

Bond University  
Research Repository



## Public engagement in major projects: The Hong Kong experience

Ng, S. Thomas; Skitmore, Martin; Tam, Ka Yan; Li, Terry H.Y.

*Published in:*

Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers: Municipal Engineer

*DOI:*

[10.1680/muen.13.00009](https://doi.org/10.1680/muen.13.00009)

*Licence:*

Other

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

*Recommended citation(APA):*

Ng, S. T., Skitmore, M., Tam, K. Y., & Li, T. H. Y. (2014). Public engagement in major projects: The Hong Kong experience. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers: Municipal Engineer*, 167(1), 22-31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1680/muen.13.00009>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.

# Public Engagement in Major Projects – The Hong Kong Experience

*S. Thomas Ng*<sup>1</sup>  
*Martin Skitmore*<sup>2</sup>  
*Ka Yan Tam*<sup>3</sup>  
*Terry H.Y. Li*<sup>4</sup>

Please contact:

*Professor Martin Skitmore*  
*School of Civil Engineering and Built Environment*  
*Queensland University of Technology*  
*Gardens Point, Brisbane Q4001, Australia*

*Tel: Int+ (61) 7 3893 3170*  
*Email: [rm.skitmore@qut.edu.au](mailto:rm.skitmore@qut.edu.au)*

Version 5 (16 July 2013)

Words in main text (excluding Summary and References): 5062

Number of Figures: 4

Number of Tables: 2

---

<sup>1</sup> BSc (Hons), MSc, PhD, FCI0B, FRICS, Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, Email: [tstng@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:tstng@hkucc.hku.hk)

<sup>2</sup> MSc, PhD, FRICS, MCI0B, Professor, School of Civil Engineering and Built Environment, Queensland University of Technology, Gardens Point, Brisbane Q4001, Australia, email: [rm.skitmore@qut.edu.au](mailto:rm.skitmore@qut.edu.au)

<sup>3</sup> B.Eng. Student, Department of Civil Engineering, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, Email: [tamkayan@graduate.hku.hk](mailto:tamkayan@graduate.hku.hk)

<sup>4</sup> MSc, PhD, Student, Department of Civil Engineering, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, Email: [li.terryhy@gmail.com](mailto:li.terryhy@gmail.com)

# **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN MAJOR PROJECTS – THE HONG KONG EXPERIENCE**

## **Summary**

Public engagement is an essential process for major municipal infrastructure and construction projects as it serves to identify the interests and concerns of citizens before the planning and design are finalized and thus ensures the schemes are beneficial to all sectors of the community. However, the successfulness of public engagement depends on a number of factors not least the suitability of engagement methods used, representativeness and activeness of participants, time pressure, financial constraint, etc. In Hong Kong, the community have experienced discontentment with several major projects recently, suggesting the need to examine the effectiveness of its current public engagement mechanism. This paper reports the results of a series of interviews with a variety of stakeholders - indicating the need for a carefully considered public engagement plan to be established at the beginning to drive the process and more experienced people to lead and facilitate the engagement process.

*Keywords:* Infrastructure planning, social impact, public policy

## **1. Introduction**

Public engagement is considered to be one of the key determinants of success when planning and designing a municipal infrastructure and construction project, as the satisfaction of citizens generally is becoming increasingly important in today's society (Shan and Yai, 2011). In Hong Kong, the concept of public engagement has been strengthened and more innovative techniques have been adopted to facilitate the participation of the public. For example, Hong

Kong was the first place in the world to use three-dimensional (3D) public engagement tools during the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process (EPD, 2004; Li *et al.*, 2012a). This can help people to understand complex projects and issues, and thus promote continuous public involvement and stakeholder engagement.

Compared with mainland China, where the implementation of participatory mechanisms is still in its infancy, public engagement in Hong Kong is conducted in a relatively comprehensive and thorough manner (Figure 1) (Li *et al.*, 2009), with the *Project Administration Handbook for Civil Engineering Works* produced by the Civil Engineering and Development Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government, discussing public engagement in detail in terms of different project stages. A successful practical example is the public engagement exercise for the review and update of the Railway Development Strategy 2000 (RDS 2000) to map out a long-term railway development blueprint for Hong Kong (HKSAR Government, 2012). As detailed in the Railway Development Strategy 2000 (RDS 2000), this will result in five railway projects being completed between 2014 and 2020, including the West Island Line, the Hong Kong Section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, the South Island Line (East), the Kwun Tong Line Extension and the Shatin to Central Link (HKSAR Government, 2012).

< *Figure 1* >

A criticism, however, is that the means of public involvement is rather limited in Hong Kong and is usually through a District or Rural Committee in the general belief that the Councillors involved will collect the views of local residents and represent their rights and opinions

accordingly (Heung, 2006). On the other hand, with the more lengthy and indirect communication channels involved, a longer time is usually needed for a consensus to be reached and this can create an additional financial burden and delay the project schedule (Creighton, 2005; Zhu, 2009a,b). As a result, there is a temptation to conduct a cursory or superficial engagement exercise. The experience of some recent public infrastructure and construction projects in the city (such as the Queen's Piers demolition, Central-Wanchai Bypass (CWB), Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL) and Wing Lee Street Redevelopment) have attracted considerable attention in this respect (Lam, 2005; CET, 2010; Yung and Chan, 2011). The discontentment of Hong Kong citizens over these projects - especially as manifested by the behaviour of the "after 80s" - has aroused a heated debate on how best to balance the physical development of the city against the interests of its human inhabitants (Lee and Chan, 2008; Tam *et al.*, 2009; CET, 2010).

