

Social challenges and climate action

## **Community Dialogue 1 - Empowering residents of subdivided houses in Hong Kong**

by Kevin Li and John Sayer

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A common argument against more decisive climate action suggests that priority should be given to more pressing social and livelihood issues which require immediate policy action and finance.

As part of the Paris Watch programme initiated in 2018<sup>1</sup>, CarbonCare InnoLab planned a series of community dialogues with citizens active on various social issues to discuss the relationship between social and climate change issues.

The dialogues seek to address both the physical impact of global heating on people's lives, as well as the social impact of measures to transition to a future net-zero economy. This incorporates the concept of a "Just Transition"<sup>2</sup> which seeks to ensure that climate policies are mindful of the need to protect those members of the community vulnerable to job loss or price increases that may occur during a green transition.

### **In the Spirit of "Talanoa Dialogue"**

In 2018, CarbonCare InnoLab held the first and only "Talanoa Dialogue" in Hong Kong. The Talanoa concept stems from a traditional problem-solving practice in the South Pacific island communities, and was promoted by the United Nations when Fiji was official host of the 2017 COP23 climate summit.

Talanoa represents a participatory and transparent discussion process based on story-telling and designed to foster a non-accusatory and supportive way to address problems.

The Hong Kong Talanoa brought together academics, business, finance and NGOs to address the guidance questions put forward by the United Nations climate summit: Where are we now? Where do we want to get to? How do we get there?

The results of the Hong Kong Talanoa dialogue<sup>3</sup> were submitted to the United Nations and displayed on the UNFCCC Talanoa Dialogue portal website.

The first community dialogue to address social issues in Hong Kong was held in September 2020 with a focus on the city's housing problems. The meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Other aspects of the Paris Watch programme monitor Hong Kong's climate mitigation and adaptation performance as a city in accordance with the spirit and letter of the Paris Climate Agreement and in comparison with other Asian cities. Another element of the project trains young people on youth participation in international climate conferences and other initiatives in relation to sustainable development.

<sup>2</sup> "Just Transition" was included as a key principle in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change: "Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities." (Please refer to [https://unfccc.int/files/essential\\_background/convention/application/pdf/english\\_paris\\_agreement.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Annex 1.

discussed climate impact on the residents of subdivided apartments and other poor housing conditions in Hong Kong. The purpose was to enable the discussion among a group of active citizens who are concerned about living conditions in high-density accommodation. The participants<sup>4</sup> worked together to identify problems and find suitable solutions for both the housing quality and the growing impact of climate change.

The issue of sub-standard housing faced by many working people in Hong Kong has been recognised as an important social challenge for some years. From rooftop houses, caged homes, cubicles to subdivided houses, the living environment for a significant proportion of Hong Kong's people is crowded and harsh. As of now, more than 200,000 people are living in sub-divided houses<sup>5</sup>.

### **Global warming and pandemic challenge the sub-divided housing**

The weather in Hong Kong is humid and hot for half the year. This is now coupled with the threat of increasingly serious climate impacts and the recent global outbreak of coronavirus, exacerbating the pre-existing housing problems. The situation of residents of sub-divided flats, who are disproportionately vulnerable to extreme weather and coronavirus, has aroused increasing attention from the community.

For the dialogue, CarbonCare InnoLab invited a range of housing groups, social service centres, environmental organizations, scholars and others to conduct a ground-breaking cross-sectoral exchange on how residents of subdivided housing can meet the need for improved living conditions while also meeting the challenges arising from climate change.

Sub-divided houses are generally poorly ventilated with poor drainage and waste water systems, all of which increases the risk of infection from a range of sources, including the Covid-19 virus.

At the time of the pandemic, residents confined to tiny sub-divided houses have had to face increased mental stress and negative emotions, including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, emotional distress, loss of appetite, and even insomnia.

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<sup>4</sup> For the full list of participants, please refer to Annex 2.

<sup>5</sup> "Report of the Task Force for the Study on Tenancy Control of Subdivided Units (March 2021)," Secretariat for the Task Force for the Study on Tenancy Control of Subdivided Units Transport and Housing Bureau.  
[https://www.thb.gov.hk/eng/contact/housing/studyOnTenancyControl\\_Report.pdf](https://www.thb.gov.hk/eng/contact/housing/studyOnTenancyControl_Report.pdf) (Accessed on 17 August 2021)

Many sub-divided housing residents are reluctant to turn on air-conditioning because they cannot afford the high electricity bills. Many residents have health problems related to high temperatures, including cases of indoor heatstroke. Where the government has provided electricity subsidies to households, these are usually in the hands of the property owners, and the landlords have no incentive to pass on these lower electricity costs to the tenants in subdivided houses.

