

Executive Summary

Countryside areas possess precious natural resources and cultural heritage. However, as urban growth accelerates, the issue of uneven development between urban and rural areas has become more pronounced. This can detrimentally affect sustainable social development. The issue of countryside conservation is gaining increasing attention, with many societies around the world encouraging the public to become involved. Engaging in rural conservation could provide young people with a platform to learn more about and build the society in which they live; strengthening the connections between individuals and the community.

Hong Kong has long been considered a bustling city. Increasing the attention on sustainable urban-rural development and with the rising popularity of post-pandemic in-depth local cultural travel, previously less well-visited rural areas have become more attractive for people to explore. Various community organisations and institutions have also initiated related projects and activities in which there are youth participants.

However, data shows that the percentage of surveyed youth expressing a sense of belonging to Hong Kong is still far lower than the previous highest level of more than 90%¹. The percentage of young respondents who are pessimistic about the development of Hong Kong in the next ten years (46.9%) is markedly higher than those who are optimistic (17.5%). On the plus side, 18.0% of surveyed youth expressed a willingness to participate in environmental protection and sustainable development initiatives for a better Hong Kong².

In recent years, the HKSAR Government has proposed the Northern Metropolis initiative to transform the northern New Territories into a liveable metropolitan area, with "urban-rural integration" and "proactive conservation" as part of its planning principles³. The Northern Metropolis is rich in blue-

¹ The percentage of the surveyed youth expressing a sense of belonging to Hong Kong stood at 93.7% in 2017. It dropped to 62.6% in 2021. Although there was an increase in 2022 and 2023, it remains far lower than the highest level. For details, refer to HKFYG. Youth Trends in Hong Kong. Various years.

² HKFYG. (2022). YI069 What Young People Want for Hong Kong. May 2022.

³ Chief Executive, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (2021). Northern Metropolis Development Strategy Report. 2021-10-30.

green ecology, cultural resources, and rural traditions; the Government has stated that this is a long-term vision intended for the younger generation⁴. Against this background, given the attitude of youth towards countryside conservation in Hong Kong; their motivation for participation; their experiences in this context; their outlook on future urban-rural integration, further research of these issues is both timely and worthy.

The current term Government places a strong emphasis on youth development. It is also committed to enhancing the connection between young people and the Government and society through various channels. This research aims to leverage this context to gain insights into the youth perspective regarding countryside conservation in Hong Kong, as well as their experiences and attitudes toward participation. Incorporating observations and practical case-sharing from experts and scholars, this research also seeks to identify important elements that could motivate or enable aspiring youth to either activate or maintain their involvement. Additionally, it aims to provide feasible recommendations to further promote youth participation in the sustainable development of Hong Kong's future urban-rural landscape and to explore new avenues for youth engagement in society.

To conduct this study, data was collected between January and April 2025 through an online survey of 534 young people (aged 15 to 34); case interviews with 15 individuals; and one-to-one interviews with 5 experts and academics.

⁴ news.gov.hk. 2021. 「特首：北部都會區為年輕一代而建」。2021-10-30。

Main Findings

- 1. The countryside possesses rich resources. Urban-rural interaction could enhance the quality of life and promote the sustainable development of society. Hong Kong's countryside has a long history. This Study shows that over 90% of the surveyed youth believe countryside conservation is important for urban-rural sustainable development of Hong Kong; countryside conservation holds significant meaning for Hong Kong society.**
- 2. The countryside is the foundation of urban development. Youth are the cornerstone of society's future, and social development will affect their quality of life, making youth participation particularly important. Over 80% of the surveyed youth believe that countryside conservation offers a genuine alternative for youth engagement in society; serving as a platform of connecting youth with the community.**
- 3. The uniqueness of youth participation in conserving the countryside. Hong Kong's rural areas are distinctive in that some are adjacent to urban centres, while others are more remote. The level of young people involvement, their motivation, perspectives and the challenges they perceive that Hong Kong is facing in terms of rural conservation, are all worth noting.**
 - 3.1 Fourteen percent reported having participated in countryside conservation projects in Hong Kong, mainly through schools, tertiary institutions, or non-governmental organisations; 77% indicated they had not participated.**
 - 3.2 Main motivations to take part in conserving countryside activities include: to visit places they have never been, broaden horizons, and enhance problem-solving skills. The most commonly-cited challenge to further promoting**

countryside conservation is that Hong Kong society is more focused on economic development.

- 3.3 The surveyed youth have had unique experiences in conserving the countryside. The diversity of countryside conservation allows youth from different backgrounds to find entry points for involvement, integrate innovative thinking into cultural heritage and align with the values of co-creation and co-sharing. All these provide them with greater opportunities to showcase their strengths.**
- 4. Conserving countryside is not in conflict with economic, social, and environmental development. Developing rural economic activities and industries has a positive effect in encouraging young people to participate in conservation in the long term.**
- 5. Sustainable rural-urban development is not an overnight task; results are not immediately visible: it requires collective participation by all sectors of society. Hong Kong needs a vision and the imagination for countryside conservation, allowing the general public—especially the younger generation—to see the prospects and opportunities for participating in future rural-urban development, and to make good use of the Northern Metropolis initiative to encourage more youth engagement.**

Recommendations

The countryside is an important part of Hong Kong's environment, history and culture. Conserving the countryside is both important for Hong Kong society as a whole and as a platform to connect its youth. To promote youth participation in countryside conservation, we recommend that the following proposals are worth considering.

