

Executive Summary

Launching public consultation exercises regarding policies or other matters provides a chance for the public to find out more concerning the issues that they are being consulted about and to engage in discussion with the issues. This helps not only to maintain an open and transparent process of policy formulation, but also to facilitate consensus among the public. This could also garner the public's support for or recognition of the policies, which is an important element for good governance.

It has long been the practice for the government in Hong Kong to consult the public on policy issues, social issues or other matters. Since its establishment in 1997, the HKSAR government has continued to launch public consultation exercises on different matters. By January 2016, over 400 consultation papers had been released. The current government put forward more than 100 consultation papers in the past four years. Recently, the government has highlighted the importance of public engagement in consultation, in which the public are encouraged to give feedback or express opinions during consultation.

However, in recent years, the government's work on public consultation has been under fierce criticism. Accusations have included poor transparency, lack of scrutiny, and low efficacy. Both the performance of the District Council and the Government's Advisory and Statutory Bodies in their respective roles in the consultation exercises has been under challenge as well. Indeed, the "Guidelines on Public Consultation"¹ issued in 2003 might no longer meet the needs of the society in Hong Kong today.

This research investigates the views of young people in Hong Kong on, and their participation in, public consultation. The research looks into how young people receive information, give feedback on the consultation, and evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation. It aims to explore the limitations and insufficiencies of the current public consultation exercises. Recommendations will be put forward in an attempt to encourage young

¹ "Guidelines on Public Consultation", former Constitutional Affairs Bureau, November 2003.

people to participate more in public consultation.

This research collected data through a random sampling telephone survey, case studies on young people, and interviews with scholars and experts. The survey was conducted in December 2015, and there were 520 respondents between the ages of 18 and 34. The case studies were conducted in November and December 2015 with a total of 20 young people between the ages of 18 and 34. The interviews with scholars and experts were conducted in December 2015 and January 2016. Four scholars or experts were interviewed.

Key Data of the Survey

- 1. The respondents believe that public consultation is both the right and duty of the citizens. Consultation helps the government to gain public support and thus facilitates good governance. The respondents believe that the most important purpose of consultation is for the government to absorb public opinions and give responses to people's hopes. Yet the SAR government's performance in listening to public opinions is far from satisfactory.**

The case studies results noted that the young people considered public consultation to be both a right and a duty, and an opportunity for addressing the issues that concerned them and expressing their opinions. They believed public consultation could help garner public support for and recognition of the policies, and therefore minimize resistance during policy implementation.

The survey results noted that the respondents considered absorbing public opinions (30.3%) and responding to people's hopes (29.8%) as the major goals that the public consultation exercises should achieve. Some respondents said that it should meet the objective of improving policy quality (10.6%) or consolidating public consensus (9.9%). More than half of the respondents (52.2%) took the view that the government should consult the public on all issues, however big or small the issue may be.

However, the respondents only gave a general rating of 5.32 points in regard to evaluating the performance of the SAR government in heeding the views from people holding different stances on a scale of 0-10 (10 points denoting full marks, 5 points being fair). Additionally, the respondents had a negative impression of the government's consultation work, thinking it was akin to putting on a show (25.6%), or it was all talk and no action (22.6%).

- 2. The respondents find it complicated and time-consuming to search for consultation information on the official websites, and the information provided is hard to comprehend. The greatest problem facing the young people is their unfamiliarity with the issues they are being consulted about.**

The respondents received news about public consultations through television news reports or programmes (56.6%), surfing the Net on computers (23.5%), newspapers and magazines (21.2%), or mobile phones (19.7%). Yet, around one-eighth (12.4%) said that they had never heard or paid attention to any news about consultations.

The biggest obstacle hindering the respondents from engaging in public consultation was the lack of familiarity with the issues that they were being consulted on (37.2%). This was followed by the fact that some of the respondents lacked the time to engage in public consultation (26.7%). Some respondents (8.2%) expressed difficulties in reading the consultation documents.

