

Hong Kong means business in sustainable development

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

Hong Kong's status as Asia's world city is backed by its cosmopolitan lifestyle, vibrant atmosphere and modern infrastructure. But what also sets it apart is its commitment to the environment.

The government means business in improving the environment. Every endeavour is being made to achieve sustainable development in Hong Kong. Translated into action, "sustainable development" means:

- finding ways to increase prosperity and improve quality of life while reducing overall pollution and waste;
- meeting the community's needs and aspirations without damaging the prospects of future generations; and
- reducing the environmental burden on Hong Kong's neighbours and helping to preserve common resources.

A host of "green" strategies and initiatives to realise the objective of sustainable development were clearly spelt out by the Chief Executive in his 1999 Policy Address. Good progress has been made. For example, the total emissions of respirable particulates from vehicles have already been reduced drastically – by 60% at May 2003. At the same time, nitrogen oxide emissions have also been reduced by 28%, very close to the reduction target of 30% by the end of 2005.

These achievements have not come easily. Air pollution, sewage treatment and solid-waste management are major problems that face all communities. The challenge is even more difficult in tiny Hong Kong, with a population of close to 7 million in an area of about 1,100 square kilometres. The population is twice that of Los Angeles, but concentrated in less than half the space.

"Caring for the environment is our prime concern," Mr Simon Hui, Principal Environmental Protection Officer of the Environmental Protection Department, said. "We do not simply tackle environmental problems as they arise. In countering environmental impact arising from projects, we take pre-emptive measures to address problems at the initial planning stage.

"Hong Kong has more than 18 years' experience in using the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process on major development projects. We took a major step forward as early as 1998 when the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance came into full implementation."

The assessment system is a robust and systematic process. It is open and highly transparent and involves community input. All designated projects are required to go through the assessment process before works can proceed. And when they do proceed, they must comply with all the requirements in the permit.

Leading position in environmental impact assessment

Hong Kong's comprehensive environmental impact assessment system is far ahead of many countries and has won international acclaim. Given its leading position in the field, Hong Kong was chosen to host the millennium conference of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) in June 2000. Over 600 delegates from 80 countries or territories attended the conference to share their experience, strategies and practices to preserve and improve the environment. Dr Sarah Liao, now the Secretary for Environment, Transport and Works, was the conference chair.



Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa speaks at the conference with (from left) former Secretary for Environment and Food, Mrs Lily Yam; Director of the Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations, Ms JoAnne DiSano; and IAIA President Professor Hobson Bryan.

At February 2004, 75 EIA reports had been approved and 238 environmental permits had been issued under the ordinance. More than \$448 billion worth of projects have gone through the statutory process to ensure that environmental and ecological impacts are fully considered. There are almost 100 categories of designated projects that are required to go through the assessment process, including roads and railways; airport and port facilities; reclamation, dredging and dumping; energy and water supply; waste disposal and sewage treatment; residential and recreational developments and various engineering and decommissioning projects.

Hong Kong's international status as a leader in environmental impact assessments goes back to the 1990s:

- Director of Environmental Protection Mr Robert Law was invited to sit on the International Steering Committee from 1994 to 1996 to help steer the "International Study of Effectiveness of Environmental Assessment" with other experts from Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia. Since then, the department has participated in the International Inter-governmental Forum to share Hong Kong's experience and knowledge of environmental impact assessment.

- the Environmental Protection Department led an international review of the follow-up practices for environmental impact assessments in 1995. Representatives from North America, Europe and Australia participated in the review.
- Assistant Director of the department Mr Elvis Au was elected by international members from over 100 countries as the President of IAIA from 2001-02. Mr Au also presided over the IAIA annual conference in the Hague, the Netherlands in 2002 with over 600 participants from more than 75 countries.
- The United Nations Environmental Programme and the World Bank often invite professional staff from Hong Kong's Environmental Protection Department to share their experiences and expertise in impact assessments. Hong Kong has been working closely with these two international organisations in promoting good practice. For instance, Mr Au was invited to the World Bank headquarters in 2002 to share Hong Kong's expertise, while Senior Environmental Protection Officer Mr Wang Yuen was invited to run a World Bank training course on the Mainland. Hong Kong's experiences are included in the United Nations Environment Programme's latest Environmental Impact Assessment Training Manual. In March 2004, the Assistant Director Mr Elvis Au was again invited by the World Bank to deliver two lectures at the Train-the-Trainer Course on Strategic Environmental Assessment, jointly organised by the World Bank and the China's State Environmental Protection Administration in Beijing and attended by about 100 very senior officials and professionals from about 24 provinces/major cities in China.

Assessment process minimises impact of airport project

The department started to apply the assessment procedure in the early 1980s for power plants and important urban developments. Application of the environmental impact assessment process to major government projects became a requirement in 1986. The single most important local application of this requirement was in relation to Hong Kong's US\$20 billion new airport and related projects.

Mr Hui said: "Facing such an unprecedented scale of construction, we were very concerned about the environmental impact it would bring. A lot of effort has been put into developing a more structured assessment follow-up system. We are proud that in 1992 an Environmental Monitoring and Audit system was put in place.

"The environmental impact assessment process has significantly minimised the environmental damage that would otherwise have been inflicted. An environmentally important sea channel and a long stretch of valuable natural coastline could have been lost for the airport island," he said.

