

# MEASURING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: A HONG KONG PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Trust and legitimacy occupy a central position in contemporary discourse surrounding the process of environmental reform in late-modern societies. This study examines dimensions of trust from stakeholders and uses a group process to enrich the data describing and explaining the reasons behind a possible 'trust deficit' in the context of environmental governance and policy making in Hong Kong. Results from focus groups indicate that trust in government with regard to environmental issues is generally very low. Factors include poor leadership, a rather out-dated mindset of the government, inflexible government structures, inconsistent governance, misplaced knowledge and expertise in the government and its reluctance to create dialogue or communication. Stakeholders suggested that to enhance public trust in the government, the government needed to develop stronger leadership, reform government structure, improve communication on environmental issues to the public, take input from the community more seriously and make better use of regulation and provide incentives for environmental protection.*

## INTRODUCTION

Public trust in the motives, effectiveness and transparency of government is an essential dimension of institutional legitimacy. Policy and policy instruments need a degree of public trust and confidence if they are to be accepted as credible and legitimate. Previous research on environmental reform processes in Hong Kong (Hills 2005) indicate that key stakeholders are concerned with the overall policy efficiency, the ability of the Hong Kong government to deliver on its sustainability agenda, and the responsiveness of the administration to stakeholder opinion. Important local environmental institutions are widely perceived to be underperforming, and there is limited confidence in the efficacy of voluntary environmental agreements that are widely used elsewhere. This situation may be indicative of a broadly based 'trust deficit' involving relations between stakeholders and government. If this is the case, prospects for environmental reform in Hong Kong may be compromised.

To complement previous work in this area the focus group method was adopted for this study in order to enlarge the stakeholder participation beyond questionnaires and interviews. The group interaction helped elicit greater stakeholder defined terms of trust rather than just researcher defined terms, while gathering a rich set of data arising from participants exploring topics more deeply. Focus groups are a means of bringing people together for the purpose of gathering their opinion on a specific topic. They are more widely established now in the field of social research and are a useful complement to other methods of data gathering. The main features of this method that were of value to this project included: participants were able to present their own views as well as listening to others, they reflected on their own views and additional material was

generated; with each discussion the topic was more deeply explored often producing clearer identification of problems, more analysis and when given the chance participants offered practical solutions. As Finch and Lewis (2002) explain focus groups, "... are synergistic ...in the sense that the group works together: the group interaction is explicitly used to generate data and insights." (p.171)

The focus group method enabled exploration of not just *what* stakeholders think about environmental policy making in Hong Kong but *why*. The group environment also revealed consensus and diversity of individual's and group needs, experiences and preferences. Of particular interest with this form of data gathering was the unexpected comments or perspectives that were explored. These new ideas could not have been extracted through a questionnaire, may have been brought out in an interview, but the focus group allowed further exploration of these new ideas.

Although the disadvantage of the focus group format meant the group size is small and may not necessarily be representative of the general population, this research method complemented other examinations of trust in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Previous studies examining trust in Hong Kong (Hills 2008) have also shown a lack of confidence/trust in the government's ability to formulate effective environmental policies. Moreover, the focus groups tapped into an extensive pool of experience and expertise in the environmental and policy fields in Hong Kong. This made the discussions very relevant and specific to the case of Hong Kong, yet there were common undercurrents throughout the groups that were consistent with and supported by findings from the general trust literature.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Discourses on trust have achieved considerable prominence recently in a number of disciplines: in economics (e.g. Fukuyama 1995; Williamson 1993), management science (e.g., Korcznski 2000), public administration (Coulson 1998; Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2002), and sociology and social administration (e.g. Giddens 1990; Gilson 2003; Sztompka 1999; Tonkiss et al. 2000).

Large sectors of the trust literature report on decreasing levels of trust in institutions or large organizations, along with a decline in general trust within populations (Edelman 2005; Paxton 2005). This has led to increasing focus on the repercussions of trust/distrust as well as the relationship of social capital and its impact on economic activity, democracy, civic and political participation. The general belief being that decline in social capital, and therefore trust, is detrimental to a society as a whole (Keele 2007; Brewer 2003; Putnam 2000).

