

Executive Summary

Effective district governance is crucial for promoting the well-being of people and maintaining good governance as it is the local community level that is most closely connected with the daily life of citizens. It is also the place where government implements policies and provides services. As such it directly impacts the overall quality of life for the public in relation to their opinions, concerns, and how it encourages the active participation of citizens.

One of the principles of good governance as advocated by the United Nations is public participation. Governments worldwide attach great importance to governance at community level. President Xi has emphasised that communities serve as the nerve endings for the government to connect with and serve the people, and that governing officials should promptly perceive and address residents' concerns¹. An overseas government regularly conducts surveys on citizens' perceptions of community life to better understand residents' quality of life².

In Hong Kong, the SAR Government has been carrying out this work through the District Administrative Scheme. The Government also encourages young people to take part in building their communities. Previously the active and dedicated participation of youth in community activities were highlighted by the media. Research by Youth I.D.E.A.S. showed that a significant proportion of the young people surveyed took involvement in public affairs seriously, and had a sense of belonging to Hong Kong society³.

With the enforcement of the National Security Law and the gradual implementation of Improving the Electoral System of the HKSAR, it is considered that Hong Kong has entered a new era, especially when the current Government took office. President Xi laid down "four proposals" for the current administration in an important speech when he visited the city last year: to further improve its governance and earnestly address people's daily-

¹ 新華網。2018。「習近平在上海考察」。2018-11-07。

² UK Government. Community Life Survey.

³ HKFYG. (2015). Youth I.D.E.A.S. "Who is Willing to Take Up Positions in Public Affairs?"; HKFYG. (2022). Youth I.D.E.A.S. "What Young People Want for Hong Kong".

life concerns and difficulties. He also hoped that all of Hong Kong's young people would devote themselves to building Hong Kong into a better home⁴. However, research showed that the level of mutual trust between young people and the Government continued to be low. Some interviewed youth cases said that their motivation to participate in society had decreased with the changing situation of the city.

The soon upcoming District Council Ordinary Election (in December 2023) is the first large-scale territory-wide election to be held after improvements in the district governance system and the reform of the District Councils. These have always been an important platform for citizens participation and are crucial in assisting the Government to implement district governance. In this new era, it is believed that this election would capture the attention of the city.

Against this background, this research examines what young people think about their relationship with the community and their expectations of District Councils. This also seeks to identify the attitudes and barriers faced by young people when it comes to engaging themselves in district governance. Recommendations will be put forward to increase youth involvement in this aspect.

In conducting this study, data was collected between September and October 2023 through: an onsite survey of 526 young people (aged 18 to 34); parallel-case interviews with 20 individuals; and one-to-one interviews with 3 academics and experts.

⁴ 國務院港澳事務辦公室。2022。網頁。「習近平在慶祝香港回歸祖國 25 周年大會暨香港特別行政區第六屆政府就職典禮上的講話(全文)」。2022-07-01。

Main Findings

- 1. It is in the local community where citizens have the most daily interactions and where government implements policies. It is also where the related work meets the needs of the residents and solves their difficulties. This study showed that 85% of the respondents agreed with the notion that the ultimate goal of governance at district level is to improve the quality of life for residents. Effective district governance is important for promoting the well-being of the people and maintaining good governance.**

- 2. The HKSAR Government's proposals on improving governance at the district level consist of two major parts: strengthening the governance structure, and reforming District Councils. When asked, this study found that not many respondents were familiar with the overall proposals. Many expressed no interest in joining the relevant committees or teams under the new structure. They did, though, have expectations regarding the future performance of District Councils: in particular the provision of services and taking note of public opinion.**
 - 2.1 Respondents in the survey gave an average rating of 3.25 points when self-assessing their familiarity with the overall proposals. The rating was below the general level of 5 set by the survey (0-10, 10 being the highest). The majority of the respondents said that they had no interest in joining the Care Teams or taking up the posts if they were appointed as members of the “Three Committees”.**