Another key success in the early 1990s came from the abandonment of a project proposing the excavation of 400 million cubic metres of fill material from Mirs Bay to the east of Hong Kong. An environmental impact assessment saved one of the most pristine, valuable marine ecosystems left in Hong Kong for present and future generations to enjoy.

World leader in practising environmental follow-up

The successful application of comprehensive environmental impact follow-up in Hong Kong is acknowledged worldwide. "This covers a wide range of activities, from site inspection and surveillance, concise compliance statements,

to a systematic process of monitoring and audits,” Mr Hui said. “Hong Kong is one of just a few places in the world to have this process effected under a statutory framework.

“We are fully aware that without systematic follow-up, assessments may become a pro forma process, a paper chase to secure a development permit.

“Construction and operation of most designated projects will require an environmental permit from us. Through the EIA process, the proponents will have to demonstrate how they are going to protect the environment and ensure that any impact will be acceptable. If we agree with their assessments, then we will issue them with permits, and their proposals will become enforceable conditions in the permits.

“We also act as a facilitator to promote public participation through the application of information and communications technology,” Mr Hui said. “This is in line with a new practice termed Continuous Public Involvement, which was adopted by the government in September 2003.”

Internet-based reporting system

The follow-up process in Hong Kong uses a sophisticated internet-based reporting system. All assessment reports and project profiles, and decisions made by the Director of Environmental Protection are placed on a dedicated website for public inspection. For major projects, the proponents are required to set up their own websites and to upload their monitoring and audit reports for public inspection.

Hong Kong is one of the few places in the world that widely applies web-based technologies in the environmental impact assessment process including the use of a real-time web camera for public access and participation.

Real-time web camera monitoring

Real-time web cameras have been installed at selected major construction sites since April 2002, so that the department and net surfers can monitor construction progress and compliance with the ordinance. In January 2003, an on-site camera was installed at the former Cheoy Lee Shipyard at Penny's Bay, from where contaminated soil is being transferred to To Kau Wan.

By installing a synchronised camera with a 10X optical zoom capability for EIA follow-up work, the department and the public can monitor the decommissioning work around the clock. They can also view the related Sheung Sui to Lok Ma Chau Spur Line project through the web cameras.

“The idea of using a real-time web camera for EIA follow-up is a world first. It greatly improves the transparency of projects and allows public involvement in environmental assessment follow-up,” Mr Hui said.

Real-time web camera images of the To Kau Wan project broadcast online.



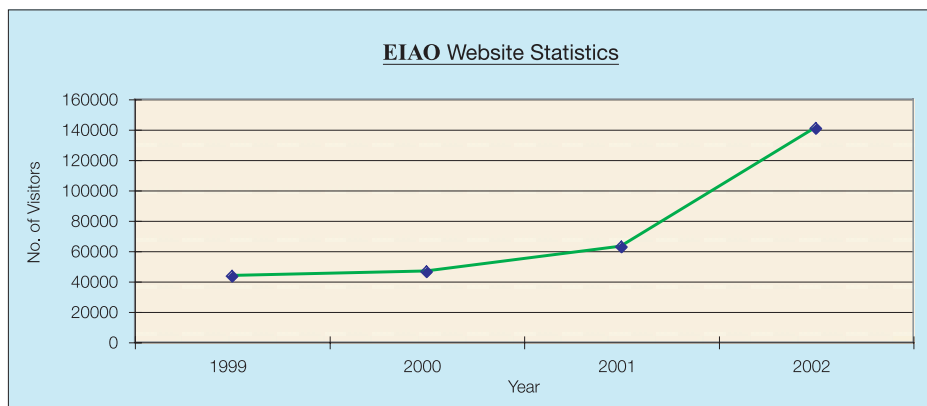
Public monitoring only a few clicks away

The application of web-based environmental monitoring and audit technologies for disseminating all environmental impact assessment reports and environmental monitoring and audit results has won the department worldwide acclaim. Numerous commendations have been received from international experts:

“I wish my environmental administration would be this open and transparent! And constructive!” – Maria Partidario, Past President of IAIA.

“I am always impressed by the way you handle EIA and public information in Hong Kong.” – Markus Eggenberger, Swiss Development Corporation, Switzerland.

Locally, public involvement has increased greatly. The number of visits to the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance website (<http://www.epd.gov.hk/eia/>) has tripled from 43,000 in 1999 to 140,000 in 2002. The use of the internet to communicate with the public during follow-up activities has dramatically increased the number of participants compared with the earlier system of office visits and written reports.



Page visits for the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance website.

“Hong Kong is the first and only place where the general public can access full environmental impact assessment reports and comprehensive environmental monitoring and audit information via the internet,” Mr Hui said. “There are now more than 70 EIA reports and hundreds of environmental monitoring and audit reports that can be accessed any time and anywhere in the world.

“We believe public involvement is crucial to the success of the follow-up system. Better communication between different community stakeholders enhances work efficiency and creates consensus. In many cases this has contributed to smooth implementation of projects.”

“We are working hard not just for the present generation, but also for our children, and our children’s children. That’s why sustainable development is so important to the globe. All of us are gatekeepers of the future,” he said.