

# HK's quest for carbon neutrality



Like the rest of the world, Hong Kong is implementing myriad measures to help fight climate change. What are these actions? Are they effective, and how much will they cost?

**T**HE latest United Nations summit on tackling climate change – COP28 – concluded in December 2023 with a “historic” agreement between nearly 200 countries to start reducing the global consumption of fossil fuels.

Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Espen Barth Eide observed, “It is the first time that the world unites around such a clear text on the need to transition away from fossil fuels.”

To Hong Kong, this means we must step up efforts to reduce our carbon footprint, aiming to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

## What is carbon neutrality?

CARBON neutrality means to achieve relative “zero-carbon” emissions over a certain period of time.

This can be done by reducing or offsetting carbon emissions by various methods, which include replacing conventional fossil energy, conserving energy, green commuting, reducing consumption, reducing waste, planting, afforestation, purchasing renewable energy certificates and carbon trading.

The European Parliament defined carbon neutrality as “having a balance between emitting carbon and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere in carbon sinks... [which] is any system that absorbs more carbon than it emits. The main natural carbon sinks are soil, forests and oceans.”

## Net-zero power generation

TO achieve this goal, our top priority must be reducing carbon emissions in electricity power generation because it is the largest source of Hong Kong’s carbon emissions, accounting for 66 percent.

We must stop using coal and increase our use of renewable energy for electricity generation to between 7.5 percent and 10 percent by 2035 and to 15 percent subsequently.

We must also strengthen cooperation with neighbouring regions on matters relating to climate change.

## Ongoing actions

VARIOUS renewable infrastructures are being developed to generate power as we move away from coal, which accounts for around 25 percent in the current fuel mix, and stop using it completely by 2035.

These include developing more waste-to-energy facilities to meet 3 to 4 percent of local energy demand by 2035. Off-shore windfarms being developed by the two power companies should be able to generate another 3.5 to 4 percent of our power needs.

Solar power generation facilities are also being deployed throughout Hong Kong, with floating generation systems of 100kW each at Shek Pik, Plover Cove, and Tai Lam Chung reservoirs. A “high-efficiency thin-film” solar system has also been installed on the curved sedimentation tank covers at Stonecutters

Island Sewage Treatment Works.

Two waste-to-energy facilities, in Tuen Mun and North Lantau, have been in operation since 2016 and 2018 respectively. Solar energy generation systems are also being tested at restored landfills.

## Cost of decarbonising

WHAT do decarbonisation measures mean when translated as costs for households? Specifically, would it mean receiving higher electricity bills?

There is no definitive answer to these questions at this stage, as it involves complicated calculations involving myriad direct and indirect costs, which are changing and relative to alternative costs like fossil fuel.

But in setting out the net-zero power generation targets, the Climate Action Plan noted the importance of affordability but also stated that “decarbonisation comes at a price”.<sup>1</sup>

### Multimedia

What is carbon neutrality and how can it be achieved by 2050?



Video: What was accomplished at COP28?



### iNKY instant exercise







-photo: HKEJ

# Baby incentives unveiled

• Chief Executive John Lee has made boosting fertility rates a top priority. -photo: CNSA



**Hong Kong has a problem – we have too few babies. This will cause significant challenges down the line, so the government has rolled out a host of measures to lift birth rates. What are they, and will they work?**

**L**IKE many developed economies, Hong Kong has had low birth rates for years. So, in his Policy Address 2023, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu unveiled a basket of initiatives to reverse the trend.

Most notable is the New Baby Bonus – a one-off cash payment of HK\$20,000 for each baby born on or after 25 October 2023, the day the measure was announced, to a parent who is a Hong Kong permanent resident.

Setting the measures in context, Lee observed, “Hong Kong’s birth rate remains at its lowest level. The average parity of local couples dropped to a record low of 0.9 in 2022 (we need at least 2.1 or higher).

“Meanwhile, Hong Kong has among the longest life expectancies in the world – the proportion of elderly persons aged 65 and above will increase from 20 percent of Hong Kong’s population to nearly one-third by the end of the next decade.”

The measures are designed to head off the consequences of this worrying demographic trend by helping to “promote fertility and create a childbearing environment”.

On housing, families with a newborn will have a better chance of buying Subsidised Sale Flats, with a quota reserved for balloting and priority flat selection by applicants with newborns until the child reaches the age of three. And in each sale exercise, an additional 10 percent of flats will be reserved for selection priority.

Priority will also be given to these families when they apply for public rental housing, with waiting time reduced

by one year. The policy will take effect from April 2024.

There will be more support for working families. Apart from increasing the Working Family Allowance, the government will also increase childcare centre places and allowances and extend an after-school care programme in all districts.

A total of HK\$8 million will be allocated for a five-year Funding Scheme on the Promotion of Family Education that will be launched in the latter half of 2024 to support community projects promoting family education.