As much as there is widespread disagreement on how to define and measure trust (as well as social capital) there is strong agreement regarding its importance to the functioning of our complex and multicultural society. For example:

- Trust helps social interactions to function smoothly and harmoniously (Taschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000)
- Trust reduces social uncertainty and complexity (Bouckaert and Van deWalle 2002)
- Trust is an important element of social capital (Keele 2007; Paxton 1999)

- Trust plays a role in a healthy and flexible economy and democracy (Galston 1996; Fukuyama 2001)
- Trust is a critical factor in perceptions and acceptance of environmental risks (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003)
- Trust is an important element for effective risk communication (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2004)
- Trust is an important component for the functioning of public administrations (Kim 2005)

As such, trust is widely regarded as a basic ingredient of social capital (Brewer 2003; Keele 2007), in that it helps create networks between people in a community and helps to make these networks function smoothly.

Trust is an elusive concept but yet fundamental to the success of relationships and communication. It is however, seen to function on different levels. What this means is that an individual trusts another individual quite differently to trusting an organization (Bouckaert et al 2002). The trust or confidence in an organization tends to come from experience with the organization, the organization's reliability and its competence. An individual's perception of an organization's ability to fulfil its obligations has an affect on that individual's trust in the organization. As such we know we require trust in others if they are to make decisions on our behalf, yet we have difficulty in defining trust. Is trust a moral question that requires moral answers or is it a rational decision based on experience or performance? How do we measure something that has not been clearly defined? What dimensions have been agreed upon that constitute trust, that we can in turn analyze and use to help us define trust?

A number of studies have explored the nature and dimensions of trust. Gilson (2003: 1454) argues that trust '...is a relational notion: it generally lies between people, people and organizations and people and events.' She provides a valuable overview of intellectual contributions to trust debates and distinguishes between voluntary trust and dependency, and impersonal trust. She also observes that it is necessary to build trust in the state and its agencies to establish the legitimacy of state action. Furthermore, the process of building legitimacy involves consideration of the interactions between fairness, trust and legitimacy. This leads her to argue that '...trust and legitimacy are, therefore, likely to be rooted as much in fair processes as in material redistribution' (p.1463).

Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) explore the dimensions of trust in the context of risk management research. Their review of the literature points to the existence of various attributes of trust identified by researchers, including perceived competence, objectivity, fairness, commitment, caring and predictability. They point out that some writers, such as Metlay (1999) argue for simpler formulations that recognize two basic dimensions: a set of affective beliefs about institutional behaviour ("trustworthiness"), and perceptions of an institution's competence. Their own findings confirm the existence of a two-factor dimensionality that they label *general trust*, which blends perceptions of competence and care, and a *skepticism* dimension reflecting credibility and reliability. But they also suggest there to be two slightly differing empirical models with scepticism as a possible third dimension. Previous work examining the dimensionality of trust in Hong Kong (Burnett et al., 2008) also found there to be a skepticism dimension.

Within the body of literature there are a core set of elements or dimensions of trust. For example Renn and Levine (1991) outline perceived competence, objectivity, fairness,

consistency and faith (or perception of 'good will' of the source). Kasperson et al. (1992) outlined commitment, competence, caring, and predictability (or consistency). Metlay (1999) points out that trust and confidence legitimates an institution's actions and existence. Metlay also argues that trust is not as complex and is based on two distinctive components – affective beliefs about institutional behaviour (or 'trustworthiness') and perceptions of an institution's competence. Frewer et al. (1996) also identify a two-factor structure – general trust evaluation of an information source (competence and caring), and a more complex factor encompassing the vested interest and accountability elements. Other research such as Hovland et al. (1953), Jungerman et al. (1996) also substantiate this two-dimensional structure. Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) argue that previous research suggests two slightly differing empirical models of the dimensionality of trust. These are general trustworthiness and competence (Metlay) and general trustworthiness (competence and care) and vested interest (Frewer et al.).

