

# **CITIES LEARNING TOGETHER CONFERENCE**

## **Hong Kong, 18-20 November 2013**

### **CO-RAPPORTEURS OVERVIEW REPORT**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The objective of the *Cities Learning Together* conference was to bring together awareness to the role and needs of the local communities in relation to sustainable and healthy learning and seek ways in which the different sectors can play a greater role in response to those needs. The conference aspired to answer the following questions:

- a) Can integrated effort and partnership within and among sectors, organisations and urban centres lead to a viable and sustainable future for the urban majority who now inhabit the planet?
- b) How can city administrations, voluntary bodies, businesses and universities work together to overcome the multiple crises facing us and develop healthy cities that can survive and self-improve?
- c) Does city learning really matter? How do cities really learn? How can we create learning spaces and processes that encourage people to learn and plan consciously as groups linking up with other learner-actors across all sectors and institutions in the city? How and where does devolution really work? How can local responsibility and wisdom be engaged to meet global and national environmental and economic priorities? How is high-level intent translated into practical action? And
- d) What are the roles of local communities and neighbourhoods in addressing the big issues confronting cities?

These questions are seen as vital to the health and survival of people in towns and cities, especially the multiplying mega-cities growing up in all continents as the global balance of population tips over: more than half the world's people are now urban dwellers. Meanwhile decades-old environmental and resource challenges combine with persisting global financial and economic crises to make "the end of growth" a real possibility acknowledged and even favoured by some, feared by others especially in business and politics.

The conference planners asked what we mean by learning cities, by the widely used term community, and about the place of cross-sector partnership in a problematic world. Will these help us to build futures that are economically viable, socially cohesive, culturally inclusive and environmentally constructive?

Ten organisations, led by the EU Centre at RMIT University (Australia) with Pascal International Observatory and hosted by the Hong Kong Institute of Education, brought together diverse stakeholders from across 23 countries to discuss these issues. The other partners were CITYNET, the Asia Pacific University Community Engagement Network (APUCEN), the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE),

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the East Asian Forum for Adult Education (EAFAE), DVV (the German Adult Education Association), the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

To explore these questions, an unusual Conference design was adopted:

- (a) an opening morning in a plenary session - not hearing keynote addresses but collectively identifying issues and resources to address them;
- (b) an opening afternoon in more specialised smaller groups looking at four key policy areas: Economic; Green; Health, Welfare and Social Well-being; and Social;
- (c) a full day in the field with the same four groups probing what these mean, what happens, and what is or might be done in a unique Hong Kong context; and
- (d) a final day in a plenary, sharing these field experiences and analyses, considering the role of different parties in development work and governance; and discussing different ways forward.

This brief summary of the work of the Conference follows the logic and design of the event, using reports from the different strands presented on the last day. Dominant strands concern the four main chosen policy arenas. The secondary strands looked at the place of city administrators, higher education, and civil society, while the third dimension comprised some overarching questions listed as: neighbourhood, community and city; the learning city; integration in governance; and sustainability especially with big city living. Discussions were supported by a comprehensive volume of *Proceedings* which were distributed to participants in advance (see <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/4khvnp345yqe.pdf>).

## Day 1 Plenaries

**Professor Rupert Maclean** welcomed participants to Hong Kong and provided an overview of Hong Kong's demographics, geography, literacy levels, income and poverty. Social and environmental issues with a focus on sustainability were mentioned as key issues for Hong Kong and other Asian cities.

**Professor Bruce Wilson** welcomed participants on behalf of the European Union Centre at RMIT, mentioning the importance of the linking the EU with Asia and Australia in building relationships and shaping action. New and practical steps will be necessary to address challenges to move forward.

**Professor Josef Konvitz** presented introductory remarks on behalf of Pascal International Observatory, mentioning the significance of the world economy crisis, the shift of wealth and widening income disparities on the well-being of citizens. Worldwide, trust in governments is at an all time low. The impact of natural disasters, such as, the recent typhoon in the Philippines and the reaction of the government and its people add to the challenges. Other issues such as surveillance of the Internet; immigrants performing outside their first language; and adult learning peaking at 30 years old were also highlighted. For PASCAL members, there is a common agenda: to bring people together: cities, citizens, universities and to link global and national themes with local experience and debate.

