Climate Governance Engagement Workshop

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Hosted by:
HKUST & Our Hong Kong Foundation

Date:
8 May 2026 (Friday)

Participants:
Former Senior Government Officials

THE HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY | ENVR Division of Environment and Sustainability

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1. Purpose of the Workshop

The workshop explored whether climate governance can provide a useful framework for strengthening long-term governance, coordination, and implementation capacity in Hong Kong, particularly in the context of Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan (FYP), the upcoming Chief Executive election, and the next administration.

Discussion was structured around a draft "5-Pillar Model" proposed by HKUST. The four case studies – retrofitting existing buildings, biodiversity and nature-based solutions (NbS), shipping and port development, and green finance – were noted with some discussion. The focus stayed on broad governance themes.

2. Overall Theme – Five-Year Planning for Hong Kong

(a) Limited public pressure in Hong Kong

Climate change itself may not yet be sufficiently salient within Hong Kong's political and administrative culture. Public awareness remains relatively limited, and climate-related issues are often still perceived primarily as costs or secondary policy concerns rather than as central to economic development, long-term competitiveness and as beneficial to the people's well-being.

As a result, there is currently limited public pressure on government to prioritize climate action at scale, and government does not feel the need to see it as a central pillar.

(b) Longstanding major top-down push on Mainland

In contrast, the Chinese Mainland has made major advances through a long-term top-down mainstreaming process that began before 2012. China's new Ecological and Environmental Code (生態環境法典), adopted by the National People's Congress in March 2026, was a case in point about the nation's continuous focus on pushing ahead to consolidate fragmented environmental and climate-related laws into a unified legal and governance framework.

China's concept of "ecological civilization" (生態文明) frames climate and environmental issues not as environmental concerns, but as part of a broader development paradigm linked to economic modernization, quality of life, technological advancement, and national rejuvenation. This framing has been reinforced over time through what have become widely understood political narratives and phrases that connect environmental improvement with people's aspirations and development goals, such as 綠水青山就是金山銀山, 美麗中國 and 綠色低碳發展.

(c) 生態文明 is integrated into national planning

China's Five-Year Plan functions not merely as a planning document, but as a broader governance mechanism that articulates strategic direction, aligns institutions, guides market behaviour, mobilizes resources, and coordinates implementation over time. Ecological civilization has been embedded into successive planning cycles as part of a wider development model linked to modernization, innovation, competitiveness, and long-term national strategy.

(d) Five-year planning requires establishing a new system in Hong Kong

Against this background, participants felt that Hong Kong's own planning process may need to evolve beyond collections of policy "points" towards clearer mission-oriented frameworks supported by targets, timelines, roadmaps, coordination mechanisms, and clearer accountability.

(e) Frame issues to show broad relevance

Climate transition can gain stronger policy and public traction when framed through broader economic and societal priorities, including competitiveness, finance, shipping, technology, trade, talent development, resilience, and quality of life, which align closely with CEPU's indicated priorities.

This is particularly important for the long-term development of the Northern Metropolis, where climate resilience and NbS should be central considerations in planning, public works, infrastructure management, long-term stewardship, and financing. A sense of ambition could be for data centers in the Northern Metropolis to become net zero.

Successful policy framing requires clear articulation of costs, benefits, trade-offs, and timing. In practical political and policy terms, transition strategies are easier to sustain when government can clearly explain who benefits, how benefits are created, what the costs are, and over what timeframe outcomes can reasonably be expected. This is important not only for public communication, but also for strengthening alignment across B/Ds, markets, and external stakeholders.

(f) Mission framing could help the government act as transition "architect"

The discussion turned to the role of government in enabling the transition. Participants generally agreed that clear missions help provide direction, encourage coordination, and support institutional learning across government. Government increasingly needs to act not merely as a regulator, but as an enabler or "architect" helping to create the conditions necessary for the transition and market development (promoting EV provided an example).

In this context, participants agreed that finance should be treated as a core governance issue rather than a separate technical matter, and that financing structures and market creation should therefore be incorporated explicitly into the 5-Pillar Model.

3. Mainstreaming and Administrative Capacity

Climate transition is inherently cross-disciplinary and does not fit neatly within traditional bureaucratic silos. Effective implementation therefore requires stronger mainstreaming across government processes, institutions, and policy domains, although important advances have already been made in some departments.

(a) Learning and adapting to change is possible with leadership and engagement

It was recognized that civil servants may not yet be sufficiently familiar with important aspects of climate transition, including climate science, biodiversity, energy systems, emerging technologies, industrial decarbonization, transition

pathways, and the growing intersection between transition policy, finance, and market development.

At the same time, there was broad agreement that Hong Kong's civil service can adapt and learn quickly when missions are clear, policy direction is consistent, and leadership signals are sustained. Fostering a willingness to learn, work across disciplines, and engage openly with industry and stakeholders was seen as increasingly important. Where there are cheerleaders and champions within B/Ds, things can progress quickly.

(b) Mainstreaming can build capacities
Mainstreaming should not be understood simply as public communication or awareness raising, but as embedding climate, biodiversity, resilience, and transition considerations into routine governance and decision-making processes. This includes strengthening coordination across bureaucratic silos, encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration, and building institutional learning capacity across government (see below for specific ideas discussed).

(c) Conscious narrative creation for good communication
Participants also noted the importance of stronger public narratives and communication to help connect the government's transition goals with people's everyday aspirations, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. Reference was made to the Chinese Mainland's long-term mainstreaming of ecological civilization through simple but consistently repeated narratives and phrases that connect environmental improvement with modernization, prosperity, and quality of life. Hong Kong can learn and create language that resonates with Hong Kong people.

