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FROM FRAGMENTATION AND SILOS TO TRI-SECTOR COLLABORATION

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN HONG KONG

Social innovation is gathering momentum in Hong Kong. It is connecting silos and developing partnerships for change. **Ada Wong** describes how five social innovators are approaching social change to bring about cohesion amidst a fragmented political landscape.



Ada Wong J. P. is the Convenor of The Good Lab and the Make A Difference initiative. She is also the Founder & Honorary Chief Executive of Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture, Supervisor of HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity, and board member of Social Innovation Exchange. She is a solicitor, social innovation enthusiast, cultural pluralism advocate, educator, radio host and former elected councillor.

There are three zones at the Good Lab. On 27 July 2013, the eight finalists for the 2013 Young Social Entrepreneurs Award (comprising three grants of HK\$100,000 each) were presenting to a panel of judges at the bean bag area. This is Hong Kong's only award that encourages young people to become social entrepreneurs by providing them with a stipend so that they are able to commit full-time to their fledgling social enterprises.

At the opposite end of The Good Lab, ladies from the nearby *Sham Shui Po* district gathered for a demonstration of soap-making with used oil. This is a "waste not" campaign organised by MaD (the Make A Difference initiative) for participants to learn how shops and households in poorer communities are mindful of food waste and have creative recipes even for leftovers.

In the Dialogue Experience Square, 30 people joined a "Lunch in the Dark," one of the experiential activities designed by Hong Kong's most popular social enterprises, Dialogue in the Dark. The event featured different

kinds of dark experiences aimed at building empathy for the visually-impaired. There were probably over 200 people in the different spaces on that exceptionally busy Saturday.

The Good Lab is Hong Kong's social innovation hub and the brainchild of five people: Francis Ngai (Social Ventures Hong Kong), Patrick Cheung (HK Social Entrepreneurship Forum), Dr Ka Kui Tse (Education for Good), Vincent Wong (Solutions On Wheels), and myself (Make a Difference). It is a convenor with networking and support functions. It serves as a platform with a mission to bring the most innovative ideas, the most passionate people, and individuals with resources and support together to create innovative solutions to address unmet needs.

In this 20,000 square feet of co-working space, trust is in the air. It is also a social innovation hub where knowledge, skills and insights are constantly shared. It is a cosy community where people easily become friends and interesting initiatives can be explored. IT start-ups and social entrepreneurs have sat next to each other and then decided to partner each other in new ventures. Here, people feel inspired to make a difference and believe that they too can help to change society for the better. The Good Lab does not sound real, since the positive energy and cross-sector collaboration that comes out from it is not the norm in Hong Kong.

We have been hard at work creating platforms to launch innovative initiatives and harness the work of those passionate in generating solutions to address unmet needs in society. Social innovation work involves a tri-sector approach; the wisdom, resources and insights of the public, private and people sectors must be shared. Here,



Rally in Hong Kong

trust is an essential ingredient. As social innovators, we encourage social entrepreneurship and advocate cross-sector collaborations by creating intermediary platforms to break silos. We attempt to identify unifying strands to work through the fragments in our society. However, our positive energy is not yet echoed in Hong Kong, which at the moment, is split politically.



THE STATE OF HONG KONG

In early July 2013, the Hong Kong government rolled out its plan to develop two new towns in the northeastern part of the New Territories (NENT NDA Development).¹ This was in anticipation of further population growth and the need for affordable housing. The plan calls for the resumption² of hundreds of hectares of farmland and the demolition of village houses. The Hong Kong Golf Club, with 2,000 of the city's elite as members, operates three golf courses, occupying 170 hectares of land in the vicinity of the NENT NDAs. After the plan was announced, villagers were angry that they would be displaced while the golf courses would be kept. They threatened to occupy the golf club land if the area where their village houses stood were to be resumed. Activists and villagers went to protest at the front gate of the golf club, calling for re-entry to the golf club land that was under short-term tenancy. Such an action highlighted the people's mistrust of government initiatives and actually pitched 2,000 "haves" against over 100,000 "have-not" families who could have benefited if the golf courses gave way to public housing. Such is the fragmented state of the society in Hong Kong.

The people of Hong Kong are full of discontent and they have demonstrated (often peacefully) in hundreds of rallies each year. The largest took place on 1 July, on the anniversary of Hong Kong's reunification with China. The rally has now become an indication of our state of governance. In the momentous year of 2003, the year of the SARS outbreak, and when there was strong opposition to Article 23 legislation,³ half a million people rallied to say no to the erosion of core values. The event resulted in the resignation of principal government officials. This year, 430,000 people marched on the streets despite the heavy rain and the announcement of typhoon signal No.3.⁴ It was the largest turnout since 2003.