In addition the literature examining trust in government identifies a number of components that affect (contribute to) the levels of trust and as such are closely related to the dimensions (description) of trust. Some components are also explored in the literature in such a way as to identify those that can be measured. Some researchers have attempted to give empirical merit to the various components of trust and have measured performance (Yang and Holzer 2006), good governance (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003), accountability (Wang 2000) as well as components from the concept of social capital. In addition some authors examine cultural aspects (Gowda 1999) and how those non-technical and non-rational paradigms define and measure trust, "*culture is an intricate web of institutions and activities - a way of life that sustains the community rather than being merely a common outlook or set of beliefs.*" Further, Earle and Cvetkovich (1999) suggest that in some situations that involve risk removed from the individual, trust may be based on agreement and sympathy rather than on reasoned arguments and direct knowledge. Thus, trust judgements may be based on whether people feel that the other person(s) or organization shares the same values or are seen as having the same understanding of a particular situation. They refer to this as Salient Value Similarity (SVS). However, it is a difficult one to measure and appears that empirical studies do not necessarily support this theory, perhaps since other dimensions of trust such as competence, care, knowledge, may affect trust in combination not just SVS on its own.

With this as the backdrop this study attempts to gather more data to support the key dimensions of trust more commonly used and supported by the trust literature.

## METHODOLOGY

Focus group research requires group membership to be purposeful and systematic, ensuring that participants share a target experience (Morgan & Scannell 1998; Bova et al. 2006). The focus group meetings involved informed stakeholders who were either directly involved in or had good levels of knowledge of Hong Kong's environmental policy process. These informed stakeholders represented different sectors of the Hong Kong community. To investigate how trust influences environmental processes in Hong Kong, the informed stakeholders were invited to a series of focus groups to share their opinions regarding their level of trust in government.

Although language differences were not an area of research, it was considered important for individuals to have the choice to express themselves in either language. As a result, 3 meetings were held in English and 2 in Cantonese. The sectors represented in each focus group session are listed below:

Focus group sessions	Language	Sector represented
1	English	Private
2	English	Mixed*
3	English	NGO
4	Cantonese	Private
5	Cantonese	NGO

*\*Participants consisted of representatives from the private sector, NGOs and academia.*

Each focus group session ran for approximately one and a half hours. All sessions were video-taped and transcribed. The discussions were organized around a topic guide, with the aim:

1. To identify the dimensions of the concept of trust as reflected in the opinions and attitudes of the informed stakeholders;
2. To estimate the existing level of trust in the government regarding environmental policies;
3. To identify the mechanisms or initiatives that may enhance the levels of trust in these institutions, policies and instruments.

The following sections provide an overview of the major issues raised during the focus group sessions. This includes a summary of the participants' understanding of what determines or shapes trust, their opinions on the government's performance concerning environmental policy, and their views on how to improve overall trust levels in the government. Notable differences between the individual focus groups are briefly outlined at the end.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUST

Table 1 illustrates many of the terms used throughout the focus group discussions. The main terms shown in the left hand column were the most used in response to the question "*What are the characteristics that make you trust an organization such as the government?*" As the discussion progressed and greater detail was given regarding the characteristics, participants described what these terms meant to them by giving more in-depth examples. The related terms are given in the right hand column.

Table 1: Characteristics of Trust

Main terms	Related terms
<i>Leadership</i>	Being active, Being persuasive, Vision
<i>Listening/Consultation</i>	Open Channels, Willingness to listen, Dialogue, Modesty
<i>Transparency</i>	Openness, Honesty, Believability
<i>Accountability</i>	Responsibility, Vested Interest
<i>Expertise</i>	Capability, Being Professional
<i>Government structure</i>	Bureaucracy, Culture, Consistency, Mainland China
<i>Others</i>	Efficiency, Concern

*Leader(ship)* was by far the most mentioned dimension affecting trust in the Hong Kong government. Other highly mentioned dimensions included: *listening/consultation* in terms of real communication between the community and government; *transparency*, or highlighting the need for the government to inform the public clearly of what it is doing and; *accountability* in terms of taking responsibility for decisions and actions, including the failures. These strong themes emerged within a general perception of the government's lack of care or concern for issues raised by the general public.

## GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Based on the characteristics of trust the participants identified, they were asked to further elaborate how their trust was influenced by the government's performance on environmental issues. The perceptions of the participants are summarized as below.

### Poor and Weak Leadership

Leadership was associated with terms such as vision, being proactive and being persuasive. A very strong theme among participants was the sense of no solid leadership within the government for environmental issues. Leadership in Hong Kong was described as ignorant and lacking vision, having short horizons, a narrow perspective, autocratic and weak.