This indicates the need for improvement in the current practice of public engagement in Hong Kong in order to ensure its major projects are successfully implemented in future. To do this, the obvious starting point is to investigate the effectiveness of current public engagement in public infrastructure and construction projects in Hong Kong as a precursor to proposing ways to improve the process.

## **2. Methodology**

Despite a public engagement process having been followed for many public infrastructure and construction projects in Hong Kong for many years, little systematic attention has been paid to this important topic (Bastian, 2005). There is therefore a need to identify the problems associated with current practice. One approach to this is to analyze some of the

more successful and controversial projects in which public engagement was used. In addition, the opinions of various stakeholders may help uncover the divergent expectations involved.

The projects in Hong Kong that have aroused public feelings in recent years include the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), Kai Tak Cruise Terminal and Central-Wanchai Bypass (CWB) projects (Lam, 2005; Planning Department, 2005; WKCDA, 2010). These projects are of a significant scale and cover a wide variety of schemes including urban planning, building and civil engineering work. The WKCD and CWB projects provoked a considerable protest due to the possible transfer of interest to a private investor in addition to a likely adverse effect on the environment. Therefore, these projects should provide a good illustration of the current public engagement process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders, *viz.* construction professionals, government officials, legislators, and representatives of non-government organizations. Since each group of participants have their own expertise, experience and concerns of the public engagement process, their comments should be extremely valuable in the effort to enhance the public engagement process in Hong Kong. The interview protocol consisted of 15 questions, covering topics related to (i) the process of public engagement; (ii) representativeness of stakeholders; and (iii) how to balance the various interests involved. The interview protocol had been piloted with two experts in public engagement and their comments were incorporated in the final version of the interview protocol.

The samples were first stratified into four main groups who are believed to be involved and interested in the public engagement process, and they include government officials, construction professionals, those representing society, and academics. From these four

stratified groups, relevant samples were drawn according to their professional background and previous experience in public engagement. Using a combination of stratified and purposive sampling approaches should help ensure the data collected is more comprehensive and reliable. A total of 25 potential interviewees from various organizations were identified and invitation letters were despatched accordingly. Of these, 16 agreed to take part in the semi-interview process.

Those interviewees who had agreed to participate in study were provided with the interview questions beforehand. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the office of the interviewees and their opinions were recorded in writing. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were returned to the interviewees for verification. Based on the information in the transcripts, relevant findings were extracted according to the fairness and efficiency of the current mechanism as well as the ways to improve practice. Since the interviewees were not asked to comment on the public engagement process of a particular project, it is possible that their views can be quite diverse. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the results will facilitate cross-learning between different projects and thus drive the improvement of public engagement in Hong Kong.

### **3. Case studies**

Figures 2-4 show the engagement activities involved in the case study projects. The specific objectives of all the projects were stated before commencement of the public engagement exercise in support of the proposals (Planning Department, 2005; Highways Department, 2007, 2011; WKCD, 2010). The democratic and decision making processes for major public infrastructure and construction projects as well as the key concerns of various

stakeholders in this type of projects are described in Ng *et al.* (2012) and Li *et al.* (2012b) respectively. Clearly, this is an important measure in order to minimize the likelihood of conflicts, as spelling out the objectives of a project clearly and transparently enables any alternatives as proposed by citizens to be compared with the project objectives before a solution is established.

< *Figure 2* >

< *Figure 3* >

< *Figure 4* >

The three projects analyzed show that the engagement processes were conducted at the planning stage and usually before the development plan was completed (Planning Department, 2005; Highways Department, 2007; 2011; WKCDA, 2010). This is because the cost of public engagement is highly correlated with the time and resources being provided for the process and, if the proposed plan and/or design is rejected, the planners and design team members will have to ‘go back to the drawing board’ – making much of the previous work redundant (Creighton, 2005). As a result, early public engagement in the planning and design process is encouraged in order to minimize the amount of revisions needed to accommodate any radical and surprising feedback (CEDD, 2009).

The engagement processes involved three stages for all three case study projects (Planning Department, 2005; Highways Department, 2007; 2011; WKCDA, 2010). The first stage was primarily to identify the public aspirations and wishes for the project. Having received general opinions from the public, possible concept plans were prepared and published for the second stage, which involved soliciting public views on the developed concept plans and

formulating a development plan based on the preferred concept plan. For the final stage, opinions on the development plan were gathered. Such an engagement process takes approximately 3 to 6 months to complete, with the time gap between the conceptual stage and public engagement stage necessarily being quite lengthy so as to gain support from the majority of the community.

Pre-consultation meetings with professional bodies were held prior to widespread public engagement in order to produce conceptual ideas in advance. However, in the case of WKCD, the design of the canopy was announced before any public engagement, and this led to considerable negative feedback at the early stage of planning and a consequently lengthened engagement process (WKCDA, 2010). The problem was aggravated when no contingency plans had been made.

The commonly used engagement methods include television or newspaper advertisements, poster announcements at MTR stations, exhibitions, road shows, public forums, focus group meetings, meetings with secondary schools, telephone polls and written submissions (e.g. through faxes, wish cards, letters, internet discussion boards, emails and e-wish cards through the project website) (El-Gohary *et al.*, 2006). However, these methods are not particularly effective in Hong Kong as reflected by the low response rates achieved, possibly due to the prevalent traditional Confucianism culture of respectfulness existing in this region (Li *et al.*, 2012a). As a result, it was observed that the channels of communication are becoming increasingly innovative, e.g. the use of Internet platforms, so as to 'break the ice' between the government and the public. Furthermore, as the scale of these projects is very large, it was necessary for individual authorities to provide different communication channels for the

public to voice their concerns, expedite the response time and improve project success (CEDD, 2009).

