



HISTORY OF YOUTH POLICY IN HONG KONG

OVERVIEW

In May 1986, the Central Committee on Youth (CCY) was established to examine the need for a youth policy in Hong Kong. The CCY delegated this task to its Working Party on Youth Policy (**Working Party**). After 18 months of deliberation, the Working Party released a *Report on Youth Policy* on 25 April 1988 for public consultation.

The Working Party's report was endorsed without substantive changes by the CCY and published in January 1989, entitled *Report on the Need for a Youth Policy in Hong Kong*. It recommended the colonial Government to formulate a youth policy and establish a commission on youth for the task (among other responsibilities).

The CCY's recommendation for a youth policy was eventually rejected by then Governor David Wilson, though its recommendation for a Commission on Youth (CoY) was accepted. The CoY was set up and subsequently issued a non-binding *Charter for Youth*.

1960 – 1985: FAILED ADVOCACY ATTEMPTS

From 1960 to 1985, there had been multiple attempts from the grassroots level to advocate for a youth policy in Hong Kong, but without success.

After the civil disturbances in 1966-1967, the Government was urged to strengthen youth services, specifically, to: (a) establish a formal channel for youth to participate in policy-making; and (b) set up a department dedicated to youth affairs or to appoint a Commissioner for Youth Affairs. These recommendations were not accepted and the reasons given were limited resources and administrative difficulties.

In 1972, Dr. Irving Spergel, a United Nations expert on youth affairs, was commissioned by the Social Welfare Department of the Government to look into having a youth policy in Hong Kong. In Spergel's report, he criticized the Government for being shortsighted in not setting a clear policy direction for youth development. He advised formulating a long-term youth policy and setting up a Standing Committee on Social Development of Youth with the Chief Secretary as the chairman. Spergel's recommendations were not accepted.

In the same year, the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS) set up a Working Group on Youth Policy. The Working Group's draft report raised the need for a youth policy to provide comprehensive development and training opportunities for young people and prepare them to assume positive roles in the society. HKCSS's Management Committee did not endorse the draft report, largely because the Committee thought that there was no consensus in the society for the need of a youth policy. That notwithstanding, the HKCSS's Children and Youth Division incorporated the formulation of a long-term youth policy into their sphere of responsibility in 1974.

As youth delinquency had become a major social problem in the 1970s, the Government commissioned the Chinese University of Hong Kong to research on the underlying causes. The resulting report entitled *The Social Causes of Violent Crimes Among Young Offenders in HK* in 1973 recommended the Government, among other suggestions, to set a clear direction for the future development of youth services, to formulate a comprehensive youth policy and to establish a consultative committee on youth affairs. These suggestions were again rejected.

The failure for youth policy to gain political momentum during that period could be attributed to several factors.

For one, the colonial Government's approach to youth matters had largely been passive and fragmented, responding to isolated problems, such as juvenile delinquency, as they occurred. Youth services aimed mostly at welfare and control, instead of development. Formulating a youth policy also entailed having a central coordinating mechanism, which did not tally with the Government system, which was organized on a functional basis.

For another, people at that time were more or less apathetic towards politics and there was not much discourse in the society on having a policy direction for youth development, not to mention a formal youth policy.

One scholar was of the view that, essentially, policy-makers did not see a need for a youth policy. Policy-making in the colonial times had been incremental and took the approach of crisis management, so much so that no policy was regarded as good policy.

1985 – 1989: THE WATERSHED

1985 – 1989 was the watershed for the development of youth policy in Hong Kong. Scholars described the gradual erosion in the powers of the colonial Government during that period, and an increased receptiveness to public opinion. For instance, limited franchise elections were introduced into the Legislative Council in 1985.

There was also a heightened awareness and interest in public policy among the general public, largely in light of Hong Kong's imminent transfer to China. There was a growing sentiment that the future stability and prosperity of Hong Kong depended on its younger generation, hence the need to increase young people's civic awareness and sense of belonging.

Scholars commented that the society's interest in youth development and policy was one of the reasons for the Government's willingness to look into the need for a youth policy. In May 1986, it set up the Central Committee on Youth (CCY), which in turn delegated a Working Party led by Mrs. Rosanna Tam to examine the need for a youth policy. The Working Party released its *Report on Youth Policy (Report)* on 25 April 1988 for public consultation.

Report on Youth Policy

Key points of the Report are extracted below.

Definition of "Youth"

Youth was defined as the population group between 10 and 25 inclusive, taking into account evidence that the age of juvenile delinquents had shifted downwards.

Methods of study

The Working Party conducted visits to youth services, group discussions, seminars and surveys to gauge public opinion on the need for a youth policy. They also reviewed the youth policies of Japan, PRC, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, UK, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Australia, and Sweden.

