

Getting Heard

A Handbook for Hong Kong Citizens

Christine Loh & Civic Exchange

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Chapter 1

What One Person Can Achieve

We live in interesting, and perhaps difficult, times. While knowledge and material wealth have increased for some, poverty, sickness and environmental degradation remain widespread. And although the developed world enjoys access to instant telecommunication, many individuals nevertheless feel isolated and alienated from society.

These kinds of contradictions also occur on a political level. Ordinary citizens in countries around the world do not feel that their political leaders really represent them. Civic-minded people everywhere have become discouraged because they do not see how they can participate meaningfully in public affairs. Many people feel their views and ideas don't matter. They may believe there is no point in participating in an imperfect political system. Others may wish to be more active in public issues but lack information about how they can participate.

This Handbook is aimed at anyone who is interested in contributing to the dialogue on public affairs in Hong Kong or shaping decision-making on a particular issue. It provides a practical guide to tools for improving communication in order to help ordinary citizens participate more effectively in public issues.

What is dialogue? At the most basic level, dialogue is a useful way of solving problems. This requires mutual understanding between different individuals or groups. On a deeper level, dialogue is an expression of an essential aspect of the human spirit. Dialogue is both a way of being and part of the process of successful relationship building. We believe that increasing dialogue on public issues benefits all sectors of society, including the government, and that the contribution of ordinary citizens to this dialogue is significant and important. It is possible for one person to make a difference.

The following stories describe the contribution made by different individuals in influencing public policy and decision-making in Hong Kong. These accounts illustrate what one person can achieve in working on an issue. The people mentioned here are not necessarily famous, but they have been successful in raising new ideas and pushing government to do things in new ways.

You don't need to be famous or powerful to make a difference. All you need is an idea, a vision and the commitment to take your idea and vision forward.

Mei-Ling Fok

Up until 1991, Mei-Ling Fok was a practising lawyer in Hong Kong and enjoyed a privileged lifestyle. In 1991, her firstborn child, a handsome baby boy, was diagnosed with a rare debilitating genetic disorder called Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). Mei-Ling had never heard of the disease, although 1 in 40 people carry the recessive SMA gene. Doctors told her that SMA was fatal and that there was nothing anyone could do to help her son. In a matter of months, he lost the ability to move, eat and even breathe. Nobody, including local medical professionals, knew much about SMA children and few people showed any real interest in the case.

Mei-Ling set out to learn everything she could about SMA. Children with SMA in Hong Kong and their families were not receiving the help they desperately needed. Mei-Ling wanted to change the experience of these children. Today, her son Howard is 11 years old, despite the initial medical prognosis that he would not live past his first birthday.

In 1998, a newspaper featured Mei-Ling in an article entitled "A mother who would not quit." Howard was the first SMA child in Hong Kong using a 24-hour mechanical ventilator to attend a special school. Even

though Howard was certified as medically fit for school, he was only able to attend as a result of Mei-Ling's persistent reminders to Hong Kong educators and government officials about the need to uphold the basic right of disabled children to education.

Mei-Ling is the founding Chairman and Trustee of a charity called Families of SMA Charitable Trust. The Trust's objectives are to raise awareness of SMA diseases, help relieve hardship and suffering for SMA patients and their families and support international medical research to find an early cure for the disease. The SMA Trust raises its own funds from the public.

With the help of an interested politician, Mei-Ling also successfully lobbied the Hospital Authority for the establishment of a tertiary rehabilitation centre for ventilation-assisted children to help SMA patients and other children who need 24-hour mechanical ventilation move towards living at home and integration into society. The rehabilitation centre, the first in Southeast Asia, is located at the Duchess of Kent Children's Hospital in Pokfulam.

Acting on behalf of the SMA Trust, Mei-Ling will be co-organiser and co-sponsor of an international satellite symposium on neuromuscular diseases, including SMA, in late 2002, together with the Queen Mary Hospital Department of Paediatrics and the University of Hong Kong Medical Faculty. The symposium aims to upgrade the knowledge of Hong Kong medical professionals on SMA research and management as a form of continuing medical and professional education.

As a result of the efforts of one individual, Mei-Ling's message about the situation of those affected by SMA has reached numerous people in the private and public sectors. Her vision of allocating some community resources for SMA children and their families is now a reality.

Wong Wai-king

Wong Wai-king has spent almost all of her life in Tai O, a small fishing village on Lantau Island. First as a child and then as a wife and mother, she developed a deep appreciation and love for the natural beauty of the area and the Tai O community. Her attachment to the area led her to become involved in local issues, including improvements in the village water supply and preservation of the old sea wall.

