LANTAU TOMORROW VISION: TO RECLAIM OR NOT TO RECLAIM?

Case ID: 2020008B

Introduction

Housing is one of the most challenging livelihood issues in Hong Kong. In fact, current Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor considers housing a formidable and complex problem. A direct cause of the housing shortage is the limited supply of land for housing. As the demand for housing as well as commercial and office space continues to increase, the need to find or create land for development is becoming all the more pressing.

Adopting a multi-pronged approach, the government set up the Land Supply Task Force that conducted a study that included a public consultation on the various potential sources for land. Among these options is the creation of artificial islands off the coast of Southeast Lantau. Lam has made this a priority policy area of her government, launching the Lantau Tomorrow Vision proposal in her 2018 Policy Address. The plan is envisioned to provide as many as 400,000 residential units by the year 2032, of which 70 per cent will be public housing, with some units planned to be released earlier for occupancy.

Various concern and environmental groups such as the Save Lantau Alliance oppose the development plan. According to these groups, the plan is wasteful and unnecessary, since there is still sufficient existing land that can be utilised, provided there is sufficient political will on the part of the government. Other groups such as Our Hong Kong Foundation support this plan, with some even proposing an enhanced version of the development plan.

This case study will first provide some background on the Lantau Tomorrow Vision project, then highlight the different stakeholders and their points of view. Some stakeholders try to
balance competing concerns, while others reject the whole plan as wasteful and unnecessary. Additionally, this case will showcase the diverse methods these stakeholders use to convey their viewpoints and participate in policy making.

Background

The proposal to reclaim 1,000 hectares of land from the sea to create the East Lantau Metropolis (ELM) was first officially announced in the 2014 Policy Address, delivered by the former Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying. Leung stated that the rationale for the reclamation was to develop a core business district like Central or Kowloon East to boosting economic development and employment opportunities. At the same time, Leung announced the establishment of the Lantau Development Advisory Committee to advise the government on the strategies for developing Lantau. The government requested the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council to fund a feasibility study of ELM. However, due to scepticism, Leung’s administration subsequently withdrew the funding request.

The ELM concept was included in the Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030 (Hong Kong 2030+) report released in 2016. Hong Kong 2030+ updated Hong Kong’s Territorial Development Strategy. The core of the ELM proposal is to create artificial islands largely through reclamation from the waters near Kau Yi Chau and Hei Ling Chau. Underutilized land in Mui Wo will also be developed (Figure 1). Aside from providing housing for up to 700,000 people, the area is also envisioned to become a new core business district, bringing jobs closer to home. The ELM business core was presented as having the potential to generate enormous economic benefits and provide 200,000 jobs. New transport infrastructure will provide good connectivity between ELM and existing urban areas.

An Expert Advisory Panel was set up for Hong Kong 2030+ comprising academics, professionals, and representatives from various organizations to advise on various aspects of the project, including architectural, planning, surveying, social, and environmental.

In 2017, the Development Bureau issued the Sustainable Lantau Blueprint, proposing the ELM as a long-term strategic growth area. ELM has the potential to be developed into “a new and smart financial and producer services hub”. Moreover, ELM will be at a strategic location that connects Hong Kong Island with Lantau Island. Upon the promulgation of the Blueprint, the Sustainable Lantau Office was established under the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD). The Office is responsible for coordinating, planning, and implementing various activities to balance the development and conservation of Lantau. Sustainable Lantau
Blueprint embraces the principle of “develop the North, conserve the South”—concentrating urban development in the northern parts of Hong Kong while keeping the southern parts green and pristine. The Sustainable Lantau Office is dedicated to promoting this principle.2

In her Policy Address in October 2018, Lam announced her government’s decision to make ELM a priority policy area. The artificial islands to be reclaimed totalled about 1,700 hectares, much larger than the previous proposal of 1,000 hectares from various reports, including the Land Supply Task Force’s report that was finally released in December 2018. That task force had been appointed by Carrie Lam in September 2017 with a mandate to review and identify various options for sourcing land supply from a macro perspective in order to address the pressing social and economic needs of Hong Kong. Its work was concluded with the submission of a report to the government towards the end of 2018. In her 2018 Policy Address, Lam said:

