

How Kong's civil society networks have contributed to the containment of COVID-19

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Hong Kong's success in containing the COVID-19 pandemic poses a unique puzzle.

Located at the south-eastern tip of China, and with an average daily cross-border traffic of over 600,000 people, Hong Kong has managed to prevent a large-scale pandemic outbreak. In May, the number of confirmed cases per 100,000 people in Hong Kong was only approximately 160 compared with South Korea (250), Japan (510), Singapore (1,070) and the United States (10,0010).

In countries such as New Zealand (approximately 55 confirmed cases per 100,000 people) and Taiwan (less than 10), successful containment of the pandemic has been due to governments enforcing quarantines and restrictions on people's movements at the early stages of community infection. The public in these nations have seemed willing to compromise their freedoms and personal information in order to comply with public health measures; and have expressed high levels of trust in government.

But what happened in Hong Kong was different. Most Hong Kongers have a relatively low level of trust in their government and the Hong Kong government's response alone cannot explain Hong Kong's successful containment of infections. Instead, Hong Kong's civil society has taken the lead in transforming networks established by recent protest movements to help fight against the pandemic.

Researches in Hong Kong and other countries have highlighted civil society and social movement as one of the key actors in containing the pandemic, and we offer further analysis on the role of civil society and its future in Hong Kong in this article.

The timing: a pandemic in the midst of a movement

The pandemic struck Hong Kong at a time when the protest movement against the controversial Extradition Bill was continuing to develop. The Bill was introduced by the Hong Kong Government in June 2019 and enables extradition of some criminal suspects from Hong Kong to mainland China. Opposition to the Bill by the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (AEBM) has since developed into a continuous anti-government movement demanding broader political reform. The AEBM has become an unprecedented mass movement involving widespread community participation—a survey conducted by Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong indicated that 52.6 percent of respondents participated in one way or another in the AEBM.

Hong Kong civil society's broad and diverse participation in the AEBM has given rise to a vast number of intertwined networks, which later became the key responders who mobilised civil society and initiated response to the pandemic. These networks and organisations formed during the second half of 2019 as activists started to explore fronts of resistance in addition to street protests, including unionising drives, 'Yellow Economic Circles' (a network of businesses which openly support the AEBM protests), and community-based organising.

Using the pandemic as a pretext, the government imposed strict bans on group gatherings, demonstrations, and carried out mass arrests for what it termed 'illegal' protests. As a result, it became extremely difficult for protesters to turn out on the streets. In the meantime, political repression has escalated. The central government introduced the National Security Law on July 1, 2020 which is being used to arrest

activists. In addition, the Legislative Council Election was postponed for 12 months, and the candidates who ran for the primary election were arrested and prosecuted for ‘subversion’ under the National Security Law.

The Hong Kong government was slow to take effective pandemic measures. In December 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China, reported a cluster of COVID-19 cases in Wuhan. The first confirmed case in Hong Kong occurred on January 22, 2020—a passenger travelled from mainland China to Hong Kong on the highspeed railway. Yet the Hong Kong government didn’t strengthen border control or launch COVID-19 tests or compulsory quarantines for travelers from mainland China until medical workers went on strike in early February. It was only in mid-2020—after months of shortages of personal protective equipment and economic hardship brought on by the pandemic—that the government started to distribute masks and launched bailout schemes for effected businesses and an employees’ wage subsidy.

In contrast, civil society networks formed by the protest movement responded to the pandemic almost immediately.

Self-organised distribution of information

During the protests, a network of self-organised information compilation and distribution networks played a crucial role in actively informing and mobilising protesters. For example, social media networks, using popular messaging app Telegram, were set up to enable the decentralised dissemination of information, protestors teamed up to post political messages criticising the government on so-called ‘Lennon Walls’, and set up political street stands. The decentralised nature of the networks made it possible to reach out to people quickly and on a large scale.

Since the pandemic outbreak, these networks have compiled and distributed COVID-related public health information. The ‘Lennon Walls’ have included posters with mask-wearing tips, counter-narratives of government’s pandemic policies, and lists

of 'Yellow Economic Circle' businesses. In addition, a website originally set up by protesters to consolidate information about elections was repurposed to archive pandemic news, visualisations of infection distribution, and COVID-19 prevention measures.