The young people in our case studies pointed out that it was complicated and time-consuming to search for related information on the official websites. They said the information provided by the government was difficult to comprehend, making it hard for them to give feedback.

- 3. Close to a quarter of the respondents contribute to public consultation by giving feedback on the issues. The young people are not interested in using the traditional channels for expressing**

their opinions. They share the view that the use of information technology helps to encourage them to speak their mind, but the government is not doing well at this.

Of the respondents who had heard about or paid attention to the government's consultation exercises, close to one-fourth (24.1%) said that they had contributed to the consultation by giving their views, with most of the respondents attributing to the reason that they wanted to fulfil their duty as a responsible citizen (42.5%). The channels that they used to submit their views mainly included official online forums or social media, or consultation activities by other organizations. Only a few adopted such traditional channels as hotline, mail, or fax.

Of all the respondents, nearly two-thirds (61.7%) believed that the use of information technology could help them to give feedback on the government's consultation exercises. However, the respondents only gave an average of 5.84 points when it came to rating the government's performance on using the information technology for its public consultation exercises.

The case studies results showed that the traditional channels of collecting public opinions such as hotline, mail, or fax, were not well-received by the young people. The respondents said that these channels were lacking convenience and interactive elements. Some interviewees had attended a consultation forum. They experienced a positive feeling from it, saying that it was an opportunity to directly and openly communicate and discuss with the government representatives and that they had their voices heard with respect. All these factors contributed to leaving them with a good impression about the consultation.

- 4. The respondents attach importance to the values of transparency, equal participation, and communication with people about public consultation exercises. The lack of transparency and communication negatively affect the young people's impression of the efficacy of consultation exercises.**

The survey results noted that the greatest proportion of respondents considered transparency (40.4%) as the most important value of an ideal consultation exercise. The second and third values most upheld by the respondents were equal participation (19.8%) and communication (12.6%). However, the respondents only gave an average of 5.34 points to the government for its performance in giving an account on the results of the consultation exercises.

The case studies results noted that the young people were confused about how the government handled and analysed opinions submitted during the consultation exercises. They also criticized the government for not providing sufficient information on when and how it published the results of the consultation exercises. All these aspects left them in the dark or with queries about the efficacy of public consultation.

The case studies results noted that the young people cherished the opinion exchange and discussions during the consultation exercises, regardless of whether their opinions were taken on board or not in the end. They were dissatisfied with the repetitive stereotyped replies from the government regardless of the nature of the questions initially raised.

5. The respondents believe that the District Council and the Government's Advisory and Statutory Bodies could do more. The poor popularity of the government in recent years affect the young people's eagerness to participate in public consultation.

The respondents gave a general rating on the performance of the District Council (5.34 points) and Government's Advisory and Statutory Bodies (5.19 points) regarding their role during the consultation exercises. This implied that there was ample room for improvement.

Over 40 percent (40.8%) of the respondents revealed that the more trust they had towards the government, the more eager they were to participate in public consultation. The case studies results noted that the young people expected the government to be sincere when

launching consultation exercises amidst its poor popularity in recent years. They believed that it could help improve the general public's impression of the efficacy of public consultation.

Key Findings

The following key findings emerged from the study, after integrating the data and results from the survey, case studies, and interviews with scholars and experts.

- 1. Young people uphold the value of public consultation, and they are eager to participate in the process. However, the government is not doing well in heeding public opinions according to young people's views. There is a disparity between the expectations from young people and the performance by the government.**

Young people are positive towards public consultation, and they think it is both their right and duty to participate in it. They believe public consultation can help the government absorb public opinions and give responses to people's hopes. Some young people contribute to a consultation by giving feedback. However, they are discontented with how the government handles public opinions. From young people's point of view, the District Council and the Government's Advisory and Statutory Bodies only fairly perform in their role during the consultation process. There is an obvious gap between the expectations from the young people and the performance by the government. This sense of helplessness in the young people brought about by the gap is worth noting.