As some couples may need assisted reproductive technology to conceive a baby, the government will enhance support by increasing the public service quota for assisted reproductive services and offering a tax deduction for such expenses.

### Effective measures

IT will take time to see the effects of these measures. Chief Secretary Eric Chan Kwok-ki noted, “Young couples have different considerations, and some even prefer pets rather than having children. It is hard to change a person’s mind. But the purpose of our policies



• At about 0.8 births per woman, the fertility rate is extremely low in Hong Kong. -photo: HKEJ

is to ease the concern of those who are willing to have children.”

But some people think the baby bonus is too little; it is unable to cover even one month’s rent or mortgage payment. Others highlighted parents’ longer-term financial concerns.

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, who studies population health at the University of Hong Kong, said, “There are three parts to consider when giving birth to a child, that is, the actual part of giving birth, then raising them, and then educating them.”

A parent-friendly office environment, such as flexible shifts, would also help. It has been observed that countries with a higher prevalence of part-time positions tend to have higher fertility rates.

Society for Community Organization’s Sze Lai-shan noted the dilemma of lower-income families who cannot afford childcare or to take time off work to look after their child. Providing affordable childcare is essential.

However, there are other factors that monetary incentives cannot simply address. These include better education of women, leading to increased opportunities to bear childbirth costs, the psychological and social pressure of childrearing, and gender inequality that places childcare responsibility mostly on women.



### Negative impact of declining birth rates

**L**OW birth rates, coupled with an ageing population, can bring dire social and economic consequences. This was the warning in a 2022 paper by the Legislative Council's Research Office.

The World Economic Forum observed, "Fewer people are good for the climate, but the economic consequences are severe. In the 1960s, there were six people of working age for every retired person. Today, the ratio is three-to-one. By 2035, it will be two-to-one."

While ultra-low fertility is a phenomenon many developed economies face, Hong Kong is in a particularly acute situation.

Hong Kong's total fertility rate fell from 1.93 in 1981 to 0.77 in 2021, placing the city not only "far below the natural population replenishment rate of 2.1 per woman but also among the lowest in the world", according to the 2022 paper.

The Census and Statistics Department projected the percentage of elderly persons aged 65 and above in the total population to gradually increase from 20.8 percent in mid-2022 to 25.3 percent in 2028 and 35.1 percent in 2069.

Secretary for Labour and Welfare Chris Sun pointed out, "[G]iven a lower labour force participation rate for the elderly



• An ageing population and low birth rates is threatening many nations in the world. -photo: HKEJ

persons, it will be inevitable for the overall labour force participation rate to drop consequentially.

"Manpower resources is one of the key elements for local economic growth. In the event of a dwindling labour force, it will likely impede the potential of economic growth."

An ageing population will also increase the demand for various elderly and healthcare services, putting pressure on public finances.

Fewer working-age people also lead to lower total savings, which affects economic growth via capital accumulation.

Another lesser-discussed impact of low birth rates is that on "social capital". According to a 2020 report by the US Joint Economic Committee Republicans, "Declining fertility also means fewer siblings and extended family members to whom people can turn for support throughout life, as well as fewer adult children upon whom parents can rely for care and companionship in old age".

This is a ticking time bomb in Hong Kong as Chinese people's moral obligation is to be filial.

#### Multimedia

Policy Address – promote fertility and create a childbearing environment



Video: Why does Japan have so few children?



#### iNKY instant exercise



### Boosting baby births

**C**OUNTRIES are deploying various measures to arrest declining birth rates, with varying success.

In South Korea, where the total fertility rate sank to almost the world's lowest at 0.81 in 2021, the government introduced measures ranging from pregnancy and childbirth support and expanded childcare services to job-seeking and housing assistance for newlyweds.

But after spending at least HK\$1 trillion since 2006, the decline **persisted**, prompting the government to expand cash benefits, which include a one-off two million won (HK\$11,000) payment to expectant mothers and an extra 300,000 won (HK\$1,700) monthly child allowance for children under one year old.

Singapore offers 16 weeks of maternity leave and up to six days of paid and unpaid childcare leave. The government also runs a co-saving scheme with parents to meet the children's education and medical expenses. These measures have stabilised fertility rates, which remained at 1.12 in 2021 despite the pandemic.



• The Chinese government introduced measures to increase the fertility rate including relaxing the one-child policy. -photo: CNSA

Mainland China relaxed the one-child policy to a two-child one in 2015 and further to three-child in 2021. It also set childcare place provision in the National 14th Five-year Plan at 4.5 per 1,000 population by 2035.

Hungary offers a low-interest loan of about HK\$319,500 to all women under 40 who have married for the first time and are ready for childbirth. Also, women with four children enjoy a lifelong personal tax exemption. Families with more children also get subsidies to buy larger cars.

Lestijarvi, a small municipality in Finland, gives a baby bonus of 10,000 euros (HK\$85,650) for each baby born, to be paid over 10 years.

