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PRESS RELEASE

**“An exclusive government consultative system is missing the input of
many active conservation advocates”**

**HKU’s Department of Politics and Public Administration
and Centre for Civil Society and Governance Released
Annual Report on the Civil Society in Hong Kong 2010**

A report released today (31 January 2012) by The University of Hong Kong reveals that conservation groups (CGs) in Hong Kong are very active in advocacy but the government’s consultative system on conservation policies has not included most of their voices. The ***Annual Report on the Civil Society in Hong Kong 2010*** was released by the **Department of Politics and Public Administration (‘the Department’)** and the **Centre for Civil Society and Governance (‘the Centre’)**, the University of Hong Kong.

Professor Joseph Chan, Head of the Department, said, “the Annual Report is an unprecedented multiyear project to map the civil society in Hong Kong through the collection and analysis of basic data.” Last year, the report was on the social service sector. The focus this year is on conservation groups working on either natural or built environment conservation. The report covers a wide range of conservation groups concerning pollution control, energy conservation, animal protection, heritage conservation and promotion green life.

Between April-August 2011, the Centre conducted a questionnaire survey on 142 CGs. The response rate was 41.5 percent, higher than the international average. Through the survey and other research methods, the Centre collected a large amount of data on CGs’ operations and on their external relations with the government, businesses and peer groups. A roundtable attended by scholars and representatives from CGs was organized for 5 November 2011 to discuss the preliminary research findings.

Exclusive Government Consultative Mechanism on Conservation

The Report found that the conservation sector has grown in numbers in recent years. Nearly 65% of the respondents had been in existence for less than 9 years. While many of the groups are active in policy advocacy, they have diverse views on their roles and their positions on conservation. Meanwhile, the government appointed personalities associated with CGs to less than half (43 percent) of the conservation-related government committees. Furthermore, these representatives came from only 15 of the CGs, most of which were older ones established in the 1990s or before.

“The government has included only a handful of environmentalists in its consultative committees – quite likely these are the ones it can trust,” said Dr. Eliza Lee, Director of Centre for Civil Society and Governance. “As a result, the consultative system on conservation policies is exclusive. It probably is missing many voices, especially those of the younger environmental activists,” she continued. “This may be a reason why the government has faced numerous unexpected conservation crises.”

'Guerrilla' Advocacy

Dr. Lee likened conservation advocacy in Hong Kong to a kind of 'guerrilla warfare'. Many CGs are small in terms of staff number (only half hire full-time staff), budget size (over 60 percent have an annual income of less than HK\$1 million) and number of branches (57 percent have no branch office), etc. The research team employed network analysis and found that collaboration among CGs is fragmented, ad hoc and issue-based. Many groups work in isolation. Overlapping of board directorship is found only in 22 percent of the 142 groups.

Yet, overall advocacy is vibrant. 44.5 percent of the surveyed groups said advocacy of policy rights or values is their primary mission. 55 percent participated in a total of 97 policy advocacy activities (including protests, signature campaigns, press conferences, submissions to government, etc.) in the previous twelve months. The average number of protestors mobilized was 463, and signatures collected on streets, websites or Facebook were in the range of 8,000-12,000 for each event. CGs promoted advocacy through their membership network, social networking tools and emailing /

SMS.

“This kind of ‘guerilla advocacy’ --- where the relatively small and under-resourced groups advocate alone or form tactical alliances on selected issues only when necessary --- appears to have worked fairly well for the sector,” said Dr. Lee. Some CG representatives at the roundtable remarked that, for the purpose of advocacy, “small is beautiful” because when the groups grow bigger, they have to spend more time on administration and service, and thus less on advocacy. However, “if there were a platform to promote regular dialogues or exchange of views among CGs in Hong Kong in the future, the sector could operate even more effectively as a whole,” Dr. Lee commented.

A Diverse Conservation Sector

Nonetheless, not all CGs are active advocates. Part of the conservation sector is very quiet. Almost 37 percent did not participate in any advocacy in the previous year. 41 percent said they played no role in monitoring the government. Over 55 percent do not monitor businesses. Those groups focus on public education or promotion of green life.

“Conservation groups in Hong Kong are rather diverse in their approach towards conservation,” Dr. Lee said, “and often have different views on the same issues.” That could be why the government and private developers had allied with some CGs to neutralize opposition from other groups in some development projects in the past.

Transparency Can Be Improved

Financially, CGs mainly rely on donations from the public and members. However, less than half have put in place accountability mechanisms such as financial reports, regular updates, annual reports, and annual meetings. “Conservation groups should seek to improve transparency, such as by publishing annual reports and financial reports that the public can access,” suggested Dr. Lee. “This would enhance the public's confidence in donation and rendering support.”

About Annual Report on Civil Society in Hong Kong 2010

– Natural and Built Environment Conservation Sector : This is the second Annual Report published by the Centre for Civil Society and Governance together with the Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong. The objectives are to contribute to our community's understanding of the state of development of our civil society – an actor that is growing in its importance and influence in recent years --- and to build up a knowledge database. Each year, the Centre will study one or more civil society sectors through baseline research, including a major questionnaire survey. The sectors for study include social services, environment and heritage protection, arts and culture, sports and recreation, education, health care, civic and advocacy organizations, and philanthropic intermediaries.

About the Centre for Civil Society and Governance: The Centre for Civil Society and Governance was established in December 2002 with a mission to advance knowledge of the nature, constituents, and roles of civil society and to foster its healthy development. The Centre has published numerous research reports on the various aspects of Hong Kong's civil society, including *the Opinion Survey on Civic Education and National Identity (2004)*, *the Hong Kong Civil Society Index Research (2005-6)* and *A Study on Civic Engagement in Public Policy Making (2006-7)*.

Enclosure:

English and Chinese Executive Summary of ***Annual Report on the Civil Society in Hong Kong 2010 – Natural and Built Environment Conservation Sector***

Please view the full report at: <http://web.hku.hk/~ccsg/whatsnew.html>

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