4. Governance Insights from the Case Studies

Regarding Hong Kong's positioning as a "super-connector," discussion focused on what exactly Hong Kong should connect to.

Hong Kong could better position itself to connect with emerging large-scale transition markets, which requires thinking across B/Ds rather than within traditional policy silos. In this context, standardization, product/services development, certification, finance etc are areas where Hong Kong could continue to add value.

While these strengths are already recognized, adopting a more business-minded and market-oriented "connector" mindset across B/Ds could help open new opportunities and create clearer transition "pathways" for Hong Kong that are manageable by B/Ds.

The four case studies provided practical talking points for the discussion (all of which are areas where the Chinese Mainland is also developing new policies, targets, timelines, and transition pathways):

(a) Existing buildings
Discussion reflected a shift from viewing retrofitting primarily as a technical challenge toward one of market creation, as reflected in the *2025 Policy Address* commitment to "drive the market to accelerate carbon reduction in existing buildings."

This shift requires a different mindset within government, strong cooperation across B/Ds, and close engagement with external stakeholders, in which every relevant unit has a part to play.

At the same time, technical standards, certification systems, and aggregation mechanisms could be strengthened to help scale retrofit markets – emphasizing the economic and social benefits. Beyond retrofitting buildings, there could be emphasis on neighbourhoods and districts and to see how these could be seen as both good economic opportunities as well as creating better living conditions for the people.

(b) Biodiversity and nature-based solutions

Participants noted that biodiversity on its own can be difficult to elevate as a policy priority, even though Hong Kong's biodiversity ranks the highest in China and among the highest globally.

At the same time, BSAP and NbS have increasingly attracted attention from the financial sector as interest grows in financing nature-related projects. Reference was made to the new CEDD/AFCD NbS Guidelines for Professionals, which has helped energize external stakeholders and stimulate discussion around implementation opportunities.

However, considerable work remains for both government and private-sector stakeholders to identify workable arrangements and pathways forward, particularly in relation to planning, implementation, long-term stewardship, and financing.

Biodiversity can also be linked to building retrofits, good neighbourhoods/districts for bringing benefits to the community, such as heat control, sense of well-being, and beauty.

(c) Shipping and port development

Shipping decarbonization is increasingly reshaping the competitiveness of ports and regional supply chains. Across the Greater Bay Area, different ports are already evolving differentiated functions and transition pathways, including green fuel bunkering, shore power deployment, multimodal logistics, certification, carbon data governance, and maritime services, reflecting their respective comparative advantages.

The key challenge for Hong Kong is therefore less about creating identical policies across ports, and more about strengthening institutional coordination, interoperability, and trusted interfaces across the region.

In this context, Hong Kong is well positioned to add value through green finance, certification, regulatory alignment, carbon data verification, and other high-value maritime services as a "super-connector" within an emerging low-carbon regional shipping system. B/Ds could articulate a clear mission to spell out its comparative advantage.

(d) Green finance

Hong Kong's aspiration to become an international green finance center cannot be separated from the development of real-economy transition opportunities. While Hong Kong already possesses strong financial capabilities within the private sector, the broader challenge of financing the transition is not yet fully appreciated in policy terms.

Participants discussed the need to connect policy objectives with investable pipelines, including retrofitting existing buildings, biodiversity and NbS, shipping decarbonization/electrification, and other forms of low-carbon infrastructure.

In this context, government needs to play a stronger role in reducing uncertainty, aggregating opportunities, and helping create investable conditions capable of crowding in private capital, including where philanthropy may contribute. Participants noted that this would require new ways of thinking across B/Ds.

5. Practical Ideas Raised

Practical ideas raised during the discussion for strengthening climate governance and cross-government coordination included:

(a) Government mainstreaming

- Requiring a climate-related section in ExCo papers and major policy submissions (like for sustainable development).
- The above could be expanded to include biodiversity, resilience, and transition finance considerations in routine policy processes.
- Encouraging greater cross-B/D collaboration on transition-related issues, as it will strengthen Hong Kong's desire to be an international finance, trade and shipping center.

(b) Building administrative capacity

- Establishing small cross-disciplinary research groups within government to accelerate learning on emerging transition issues (as was done with investigating hydrogen).
- Encouraging greater engagement with universities, industry, and external stakeholders (similar to the process on the Chinese Mainland).
- Exploring the use of AI and digital tools to accelerate policy learning and knowledge-sharing across the bureaucracy, since learning AI is now a new mandate.

(c) Market development and transition finance

- Developing clearer investable project pipelines linked to public policy objectives.
- Strengthening aggregation mechanisms, standards, certification systems, and financing structures capable of creating investable-grade products and crowding in private capital.
- Exploring roles for philanthropy and blended finance in supporting transition projects.

(d) Northern Metropolis

- Using the Northern Metropolis as a long-term platform for integrating climate resilience, NbS, low-carbon infrastructure, and innovative financing approaches.
- Exploring opportunities for net-zero infrastructure development, including data centers.

(e) Public narrative and communication

- Developing clearer public narratives that connect transition goals with economic opportunity, competitiveness, resilience, and quality of life.
- Learning from the Mainland's use of simple and consistent narratives to

mainstream ecological civilization concepts while using Hong Kong vocabulary.

6. Concluding Reflection

The workshop suggested broad agreement that climate transition should be understood not merely as an environmental issue, but as a governance and development challenge linked to Hong Kong's future competitiveness, resilience, quality of life, and strategic positioning. Participants supported the value of mission-oriented governance frameworks capable of aligning institutions, finance, markets, and implementation capacity over time, particularly in the context of Hong Kong's first and subsequent FYP process.

The discussion also reflected growing recognition that enabling the transition will require not only technical solutions, but new forms of coordination, institutional learning, public narrative, and market development across government and society.