Like other coastal communities, Tai O is protected from flooding by a sea wall. By the 1980s, typhoons and farming activity had seriously damaged the old sea wall and a new cement wall was constructed. Wai-king had many memories of playing and walking along the old sea wall. After she found evidence that the wall was at least two hundred years old, she decided that it should be restored for historical and practical reasons.

Her initial efforts to win support for this project from the rural authorities and the government were unsuccessful. Wai-king then petitioned Tai O residents and organised a press conference to put pressure on the government. The issue continued to drag on, despite the fact that flooding in 1989 destroyed half of Tai O.

Since the government was unwilling to commit resources to restoring the sea wall, Wai-king decided that she would restore it herself with the help of a sympathetic education officer from the Vocational Institute. On May 1, 1993, more than 100 students and teachers participated in the "Yu Gung moves the Mountain Sea-wall Restoration Campaign," an event that attracted considerable media interest.

As she became more involved in the campaign, Wai-king also realized the need to somehow document the history and lifestyle of Tai O. Although she was not a historian or an anthropologist, she could draw on her own memories and the resources of the community in recording village life. With the help of a few interested people, including a local journalist and an anthropology student from Chinese University, Wai-king began talking to residents and collecting photographs and background information. Over three hundred elderly residents of the community were interviewed for the project.

Wai-king organised this material into essays and stories that combined community history and memory with her own observations. In 1999, she published these essays in a book called *Tai O – Love Stories of the Fishing Village*.

Although Wai-king's campaign to restore the sea wall was unsuccessful, her efforts have succeeded in raising awareness of the need to preserve Tai O's rich heritage. Through her campaign and her book, Wai-king was able to impact public thinking and win support for preservation of Tai O and the surrounding area.

Amy Yung

Amy Yung, Islands District Councillor for Discovery Bay, Lantau Island, is an unusual politician. A part-time Sunday School teacher with no political ambitions, Amy became increasingly involved in public issues and now represents 15,000 people. Her involvement in politics is driven by her desire to serve the community and maintain a safe, green and family-oriented environment in Discovery Bay.

As a result of her professional accounting skills, Amy was invited to sit on a Discovery Bay property owners committee. She quickly realized that the Discovery Bay management was overcharging residents by a substantial amount. Her efforts to draw attention to this issue led to her election as a member of the City Owners Committee – a powerful 18-member council representing all Discovery Bay property owners.

Amy was then persuaded to run as Island District Councillor in 1998 and won the election by a large majority. During her four years in office, Amy has taken a proactive stance on a number of local issues. In 1998 and 1999 she campaigned against the management's unpopular decision to switch the residents' water supply from the local reservoir to government mains water. Amy thoroughly researched the issue and organised meetings and petitions. Her campaign highlighted the fact that switching to mains water was not a sustainable solution in view of the diminishing water supply from mainland China, which makes up 80% of mains water.

When the first land use zoning plan for Discovery Bay was announced in 2001, Amy organised town hall meetings and invited planning officials to explain the plan to residents. It became clear that residents were overwhelmingly against plans to site a second golf course in a favourite picnic area. Amy organised petitions, letter writing events and a "save our stream" campaign. She also made presentations to the Town Planning Board on behalf of the residents and helped other residents to present their concerns. Given strong local opposition to the project, the Board eventually re-sited the golf course and zoned the stream picnic spot as a conservation area.

Amy has used the media as an effective tool for publicising the concerns of Discovery Bay residents. As a politician, she attempts to put the concerns of her constituents above her own personal views.



2 Chapter

Social Tools for Sustainability

communication | social capital | social entrepreneurs | civic society

This Handbook provides a practical guide to tools for improving communication with government and with each other so that people can participate in making choices and taking action. The stories of the individuals and organisations mentioned in this book (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, Part II) demonstrate that it is possible for ordinary citizens to shape public policy and decision-making on the issues that interest and affect them.

The emphasis of this book is on **Sustainability Tools** for communication and self-organisation. This term is shorthand for **social tools for sustainability** because these tools enable us to make decisions about public issues in an open and creative manner. Increased participation in decision-making means that different social, environmental and economic considerations are factored into the process. Resources are used in better ways and to the best interest of everyone in a society.

This Handbook is not a critique of Hong Kong's political system or a civics textbook, although it touches on both of these areas. The discussion of Hong Kong's political and civic landscape is limited to a quick overview because there are already other

useful publications on the market that discuss local politics in detail. This Handbook does address the question of why participation in political and civic life is important and discuss the need for active and effective communication between all sectors of society and within the government.

Politics will become increasingly important for Hong Kong people. The Basic Law states explicitly that the “ultimate aim” of political evolution in Hong Kong is universal suffrage. Therefore, we all need to improve our political literacy and be effective participants in the political process. The ideas and strategies outlined in this book may also be useful to the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The government also needs to improve outreach to the public and communicate more effectively.

