

**Robust Community Governance:
Towards Community Partnerships in Hong Kong**
新社區管治：社區伙伴的發展

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Abstract

Partnership or collaboration is central to the building of social cohesion and the delivery of services addressing cross-cutting social issues. The growth of partnership structure, particularly at the community level, signifies the increasing use of collaborative and inclusive approach. There is a growing awareness of inter-dependency and shared responsibility among community stakeholders to tackle urgent social issues. In short, as the UK Government Paper on Local Government (2006) claimed that “many of the intractable problems can only be dealt with by agencies working together to tackle them at community level. Inner city partnerships are just some of the schemes that have been applied.” Meanwhile, public sector reforms have encouraged governments to increasingly rely on strategic partners, including the private and the third sectors to implement public programmes.

There are more discussion on “why” (motivations), “what” (definitions), “who” (partners), “how” (governance), and evaluation (impacts) of partnerships. Partnerships, in general imply “an agreement between two or more independent bodies to work collectively to achieve an objective”. The defining features of partnerships are: long-term commitment, shared goals, inter-dependency, mutual trust, and joint decision making and production process. Partnerships claim to have a lot of benefits – “collaborative advantages” which cannot have been provided by an individual organization. Through collaboration, partnership can involve the sharing of key resources, including finance, expertise, information and networks.

The central coordinating mechanism in partnership is trust, in contrast to the commands and price competition that articulate hierarchies and markets respectively. Managing and maintaining networks or partnerships in community governance is not simple and straightforward. One has to recognize the recurring multiple, competitive and conflicting interests in the community. The role of the government needs to be impartial, open and transparent, balancing conflicting interests between community stakeholders and mobilizing them together for joint action. Negotiation and persuasion, as well as the use of incentive, replace command and control as the preferred management approach. The promotion of mutual trust vertically between the government and the community, and between community organizations is the key to community cohesion – social stability and social integration.

In Hong Kong, public sector reforms have emphasized the importance of developing tripartite partnership across public, private and the third sectors, notably, public private partnership programmes (4Ps). Without a system of local government, administrative districts have become a key platform for cross-department, cross-service, cross-sector, cross-organization and cross-political party collaboration. The need of the government to promote community engagement has led to a series of

reforms to encourage the participation of community stakeholders, not only in policy scrutiny and consultation, but also in the design, planning and management of programmes – the development of ownership, responsibility and accountability towards programme implementation. The restructuring of the district social welfare office, the district administration, and the provision of special funds to encourage cross-sector partnerships and social capital are some of the examples.

The further promotion of partnership mode of working in Hong Kong requires a new culture of learning and capacity building for all sectors – being open minded and innovative. We can only effectively respond to the challenge of a more heterogeneous community by trying to find out more about our common identity and similarities through more dialogue, while at the same time, show acceptance of the differences between community stakeholders.