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**Professor Chris Duke** introduced the conference, remarking that governments are good at addressing such challenges in the short-term, but not so successful at finding long-term solutions. He emphasised the theme of partnership, as a key focus for this Conference in exploring how solutions could be achieved in the future.

The first Plenary session focused on ‘The context and concept of the learning city: Governance, Cities, Communities and Neighbourhoods’, with Joanne Curry as moderator and Peter Kearns, PASCAL International Exchanges; Nicola Vathauer, Eurocities; Jin Yang, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning; and See Ching Mey, APUCEN, as panellists.

The session raised a number of issues and important themes: at the community level the importance of maintaining personal contact between people; the need for partnerships between stakeholders including education institutes, local governments and industries; the need for dialogue and the exchange of information between all stakeholders; the need for peer review of programmes and initiatives; mentoring visits to trainees and trainers from industry; care for the elderly through visits to maintain social inclusion; the lack of trust in governments leading to tension between communities and their leaders; and the importance of indigenous/cultural issues to minority groups.

The roles of national and local governments were discussed, such as their role in power supply, water regulation, flood control and wastewater treatment, and other issues that cannot be efficiently resolved at the local level. It was noted that 49 per cent of people live in rural areas, which raises the question of the role cities play in rural life. The question was asked about whether local or national governments should be more influential in the operation of cities. The importance of effective inter-city communication was also discussed. Other issues included stakeholders not speaking the same language with the resultant lack of dialogue - common language was needed to engage the digital revolution. Frustrations were expressed with bureaucracy such as the inability of international agencies to get information to the appropriate parties.

The second Plenary session of the first morning focused on ‘How to achieve sustainable action and change? Who acts and what can they do?’. Panellists included: Mary-Jane Ortega, CITYNET; Mike Osborne, University of Glasgow; Kim Shinil, Baekseok University; and Ratna Jain, Hon'ble Mayor Kota Municipal Corporation.

The importance of active citizenship to create functioning villages, towns and cities was raised, for example, the promotion of citizenship in community colleges in Taipei, and the initiative of empowering new migrant domestic helpers working overseas for the first time. They needed to have an identity and citizenship in their adopted cities. Making sustainability a core value for cities through the engagement with the business community to promote initiatives such as energy efficiency (for example adoption of solar power systems), and the importance of slum redevelopment in India were discussed. The facilitation of adult lifelong learning and the promotion of learning for all (formal and informal) through local cultural events such as “learning festivals” were put forward as key issues. Issues surrounding changes in leadership were discussed and the potential for change to existing policies and agreements under political change were raised. For example, the impacts of a change of mayor or local leader(s), at the community level and the effects this can have on cities.

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Finally, difficulties caused by the reduction of education funding and the challenges subsequently faced by education institutes at all levels were raised.

Conference participants were asked to identify controversial issues that required bold policy action by governments. Ideas put forward included the need to invest in human resource capital through empowerment of people who lacked education, rights and the ability to become active and constructive members of communities. It was suggested that it was easier to engage with people when there was an external threat, for example, from a natural disaster because there was a tendency for people to cooperate in the face of a common adversity with old conflicts temporarily forgotten. The issue of decentralization and the strengthening of local government to represent communities at the grass-roots level was mentioned as an important point for discussion.

## **The Four Policy Arenas**

### *Economic*

The Economic group explored a number of contextual and conceptual issues. These included an overview of the Hong Kong economy and a discussion of the proceedings. The debate canvassed various issues about the role of the market on the one hand, and public intervention on the other, and how these tensions are expressed in very specific ways related to such diverse issues as skills development, public transport provisions, competitiveness of liveability, university-city engagement, “aggressive individualism” and risk management.

The host organisation, Energising Kowloon East Office (EKEO) was visited on the second day. EKEO is an authority charged with the overview of major development on the former Kai Tak airport site and an adjacent, old manufacturing area in which 220,000 people are still employed. The group spent some time reviewing the information provided, drawing on their experience in other settings, ranging from major port redevelopments, to smaller university-city-community regeneration projects. The conversation highlighted that this was clearly a place where learning could be, and was, occurring. There was the formal aspect linked particularly with employment and design, and the informal, which is important always in large economic districts. It was acknowledged also that there is a much larger list of cities where a significant scale of redevelopment has occurred, many of which were well known by members of the group.

