

Executive Summary

In Hong Kong, the District Administration Scheme has been implemented since 1982. The Scheme aims at promoting community development and nurturing civic responsibility and a sense of belonging. One of the elements of the Scheme is the establishment of District Councils (DCs). The election-based nature and front-line community work experience of DCs has made them an important cradle for training the political talent of Hong Kong.

The DCs' performance, however, has always been criticized. Worse, the number of both district and territory-wide issues referred to DCs by the government, between the third term (2008-2011) and the fifth term (2016-2019), has dropped from 15,500 consultations to 14,700 consultations. This has caused reservations about the ability of DCs to effectively perform their role.

Nevertheless, DCs have had a growing significance in Hong Kong's political landscape. Currently there are 6 DC members in the Legislative Council, and 117 in the 1,200-member Election Committee for Chief Executive (approximately one-tenth of the Election Committee).

Hong Kong society is changing, and the public's expectation of DCs is increasing. This is particularly so in the case of young people. Their involvement and performance in the last DC elections (i.e. the voting rate, the number of candidates, and those being elected) was encouraging. Even though this might be due to various reasons, it does show that young people are looking for changes to DCs.

DCs have been in operation for more than 30 years. However, while the city has experienced many changes, the role and functions of DCs have not been assessed for a decade (the last review of DCs was in 2006). The next DC elections will be held in November 2019, so it is timely to explore what could be arranged to strengthen their role and functions, thereby making them more responsive to the changing demands and expectations of society.

In conducting this research, data was collected through overseas literature reviews on related areas, an on-site survey of 520 Hong Kong-based young people (aged 18-35 in July 2019), and exclusive research interviews with 4

academics and experts, as well as 15 current DC members. Some of the DC members interviewed do not have political affiliation, while some are from local political parties or associations.

Main Discussion

- 1. The value of DCs as a symbol of representing public opinion is assured and appreciated. It is also a testament to their growing significance in the political landscape of Hong Kong. The Government has a responsibility to assist DCs build upon their current significance.**

This research study showed that one-third (33.3%) of the 520 respondents believed that the District Councils' greatest potential value was as a symbol of the representation of public opinion. A similar proportion (34.4%) said that the DCs' major function was to convey residents' views to the government.

Indeed, the number of elected seats in the DCs has increased steadily over the years, and currently the majority of its seats are elected. Meanwhile, the turnout rate of the DC elections over the past three terms has increased. All this indicates that DCs have established a positive image with a broadened electorate.

The icon of DCs as the representative of public opinion is clear and distinct, while their position in the political landscape of Hong Kong has grown. The Government has a responsibility to assist DCs to maintain these two features.

2. These are the major challenges that DCs face:

2.1 DCs have difficulties in effectively reflecting public opinion to the Government.

Currently there are more than 400 elected DC members serving at the community level in different districts. This provides a wide network for the Government to determine public opinion.

However, according to the DC members interviewed, DCs face limitations when providing public opinion to the Government. These include: 1) Government departments tend to handle community-level problems from their perspective, while dismissing DC members' opinions with various reasons or excuses; 2) The Government is not accountable to DCs, and so the Government can ignore DC members' opinions; 3) The Government has adopted a beck-and-call attitude towards the representativeness of DCs.

As DC members work at the community level, they are supposed to be in the most advantageous position to understand what residents are thinking about. It is worth studying how to make DCs more effective in conveying public opinion to the Government for the sake of good governance.

2.2 The Government does not attach much importance to DCs in respect of their consultative role.

From the respondents' point of view, it was important for DCs to take up the mission of advising the government on community matters, averaging 7.26 on a 0-10 scale (10 being the most important). However, respondents rated it at an average of only 4.72 (below the pass mark of 5) when asked about the performance of DCs in this regard.

In the parallel research interviews with the experts and DC members, this study noted that it was not a must for the Government to consult with DCs on each consultation item. Even worse, it was not necessary for the Government to publish the results of any consultations with DCs; the Government can bypass DCs altogether and liaise with other consultative bodies.

Advising the Government on community matters is one of the major functions of DCs. Amid the background that society is becoming more complicated, DCs are supposed to have more chances to play a more active role. However, it has been witnessed that there is a discrepancy between what the general public has expected and what is being seen in reality. This has led to people becoming increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of DCs in fulfilling its mission of advising the Government on community issues.

