

# THE ROLE OF DISTRICT SOCIAL WELFARE OFFICES IN ENHANCING COMMUNITY COHESION

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## Introduction

Facing a more polarized, individualized, divided and heterogeneous society, the notion of social cohesion has recently become more popular in public policy debates. It is closely related to other contested concepts, such as social capital, social integration, community building, social harmony, social exclusion and inclusion, community cohesion, social solidarity and partnerships. Primarily, these concepts are regarded as pivotal in policy formulation, promoting responsive policy, maintaining social stability, and reducing social exclusion.

From the “New Labor” government in U.K. to the Chinese government, there is a new emphasis championing active participation of citizens at the community level, supplementary to representative democracy.<sup>1</sup> With the growing loss of credibility of the citizens toward democratic institutions, community participation has been advocated as a way to improve service responsiveness and representation, as well as to re-invigorate the democratic institutions. To enhance policy accountability and responsiveness, the major strategy is to decentralize the government operations. Enhancing local governance can bring politics and policy decisions closer to the people, and allow people to have greater control over their own lives.

Social welfare policies and programs have been regarded as the key to promote the social integration of those groups at risk of exclusion, or marginalized groups, such as the unemployed, the disabled, the youth at risk, and the new arrivals. Under the growing consensus on the welfare model of “a mixed economy of welfare,” the emphasis of social policy is on the creation of partnerships that cut across sectors (public and private sectors and civil society) to work jointly on common projects, tackling urgent community needs.<sup>2</sup> The use of community partnerships, often supported with government fundings, has emerged as a popular strategy to mitigate social tensions due to multi-ethnic relations, urban renewal, rising unemployment, and social exclusion of the disabled and migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Daly and Davis, H. (2002). “Partnerships for local governance: citizens, communities and accountability,” in C. Glendinning, M. Powell and K. Rummery (eds.). *Partnerships, New Labour and the governance of welfare*. Bristol: The Policy Press; Wang, Z. H. (2003). *Community politics*. Taiyuan: Shanxi People’s Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Kjaer, L. *Local partnerships in Europe – an action research project*. The Copenhagen Centre, 2003; Department of Health, U.K. Government (1998). *Modernising social services – Promoting independence, improving protection and raising standards*. [www.doh.gov.uk/scg/execsum.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/scg/execsum.htm).

Here in Hong Kong, community building, the creation of community-based consultative structures, had been a strategic focus of political reforms introduced by the Colonial government from 1970s to the early 1990s. The primary aim of these reforms was to divert and forestall the emerging demands for democratization and representation, as well as to maintain social stability. Community building programs had established a viable mechanism of collecting public opinion and responding to public concerns and grievances. Not only the system was vital to enhance the democratic and legitimate image of the Colonial government, it had also widened the participation channels and encouraged the people to participate in politics and to exert influence on the government. With the focus of the political reforms shifted toward the higher levels before and after the turnover in 1997, community building strategy has seemingly been downplayed by the government.

This paper examines the recent initiatives of the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government in promoting community consultation and cross-sector partnerships at the district level. The Study indicates that partnerships have brought resources and energies from different community sectors together to focus more effectively on social issues at the community level. In other words, community cohesion has been promoted. The development carries profound implications for the public and welfare policy on promoting community and social cohesion.

### **Community cohesion, Community Building, and Partnerships**

There are criticisms that modern governments are not responsive and open. There is a widespread disillusionment with the democratic process.<sup>3</sup> The problem is manifested in declining political participation (electoral turnout and public engagement in political parties), organizational affiliations (union membership and church attendance), social trust and civic engagement.<sup>4</sup> To many people, the answer to the problem is to develop a strong and active civil society. Through norms and networks of civic engagements and collaborations for collective benefits, the quality of community life can be enhanced.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, society should build bridges that divide people according to race, income, occupation and culture.

Community building has been referred to as a locally-focused approach to collective problem – solving public problems and to promote socially valuable forms of connectedness, sustained stakeholder engagement, a sense of common purpose, and greater institutional capacity.<sup>6</sup> The approach focuses on creating relationship among

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<sup>3</sup> Giddens, A. (2001). *The third way: The renewal of social democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998; *The global third way debate*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster; Putnam, R. (2002) (ed.). *Democracies in flux: The evolution of social capital in contemporary society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> M. Hooghe and D. Stolle (2003) (eds.). *Generating social capital: Civil society and institutions in comparative perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, X. (January 2002). "Community building: The new politics of urban problem-solving, *Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; R. Chaskin, Brown, P., Venkatesh, S., and Vidal, A. (2001). *Building community capacity*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter; R. Gittel and Vidal, A. (1998). *Community organizing – building social capital as a development strategy*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications; Aspen Institute. *Community building*

local interested stakeholders, taking collective problem-solving actions. Community cohesion implies common values and a civic culture of tolerance, respect for differences, inter-group cooperation, social participation and civic engagement, support for political institutions, equal access to services, acknowledging social obligation and willingness to assist others.<sup>7</sup> Community cohesion is affected by a wide array of policies and factors relating to welfare, housing, environment, employment, education, health, crime and other public services. Community cohesion lies at the heart of what makes a safe and strong community and is, therefore, a key outcome for both local and central government to work toward.

More governments are committed to the use of community strategy to promote community cohesion. In Singapore, the establishment of the Community Development Council in 1997, represents the government attempt to decentralize the initiating, planning and managing of community programs to the community level in order to promote community bonding and social cohesion. Community Development Councils are delegated with the responsibility of managing job assistance, social assistance, skills upgrading and health care assistance, and volunteers at the local level. Through the Councils, local residents, organizations and leaders can get involved in their community and work toward making life better for themselves and their fellowmen.<sup>8</sup> Primarily, the Councils support community projects in helping the needy, promoting racial harmony, inter-generational bonding, and environmental conservation.<sup>9</sup> As the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong claimed:<sup>10</sup>

The establishment of Community Development Council is part of the process to build a tightly-knit, compassionate and self-reliant community.

In Australia, The Minister for Family and Community Services outlined the key strategy for welfare reform toward community-oriented welfare services:<sup>11</sup>

Strong family and community networks nurture children, care for those in need, and help people take up opportunities and find work. It's about neighbors and families helping each other in times of crisis. It also involves the commitment of local volunteers who provide much-needed community services and who work

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resource exchange. [www.commbuild.org](http://www.commbuild.org)

<sup>7</sup> Community cohesion is one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- those from different backgrounds have a similar life opportunities; and
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighborhoods.

See Community Cohesion Unit, Home Office, U.K. Government (2003). *Community cohesion: A report of the independent review team* (1 January). [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/comm\\_cohesion3.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/comm_cohesion3.html); Home Office, U.K. Government. *Building a picture of community cohesion: A guide for local authorities and their partners*. [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/buildpicturecomcohesion.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/buildpicturecomcohesion.html).

<sup>8</sup> Community Development Council, Singapore. [www.cdc.org.sg](http://www.cdc.org.sg).

