Social Work Association and Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau. His major publications include Social Welfare in China: Authority and Benevolence (Chinese University Press/ St. Martin’s Press, 1995) and a total of 50 refereed publications.