Reason for study

The Working Party gave the following reason for studying youth policy:



“In view of the critical stage of youth development, the importance of youth in Hong Kong as well as the constructive and destructive potentials young people possess, there is a need for both the Government and voluntary organizations to combine their efforts in developing young people to be healthy and responsible residents.”

Development trends of Hong Kong

The Report emphasized the relevance of Hong Kong's development trends in terms of identifying the issues that youth faced at that time, and the aspirations and goals the policy should set for young people. The Working Party considered Hong Kong's development trends to be as follows:

- a. *Political* – Hong Kong people would become more involved in the region's administration, and young people would inevitably play a greater role.
- b. *Economic* – To maintain Hong Kong's competitiveness in the world market, it was necessary for its youth to possess multi-linguistic and vocational skills and a broad, up-to-date international outlook.
- c. *Social* – Commercialization and materialism, and increasing individualism and alienation had created a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among young people. They would have to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the increasing number of elderly people. The Working Party also noted the development of information technology and its impact on young people.

Review of existing youth services

The Working Party reviewed existing services addressing youth needs, and noted that:

- a. Existing youth services were jointly provided by the Government and voluntary agencies.
- b. Government services were arranged on a functional basis.
- c. Policy advice was rendered to the relevant Government branch by advisory bodies consisting of government officials and individuals representing a wide cross-section of the community, and by the Executive and Legislative Councils, Municipal Councils and District Boards.

Comparative Studies

The Working Party studied Japan, PRC, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, UK, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Australia, and Sweden with respect to their:

- national policy for youth development;
- political, historical, cultural and socioeconomic background;
- body responsible for formulating and implementing their policy; and
- body responsible for coordinating youth activities and programmes.

It found that:

- a. The *objectives* of a national youth policy could be boiled down to: (i) individual development and welfare (e.g., Australia, Netherlands, and Sweden); or (ii) nation building (e.g., PRC and Singapore).
- b. In terms of the *form* of the policy, on one end of the spectrum, some countries had a coherent and comprehensive policy (e.g., Netherlands and Australia) or a piece of legislation (e.g., Sweden), supported by an institutional framework and coordination among government branches and consultation at all levels. On the other end of the spectrum, some countries (e.g., UK) did not have a comprehensive policy, but a number of policies in areas such as education, employment, etc., and a wide range of youth services rendered by local authorities and voluntary agencies, with consultation through advisory councils. In between, some governments assumed the role of policy-making with



limited participation from young people, and only framed their youth policy in broad terms (e.g., Singapore and Thailand).

- c. In all of the surveyed countries, there was a *coordinating body* for youth matters.

The Working Party did not advise transplanting any of these countries' models to Hong Kong due to differences in political philosophy and social environment. Yet it noted that most countries had a statement of their objective and expectation for young people, and developed youth services in accordance with the needs of their young people or of the nation.

Need for youth policy

The Working Party observed that there was a need for a youth policy in Hong Kong, because:

- a. There was a lack of a focal point and direction for the development of youth services, in the sense that there was no common set of reference principles.
- b. Certain youth needs were not well addressed: mental health, personal counseling, political participation and international perspective.
- c. With regard to youth services, there was no clear division of responsibilities between government departments and voluntary agencies.
- d. There was little long-term planning to facilitate the development of young people that took into account their changing needs and the developmental trends of the society.
- e. There was a need for a central body to undertake periodic reviews of youth services and advise on gaps and changes required. This body should include persons from the community and the private sector.

The Working Party felt that the existing situation could be improved through:

- a. a direction for youth development;
- b. better communications and cooperation to optimize resources, to avoid duplication of efforts and to fill service gaps;
- c. proper programme planning;
- d. a regular review of youth services; and
- e. an information repository on young people in HK.

The Working Party put forward three possible policy approaches to achieve the above, and their pros and cons.

Option I: Strengthening the current system

The Party felt that this would fall short of meeting the fundamental need to provide a direction for youth development.

Option II: Comprehensive Youth Policy and Central Body for Implementation

There would be a comprehensive youth policy and a central body responsible for implementing the policy and providing youth services. The youth policy would govern the formulation, planning and provision of all youth services, leading also to the formation of a department or ministry of youth.

Underlying this approach was an assumption that what was right and good for youth was known and non-contentious; yet the Working Party opined that there were diverse opinions on the status (binding or not) and the content of a youth policy.

Another drawback was that the policy would need to be constantly reviewed. The Working Party thought that this approach would not be cost-efficient, given the lead-time between deliberation and implementation.