In order to increase the transparency of the process, individual authorities (i.e. Expert Panels) and relevant ordinances were established to control the entire process (CEDD, 2009). For instance, a WKCD Authority and Harbour-front Enhancement Committee were set up to facilitate the engagement exercise for the WKCD and Central-Wanchai Bypass projects. In addition, a WKCD Ordinance and Railway Ordinance were devised to control the WKCD and XRL developments respectively. Examples are shown in Table 1.

*< Table 1 >*

#### **4. Interview findings**

A total of 25 invitations were dispatched and 16 individuals agreed to take part in the interviews. Of the 16 interviewees, 5 were government officials, 3 worked as construction professionals, 4 represented the community, and 4 were academics. Their profiles are shown in Table 2.

*< Table 2 >*

According to Rowe and Frewer (2005), the effectiveness of the public engagement process depends on the 'Fairness' and 'Efficiency' of the mechanism. Therefore, the interview findings are provided in these two categories to assess the effectiveness of the current public

engagement mechanism in Hong Kong. Furthermore, recommendations are drawn from the findings of the interviews.

## **4.1 Fairness of the mechanism**

### ***4.1.1 Public acceptance***

Most interviewees (i.e. Interviewees G1-5, P2-3, S3 and A1-2) agreed that public engagement should serve its purpose by collecting opinions from the public. Interviewee G3 believed that citizens are already familiar with, and would participate more in, public engagement exercises these days as they are increasingly concerned about the existence of any engagement processes at the planning stage and would even enquire about the timelines involved.

However, Interviewee A3 did not think public engagement could achieve the desired purpose as it fails to address public concerns. Moreover, the process may not lead to any conclusive solution, which renders public engagement meaningless (Interviewee A4). Some interviewees expressed concern over the vagueness of the questions set for the public engagement (Interviewees S1 and S3). Inadequate research prior to the engagement process (Interviewee A1) has resulted in superficial questions being asked, adding to the difficulties in soliciting true opinions from the public.

Some interviewees also asserted that the government does not have any sincere intention of conduct genuine public engagement as they always try to reach a consensus at the last

moment. Public engagement is sometimes regarded as simply a “procedure”. In the absence of trust between the government and the public, public engagement was considered by Interviewees P1 and S2-3 to be an unrealistic process.

#### ***4.1.2 Equity***

*4.1.2.1 Resource allocation:* Equal resources should be allowed to different stakeholders during the public engagement process. However, as there is a rather large discrepancy between the high and the income groups in the city, it is unfair for the disadvantaged or minority groups to have less opportunity in the public engagement process (Interviewee P1). With ample resources, the government should take a lead in facilitating the public engagement process to ensure different opinions are solicited from the low-educated sector and minority groups (Interviewee P1). Interviewee G1, however, believed that the affected groups had been given adequate consultation, and quoted the example of visits being made to the residents of Choi Yuen Village. As mentioned by Interviewees G1, G3-4, P2-3, S3 and A1-3, all parties were given opportunities on an equal basis, as the same set of project details was made available to the general public for access through various channels. However, Interviewee P1 argued that various people were provided with different levels of information, with construction professionals usually receiving more information so that they could advise on the technical feasibility of the project. Interviewee S1 also opined that project information should vary from one project to another, and such information should be expressed in layman terms to help the general public to appreciate the likely impact to be made by the project (Interviewees G2-3, P1, S4 and A2-3).

*4.2.1.2 Avoidance of domination:* In Hong Kong, it is normal to bias attention towards activists more than the feelings of the silent majority (CCSG, 2007). It is also possible that opposition to proposals may be driven by personal interest (Interviewee S1), political agendas (Interviewee S4) or for no reason at all (Interviewee A1). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to establish whether the activists involved are indeed directly affected by the project (Interviewees G3, P1-2, S4 and A2-3).

*4.2.2.3 Balance of interests:* While it is ideal to cater for the needs and requests of everyone, Interviewees G2, P2, S1-4 and A1-3 thought it was difficult to balance the interests of all stakeholders. In any case, the overall public interest in the long run is the prime consideration (Interviewees G1, G3, P2, S1, S3 and A4). A project should go ahead if the majority of the community agree to do so (Interviewees G2, P2 and A2). Any conflicts can be resolved by law (Interviewees G1, A1 and A3), by compensation (Interviewees G1, P1, S1 and S4), by considering different criteria (Interviewees G3 and A3), or through better communication (all except for Interviewees P1 and S2). Ideally, a compromise should be reached to maintain social harmony (Interviewees G3, P3 and A3-4). As land in Hong Kong is very limited, the development needs to be balanced against the positive or negative concerns of people (Interviewee S1). Interviewees G1-2 stressed that the role of the government is to be fair, impartial and unbiased, and that an effort was made to strike a balance in the Lok Ma Chau project and land requisition in the Express Rail Link project. Mitigation measures can also be introduced to reduce the disruption caused by the project so as to minimise its impact on the locality. According to Interviewee G1, some mitigation measures can be highly flexible and, as Interviewee P1 pointed out, they should be introduced when no consensus is reached.

