

## Executive Summary

Advisory and Statutory Bodies (ASBs) were already in operation in Hong Kong in the mid-20th century. In accordance with Article 65 of the Basic Law, the HKSAR Government has maintained the same system of establishing advisory bodies by executive authorities. The government appoints suitable members of the public to serve on these bodies. The ASBs provide a platform for public engagement.

There are seven types of ASBs of which there are a current of about 500; the largest number of them being Advisory Committees. Overall, about 4,600 members of the public have been appointed to serve on about 440 of these bodies<sup>1</sup>.

Young people are our future. They are energetic and creative. Their views and voices regarding public affairs, public policies, as well as the future development of our society, deserve attention. The current-term government, in its maiden Policy Address, set the goal of increasing the overall ratio of youth members (i.e. persons who are aged between 18 and 35) to 15% by mid-2022. However, since the ratio as at December 2019 was below 12%, the government has less than two years to achieve this target before its current term ends<sup>2</sup>.

As citizens' awareness of participating is increasing gradually, together with other factors, the appointment-based committees of the ASBs are limited in their ability to effectively reflect public opinions. This is especially so given the current, and increasingly complicated, political environment that fails to meet the needs of young people's aspiration for participation. The social unrest of recent years, to a certain extent, has highlighted that the government lags behind in listening and responding to voices from this sector of society.

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<sup>1</sup> Home Affairs Bureau. Website. Retrieved July, 2020 from [https://www.hab.gov.hk/en/policy\\_responsibilities/District\\_Community\\_and\\_Public\\_Relations/advisory.htm](https://www.hab.gov.hk/en/policy_responsibilities/District_Community_and_Public_Relations/advisory.htm)

<sup>2</sup> A speech by the Secretary for Home Affairs in the Home Affairs Panel of the Legislative Council on 2019-11-04 noted that overall ratio of youth members in the ASBs was over 11%. In other words, the percentage was still below 12%.

While the city has experienced many changes in recent years, the last review of ASBs was in 2003<sup>3</sup>. This means the role and functions of ASBs have not been assessed for more than a decade. It is therefore worth reviewing what could be done to improve the operations of advisory bodies to better facilitate youth engagement.

This research is aimed at understanding the attitude and situation of young people about taking part in the government's advisory bodies. Major barriers that impede the active participation of the youth in serving on any committee will be identified along with recommendations to address the relevant issues.

In conducting this research, data was collected between June and July 2020 through: an on-site survey of 524 young people aged 18 to 35; parallel case interviews with 18 similar individuals; and research-exclusive interviews with 3 academic and experts.

## Main Discussion

- 1. An effective advisory-body system could help bring about better governmental governance. This system has operated in Hong Kong for decades, yet it faces challenges. The HKSAR Government should be focused on enhancing the system's performance given the ever-changing environment of the city.**

One general purpose of setting up, and appointing members of society to serve on advisory bodies is to absorb public views in policy formulation. This, in turn, can help to increase the legitimacy of the policy.

In Hong Kong, ASBs have been in operation for many years, and the government regularly seeks opinions from members of these bodies. ASBs are therefore considered to be an important platform to nurture talent.

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<sup>3</sup> Home Affairs Bureau. (2003). Review of the Role and Functions of Public Sector Advisory and Statutory Bodies Consultation Paper.

However, an interviewed academic raised the concern that the function of ASBs in providing advice, as well as their attractiveness to talent from participating, was declining. The availability of other channels that serve a similar purpose is becoming more widely available.

The 524 respondents polled gave a pass mark (on a scale of 0 to 10; 5 being the pass mark) regarding the performances of ASBs in two basic functions: (1) enhancing the legitimacy of the policy (an average of 5.55 points), and (2) absorbing professional advice (an average of 5.52 points). Close to one-third (32.1%) did not think that the system had performed the function of being a talent bank.

The findings above highlight room for improvement in the performance of the government's advisory bodies. The system has not been reviewed for more than 10 years, despite the city undergoing many significant changes during this period of time. The government should consider revising the system to meet the needs of today's society, and to enable better governance.

**2. There are several hundred ASBs in Hong Kong involving different government bureaux and departments. A pro-active and influential leadership structure is crucial for developing an all-round strategy for ASBs in future.**

Referring the situations overseas, a high-level government unit manages the entire strategic development of advisory bodies irrespective of the fact that they are under different ministers or operational departments.

As at end of 2019, there were about 500 ASBs in Hong Kong, under different bureaux and departments. Approximately 4,600 citizens (who collectively hold a total of around 7,000 service posts), have been appointed to serve on about 440 ASBs. The number of personal CVs collected in the government's centralized database, which contains the information from the citizens showing interest in serving on these bodies, has been on the increase in recent years. Also as at end of 2019, more than 40,000 CVs were being kept in the database.