Option III: Youth Policy with Principles for Youth Development and Advisory Body

There would be a youth policy with a set of principles for youth development, and an advisory body to review and update the policy. The principles for youth development would blend the needs, aspirations and expectations of the community at large with those of young people. It would provide a unified framework to which all policy branches and organizations might refer when considering youth matters; yet it would not spell out any specifics relating to implementation. Unlike Option II, the policy would not be the basis for establishing any department of youth.

Having a youth policy would demonstrate the Government's commitment towards youth development and increase public awareness of the issue. At the same time, framing it as a set of principles would permit flexibility in application, and would not be seen as a form of social control.

Working Party Recommendation

The Working Party recommended taking the *third* approach, that is, formulating a youth policy with a set of principles for youth development and forming an advisory body to review and update the policy. This approach would improve upon the existing system with minimum disruption to the delivery of existing services.

Legislative Council Debate

On 11 May 1988, Mrs. Rosanna Tam moved a motion for the Legislative Council to take note of the Working Party's *Report on Youth Policy*.

Her opening remarks shed light on the timeliness of a youth policy and public attitudes:

“The Sino-British Joint Declaration has established a historic watershed in 1997 for Hong Kong ... [i]n order to maintain HK's stability and prosperity and to meet the great challenges of the time, it is essential to have a new generation of citizens who have had healthy development and have a sense of belonging and are committed to the future of the community. It is against this background that youth development has seen a resurgence of public recognition and attention.”

At the same time, she emphasized the intrinsic value of youth development – that helping young people realize their personal potentials was conducive to social development. Therefore a youth policy should not be subject to temporal constraints.

Her review of past Government efforts in youth development was that it lacked a clear, defined direction and coordination between departments, and was passive and preventive in its approach. She concluded that the Government was obliged to make clear its commitment towards the future development of youth, set up a clear direction and targets, and achieve those targets through a more effective deployment of resources and co-ordination.

In explaining the Report's recommendation, specifically, that the youth policy be couched in general terms in the form of a set of principles (rather than in great detail), she said that this was to preserve flexibility in implementation. She also stated that the youth policy was not a set of rules, but a document for guidance.

14 Legislative Councillors supported the motion. This included Tam herself and 5 Government officials (the Secretary for Health and Welfare, the Secretary for Education and



Manpower, the Secretary for Security, the Secretary for Administrative Services and Information, and the Secretary for District Administration).

Public Consultations

The CCY conducted a public consultation from April to September 1988. The majority of the public supported the formulation of a youth policy and the setting up of a Commission on Youth (CoY). Most thought the CoY should be an advisory body, though some thought it should be given executive power to ensure effective operation.

HKCSS also conducted an *Opinion Survey on Youths' Views on Youth Policy*, and found that:

- 78.9% agreed that there was a need for a youth policy. When asked if a youth policy was “on paper only and had no relationship with youth”, 74.3% disagreed.
- 69.8% agreed with the proposed objectives of the youth policy. 62.4% expressed that the objectives could meet the needs of young people.
- 82.5% agreed to the proposed principles of the youth policy. 85.3% expressed that the principles could meet the needs of young people.
- 79.4% agreed that there was a need for a Commission on Youth.
- 61.6% expressed that youth should be involved in the future formulation and review of the youth policy (while a significant proportion of 35.6% had no comment on this aspect).

CCY Final Report

The Working Party's Report was endorsed by the CCY without substantive changes. The final CCY report was published in 1989. In addition to the sections in the Report above, it also laid out the spirit, objectives and principles of the proposed youth policy as follows:

Spirit

- to give due recognition to a young person as an individual of his own right;
- to confirm the importance of young people in society;
- to acknowledge the close relationship between youth development and society; and
- to reaffirm the Government's commitment to promote the proper and overall development of the young people of Hong Kong.

Objectives

- to promote the awareness of the rights and responsibilities of young people;
- to provide a framework to which all departments and organizations may refer when considering youth matters;
- to provide a focal point and direction in formulating programmes for youth development and in according priorities for the allocation of resources; and
- to illustrate the significant investment in young people and to enhance public awareness of the efforts expended in serving young people.

Principles

- to maximize opportunities and facilities for education, acquisition of multi-linguistic and vocational skills, physical and mental fitness, employment and vocational training, and the enrichment of the quality of life;
- to promote harmonious family and other interpersonal relationship for the balanced development of young people as mature and responsible members of the community;
- to increase the political and social awareness of young people, to help them develop critical and independent thinking, and to stimulate and encourage their willingness to participate in community affairs to enhance their sense of belonging and commitment;

- to broaden young people’s perspective of their life by providing opportunities to acquire international experience and exposure, and to encourage them to know more about China and its cultural heritage; and
- to assist young people in assuming their proper roles in the community with supporting and remedial services.