### ***4.1.3 Democracy***

The core of public engagement is democratic and hence different channels should be provided to allow the public to express their opinions (Interviewees G1-5 and P2-3). Some interviewees believed that early engagement has served the purpose of soliciting different views (Interviewee G2, G5, P2-3, S4 and A2), while others did not think the public engagement process was democratic enough as no engagement activities take place at the conceptual stage (Interviewees P1 and S2-3). Interviewee S3 also argued that a public forum may provoke a less democratic environment as a number of pro-government individuals and groups will be involved. In addition, Interviewee S4 opined that, although Hong Kong people are highly educated, they can be easily influenced by experts or celebrities who are biased towards their own political standpoint.

### ***4.1.4 Representativeness***

*4.1.4.1 Stakeholder selection:* The interviewees unequivocally agreed that every citizen is a stakeholder of a major infrastructure and construction project, and their opinions should be properly collected and considered. However, it is impracticable to have all the citizens involved in the engagement exercise, and participatory planning is required to ensure the representativeness of the stakeholders before any engagement activities are introduced (Interviewee A1). Interviewee A3 also believed that a right mix of stakeholders is crucial to success, and Interviewee G5 suggested having a multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary group. Interviewees G3-4 and S4, on the other hand, proposed selecting stakeholders by experience alone.

*4.1.4.2 Role of district councillors:* Under the District Administration Scheme, District Councillors represent particular districts (Interviewees G2, G5, P1-3, S1, S4 and A1-4), and they should act as the bridge between the government and the public (Interviewee S1) or even facilitate the engagement process (Interviewees G2, G5, P1, P3 and A1-4). This is particularly important in Hong Kong as the majority of its people do not have time to participate in public engagement exercises (Interviewees S1 and S4), and they rely on the District Councillors or any representatives to represent their opinions instead (Interviewee S1). As pointed out by Interviewee S4, one way of engagement is by channelling project information to the District Councils for discussion. However, one should be cautious about the representativeness of the opinions in this way as they could be distorted when the personal judgment of the District Councillors becomes involved or when they have a conflict of interest. Should the District Councillor have a political background, it could be difficult for them to judge whether they are representing the people in their districts or political parties (Interviewees P2 and S4). Interviewee A1 added that a District Councillor is also one of the stakeholders, and he or she should not represent other individuals. Also mentioned was that a District Councillor's power is only limited to a particular district (Interviewee S2).

#### ***4.1.5 Transparency***

Around half the interviewees considered the current engagement mechanism to be very transparent as most of the materials are published through various communication channels, such as newsletter, forums, exhibitions, and Internet (Interviewees G1-5, P2-3 and A2). To enhance transparency, the “Code on Access to Information” is followed which requires all information other than personal data to be provided to the public upon request (Interviewee P2). However, others argued that the government is sometimes reluctant to disclose all the

project documents – as happened with the XRL project (Interviewees P1 and S2-3). Interviewee G1 also explained that certain sensitive information, such as that related to land requisition, might be withheld in the early planning stage to prevent its exploitation.

#### ***4.1.6 Mutual influence***

Some interviewees believe that it is good for stakeholders to influence each other, as this can increase the public awareness of the project and improve the democratic process (Interviewee S3). Other expressed concern over mutual influence as opinions can be distorted and hence dominate the true concerns over the issues. Interviewee S4 claimed that those experts and celebrities with a political agenda might influence the general public. The way in which the project is reported by the media can affect the will of citizens too. There are also some people who do not have a strong reason for objection, but they simply follow the protestors to express their general discontentment anyway.

### **4.2 Efficiency of the mechanism**

#### ***4.2.1 Appropriate elicitation***

*4.2.1.1 Communication channels:* According to Interviewees S1, S3-4 and A1, the public engagement mechanism in Hong Kong is vague and difficult to follow. Interviewee A4 further argued that there is a lack of a systematic mechanism to collect opinions from the public that has led to inconclusive findings. In addition, the public, non-government organizations (NGOs) and Legislative Council members are not familiar with the mechanism of public engagement provided by the government (Interviewee S2). The public engagement

documents should also be packaged properly in order to raise public awareness (Interviewee A2). To prevent asking overly vague questions during the public engagement exercise (Interviewees S1 and S3), more research should be conducted in advance (Interviewee A1). Otherwise, public engagement can be more of pretence than a genuine platform for obtaining public opinions (Interviewees S2-3 and A1). More importantly, the attention needs to be paid to those who support the scheme (Interviewees G1, G3, S4 and A3) and they should be encouraged to take part in the engagement activities to prevent negative views being dominant (Interviewees G1, S4 and A2-3).

*4.2.2.2 Use of consultants:* Consultants are sometimes employed to assist the government in conducting its public engagement exercises (Interviewees G1, G3, S4 and P2). They might also be asked to attend, or even facilitate the engagement activities and subsequently analyze the results after each stage of the exercise (Interviewee P3). However, there is a danger that the consultants employed focus more on the technical aspects of the project without thoroughly considering the social, economical and environmental issues involved (Interviewees G3 and S4). In order to determine the social, economical and environmental impact of the project, Interviewees G4, P2, S4 and A1 suggested conducting market research before the commencement of the public engagement process. Furthermore, it was suggested that university research teams, or public relations firms, may be employed to improve independence and impartialness (Interviewees G3, S3-4 and A1) and through which the public are more willing to express their opinions freely (Interviewee G3).

#### ***4.2.2 Consideration of public views***

Interviewees G1-5 and P2 were convinced that both positive and negative opinions captured from the public should have been recorded and series of follow-up actions made, including reporting to individual expert panels and answering the enquiries of different groups. In reality, however, Interviewee S3 had been unaware of some suggestions by the government after the engagement process. Likewise, Interviewees P1 and S2-3 said the government had not responded to certain suggestions proposed by the professional groups.