<sup>9</sup> Hing, A. (2003). *Building the community through partnership: Singapore's experience*, paper presented at the Community Investment And Inclusion Fund Inaugural Sharing Forum, 9 October, organized by the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund, Hong Kong.

<sup>10</sup> Community Development Council, Singapore. [www.cdc.org.sg](http://www.cdc.org.sg).

<sup>11</sup> Newman, J. *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, 2000).

on community projects. It's about community leaders pulling their communities together in times of change.

Promoting partnerships between organizations, departments, programs, and community stakeholders is a powerful tool to achieve program cost-effectiveness and the efficient use of scarce resources.<sup>12</sup> Partnerships, as a cornerstone of social and public services, can enhance the sharing of resources, including expertise, manpower, information, facilities and finance to support joint action. As the U.K. Government Report on *Good Practice Guidance on Partnership Working* explained that partnerships have been developed:

.... in the context of increasing emphasis by government of the need for a more joined-up, holistic approach to addressing social issues, leading to the developing of a wide range of planning and operational partnerships, involving not only the core public services, but often including the voluntary and private sectors, and wider communities.<sup>13</sup>

Facing the challenge of controlling uncertainty and managing the environment, partnerships, or inter-organizational networks has changed the view on governance. Agranoff and McGuire indicate:<sup>14</sup>

Governance is increasingly symbiotic, which places a significant burden on the public manager to recognize the multiple entities and interests that comprise most policy arenas. As a result, public management has become a function of more organic, less differentiated enclaves than indicated by the bureaucratic models of the past.

Under the direction of the "Third Way", the New Labor Government in U.K. has advocated a collaborative discourse under a variety of terms, such as partnership, inter-agency working, integrated service delivery, joined-up government, coordination and seamless service.<sup>15</sup> These partnership projects, as a form of coordinating or delivery welfare services, often would appeal to the community values of civic responsibility, family solidarity, and work ethic.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the U.K. government has moved from a "contract culture" to a "partnership" culture. Accordingly the dominant mode of government has shifted from hierarchies to markets, and most

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<sup>12</sup> In business sector, the term "strategic alliance", is used to refer the collaborative organizational arrangement that use resources and/or governance structures from more than one existing organization. Strategic alliances have the potential to create various benefits for the partner firms, such as access to new technologies and complementary skills, economies of scale and the reduction of risk. A. Inkpen (2001). "Strategic alliances," M. Hitt, Freeman, R. E., and Harrison, J. (eds.). *The Blackwell handbook of strategic management*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 409-432.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Health, U.K. Government (November 2002). *Good practice guidance on partnership working*. [www.doh.gov.uk](http://www.doh.gov.uk).

<sup>14</sup> Agranoff, R. and McGuire, M. (1997). "Managing intergovernmental networks: economic development in cities," School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, Bloomington and Department of Public Administration, University of North Texas, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Health, U.K. Government (October 2001). *Building capacity and partnership in care – an agreement between the statutory and the independent social care, health care and housing sector*. [www.doh.gov.uk](http://www.doh.gov.uk); C. Roaf (2002). *Coordinating services for included children – joined up action*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>16</sup> T. Burden, Cooper, C. and Petrie, S. (2000). *'Modernizing' social policy: Unraveling new Labour's welfare reforms*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

recently, to networks. The central coordinating mechanism in network is trust, in contrast to the commands and price competition that articulate hierarchies and markets respectively.<sup>17</sup> Because these different sectors represent different social orders, the use of partnerships to bring them together to solve a specific problem is a real challenge.<sup>18</sup>

Partnership is described by the Audit Commission, U.K. Government as a joint working arrangement where the partners:<sup>19</sup>

- are otherwise independent bodies;
- agree to cooperate to achieve a common goal;
- create a new organizational structure or process to achieve this goal;
- plan and implement a joint program; and
- share relevant information, risks and rewards.

As such partnership is marked by a degree of autonomy on the part of relatively equal partners to determine and implement a plan or program. The emphasis is on shared objectives, interests and common mission. Partnerships can involve cross-sector relationships – public-public, public-voluntary, public-community and public-private. The defining feature of partnerships is to promote horizontal coordination and joined-up solutions. Through comparative advantages, the aim of partnerships is to achieve synergy or added value by combining the expertise and assets of the partnered organizations.

Increasingly, it has been acknowledged that community problems can be best understood by gathering the local views from residents and those working in the locality. Community consultation – that public sector should consult people about the kinds of services and policies that they want, has been considered as a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring policy-makers stay in touch with citizens.<sup>20</sup> Policy and solutions need to be tailored to the particular nature of a neighborhood, to ensure that solutions are sufficiently fine-tuned to be effective. In essence, policy will not work in the long term without the commitment, participation and leadership from the local community. Best-designed policies and services can fail if arrangements are not in place at point of delivery to ensure they are properly implemented, run to time and meet local needs.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in U.K., there is a growing emphasis to develop a variety of

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<sup>17</sup> Glendinning, C., Powell, M. and Rummery, K. (eds.). *Partnerships, New Labour and the Governance of Welfare* (The Policy Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> In general, market actors are guided by rationality, individual preferences for maximizing utility, freedom of choice and indifference to other actors. Market relations are facilitated by the medium of money. The rationality of state actions is one of hierarchy and exercised through the medium of power, but it is also based on equality of legal status. In civil society, actors are guided by passion, loyalty and commitment, mediated by solidarity. C. Glendinning, M. Powell and K. Rummery (eds.) (2002). *Partnerships, New Labour and the Governance of Welfare*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

<sup>19</sup> Audit Commission, U.K. Government (1998). *A fruitful partnership: Effective partnership working*. London: Audit Commission; Department of Health, U.K. Government (November 7, 2002). *Key to partnership: Working together to make a difference in people's lives*. [www.doh.gov.uk/learningdisabilities/partnership.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/learningdisabilities/partnership.htm)

<sup>20</sup> Audit-Commission, U.K. Government (17 November 1999). *Listen up! Effective community consultation*. [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports).

<sup>21</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (2001). *National strategy for neighbourhood renewal*.

ways of working with and consulting local stakeholders. The development of “local-strategic partnerships” to prepare community strategy forms the key to modernize the government.<sup>22</sup>

At the level of the local government, “local strategic partnership” (LSP) is a single body that:<sup>23</sup>

- brings together at a local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together;
- is a non-statutory, non-executive organization;
- operates at a level which enables strategic decisions to be taken and is close enough to individual neighborhoods to allow actions to be determined at community level; and
- should be aligned with local authority boundaries.

LSPs are expected to bring together public, private, voluntary and community sectors to provide a single overarching local coordination framework to. The role of LSP is to:

- prepare and implement a community strategy for the area;
- bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives;
- work with local authorities that are developing a local public service agreement; and
- develop and deliver a local neighborhood renewal strategy to secure more jobs, better education, improved health, reduced crime and better housing.

LSPs are not statutory requirement. But LSPs are essential to implement the community strategies. The role of the government is to facilitate and support the development of LSPs, mediate and resolve difficulties which may arise.

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[www.social-exclusion-unit.gov.uk/publications/pat/pat4/01.htm](http://www.social-exclusion-unit.gov.uk/publications/pat/pat4/01.htm).