 - 2.2 Close to 50% of the respondents expected that the new term District Councils could deal with community issues; another 30%, considering public sentiment and opinion. Some respondents in the parallel-case interviews were concerned about Councillors’ ability to develop a macro perspective of district work, and their understanding of and ability to consider or act upon public opinion.**

- 3. Community needs youth, and youth need community. How young people perceive their relationship with the community and how they assess and explore the opportunities to participate in district governance, does deserve the attention of those who care about youth and the future development of the governance of Hong Kong.**
 - 3.1 Most respondents in the survey had a positive view regarding their relationship with the community. 79% believed that district affairs were closely related to them, and their sense of belonging to the community was rated at an average of 6.82 points.**
 - 3.2 More than half of the respondents did not think that their opportunities for participating in district governance through institutions had decreased. Some respondents in the parallel-case interviews, however, believed that it had become more difficult for young people to win a seat in the District Councils through individual effort only.**
 - 3.3 On an individual level, the main barriers to participating included a lack of preparation (30.0%) and networks (23%). However, based on the experiences of some currently serving in the institutions, we noted that establishing connections with the community through different activities was an important first step in gaining the opportunities to take part in district governance. It was found that enhancing the efficacy of participation could promote continued involvement.**
- 4. The district is a platform for daily interactions between citizens and government; mutual trust is foundational for genuine interactions. 59% of respondents stated that they trust the Government: surpassing 50% for the first time. The Government should take this opportunity, starting at the district level, to create more occasions for collaborating with the youth. Through more effective**

interaction and communication, a more conducive atmosphere can develop to further improve mutual trust.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study notes that district governance connects citizens and government; this is an important issue in Hong Kong society. Respondents have a desire to contribute to community improvement. They, however, encounter barriers whether they seek participation through institutions or non-institutional means and they also have expectations of the HKSAR Government's work in this aspect. This study will put forward recommendations for promoting the effective involvement in district governance among young people with different needs and backgrounds.

- 1. A strategy to promote district governance with three main dimensions: promoting public education, assessing performance, and reflecting public opinion.**

This research highlights that young people have limited understanding of the Government's proposals on improving governance at the district level. The majority lack interest in joining the "Three Committees" and the Care Teams. There are youth who say that they have never heard about the "Three Committees" or are unfamiliar with their work.

District Councils and the "Three Committees" have been operating for a while already. Yet, the general public tend to perceive the role of District Councillors as serving the Kaifong only, and they are also unfamiliar with the "Three Committees". This might create an unfavourable environment for the future development of district governance. This might also pose concerns regarding succession and the continuity of these institutions.

The current HKSAR Government has been attaching great importance to enhancing governance capacity, and the general public also expect the Government to effectively address livelihood issues. Our research suggests that the Government should develop a strategy that should encompass public education, performance assessment, and reflecting the opinions of the public. It should aim to strengthen citizens' understanding of the Government's work and the related institutions, promote the effectiveness of the work, and understand the needs of citizens in relation to local services and community life in an ever-changing environment. By implementing a continuous, timely, and appropriate promotion strategy, the achievements of district governance could be confidently presented to the public. In turn this would help to improve district governance through active participation and a results-oriented approach.

- 2. Launching a thematic-based community scheme where each District Council selects local issues and submits research proposals. The Government can prioritise these proposals and provide funding. Through strengthening the District Council members' ability to identify and lead local discussions, this initiative aims to promote higher quality development of the district, and assist the Government to implement effective district governance.**

Some case-interviewees consider the core value of district governance is to reflect residents' opinions. Despite this, some respondents do not think that the Government can effectively ascertain its citizens' opinions. The expansion of each District Council geographical constituency boundary might lead to increased complexity in handling district affairs; making it more challenging for District Councillors to collate public opinion. There is also a demand from the public that District Councillors adopt a macro perspective. The role of District Councillors in

assisting District Officers to effectively understand public sentiment is also challenging.