### **DISCUSSION**

*Pre-engagement stage:* Both Interviewees P1 and S4 suggested that early engagement is essential in the public engagement process, and can take the form of market research in order to understand public opinion on the technical, environmental, social and economic aspects involved (Interviewee S4). At the pre-engagement stage, the project objectives should be clearly stated for the public to have a better understanding of the project (Interviewee S4). In addition, possible mitigation measures should be communicated to the public for the government to increase time and cost effectiveness.

*Public engagement stage:* In order to resolve any conflicts, Interviewee S1 suggested identifying the reasons for opposition to the project and start discussions with various groups irrespective of whether they are for or against the project. Similar comment was made by Interviewee G3, as she believed that opposition or protests are predominantly due to insufficient communication and that the use of Facebook or other computerized social

network tools may help resolve the problem, especially for those who do not want to be present in person in the engagement activities (Interviewees G3 and S4). Interviewee G3 advocated using the right engagement techniques and identifying the needs of the public as the key to conflict avoidance. More effort should be made to encourage professional bodies to generate ideas/options and to list alternative options to allow the public to have a better picture of the costs and benefits of the proposed scheme (Interviewee P1), a view endorsed by Interviewee P2, who believed that construction professionals can serve as the bridge between the public and the government in helping explain the technical issues to the public on an independent basis. Acknowledging the importance of our next generation, different youth groups should be invited to participate in the engagement activities so they can, in turn, become ambassadors to inform the other sectors of the society of the needs and challenges of the project (Interviewee S4). However, since different stakeholders may be directly or indirectly affected by the project to different extents, their opinions should be carefully considered and balanced before a final conclusion is reached (Interviewee A3).

*Post-public engagement stage:* Interviewee G4 emphasized the significance of the engagement report as it records all the solicited opinions and can therefore serve as a good source of information for educational purposes and future projects. Therefore, they should be made available to the public, possibly through the Internet.

*Time and cost considerations:* Interviewees G1, G3, A1 and A3 commented that time is one of their concerns, but not the major one. The major concern is the comprehensiveness of the public engagement and consensus building. Undoubtedly, the time and cost of a project would increase as more effort is put into public engagement, so the government needs to

justify to the public the value of spending the extra time and money involved (Interviewee S4).

*Voice of the protesters:* It is believed that some possible reasons for protesting include ideological arguments against the development (Interviewee S1) or idealization (Interviewee A2). Some people are reluctant to accept new developments *per se* and support the ideas of environment protection, cultural and heritage conservation. On the other hand, Interviewees S1, G2-3, P1, P3 and S4 believed that Hong Kong people are rational and protest with firm reasons and beliefs. Currently, there are insufficient channels for the public to express their opinions (Interviewee G3), and that is why some Hong Kong people wish to spend time in protesting.

## **5. The way forward**

- Hong Kong tends to plan public engagement in an *ad hoc* manner and entrust the planning task to consultant or public relations firms (Rowe and Frewer, 2005), which can lead to a misidentification of stakeholders and an undue emphasis on technical aspects at the expense of the social, economical and environmental impacts of projects. Conducting market research would help prevent mistakes that hinder project progress.
- Currently, public engagement is often a merely routine bureaucratic process. Better would be for the various stakeholders to make their views known to relevant officials before project planning commences.

- There is a lack of people technically sound and sensitive enough to the effects of construction projects on the community. Construction personnel need to be properly trained and educated to have strong communication and leadership skills.
- It is currently difficult to fully communicate the necessary information within the community. All possible alternatives and constraints should be made identified and simple and non-technical information-sharing sessions provided for the less technically knowledgeable.
- Community members currently reveal their views through petitions or protests. More innovative engagement means can be introduced through information technology and mass media.
- Professional groups can use their expertise to convey technical aspects to the public by organizing workshops to encourage interest and participation. As young people are increasingly interested in social issues, they can direct their energies into soliciting data from the community for relaying to the government.

## **6. Conclusions**

As the importance of public engagement increases, more effort needs be made to improve the mechanism of this crucial process. In this study, three cases were reviewed and the associated interviews analyzed. It is found that the current public engagement mechanism in Hong Kong has some room for improvement. In particular, there is a need for conduct market research to identify public concerns over any plans or designs put forward. More importantly, a carefully considered public engagement plan should be established at the very beginning to drive the entire process. Professional institutions should play a more active role

in public engagement, particularly during the conceptual stage. Moreover, the possible risks should be identified and a contingency plan made to address all possible scenarios. In the absence of experienced people to lead and facilitate the engagement process, an urgent task is to train a group of experts who are not only knowledgeable in the project's technical aspects but are also sensitive to the societal issues involved.

To be successful, all stakeholders should be actively involved in the engagement process. This can only be achieved by arousing the interest of people and make them feel they have a stake in the project. Therefore, relevant information should be provided to the public at different levels of abstraction so that no sector of the community will be disadvantaged. Innovative ideas should be applied to reach different groups of people. For instance, physical or 3-D models and TV campaigns may help non-literate groups while computer games and social networks could encourage young people to express their views. The government should take the lead in educating all stakeholders and persuade them to be involved in the process, so that a broad spectrum of opinions can be solicited to avoid any possible bias towards a particular sector. Regular reviews and evaluations should be carried out during and after the public engagement process to ensure the views of different stakeholder remain unchanged over time.