The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) has been responsible for the overall policy on public sector ASBs. Despite this there are no clearly defined working relationships between the HAB and other bureaux and/ or their respective departments.

An expert who was interviewed pointed out that there was a lack of leadership within the HKSAR Government, with no-one taking charge of the overall strategic development of ASBs. An interviewed academic said that the increasingly complicated political environment of the city had left the government with no time to consider the future of ASBs.

As ASBs cover a wide range of issues, a pro-active and influential leadership structure is crucial for developing all-round strategies for human resources, public education, and the setting of future ASBs goals.

- 3. ASBs provide a platform for public engagement, and as such is a matter of public importance. The government should pay attention to the public's perceptions about the efficacy of participation, and the quality of the appointed members. Securing public trust and support is essential for the continuation of the system.**

ASBs provide a platform for public engagement. Yet youth from the case interviews raised two major problems about the appointment process. These were drawn from experiences of attending panel interviews for posts under the "Member Self-recommendation Scheme for Youth" (MSSY): (1) the selection criteria were too general; (2) the ability of the appointees was not convincing.

These negative perceptions undermined future interests in applying again for the similar purpose. Some current ASB members in the parallel case interviews mentioned that their peers were suspicious about their appointment based on political reasons rather than personal merit. Some mentioned that ASBs rarely publicly promoted their work, thus giving the public the impression that taking part in ASBs was not worthwhile.

More than 45% of the survey respondents disagreed with the notions that advisory body operations were transparent enough (46.7%), or there

was direct communication between the government and the citizens (45.1%). Over 30% (32.3%) did not think that the government had made ASBs appointments based on the merit of the individual concerned.

When it came to those who showed no interest in nominating themselves to serve on these bodies (72.9%), a considerable proportion stated their reasons as being that: a) the bodies had no influence (27.7%), or b) they were unclear about the selection criteria (25.7%).

When asked about the extent of fear of being labelled as “pro-government” if they were appointed to serve on ASBs, survey respondents rated it at an average of 4.98 points (on a scale of 0 to 10; 5 being the half-half).

The academics in the interviews mentioned that the HKSAR Government should clearly show its commitment in wanting the public to actively take part in ASBs. However, given the political vulnerability of the government, and its many years of low approval ratings, it could not be ruled out that members of the public might worry about their own reputation if they accepted the government’s appointment to serve on these bodies.

Taking part in public affairs should intrinsically be considered a good thing: as a citizen’s right and responsibility. The basic rationale for the establishment of ASBs is to provide recognition of the service made to society by members of the public. It should not provoke public suspicion, or have a negative impact upon appointees. All these show securing public trust and support is essential for the continuation of the system.

**4. While some young people aspired to participate, others had hesitations about joining advisory bodies. A poor level of trust between the government and young people was one of the factors.**

More than 70% (72.9%) of the survey respondents believed that youth could bring about changes through participation. 27% (27.1%) expressed an interest in nominating themselves to serve on ASBs, mainly because they wanted to directly reflect the youth voices (55.6%), or wanted to have an influence on policies (54.2%). Survey respondents also had high

expectations of the MSSY appointees' performance: 70% expected them to be active in providing opinions; 64.5% hoped that the young appointees could bring new perspectives to the government.

Some respondents from the parallel case interviews mentioned that once they were given a chance to have discussion sessions with government officials. They noted that the officials were serious in listening and responding to their opinions. Some current ASB members felt encouraged when they brought their voluntary/ frontline experiences into the advisory bodies.

Respondents in the survey believed that it would be helpful for the government to demonstrate that it was absorbing youth voices if it gave responses to opinions provided by young people. They rated it at an average of 6.16 points (on a scale of 0 to 10; 10 being very effective).

Some youth from the parallel case interviews, however, said that they hesitated to take part in serving on advisory bodies due to increasing distrust between the government and young people in recent years. Some even worried that doing so would provoke criticism from their peers.

Over 70% (72.9%) showed no interest in nominating themselves for serving on the advisory bodies; more than one-tenth of whom (13.6%) stated they did not want to help the government. More than two-fifths (45.2%) disagreed with the notion that the government treasured the participation of young people.

The relationship between the government and young people has consistently been at a low level in recent years. The general public has also had an overall negative sentiment towards participation. Government and society at large need to take this matter seriously. Young people value the importance of participation, and they also want to have their voices heard. The government should make a greater effort to maintain the enthusiasm of the youth to serve society. The continuous participation of the younger generation is of great importance, particularly when society is dealing with its current unprecedented difficulties.