The country also provides parents a monthly allowance of 100 euros (HK\$856). Each newborn gets a starter kit containing bodysuits, a sleeping bag, outdoor gear, baby products, bedding and a small mattress.

Canada, Estonia, Italy, Japan, and Australia offer financial incentives to help families with the costs of raising children. **i**

#### Listening comprehension



Scan the QR Code to listen to a summary of the part of the article *Negative impact of declining birth rates*.



-photo: AFP



Download the PDF at [inky.hkej.com](http://inky.hkej.com) to complete the listening comprehension exercise based on this audio.

#### Learning English

##### Persist and persevere

'Persist' is a verb that means to continue to do something, even when it is annoying other people. For example, "He persisted in playing the trumpet late at night despite repeated complaints from neighbours."

If an unpleasant feeling or situation persists, it continues to exist. A doctor may advise her patient, "If the coughing persists for over a week, come back to see me."

'To persist' in something means to continue to do something despite difficulties or opposition. For example, when a detective refuses to give up on a cold murder case, we can say

the detective persists in her search for the murderer even if it seems unlikely that the investigation will yield results. 'Persistent' is an adjective that means being determined to do something despite difficulties, especially when others are against you and think you are annoying or unreasonable.

To be a successful salesperson, one has to be persistent. If you have a friend who does not easily give up on what he wants, you can describe him as persistent. A persistent offender, however, continues to commit crimes even after being caught and punished.

A related word is 'persevere', a verb that means to continue trying to do or achieve something despite difficulties. To persevere is essential to succeed in reaching one's goals and ambitions.

All great inventors know perseverance, which is about not giving up in the face of repeated failures. Such a spirit was exemplified by Thomas Edison, one of the most successful innovators in American history. He once commented on the process of inventing the light bulb, "I have not failed 10,000 times – I've successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work."



## Elevating your writing, Pt 2

iNKY instant exercise



**B**ODY paragraphs form almost all of our writing. They play a crucial role in providing support for our ideas. In this article, we will evaluate the body paragraphs of a piece of Level 3 writing and explore ways to enhance them.

### Analysis of body paragraphs

IN the last issue, we looked at a sample question from the 2022 paper. Following the candidate's (unedited) introduction paragraph, they write:

*First, opening a cafe need lots of money, not only the coffee machine, if you want to open a nice and cozy cafe, you also need good internal designs, nice furniture and some decoration or even some extra things like speakers to play music, wifi and more, as I know, these things is not cheap. You have to make sure you have enough money for these things.*

In this paragraph, the candidate makes the point that opening a cafe is expensive, and hence, the reader must first ensure he has sufficient money. Whilst the idea is relevant and appropriate, the technique to deliver the point can be improved.

A topic sentence should be concise and short. However, the candidate's first body paragraph consists of just two sentences, with the first being three lines long.

The topic sentence can be rewritten as:

*Firstly, opening a cafe requires large amounts of financial investment.*

Subsequently, we can elaborate on our idea:

*Starting a cafe requires significant purchases. You will need to buy large coffee machines. Furthermore, to create a cosy ambience, you will also need to invest large amounts in the cafe's interior design. Setting up the cafe is costly, from hiring interior designers to purchasing furniture and decorations. Additionally, to attract customers, you may also want to provide services such as Wi-Fi and music, requiring you to spend more money. Hence, it would be in your best interest to save up at your current job first.*

This body paragraph is built on the same point as the candidate's: opening a cafe is expensive. However, we were able to write a more structured body paragraph with a topic sentence, elaboration, and a concluding sentence.

Moving on to the second body paragraph, the candidate writes:

*On top of the cost of opening a cafe, the timing of opening is important too. People are unable to go around due to Covid-19, many shops are closed, it is not a smart choice for you to open a cafe with your friends now. In fact, I think you can wait a few years, when the virus will have subsided, then open your dream shop, otherwise, you might lose a lot of money. It won't feel good if your dream failed, right?*

The topic sentence succinctly tells us that the paragraph will discuss the importance of the timing of starting a cafe. The candidate reasons that due to the occurrence of the pandemic (at the time of writing), it is not the best time to open a cafe.

Whilst the candidate provides sufficient elaboration on their idea, there are some areas for improvement, such as grammar and punctuation. The comma is used unnecessarily in some instances, eg, 'I think you can wait a few years, when the virus will have subsided'. In other instances, it is better to split clauses into separate sentences to express the ideas more clearly, eg, 'People are going out less often due to Covid-19, and many shops are closed. It is not a smart choice for you to open a cafe with your friends now.'

Remember to pay attention to the tone of the writing. The question that the paragraph ends on sounds pessimistic and may be discouraging to the reader. Instead, try reframing your conclusion with a positive spin, eg, 'Waiting may increase the success of your cafe.'

Strong body paragraphs are built on a foundation of good organisation of ideas, ample elaboration, and clear, engaging language. Following this recipe can elevate your writing to make it more effective and impactful.



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