

**The Importance of Community:
A Review of International and Hong Kong Development
社區的重要性：國際與香港的發展**

Professor Joe LEUNG

Department of Social Work and Social Administration
The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

“Community” is a buzz word associated with a variety of meanings. Here in this seminar, it is narrowly confined to mean geographical locality, or “place”. Without defining the concept in detail, “community” is focused on its importance as a strategic platform for promoting:

1. Community engagement and civic renewal: Community is a place where residents can exercise their rights and responsibilities and participating actively in public realm. Community engagement includes the mobilization of interests and support in social movements, policy consultation, volunteering, corporate social responsibility, and the cultivation of local representative leadership.
2. Policy formulation and implementation: Decentralized and community-based service delivery can enhance policy responsiveness, joint-up action and partnerships tackling cross-cutting social issues.
3. Social network and social capital: Strong social network is pivotal to support social programmes targeting impoverished and deprived communities. It can reduce community problems relating to crime, employment, anti-social behaviour, domestic violence, socially exclusion and hard-to-reach vulnerable groups.

Overall, the notion of community does not simply try to recapture the lost form of social solidarity, but it is now a popular area-based approach to address social, political and economic issues. With the upsurge of governments’ interest to decentralize the administration to enhance policy and programme responsiveness and promote community engagement, this presentation reviews some of the recent government initiatives on engaging community in UK, US, Singapore, Australia and Mainland China. In U.K., the government has actively developed programmes building “community cohesion”, “active community”, “local strategic partnership” and “sustainable community”. The White Paper on local government published in 2006 demonstrates the government determination to empower community capacity to tackle community issues. According to the Report on Welfare Reform by the Australian Government, building community capacity is described “as a process of accumulation of human, financial and social capital within disadvantaged communities. Societal sectors through partnerships can work together to discharge their mutual obligations by helping to strengthen communities and thereby increase opportunities for economic and social participation.”

Without a system of local government, Hong Kong has built up a system of consultative politics and coordinating governance structure since the 1970s. After becoming a Special Administrative Region, community activism has moved from the

focus on housing facilities and resettlement issues to cover wider social issues, including employment, social exclusion, environmental protection, urban renewal and social service provisions. With the increasingly politicization of the district council, district council members have replaced community activists and pressure groups as local spokesmen and champions of local grievances. In addition, there is a wide variety of community organizations actively recruiting members and organizing community-based activities. These organizations include faith groups, residents associations, labour groups, interest groups and business associations.

In recent years, the government has strengthened district-based programmes through enhancing the leadership role of the district officers and the district social welfare officers. More resources and discretion have been allocated to districts for promoting community participation and partnerships. Moving away from the traditional emphasis on organizing recreational, cultural and sports activities, local districts have put more priority to address social issues, such as the local economy, poverty, employment, public safety and child development.

More importantly, there is an emerging awareness that, partly due to urban planning and physical characteristics, districts vary in their socio-economic development. There is a high concentration of vulnerable populations in certain remote and old urban districts. There should be no one-size-fits-all approach to resolve district issues. Instead, district should have more delegated discretion, supported with adequate resources, to share the responsibility with the government to improve the quality of community life. Finally, it points to the need for the government to support community capacity building – enabling people to take a more active part in their communities.

Facing declining community relations and social capital, a key challenge for governments is to identify and harness the strength of community ties and resources contributing towards a just and harmonious society. More importantly, it involves the building of positive relationship (bridging social capital) across different groups, cultures, parties, departments and organizations.