MOVING INTO NEW TOWNS - THE COSTS OF SOCIAL ADAPTATION *

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Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, with the construction of the Shatin and Tuen Mun new towns, there has been a definite and continuous shift of the population in Hong Kong to the New Territories. In March 1986, 34.9 per cent of the population were living in the New Territories and more are expected to move there from the congested areas of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula. The fact that over 400,000 people have moved from the urban complex to live in the new towns within a short period of five years (1981-86) clearly indicates that changes are occurring in the living pattern of a great number of people in Hong Kong. This huge migration of people has attracted the interest of researchers, but so far few attempts have been made to understand the impact of moving to the new towns upon the life-style of new residents in the New Territories. While it is generally agreed that housing conditions for people who have moved to the new towns have usually improved, there is less certainty regarding improvements in other aspects of their lives.

Population decentralization and fulfilling the housing need have undoubtedly been the two prime factors motivating the government to develop the new towns. But employment and other needs of the people have also to be met apart from better housing, and the act of moving may have intensified those needs. Any rigorous evaluation of the new town development should thus take into consideration the various aspects of the lives of the new town inhabitants and should not be content with an assessment of the satisfaction of housing needs. As people are moving into a new environment, adjustments and adaptations are inevitably required and they may incur a cost for some who, in exchange for better housing, have found it necessary to make sacrifices in other areas. This cost may be expressed in the form of longer travelling hours to and from work, or a weaker family supportive network as they are farther away from their

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relatives remaining in the urban areas. Although the improved environment of the new towns may well compensate for some of the losses incurred, more in-depth examination may be necessary before one reaches a conclusion.

The present article represents such an attempt to provide a framework to better understand the life-style of the new town inhabitants. While the proposed framework may not be equivalent to a direct measurement of the well-being of the new town inhabitants, it will help to generate data useful to a fuller understanding of their living patterns. Furthermore, information so generated will be conducive to an evaluation of the new town development policy, and should show whether or not the measures presently implemented in the new towns have been successful in providing the inhabitants with a better living environment.

**Purposes and Impact of New Town Development**

With the completion of three "large new towns" in Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun and Shatin, and three "small new towns" in Yuen Long, Fanling/Sheung Shui and Tai Po, nearly half of the population in Hong Kong are expected to be living in the New Territories before the end of the present century. The government's main purpose in developing new towns in the New Territories, since the policy's inception in the early 1960s, has been to provide housing for the rapidly expanding population. For those who move to these new towns, faster allocation of public housing or cheaper rents and lower prices of private accommodation are the main attractions. In solving the acute problem of housing, both the government and the new town inhabitants have obviously de-emphasized the importance of the various needs other than decent accommodation. These needs, all very basic to a happy and comfortable life, include employment opportunities for working adults, schools for children, market places for housewives, recreational facilities for youth, medical care for the sick and community facilities for leisure. If some people, for the sake of having a proper roof over their heads, have to move to a place where these basic needs are not met, or met less satisfactorily than before, their overall quality of life will certainly be affected. There is evidence now to suggest that, despite improvements in housing conditions, new town inhabitants are paying a high price in adjusting to the new environment. Not only are school places often insufficient in the new towns, but other essential facilities such as transportation may also not be readily available, resulting in inhabitants having to get up much earlier in order to get to work on time. These may be inconveniences which inhabitants of any new town must perhaps bear, especially in the initial phase of development, but questions remain about their impact on the lives of these people.
What has been mentioned so far are some of the more obvious problems associated with new town development, which will probably be ameliorated with remedial measures introduced by the government. But other than the above, what may be more difficult to identify and assess are the changes which are occurring in the structure and composition of the families in the new towns, in the inhabitants' relationships with one another, and their general mental health situation. Reports indicate that despite their improved residential facilities, new towns often have higher delinquency rates, higher records of child abuse, more family problems and a higher level of individual stress and strain than inhabitants in the traditional areas of Hong Kong. While current evidence is insufficient to formulate a clear picture of the life-style of the new town inhabitants, it provides enough to suggest that life in the new town is not as rosy as one is often led to believe.