The Government has decided to commence immediately a study on phased reclamation near Kau Yi Chau and Hei Ling Chau for the construction of artificial islands with a total area of about 1,700 hectares. The study and design work will begin shortly with the aim of commencing the first phase of reclamation in 2025. The land reserve to be provided by reclamation could be planned for building 260,000 to 400,000 residential units. These units, with 70% being public housing, could accommodate a population of 700,000 to 1,100,000. We anticipate that the first batch of residential units could be available for intake in 2032. The construction of artificial islands in the Central Waters helps meet the housing, economic and employment needs in the long run, which ties in with the overall population growth and economic development of Hong Kong.3

Even though the benefits of ELM as described above seem attractive, whether the plan can be accepted by the public and whether a consensus can be reached remains a challenge. Land reclamation from the sea has conventionally been the strategy used in the topographically hilly territory of Hong Kong with a land area of only 1,100 square kilometres. To increase the supply of flat land, the British colonial government had previously carried out reclamation from the sea (see Exhibits 1 and 2). The new towns of Shatin, Tseung Kwan O, Tuen Mun, and Tung Chung sit mainly on reclaimed land.

Land reclamation has slowed in recent decades. Between 2001 and 2015, only 690 hectares of land was reclaimed, much lower than the 3,000 hectares of reclaimed land between 1985 and 2000.4 For one, this form of land creation has become controversial since the 1980s, coming under heavy criticism by civil society, particularly environmental groups.5 Due to public pressure, the Protection of Harbour Ordinance (Cap. 531) was enacted in 1996 to prevent further land reclamation in Victoria Harbour barring a compelling, overriding, and present need.
While the proposed ELM island reclamation is outside Victoria Harbour, this did not stop the mega project from meeting with public opposition.

**Figure 1**: Proposed artificial islands in the central waters between Hong Kong Island and Lantau Island

![Map of Hong Kong showing proposed artificial islands](source.png)

*Source: Sustainable Lantau Blueprint (2017)*

**Major Supporters of the East Lantau Metropolis**

Thirty-eight economists and academics signed a petition endorsing the government’s Lantau Tomorrow Vision plan. These include figures connected with Our Hong Kong Foundation, a think tank founded by former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa; and Path of Democracy, a political group and think tank. They argued that the planned island reclamation will be cost efficient when both the projected cost and revenue are taken into account, given that the ELM is a relatively short distance from existing business districts.⁶

*Lantau Tomorrow Vision* has also found support among various professional institutes; namely, Hong Kong Institute of Architects, Hong Kong Institute of Planners, Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors, and Hong Kong Institute of Engineers.
Our Hong Kong Foundation not only supported the ELM plan, but also suggested an enhanced version. The enhanced plan proposed to create a 2,200-hectare artificial island by reclamation from the sea between the east coast of Lantau Island and the west side of Hong Kong Island (Figure 2), which was larger than the government plan. President of the Association of Hong Kong Professionals and adviser to the Our Hong Kong Foundation Dr. Eugene Kin-keung Chan wrote in a column for the English daily *South China Morning Post* that:

*Without doubt, this [enhanced version of the ELM plan] will resolve Hong Kong’s acute land shortage and housing problem in one go. In fact, reclamation is not uncommon in different parts of the world. In Asia, Singapore is an excellent example, with around 25 per cent of its total land area reclaimed from the sea. In Europe, the Netherlands is also well known for reclamation of marshland for agriculture and residential development.*

*A steady supply of land is the foundation of the sustainable development of a society because land is needed for both housing and a thriving economy, and regrettably land is what Hong Kong lacks. Major reclamation projects beyond Victoria Harbour, such as the East Lantau Metropolis that aim to address this shortage, should not be viewed with suspicion.*

**Figure 2:** The proposed enhanced East Lantau Metropolis
Our Hong Kong Foundation interpreted the advantages of the land reclamation at Lantau in terms of the so-called five ‘re-imaginations’:

1. **Re-imagining affordable housing**: Address long-standing housing issues, including long-term land supply, aspirations for homeownership, as well as aspirations about the size of public and private housing.

2. **Re-imagining urban design and quality of living**: Set a gold standard of urban city design and planning, showcasing what a “future city” would look like to improve quality of living (e.g., through walkability, at-scale implementation of environmental-friendly solutions, adequate green and communal facilities etc.).

3. **Re-imagining the re-development of old Hong Kong**: Provide a large piece of decanting land to facilitate the relocation of residents during the re-development period, which will act as a critical enabler to speed up the process and rethink our approach to urban renewal in dilapidated areas.

