

## Plenary I

### Sustainable Volunteerism and A Sustainable Community



## Volunteering to Shape the Future

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My topic today is not an easy one. I have been asked to talk about “volunteering to shape the future” in the context of sustainable development. These are two very different concepts, and my challenge will be to bring them together.

Volunteerism and sustainable development do have one very important thing in common. Both are considered to have inherent benefits for society. They are welcomed as effective ways to build community and to heal the differences that can destabilize even the most open and democratic societies. But they have very different roots and consequences.

Volunteer work is practical and immediate. You can see the results right away. Because you see results, it is something you can feel and measure.

Sustainable development, on the other hand, is much less tangible. Internationally accepted criteria for sustainable development are outlined by the United Nations, in a 300-page document that resulted from the Rio Summit on the Environment and Development in 1992. The 300 pages of “Agenda 21,” adopted by 178 countries including China, provide guidelines for communities on ways to balance goals of social equity, economic development, and environmental protection. A fundamental principle of the guidelines is that sustainable development must be participatory to be successful. That means that it must engage all levels of society, conceived as the three pillars of government, civil society and business.

Volunteer organizations and non-governmental organizations are important to the sustainable development process as part of the third sector, or civil society. Even in the early stages of the ideas of sustainable development, in the late 1980s, it was clear that

community participation and the involvement of volunteer groups was seen as a key element of putting sustainability into practice.

In one sense, the participatory model of sustainable development turns everyone into a volunteer, whether they are from government, the third sector, or business. All of these volunteer time and resources to the process of shaping the future of a community. This shaping begins with the identification of issues and debate over the best solutions. To succeed, the process needs to move beyond debate to outcomes. It is only when you see something happening that you can derive satisfaction, and this may take years.

So how does sustainable development move from talk shop to social change? When and how does it get to the point where you can see tangible change? In particular, how do volunteer organizations, which are so well adapted to doing good, adjust to the abstractions of sustainable development?

I have two answers to this question. One of them relates to the international framework in which volunteer organizations may channel their efforts for sustainable development. The other is based on our experience in Hong Kong, where we are still in the very early stages of developing a strategy for sustainable development. The Hong Kong experience tells us that volunteer organizations play a valuable role precisely because they are accustomed to achieving concrete results, and they have the mindset and persistence required to keep at the task even when the goalposts are distant.

In Hong Kong, some of the most passionate contributions to sustainable development have come from volunteer organizations such as the Hong Kong People's Council for Sustainable Development, the Hong Kong Council for Social Services, and the Business Environment Council. In Hong Kong, we are at an early enough stage that volunteer organizations have been able to help us design our own institutional framework and process for arriving at strategies and guidelines for sustainable development. I will spend more time on our Hong Kong process in the next few minutes. But first, let me offer a brief review of the framework provided by the UN.

To help non-government and voluntary organizations deliver effective programs of action for sustainable development, the UN has put in place a coordinated partnership program that encourages links with business and government groups. There are currently over 300 such partnerships registered with the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, with thematic emphasis on issues such as natural resource conservation, education and poverty eradication. It is interesting to note that 38 percent of these partnerships, the highest percentage, are based in the Asia-Pacific region. Government is involved in 84 percent of the partnerships, suggesting a strong commitment to implementation.

The Hong Kong experience is special partly because we are so rich in volunteer organizations and a history of volunteering. Here, it became very clear that this resource made it very easy to see the importance of volunteering time and effort to this new idea.

The people of Hong Kong know what it means to volunteer for the benefit of society. According to one study, there are nearly 17,000 “third sector” organizations in Hong Kong, with 10,000 district and community based organizations alone. At the time that Hong Kong’s Council for Sustainable Development was established in 2003, we recognized that such volunteer organizations had a credibility that stems from the “constructive and responsible role they play in society,” in the words of the UN.

As it turned out, volunteer organizations were among our most active and hard-working partners, as we began to develop a strategy for sustainable development based on multi-stakeholder engagement. We involved all stakeholders, including volunteer organizations, in the design of the process as well as its implementation. We formed partnerships with the three organizations I mentioned a minute ago, who helped spread the message to their members and joined in the debate over the first set of “pilot areas” that we identified – solid waste management, renewable energy, and urban living space. The debates conducted in the engagement process led to a number of recommendations for new programs and policies based on sustainable principles. These were accepted by the government, to a large degree, leading to the publication last May of Hong Kong’s first sustainable development strategy.

It is fair to say that we could not have reached the present level without the involvement of volunteers from a broad range of individuals, not only from formal “volunteer organizations” but also from business, academic, social and professional organizations. By drawing on the creative, organizational and network building skills of the voluntary and non-government sector, we were able to develop an inclusive and open process that allowed a high degree of participation. This in turn enhanced the credibility of the process, and provided the basis for achieving trust, even between groups with very different interests and profiles.

I am among the converted. I strongly believe that the future is for everyone in this city to have the idea of sustainable development in the back of their mind when they wake up in the morning, and to want to do something about it during the day. We want them to feel that there is a direct link between the debates over sustainable development and policy making.

This is quite a natural link for some countries – especially in Europe and North America, where virtually all issues go through lively, public debate. Sustainable development has perhaps the strongest roots in Europe, where there are local communities with proud historical legacies and a commitment to preserving them, as well as a long tradition of democratic participation. But there are many other places in the world that are far from that level.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is China, where the top-down nature of authority means that the government can establish sustainable development by decree. China’s rapid growth has created social and environmental problems that are clearly

unsustainable – the rising income gap between urban and rural areas, pollution that is threatening the health of citizens and neighbors, and health and safety issues arising from rapid industrialization. At the highest level, the central government understands the urgency of the problem, and has adopted sustainable development as a key principle. It understands the need to strengthen civil society as well, because without a mindset change at the local level, implementation would be impossible. So China recognizes the importance of volunteerism, and the link with sustainable development, even if it operates from a different model.

In terms of its sustainable development policies, Hong Kong is somewhere in between Europe and China. The tradition of public debate is much weaker in Hong Kong than it is in Europe. Hong Kong's sense of community is also far more fragile, as it has been built on successive waves of immigration and layers of different cultures. Hong Kong's community has acquired a degree of complacency, too, as a result of economic success. Sustainable development represents a completely new way of thinking to many people in Hong Kong. Planning for the future of the community does not come easily when we have only just begun to think of ourselves as a community, rather than as a collection of refugees, expatriates and entrepreneurs. Even so, we have made a start.

Hong Kong's Council for Sustainable Development purposely started out by seeking its own model of sustainable development, rather than simply adopting the Agenda 21 principles on paper. Because of Hong Kong's uniqueness – one could, of course, describe every community as unique – the decision was made to develop our roadmap for sustainable development from the bottom up, through an extensive process of engagement with the entire community, so far as possible. If our legislative process is vertical, shaped by the experience of British colonialism and the One Country, Two Systems framework, the engagement process for sustainable development was to be horizontal, encouraging the three sectors – civil society, government and business – to work together.

We are far from achieving the goals of sustainable development, yet we have developed our own approach that reflects our pragmatic nature. We have learned many lessons. The most durable of these comes indirectly and directly from the volunteer movement, with its traditional, task-oriented mindset. The strength of this mindset in Hong Kong helped to shape an approach that is distinctive, and possibly unique, focused on outcomes and collaboration. We have learned that to shape the future, we need a society of volunteers, who will keep prodding us until we do something, who are impatient with talk shops, and insist on tackling future problems in the present. Fortunately for us, our legacy of volunteerism has made that possible.

Thank you.