



Building Forward Better For Inclusive Housing



Post-Event Report

Asia-Pacific Housing Forum - Hong Kong
Bloomberg L.P., 25/F Cheung Kong Center,
2 Queen's Road Central,
Hong Kong

2:00pm - 5:30pm
Monday October 4, 2021



Event summary

Over 70 participants attended the Asia-Pacific Housing Forum Hong Kong pre-event. This hybrid event explored what the private sector and the public can do to build forward better, recognising that the housing sector is a key driver for economic and social recovery. It also raised awareness of SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities as a major driver and contributor to all the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and explored how to help Hong Kong accelerate its progress towards achieving SDG11.

Virtual panel discussion

The theme of this panel discussion was 'Improving inclusive access to adequate and affordable housing'. We invited panelists with the personal experience and professional background to speak directly to this issue from a diversity of angles. A key takeaway from the session was that inclusive housing is complicated and that addressing the intersection of housing and inclusion is a topic that is welcome and long overdue. The HKSAR Government needs to conduct public policy research, educate the community on this issue and amend local anti-discrimination ordinances to protect people from discrimination and harassment in housing when they're renting properties. For persons living with disabilities (PWDs), finding housing that can accommodate a wheelchair user is just one part of the challenge, it's also about accessibility in the community in terms of access to transportation, shopping, and public facilities.



Panelists



Shalini Mahtani,
Founder of the Zubin Foundation and Community Business

One of Hong Kong's most respected voices on diversity and inclusion, Shalini founded The Zubin Foundation and Community Business and has served on the boards of government advisory and statutory bodies. She was recognized by the Hong Kong Government for her contributions to issues related to ethnic minorities.



Peter Reading,
Senior Legal Counsel, Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)

Peter has worked in international human rights law for 20 years. He is Senior Legal Counsel at the EOC, where he has been leading advocacy work on equality issues, including modernizing all existing discrimination legislation in Hong Kong relating to sex, disability, race, and family status.



Rabi Yim,
Chairperson, Direction Association for the Handicapped

After a car accident Rabi became partially paralyzed and now uses a wheelchair. She became an advocate for barrier-free environments and advises on numerous government committees, such as the Transport and Housing Bureau's Advisory Committee, to promote barrier free access. She also serves on the Board of the EOC.



Dr. Ngai Ming Yip,
Professor of Housing and Urban Studies in the Department of Public Policy, City University, and Programme Director of the Bachelor of Social Science in Public Policy and Politics

Dr. Yip has been engaged in the teaching of housing and urban policy for over 20 years. He is an active researcher and involved in several committees, including the government-appointed Task Force for the Study of Tenancy Control in Subdivided Units.



Yvonne Man(Moderator),
Bloomberg news anchor

Yvonne Man co-anchors "Bloomberg Markets: China Open" and "Bloomberg Markets: Asia" from Bloomberg Television's Asian headquarters in Hong Kong, bringing viewers the most pressing global business, political and financial information as Asian markets open.

Introduction

In Hong Kong, there is a housing deficit. There is an extreme shortage of adequate and affordable housing. The HKSAR Government provides public housing; but supply does not meet the demand. The projected production of public housing units over the next five years is just over 100,000.¹ This number is less than half the supply needed to house over 250,000 applicants currently on the waiting list. Not surprisingly, the average wait time to access public housing has reached an all-time high of 5.8 years. While waiting for public housing, many people are forced to turn to subdivided flats or other forms of substandard and informal shelter.

While the housing shortage imposes hardships on many low-income tenants in Hong Kong, negative effects can be experienced acutely by members of traditionally disadvantaged groups. As a foundation from which to access employment, education, and health services, housing can be a strong driver of socioeconomic inclusion and a pathway out of poverty. It is essential to improve inclusive access to housing processes and promote equitable access.

¹ Paul Chan, Financial Secretary, 2021-2022 Budget Speech, (24 February, 2021)





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Discussion highlights

- Within the non-Chinese population of Hong Kong, one in four people live in extreme poverty. At a time when Hong Kong people aren't having many children, the ethnic minority (EM) population is growing very quickly, and many families have five to six children. It takes a significant portion of income to rent an apartment that accommodates a large family.
- In small flats, the kitchen and toilet are sometimes combined in one area. For Muslims who consider food and the kitchen to be sacred, it is culturally inappropriate to mix the kitchen and bathroom spaces together in one area, meaning that these living conditions are not dignified.
- It is not uncommon for agents or landlords to say, outright, "We do not sell [rent] to ethnic minorities, we do not want them." Chances are high that ethnic minorities are paying more to find a landlord willing to rent to them.
- EOC research from 2016, found discrimination in private housing rental practices by both by landlords and real estate agents toward members of ethnic minority communities. As a result, the EOC worked with the Estate Agents Authority to educate agents on issues of discrimination and conducted a public education campaign. But these actions don't address the wider issue, which is a fundamental lack of adequate and appropriate housing.
- The government has done well in creating inclusive policies in public housing for the elderly and poor. But public housing is not necessarily catering to those with special issues. The Hong Kong government puts much emphasis on mainstream society and not enough on diverse social needs. The government will need time to conduct public policy research on this topic and also to educate the community.
- Persons with disabilities (PWDs) seeking private rental housing may spend months and visit upwards of 100 housing estates to find suitable accommodations. Finding housing that can accommodate a wheelchair user is just one part of the challenge, it's also about accessibility in the community. Public transportation, shopping areas, pavements, and facilities such as medical centres in the surrounding area must also be available and accessible.
- PWDs may encounter several issues with private landlords. Many hold superstitious beliefs that wheelchairs are 'bad luck' or stereotype wheelchairs as being dirty. With limited storage, many landlords are unwilling to move furniture out of the unit to provide more space to manoeuvre. In addition, it can be challenging to find a landlord who will permit modifications be made to the flat, even though costs of both modifications and restoration of the home back to its original condition at the end of the lease are completely borne by the renter.