Social harmony has underpinned the success of Hong Kong over the last century. In view of the rapid expansion in economic activities and, with the change in demographic profile anticipated in the years to come, the construction of additional public infrastructure and construction facilities is inevitable. However, any further building and infrastructure development should be balanced against the potential damage to the environment as well as the effects on the lifestyle of the local community. Public engagement should therefore

provide a good platform for policy makers and society to exchange views on how to make Hong Kong a better place in which to live. A change in culture, from merely obeying to a logical exchange of ideas is needed. This study can serve as a starting point for decision-makers to improve on the existing public engagement mechanism. The successful experiences of other countries can be examined to see if they can be adapted to suit the unique culture and environment of Hong Kong.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors are grateful to the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government for financially supporting this study under the Public Policy Research Scheme (Grant No.: 7010-PPR-4).

## **REFERENCES**

Bastian E 2005 *Public Engagement Processes in Hong Kong*, Available on line at  
<http://www.civic-exchange.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/2005-eleanor.pdf>

(accessed 25/07/11).

CSG 2007 *From Consultation to Civic Engagement: The Road to Better Policy-making and Governance in Hong Kong*, Centre for Civil Society and Governance, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

CEDD 2009 *Public Consultation/Engagement Guidelines*, Civil Engineering and Development Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong.

- CET 2010 *Local Citizen's Protest on Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link*, China Economic Net, Available on line at <http://news.163.com/10/0107/16/5SEKICSR0001124J.html> (accessed 25/07/11) (in Chinese).
- Creighton JL 2005 *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions through Citizen Involvement*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- El-Gohary N Osman H and El-Diraby T 2006 Stakeholder Management for Public Private Partnerships, *International Journal of Project Management*, **24(7)**, 595-604.
- EPD 2004 *3D tools facilitate public participation in EIA process*, Environmental Protection Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong. Available on line at [http://www.epd.gov.hk/eia/english/press\\_release/3D.htm](http://www.epd.gov.hk/eia/english/press_release/3D.htm) (accessed 25/06/13).
- Heung PH 2006 *Public Participation in Urban Renewal in Hong Kong*, Unpublished B.Sc. Dissertation, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
- Highways Department 2007 *Leaflet of Central – Wan Chai Bypass Project*, Highways Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong. Available on line at <http://www.hyd.gov.hk/eng/major/road/projects/6579th/leaflet.pdf> (accessed 25/07/11).
- Highways Department 2011 *Central – Wan Chai Bypass and Island Eastern Corridor Link*, Highways Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong. Available on line at <http://www.hyd.gov.hk/eng/major/road/projects/6579th/> (accessed 25/07/11).
- HKSAR Government 2012 *Our Future Railway Stage 1 Public Engagement exercise launched*, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong.

Available on line at <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201204/20/P201204200408.htm>  
(accessed 25/06/13).

Lam WHK 2005 *Report of the Expert Panel on Sustainable Transport Planning and Central – Wan Chai Bypass*, Expert Panel on Sustainable Transport Planning and Central – Wan Chai Bypass, Hong Kong.

Lee GKL and Chan EHW 2008. Factors affecting urban renewal in high-density city: case study of Hong Kong, *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, **134(3)**, 140-148.

Li THY Ng ST and Wong KKW 2009 A framework of public engagement for PPP projects in China, *Proceedings of Global Innovation in Construction Conference*, September 13-16, Loughborough University, Loughborough, United Kingdom, 46-56.

Li THY Ng ST and Skitmore RM 2012a Public participation in infrastructure and construction projects in China: from an EIA-based to a whole-cycle process, *Habitat International*, **36(1)**, 47-56.

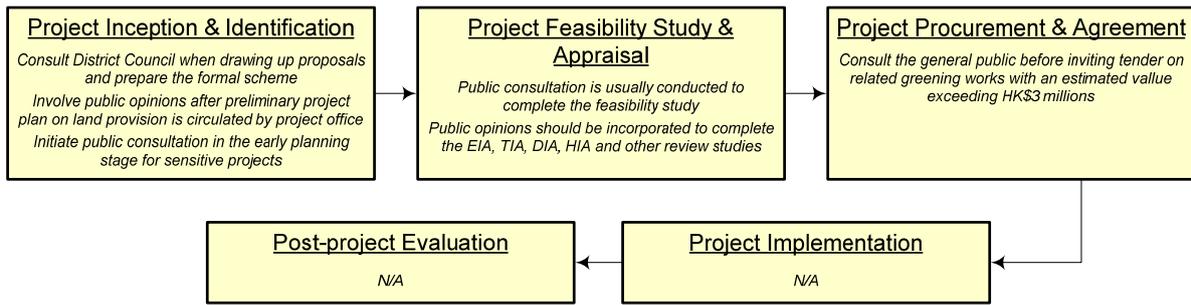
Li THY Ng ST and Skitmore RM 2012b Conflict or consensus: an investigation of stakeholder concerns during the participation process for infrastructure and construction projects in Hong Kong, *Habitat International*, **36(2)**, 333-342.

Moore A and Warren A 2006 Legal advocacy in environmental public participation in China: raising the stakes and strengthening stakeholders, *China Environment Series*, **8**, 3-23.

