

# Agriculture reborn?

Hong Kong is a commercial and financial hub, but no one would call it an agricultural centre. Local agriculture has been **diminishing** into insignificance for decades, but the government is proposing to develop this long-forgotten sector again. Why the renewed interest and how do we go about doing it?

**A**GRICULTURE used to be an important industry in Hong Kong. In the New Territories, paddy fields, vegetable plantations, and poultry and pig farms were everywhere.

But over the past decades, **urbanisation** turned farmland into new towns, service industries took the place of primary industries, and more and more farmland fell into disuse.

Naturally, most people think local agriculture is all but dead. But while the industry is small, it is still producing a **sizeable** amount of vegetables, poultry and pigs for local consumption.

The value of local agricultural output in 2012 and 2013 was \$766 million and \$776 million respectively. In 2013, 2 percent of the vegetables we ate were locally-produced. The market share for fresh flowers was 27 percent, live pigs 7 percent, and live poultry 60 percent.

## Changing views

SHOULD we allow local agriculture to continue its descent into **oblivion**?

The government, for one, does not think so. The 2014 Policy Address stated: “There is much our agriculture and fisheries industries can achieve, provided they move towards high-tech, diversified and **sustainable** development.”

Late last year, it issued a consultative document proposing to **revitalise** the sector.

*The New Agricultural Policy: Sustainable Agricultural Development in Hong Kong* (新農業政策：本港農業的可持續發展) suggests Hong Kong “adopt a more **proactive** approach towards the modernisation and sustainable development of local agriculture”.

The paper noted changing public perception about the future development of local agriculture. More people are seeing the positive impacts this would bring.

## Why save a dying sector?

WHY save a declining sector when we can use all our energy to develop commerce, finance and services, the pillars of our economy?

Secretary for Food and Health Ko Wing-man (食物及衛生局局長高永文) says doing so would bring many advantages. Agriculture:

- diversifies our food supply and reduces our reliance on imported food, whilst meeting consumers’ aspirations and demand for food with a high safety standard;
- provides jobs for lesser-skilled workers; bringing opportunities to young people who aspire to develop a career in modern agriculture;
- encourages the productive use of land, contributing to the integration

of urban and rural developments, and helps preserve the visual appearance and improve sanitary conditions of the rural environment;

- helps natural resources conservation, enrichment of biodiversity and reduction of the carbon footprint in the food supply chain.

## Agri-park and development fund

TWO major measures are proposed – an Agri-Park (農業園) and a development fund.

With a size of about 70 to 80 hectares, the park would admit commercial farmers.

It will be a base to experiment with new agricultural practices for wider application to increase agricultural production to meet public demand for safe and fresh produce.

The Sustainable Agricultural Development Fund (SADF, 農業持續發展基金) is for the upgrading of local agricultural practices.

It also aims to promote public participation in leisure farming and educational activities for students and citizens.

## Will it work?

CRITICS say sustainable agricultural development requires a comprehensive and long-term strategy. Simply having a few isolated

measures will not do.

The government must also ensure that there is enough farmland for farming. Not that we do not have agricultural land, but there is a serious mismatch in land use. Much of our farmland is either used for other purposes or just left unused by developers, who amass farmland for future development.

## Conclusion

ONLY 4,400 people engage in agriculture, making up a mere 0.11 percent of the total work force. But many city folk are taking an interest in farming.

Over 100 leisure farms have been set up for people to experience farming during holidays. Growing one’s own food is also a valuable experience for children.

Urban farming on rooftops is a growing fad in cities such as London, Paris, Singapore and Tokyo, and more people are adopting a new “half-farmer-half-X” lifestyle – retaining their original profession while taking on farming too.

No one is under the **illusion** that agriculture in Hong Kong can have any economic significance.

But it certainly can be developed into an alternative source of unpolluted food and as a leisure activity for all! 🍅