1989: REJECTION OF A YOUTH POLICY AND THE AFTERMATH

In his address in October 1989, then Governor David Wilson turned down the CCY’s proposal for a youth policy without giving any reason. He did, however, agree to setting up a Commission on Youth to give advice on youth issues, which would also be tasked with preparing a Charter for Youth.

Scholars gave two reasons for the rejection. Chan posited that the colonial Government’s priority was to prevent juvenile delinquency (not youth development); it was also worried about creating a divide in society as other functional groups might ask for an independent policy for themselves.

Mok suggested that requests from other social groups would affect the Government’s existing functional policy planning mechanism and principles of resources allocation. Mok also interviewed a then Legislative Councillor, and it was that Councillor’s view that the public perception for the need for a youth policy was not strong enough for the Government to respond (though this might be directly contradicted by the survey results themselves).

Commission on Youth

The CoY was established in February 1990 based largely on the CCY’s proposed terms of reference – as an advisory body to advise the Government on all matters pertaining to youth. It was chaired by Mrs. Rosanna Tam, and unofficial members included Cheung Chi-kong, Lau Kin-ye, Nelson Chow, Mak Hoi-wah, Tai Poon Ching-sheung, Lo Chi-kin, Howard Young, Chan No-pao, and Chan Ka-kui.

The CoY’s working definition of “youth” was those between 15 and 24, with a 5-years flexible range at each end and where appropriate.

Charter for Youth

In 1992, the CoY released a draft *Charter for Youth (Charter)* for public consultation. The Charter was not legally binding and did not entail any commitment on the Government’s part to allocate resources in any particular manner. According to the Consultative Note on the draft Charter, the Charter was a statement proclaiming the rights of young people, their needs and aspirations and the social goals for youth development.

The Charter comprised:

- a. the Pledge section – with 10 ideals and principles on youth development (that youth should be respected, that youth should be encouraged to grow and develop in the spirit of freedom, democracy, dignity, tolerance, solidarity and peace, etc.);
- b. the Recognition section – stating the rights of youth, e.g., civil and political rights, the right to privacy, and the right to be protected from abuse and exploitation; and
- c. the Consideration section – stating the social goals for youth development (that youth should be brought up in their own homes, that youth should have equal access to education opportunities and opportunities to participate in cultural, artistic, sports, recreational and leisure activities, etc.).



The CoY proposed to operate the Charter on a system of voluntary subscription. The Government would be the key subscriber and all parties interested could subscribe. The CoY proposed implementing the Charter through educational programmes and publicity campaigns, policy formation and developing working targets. It also proposed a biennial review system for subscribers to share their experience in fulfilling Charter provisions.

Eric Li, as the second chairman of CoY, moved a motion debate on the Charter at a Legislative Council meeting on 26 February 1992. 23 Legislative Councillors including himself and the Secretary for Home Affairs were involved in the debate. Legislative Councillors questioned the Government's sincerity in implementing the Charter, and urged the Government to introduce more concrete policies and plans.

In 1993, the final Charter was published.

The HKCSS described the Charter as “a host of high-sounding statements and slogans ... that contains very little substance”. Specifically, its critiques were that there was no linkage between the Charter and government policies, no dedicated body to promote the Charter or monitor its implementation, and no accountability mechanism to ensure that subscribers would carry out their pledges and to punish those who did not.

SOURCES

1. Central Committee on Youth Working Party on Youth Policy, *Report on Youth Policy* (1988) (**Appendix 1**)
2. Hong Kong Council of Social Service Children and Youth Division, *Opinion Survey on Youths' Views on Youth Policy* (1988) (**Appendix 2**)
3. Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Hansard* (11 May 1988) (see p. 23 onwards for a discussion on the *Report on Youth Policy*) (**Appendix 3**)
4. Central Committee on Youth, *Report on the Need for a Youth Policy in Hong Kong* (1989) (**Appendix 4**)
5. Hong Kong Council of Social Service, *Draft Charter for Youth (Fact Sheet No. 4)* (1992) (**Appendix 5**)
6. Chan Wai-Yin Rosa, *The Evolution of a Youth Policy in Hong Kong* (1990), submitted as a dissertation for M.P.A. at the University of Hong Kong (**Appendix 6**)
7. Mok Hon-Fai James, *Hegemonic Accounts of Youth in Hong Kong, 1980 – 1997* (1998), submitted as a dissertation for M.Phil. at the University of Hong Kong (**Appendix 7**)
8. Chan Shui-Ching, *A Proposal for Formulating a Youth Policy in Hong Kong for the 21st Century* (2009), submitted as a dissertation for M.P.A. at the University of Hong Kong (**Appendix 8**)