*"So business as usual with moderate tinkering. What is incredibly lacking is a sense of leadership coming from the government on this issue. It's so important to have government leaders who know their stuff and we have absolutely no sense they have that at the top. In California amazingly enough we have a leader who was in sci-fi films and is most visible and advocates even in face of strong opposition. He wants to make a difference. We have none of that here..."*

The government is perceived as not having the expertise or knowledge to carry out their job. Although skilled people are present in the government they do not appear able to apply those skills. Many felt that there has been a lack of performance on air quality as a direct result of government not taking the lead and thus encouraging the business sector to follow. The ignorance of the leadership is vividly illustrated by the Chief Executive Donald Tsang's speech<sup>1</sup> in November 2006, which essentially denied there was an air pollution problem in Hong Kong.

*“I would just say that we have very poor, ignorant leadership. I mean, for a chief executive to come out and say what he said, about the toxicity of ambient air pollutants ...”*

The Chief Executive was identified as having the power to put things into action. Yet his speech which projected denial has created resentment among the public who are concerned with air pollution. As such *leadership* was then described to be a whole value set where government leads by example so that business and the community will follow. Participants clearly stated that this did not mean that government had to be regulating all the time but rather to show where trends should be and persuade the community to participate. The issue of idling engines was given as an example whereby the government, on the one hand was telling everyone to switch off their engines but on the other, they might not themselves abide by this rule and employed heavily polluting vehicles.

The local government was described as a weak government in that once any kind of opposition came from the community, policies were often withdrawn without regard to the community as a whole, or discussion on the issue. The smoke free policy was one example given by the participants that illustrated the government's lack of determination in implementing certain policies. The implementation of this policy had dragged on for 10 years and then finally implemented on 1 January 2007.

Fletcher (2003) supports the idea that effective public organizations have high quality leadership and that leaders acquire the help and support of others by engaging top level oversight, advisory or decision-making groups that are composed of stakeholders. Trust is further enhanced in organizations by the trustworthy behaviour of managers (leaders). Bouckaert et al. (2002) discuss how people judge politicians and whether they perceive them to be trustworthy. Whether public officials (leaders, managers) keep their promises and whether they are seen to be reliable and honest appear to have a direct effect on trust. Since certainty (reliability, consistency) is important in creating trust, a good leader would be someone who would consider carefully the reality before making promises that create expectations and, therefore choose wisely what to promise. This would seem to go hand in hand with transparency. A good leader would be open and honest about the limitations and capacity of the government. In addition, a strong leader would be able to counteract negative stereotypes perpetuated through the bureaucratic bashing that often takes place in the media. Again, this can be managed through competent leadership that recognizes the self-perpetuating nature of mistrust and lack of transparency and accountability to be counterproductive to the efficient functioning of government.

#### Reluctance to create Dialogue or encourage Communication

There appears to be a mismatch of evaluation. The government appears to believe they are doing a relatively good job, whereas the community evaluates them as fair to poor. Yet, some participants believed the government knew they were doing a poor job but would not admit this. Any willingness to listen was seen to be with vested interests such as the business sector and not so much with other community groups. There is no effective response to concerns and the government is not seen as doing anything substantial, but rather tinkering since it seems there is too much acceptance, on the part of the government, of the current situation. The doors to government are closed and they do not receive critiques well, with a tendency toward denial. Some participants also commented on the amount of dialogue that was present between the government

and the community before the handover of sovereignty in 1997, and that this dialogue has decreased since then and today is almost non-existent.

There is a fair body of literature that focuses on the benefits of public participation in the polity and administration of government with general consensus being, that having the public on-board during the process of project development is a good use of resources and engenders greater trust in the government (Wang 2000; Heintzman and Marson 2005). Further, Yang (2006) shows that trust by administrators in the participation process and the public's ability to participate is very important to the success of communication and dialogue between government and the public in that "... trust affects whether administrators proactively promote citizen participation." (p. 575). It would be safe to say that citizens must have trust in the administrators or leaders of the process as well as the process itself. Wang and Van Wart (2007) also pointed out that public participation must be followed with improved government performance. Therefore, process must be results oriented and embody a genuine expression of working in the public interest.

