Background & Objectives of Clean Air Network

Clean Air Network (CAN) is an independent NGO, founded in July 2009, which aims to educate the public about the health impacts of air pollution. CAN is harnessing public opinion to support the Hong Kong Government's efforts to clean up air pollution in our city.

- Hong Kong air pollution caused 846 avoidable deaths in 2009.
- Last year, 2010, saw the worst roadside pollution in Hong Kong’s history.
- Hong Kong’s air is three times more polluted than New York's and more than twice as polluted as London’s.
- By WHO standards, Hong Kong’s air is only decently breathable 41 days a year (according to data from 2006).
- 53% of the time the Hong Kong air pollution that affects us most is attributable to local sources (2006).

We are conducting a 360° education and mobilization campaign, working closely with District Councillors, LegCo members and universities. We have given numerous educational talks, media interviews and street discussion forums. At the same time, more than 90 NGOs, including all the leading green groups, are Friends of CAN. Many blue-chip corporations have lent their public endorsement to CAN and provided generous pro bono support, e.g., CSL, TVB, MTRC, CLSA, The Link.

Looking back over 2010

In late March, a giant sandstorm from northern China caused levels of particulate matter (PM) to reach record levels in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s API readings hit 500 and even exceeded the monitoring technology's limitations. The dust cloud caused levels of PM to exceed 700 micrograms per cubic meter. This was over 14 times higher than the annual level of 50 micrograms per cubic meter suggested by the World Health Organization’s Air Quality Guidelines. However, experts remarked that living in a persistently high pollution environment actually poses a greater threat to one’s health.

The threat is so serious that in late April one of Hong Kong’s leading authorities on air quality and public health, Professor Anthony Hedley, left Hong Kong in order to avoid its polluted air and recover from severe health and respiratory problems. It is indeed a sad irony that one of the people most committed to alleviating Hong Kong’s air pollution problem had to leave the city for such a reason.

Soon after, the Environmental Protection Department introduced the Motor Vehicle Idling (Fixed Penalty) Bill to LegCo. The Bill requires drivers to switch off their engines while their vehicles are stationary on roads or in a car park. CAN successfully lobbied doctors and schools to speak up for the Bill from a public health perspective. Unfortunately, after months of deliberation, the bill was emasculated by transport interests in the Legislative Council. CAN and other environmental groups have decided not to deplete valuable political capital on this bill, choosing instead to focus on measures which have a greater chance of significantly benefiting public health, such as the clean-up of commercial diesel vehicles.
During October’s policy address, Chief Executive Donald Tsang emphasized roadside pollution in Hong Kong as a serious problem and pledged to alleviate it. Measures he announced include:
  • introducing environmental safeguards into franchise bus agreements when they come up for renewal;
  • the government purchase of six trial hybrid buses;
  • paying for the retrofit of all Euro II and Euro III buses to meet Euro IV emission standards;
  • designating low-emission zones in busy districts in Hong Kong by 2015.

However, CAN thinks these actions are “too little too late” and will not tackle a major part of the problem - the approximately 35,000 old, very polluting pre-Euro and Euro I commercial diesel vehicles plying Hong Kong’s streets.

Given the inaction of the government in dealing with shipping emissions, think tank Civic Exchange, which had worked with the maritime sector for three years, helped major players in the private sector stepped into the leadership void. In November, the Hong Kong Liner Shipping Association announced the Fair Winds Charter - a voluntary charter under which international shipping companies will, when berthed in Hong Kong, use low-sulphur diesel fuel. Encouragingly, 17 lines out of the association’s 21 container shipping members agreed to be bound by the charter. The associations that signed the charter represent 80 percent of all international shipping traffic.

Towards the end of the year, Civic Exchange released a public opinion survey of 1,000+ residents, entitled “Less Talk, More Action.” The survey shows that one in four people are considering emigration in response to the public health threat posed by Hong Kong’s air pollution. This is up from one in five in December 2008, when a similar survey was conducted. Results also show that the most educated are the most likely to consider leaving.

But nothing was worse than Bloomberg’s terrifying wrap-up of Hong Kong’s air pollution situation published at the end of the year: Hong Kong’s 2010 roadside pollution levels were the worst on record since 1999. Roadside smog reached “very high” or “severe” levels on the city’s air pollution index at least 12.6 percent of the time this year, excluding December. This is compared with “very high” or “severe” roadside pollution recorded at monitoring stations 10.62 percent of the time during the whole of 2009.

**CAN’s achievements in 2010**

- CAN has become the #1 information resource about air pollution, health and policy in Hong Kong, thanks to its continuously updated website and social media feeds which are based on the most recent international and local news; CAN serves a combined audience of 20,000+ members who subscribe to the email newsletter.
- CAN is also an important information and service resource for associations such as the Senior Care Health & Safety Association and the Hong Kong Asthma Society, whose members are directly affected by air pollution policy and news. CAN also works with other organizations concerned about air pollution, both locally and globally; CAN counts over 90 NGOs in its network.