2.3 The constituency size was too small.

For many years, the population quota for DCs has been set at around 17,000 people per constituency. Some experts and DC members interviewed said that it had cramped the mentality of the members, with the effect of unintentionally over focusing them on the interests of their small constituency. The ability to develop district-wide long-term master planning policies might be ignored. This fails to live up with people's expectations that DCs ought to be pursuing local development with a macroscopic view.

This research study also noted that the lack of coordination among DCs was regarded as their biggest hindrance to performing well (36.0% of respondents polled took this view). Around 10% (8.5%) pointed to the small size of the constituency as the barrier.

The projection for the growth of the population of Hong Kong is for a steady increase in the coming 20 years. It implies that the number of the elected seats of the DCs will similarly increase. Taking this consideration into account, the problems associated with the current small constituency size will continue. The Government should make decisive and sweeping reforms in this regard.

2.4 Information dissemination fell behind the pace of the society.

More than 70% of respondents rejected the notions that they trusted DCs (74.0%), or the transparency of information from DCs was high (74.1%). A similar percentage (75.0%) thought they had a responsibility to monitor DCs.

Some DC members in the interviews said that a large part of DC meetings' information was disseminated to the public through voice recording or Word files. The convenience in retrieving the information and the readability of the content was far from satisfactory given the current rapid development and widespread use of Information Technology. They also referred to the issue that many of the DCs' official websites not only failed to provide up-to-date information but also failed to comprehensively reflect the performance of DC members.

Since the advent of the Information Technology Age, people demand real-time information so that the performance of the councillors and the government could be kept more effectively under the watchful eye of the public. However, unlike the Legislative Council, currently there is no live broadcast of DC meetings. The DCs should make better use of advanced I.T. to enhance their transparency, and to secure support from the public.

3. DCs are platforms for nurturing political talent. Yet, community work in districts has never been easy. Besides, the political career path in Hong Kong is not clear; the young generation hesitate to develop a career in DCs.

Summing up the points raised by the DC members interviewed, the job nature of being a DC member provided opportunities to learn how to articulate problems and solutions at the community level. Interactions with residents allowed the DC members to build up trust from the public. Besides, being elected meant that the councillor had already gone through an election campaign, which was generally regarded as an asset to be a politician.

However, the political career path in Hong Kong is not clear. Worse, there is no guarantee that a DC member will be re-elected for another term. Community work in districts has never been an easy task.

Indeed, more than four-fifths (85.2%) of respondents indicated their interest in running for DCs at 4 points or below on a scale of 0-10 (10 being most interested); poor career outlooks and the lack of initiative were the main reasons. Some DC members interviewed expressed concerns about the lack of training or support for DC members, in particular the case for those who

ran for elections from a non-politically affiliated background.

Hong Kong is facing the problem of a shortage of political talent. The crucial point is how to let the public, particularly young people, be able to “see” the achievements or the meaning of developing a career in DCs. This requires the co-operation of the Government and society as a whole.

4. Young people showed concerns over DC matters. They are also concerned about the policy discussion ability of DC members. Experts and DC members in the interviews believed that paying more attention to policy research could increase the quality of DCs.

Close to 68% (67.8%) of respondents said that they were concerned about DC matters. Nearly 63% (62.5%) said they would like to be more involved in DC decision-making. When asked about what requirement they would be most concerned about when voting for a DC member, close to one-third (32.1%) highlighted policy discussion ability or the personal competence of the candidate.

Some DC members in the interviews believed that more attention ought to be paid to policy research to match the expectations of the general public. Some experts in the interviews mentioned that putting more effort into policy research would be the way to increase the quality of DCs.

Currently research work in making policy is mainly conducted by the Government. Co-operation in research work by DC members seems unlikely due to the competition for resources or other reasons.

Indeed, providing DC members with more opportunities to participate in policy formulation (and thereby strengthen their role) was one of the key areas that the Government had proposed in the early 2000s. Recently, there is increasing demand from the public that DC members need to be more involved in policy discussions. Against this background, it is widely believed that the responsibilities of DC members are no longer solely focused on directly serving the community. Participating in policy formulation becomes an important direction for the development of DCs in future.