<sup>22</sup> The Stationery Office, U.K. Government (November 1998). *Modernising social services – promoting independence, improving protection, raising Standards*. [www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm41/4169/4169.htm](http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm41/4169/4169.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Local Government Association (July 2001). *A new commitment to neighbourhood renewal: national strategy action plan and local strategic partnerships – frequently asked questions*.

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions: London (March 2001). *Local strategic partnerships: Government guidance*. [www.detr.gov.uk](http://www.detr.gov.uk).

Strategic Partnering Taskforce, Office the Deputy Prime Minister (September 2002). *Structure for partnerships – Technical notes*. [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (8 December 2000). *Preparing community strategies government guidance to local authorities*. [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/pcs/guidance/index.htm](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/pcs/guidance/index.htm).

Department of the Environment, Transport and the regions: London.. *Local Strategic Partnerships – Government Guidance* (March 2001).. [www.local-regions.dtlr.gov.uk/lsp/guidance/index.htm](http://www.local-regions.dtlr.gov.uk/lsp/guidance/index.htm).

Local Government Association. *Effective Local Strategic Partnerships – LGA advice note for working with the community and voluntary sectors* (May 2001). [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2001). *Supporting strategic service delivery partnerships in local government: A research and development programme*. [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/ssdp/research/03.htm](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/ssdp/research/03.htm).

Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office (January 2001). *A new commitment to neighbourhood renewal: National strategy action plan*..

LSPs need to:

- develop a variety of means to work with and consult local people, including faith, minority communities;
- develop and publicize common aims and priorities;
- value the contribution of all partners, avoiding domination by particular members or organizations;
- share local information and good practice;
- identify, encourage and support effective local initiatives;
- develop a common performance management system; and
- provide a forum for debate, discussion and common decision-making.

As the U.K. Local Government Association commented on the requirement of a cultural change to support LSP:<sup>24</sup>

But this new intensive partnership mode of working will mean a change in culture in many of the organizations which will be involved. It will mean honing negotiation skills; in reaching decisions through consensus and collaborations; in acknowledging in many other demands being placed on representatives of other organizations by their duties, structure or funding; a new culture of learning and capacity building for all sectors; and being open minded and innovative.

In summary, the use of partnerships at the community level has been regarded as a powerful tool to strengthen democracy, build community cohesion, promote service integration, reduce social exclusion, and maintain social stability. The developments of community partnerships in other countries, especially in the United Kingdom, can provide some insights on the development of partnerships promoting community cohesion in Hong Kong.

### **The Emergence of Community Building in Hong Kong**

Under the governing model of a minimal state, the role of the Hong Kong Colonial government in social welfare, particularly before the 1970s, was largely limited and residual. In fact, the legitimacy of the government was seldom challenged and threatened. The government encouraged faith groups and traditional non-governmental organizations to provide the necessary welfare services for migrants from China so as to relieve the burden and responsibility of the government in welfare.

In the 1950s, the government encouraged the establishment of the Kaifong associations to provide the necessary social services for migrants from mainland China. In addition, Kaifong associations also functioned as the communication bridge between the government and the local residents. In social welfare, community centers were established in public housing estates in the early 1960s to encourage the “amalgamation of divergent groups and the formation of more coherent communities, fulfilling the quasi-political function of integrating migrants from China into the Hong Kong society, inducing a sense of community and maintaining social stability”.<sup>25</sup> On

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<sup>24</sup> Local Government Association (May 2001). *Effective local strategic partnerships – LGA advice note for working with the community and voluntary sectors*. [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

<sup>25</sup> Director of Social Welfare (1967). *Annual department report*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

the whole, the policy of minimum intervention was sufficient in maintaining social stability and enhancing the legitimacy of the Colonial government.

The 1966 and 1967 riots had challenged the complacency mentality of the government. Given the need to strengthen communication with the citizens and project a public image of responsive government, the City District Officer Scheme was launched by the Home Affairs Department in 1968. The Scheme, performing the role as the “ears and eyes” of the government, represented an unprecedented shift of the government to encourage and sponsor community participation. In the early 1970s, the formation of the three-tier consultative structure within each urban district (city district committee – area committee – mutual aid committee) indicated the government’s intention to widen and strengthen the community participation channels in order to mitigate rising urban conflicts. More specifically, the community-based consultative mechanism facilitated, on the one hand, the collection of public opinion by the government, and on the other hand, the opportunities for the government to explain policies. In a sense, local channels, whereby local people could communicate directly with the government, and local forums whereby government policies were discussed, had been established.

The introduction of “community building – building a society where there is mutual care and responsibility” in 1976 by the Governor, MacLehose, was perceived as a way to divert demands for representative government.<sup>26</sup> The cherished governing principle of “government by consultation and consent” was regarded as significant in promoting the democratic and responsive image of the government. Moreover, the attitudes toward thriving pressure groups had become more tolerant, and whenever appropriate, dialogue was encouraged.

The implementation of the District Administration Scheme had further politicized the community dynamics. District Boards (now District Councils), even though with only advisory power, would function as a power center affecting government policies, especially for issues related to local quality of life. More importantly, the introduction of direct elections in the District Administration has aroused the political awareness of the ordinary citizens toward their rights to select their representatives.

In summary, the community building policy, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, had established a system of community-based participatory and consultation, facilitating the vertical political communication between the government and the citizens. Shortly before and after the return of the Hong Kong to China in 1997, reforms at the legislative council had received most public attention, while the District Councils had played a diminishing role. Now, the center of policy debates has shifted to the Legislative Council.

With the rapid expansion of social welfare services in the 1980s and 1990s, more social welfare projects have been implemented to provide support to the vulnerable populations, such as the new arrivals, youth at-risk, the disabled, the unemployed,

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<sup>26</sup> Leung, J. (1994). “Community participation: Past, present and future,” in B. Leung (ed.). *25 years of social and economic development in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, the University of Hong Kong, pp.252-269.

single-parents, older adults living alone, victims of domestic violence, and ethnic minorities. The aim is to tackle social exclusion, and facilitate their social integration through active economic and social participation. The introduction of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund by the Chief Executive in 2002, represented the government efforts to promote social capital among community groups, to strengthen their supportive network, and to build “a compassionate, cohesive and vital society.”<sup>27</sup>

The SARS crisis showed the importance of the community in mobilizing resources and targeting the needy for assistance. At the district level, NGOs were very active to coordinate efforts to prevent the infection by SARS, reach out to at risk families or individuals, and to provide them with prompt assistance. Assistance included house cleaning, escort services, shopping, distribution of material (surgical masks, detergents, protective wear, and educational pamphlets), delivery of meals, home visits and telephone calls to the elders and disabled living alone, mobilization of volunteers, clean community campaigns, educational support to students, and counseling the victims and their caregivers, and creating jobs for the unemployed. These coordinated efforts had emphasized cross-sector collaboration and partnerships.<sup>28</sup> SARS crisis implicated the potentials of the community to mobilize and deliver resources promptly, and to establish cross-sector social network to respond to community crisis.