### Lack of Transparency

*Honest, believability and openness* are the terms used by participants related to *transparency*, which appears in all the focus groups. There were strong feelings about the lack of openness and honesty with information released to the public. It was perceived that the government has been hiding the decision-making process from, and did not disclose all the information to the public. Public information and announcements are not forthcoming especially regarding the environment. The Air Pollution Index (API) was given as an example since the meaning of this composite reading is not explained to people. The API readings should be clearly compared to the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other country readings to show what they really mean, how they compare and what they are measuring. Considering the prominent issue of air pollution in the region, the lack of serious consideration to communicate and address the problem continues to reduce the government's believability and credibility. Further, the government seems reluctant to comment on measures that would have a more immediate effect.

Supported in the literature, transparency, also expressed in terms of openness, honesty, and communication is about important information being withheld. When information is being hidden, people become suspicious and begin to ask what is being hidden and why? Metlay (1999) shows that trust and confidence are "... related to an institution being open and forthcoming." (p. 101). Bouckaert and Van de Walle discuss the performance of government and the public's perception of that performance. They highlight the importance for the government to know what criteria the public use for evaluating the government's performance. In this case, the focus group participants felt strongly that the government has not been transparent (open and honest). This is not only important in terms of the public's perceptions i.e. they want more information about the government's decision-making processes but, important for the government themselves in terms of reduction in the errors attributed to the government. As such, increased transparency would be a win-win situation.



## Inflexible Governmental Structure and Inconsistent Governance

The government was described as inflexible and rigid. The hierarchical structure and the little or no communication across departments is neither conducive to efficiency and nor accountability. The frustration, with the bureaucracies and government inefficiencies exhibited by various government departments, was obvious. Many participants asked, *“What does create change in the government? How do decisions finally get pushed through especially when the government has been ‘talking’ about doing certain things for lengthy periods of time, such as the smoking ban and alfresco dining?”* This rigid, top-down style is inflexible to a changing environment and, was seen to hamper the generation of new ideas.

As a result of the embedded structure of the government departments, and the poor coordination between them, the public was described as having become confused and distrustful. The following two examples express the general frustration and the feeling that government must lead by example:

*“.....January last year, landfill charges are imposed and this involved problems between different government departments. Our company provide services to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). Environmental Protection Department (EPD) tells us to do it this way while FEHD has another way of implementation. FEHD asked us to pay for the landfill charges. But EPD says that the polluters should pay. So, we talked to the FEHD and tell them they should pay for the rubbish. And they said “NO, I won’t pay for that. Please talk to EPD.” There has been so much confusion which led to a strike at around the same time last year, near the Chinese New Year, in which many truckers went blocking the access to the landfill sites.”*

*“If government could set an example to the private sector and the community in everything it does, for example in the past, the government had huge infrastructure works department that could do anything it wanted, they had open burning and because one government department cannot prosecute another, they are immune from prosecution and by extension so are their contractors. This situation has improved over the last few years but we still have cases where the government is not doing what it preaches. It’s expecting from the community and private sector one performance that itself is not able to deliver. If this was addressed it would automatically help.”*

In more traditional styles of management, top-down decision-making tended to be common, and decision-makers essentially did not explain their actions. Bouckaert et al. (2002) discuss the aim of reducing complexity in a large bureaucracy which would be through the creation of perceptions that government is infallible. The admission of mistakes would create uncertainty. This would appear to have repercussions both within government (working environment) and outside (public confidence). From a business perspective it has become clear that inflexibility and inconsistency in managers and their decision-making is neither efficient nor conducive to a healthy or productive work environment. In this vein Heintzman and Marson (2005) apply private business sector approaches whereby managers have always achieved performance results by examining *what* is being done and *how* it is being done. Traditionally the focus was on *what* was being done but not necessarily *how*. Greater attention has been placed on *how* managers achieve results. Heintzman and Marson present the case for the same emphasis to be placed on public sector managers. This means “Improving leadership and management skills ought to be an important focus for the government.” This would

mean increasing the accountability for *how* functions are performed and communicating the results achieved, simultaneously contributing to improvements in the working environment of the public sector. This in turn has been closely linked to improved service delivery and service satisfaction on behalf of the public (Canada 2003).

With improvements in the work environment, greater employee job satisfaction, employee confidence in the leadership and communication processes should help reduce the reluctance to change. Change can be intimidating if one does not know what kind of change is about to take place therefore, with clearly communicated goals and strong accountable leadership, change within the structure of government would be supported. Unlike service delivery in the private sector, public service delivery is, “... *always about much more than just service. Because the clients of government services are never ‘just’ clients, as they might be in the private sector. They are not just consumers of government services: they are usually taxpayers and citizens, that is, bearers of rights and duties in a framework of democratic community, with civic and public interests that go well beyond their service needs.*” (Canada 1996, 2000: 31-2, quoted in Heintzman and Marson (2005 p.570)).