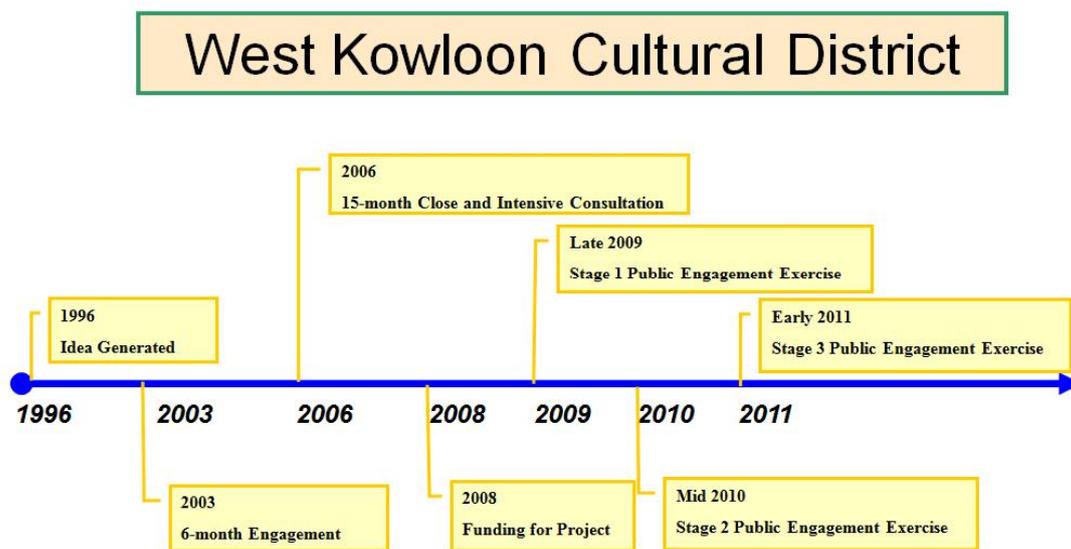
Ng ST Li THY and Wong JMW 2012 Rethinking public participation in infrastructure projects, *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Municipal Engineer*, **165(2)**, 101-113.

Planning Department 2005 *Kai Tak Planning Review*, Planning Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong, Available on line at [http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland\\_en/p\\_study/prog\\_s/sek\\_09/website\\_chib5\\_eng/Stage2PP\\_comments/Topical\\_Forum\\_2/topical\\_forum2\\_06\\_12\\_05.pdf](http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/prog_s/sek_09/website_chib5_eng/Stage2PP_comments/Topical_Forum_2/topical_forum2_06_12_05.pdf) (accessed 25/07/11).

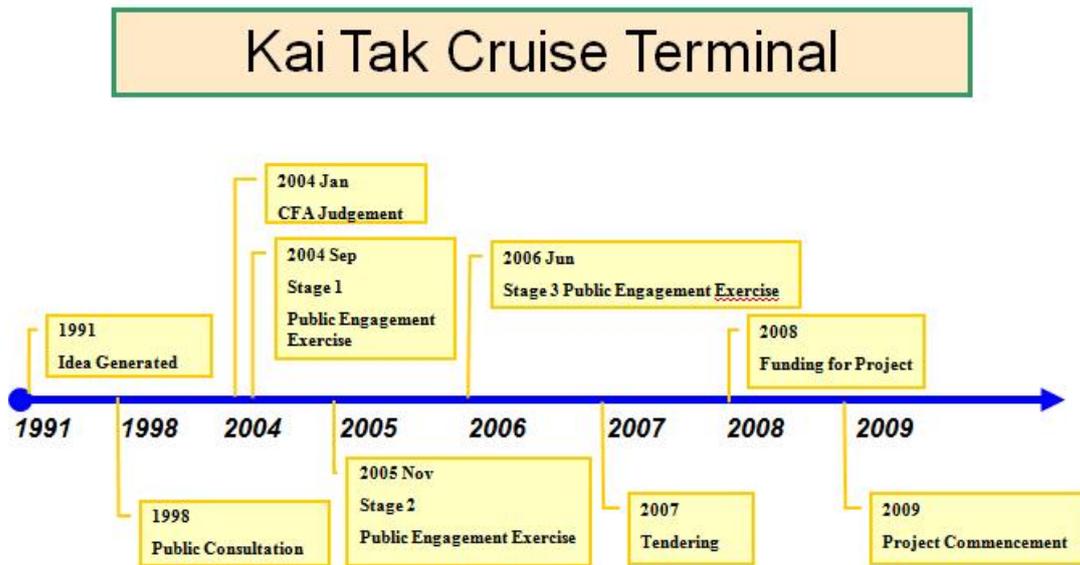
- Rowe G and Frewer LJ 2005 A typology of public engagement mechanisms, *Science, Technology & Human Values*, **30(2)**, 251-290.
- Shan C and Yai T 2011 Public Involvement Requirements for Infrastructure Planning in China, *Habitat International*, **35(1)**, 158-166.
- Tam CM Zeng SX and Tong TKL 2009 Conflict analysis in public engagement program of urban planning in Hong Kong, *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, **135(2)**, 51-55.
- WKCDA 2010 *Public Engagement Exercise*, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong, Available on line at [http://www.wkcda.hk/en/pe\\_exercises/index.html](http://www.wkcda.hk/en/pe_exercises/index.html) (accessed 25/07/11).
- Yung EHK and Chan EHW 2011 Problem issues of public participation in built-heritage conservation: two controversial cases in Hong Kong, *Habitat International*, **35(3)**, 457-466.
- Zhu KD 2009a *Worse than Fake Public Consultation*, Available on line at <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1002532> (accessed 25/07/11) (in Chinese).
- Zhu KD 2009b *Administration-oriented Public Consultation*, Available on line at <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1002679> (accessed 25/07/11) (in Chinese).