### *Green*

The group created a framework articulating their thinking around conceptualising how cities can learn sustainably together in order to transform themselves. Ideas emerging from their discussions included:

- (a) green/blue to recognises earth is blue and importance of clean ocean and water;
- (b) if you want to go fast go alone; if you want to go far- then go together;
- (c) overcoming an obsession with development;
- (d) moving beyond the work context into the life context;
- (e) making a future rather than waiting for a future;
- (f) do we need to wait for a disaster to find the learning moment?;

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- (g) rethinking at a more radical level; and
- (h) working for holistic learning and holistic approaches in which indigenous frameworks may provide good exemplars.

It was agreed that in order for global sustainability to occur local sustainability must already have been achieved in cities. Partnerships, acknowledging diversity, the creation of a comprehensive learning plan and a consideration of the role of leadership with grassroots support were considered to be of importance. It was suggested that issues of power should be acknowledged in terms of partnerships between government, civil society and private sector with resources being co-managed to encourage collaborative working.

On the second day, the group visited the new CBD planned for East Kowloon. It was reported that challenges exist within the development process. Efforts from universities were apparent with regard to people being trained or by capturing their own learning. Two questions arose from the visit: How do we sustain the CBD as it is not a Greenfield site? How to engage with people?

### *Health*

The Health, Well-being and Social Welfare strand addressed the question of the characteristics of health systems in the future in a context where there is growing recognition that the present arrangements for public health systems are not sustainable in the long term. It was agreed that the future will see a series of shifts from the current arrangements which will include a shift from the current concept of a patient towards “super-empowered individuals” directing their own healthy lives, possibly with a new social contract underpinning these arrangements. Lifelong learning will be much more important in these arrangements.

A workshop conducted in the strand focussed on the future of Healthy Cities in Hong Kong in a situation where all Administrative Districts have Healthy City initiatives but no Learning City initiatives exist. A preferred option involved a convergence of Healthy City and Learning City characteristics, as in the PASCAL EcCoWell work, with provision for seniors seen as a possible transition pathway. It was recognised that well-being will be increasingly important, with improved assessment, in the shifts identified by the strand.

### *Social*

The group discussed vulnerable groups in society including: a) migrant workers in China and Hong Kong and poor conditions usually encountered; b) foreign women imported to Korea to marry men 15 years older and suffer various abuse; and c) the issue of child labour in San Paulo which is estimated at 50% increase annually.

The group reported the need for important issues to be identified and regional authorities questioned on improvements, and how they can be measured. In addition, they explored ways for human and social capital can be transformed. It was noted that financial status should not become a key indicator.

A field visit was organised by the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) in partnership with the Alliance of Progressive Labour-Hong Kong (APL-HK) to discuss the issues and concerns of migrant workers. The health and well-being of migrant workers may be compromised due to work conditions and their need to support immediate and extended families in their home countries. Issues including contract violations; maltreatment and abuse and poor working and living conditions were discussed.

### **Day 3 Plenaries: ‘Cross’ Themes**

On the third day, all conference participants reconvened in plenary session to share their insights from the field investigations, and to explore how the key learning about how the partners could work together to address the ‘global problematique. The decisive aim of the conference is to demonstrate how the different themes of the Economic, Social, Green, and Health can be brought together in an integrated way to enlighten the understanding of how appropriate responses to the challenge of sustainable and healthy living in cities. The local community theme was helpful in providing practical examples of ways in which the four policy strands of the conference could achieve this. At the same time, how is this enhanced by collaboration amongst institutions such as universities, civil society, government and business?

The following themes arose in each of the four strands, and in the discussion of the third day. These are not presented in any order or priority of importance.

#### *Development and Sustainability*

The conventional approach is to define economic and social development in largely economic terms, with a focus on quantitative economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product per person, and income per capita. Delegates believe that a broader definition of development is needed which places a greater emphasis on non-economic matters such as well-being. Additionally, as development implies improvement over time, long-term improvement and balance is crucial in order to ensure a socio-economically and sustainable development for the present and future generation.

#### *Relevance, Access and Equity*

A major test which needs to be satisfied by all policy and practice concerning the four strands relates to relevance in solving the various problems being addressed, in order to overcome these. The conference highlighted the need for quality over quantity, and that access should be central, regardless of an individual’s social, economic, political or personal characteristics.