The dual impacts of climate change and coronavirus on residents of subdivided housing are already sufficient to show the inequality of housing in Hong Kong has serious social impact.

### **Cross-sectoral exchange enhanced understanding of climate impacts**

Participants at the September Community Dialogue agreed that per capita living area needs to be at least 50 square feet, and the bed space should be long enough to lie flat and straighten the feet. Sufficient storage space, dining space, activity space and sleeping space, and an independent kitchen and toilet are also seen as basic minimum needs. In addition, the residence should also have a certain degree of privacy and private space. Accommodation should be equipped with sound insulation measures, a good ventilation system, sufficient sources of light, and whatever measures are needed to ensure a safe, hygienic environment.

In order to meet the goal of adequate housing for all, the use of innovative technology, cross-sectoral cooperation, and innovation in improving regulations are all worth exploring in addition to establishing the minimum standards listed above.

Dialogue participants gave the following specific suggestions:

1. Use idle spaces such as rooftops or unused hotels as transitional residential houses.
2. Learn from co-accommodation models used in other countries in terms of the benefits of shared common space to lessen the problem of small private living spaces.
3. Consider the outcome of the coronavirus pandemic on increased opportunities for employees to work from home and the resulting reduced demand for commercial office space. Explore the possible potential this brings for planning more low-cost residential housing development.
4. Solve energy poverty. Currently, sub-divided households suffer from high electricity bills because they do not have independent electric meters, and therefore they could not benefit from the current Electricity Charges Subsidy Scheme. Independent meters can make the subsidy scheme more effective.

Installation of smart meters for sub-divided households would provide better opportunities for the provision of more energy-efficient appliances as well as incentives for energy-saving behaviour.

5. Cross-sectoral civil society action and better use of community resources. Non-profit organizations can also provide a platform for cross-sectoral partnership to promote collective action, help residents of sub-divided houses cope with climate change and increase social dialogue and cohesion. Examples of cross-sectoral cooperation include the establishment of community-level waste collection and recycling stations. Here, social workers, environmental organisations and the recycling industry collaborate to benefit the community.
6. Advocate the review and revision of relevant laws: The SAR government should be encouraged to add requirements to housing regulations to include climate change adaptation as part of basic building safety measures.

Participants at the meeting noted that according to the first paragraph of Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations, everyone has the right to "an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions<sup>6</sup>."

### **Government has an obligation to fulfil requirements for adequate housing**

The UN has put forward seven major standards related to the right to adequate housing including: security of tenure; availability of services; materials; facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy.<sup>7</sup> The Hong Kong SAR follows the People's Republic of China as a party to the United Nations Convention. It also stipulates in accordance with Article 39(1) of the Basic Law of the SAR that the relevant provisions of the Convention applicable to Hong Kong "continue to be effective and shall be implemented through the laws of the Hong Kong SAR." The SAR government therefore has responsibility and an obligation to fulfil relevant requirements in the spirit and letter of the Convention with regard to decent housing conditions.

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<sup>6</sup> "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights", United Nations Treaty Collection. [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch\\_IV\\_03.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch_IV_03.pdf). Accessed on 17 August 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "The Right to Adequate Housing," Fact Sheet No. 21/Rev. 1, United Nations, p. 3. [https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/fs21\\_rev\\_1\\_housing\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/fs21_rev_1_housing_en.pdf). Accessed on 17 August 2021.



The government can revise policies that improve the structure of buildings, make better use of social space and land, reduce energy poverty in partnership with power companies, and support technical research to improve environmental hygiene and heat control. Civil society can also carry out cross-sectoral cooperation to mobilise and make good use of diverse resources and promote community-level discussions to identify and solve problems. Only with the concerted efforts of all walks of life, can residents of subdivided housing be expected to cope with the impact of climate change.

### **Author's Profile**

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### **Annex 1**

The First Talanoa Climate Dialogue in Hong Kong: Building trust and ambition (14 September 2018)

### **Annex 2**

CarbonCare InnoLab invited different groups and experts (20 people in total) to participate in the first community dialogue, including (in no specific order):

- Hong Kong Subdivided Flats Concerning Platform
- Christian Care for the Homeless Association
- Caritas Mok Cheung Sui Kun Community Centre
- Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Lady MacLehose Centre
- Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Entrepreneurship Initiative, Lingnan University
- Institute of Future Cities, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Mr. Jordan Ka Ho Pang, Central and Western District Councillor
- Mr. Felix Hiu Laam Chow, Sha Tin District Councillor
- Ms. Siu Lik Wai, Eastern District Councillor
- Dream Impact
- Health In Action
- Greeners' Action
- 350HK
- Secure Information Disposal Services Ltd.