### **Evaluation on the Effectiveness of the Enhanced Functions of the District Social Welfare Offices<sup>29</sup>**

#### *The Re-organization*

To decentralize the operational structure and enhance community responsiveness, the Social Welfare Department began regionalization in 1979 to form the three-tiered headquarters, regional and district structure. To cope with the operational requirements and challenges arising from rapidly changing community welfare needs, the Department structure was re-organized in March 2002 to enhance its responsiveness, service integration, agency coordination, service accessibility network and community partnership. The re-organized structure involved the disbandment of the five former Regional Offices, and the 13 District Social Welfare Officers were upgraded to oversee the five enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices.

The enhanced functions are:

- a) planning welfare services on a district basis to meet local community needs;
- b) collaborating with District Council (DC), related government departments and district organizations to facilitate the implementation of social welfare policies in the district;
- c) coordinating with non-governmental organizations in the district in respect of

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<sup>27</sup> Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (August 2002). *Community Investment and Inclusion Fund – Application guide and form*.

<sup>28</sup> Hong Kong Council of Social Services (2003). *Unity in combating SARS: Social services during the outbreak*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Services.

<sup>29</sup> For details, see the consultancy report, Consultant Team, The University of Hong Kong (September, 2003). *Building community strategic partnerships: The report of the study to evaluate the effectiveness of Social Welfare Department’s enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions*. Hong Kong: Government Publishers.

- delivery of services in meeting the welfare needs of the local community;
- d) establishing a more proactive social outreaching network in the district to help the needy and the disadvantaged; and
- e) administrating and managing centralized operational units.

Under each district office, the District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO) is directly responsible for and accountable to the Director of Social Welfare through an Assistant Director. To carry out the enhanced functions, the Planning and Coordinating Team has been formed to assist the Officer in assessing welfare need and planning, coordination of welfare services, and district-wide liaison, networking and collaborating duties. After the re-organization, District Social Welfare Officers are expected to continue to play the important role of explaining the government's welfare policies and service initiatives to key stakeholders in the districts through various channels. One of the primary responsibilities of the officers is to ensure that district interests, views and sentiments are thoroughly considered in the policy planning processes at the headquarters. In introducing new welfare services and initiatives, particularly for those "unwelcome" and sensitive services, such as services for the mentally handicapped, young people involving drug abuse and ex-prisoners, the District Social Welfare Offices will have to actively involved to conduct local consultations – lobbying for support and softening resistance. Targets include government departments, leaders of residents' association, District Council (DC) members, Area Committee members, and local residents.

District planning is central to the enhanced roles and functions the District Social Welfare Offices. One of the major tasks of district planning is to assess local welfare needs, define district priorities, and formulate action plans and strategy to address identified needs. Each District Social Welfare Office is expected to employ evidence-based and multiple methods to identify local needs and inform planning. First and foremost, the district planning process, particularly in need assessment, requires the active participation from community stakeholders. Need assessment is carried out to achieve the following objectives:

- to identify and prioritize the district welfare needs;
- to assess the satisfaction levels of the community on the existing welfare service provisions;
- to address the genuine welfare needs of the community, especially those of the at-risk targets and vulnerable groups; and
- to fill service gaps and improve existing services through rationalization with a view to ensuring optimal use of available resources.

The common approach adopted by District Social Welfare Offices in need assessment is to compile district profiles, including demographic and socio-economic data from Census, survey reports, local research studies, service statistics from SWD and NGO units, action plans of other government departments, and made reference to the ten social indicators compiled by the SWD headquarters Family and Children Branch.<sup>30</sup> To collect views and conduct consultation on district needs from

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<sup>30</sup> The ten major social indicators include population size, active cases in family service centers, child abuse cases, battered spouse cases, number of new arrivals, number of youth crime, number of single parent families, number of low income families, unemployment cases, and number of poorly educated

community stakeholders, DSWOs would conduct and attend various types of district meetings. These meetings include briefing/sharing sessions, district forums, workshops, focus groups, and welfare seminars, attended by members from DCs and District Coordinating Committees (DCCs), community leaders, NGO staff, and even service users. Large scale community forums are welcome by community stakeholders as a useful platform to facilitate exchange and promote participation, collaboration and commitment in developing the district welfare plans.

In each District Social Welfare Office district, there are five typical District Coordinating Committees (DCCs). They are committees on:

- elderly services
- rehabilitation services
- family and child care services
- youth services
- volunteer movement

The common objectives and functions of the five DCCs are:

- to develop and formulate strategies in planning and coordinating welfare services to meet particular needs of the district and rising public expectations;
- to enhance coordination and interfacing among service providers, disciplines of different professions, government departments and local organizations;
- to promote, plan and organize district joint programs to arouse public concern on specific issues; and
- to identify and coordinate resources, including funding and manpower.

In terms of the structure of the committees, the DSWO is the chairperson, and members traditionally comprised mainly representatives from local NGOs. In recent years, there is a strategic move to widen the participation and extend membership to include representatives from other government departments, schools, community leaders, DC members, business organizations, faith groups and service users. Under the initiatives from the DSWOs, more DC members are involved in the planning and consultation on district welfare issues and overall welfare policies. DSWOs also can achieve better collaborative relationships with other government departments through sharing of information and joint up action. Moreover, a variety of district organizations, including parent-teacher associations, women's organizations, faith groups, residents' organizations, and business organizations have been connected to the district-based social welfare network. In summary, a locally-based welfare forum has been formed to review and scrutinize social welfare development.

For NGOs, the role of District Social Welfare Office is central in the planning, coordinating, and reengineering of services. The traditional welfare planning approach on new provisions based on population size has been abandoned, and local views and needs have received a higher priority in the provision of new service. In short, a social welfare network has been established in each district, which can work together, often through joint community projects to address local social issues. Finally, District Social Welfare Offices are expected to coordinate efforts to identify at-risk families through out-reaching and proactive approaches. Outreaching means to connect at risk-families include road shows, operating street stalls, mobile exhibition, mobile

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population.

enquiry service, promotional material, hotlines and door-to-door visits. The capacity of District Social Welfare Offices to foster inter-departmental and cross-sector collaboration is demonstrated in the SARS crisis. During the crisis, District Social Welfare Offices became the leading centers coordinating district initiatives targeting vulnerable groups and SARS victims.

### *Methodology of the Consultancy Study*

In February 2003, the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong was commissioned by the Social Welfare Department to evaluate the effectiveness of the enhanced functions of the District Social Welfare Offices between April 2002 and March 2003. The objectives of this Study were to evaluate the effectiveness of these functions with a view to identifying room for further improvement and better serving the community, and to set benchmarks for the aspects where enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices have created the greatest impact, in terms of customer satisfaction, cost-effectiveness and feedback from stakeholders. As a formative evaluation, this Study aims to seek informed continuous learning through feedback from key community stakeholders, to provide future strategic directions and enhance institutional capacity and effectiveness on district planning, service coordination, community partnerships and outreaching services targeting people in need.

Based on a pluralistic approach, mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this Study collected information from a variety of sources, including documentary review of relevant reports, analysis of the structure, operations and self-assessment reports of all the District Social Welfare Offices, a self-administered questionnaire survey and focus groups on the views of the key community stakeholders.