The reason for people moving to live in the new towns in the New Territories often lies in the "push" of their original, almost uninhabitable, environment, rather than the "pull" of the new towns. Leung, in her study of new towns, commented that inhabitants of new towns "are satisfied because they have experienced worse things before." It is not difficult to appreciate the attractiveness of an independent housing unit at a reasonable and relatively cheap rent in a new town, as compared to a tiny room in a crowded flat or a squatter hut along the hillside deprived of proper water and electricity supply. However, should better accommodation be the only consideration in new town development? Are new town inhabitants actually aware of the costs before they make up their minds to move? Leung also queries whether the environment at the end of the move is really that satisfactory or pleasant as advocated by the government. The answer to this query is difficult to provide as it depends on one's definition of "satisfaction" and "pleasant." The present policy of new town development, described by Wong as a "decentralization strategy aiming at alleviating the problems caused by the limited land resources within the urban core," appears to have created as many problems as it intends to solve.

Limitations of New Town Development

It is obvious from the above analysis that in developing the new towns, both the government and those moving in have over-stressed the need for proper housing and under-estimated the importance of other needs. The extent to which this has affected the overall quality of life of new town inhabitants is yet to be assessed. But in planning the new towns, even the government acknowledges that the physical environment has for a long time been given the greatest attention and that this has only been rectified recently. There is no doubt that new town planning in Hong Kong has
substantially progressed since the construction of Kwun Tong in the 1950s. The government is now able to present the Shatin New Town as a model of what Hong Kong can achieve in new town development. However, despite the advancement in planning technique and the widening of considerations to include aspects other than the physical environment, it remains uncertain if the efforts made by the government to secure a pleasant life for the new town inhabitants are sufficient, not to say attempts to evaluate such efforts.

One of the factors that has prevented the government from taking each new town as an entity on its own for planning purposes is that most policies affecting the whole population in Hong Kong are usually planned at the central level. Thus, evaluation of such needs as housing, education, medical care, social welfare, employment and recreation are universally applied to every resident in Hong Kong with no distinction made as to where he or she lives. In theory, new town inhabitants can receive all the above services in the urban areas and vice versa. This conception has undoubtedly made the planners of new towns feel uneasy about giving concessions to the special needs, if any, of new town inhabitants and revising the policies determined centrally. Indeed, the present complaints about the lack of social services and other essential facilities in the new towns arise not so much from the absence of development blueprints, but from the lack of anticipation of the special conditions of each new town. Hence, it is not uncommon to find that schools and other facilities are insufficient in the new towns as the characteristics and subsequent needs of the people living there are actually different from those of the entire Hong Kong. Such mistakes have only recently been admitted and improvements depend on the cooperation between the various government departments responsible for new town planning, the provision of social services and other necessary facilities. Again, the question remains whether or not social services and other community facilities in the new towns should have functions different from those in the urban areas. Those who maintain that such services and facilities should perform the same functions, notwithstanding their location, would probably argue that Hong Kong is a very small place and that a discriminatory approach would create problems and antagonism. On the other hand, those who favour a more independent planning strategy argue that since such services and facilities are aimed at improving people's lives, they would not serve their purposes if they are inappropriate and insufficient for the people's needs. But what seems lacking at the present moment is knowledge of the exact needs of the new town inhabitants for the various public services and facilities and in what ways they are special to their own district. Without such knowledge, it would be futile to define the "special" roles of the services and facilities and the way in which they would help the new town inhabitants adjust to the new environment and, more ideally, secure a satisfactory living.
The second commonly found limitation is the problem of time lag in the development process. As a new town is built, the first completed structures, almost without exception, are the public housing estates; other services and facilities such as schools and clinics are usually not yet ready to serve the inhabitants when they move in. Some government officials have argued that this time lag is inevitable as different services and facilities require different time frames of development. But the result is that those moving in at the initial phase have to bear the costs of doing without some of the most essential services and facilities for a considerable time period. The effects of this deprivation on the lives of the new town inhabitants must be considered in assessing the achievement of new town development.

The third factor limiting the performance of new town development is the difficulty of bringing together the services provided by the different government departments in meeting the needs of the inhabitants. The co-ordination of government services within a district has long been problematic. As a former Tsuen Wan Town Manager has observed, "The functional division of business between department and between officers in different sections of large department leads sometimes to 'buck-passing,' but also produces a more serious disease. This is a lack of initiative and failure to grasp problems or report them upwards." The remark was made in the late 1970s and since then District Boards have been set up with the purpose of bringing about a more satisfactory co-ordination among the various government departments and to carry out minor improvement projects within their districts. It has yet to be assessed whether the problem of "buck-passing" has been overcome with the establishment of District Boards, but there remain cases, especially in the Tuen Mun New Town, where essential services and facilities are not provided when needed. Notwithstanding the problems which still exist, the past history of District Boards suggests that needs of the inhabitants are now more readily expressed by the District Board members and government departments are more responsive to these needs.

