

TRANSCRIPT

Public Policy: Challenges in Decision-Making

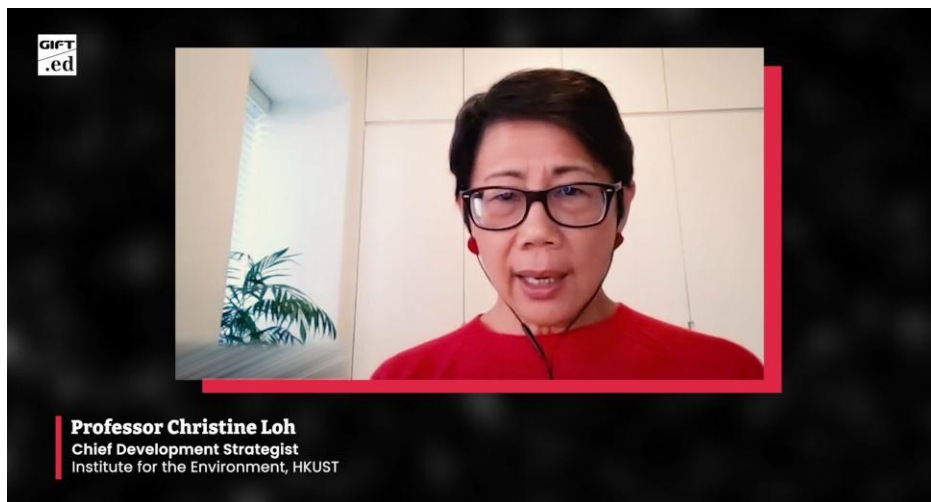
Rohan Hazell:

Have you ever wondered how public policy is created? Should companies wait for regulation before addressing the potential for negative impact in their business models?

To help answer these questions, you'll hear from Professor Christine Loh, who is a former legislator who also served as Undersecretary for the Environment in the Hong Kong Government.

Professor Loh, who is currently Chief Development Strategist at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for the Environment, will help you understand and navigate the decision-making complexity that policymakers and business leaders alike will encounter in their efforts to redesign society.

Professor Christine Loh:



What has your journey through the public, private and civil sectors been like?

My journey has been that of many different things; I've started off as a lawyer, I studied law, then I went into business. I was a commodities trader for 12 years, and then without really expecting it, I had a chance to be a legislator in the late part of Hong Kong as a British colony. So I was the last appointment in the last phase of British rule before they departed, and before I started running elections.

Then I got interested in public policy and then after I retired from government, having also spent time on the executive side of government, I transitioned to be an academic but I'm not a real academic in the sense that I haven't really come through an academic career, but I do a lot of teaching and writing at the moment.

Key Factors in Effective Policy Decision-Making

I think I'm best known for my work in the environment and in things like climate change, energy, and biodiversity. And that's because when I was in the government, I was the policy wonk. I was the undersecretary for the environment.

But in my work, over the course of my public policy and political career, I was actually interested in how policies are made, how policies are made overall, because as a legislator, I actually had to deal with many parts of public policy. We had to vote on many things. So, I had to learn really what do you do when you don't know all these areas? What are the responsibilities that you have? So, I think if we are looking at just environmental policies, that is one aspect that for me is obviously very important.

But my biggest interest is really how the government makes evidence-based policies, not based on people's opinions, because one of the most important things I discovered when I became a legislator was how much I didn't know. And my concern was people made policies based on opinion. And we are not really sure whether our opinions are what should drive policy and if we didn't understand the background to issues, how can we really make good policies?

So that's my big point. Don't be opinion driven. Make sure you understand where your opinion came from. And perhaps you need to correct what you think you understood once you have done the background as to what the issues really are about.

The Importance of Making Evidence-Based Decisions

When I was appointed as a member of the Hong Kong legislature in 1992, there really weren't political parties in Hong Kong. There wasn't even a line that I could follow. And obviously all of us are limited by our own direct area of knowledge.

And what I found sitting on the legislature was that I had to vote on many things ranging from environment to education, to social welfare, to legal matters and so on. And I must admit that I felt extremely uncomfortable because in most areas, I was ignorant of them. But I had a vote. I had to support things, I had to support very specific things, and I had to speak at motions raised by other legislators. So obviously I had to learn very quickly.

And I developed a method where I thought; well, I'm either not going to say anything if I don't understand it and listen to others, or if I really have to vote, I have to do some really basic 101 homework. And I had to understand enough myself to be able to make a decision.

And that was when I realised my own leanings. For example, you know let's say about some kind of welfare issue. Should we approve of some kind of welfare package? Now, I realised then that I had certain views about certain welfare packages.



Ask yourself

Where do my opinions come from?

Do they fit my context?

What do I really think?

Will this solution actually
work in my context?



But when I asked myself, where does my opinion really come from, and does it fit what was happening in Hong Kong? What do I really think of the proposal? Will the proposal actually work in Hong Kong?

So, I read up on things. I went and talked to people who I thought could provide different aspects of that problem and then tried to think about it before I would cast my vote.

What surprised me was I had a better understanding of my own biases and prejudices. Because we hear a lot as we grow up about how the world should be, but most of the time we have opinions that we don't have to take responsibility for.

It's almost like that, we sit together at a dinner, and we just shoot off and talk about what we like and what we don't like.

But when you have the responsibility to actually support something or to refute something that has an impact on millions of people, I've really felt extremely uncomfortable.

And as I said, Hong Kong in 1992 did not have political parties where I could vote with the party. It was my responsibility to understand enough to be able to cast a vote that I felt was responsible.



Rohan Hazell:

The decisions we make are only ever as good as the data and evidence they are based on. But even the highest quality information is no substitute for constructive engagement with the stakeholders who will be affected by our decisions.

As the number and range of stakeholders impacted by a decision increases, gathering different viewpoints and finding common ground for collaboration becomes increasingly challenging, especially for governments.

The complexity of decision-making when it comes to public policy reinforces the need for a deep understanding of the issues, a heightened awareness of local, national, and cross-border contexts, and a deep appreciation for the ecosystem of stakeholders involved.