5. Some Standing Orders relating to the public mandate and public participation vary between DCs. It is worth discussing if consistency of these Orders would be better for the sake of giving clear guidelines to the public.

According to the District Councils Ordinance, a DC may make its own Standing Orders to regulate its operating procedure and that of its committees. Information from different sources collected by this research noted that some Standing Orders of the 18 DCs are different from each other.

Here are some current examples:

12 DCs allow proxy voting, in which a member who is unable to attend a meeting but wishes to vote may appoint, in writing, another member to be his or her proxy for the purpose of voting; six DCs do not allow this proxy arrangement.

15 DCs allow the appointment to a committee of any person who is not an elected member of that Council to serve as co-opted member of the committee. The co-opted member may vote at a meeting of the committee and is to be counted for the purpose of constituting a quorum; three DCs do not have co-opted members.

15 DCs do not state explicitly if the public observing the meeting of the Council or its committees can or cannot record proceedings. Three DCs, however, do have clear statements about this matter.

The advantage for DCs to make their own Standing Orders is to allow them to fulfill the special needs or cultures of the district they are serving. Yet, the arrangements mentioned above are not strictly related to district factors. They are more related to issues of public mandate and public participation. As some of these arrangements are tighter than others, the public might be confused. It is worth discussing if consistency of these arrangements would be better for the sake of giving clear guidelines to the public.

Recommendations

The intended aim of this study is to put forward possible measures that could strengthen the role and functions of DCs. Based upon the findings and discussions above, this study proposes the following recommendations:

1. Review the role and functions of DCs to ensure they keep pace with the changing demands and expectations of society.

The role and functions of DCs have not been assessed for a decade. We recommend the Government conduct a comprehensive review into the effectiveness of DCs to convey public opinion and of their being an effective important partner for consultation.

With reference to overseas experience, when reviewing the role and functions of DCs, we also recommend the Government introduce the concept of community rights. This would allow residents to make proposals on releasing underused land in the community, and nominating and/or listing buildings or land as a community asset. It is hoped that there will be more community development projects with public participation, while broadening the scope for DC members to participate in community development.

2. Enlarge the size of the constituency to broaden the mentality and improve the ability of DC members.

The population of Hong Kong is set to rise over the next 20 years. Based on the current population quota for each DC, the number of constituencies within each DC would increase as well. It is already difficult to improve the problems caused by the small size of each constituency.

We recommend the Government make a decisive and sweeping reform in this regard, such as increasing the population quota per constituency and restructuring constituencies. It not only could broaden the horizon and improve the ability of DC members, but also allow DCs to be more responsive to the needs of their districts.

3. Set up a research team to improve the quality of both DC members and DCs.

The civic awareness of citizens has been improving and the ability of DC members to take part in public policy discussions has become more important. We recommend the Government set up a research team for each DC to assist its members in the use of evidence-based methods to deal with community problems. This could improve the quality of the DCs' work in future. The research team should also provide a Best Practice of community work to share among DC members across different districts.

4. Enhance the working relationship between District Officers and DC members.

District Officers are the heads of each District Office, who are Government representatives at the district level. In other words, District Officers play a critical role as bridges of communication between the Government and DCs.

We recommend the Government should enhance the relationship between the District Officers and the DC members in community work. The two sides could meet up yearly or at the beginning of each DC term to reach a consensus about working targets.

We also recommend the District Officers regularly present to DCs the schedule and progress of the government's community work. This could facilitate the working relationship between the two.

5. Improve information transparency so that the public can effectively monitor DCs.

We recommend the Government make better use of Information Technology and various media platforms to improve the speed and convenience of disseminating DCs' information to the public, such as live broadcasts of their meetings.

We also recommend DCs regularly report on the objectives of their latest community work to the public by listing out one or two key achievements in measuring the results of the objectives. This type of information

presentation could more easily allow residents to understand the progress of community work.

6. Make Standing Orders of different DCs in relation to the public mandate, public participation, and information openness more consistent.

Currently some Standing Orders of different DCs vary, particularly those relating to public mandate, public participation, and openness of information. We recommend that the rules regarding these aspects should be made more consistent. This would provide clearer guidelines and also create a better impression with the public, while establishing a new DC culture.