It is not an easy task to develop new towns for half a million people or more, but the limitations identified above serve to indicate that the satisfaction of housing needs, no matter how important this may be, is not the only factor determining the outcome of new town development. Indeed, the costs incurred by the new town inhabitants in adjusting to a new environment are often so high that an assessment of the entire new town development process is long overdue. Such an assessment should also evaluate whether or not adjustment problems encountered by the new town inhabitants can be reduced with more foresight on the part of the planners, greater flexibility in assessing the inhabitants' needs and better co-ordination among the various government departments responsible for providing the necessary services and facilities.
Objectives of New Town Development

Since the early 1970s, two goals have often been put forward by the government in developing the new towns, namely that each town should in principle be self-contained, and that each should be a "balanced community." Self-containment means that each new town should be equipped with the basic facilities to satisfy most of the inhabitants' needs, including employment opportunities, safe and secure living environment, space for recreation and leisure, medical and educational services, and opportunities for personal development and social life. A "balanced community" means that each new town should have living units to suit people of different economic and social classes, so that they have chances to mix and mingle and their life in the new town can be full of variety. The attainment of these two goals has been the subject of much debate. Yeh and Fong have remarked, "The new towns are successful in filling their public housing estates with people, but there is not much success in private housing development." Furthermore, they have found that, "New town development in Hong Kong has placed too much emphasis on public housing construction and there is a general lack of co-ordination in the provision of social facilities and transportation which are vital to the living environment of the new towns." Other findings also arrive at similar conclusions, namely that there is little chance for new towns to be self-contained and to have a balanced proportion of public and private tenants. This may explain why the government has played down the importance of these two goals in recent years. However, if these two goals are not to be pursued, what impact would this have on the living pattern of the new town inhabitants?

In relation to the goals of "self-containment" and a "balanced community," another concept, generally known as "community building," has frequently been referred to. The Former Governor, Lord Murray MacLehose, announced in 1976 the intention of the government to promote "community building" and defined it as an effort to encourage mutual help among the residents of each community and develop a greater sense of responsibility towards their community affairs. Since then, representatives of the main government departments and District Board members have formed themselves into community building committees in each district. It has to be pointed out that community building itself is a difficult concept and defies a clear definition. Its attainment is therefore difficult to evaluate and so far as the new towns are concerned, a community characterized by mutual help among members will definitely require a great deal of nurturing from the government, and it also needs time to develop.

Hence, in measuring the well-being of the new town inhabitants, at least three concepts must be addressed. These three concepts represent the
explicit objectives which the government has expressed in developing the new towns and through which new town residents can be provided not only with reasonable accommodation but also an environment conducive to satisfactory living.

Framework for Evaluating New Town Development

Following the above discussion, if the objectives of new town development include more than the satisfaction of housing needs, then their evaluation must be broadened to encompass the different aspects of life of the new town inhabitants. In operational terms, it is proposed that the measurement of the quality of life be made at two different levels. The first involves assessing the satisfaction of certain basic needs, like those for food, shelter, medical care, work, education, recreation and mobility. The list is not intended to be exhaustive and it usually varies with the actual level of social and economic development. A measurement of the first level is therefore an assessment of whether or not these needs have been met. The second level is more complicated and aims at assessing the more subtle aspects related to the ideal of "community building." These aspects include the ways in which people are relating to one another, both within the family and in the community, and the level of satisfaction derived from such relationships.

Some studies have already been conducted to collect data regarding the first level, but information is generally lacking about the second one. To examine the second level, it seems appropriate to ask the following questions pertaining to the relationships and experiences ordinarily maintained and felt by new town inhabitants. Specifically, the questions are: as a result of moving into the new town, (1) Have the family's roles of rearing the young and caring for the aged been strengthened? (2) Has the relationship between husbands and wives been improved? (3) Has a stronger sense of neighbourliness and mutual help been fostered among the people? (4) Have inhabitants felt a greater sense of belonging to their own communities? (5) Have inhabitants experienced greater security and a lower level of stress in their daily living? (6) Have inhabitants been leading a generally more satisfactory life?

Answers to the above questions may not only be important to those planning new towns, but they will be useful in determining the quality of life of the new town inhabitants. It can be hypothesized that if answers to the above questions are more often negative than positive, especially in comparison with equivalent conditions provided in previous residential locations, then the lives of the new town inhabitants will be less than satisfactory, despite the fact that they have better housing conditions. If that is the case, then it can be deduced that the new town inhabitants are actually paying a high price for their improved accommodation. On the other hand, if answers to the above questions are more often positive than
negative, then one may conclude that the new town development has not only improved the living environment of the new town inhabitants, but also their overall quality of life.