Two comparable sets of questionnaires for all the District Council/ District Council Social Service Related Committee (DC/ DCSRC) members and District Coordinating Committee (DCC) members were sent out in April-June 2003. Out of the total 1,769 members covered in the survey, 1,301 respondents had returned the completed questionnaires, representing an overall response rate of 74%. Specifically, the return rates were 58% for DC/ DCSRC members and 83% for DCC members.

Focus groups were carried out in April-May, 2003 for three groups of selected key community stakeholders in each district, namely the DC and DCSRC members, DCC members, and other community stakeholders (key people who were not members of the DCs/ DCSRCs and DCCs). There were a total of 39 focus groups with key community stakeholders, with a total of 352 participants; and another 13 focus groups with District Social Welfare Office staff, with a total of 115 participants.

Although the consultants would very much hope that this Study can offer a comprehensive study aimed at improving the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices, we are fully aware that the re-organized District Social Welfare Offices have only been implemented for over one year. Such a thorough evaluation would require more in-depth considerations and further investigations. Indeed, most District Social Welfare Offices are still in the process of consolidating and reassessing their working plans and operations. Most community stakeholders are only beginning

to clarify their expectations and understanding on what are and what are not the duties of District Social Welfare Offices in practice, as well as the division of responsibilities between the district and the headquarters; and how can they strategically relate to the district planning mechanism. As the re-organization represented efforts to strengthen some of the former functions of the District Social Welfare Offices, rather than a radical transformation of the direction and operations, many of the improvements and changes have been gradual, emerging and subtle, rather than dramatic. Having said all these, the consultants believe that this Study can stimulate further reflections and discussion that can contribute to the future development of District Social Welfare Offices.

### *Key Findings*

Overall feedback from key stakeholders both through the questionnaire survey and focus groups on the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Office has been very positive. In the survey, key stakeholders were largely satisfied with the performance of the District Social Welfare Offices, and the proportion of dissatisfaction was very small. Based on a five point scale (5 representing most satisfaction), the average satisfaction score on the four enhanced functions ranged from the highest of 3.8 to the lowest of 3.4. In addition, some 70-80% of the respondents perceived improvements in the performance of the District Social Welfare Offices in the enhanced functions.

Focus group participants also indicated a general support of the re-organization of SWD. Simply put, the re-organization had been welcomed by the community stakeholders, and the re-organized District Social Welfare Offices had been perceived as more effective and responsive than the former SWD district operational structures. Stakeholders were impressed by the hardworking, pro-active, consultative and helpful approach of the District Social Welfare Office staff. According to them, DSWOs were better informed and knowledgeable about the government's welfare policy, responsive to their requests, and resourceful in providing assistance, as well as in a better position to negotiate with other government departments for collaborations.

Among the four enhanced functions, the survey indicated that the function on "liaison and collaboration with DC and district organizations" received the highest score, followed by the two other functions, "coordination and promotion of welfare services" and "planning of district welfare services". Relatively, the function of providing a more "proactive and outreaching network to help the needy and the disadvantaged" was accorded with a lower score.

### *Planning of District Welfare Services*

In the planning of district welfare services, the survey indicated that stakeholders were relatively more satisfied with the functions of introduction and explanation of the government's welfare policies, and the provision of updated information on welfare services. Relatively lower ratings were found in the functions of reflecting the special needs and views of the district to the SWD headquarters. On the whole, DC members and DCSRC members were more satisfied and perceived more significant improvement in the performance of the District Social Welfare Offices than DCC members, particularly in the areas of explaining the government's welfare policies,

DC/DCC consultations, and formulations of welfare strategies. Both groups of stakeholders expected more support on assessing community needs.

After the re-organization, District Social Welfare Offices have been given greater authority, responsibility and influence in welfare service planning. DSWOs are expected to provide detailed district information and reflect local sentiments to inform the headquarters on policy and service planning. There are a number of outstanding examples where proposals from DSWOs have been incorporated to modify the original plans of the headquarters. In seeking community consultation, District Social Welfare Offices have been able to use a variety of methods to connect a wide range of district stakeholders and to solicit their inputs.

DCC is the main mechanism for district planning. As reflected from the membership, DCCs have been able to draw in a more diversified and representative community participation beyond NGOs. More recent community partners include DC members, representatives from NGOs not receiving SWD subventions, district organizations, other government departments, and service users. The wider circulation of meeting minutes and the sit-in attendance of non-core members have further opened up the DCC mechanism. Nevertheless, representatives from the business sector are still limited.

In general, DCCs should follow the planning cycle of “need assessment – formulation of objectives and strategy – monitoring and evaluation”. Noteworthy is the fact that DCC, being focused on a specific type of service or target group, does not represent the overall district plan. The overall district plan would be formulated by synthesizing the DCC plans together by the District Social Welfare Offices. Most District Social Welfare Offices would present the overall plan to the DCSRCs and to key stakeholders in community forums. Some District Social Welfare Offices would involve stakeholders in undergoing district strategic planning and SWOT analysis.

One of the key duties of the District Social Welfare Offices is to perform district need assessment. Community stakeholders on the whole welcomed the information, such as Census data, crime figures, service statistics and user profiles provided by the District Social Welfare Offices. Noteworthy is the fact that different stakeholders would have different information needs. To many NGO operators, they would expect more comprehensive information and analysis on welfare provisions to support their organizational planning. To other community stakeholders, they were largely satisfied with some general information on the district situation, which seemingly no other government departments would prefer to provide this service. In addition, most District Social Welfare Offices would perform community need assessment and consultation through community forums, focus groups, surveys and committee meetings. To encourage local flexibility in carrying out need assessment, there is no standardized protocol shared by all District Social Welfare Offices on need assessment.

There were a variety of examples whereby District Social Welfare Offices had demonstrated their effectiveness in identifying and responding to district needs. Community stakeholders had been particularly impressed by the role of District Social Welfare Offices in pooling them together to provide assistance to residents under the comprehensive redevelopment program of public housing estates, ethnic

minorities, elderly people living in remote villages, and young night drifters.

All effective planning should consist of some basic ingredients. Planning should be vision-guided, with clearly defined objectives, strategy, business plan, implementation schedule, time frame, and monitoring and evaluation mechanism. To many stakeholders, district planning was loosely-structured, illusive, largely District Social Welfare Office-led or District Social Welfare Office-centered, and had not been vigorously pursued. On the whole, the participation of stakeholders in the formulation of district plans has been limited. To increase the ownership of these plans, there is a need to strengthen their participation all through the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes. In line with the growing public demand for accountability, stakeholders would expect feedback on the performance of the district plans.