4. **Re-imagining industry development**: Bring new possibilities to industries that are bottlenecked by shortage of land, as well as accommodate plenty of opportunities for innovation.

5. **Re-imagining transportation and connectivity**: Enable strategic transport links between New Territories West, Lantau and Hong Kong Island West, in addition to being at the core of the “one-hour living circle” connection within the Greater Bay Area.

Based on these five major aspects, the Foundation characterized their proposal as a ‘game-changer’ and ‘holistic,’ since it will be much more advantageous than developing existing land such as brownfields in the New Territories or the Fanling golf course. With the assistance of several academics and a team of researchers, the Foundation produced a number of research reports that lent support to their ELM proposal.

The Foundation advocated the use of reclamation for creating land supply for development. Apart from submitting their research output to the government for consideration, they also utilised social media platforms such as Facebook to disseminate their ideas to the public. They have participated in the public consultation on land supply, approached legislators and district councillors directly, and appeared in a TV talk show. The Foundation has two advisers who currently sit on the Lantau Development Advisory Committee.

Some lawmakers have actively expressed support for the government’s ELM plan. Legislator Tony Wai-chuen Tse, representing the architectural, surveying, planning, and landscape sectors was in favour of the ELM project. He argued that “land supply via reclamation from the sea is
more effective than other means such as leveling the mountains and slopes.” He also argued that the reclamation cost was not a monstrous figure if spread over several years, warning that the claim that the project would empty government coffers was an exaggeration:

I don’t know how they come up with such a calculation… Their claim that the reclamation plan would cost huge sums of money and will exhaust the treasury is unsubstantiated and contains groundless, isolated information… Still, they are blind to the fact that the government would reap considerable revenue from selling the sites. If they insist that it will cost HK$1 trillion, they should produce relevant financial data and analysis to back their claims… Not only are these people misleading society, they are also harming our citizens because they don’t want the people of Hong Kong to live in better conditions.  

Jeffrey Lam Kin-fung, a non-official member of the Executive Council as well as a legislator representing one of the Commercial sectors, supported the ELM project and urged the government to be decisive, promptly conduct the feasibility study, and begin reclamation as soon as possible. Defending the ELM plan, he wrote that:

Indeed, with moderate wind and wave conditions and water depth, coupled with the fact that it is relatively far away from the habitat of Chinese white dolphins and finless porpoises, East Lantau is a suitable location for land reclamation…

As an international city, Hong Kong should strike a balance between different land uses such as commercial and industrial, cultural and recreational, and education and medical services, in addition to addressing the housing problem. Demand for land will only continue to increase… Given the foreseeable long discussion process, if the community does not reach a consensus as soon as possible, and keeps procrastinating over the plan for large-scale reclamation, Hong Kong runs the risk of lagging behind other metropolises.  

At the same time, the government promoted the ELM project through the Lantau Development Advisory Committee’s public engagement activities. The public engagement activities included public forums, focus groups, roving exhibitions, and consultation meetings with the relevant district councils, rural committees, and the Legislative Council panel.  

**Stakeholder Groups Leading the Opposition**

One of the first groups to oppose the ELM proposal is the Save Lantau Alliance. Established in 2014, the Save Lantau Alliance comprises well-known environmental NGOs in Hong Kong,
including Green Sense and Designing Hong Kong, as well as other local community groups and associations such as the Tai O Sustainable Development Education Workshop, Land Justice League, Tai O Culture Workshop, and so on. Some of these groups are officially registered associations, others looser and more informal. The convener, Eddie Tse Sai-kit, decided to bring various groups together to form the coalition because he felt there was not enough critical reaction to the government’s proposal. The formation of the coalition not only facilitated more discussions and exchange of views, but also the sharing of resources and joint efforts to advocate against the ELM plan.\(^\text{16}\)

Since its establishment, the coalition’s advocacy work has taken on various forms, including delivering an open letter to the Chief Executive, making submissions during the public consultation, lobbying lawmakers and political parties, social media publicity, street campaigns to collect signatures, distributing leaflets, and exhibitions with portable banner stands. They found parties in the pro-democracy camp sharing the same views as the alliance, such as Civic Party. They called on like-minded lawmakers to sign the charter of *Opposition to East Lantau Metropolis*. Together with representatives of green groups and of NGOs, they also attended a special meeting of the legislature’s Panel on Development to express their views on the ELM plan.\(^\text{17}\)

In 2016, these environmental and concern groups issued a joint statement expressing their disappointment with the government for showing a finalized model of Lantau development to Zhang Dejiang, the then Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, but not to Hong Kong citizens during the public consultation period. The model clearly showed many details that were omitted from the public consultation. Other green groups such as World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth also urged the government to withdraw the East Lantau reclamation plan.