The framework to investigate the quality of life of the new town inhabitants can thus be divided into two levels, with the first directed at the assessment of the satisfaction of certain basic needs like school places for children and the second directed at the assessment of the various components of a satisfactory life. In diagrammatic form, the framework is summarized in Figure 1.

After differentiating the two levels of assessment, the next step would be to develop indicators to measure the items identified under each of them. As far as the first level is concerned, two types of questions ought to be asked: (1) Have these basic needs of the inhabitants been met? (2) To what extent do inhabitants regard the provisions as satisfactory, especially in comparison with their previous conditions before moving into the new towns? Factors of the second level are generally more difficult to measure. While some scales have been developed by local and overseas researchers to measure such aspects as family functioning, neighbourliness, and sense of community belonging, most need to be modified for the present purpose. However, it would probably be useful if such scales, and subsequently an index of the quality of life, can be established and applied to all new town inhabitants in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The study of the quality of life of the new town inhabitants is suggested in this article as a viable and effective means to assess the impact of new town development. The advantage of this approach is that it will embrace a much broader area and avoid the mistake of concentrating merely upon the satisfaction of housing needs. However, it also has its limitations: first, every new town in Hong Kong is rather unique in its own characteristics and it will be difficult to generalize the varying situations. Second, the lack of certain facilities or qualities in any particular new town may be the result of a general phenomenon, and cannot be attributed to a special feature of the new town concerned. Third, changes in a particular area, such as the level of stress, can seldom be explained by any one single factor; the impact of new town development may only be playing an insignificant role. The best that one can aim to achieve in this kind of investigation is to measure the general quality of life of the new town inhabitants, the adaptations made and consequently the costs incurred in the move. In brief, the present article represents an attempt to construct a framework to investigate an area often neglected in the planning of new towns, namely the quality of life afforded to new town inhabitants. It is proposed that this framework will not only generate information on the adaptations and adjustments
Figure 1

Framework for Investigating the Quality of Life of New Town Inhabitants

The first level of assessment: Facilities ensuring the satisfaction of basic needs

Aspects of assessment:

- Habitable housing conditions
- Employment opportunities
- Convenient transportation
- School places for children
- Market and other essential facilities
- Medical and health services
- Cultural and recreational facilities
- Social welfare provisions
- Spacious living environment

The second level of assessment: Components of a satisfactory life

Aspects of assessment:

- Family functioning and cohesiveness
- Husband and wife relationship
- Nature of neighbourliness
- Sense of community belonging
- Level of stress and security
- Meaningful life experience
experienced by the new town inhabitants, but also help evaluate the achievements of the entire new town development programme.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p.26. The 1986 By-census recorded that a total of 1,157,100 people living in Hong Kong had moved home between District Boards/new towns during the period 1981-86. Of this number, movements within the main urban areas involved approximately two-fifths, whereas movements from the urban complex to the new towns accounted for another one-third, or 401,597 persons.
4. J.M. Wiggleworth, a Senior Planning Officer of the government, wrote in the early 1970s, "The original decision to proceed with the development of Shatin and Castle Peak as new towns was influenced by the need for sites for government-built high-density housing." See Wiggleworth, "The Development of New Towns," in D.J. Dwyer, ed., Asian Urbanization: A Hong Kong Casebook (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1971), p.50. See also V.F.S. Sit, "Hong Kong's New Towns Programme and its Regional Implications," in Leung, Cushman and Wang, Hong Kong: Dilemmas of Growth, pp.397-417.
5. See Hong Kong 1979 (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1979), Chapter 1.
10. Ibid., p.381.

13. See N.W.S. Chow, "Development and Functions of Social Services in Hong Kong," in Cheng, Hong Kong in the 1980s, pp.140-151.


18. For a discussion of these two goals and the extent of their attainment see A.G.O. Yeh and P.K.W. Fong, "Public Housing and Urban Development in Hong Kong," Third World Planning Review 6 (February 1984): 79-94.

19. Ibid., p.89.

20. Ibid., p.62.


23. An example is the study conducted by W.T. Leung about feelings of the inhabitants towards lives in Tsuen Wan and Tuen Mun. Leung, "Hong Kong's New Towns Programme".