For community stakeholders, they would invariably expect the DSWOs to act as an advocator, communicating with the SWD headquarters to reflect district concerns and to negotiate for more resources. However, when the headquarters turn down their district proposals, they would express disappointment over the functions of the DSWOs. Community stakeholders, particularly NGO operators have to comprehend that the authority of DSWO is more in operational matters, rather than in policy-making decisions. The role of DSWO in the policy-making and policy implementation processes has to be clarified, particularly on the division of work between district and the headquarters. In essence, close interfacing between district and the headquarters is central to facilitate the effectiveness of District Social Welfare Office's enhanced functions. To provide incentives to community stakeholders, the SWD headquarters has to demonstrate that district views carry weight in the policy formulation processes, and be ready to handle different district views and preferences in an open and accountable manner.

Indeed, consultation has become an integral part of District Social Welfare Office functions and is a prerequisite for program learning. There is a general expectation among all stakeholders that there should be more local and open consultations on welfare service planning. Community consultations should be extended to include more district organizations and personalities. However the existing practice of consultations may easily give an impression that the policy undergoing consultation has already been finalized, and the role of DSWO is to "inform", "sell" and "market" the policy. Consultations should avoid being perceived as adopting a "Decide-Announce-Defend" approach. To be sure, consultations would raise the expectations of stakeholders. The government has to be prepared to make some changes, otherwise one should not ask for the views of the stakeholders.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Liaison and Collaboration with District Council and District Organizations***

In the survey, both groups of stakeholders were largely satisfied with the liaison and collaborations of District Social Welfare Offices with DC and district organizations. But DC members and DCSRC members had rated higher

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<sup>31</sup> Audit Commission, U. K Government. *Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation* (17 November 1999). [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

improvements in this area than DCC members. Overall speaking, stakeholders endorsed the strategic shift to widen and strengthen community partnerships at the district level. To this end, the re-organization of the District Social Welfare Offices has been regarded as successful.

Through sincere invitation and active collaborations, more DC members, and personalities of district organizations have been connected and included into the district planning mechanism. Their interests in social welfare have been stimulated through joint planning and projects, as well as visits to local service centers. Still, social welfare issues have not been accorded with a higher priority on the agenda of the DC and District Management Committee meetings. The roles and functions of DSWO in District Administration should be more articulated and recognized. In specific, SWD should be a core department in District Administration.

Now the District Social Welfare Office system has become a focal point for district organizations and personalities to interact and exchange resources, and to explore collaborations. They can participate through a variety of channels, such as DCCs, locality meetings, and working groups. On specific community issues, such as family violence, suicide and youth delinquency, they would be invited to participate in information sharing seminars. In addition to the provision of interaction opportunities, District Social Welfare Offices would provide assistance in terms of vital district information, referrals for funding and resource support, professional expertise, connections to relevant services, access to vulnerable groups, and arrangements for joint programs.

According to the stakeholders, District Social Welfare Offices were also recognized as a “match-maker”. DSWOs can connect organizations together to form partners for district programs and service providers to funding support. Support from the District Social Welfare Offices is recognized as vital to secure funding support from trust funds and funding bodies, such as the Hong Kong Jockey Club and Community Investment and Inclusion Fund. More district organizations are looking for DSWOs to facilitate their applications for funding support on program expenses. In this way, it is expected that more district organizations and personalities would approach or be connected to the District Social Welfare Office networks for partnerships. Meanwhile, as the district representative of the SWD, DSWO has to act as a “trouble-shooter” for all sort of welfare-related problems. District organization representatives and personalities would approach DSWOs to make complaints on service quality or to resolve inter-organizational conflicts. To many community stakeholders, they may not know that District Social Welfare Offices are no longer responsible for monitoring service performance and quality of subvented services run by NGOs. The confusion may also arise because District Social Welfare Offices are still responsible to monitor the performance of SWD service units and those community projects subsidized not through the current subvention allocations. Often, being close to the operations, the Subventions and Performance Monitoring or other branches/section of the headquarters would invariably seek comments from the DSWOs on the performance and track record of NGOs or their services units when they apply for other funds or premises. Taken together, the monitoring role of District Social Welfare Offices has to be clarified.

The re-organization has established a wider community network of professional

expertise and interest representation. This enhanced function has been rated as the most successful of all. This cross-service, cross-sector, cross-departmental, and cross-professional participative system centered on the District Social Welfare Offices is vital for informed service planning and effective service implementation.

### *Coordination and Promotion of Welfare Services*

In the coordination and promotion of welfare services, the survey findings indicated that DC members and DCSRC members had again perceived higher improvements than DCC members. They were particularly impressed by the implementation of integrated services. DCC members showed less satisfaction in the areas of reconciling the problems and difficulties between organizations in the process of service integration and assisting organizations to solve problems and difficulties. Perhaps the limitations of DSWO in dealing with individual organizational problems have to be appreciated by NGOs.

With widened, enlarged and diversified participation, the focus of DCCs has already moved away from the coordination of welfare services. Stakeholders perceived the main function of DCCs more as a welfare forum for receiving information on welfare development. With about four meetings a year, it would be difficult for DCCs to have thorough discussion on welfare development and initiate joint programs. Furthermore, the title of these committees does not fully reflect their new focus and functions.

From the formation of pilot integrated family service centers and integrated youth service centers to the re-engineering of community-based elderly services, the role and contribution of DSWOs have been increasingly reckoned and regarded as exemplars of success. In the coming re-engineering of the family services centers, the role of DSWO will be more prominent. In addition, the role of District Social Welfare Office in initiating key community projects addressing urgent social needs has been acknowledged by community stakeholders.

In relating to the re-organized District Social Welfare Offices, NGOs have to learn how to re-structure and maintain their new relationships. Some had expressed the uncertainties of not having a specific subject officer, such as the Youth Officer or Rehabilitation and Elderly Officer in the past, in liaison with their service. Some admitted that they were still in the process of finding out how to work with the Planning and Coordinating Teams (PCTs). Others also expressed that the PCTs did not have the relevant professional experiences to lead and coordinate the service development for some services or target groups. To be sure, most NGOs are still struggling in the process of how to reposition themselves and build up their strategic relationships with the District Social Welfare Offices in specific and with other community stakeholders in general.

For most non-NGO stakeholders, their conceptions on welfare services and their mode of delivery would be different from that of professional social workers. They may expect social welfare services to serve a larger target population beyond single parents, single elderly, the disabled, CSSA recipients, and families at risks. They may also have different interpretations on how services should be organized, such as the drawing of service boundaries, allocation of new service centers, and interfacing

between different services. With a more diversified participation, DSWOs would expect more efforts devoted to resolve the differences in views on social welfare policies and services.

### *Community Networking and Outreaching Work*

In comparing with other functions, community networking and outreaching work had been regarded as less satisfactory by both groups of stakeholders. DC members and DCSRC members had rated relatively higher than DCC members in recognizing the improvements. Perhaps, the majority of the stakeholders may not have enough knowledge on the work of the Family Support and Networking Team. Many could not even differentiate the work between Planning and Coordinating Team, Family Support and Resource Center and Family Support and Networking Team. Nevertheless, stakeholders acknowledged that there were more service promotional activities through street stalls and home visits. But they were not certain about the effectiveness of these outreaching efforts.