I. Communication

Social tools are the tools we use to interact with people. They are tools for communication. Sending and receiving messages is dependent on how well we use these tools. Poor usage means the message is muddled or unclear. Good usage improves communication.

Intent, point of view, outcome

Intent, point of view, mindset and desired outcome all affect communication. In other words, communication varies depending on the identity of the participants. For example, communicating with a family member is very different from communicating with a professional group, a Legislative Councillor, a government department or the media.

Communication is affected by the point of view and mindset of both the receiver (listener, reader, watcher, etc.) and the sender (writer, speaker, artist, musician, etc.). Point of view and mindset are also reflected in the content of the message and the form in which it is delivered, whether it is written, visual or oral.

The outcome of the communication process is determined by whether the message is received and whether the received message is the same as that intended by the sender.

Communication is a process

We see effective communication as a process whereby a message is received clearly and understood. Social tools are methods of communication that people use to influence the environment in which they live. Talking, listening, writing, complaining, organising, networking, reacting, facilitating, mediating, interacting and lobbying are all examples of the ways in which people can use these tools to communicate and send a particular message.

Silent communication

Some forms of communication are “silent” and dependent on subjective, culturally specific interpretations of data. For example, our assumptions and opinions about other people are based on cues such as dress, personal appearance, education level, sex, social class, race, religion and body language.

Silent communication is an important part of every social interaction, but is very difficult to identify or change. It should also be noted that in every interchange, what we don't say may be as important as what we do say.

This Handbook will focus primarily on observable social tools that can be developed and enhanced to improve communication.

II. Social Tools and Public Participation

Communication is essential to all public processes. Members of a society need to be able to communicate with one another in making choices. Those who are in government need to be in constant communication with the public. Public participation involves giving feedback on a specific decision or problem to those in government.

Government officials need to explain public issues to community members, consult stakeholders, get feedback on government projects, deal with crises, account for mistakes, etc. At the same time, ordinary citizens want to express their views and feelings to those in power. The dialogue between them should be ongoing and dynamic.

Communication also involves bringing people together in meetings. The

way in which meetings are organised and conducted will impact the effectiveness of the dialogue among participants. People feel positive after a productive meeting. People feel negative after a meeting that has been a waste of their time.

Thus, making sure that we communicate better is a key part of public participation. The good news is that we can all learn to communicate better. We believe the social tools discussed in this Handbook are useful for everyone. Indeed, they can be adapted for use within a family, at work, in a community group or in conducting political dialogue. These tools help us to deliberate and make decisions about important issues and they can help us to feel connected to each other and to the government. A sense of connection will help to build confidence in a society.

Building social capital

It has become fashionable to talk about social capital. Innovative thinkers have argued that social capital is a key enabler of innovation in a society. Social capital is about the relationships between people. It encompasses certain features of social life, such as the networks and connections among family, friends and acquaintances and it affects people's ability to co-operate with each other. Social capital includes factors like the degree of shared values and trust existing within a community. People who are connected to each other in a community are better at collaborating and cooperating.

The richer the social capital, the more effective the community. Investments in social capital include improvements in community education, cultural experiences, local economic development, environmental protection, social networking and inter-institutional collaboration.

The following four components enable effective public participation, which in turn helps to build social capital in a society:

Influence – People need to feel they can affect the course of events.

Inclusiveness – People need to feel that they are included in decision-making processes.

Communication – People need to share information about issues, problems, options, etc.

Capacity – Understanding and use of skills needed for effective communication and group participation. These skills can be developed and improved.

This Handbook aims to help ordinary people learn about the social skills needed for more effective public participation as a way of developing participatory governance in Hong Kong. This will enrich our social capital as a community. More experienced social activists may also benefit from some of the suggestions and examples given here.

Fostering social entrepreneurs

In every community there are exceptionally energetic and caring people who want to promote social progress. These people are central actors in helping to build trust and create networks in a community. They are true innovators – we call them social entrepreneurs. The collaborative partnerships developed by social entrepreneurs provide the social capital for innovative community ventures. The social tools discussed in this Handbook will be useful to anyone who is working on a community project, whether it is big or small.

If we accept that social capital is as important as financial capital in building a participatory community, social investments always involve an element of risk, just like financial investments. Social entrepreneurs are willing to experiment. There is no one right way to achieve something. Hopefully, this Handbook will provide a few different ideas on how you can take your idea forward.

Know your civic landscape

Since we are dealing with how to improve public participation and participatory governance in Hong Kong, we need to have a basic understanding of the local political and civic landscape. This Handbook provides a quick overview of Hong Kong's broader political and civic territory. Ordinary citizens, social activists and local organisations can all benefit from a better understanding of how to develop a public policy agenda and impact government.