

October 5th 2023

Dear Chief Executive John Lee and Members of the Steering Committee on Climate Change and Carbon Neutrality,

On September 7th and 8th 2023, Hong Kong experienced its most extreme rainstorm as Typhoon Haikui swept across Guangdong Province. Our city registered the highest volume of rainfall in an hour since records began in 1884, and the black rainstorm warning hoisted that day was the longest ever - lasting 16 hours. The extreme rainfall has caused flooding in many districts, both in rural areas in the north, and in densely populated residential and commercial districts such as Wong Tai Sin, Sham Shui Po, and Chai Wan. Public transport, such as buses and MTR, was paralyzed, and the floods have damaged numerous roads, vehicles, and farmland. 3 people died during the rainstorm, and over 132 people were injured.

This rainstorm marks the second extreme weather event Hong Kong has experienced in a week. On September 1st, Typhoon Saola also caused damage to public infrastructure and paved the way to the havoc caused by the rainstorm. These back-to-back extreme events are not isolated from each other. Rather, they are impacts brought by the global climate crisis, along with the extreme heat Hong Kong experienced all throughout July. The devastation brought by these events reflects the lack of preparedness from the Hong Kong government and the entire city to cope with the successive extreme weather. In this urgent moment, we find it necessary to point out the root cause of these climate-related extreme weather events: **historical and continued unwillingness to prioritise people and planet first instead of economic development has resulted in destruction of infrastructure and economic losses, and more importantly, impacting the health and lives of Hong Kong residents.**

Our observations are as below:

- 1. Marginalised communities are most threatened by climate change and extreme weather**
Frequent typhoons, rainstorms, and heatwaves can have compounding effects on our city, residents, and workers. As an immediate example, post-typhoon Saola debris and trees may have caused extra drainage blockages, which exacerbated the flash floods brought by the September 8th rainstorm. Such recurring disasters with increased frequency can have other indirect dangers and health concerns, such as infectious diseases, chemical hazards, fire, and pollution. Marginalised communities, such as low-income, ethnically diverse, disabled, elderly, and houseless people, as well as frontline workers who have to work overtime to get the city back in order, feel these direct and indirect dangers most acutely.
- 2. The city-wide alert system was not adequately utilised**
The extreme rainstorm has exposed the fact that despite having the Climate Action Plan 2050 in place, Hong Kong is still under-prepared for the climate crisis. Warning systems are part of the upgrades and focus areas listed in the Climate Action Plan, but they were not utilised to alert the public of the rainstorm in advance; this includes the city-wide alert system via mobile phones that the government heavily invested in 2020. While there are a range of emergency services available, public education on these services, as well as disaster evacuation plans, are lacking.

3. Temporary shelters are not widely available or easily accessible

In the early hours of September 8, only 12 temporary shelters were available to the public across the 18 districts. Transportation services for the elderly and disabled people to these shelters were not available. There is also no real-time information regarding the conditions of the temporary shelters and its surrounding, people in need may not be able to evaluate whether staying at their locations would be safer than journeying to the temporary shelter.

4. A comprehensive climate risk assessment has not yet been done

A comprehensive climate risk assessment is crucial for urban planning and infrastructure works to ensure a climate resilient city. The risk assessment can directly help plan temporary shelter locations, so that it is accessible to high-risk areas yet lower the chances of being impacted by disasters. Other neighbouring coastal countries already have such assessments: [Philippines](#) has NOAA, and Japan has its Hazard map portal site.

5. The climate resilience and disaster preparation workforce is understaffed and underpaid

The workforce allocated to disaster preparation and climate resilience - such as cleaners, drainage and road maintenance workers, care workers, and delivery workers - is understaffed and/or underpaid. There is also a lack of consideration of their health and safety as they work shifts in extreme conditions. Measures to rebuild from climate-related events, to prepare our communities for future disasters, and to build climate resilience in a way that does not widen inequality or exploit workers and other vulnerable people, are desperately needed.

These extreme weather events are no longer "once-in-500-years" anomalies. Instead, they should be treated as both an "emergency" and as the new normal. As such, we demand the government adopt the following measures:

Climate Adaptation Plan

- Implement a city-wide, comprehensive climate risk assessment to identify and address the magnitude and distribution of current and future key climate risks like flooding, extreme heat, and landslides, as well as compounding hazards and indirect community health concerns.
- Formulate a thorough climate adaptation plan in terms of infrastructure, community preparedness, services, contingency plans.
- City planning and development that positions climate resilience should be the central goal, and climate adaptation considerations should be reflected in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines. This includes preserving wetlands, implementing nature based solutions and blue green areas to increase stormwater catchment and buffer against extreme weather.
- Recognise climate change as a crisis that intersects with issues such workers rights, housing, poverty, ageing etc. by formulating adaptation policies that address the need for affordable and disaster-resilient housing, better protection and welfare for elderly and disadvantaged communities, environmental safety education, scaling-up climate resilience projects and jobs, and paying essential workers a living wage.

Extreme Weather Preparation

- Formulate a thorough evacuation system with public education for vulnerable groups, e.g. homeless people, elderly, disabled people, subdivided flat residents, residents living in low-lying areas and animal rescue centres.
- Open temporary shelters at least 3 hours in advance of potential heavy rain and typhoon signal 8.
- Locate / Relocate the temporary shelters to places which are highly accessible to citizens. Increase the number of temporary shelters, especially accessible to “high-risk areas” of climate risks and/or where residents are disproportionately affected.
- Implement smart real-time features into a user-friendly platform, so citizens can be informed and notified of the status, locations, and conditions of temporary shelters.
- Set up and utilise a warning system notifying the public in advance of climate disasters, related evacuation plans, and locations of shelters. This warning system should be available not only in official languages, but also Nepalese, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese, Urdu, and Hindi.
- Require employers in essential sectors to negotiate with workers in advance and establish a list of those willing to work during black rainstorms or typhoon signal 8 or above. Workers not included in the list are not required to report to work and will be considered as being on paid leave. Those who are included but cannot make it due to inclement weather conditions should not be punished.

Response

- Redistribute funding so that departments directly responding to the disaster (e.g. Ambulance, Fire Department, Emergency Monitoring and Support Centre, Temporary Shelters scheme under the Home Affairs Department, and bodies providing paramedic and medical aid) can expand their services to adequately respond to climate change.
- Designate a Special Need Response Service to assist elderly, special needs or disabled people, or any person that may require additional or extraordinary efforts by emergency response personnel to evacuate.
- Mandate employers to provide hazard pay for people performing essential work (e.g. care, drainage, cleaning) during the extreme climate event, where the salary received during the period of the event totals 3 times the workers’ normal salary.²
- Ensure worker protections on the job: mandate employers to provide free necessary safety equipment, shelters at work, and work injury compensation higher than the minimum stipulated in the Labour Legislation.

Recovery

- Conduct immediate assessments of urgent needs and priorities of each district and establish a disaster recovery plan to ensure the safety of vulnerable groups

² This hazard pay amount was suggested by union and labour groups in dialogue with CCRCG. They were in consensus that an amount no less than three times the usual workers’ pay during that period was fair compensation for working in extreme conditions.

- Expand the emergency relief grant and include residents without HKID (e.g. refugees and asylum seekers), and centralise information related to grant application to a designated website on disaster relief and recovery.
- Establish a transparent and effective reporting mechanism to collect information from communities about their needs, which can streamline the recovery process and make coordination more effective. Grassroots organisations should also be invited to play a larger role in overseeing disaster recovery and preparation.

Sincerely,

Community Climate Resilience Concern Group