The suggested research scheme could be carried out through collaboration between District Councils, universities, and non-governmental think tanks. The Government could then select the highest priority projects from the submitted proposals; conducting two or three research projects each year.

3. Three measures to enhance the participation of youth from different interests or backgrounds to connect more with their districts.

3.1 Strengthen the Member Self-Recommendation Scheme for Youth and expand the opportunities for youth to be recommended. This includes widening the scope of the Member Self-Recommendation Scheme for Youth, to gradually include the “Three Committees” while expanding the source of recommended candidates for appointment. This would allow outstanding youth to gain early promotion while nurturing opportunities which will, in the long term, broaden the Government’s talent pool.

The influence of the “Three Committees” has increased under the new district governance structure, and a considerable number of members in the District Councils will be returned by appointment. Currently, though, the “Three Committees” do not have designated seats for self-nomination by young individuals. In recent years, the proportion of young members in the “Three Committees” has been relatively low, with some committees not having any young members. One case-interviewee expresses that he does not have any connection with the Government, leading him to think that he does not have any chance to be appointed. Another case-interviewee mentions that young people usually have developed connections with

service organisations in the community as part of their daily life, and that these organisations are more familiar with young people's abilities and performance.

Opportunities for assessment, recommendation, and self-nomination should be provided to young people who are eager to serve society. This research suggests that the Government should consider expanding the scope of the self-nomination scheme for young members and gradually include the "Three Committees". The Government should also proactively consider expanding the sources of recommended candidates, with community service organisations and educational institutions recommending talented youth to the Government. Nurturing young people within institutions could help enhance their capabilities and expand the city's talent pool.

- 3.2 Strengthen youth participation with local or cross-district teams. Establishing a district improvement scheme with 3R+I elements, in which young people are encouraged to form local or cross-district teams to carry out projects they believe in, could have a positive impact on the community. The scheme would allow youth to be provided with some resources, assume responsibility and receive recognition, in an attempt to enhance the effectiveness of youth participation.**

Young people believe that district affairs are related to them, and they are concerned about community issues, especially transportation, environmental hygiene, and security. Some expect to be involved in making improvements in their communities, while some see the impact brought about by their involvement. This becomes a motivating factor in their continued engagement.

To address the needs of young people, the research suggests establishing a community improvement scheme coordinated by the 18 youth committees of each District and community service organisations. It would allow young people to form teams and submit proposals with impactful solutions to improve the areas they care about. Projects that are deemed excellent would receive basic funding and be required to complete them within a designated timeframe, with the outcomes shared with the community.

This recommendation aims to encourage young people to take the initiative, at district level, starting with small-scale projects. By incorporating elements that could enhance their sense of effectiveness, it is hoped that the collective strength of young people in the community could be further utilised.

- 3.3 Strengthen the ability of youth to tell the compelling stories of their communities. The aim is to implement a youth-focused district unique feature programme to explore and promote distinctive characteristics of the districts from a youth perspective. It also aims to broaden young people's horizons by improving the understanding of their communities and the city as a whole. Longer term, it would strengthen the foundation of the younger generation by encouraging them to tell the good stories of Hong Kong.**

The future development of the districts relies on active participation from the youth. Respondents believe that their respective districts have unique features worth promoting. In recent years, there has been a growing interest among young people in activities related to exploring and promoting community characteristics especially those connected to cultural values, conservation, and sustainable development. Each of the 18 Districts in Hong Kong has unique characteristics, and

varying social issues. While young people are familiar with their own communities, it would be beneficial for them and the broader Hong Kong society, to have an increased level of knowledge about other communities.

The research suggests implementing a unique features programme coordinated by the respective District Offices, in conjunction with young people, to launch promotional and exploratory initiatives that highlight the unique characteristics of each District. The programme would provide space for young people to make cross-district connections and to interact with peers from different backgrounds. Fostering interaction and cooperation among young people, while broadening their perspectives, this programme would enable them to tell compelling stories of the communities and, ultimately, the good stories of Hong Kong.