

「從區議會選舉看青年的社區參與」研究  
A Study on Young People's Participation in the Community  
and the 2007 District Council Elections

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# **A Study on Young People's Participation in the Community and the 2007 District Council Elections**

## **Summary Report**

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Young people form a significant part of human capital in any society. Their sense of belonging and community participation are perennial subjects of youth studies.

Our earlier study has established that civic participation is crucial to enhancing social cohesiveness. As our civil society developed and citizens became more aware of their civic senses, young people's participation in society has become a cause for public concern. The "community" is one of the social arenas young people are most involved in apart from their schools and families. Understanding young people's social participation facilitates future plans that will help in nurturing them.

The District Council is the major consultative body in districts. In light of the upcoming third-term election of the District Councils, the Federation conducted a study to probe our young people's understanding of the community and District Councils. We hoped that by asking them to give comments on community affairs, local elections and the performance of District Councils, we could have a better grasp of how our young people participate in the community nowadays.

In this study, "young people" refers to those aged between 18 and 34. "Community participation" is understood in terms of three aspects: "Knowledge", meaning the extent of one's understanding of community affairs; "Action", putting concerns of various community activities and social agendas into participation; "Affection", one's reflection and self-evaluation of individual community participation. According to the existing 18 districts in Hong Kong, "communities" referred to in this study are the administrative districts where young people reside.

To get an understanding of Hong Kong young people's community participation and their views about community affairs and the upcoming District Council Elections, the Federation conducted a random telephone survey covering young people in Hong Kong. The study also sought opinions from academics, incumbent District Councillors and community leaders about young people's community participation.

The telephone survey was conducted with the help of the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong commissioned by the Federation. It was conducted between the 25th of October and the 2nd of November, 2007 from 6:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. 520 young people in Hong Kong aged between 18 and 34 were successfully polled by interviewers over the phone. The response rate was 59.8%, with a standard error within  $\pm 2.2\%$ .

The interviews with academics, incumbent District Councillors and community leaders were conducted between the 28th of September and the 23rd of October, 2007. A total of 22 persons were interviewed, among them academics, incumbent District Councillors, young leaders and social workers. They shared with us their views and observations about young people's participation in the community.

This is a report of the main findings and analyses, followed by related discussions and finally recommendations.

## Discussions

- (1) Fostering young people's community participation is a long-term task, with far-reaching effects in developing a civic society. This study finds that young people in general have positive views about their communities. They have a sense of social belonging and are willing to contribute to the communities. This promising sign should be noted.**

The development of Hong Kong depends on the younger generations. Promoting young people's community participation is the first step towards enhancing their civic sense. Apart from the family and school, the community is what young people engage in most of the time. The earlier they take part in community affairs, the easier it is for them to get involved in Hong Kong's affairs in the future and the better it is for the development of our civic society. Young people's community participation can be seen to be a process: from understanding the community and sharing concerns about community affairs to participating in community developments. Hence they develop a sense of belonging and responsibility that will help them when preparing to build their future society.

The respondents of this study gave an average score of 6 to the evaluation of their community. Their “sense of belonging” and “community concerns” scored respectively 5.4 and 5.1. Although there is much room for improvement, there are many positive signs. For example, 57.1% of the respondents are willing to contribute to their community, 67.5% of them have no plan to move away from their current districts. With the District Councils having more than twenty years of experience in the development of the community, young people in Hong Kong have a certain level of understanding and trust in their local District Councils. 70.8% of them would seek help from District Councillors for community affairs, a much higher percentage than those who would ask for assistance from government officials (11.7%) and other community leaders. Whether it is the government or civil organizations, a lot of work needs to be done to enhance young people’s community participation.

**(2) Respondents have an insufficient understanding of their communities which may directly affect their involvement and participation. Strengthening young people’s understanding of the community may improve the situation.**

This study makes an important observation that young people have an insufficient understanding of their community. Among the 520 respondents aged between 18 and 34, most gave an average score of 4.5 on their community understanding, less than half of the maximum score of 10.

65.2% of the respondents know about their community through “banners / posters / pamphlets”, thus showing a lack of motivation to understand their community in more proactive ways.

The study finds that the lower the understanding of their community, the lower the participation rate of the respondents. Moreover, the lower their understanding of the community, the less likely it is that they would talk about community affairs among themselves, and the less they would care about the performance of district officials / community leaders.

According to academics, young people tend to pay more attention to Hong Kong’s public issues than the local affairs in their own communities. Moreover, a lack of understanding of their communities tends to discourage young people from taking part in local affairs. Hence recognising and being aware of these drawbacks is the starting point that will later enable young people’s participation in communities to be

enhanced. Once young people understand the community they live in, concern and participation will soon follow.