The trade union movement

The Hong Kong government's failure to impose COVID-19 tests or compulsory quarantines for travelers from mainland China became seen by protestors as a serious loophole in pandemic control and kicked off the first significant battle of the pandemic.

On January 24, 2020, two days after the first COVID-19 case arrived in Hong Kong, the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HAEA), together with a dozen other new trade unions, held a joint press conference announcing their so-called 'Five Demands Fighting the Pandemic' and their intention to go on strike. HAEA's membership has increased drastically to 22.5 percent of the total employees of the 'Hospital Authority' (a statutory body managing 43 public hospitals with a workforce of about 84,000). On February 5, a five-day strike was launched with medical workers demanding both the closure of the border with mainland China and changes to maximise workplace safety during the pandemic.

After the strike, the government strengthened its border polices—several checkpoints were closed and travelers from the mainland were required to undertake a 14-day quarantine and take COVID-19 tests—although the government denied these changes were as a result of the strike.

In the past, workers' voices have rarely been heard in Hong Kong society, and workers' movements in particular have been relatively marginalised compared with political reform movements. But throughout the AEBM, workers in various sectors have organised gatherings and participated in strikes mobilised through social media to show their support for the movement and put pressure on the government.

Some workers formed their own new trade unions in late 2019 aiming to launch a powerful general strike that could bring the city to a standstill. The pandemic struck Hong Kong not long after the formation of the new trade unions, and this network of cross-sector unions became an important way for workers to express a joint and critical voice about the government's pandemic policies.

Resource pooling and mutual-aid

In the early stage of the pandemic, there were months of shortages of personal protective equipment and it wasn't until mid-2020 that the government started to distribute reusable masks to every citizen. In contrast, the six-month long protests of AEBM gave rise to community-based networks and opened up possibilities for protesters' networks to gather and distribute essential pandemic protective resources. District councilors, pro-movement shops, and community groups, which supplied helmets and anti-tear gas respirators to frontline protesters, started to distribute surgical masks and hand sanitiser to people in need as soon as the pandemic began.

In addition, where government support for people who lost jobs due to the pandemic was insufficient, civil society networks helped jobless protesters with free meals through the Yellow Economic Circles. More widely, the Yellow Economic Circles have helped the sustainability of protestors' businesses: when restaurants in the networks were severely hit by pandemic-related dine-in restrictions, protesters created lists of pro-movement restaurants in every district and launched campaigns to promote these businesses. Regional food delivery networks were also formed by the protesters.

Low levels of trust in the government

Unlike other states who have successfully handled the pandemic so far, such as Taiwan and New Zealand, the public's trust towards the Hong Kong government has

remained low through the pandemic.

Several surveys indicate that Hong Kong citizens rated the government's performance poorly. According to one poll, only 20 percent of respondents agreed that it was the 'government' which successfully contained the pandemic, while over 70 percent agreed 'civil society' was responsible.

Generally, the AEBM has changed state-society relations in Hong Kong and contributed to a sharp drop in citizens' trust. Polls conducted by Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong show that since August 2019, out of a score of 10, over 40 percent of respondents rated their trust towards government and the police force as '0' and over 60 percent rated it as '1-4' .

Widespread mistrust has made it difficult for the government to put public health policies into practice. Since the pandemic outbreak, the government has launched public testing services, vaccination programs and a 'LeaveHomeSafe' app (an app which record users' locations to notify them if they were potentially exposed to COVID-19). However, mass testing and the 'LeaveHomeSafe' App were both boycotted by the medical union and other protester networks, due to concerns it would increase surveillance and collect excessive personal information from users. A poll conducted by City University of Hong Kong also revealed that only 38.2 percent of citizens were willing to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

The future of Hong Kong's civil society networks

Hong Kong's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic has been deeply influenced by the democracy movement. The networks and solidarity formed by the movement laid the groundwork for a prompt civil society response to the pandemic. The pandemic has also sustained solidarity and fostered the convergence and

interactions of these groups.

However, although civil society networks developed during the 2019 AEBM protests are a critical reason Hong Kong has been able to handle the pandemic well so far, these networks are unlikely to maintain their position in the future. The introduction of the National Security Law in mid-2020 has changed how and to what degree civil society can act. In the post NSL era, civil society space is shrinking drastically, and the government has intensified its crackdown on activists connected with the AEBM.

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Image: Lennon wall Tai Po Hong Kong. Credit: Studio Incendo/Flickr.