### Entrenched Mindset and Reluctance to change

This heading was the best way to describe what participants often referred to when describing government as ‘being stuck in the old ways’, hanging on to hierarchical thinking and structure, and top-down management styles. That this style of managing was familiar to those in the public service and that it continues to perpetuate itself, appears to reflect the administration’s unfamiliarity with new ways of managing or reluctance to change.

There was a general perception that a certain kind of attitude and mind-set is prevalent among the civil servants in Hong Kong. This mind-set was suggested to be due to a number of reasons, including the government’s inflexible structure, out-dated corporate culture and top-down management style. A culture of unwillingness to change has been nurtured inside the government over decades, developed further during the colonial period. Further, some laws and regulations that were established during the colonial years were described as locking-in the government. This gave the feeling to many that the government would not attempt to change regulations that were remotely complex. This further drew in to question their competence since the unwillingness to change could be due to lack of knowledge and expertise in more modern methods of management. Some participants pointed out that this mindset may also be due to the Chinese philosophy, which essentially follows, “*The less I do, the fewer the mistakes. The more I do, the more the mistakes.*” The thinking is to avoid trouble, not to stimulate debate, and to maintain harmony even when there is a public outcry.

*“One thing, I guess, why the government tends not to act, or the Chief Executive, or the administration tends not to act in Hong Kong, I think, is because among the Cantonese speaking group, we have a saying that within the government, there’s the mentality that “change little, there’s little chance of making mistakes or getting complaints, change nothing, you get no complaints.” And I think, in the political atmosphere, or the way the CE is elected nowadays, the same mentality applies, or at least people – it may be one or several – but people at the top have this same mentality of avoiding trouble. So they are not going to do anything to stimulate debate. They hope everything will be status quo, everything will be like every day, so there will be no debate and society appears harmonious. And I guess to a certain extent they are trying to do this, to lessen the*

*debate. But of course, people scream, people will complain, and then you get the same denial behaviour from the government.”*

### Hong Kong’s dependency on Beijing

This theme was raised quite often during the discussions, especially in the Cantonese groups, and was highlighted as a unique characteristic to Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government appeared to be reluctant to make decisions while always looking to Beijing for input and approval. One argument that came up was that the government might be using this as an excuse for not taking any action. Again participants emphasized that Hong Kong was in great need of sound leadership, someone who would focus on running the city, much like a mayor, and not turn to Beijing for input, guidance or approval.

*“The big problem is Donald [the Chief Executive] is looking over his shoulder at Beijing, and there are people who are too worried about China. They’re not really running this city, when it needs someone to stand up with a vision and with leadership, who would say “I have the ability to make all the decisions in this city, for this city.” We don’t have that.”*

### Misplaced Knowledge and Expertise

This heading describes what participants identified as an ongoing problem with the government. Individuals with great knowledge and experience in particular areas are neither in decision-making positions nor consulted. Individuals in positions of decision-making are often without expertise (competence) in the area to which they have been appointed.

*“There are a lot of professionals in government departments led by the administrative officers. These administrative officers may not have a lot of professional knowledge, and they will be transferred to other positions in one to two years. This makes both the businesses and NGOs not know what course to take. Sometimes, when we want to talk to these officials on some environmental issues, they may have already been transferred to another department. This is a very big problem of the government.”*

Most agreed that ability and expertise was present in government but it was not translated into good leadership or action. Although the term was not used often, the idea of competence did surface in that the skills-set was seen as available but that the ability to apply these skills was lacking. Public confidence was described as low due to the lack of intellectual honesty. As a result of the inability to use the expertise that did exist in government, some felt it was inevitable that Hong Kong would experience a large environmental disaster that would be the city’s ‘wake up call’. Many gave references to H5N1/Bird Flu and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). As a result of the issues raised throughout the discussions, there was a strong feeling that the only way the government would do anything would be in the face of a crisis.