Hong Kong probably has one of the highest Gini co-efficient (0.537 in 2011) in the world.⁵ Five per cent of Hong Kong's taxpayers contribute to over 50 per cent of the city's income tax while tens of thousands of households live in squalid subdivided flats or units. These are ubiquitous in rental housing in Hong Kong. In addition to the worsening rich-poor gap, conflicts in Hong Kong have centred on the increasing number of new immigrants from mainland China as well the annual 30 million mainland Chinese tourists whose buying power has left Hong Kong residents shortchanged. Local noodle shops are closing down amidst skyrocketing rent, and the community landscape is drastically shifting to tourist-led businesses.

In the last financial year, the former Chief Executive decided to distribute HK\$6,000 to each Hong Kong resident aged 18 and above. This act of extreme generosity cost the government HK\$40 billion—enough to build hospitals, schools and thousands of homes. Unfortunately, this has not reduced negative sentiments towards the government. On the contrary, it raised expectations of more such “candies” for the people each year. Our government still has the financial means to address social concerns but sometimes, money alone is

not the cure and it is certainly not a sustainable solution. Hong Kong went through rapid socio-economic changes in the last decade but players in each sector were slow to recognise these changes and were not adequately concerned about fundamental issues such as deepening income inequality, changing demographics and an ageing population. On the other hand, civil society in Hong Kong is maturing as people are increasingly awakened and becoming more confident that their participation can contribute to the halting of unwelcome measures. The last ten years have witnessed many bottom-up movements in the search of Hong Kong's identity and the protection of old districts and local community.

The post-80s and 90s generations took the lead to uphold the core values of Hong Kong. This took the form of opposition to the bulldozing of Lee Tung Street (Hong Kong's “wedding card street” with at least 20 shops designing and producing bright red invitations for weddings and celebrations), attempts to save the Star Ferry and Queen's Pier from demolition, and the rallies against the construction of the express rail linking Hong Kong to mainland China and plans to dismantle Choi Yuen Tsuen, an agricultural village situated along the planned route of the railway line.

In mid-July this year, the government was forced to withdraw a funding request to enlarge three landfill sites after ascertaining that even the pro-establishment camp was divided in this matter (with the “not in my backyard syndrome”) and it could not muster enough votes to push the paper through the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council. The state of Hong Kong is polarised. Political parties and figures have become more radical. Mistrust is growing. There is no room for collaboration, only name calling. The government is fearful of making new moves; big businesses are arrogant and in general, members of the society know how to destroy but they have not learnt to rebuild.

For Ka Kui Tse, besides being a prolific writer, editing and completing a few books on social entrepreneurship each year, he is also passionate about social entrepreneurship education. His startup, Education for Good, is a community interest company that provides inspiring programmes to empower. These programmes include the Gap Year for younger people, and Social Impact Fellows for early retirees.

Vincent Wong, formerly a sharp-tongued radio host and strategic development director at Commercial Radio, started “Solution-on-wheels” (SOW), a social venture that embraces solution journalism and wisdom of the crowd. SOW has designed a state-of-the-art mobile broadcasting van that could be brought to communities to engage district councillors and citizens in lively debates that everyone can watch and share via 4G technology. Rather than simply pointing at the problem, SOW, in functioning as an innovative media platform, has been effective in offering common ground and viable solutions with regard to many local issues.

I founded Make A Difference (MaD), a platform to nurture the next generation of changemakers. Here, we encourage real actions by supporting social projects and innovations with seed money in our MaD School initiative. Such projects originating from young changemakers are multifaceted and include using mobile technology to help Indian, Pakistani and Nepali children living in Hong Kong to speak and write in Chinese; conducting lessons on rooftop farming at schools that culminate in Big Lunch days for the neighbouring community; co-creating better street furniture involving locals and designers; collecting surplus food from markets and turning them into community meals; and recycling baby prams and products.

When each social innovator takes a small step and inspires others to do likewise, these seemingly small steps add up as bigger and bolder steps that resonate with the people. When this happens, social innovation becomes more visible and easier to understand. And when social innovators are willing to mentor younger enthusiasts, the longer-term impact of this bonding and sharing is invaluable.

These days, I find myself being a busy “connector”, embracing ideas from the crowd and helping fine-tune the ideas. A young man starting a local cultural tourism enterprise was connected to similar ventures in Taiwan, and fair trade products were introduced to corporations. Design houses and IT startups work together with social enterprises, social entrepreneurs seek inspiration from artists and educators, bloggers communicate through face time with their readers, makers of documentaries and their ideas are introduced to changemakers from all fields, and visitors from mainland China are introduced to Hong Kong’s local social entrepreneurship community. Very soon, I hope to further connect foundations and impact investors with the many fledgling social innovation initiatives being incubated.

This kind of synergy has been missing in a fragmented Hong Kong. However, as advocated by Seoul social innovator Mayor Park Won-soon, we should all live in a “sharing” city. In such a sharing environment, our civil servants should involve social innovators when considering new policies and policy changes in order to gain a deeper understanding of social issues and embrace innovative solutions. Our corporate leaders can share their knowledge and expertise and be directly involved in social projects.

The Good Lab is more than a passive intermediary. The five of us are determined to see it as an active connector

and catalyst, providing affordable co-working space and also changing mindsets for the incubation and implementation of innovative social solutions.