1 Christine Loh, the CEO of Civic Exchange, is the Chairman of CAN
• CAN has given numerous talks at educational institutions. In addition to speaking to and maintaining relationships with student groups at all of Hong Kong’s leading universities (Hong Kong University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology), CAN has also spoken to 35 local and international schools, with most of these being secondary schools. By engaging youth and students, CAN is able to educate and recruit messengers for its educational messages – that air pollution damages the health of everyone in society.

• In March 2010, CAN conducted the largest environmental messaging campaign ever carried out in Hong Kong’s history, with public service announcements broadcasting messages about the adverse health impacts of air pollution on TV, outdoor billboards, indoor advertising, print media, SMS messages and more. We received HK$4 million in pro bono in-kind contributions from corporate sponsors such as The Link, the MTR, TVB, CSL, among others, allowing CAN to conduct this campaign with minimal cash outlays.

• During the first quarter of 2010, CAN conducted a survey of over 500 parents at 10 pediatricians’ clinics throughout Hong Kong. The results, which showed that 90% of Hong Kong parents are concerned about air pollution’s impact on their children’s health, were announced at a press conference, presided over by the Chairman of the Hong Kong Asthma Society, Dr. Alfred Tam, and widely reported in Hong Kong’s print media. For the first time, the Chinese newspapers reported about air pollution in the health section.

• CAN is a resource to Hong Kong’s 18 District Councils, maintaining contact with Councillors in each District Council and working closely with certain districts. For instance, in April 2010, CAN launched a 3-month program with the Wanchai District Council to educate schools and residents associations about air pollution and health. Wanchai District is blighted with the worst roadside pollution in Hong Kong. (CAN is now conducting a similar program in coordination with the Sham Shui Po District Council.)

• To defend the government’s anti-idling ordinance introduced in May 2010, CAN rallied many organizations to make deputations before LegCo, including the Hong Kong Asthma Society, the Hong Kong Pediatric Society and the Senior Care Health & Safety Association. Most notably, two international schools sent students to make impassioned speeches before legislators. CAN continues to work with Hong Kong’s secondary schools. In December, CAN prepared a student from St. Paul’s Co-ed to make a deputation during the government’s climate change consultation.

• During the summer of 2010, CAN introduced a suite of innovative environmental information tools comprising a Real-time Air Pollution Facebook Widget, Real-time Air Pollution Email Alerts (Beta), an iPhone app and Daily Lunchtime Roadside Pollution Tweets. These tools give the public immediate, updated readings about air pollution and, in some cases, push alerts, in a convenient, readable format, allowing them to stay on top of air pollution conditions in real time.

• In July 2010, Civic Exchange invited CAN to co-present the preliminary results of a roadside pollution monitoring research project in Hong Kong’s 18 districts by the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology in a press conference. To follow up, CAN is meeting with each District Council to discuss the specific findings and impact within each district.

• Also in July 2010, CAN mobilized the Hong Kong medical profession to write an open letter to the Government, exhorting the Government to act on air pollution because it
is Hong Kong’s biggest avoidable public health problem. Signatories organizations, comprising the majority of Hong Kong doctors, included Hong Kong Doctors Union, Hong Kong Paediatric Society, Hong Kong Geriatric Society and Hong Kong Asthma Society.

- CAN has managed to significantly raise the profile of the air pollution issue in both the international and local media. Next Media (Apple Daily) has begun to write about air pollution more regularly. The New York Times and International Herald Tribune have covered Hong Kong’s air pollution several times and Bloomberg has begun to write about air pollution with unprecedented regularity. Hong Kong is now known as one of the world’s most polluted cities, with a reputation similar to Los Angeles’ and Mexico City’s in the 1990s.

- In August 2010, CAN released a public service announcement video starring Daniel Wu, Ana R., Simon Yin and Cara G, shot in the style of a 1980s-style infomercial. The video provokes viewers into imagining pollution so bad that one has to purchase “Fresh Air” from a can in order to perform even everyday functions. With its witty, absurdist and sardonic approach, it became the most successful and effective video ever made by a Hong Kong NGO. After its launch, it went viral and has been viewed over 181,000 times (as of November 2010) and was reported about widely in both the local and international media, online and offline.

- In October 2010, Donald Tsang, Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, unveiled policy measures to tackle Hong Kong’s roadside emissions which directly addressed franchised buses. Tsang followed up the announcement of these measures in his 2010 policy address by issuing a “Letter to Hong Kong” underscoring his commitment to clean up roadside emissions. CAN considers the latter especially to be a direct result of our efforts, during the last year, to coordinate and reinforce NGOs’ messaging and campaigns.

- In December, Civic Exchange invited CAN to co-present the results of a new survey entitled “Less Talk More Action” showing that the number of Hong Kong people considering leaving Hong Kong has increased considerably since two years ago, especially among those with a higher level of educational attainment. The results were widely reported in the local and international media;

- Also in December, CAN held a ground-breaking press conference with Liberal Party Legislative Councillor, Miriam Lau, who represents the transport constituency, in order to underscore its demands for subsidies for the oldest, most polluting commercial diesel vehicles. The press conference is the first time an environmental NGO and the transport sector have sought to unite forces in order to better public health. CAN has maintained this dialogue with commercial diesel vehicle owners in order to determine what solutions would be commercially acceptable and practicable to this class of polluters.