#### *Importance of adopting a holistic approach*

This refers to bringing together the Head, Hand and Heart in learning; and the importance of exploring various kinds of learning with regard to formal, non-formal and informal modalities.

### *Placing an emphasis on learning, rather than education*

Education is narrow and is generally taken to refer to what occurs in formal education institutions such as schools, colleges and universities. Learning is much broader than that and concerns the multi-dimensional ways in which individuals gain new knowledge and understanding. It is also important to focus on lifelong learning which occurs from birth and for the whole lifespan. It is not bound by time or space. Moreover, the richer concept of the learning city refers not just to an environment in which individuals can learn, but a shared collective civic capacity to learn from experience and manage our affairs better, that is to say, to better governance.

### *Capacity Building*

The process involved with promoting desirable ends and innovations is just as important as is the overall aim and destination in terms of action and outcomes. The process is necessarily a social one which necessitates the actions and good will of many different vested interest groups and individuals. It is important that the communities involved are trained, monitored and assessed to ensure that skills are built and sustained. These skills will also enable the communities to resolve existing and future issues.

### *Impact to Policies and Interventions*

It is important that the findings from the conference should influence both policy and intervention. Issues arising from sustainable and health challenges in the community should be addressed and findings should be used to develop evidence-based education, health and social policies and interventions. A cost-benefit analysis of each intervention to ensure the financial sustainability of recommendations is also essential. Ways of capturing and capitalising on efficiencies need to be identified and utilised. Evidence-based research and cost benefit analysis of programme interventions is particularly important given financial restrictions present in cities throughout developing nations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Two important sets of documents were presented in the concluding sessions of Day 3, serving as a basis for ongoing action. The first was the Big Tent statement which Rajesh Tandon, President of PRIA, had introduced at the opening on Day 1. This represented a statement of future action to which a number of organisations will be signatories, promoting it as a basis for ongoing collaborative action to address key issues of social and economic change, not least in cities.

The other was the tabling of the key documents of the International Platform for Learning Cities, which had emerged from the UNESCO Conference held in Beijing in October. These included a Declaration about the importance of learning cities in enabling urban residents to participate in addressing the challenges which their cities face. The other documents provide more insight into how cities might approach the work of becoming 'learning cities'.

*Cities Learning Together* showed that partners can collaborate productively around shared purposes. The outcome can be shared ownership and commitment to further bilateral and multilateral action. This comes from learning together in an open participatory way, where different parties contribute relevant authority and expertise from different kinds of experience.

The way forward also clearly involves integrated effort and partnership within and amongst key stakeholders, based on ethics, respect and shared purpose. It remains a central challenge for local residents in the different circumstances of big cities world-wide to best develop the necessary networks and support systems to be supported.

This Conference allowed new ways of learning together to be tried, as well as new contacts to be made for future collaboration. The rich experience and analysis of the proceedings are likely to be used further by those taking part who now want to be clearer on what other participants are moving towards and to inform wider networks as they are consulted on the websites of the partners. Social networking, nowhere growing exponentially faster than in East Asia, overlaps networks like the Big Tent and the ongoing planning, development and action of partners from Eurocities in the EU to deeply grounded ASPBAE in the Asian-Pacific half of the world. These constitute the richly populated uncontrollable, sometimes mysterious means whereby passions and meanings are shared and change occurs.

Working together inclusively is integral. Operating with the information obtained from the conference, there is a way forward for governments to benefit from the additional information obtained about sustainable and healthy living, as well as from the enhanced capacity of their populations. Organisations involved in assistance to sustainable living, mostly NGOs and businesses, should benefit from the assumptions and ideas shared in the conference--which will then enable them to make more appropriate initiatives to the local community at large. Academic institutions should benefit from direct involvement with the meeting, and in general from the published documentation arising as well as the dissemination process. Community members and stakeholders should be encouraged to continue to dialogue on issues of sustainability and healthy living beyond the course of the conference. This will help to enable local community members, business, government and non-government organisations to work together to identify societal, community and individual needs and to develop culturally appropriate policies and programmes in response.

The Hong Kong Conference provided in microcosm an experience of other ways of doing and being. From dispossessed migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong to SMILE in mighty Shanghai, to new approaches to international governance in Europe and globally, another way is possible.