STEERING HONG KONG TOWARDS SOCIAL INNOVATION

This is only the beginning. Most people in Hong Kong are presently too absorbed in protecting and expanding their turf to think about building a more inclusive society to involve different stakeholders. We prefer not to take risks. As with everyone else, funders also choose safer projects. Even non-profit organisations sometimes guard against intrusion into their turf instead of embracing a more empathetic and fuller perspective of the social issue at hand. Working in isolation has resulted in wasted resources, work duplication and missed opportunities to make a bigger impact.

Nevertheless, when a society is as fragmented as Hong Kong, things can only take a turn for the better. Indeed, we have seen the government's growing interest in social innovation. The Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund of HK\$500 million was set up under the Commission on Poverty late last year under the leadership of Chief Secretary, Carrie Lam. She is keen to support intermediaries, ventures and initiatives that encourage innovation and entrepreneurship to prevent the further widening of the poverty divide. This is a breakthrough on the part of the government as it had never supported individual entrepreneurs in the past. Details of the fund have not been announced but once it is, it will spark a flurry of applications and ignite more curiosity and interest in this emerging space.

At the same time, pioneers from the financial sector in Hong Kong have come to acknowledge that "the complex problems faced by Hong Kong require solutions that

have to balance multidisciplinary factors that cut across fields like finance, the social sciences, design and urban planning, the environment and public policy to name a few."⁷ Annie Chen of the RS Group has been a leader in fostering this mindset change. She has supported many initiatives, including the EngageHK research, encouraging businesses to support social ventures beyond CSR and collaborate across sectors. Civil society, albeit still radical, is now more inclusive, with many embarking on environmental and social projects to do good, rather than simply being resistant to negotiation and cooperation.

The Good Lab is contemplating expansion and the addition of another small venue to the existing physical space. In time to come, I hope there will be a Good Lab for makers, since there is now an expanding global movement encouraging DIY experimentation of innovative products such as 3D printing, electronics and robotics. There should be a meeting place for academia, makers, coders and funders to harness new technology and tools for greater innovation. We look forward to collaborating with institutions to set up social innovation hubs in Hong Kong and mainland China. We will continue to advocate sharing, collaboration, and the blurring of boundaries; we should cut across boundaries to support all entrepreneurial initiatives big and small.

There are champions for social innovation in different corners in Hong Kong: in government departments, businesses and the community. Given time, I am hopeful that these champions will be able to make a difference, social innovation will be fast-tracked and a social ecosystem will be co-created for systemic change in our society. ■



Recent events by The Good Lab

May 2013

The Good Lab hosted Hong Kong's first ever Open Data Hackathon where 60 coders, journalists and data scientists came together to explore opportunities presented by mashing up data. In 30 hours they built on open government data and created prototype websites and mobile apps for visualising food pollution and noise pollution.

June 2013

Together with MaD, the Good Lab hosted a SIX (Social Innovation Exchange) event with the participation of experts from NESTA (UK's innovation agency) and social innovation enthusiasts from mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Macau and Hong Kong. Interesting cases were shared and participants also attended the opening of Good Kitchen, a social enterprise restaurant situated near the Good Lab.

July 2013

At our "Enhancing Tri-sector competence and dialogue" workshop, civil servants, business executives, NGO workers and social entrepreneurs joined the one-and-a-half-day event to study social innovation cases worldwide and went through an ideation and prototyping process after identifying social problems pertinent to them. Participants were inspired by talks from the directors of Good Lab, in particular the one from Dr KK Tse, who shared his 10 social entrepreneur role models (including Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus of Grameen Bank).

Endnotes

- 1 See the press release "Result of the North East New Territories New Development Areas Planning and Engineering Study" in www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201307/04/P201307040672.htm.
- 2 The term "land resumption" used in Hong Kong is more commonly understood as the compulsory acquisition of land by the government for public purposes. See [www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/28F18E70FD9CAA25482575EE003F5A41/\\$FILE/CAP_124_e_b5.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/28F18E70FD9CAA25482575EE003F5A41/$FILE/CAP_124_e_b5.pdf), www.legislation.gov.hk/eng/glossary/homeglos.htm.
- 3 In September 2002, the government proposed the Hong Kong Basic Article 23, the basis of a security law. This led to considerable controversy as Hong Kong had operated as a separate legal system established by the Sino-British Joint Declaration on 18 December 1984.
- 4 See classification in www.weather.gov.hk/publica/gen_pub/tcws.pdf.
- 5 Economic Analysis Division, Half Yearly Economic Report, Economic Analysis and Business Facilitation Unit, Financial Secretariat's Office, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (August 2012): 86 – 89, www.legco.gov.hk/yr11-12/english/panels/fa/papers/fac1-2451-1-e.pdf.
- 6 Philo Alto and P. Ming Wong, Mind the Gap: Lessons and Findings, EngageHK: Hong Kong (August 2013):43, www.asiacommunityventures.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/EngageHK_Final_Webversion.pdf.
- 7 Ibid.