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- The government works well with making special arrangements and providing facilities for the many PWDs living in public housing estates. They arrange for people with wheelchairs to visit flats, but they only offer three locations to choose from. Once a flat is decided upon, PWD tenants undertake the full cost of all necessary modifications.
- The right to adequate housing and to be free from discrimination, are key human rights under the UN Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The local anti-discrimination laws embed that in Hong Kong's system by protecting people from discrimination and harassment in housing when they're renting properties.
- Protection from discrimination and harassment during the rental process is covered by all four anti-discrimination ordinances: the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO), the Racial Discrimination Ordinance (RDO), the Sexual Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FSDO).
- The Buildings Department strengthened the Design Manual on barrier free access in 2008 to ensure housing would be more accessible. However, guidelines only apply to new flats and it is not mandated that older housing completed before 2008 need comply.
- Universal design has been discussed in Hong Kong for over 20 years, but we are not seeing any real implementation even in public housing, so it may be the time to push forward. Implementation should include access to public areas and also interior design, to accommodate people in different life stages and with different needs. The government should take the lead.
- Another area is issues of sexual harassment in relation to housing. Current ordinances provide protection from harassment between landlords and tenants, however there is no ordinance providing protection from harassment between tenants living in subdivided units or co-living spaces. The EOC recommended to the government that the Sex Discrimination Ordinance be amended to include places of residence, to provide protection of tenants or sub-tenants from sexual harassment by another tenant or sub-tenant occupying the same premises or residential building.
- Bringing two major topics together to address the intersection of housing and inclusion, is welcome and long overdue.



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What needs to be done?

1. We need a diversity of voices and we need to include individuals from a variety of backgrounds in the formulation of policies.
2. Inclusive housing is a complicated issue. The HKSAR Government needs to conduct public policy research on this issue. On paper, the government says they are doing something, but it's not just about allocating resources, it's also about determination.
3. All buildings should take a universal approach to design so that they are accessible for PWDs, the elderly, people with families, and other vulnerable groups. Universal design is the principle of access for everyone and that's the direction the government should work toward.
4. Improve policies for universal design and update the Buildings Department Manual for new and old buildings - make compliance compulsory for all buildings.
5. We need to work with the community to educate and open mindsets that members of ethnic minority communities and persons with disabilities are valuable customers and deserve equal access to housing.
6. Real estate agents can set specific guidelines around accessibility so that landlords are encouraged or incentivized to rent accessible properties.
7. A large-scale public education programme is needed to change mindsets around racial issues. The government can also do more to address the bigger issues around inclusion.
8. The government needs to allocate a dedicated team to look at inequities in housing. For example, the EOC receives many complaints from the visually impaired, because those living in public housing are not permitted to have their guide dogs live with them. If there were dedicated staff to consider the needs of particular groups such as persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities, inequalities may be more likely to be addressed.
9. We can engage more with the private sector especially as inclusion is one of the big issues companies are focusing on now.
10. The government could introduce incentives or legislation which require private sector developers to provide a certain percentage of affordable housing with each housing development.
11. We could collect nominations from the public, and then go to developers/agents to publicly reward companies who do a good job in improving inclusion.



Youth SDG workshop

This in-person workshop was attended by students from three schools: Li Po Chun United World College of Hong Kong, South Island School and Sha Tin College. Through participation and engaging in thought experiments, students learned about subdivided units (SDUs), explored what it might be like to live in cramped conditions, and compared different factors of adequate housing. After a brief introduction to Habitat's work, students listened to a case study of a typical Hong Konger and his living condition in an SDU. In smaller groups, students engaged in other interactive activities.

For the first exercise, students spread out across the room and used masking tape to map out what they estimated to be the size of an average SDU. Interestingly, all the groups underestimated the actual size. Habitat staff shared the actual average size of SDUs, and students rebuilt their outlines accordingly. Students were then asked to conduct daily activities, such as studying and exercising, inside the unit. Afterwards, students shared the feelings they experienced. The most recurring words were, "suffocated" and "cramped," while a few students drew pictures of a volcano and a microwave oven to express their reactions to the cramped conditions.

In the second exercise, students took on the persona of a tenant needing to make a difficult decision about deciding what home to live in. Factors such as access to public facilities (e.g. hospital, library, playground), quality transport options, home safety and security, and private toilet and kitchen facilities were weighed and discussed.

The session concluded with an introduction to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular focus on SDG 11, its ripple effect on other Sustainable Development Goals, and a call to action for students to get involved and be part of the solution.





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9/F, V-Point, 18 Tang Lung St, Causeway Bay
Tel: 2520 4000

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