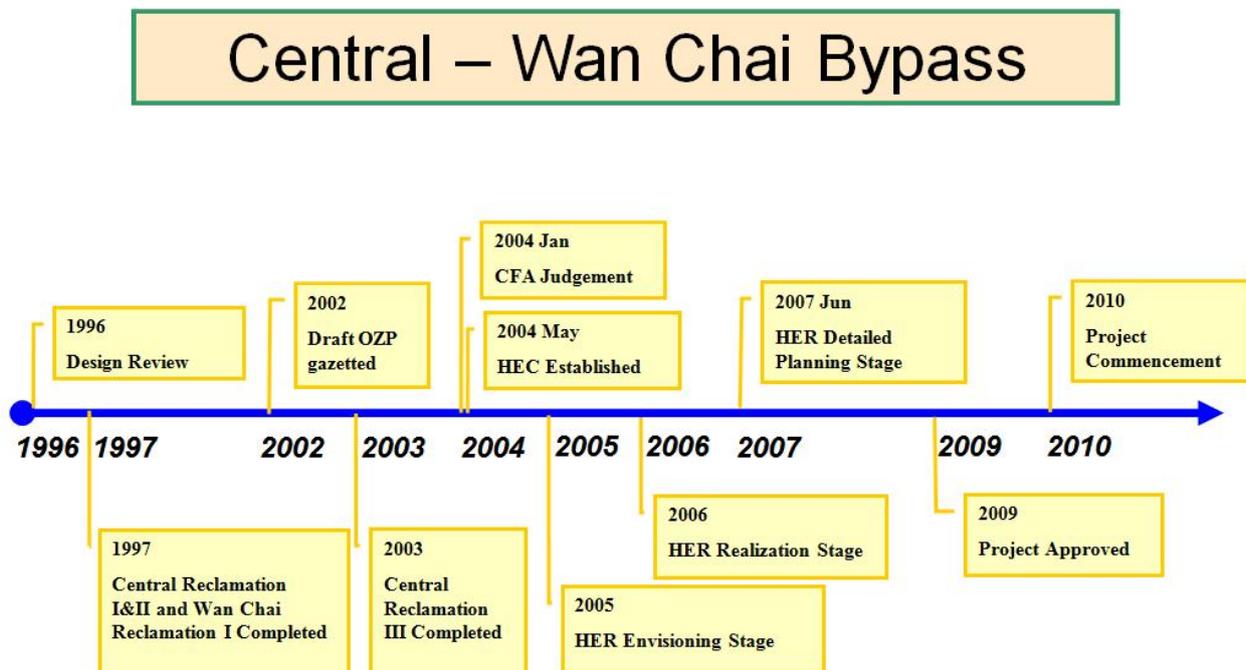
**Figure 1.** Hong Kong public engagement in different project stages



**Figure 2.** Engagement activities of the West Kowloon Cultural District project



**Figure 3.** Engagement activities of the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal project



**Figure 4.** Engagement activities of the Central-Wanchai Bypass project

**Table 1:** List of projects with corresponding ordinances

<b>Project</b>	<b>Corresponding Ordinance</b>
WKCD	WKCD Ordinance
Kai Tak	Foreshore and Seabed Ordinance
CWB	Roads Ordinance
XRL	Railway Ordinance
Town Planning Projects	Town Planning Ordinance
Urban Renewal Projects	Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance

**Table 2:** List of interviewees with dates of interviews

<b>Grouping</b>	<b>Interviewee Ref.</b>	<b>Position/Title</b>
Government (G)	Interviewee G1	Official of Government Department I
	Interviewee G2	Official of Government Department I
	Interviewee G3	Official of Government Department II
	Interviewee G4	Official of Government Department III
	Interviewee G5	Official of Government Department IV
Professional (P)	Interviewee P1	Chairman of Individual Professional Group
	Interviewee P2	Representative of Professional Institution
	Interviewee P3	Representative of a Statutory Authority
Societal Group (S)	Interviewee S1	Legislative Council Member
	Interviewee S2	Ex-Legislative Council Member
	Interviewee S3	Ex-Legislative Council member
	Interviewee S4	Representative of Non-Government Organization
Academic (A)	Interviewee A1	Lecturer, Local University I
	Interviewee A2	Lecturer, Local University II
	Interviewee A3	Professor, Local University II
	Interviewee A4	Lecturer, Local University II

## **PRACTICAL RELEVANCE AND POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS**

- Conducting market research before any planning or design solutions are made would help prevent any possible mistakes that could otherwise hinder project progress. The emphasis on public engagement should not be placed on the technical aspects and whether solution is feasible or not, as the community and affected groups are more interested to know the social, economical and environmental impacts of the project.
- The public should be engaged as early as possible with various stakeholders at least being allowed to voice what they would, and would not, like before the project planning stage for the general sentiment of society to be uncovered at an early stage to avoid future disputes. This would also allow the relevant officials to plan the contingencies of the project.
- Construction personnel need to be properly trained and educated to have strong communication and leadership skills.
- All possible alternatives and constraints should be made available for inspection by all citizens. To help those who are disadvantaged, simple and non-technical information should be provided and information-sharing sessions held to improve their understanding.
- More innovative engagement means can be introduced to arouse the interest of citizens to provide their views on public infrastructure and construction projects.
- Professional groups should use their expertise to convey the technical aspects to the public. Young people are increasingly interested in social issues and can direct their energies into soliciting data from society for relaying to the government. Professional institutions and NGOs can organize workshops to arouse people's interest and encourage them to actively participate in the process.



Professor S. Thomas NG



Professor Martin SKITMORE



Ms. Ka Yan TAM



Dr. Terry H.Y. LI