**(3) Respondents have a very low level of participation in their communities. Most took part in “social activities” and only some of them participated in voluntary work. Very few took an active role to join community groups or express opinions about community affairs.**

The respondents gave an average score of 2.5 for their community participation (on a scale 0-10). It is a very low participation rate.

On participation in community activities, 15% to 35% of the respondents respectively have taken part in activities organized by their communities in the past year which included “Recreational Activities”(37.5%), Personal Enhancement Activities” (19.0%), “Social Gathering Activities” (16.5%), “Voluntary Work” (16.0%), “Cultural Activities” (15.1%) and Public Consultations / Forums” (5.4%), with “Recreational Activities” being the most popular.

With regard to participation in community organizations, nearly 90% of the respondents are non-members of community organizations. Their non-participation includes “District Consultation Groups” (99.3%), “Local Organizations of Political Parties” (98.8%), “District Councillors’ Offices” (98.2%), “Residents’ Groups” (97.8%), “Community Uniformed Organizations” (95.6%) and “Community Service Groups” (93.5%). The most active group was that of those aged between 18 and 24 who participated in youth centres or community centres. But they only comprised 12.2% of the respondents.

87.6% of the respondents have never expressed opinions on community affairs in the past year, when compared with the 12.4% who have. They also gave themselves low scores on “Discussing community affairs with others” (3.8 out of 10) and “Monitoring the performance of district officials / community leaders” (2.7 out of 10). It seems young people have little interest in discussing and monitoring community affairs.

According to some incumbent District Councillors, young people tend to take part in community “services” rather than community “affairs”; hence their lack of concern about what is happening in the community. Other young leaders said the communities tend to promote voluntary work among young people rather than policy

discussions, which discourages them from taking part in community affairs.

Is the above situation the result of a lack of channels to take part in community affairs or discouragement shown by the community? Do our young people lack the interest or the ability to take part in community affairs? These questions deserve pondering.

**(4) Young people feel that they cannot influence community affairs significantly. Pressures from study and work also hinder their participation. To enhance their community participation society should give them more trust and attention.**

Of the 520 respondents, 65.2% do not agree that they “Can influence the planning and development of the community”. 36.3% agree that “Even if they express their views to community leaders, there will not be much change”. For the 64 respondents who expressed their views about community affairs over the past year, 57.1% said it did not make much difference.

With regard to case interviews, some respondents feel that their voice is not heard and “young people” are never considered important enough for consultations in the community. It breeds a sense of powerlessness and affects their motivation to participate in the community.

According to some incumbent District Councillors, the financial factor makes young people focus on their work and neglect their community. Pressures from study also discourage young people from taking part in community affairs.

To stem young people’s sense of powerlessness, the government should strengthen their connection and communication with young people. We believe that by giving them more respect and gaining their trust, society can foster a sense of participation among Hong Kong’s young people.

**(5) The Internet has become the dominant platform for young people to interact with their communities. The advance of communication technology makes the Internet an indispensable part of young people’s lives. Making the most of this platform is vital to promoting their community participation.**

Among the 195 young people aged between 18 and 24 interviewed in the telephone survey, 11.8% get their community updates through the “Internet network”, the second most popular channel.

According to most of the academics, incumbent District Councillors and community leaders, young people are the major users of the Internet. Hence the Internet can play a critical role in fostering young people’s community participation.

Some academics believe that in the digitalized and abstract world of the Internet, young people can express their views freely and get to know others who share the same aspirations. They need not “come out” to participate in the community. Instead, they can discuss issues of common interest on the Internet. Nevertheless, it is a loose form of organization and participants can get in and out at their will. This lack of cohesion is a major difference from the highly organized youth groups of the past.

On the other hand, some incumbent District Councillors believe the emergence of the Internet groups, for examples, discussion forums and blogs, encourages young people to fervently discuss public issues at length and allows more space for them to express their views. Expressing opinions on the Internet is also a means of participation in the community. Therefore, the Internet can be a powerful civic force in mobilizing young people to take part in community affairs.

The Internet influences every aspect of young people’s lives. How we convert it into something attractive enough to make the youth want to participate in community affairs and not merely see it as a talking forum requires more research.

**(6) Young people have a certain level of trust in District Councillors. Hence the latter can play a more active role in encouraging young people to take part in the community. We urge the District Councillors to place more concern and trust in young people’s opinions.**

Many respondents would seek help from District Councillors when encountering problems with their districts (70.8%). 22.3% believe that District Councillors are the most influential group in the communities.

Of the 64 respondents who have expressed opinions on their community affairs

over the past year, 64.1% have done so through the District Councillors' offices. This result shows that young people have a certain level of trust in District Councillors.

On the other hand, not all of them know about their local District Councillors. 50.9% know who they are while 49.1% do not. In the interview, some respondents said young people know little about their District Councillors and their work. It means District Councillors should boost their communications with young people through different channels. Young people should also take steps to understand their District Councillors.