In the coordination of service delivery to meet district welfare needs, one of the common initiatives of the DSWOs is to re-deploy the local SWD service units. In response to identified service gaps, community issues and crisis, as well as individual tragedies, Planning and Coordinating Team and Family Support and Networking Team have been central in re-deploying resources to reach out to the target groups and address their needs. However, in the light of rapid development of other community-based outreaching services, such as those in family, youth, and elderly services, the role of Family Support and Networking Team, administered under the District Social Welfare Office, should be reviewed.

### *Summary of the Ratings by Key Stakeholder:*

The ratings on the specific items of the enhanced functions can be divided into three levels according to the degree of satisfaction:

DC and DCSRC respondents:

- a) Higher level (60-80% of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):
  - Actively following up enquiries and referrals from DC members on district welfare issues (74.7%).
  - Maintaining close liaison, collaboration and partnership with DC and district organizations (73.9%)
  - Introducing and explaining the government's welfare policy to DC (73.4%)
  - Providing updated information on welfare services (66.5%).
  - Implementing integrated social welfare service model (66.5%)
  - Explaining the core business of SWD (64.6%)
  - Promoting familiarization, exchange, collaboration and partnership between the welfare sector and other government departments, district organizations, and personalities from other sectors (60.9%)
- b) Average level (50-<60%) of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):

- Coordinating services provided by SWD and NGOs (55.4%)
  - Consulting and collecting views in planning district welfare services (54.5%)
  - Mobilizing district resources and encouraging district organizations or NGOs to develop service projects (53.9%).
- c) Lower level (35-<50% of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):
- Formulating district welfare strategies, directions, priorities and work plans (49.2%).
  - Promoting outreaching and networking in the district to provide appropriate services to vulnerable groups (44.2%)
  - Promoting the understanding of district organizations and personalities on the needs and problems of vulnerable groups (43.9%).
  - Reflecting the special needs and views of the district to the headquarters (42.5%).
  - Understanding the needs and problems of the vulnerable groups and proactively initiating contacts with them (42.5%).
  - Assessing district welfare needs based on objective evidence (41.2%).

DCC respondents:

- a) Higher level (60-80% of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):
- Promoting collaboration and partnership among welfare agencies and district organizations through coordinating and organizing district services (69.7%)
  - Promoting familiarization, exchange, collaboration and partnership among the welfare sector and DC, other government departments, district organizations, and personalities from other sector (68.3%)
  - Providing updated information on welfare services (66.8%)
  - Introducing and explaining the government's welfare policy to DCC (63.8%).
  - Providing updated social welfare related reference materials and statistics in the district to district organizations (60.0%)
- b) Average level (50-<59% of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):
- Mobilizing district resources and encouraging district organizations to develop service projects (57.2%)
  - Implementing integrated social welfare service model (54.4%).
- c) Lower level (35-<49% of the respondents expressed very satisfied and satisfied):
- Coordinating services provided by SWD and NGOs (49.7%).
  - Consulting and collecting views from DCC in the planning of district welfare services in the district (44.7%)
  - Assessing district welfare needs based on objective evidence (43.6%).
  - Promoting outreaching and networking in the district to provide services to vulnerable groups (43.2%)
  - Formulating district welfare strategies, directions, priorities and work

- plans (42.6%).
- Promoting the understanding of district organizations and personalities on the needs and problems of vulnerable groups (42.1%)
- Understanding the needs and problems of the vulnerable groups and proactively initiating contacts with them (39.1%)
- Reflecting the special needs and views of the district to the headquarters (37.0%).
- Mediating potential problems and difficulties between organizations (36.8%).
- Assisting organizations to solve problems and difficulties (35.0%).

## **An Appraisal**

In the first year of implementation, the District Social Welfare Offices had been experimenting with a wide array of initiatives to strengthen their community partnerships and capacity to address community issues. Indeed, many District Social Welfare Offices are still in the process of re-evaluating their first-year experiences and making adjustments to re-assess their objectives, strategy and outcomes for the second year. For many community stakeholders, they are also in a process of redefining their role and reconsidering their commitments in the district planning process and their relationships with District Social Welfare Offices. Some NGOs have been undergoing decentralization or regionalization to enhance their responsiveness to district planning. Therefore, this evaluation exercise can provide a timely and objective feedback and learning for the institutionalization of the District Social Welfare Office functions. In addition, this Study has served the educational purpose of raising the awareness of the community stakeholders to the re-organization and functions of the District Social Welfare Offices.

Even though the SWD re-organization proposal had been introduced to all the DCs, LegCo Welfare Panel, DCCs in a number of centrally and locally-organized briefing sessions, the understanding of community stakeholders on the functions of District Social Welfare Offices in operation remains vague and is only emerging. Many community stakeholders are still in the process of clarifying their expectations realistically on what is district planning; what are and what are not the duties of District Social Welfare Office in practice; how can they strategically relate to the district planning mechanism; and the division of responsibility between district and the SWD headquarters in policy formulation and resources allocation. In the process of learning about the operations of District Social Welfare Office in practice, it is inevitable that misunderstandings will exist. The focus group participants, from time to time, had shown unrealistic expectations towards the functions and roles of District Social Welfare Office and DSWO.

In terms of the outcomes, evidence suggests that the re-organization has widened the community network and partnership of SWD beyond NGOs receiving SWD subvention to DCs and district organizations. District Social Welfare Offices have effectively energized and motivated the interests of more DC members and district organizations on welfare issues. More importantly, the re-organization has successfully connected more DC members and district organizations to the district planning processes. In fact, the new partnerships do not only stimulate more interests in social welfare issues, they have improved their understanding on social welfare

policy and services, as well as the image of the SWD. They would no longer see the SWD as a department mainly associated with relief work. Instead, SWD is now perceived as a progressive department taking up more preventive, outreaching and proactive functions. To the understanding of the consultants, the SWD seemingly is the only government department that would actively and systematically seek consultations on their policies at the district level. The interests, inputs and support of community stakeholders will enhance the local attention and commitments on welfare issues. Other government departments have been friendly in providing the necessary support, such as information and resources. Yet there are rooms to explore more joint and cross-departmental collaborations and coordination.

Coupled with the more open and diversified community participation, the function of District Social Welfare Offices has also been extended from service coordination to the mobilization of local resources to address locally identified social issues. Since social welfare services are intricately interwoven with issues related to health, leisure, housing, employment, education, public security, community building and elderly care, it is evident that the District Social Welfare Offices have become a key player in community issues involving cross-sector, cross-service, and cross-departmental collaborations. More importantly, the widened participation strategy has brought in new additional community resources, such as funding and volunteering to support welfare programs. The new partnerships with district organizations and business sector have demonstrated that there are untapped resources in the community which can be mobilized for community improvement projects.

Community stakeholders were impressed by the high-profile and friendly approach of DSWOs. District Social Welfare Offices have been rated by many district organizations as the most helpful government department in the districts. In fact the policy emphasis of SWD on community partnerships should be a learning example for other government departments. They perform the roles as “match-maker” (between NGO and district organizations), “resource-provider” (information and funds), “advocator” and “mediating bridge” (between district and the headquarters), and “service provider” (enquiries, case referrals and direct services).