At the same time, some members of the alliance made a boat trip to Kau Yi Chau, one of the islands affected by the ELM plan, to hang a banner that read, “We oppose the East Lantau Metropolis plan.”\(^\text{18}\) In 2017, the alliance, together with the Land Justice League, co-organized the HK2030+ Public Forum, inviting representatives from relevant government departments, academics, and local community groups to exchange views. In October 2018, following Carrie Lam’s Policy Address, the coalition organized a march starting from East Point in Causeway Bay. The demonstrators first observed a few minutes of silence, and then proceeded to the government headquarters in Admiralty to protest against the artificial island plan. Around 6,000 individuals joined the march.\(^\text{19}\)

Eddie Tse said that there was an on-going signature campaign with a target to collect 30,000 signatures. He hoped that such a significant number of signatures, enough to trigger a referendum in some countries, could at least put more pressure on the Hong Kong
Government. Environmental groups and concern groups set up an online platform to help members of the public to send their views directly to the Development Bureau on the ELM project.

The alliance relied on like-minded academics and university students to raise awareness about the island reclamation plan in universities. For example, Professors Ng Mee-kam and Lam Chiu-ying organized a seminar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in February 2019 to raise awareness among students and the public about land reclamation in Hong Kong.

In a forum letter published in the *South China Morning Post*, Thomas Yam Hin-bong, a member of the Save Lantau Alliance, wrote:

*Lam’s administration, which sees reclamation as “unavoidable”, set up the task force last year, ostensibly to seek public input on ways to tackle the purported land shortage.\(^{20}\)*

*The task force lists the East Lantau Metropolis as one of 18 options in its “public engagement exercise”. However, the metropolis is in a league of its own because of its complexity, cost and environmental impact. Planned to house up to 700,000 people, it’s presented as a panacea for Hong Kong’s housing crisis. In fact, it cannot increase housing supply in the short term and will cause overcapacity in the long term.*

*It’s also the only option that will immediately incur huge expenses. The feasibility study the government wants to commission will cost HK$248 million. Before spending millions on such a study, there will need to be preliminary assessments of whether the project is even minimally viable.*

*Construction companies and developers will rejoice at the prospect of HK$248 million for the study and an estimated HK$470 billion for the biggest reclamation project in Hong Kong’s history.\(^{21}\)*

Another group that has been in the forefront actively opposing the ELM project is Designing Hong Kong, a local non-profit organization founded in 2009 with the aim to promote sustainable urban planning. Its CEO and co-founder, Paul Zimmerman, is an elected District Councillor. Among its arguments in opposing the ELM project were that Hong Kong is not short of land and that the project is based on an inflated estimation of population growth and demand for land. The land supply options that Designing Hong Kong proposed for
development were, among others, brownfields in the New Territories, Fanling Golf Course, unused military land, and land banks held by private developers.

Together with like-minded groups and individuals, Designing Hong Kong formed the Citizens Task Force on Land Resources in September 2017. The Citizens Task Force worked ‘in parallel’ with the government-established Task Force on Land Supply, holding community discussions and soliciting public views, though this was only on a small scale due to limited resources. According to Zimmerman, the Citizens Task Force was formed because they saw the membership composition of the government’s Task Force on Land Supply as being one-sided, omitting stakeholders from many sectors, including concern groups, research groups, and youth groups. This Citizens Task Force produced a position paper, jointly signed by its members, which was submitted to the government during the official public consultation.

Zimmerman supported the development of existing land footprint, being in favour of the high-density model with its many advantages, including ease of travel even to country parks. Building the artificial islands would spread the city out which could increase the demand for cars. Zimmerman stressed that forming alliances was a resilient strategy for advocating against the ELM plan. A major advantage of the coalition is the sharing of resources, particularly in terms of personnel and fundraising. In addition, the group also used protest marches, social media, a signature campaign, press conferences, and public forums to disseminate information and express their views on the ELM project.