As the main bridge between the government and citizens over the past 20 odd years of development, District Councillors have become an influential figure in Hong Kong's communities. Our young people have gradually accepted their role. Nevertheless, there is still much room for them to foster the participation of young people in the community.

**(7) As they are trusted by young people, District Councils should be more proactive in promoting young people's community participation. By collaborating with local schools, they can combine learning with community participation and boost more educational effects.**

Since its inception in 1982, the District Councils have been playing an important consultative role in Hong Kong's district affairs. Apart from reflecting citizens' views and promoting community development, the District Councils have been a positive force in monitoring public affairs at the local level and facilitating government policies.

On a scale of 0-10, respondents ranked "Improving facilities for the residents", "Consulting residents' opinions" and "Striving for residents' benefits" with a higher score, with each securing an average of 6.9, 6.8 and 6.7 points respectively. It shows that young people have a certain level of understanding and recognition of the District Councils' work.

At present, the District Councils remain a dominant force in fostering young people's participation in community affairs. As the government plans to give more regional administrative power and resources to the District Councils, the District Councils should start to see young people as a positive force that will help in the building up of the communities.



**(8) Active participation in the District Council elections is an important step for young people to be involved in local communities. Their community participation is a long-term and on-going task and requires a joint effort along with local leaders.**

The government lowered the age of eligible voters from 21 to 18 in 1994. Since then young people have had more opportunities to take part in local elections. According to the data collected from the last three District Council elections, the voting rates of young people have shown some ups and downs.

The last District Council elections in 2003 saw a historic increase in the general voting rate, particularly in that of the young voters. The total voting rate in 2003 was 44.1%. For those aged between 18 and 35, the rate was 35.8%.

According to this study, 72.1% of the respondents have registered as eligible voters. Among those 375 respondents, 44.3% said they were obliged to vote in the upcoming District Council Elections while 33.0% said they would most likely do so. Among the 288 respondents who belong to these two groups, 48.1% regard voting as part of their civic obligations.

Based on the above findings, most respondents have a positive sentiment towards casting their vote in the impending District Council Elections. It is an important step towards taking part in community activities. On the other hand, voting is only one of the many aspects of community participation. While young people have a positive response towards local elections, their participation is abysmal in other aspects. We should pay attention to these discrepancies.

<b>Recommendations</b>
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**(1) The government should take the lead by taking a firm grip on the keenness shown by young people to participate in the community and keep encouraging them.**

**The government plays an important role in fostering young people's participation in social and community affairs. At present, "Youth Council" and "Youth Forum" are channels for**

**boosting young people's participation. The relevant authority should review their respective functions and position them for future developments, so that those who want to take part in community affairs know where to go.**

- (2) Enhance young people's confidence in taking part in community affairs and open more channels and opportunities for them.**

**Young people's willingness to serve their communities should be noted. If the government does nothing to ease their sense of powerlessness, their motivation to participate in community affairs will be further compromised. Therefore, at the local level, the authority should open more channels and opportunities, for example, to allocate certain proportions of local consultative representatives to young people. This way, the government pays more attention to the views of young people and this in turn increases young people's confidence through taking part in the policy-making processes. In terms of nurturing local political talents, it gives more opportunities to our young people to sharpen their political skills.**

- (3) As the functions of District Council have young people's recognition, they should boost their connection and communication.**

**Cultural and recreational activities are the most popular activities for young people in the community. The District Council is the one who allocates resources and improves facilities. In other words, young people are its main service target. As there is much room for young people to understand the District Councils and the District Councillors, the latter can proactively promote their work by running regular "Road shows" or discussion forums at local schools. Together with local schools, they can host functions similar to "District Councillors meeting students" or "Youth participation in community partnership programmes". These activities can enhance young people's understanding of their communities as well as communication among themselves.**

- (4) Make community participation more attractive to young people by offering awards or merit schemes based on individual understanding of community affairs**

**To further encourage young people to pay heed to social affairs, the authorities should make it more attractive to take part in community matters. It can consider setting up awards or merit schemes on the basis of the participants' understanding of the community, so that young people can approach topical issues concerning their communities with more incentives.**

- (5) Provide young people with various training opportunities so that community participation becomes a self-learning process**

**Through community participation, young people can broaden their horizons, enrich their experiences and even strengthen their critical thinking on public governance. Appropriate training in areas such as leadership, communication and strategic analysis can equip them to become competent participants in community affairs.**

- (6) Make the most of new communication channels to keep young people abreast with happenings in society and boost interaction**

**Under the reign of the second generation Internet Web 2.0, young people's community participation has become digitalized – apart from browsing for information on the Internet, they discuss matters via online forums through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube or Blog. In light of this trend, local authorities can consider setting up community websites so that they can continuously update news and interact with young people, thus bridging the gap between them and increasing young people's community participation.**