- 2. Hong Kong lags behind its international counterparts in enhancing public engagement in consultation. The government needs to review its work on improving consultation exercises.**

The government issued the "Guidelines on Public Consultation" in 2003, and it has emphasized the idea of public engagement in its public consultation exercises in recent years. However, the government lacks the boldness and enthusiasm in responding to and dealing with public

opinions. The government falls behind the developments of its counterparts on an international level, in terms of improving public engagement in consultation exercises. The “Guidelines on Public Consultation” were issued in 2003 and have not been updated for more than 10 years. The government should review the operation of its consultation exercises with the aim of meeting the needs or expectations of the public today.

3. Young people encounter various problems when participating in public consultation including receiving information, submitting opinions, and understanding the progress.

3.1 Receiving information: the information young people receive is superficial, making it difficult for them to find all the information required on the issues. It is hard to search for related information on the official websites.

The information young people receive about public consultation is superficial; some young people are even unaware of it. The design of the official websites that have information about consultations is far from user-friendly. The tedious and difficult-to-understand consultation papers hinder young people from finding out more. Rational discussions and the expression of opinions might be discouraged as a result. The government should address the needs of the public and young people today in their search for precise, easy to read, and comprehensive information.

3.2 Submitting opinions: the traditional channels of garnering opinions fail to encourage young people to express their thoughts.

With the rapid development of information technology, new media has become a popular means for young people to directly participate in social affairs. The same situation applies to public consultation, with young people eager to participate in discussions or express opinions through the Internet about issues under consultation. Regardless of whether the opinion held by an individual is accepted or not in the end, the opportunity to participate is already very much valued.

However, the government is still heavily relying on traditional channels to collect opinions. The traditional channels of information collection offer very limited convenience and interactive elements when compared with the Internet. This does not encourage the practice of young people expressing their opinions today. One of the possible negative effects of heavily relying on traditional channels for collecting public views would be that the government might miss out the opinions of young people.

The government should explore more ways for the public and young people especially to express their opinions. The government should also engage in interactive discussions with the public, while avoiding providing standardized official replies, which are not well-received by young people.

3.3 Understanding the progress: the government's low transparency of handling public opinions and poor accountability on the results of the consultation exercises have made young people question the efficacy of consultation exercises.

There are no formal regulations on how the government should handle and analyse public opinions collected during the consultation exercises. The poor level of transparency and the monitoring system have hindered the public from understanding the progress of opinions handling by the government. These factors also make the public feel that their opinions are not taken seriously. The consultation exercises create more questions and criticism from the public.

4. Young people have reservations in trusting the government, and public consultation fails to garner support for and trust in the government. The government needs to pay serious attention to this.

Social participation largely depends on the relationship and the trust between the citizen and the government. The popularity of the SAR government has been rather low in recent years, and there is not much trust of the public in this government. Young people are having

reservations about the government’s sincerity in launching consultation exercises. Mutual trust between the citizen and the government is a pivotal factor for a fruitful consultation exercise. If this is not present, a consultation would probably be a futile one, no matter how many opinion-expression channels are available, or no matter how frequent the consultation exercises are practiced.

Recommendations

This study proposes the following recommendations.

- 1. Reviewing the operation of public consultation exercises thoroughly, including the following:**
 - (a) Reviewing the “Guidelines on Public Consultation” and making regular updates to these guidelines to meet the needs of the society as time goes on, in particular about the handling of public opinions;**
 - (b) Reviewing the structure and composition of the Government’s Advisory and Statutory Bodies such as the number and the duties of the committees, as well as the representativeness of the appointed members;**
 - (c) Reviewing the function of the District Council in public consultation, and enhancing the role of the elected councillors so that they can exert more impact in policy-making.**

- 2. Setting up a one-stop consultation website, with the following functions:**
 - (a) Providing comprehensive and precise information on consultations, including the consultation documents, summaries, explanations for related concepts, the progress of handling the opinions collected, and the statistical data;**

- (b) Providing direct and diversified channels to collect public opinions, including the use of new media;
 - (c) Providing an interactive platform for discussion.
- 3. Developing a bottom-up channel for the public to express their opinions so that the policymakers can better understand the issues that the public are concerned about.