5. **Taking part in the work of advisory bodies is meaningful for youth. There are, however, barriers to their active participation, mostly including lack of skills or time. The government and society as a whole should jointly assist young people eliminate these hurdles.**

Summing up the points of the youth from the parallel case interviews, taking part in the work of advisory bodies is meaningful for young people: they provide an opportunity for rational discussions, to express opinions to the government directly, to be more familiar with the operation of the government, to learn from experienced members, and to contribute innovative ideas.

They, however, also raised two major barriers to effective participation: (1) lack of skills. Some, who are current ASB members, mentioned that they were not familiar with the skill in presenting viewpoints precisely in meetings, while some said that people and procedures were strange when they first began; (2) lack of time. Advisory body meetings are usually held on weekdays. Some of them were uncertain if they could keep on taking part. A youth in the parallel case interview mentioned that she had to give up the government's appointment because of a time clash between meetings and classes.

When asked about the extent of worry of having difficulty in allocating time to attend, the respondents polled rated it at an average of 5.49 points (on a scale of 0 to 10; 5 being the half-half).

An expert said that young members usually lacked skills in how to get the government to pay attention to their opinions/ ideas, and therefore a sense of uselessness might develop among them.

In the survey, more than half (57.0%) perceived that young people in the advisory bodies were political decoration. Some, who are current ASB members, mentioned that their peers doubted the difference that they could make.

To continue, the advisory bodies need the young generation to join in. Government and society as a whole should help young people overcome

the barriers that hinder their effective participation in ASBs.

**6. Advisory bodies have limitations in absorbing youth voices from a wide variety of backgrounds. The government should explore other forms of collecting different public-opinion voices.**

There were 72.9% who showed no interest in nominating themselves to serve on the advisory bodies. Of them, almost half (48.7%) stated their reason as lack of skill; 15.4% were not in favour of the appointment system. More than one-third (38.2%) of the total respondents did not think that ASBs were representative in terms of their membership composition. A considerable proportion of respondents expected that young members in the advisory bodies could make good use of their personal networks to collect more views of young people (67.8%), or could arrange district visits for exchanges of views with young people (62.4%).

Some youth in the parallel case interviews said that the government had a narrow definition of talent. Young people with outstanding performance beyond the government's scope of talent might be excluded from ASBs. They were also aware that advisory bodies had limitations in absorbing youth voices from a wide variety of backgrounds. There is a hope that young members in these bodies could help promote such voices, or act on behalf of youth from different backgrounds.

The future of society needs the participation of our younger generation. Their views and voices, therefore, should not be neglected. Government and society should look for new, innovative approaches or explore other possibilities using information technology to make sure the voice of young people from different backgrounds, as well as the general public, can be listened and responded to.



## Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion above, the following recommendations are proposed through this study in order to improve the operation of the advisory bodies to better facilitate youth engagement.

- 1. Review the role and functions of ASBs; explore the possibility of establishing a high-level, forward-looking leadership structure.**

We recommend a review on the role and functions of government's advisory bodies, in particular their performance in providing quality advice, attracting talent to serve and enhancing public engagement. The review should also include their role when the political landscape of society gets more complicated. We also recommend exploring the possibility of establishing a high-level leadership structure to ensure the long-term development of advisory bodies. The strategy would serve to set goals, allocate resources, develop talent banks, identify key performance requirements and promote public education of these bodies.

- 2. Provide concrete measures to tackle the problems that hinder youth from taking part in the advisory bodies.**

**2.1 Promote a friendly workplace culture towards participating in public affairs. Large-scale companies could provide incentives and encourage their employees to participate in public affairs. They could start by allowing employees to take four hours of leave per month to attend ASB meetings. This accounts for approximately 2.5% of monthly working hours.**

**2.2 Establish a support platform for young members of ASBs to deepen their role and influence. The platform emphasizes three areas:**

- (a.) Enhance the connectivity of young members with youth groups in community;**

- (b.) Increase the general public's understanding and recognition of the work done by young ASB members.
  - (c.) Provide nurture-based for young members.
- 3. Develop and drive new, out-of-the-box approaches by advisory bodies to collect opinions from members of the public from various walks of life.

We recommend the government to start listening to advice from panels formed by citizens who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. This will enable these panels to have well-informed debates on issues. The consensus reached by panels would then be submitted to the relevant bureaux or departments for reference. In line with developing an opinion-collection culture, the government should make good use of I.T. to facilitate citizens' participation without location or time constraints; as well as to improve its handling of the collected public opinions.