Green Sense, registered as a charity in 2010, is also part of the Save Lantau Alliance. Its main objective is to create an environmentally friendly society through education, research, monitoring, and publicity. Green Sense opposed the plan because of the cost of reclaiming the massive artificial island, development cost for residential and commercial purposes, and building cost of the support infrastructures. They also criticized the government for not addressing the issues of climate change and extreme weather. They urged the government to consider prioritizing the use of the brownfields in the New Territories and the golf course in Fanling for development.

The Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong conducted a telephone survey from 1st to 6th November 2018 to gauge public opinion on an artificial island in the central waters. Out of 1,000 successful surveys, 70 per cent said that the government should first consider other sources of land supply, specifically the brownfield sites in the New Territories and a golf course in Fanling. The brownfields were originally used for agricultural activities until a shift in the economic structure of Hong Kong led to the decline of agriculture business from the 1960s. The landowners converted their lands into more profitable uses such as open-air storage and port back-up facilities. Many of these lands are now in the hands of developers who bought them from farmers, who are waiting for the right moment to build in order to
maximize profit. The 172-hectare golf course was also cited by the Land Supply Task Force as one of the priority sources of land supply, with the potential of accommodating 13,000 homes.\textsuperscript{25}

Due to limited resources, Green Sense utilized social media, particularly Facebook, to carry out their advocacy work reaching the youth. However, the disadvantage of this method is the relative difficulty of reaching people middle-aged and older, especially those who do not use Facebook. In addition, they organized street exhibitions to raise public consciousness about land reclamation in Hong Kong in general.\textsuperscript{26} According to Mark Mak, a Senior Research Officer at Green Sense, they organized an exhibition in a site where officials and civil servants were likely to walk past between the Central Government Offices in Admiralty and the Admiralty MTR station.\textsuperscript{27}

The active participation of various policy actors and the intensity of the debates in recent years show that a consensus on the ELM plan is still a long way off, to say nothing of its implementation. Similar debates were provoked by a previous proposal to develop country park fringes for public housing, which has not been listed as a priority option by the Task Force. Whether or not the reclamation plan will end up in the same fate as country park peripheries still remains to be seen.

**Summary**

Recent debates in society and the report released by the Task Force on Land Supply highlight various land supply options to address the pressing demand for housing in Hong Kong. This case study has focused on the ELM project, a major land supply option involving the creation of artificial islands. Carrie Lam made the ELM a priority project of her government. The project is expected to create close to 2,000 hectares of reclaimed land with the capacity for as many as 400,000 residential units in stages. The government contends that the project can meet the increasing housing demand of a growing population for the next 20 to 30 years, as well as avoid the limitations of developing existing land, such as private property issues. Various environmental and concern groups have opposed the plan, arguing that the government overstated the population growth rate and suggesting the government prioritise the development of other land supply options such as brownfields, unused military land, the Fanling golf course, etc. Whether or not the projections are accurate, the government has to make a decision. There is a pressing demand for affordable housing, and for as long as this demand is not met, Hong Kong people’s dissatisfaction towards housing policy will remain a major source of tension in the city. If such dissatisfaction is allowed to grow, it will likely threaten the legitimacy of the government.
The Territorial Development Strategy (TDS) is the highest tier of planning in the hierarchy of Hong Kong’s town plans, which provides a broad framework in terms of land use, transport and environment for planning and development.


Ryan Ip Man-ki and Cathy Tang, interview, February 27, 2019.

A Facebook page of Our Hong Kong Foundation: https://www.facebook.com/ppi.ourhkfoundation/.

Ip and Tang, interview.


Eddie Tse Sai-kit, interview, February 1, 2018.


Eddie Tse Sai-kit, interview, February 1, 2018.


Paul Zimmerman, interview, March 1, 2019.
However, on hindsight, Paul Zimmerman remarked that it would have been better if they made submissions separately. They originally thought that they would add more weight to their submission by jointly signing it. However, it turned out that the government treated it as other submissions submitted by single individuals.

24 Paul Zimmerman, interview, March 1, 2019.


26 Mark Mak, interview, February 13, 2019.

27 Ibid.
Exhibit 1: Rendering of Enhanced Island Reclamation

Source: Our Hong Kong Foundation (2018)
Source: Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department