1. Formulate a sustainable development blueprint for urban-rural areas of Hong Kong. Implement the blueprint step-by-step to strengthen society and reinforce young people's confidence and motivation to participate in Hong Kong's sustainable development.

The surveyed youth recognise the importance of countryside conservation for the sustainable development of urban-rural areas in Hong Kong. While they have expectations on this issue, at the same time they also believe that Hong Kong lacks corresponding strategies and as such they are not very optimistic about the future prospects in this aspect. In fact, many rural areas in Hong Kong are derelict. Conserving countryside is not a short-term task; the Government's efforts should go beyond short-term funding or subsidies but towards a long-term commitment and policy vision.

Hong Kong's sustainable urban-rural development is at a critical stage. While society is moving towards the Northern Metropolis initiative and simultaneously revitalising and developing various industries, it is also aiming to achieve carbon neutrality and striving to promote the city's culture and quality of life.

This Study suggests the HKSAR Government should formulate a sustainable development blueprint for urban-rural areas of Hong Kong. Through macro-level policies and strategic planning, this blueprint could explore the future development path and goals for Hong Kong's urban and rural areas, to demonstrate the Government's commitment to sustainable development in these regions. The blueprint would help build a new vision for countryside conservation with elements of co-creation, co-sharing, and inheritance. By bringing together various social groups,

it allows the public—especially the younger generation—to see the prospects for and possibilities of urban-rural integration in Hong Kong. This, in turn, will help to foster confidence among young people and to motivate them to participate in the sustainable development of Hong Kong society.

2. Initiate annual rural events. Showcasing the distinctive cultural and landscape features of Hong Kong's countryside, the events' aims could be to promote urban-rural integration and encourage more diverse participation. This will help raise public awareness and establish a broader base of community engagement.

Many rural areas in Hong Kong are notably distinctive, but there has been little interaction between them and urban areas. A lot of rural conservation work has only recently started, so the general public have limited understanding of the concept of urban-rural integration.

Through the effort of various sectors in recent years, progress has been made, with some projects even receiving international recognition. This provides a favourable foundation for Hong Kong to move towards closer urban-rural integration. Using the example of the United Nations "Urban October" initiative, a robust and ongoing promotional campaign is crucial for advancing rural conservation and urban-rural integration in Hong Kong.

In response to the above issues and considerations, this Study recommends that the Government initiates annual rural events to provide a platform for different sectors and the public to interact. These could include workshops, dialogues, markets, and experiential activities. This would increase societal attention and awareness of rural conservation, and to promote the unique aspects of Hong Kong's rural areas to further increase public interest in experiencing the countryside. A sustained and robust promotional campaign would make rural development more accessible to the public and provide more opportunities for it to grow.

To enhance youth participation in the envisioned countryside events, the Study also recommends:

- (1) establishing a proposal platform where young individuals or teams could identify unique features of Hong Kong's countryside and to propose landmark events that integrate economic, social, and environmental aspects. Outstanding proposals could be selected to receive funding to participate in relevant non-local exchange or experiential programmes.
- (2) creating diverse participation roles, categorised into exploratory (guided tours), cultural (oral history, audiovisual documentation), creative (creative promotion, restoration), and leadership (curation, facilitation) functions, to broaden the scope and scale of youth engagement.

3. Expand youth participation within institutional frameworks. Open a portion of the membership seats on the “Advisory Committee on the Northern Metropolis” to the Member Self-recommendation Scheme for Youth, thereby enhancing young people’s sense of involvement in the planning of the Northern Metropolis.

The HKSAR Government's “Advisory Committee on Countryside Conservation” and the “Lantau Conservation Fund Advisory Committee” became part of the Member Self-recommendation Scheme for Youth in 2021 and 2022 respectively. This allows aspiring youth to offer opinions and suggestions to the Government through an official channel.

In recent years, the Government established the “Advisory Committee on the Northern Metropolis”. As the Northern Metropolis project is now in progress, the Study recommends opening a portion of the membership seats to aspiring young people under the Scheme. This would allow young people the opportunity to participate and provide input on this significant project that will shape Hong Kong's development over the next 20 years; bringing the planning of the Northern Metropolis closer to its youth.

4. Incorporate more urban-rural development elements into exchange activities between the Mainland and Hong Kong society.

There are many best practices on the Mainland in promoting youth participation and youth development in rural revitalisation, while Hong Kong has numerous rural areas that retain their original characters and cultures. As exchanges of both sides become more frequent, the Study encourages more elements of sustainable urban-rural development in the exchange activities. This would help to cultivate youth and broaden the horizons of the younger generation. Inter-societal exchanges should not only focus on issues like technology and economy but also cultural conservation and urban-rural development, enriching the scope of interaction.