Many highlighted that there is no intellectual link being made between the costs of the environmental damage/pollution and its effect on local economic growth. Hong Kong was described as functioning in a ‘business as usual’ scenario and that only small incremental changes were being made. There is a greater need for action in light of the scale of the problem.

*“There’s an ample amount of expertise, in the universities, in the consultancies, and in the government bureaus, on the Mainland and in Hong Kong. That isn’t the issue; the issue is really starting to strongly put the link between environmental impacts and the GDP, starting to see that it’s coming to the price mill. Once you start to realize that the impacts of pollution cost so much, the health effects et cetera, and that in fact these are beginning to outweigh the GDP in the short term, the economic benefits, then you can link these together, you can actually start to put in place the type of practices that are required to abate pollution of whatever type.”*

### **PERCEIVED POSITIVE CHANGES**

Despite all the negative comments above, participants noted some positive changes within the government. Some departments, such as the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), appear to be improving. However, there is still discontinuity across departments. EPD was described as a sector of the government that does want to hear from green groups since it helps them to push through policy.

*“The green groups are automatically involved in recent years. Just look at the new membership of the ECC<sup>2</sup>. I think that most of the green groups are involved at a higher level.”*

*“I have actually heard EPD people say they really welcome the pressure from the green groups, as it helps them do their job. Because they don’t have the ability to push it through because of the bureaucracy, unless they have the support where they can point to these guys who did this, these guys who have said this. ...”*

There was some agreement about the government appearing to have had greater involvement with green groups and NGOs in general but the feeling continues to be that government is not genuinely listening.

*“They are more willing to listen now – but whether or not they adapt to it, that’s another thing.”*

It does unfortunately raise questions of whether the government’s (perceived or real) lack of ‘credibility’ is a result of a conscious decision; to not involve the public, that the government knows best, or due to a lack of expertise in comprehensive governance. Is it possible that the structure of the government, the position of administrators and decision-makers are so disconnected that the result is a government that cannot behave in a cohesive fashion until fundamental structural changes are made?

### **POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO INCREASE TRUST**

Given the poor performance of the government as discussed above, participants have suggested a number of ways by which the government can rebuild the trust of the citizens in their ability to address environmental concerns. These suggestions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Actions suggested by participants to be taken by the government to re-build trust

Areas	Actions
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide a lead so that community and the business will follows.</li> <li>▪ Be visionary. Be determined and consistent in implementing policies.</li> <li>▪ Set high standards and ambitious targets (e.g. energy efficiency targets at 20-30%).</li> <li>▪ Make a statement and stand by it, e.g. ban old diesel vehicles, no unfiltered cigarettes.</li> <li>▪ Be consistent and proactive.</li> </ul>
Government Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Remove the functional constituencies as they have evolved into minority lobbying groups</li> <li>▪ Address the results from the misplacement of expertise inside the government. Avoid professionals being led by generalists i.e. the administrative officers.</li> <li>▪ Strengthen the District Councils to be proactive at the grass roots level.</li> <li>▪ Give the advisory bodies more power/influence</li> </ul>
Education for and communication with the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Foster greater environmental awareness of the general public. Explain information such as the API to the public. Do not keep the public in the dark.</li> <li>▪ Let the public know where the government stands. For example, tell the public the cost of implementing some measures and the cost of not implementing these measures, as well as the long-term cost to health and environment.</li> <li>▪ Recognize the ability that does exist in the community for absorbing and understanding the information from the government.</li> </ul>
Greater Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Educate the public about what the government is doing. Speak about the things that have failed and why they have failed. Avoid selectively releasing information to the public.</li> <li>▪ Make sure information that is released to the public is clear and understandable.</li> </ul>
Relationship with mainland China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Focus on cleaning up Hong Kong's own backyard before pointing fingers at the mainland.</li> </ul>
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use regulation decisively. Penalize offenders consistently as Hong Kong can no longer fall back on market forces.</li> <li>▪ Use regulation to create incentive for innovations. For example, since there is no commitment to renewable energy, there is no innovation in this area.</li> </ul>
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use a blend of carrots and sticks instead of pure regulation. Incentives can include green procurement policies and green building rating scheme.</li> <li>▪ Facilitate community partnerships for improvement projects</li> </ul>
Community Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Acknowledge there is an untapped 'wisdom' in the community. Use modern methods of engaging stakeholders and create meaningful community involvement.</li> </ul>

Although the identified dimensions were the common and consistent themes throughout the focus groups, there were two undercurrent themes from two of the stakeholder groups. The private sector groups promoted the idea of using regulation to create innovation, something that other economies like Europe and Japan were doing. The NGO groups focused on enhancing the dialogue between the community and government in general. Incorporating meaningful dialogue into the policy-making processes would be a very positive step forward.

## LESSONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

In the case of Hong Kong it would be of particular interest to explore whether the government considers levels of trust in their performance important to their legitimacy. Does the government believe that they need to improve their political and civic relations with the general public? It is strongly believed that low levels of trust and confidence in the performance and effectiveness of government undermines its legitimacy, which in turn hampers its effectiveness and credibility. The government would do well to examine its role in this interesting catch-22 and focus on mechanisms that will be mutually beneficial to stakeholders as well as the government and, therefore be productive in terms of developing effective implementation of environmental policy. The findings from these focus groups and a quantitative survey will also enhance the development of means to improve the dialogue between the government and expertise in the community.

## THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In order to take this line of research further and address the lack of empirical studies measuring the dimensions and components of trust in Hong Kong, it would be productive to continue to focus the gathering of information from informed stakeholders via a quantitative questionnaire survey. Having both qualitative and quantitative data would enhance the identification of dimensions and components of trust in Hong Kong. If Hong Kong surveys are showing low levels of trust or accountability then there is a need to look more closely at the present use of performance and financial accountability tools. In addition, public service workers' motivation to accountability as well as their commitment to work in the public interest needs to be examined.

## CONCLUSIONS

The examination of the dimensions of trust through Hong Kong stakeholders has revealed some interesting areas to focus policy and government/community action. This exercise has helped to identify the core aspects of environmental problems in Hong Kong as well as beginning the process in identifying possible drivers of change.

- a) *Problem*: Low levels of trust in the government due to poor leadership, lack of accountability and transparency, and no meaningful dialogue with the public.
- b) *Drivers of Change*: Poor environmental quality in the areas of air, water, and waste management and the link to local health issues. Growing concern regarding the environmental degradation of the Pearl River Delta region, of which Hong Kong is a part, and therefore its future economic viability. Increasing calls from the community for a clearer vision for Hong Kong's sustainability agenda.
- c) *Action*: Taking the first steps towards making changes are always the most difficult especially since the identified problem(s) affect the community as a whole. Areas for further research need to address what is required in order to make the change and how this should take place. It is clear at this point that both political and social institutional change is required if Hong Kong is to achieve improvements in the regional environmental quality.

This research has helped to illuminate some of the areas where and why, participants feel their trust has been disaffected. This form of data collection will be complementary to quantitative measures of trust in stakeholder groups in Hong Kong. As much as small group discussions could highlight anecdotal experiences, and therefore not appear indicative of the whole community, these focus group discussions showed strong consistencies across all stakeholder groups. Particularly important is the belief that the Hong Kong government lacks leadership and appears incapable of addressing real public concerns regarding the quality of the local environment. Further, and indeed an important theme is the frustration that the government and the business sector are unwilling to change their present 'close relationship' and the manner in which they conduct business.

In order to develop a sense of mutual trust and common purpose, with regard to the environment, greater democratic engagement by all stakeholder groups is the next task. A strategic framework for meaningful stakeholder participation in environmental policy development may need to be developed. If this framework is proved to be successful, this can be further adapted to other areas of policy development.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “....*We know that air quality in Hong Kong is not pristine pure as in some Scandinavian cities or in the North and South Poles. We know our food may not be 100 per cent safe. And this is accepted. And we know our neighbours may not be as developed as some other countries. But you have to look at the problem in the round. In the final analysis, the health of the people is measured by how long they live, and this is where it counts. The life expectancy in Hong Kong is among the highest in the world..... . So, while we have to continue to complain about air quality, while we complain about the impurity in our food, all these things are relative..... At the end of the day, looking at what we have achieved for the health of our people, you can come to only one conclusion we have the most environmentally friendly place for people, for executives, for Hong Kong people, to live.....*”Extracts from speech by the Chief Executive, Mr Donald Tsang, at "Business for Clean Air", a Joint Conference of Project CLEAN AIR and Action Blue Sky (November 27, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Environmental Campaign Committee



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