While NGOs have shown overall support to the re-organization, they seem to have higher expectations on how the re-organization would affect their operations and district relationships. With the inclusion of more diversified interests in the District Social Welfare Office operations, NGO representatives felt that they are no longer the sole partner in district planning and coordination. In fact, many of them found their relationships with District Social Welfare Offices have been “diluted”. As compared with other community stakeholders, NGOs would require more support from District Social Welfare Offices. The message that NGOs are still the core strategic partners of SWD has to be re-confirmed and re-assured.

In summary, the formation of an initial community welfare network, centered on the District Social Welfare Office, comprising NGOs, DC members, residents’ organizations, faith organizations, interest groups, service users or user groups, and other government departments has taken shape. These stakeholders would expect to be better informed, consulted, and supported. They are ready for more cross-sector collaborative involvement in district social welfare activities, and would look for more influence on the policy-making processes. Different from the governance of a

hierarchically organized organization, DSWOs are facing a formidable challenge to “manage” and “lead” these networks or clusters of organizations and personalities. Members of the network are linked together by a variety of exchange relationships (exchanging resources, information, influence and support), which are voluntary, and not mandated by laws, regulations and contracts. In short, the effective operation of this community network will largely depend on the trustful relationships between District Social Welfare Offices and community stakeholders.

With widened representation, these cross-sector and cross-service community forums can facilitate the exchange of views and mobilization of local resources to address community issues. The District Social Welfare Offices have provided the enabling and championing role to create these networks. This “critical mass” is paramount to provide policy feedback, mobilize local resources for concerted and joint actions, and support new welfare initiatives. At issue is how these established networks can be sustained and their institutional capacity empowered. Finally, District Social Welfare Offices will be a vital planning mechanism of the SWD in facilitating the vertical interfacing between district and the headquarters and the partnerships horizontally among community stakeholders.

For the effectiveness of district planning and the well-functioning of District Social Welfare Offices, there is a need for District Social Welfare Offices to provide the leadership that can inspire vision, enthusiasm and commitment and command the trust from other community partners. The culture of collaboration has to be built whereby mutual trust can be nurtured. In view of the growing complexity of community dynamics, the ability of District Social Welfare Offices to create trustful partnerships and sustain vision-guided joint actions is a formidable challenge. Even though such a culture is difficult to define precisely, it is vital to the success of the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions. It has been found that the essential ingredient to successful partnerships and engagement with community stakeholders has less to do with process and more to do with “attitudes”. The organizational culture is influenced by the senior management and most important of all, the DSWOs who provide the leadership.

Overall, the community stakeholders are supporting the direction that District Social Welfare Offices should aim at promoting community partnerships. DSWOs should therefore provide the leadership at the district level to engage key stakeholders as partners in developing and achieving the shared vision, and providing the supportive environment for cross-sector and cross-departmental collaborations.

Finally, there is a need to re-examine the primary objective of district planning, which would have important implications on the focus and position of the re-organized District Social Welfare Office mechanism. Is district planning aimed at improving service coordination or building community partnership? If it is targeted at improving service coordination, we would expect a clear division of responsibility about job management or governance, passive participation, short-term adjustment of efforts and limited interaction with stakeholders. In contrast, if it is targeted at building community partnerships, there should be common vision and objectives, mutual trust, long-term collaboration, active relationship with stakeholders, as well as the building of new resources to address local identified needs.

After the re-organization, the role of the District Social Welfare Offices in policy and service planning has been recognized. Now Social Welfare Department headquarters is expected to consult District Social Welfare Offices for their views and opinions on district needs and local sentiments in policy and project planning. District Social Welfare Offices are central in re-engineering welfare services, re-directing the service priority of the headquarters, introducing “unwelcome” services to the neighborhoods, seeking local consultations on welfare policies, identifying community needs and formulating community strategy, coordinating services to bridge service gaps and avoid service overlaps, and providing outreaching services to identify and connect vulnerable populations. Among these functions, a wide array of good practices has been identified.

Now the District Social Welfare Office system has become a focal point for district organizations and personalities to interact and exchange resources, and to explore collaborations. Evidence suggests that the re-organization has widened the community network and partnership of the SWD beyond NGOs receiving SWD subvention to DCs and district organizations. District organizations include residents’ organizations, faith organizations, interest groups, service users, and business organizations. District Social Welfare Offices have effectively energized and motivated the interests, as well as improved the understanding and knowledge of more DC members and district organizations on welfare issues. This cross-service, cross-sector, cross-departmental, and cross-professional participative system centered on the District Social Welfare Office is vital for informed service planning and effective service implementation.

Coupled with the more open and diversified community participation, the function of District Social Welfare Offices has been extended from service coordination to the mobilization of local resources to address locally identified social issues. Since social welfare services are intricately interwoven with issues related to health, leisure, housing, employment, education, public security, community building and elderly care, it is evident that the DSWOs have become a key player in community issues involving cross-sector and cross-departmental collaborations.

Moving from short-term service coordination and adjustments to developing long-term community partnerships, there is a need for the DSWOs to strengthen their leadership which can inspire common vision, enthusiasm and commitment, empower the institutional capacity, and command the trust from other community partners.

## **Conclusion**

The re-organization of the DSWO constitutes an extension of, rather than a break with the policy development of the SWD community partnership policy. With only a brief history of re-organization, this Study would definitely not be able to identify the full impact of community partnerships. Even so, the study indicated that the re-organization with a strategic shift to widen participation and partnerships has been welcome by the community stakeholders. With more proactive leadership and strategic facilitation by the District Social Welfare Offices, a community-based welfare collaborative network has been established. This network is better equipped and empowered to take concerted action tackling social needs and issues. Cross-sector

collaboration is the key to the building of community cohesion.

Overall, there is a need for all other government departments to develop a more strategic, consistent, consistent, and joined-up approach at the community level to build community capacity and cohesion, as well as to reduce social exclusion. A new partnership structure, based on mutual trust, is necessary to respond effectively to growing complexity of social and community issues. Government should re-think strategically its community building policy to forge new relationships with community actors.

Finally based on this study, there are specific issues which implicated further government action to promote community cohesion:

- Government leadership is important to provide legitimacy and support to the development of the community partnerships. Essential support includes funding, professional advice, and information.
- An informational strategy for supporting the participation of local residents and community organizations is vital. A data bank on local needs and resources is needed to assess needs, inform community planning and empowering local groups.
- There should be a more strategic focus involving cross-sector collaboration on specific community issues.
- Participation from local stakeholders in service and strategic planning through partnership solution is pivotal to meet changing needs and aspirations. Local views and sentiment through widespread consultation should receive more priority in government policy formulation.
- Local structure should be re-invigorated and strengthen to promote local forums for policy consultation and discussion, and participation in joint action.

Managing and maintaining networks of community governance to promote community cohesion is not simple and straightforward. One has to recognize the recurring multiple, competitive and conflicting interests in the community. The role of the government needs to be impartial, open and transparent, balancing conflicting interests between community stakeholders and mobilizing them together for joint action. Finally, the promotion of mutual trust vertically between the government and the community, and between community organizations is the key to community cohesion – social stability and social integration.