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Opening up New Territories can solve housing problems

The government should pay serious attention to your editorial ('Housing needs wiser land use', January 10), which advanced useful, innovative ideas towards solving Hong Kong's problem of a shortage of land for housing development. As you correctly pointed out, the problem is the government's failure to make proper use of our vast land resources in the New Territories.

The Joint Declaration signed in 1984 increased the permanent size of Hong Kong tenfold. By incorporating the New Territories as part of the Special Administrative Region, our total land area is now 1,104 square kilometres, but only 23.4 per cent of this, or about 260 sq km, has been developed.

The present government has not mentally advanced beyond the British colonial era which had, by reason of the limitations of the New Territories lease, concentrated development in and around the harbour and had never properly planned development of the New Territories. As clear proof of this, the Town Planning Ordinance was not extended to cover the New Territories until 1991, just six years before the handover to China.

It is vital and urgent that the government should review its policy for the strategic development of Hong Kong by treating land in the New Territories as no different from land in Kowloon and on Hong Kong Island. This will open up vast land resources vital for Hong Kong's future development as a metropolis and will resolve our housing problem once and for all.

What is being advocated above will happen anyway sooner or later, whether now or in years to come. But to do so as soon as possible will enable the New Territories to be properly planned instead of the present piecemeal development. Many historic and environmentally sensitive areas should be protected and preserved.

The government should immediately undertake public consultation to find the best way forward rather than resort to minor measures such as reclamation and cavern development which do not solve the fundamental problem.

The public consultation should involve the main stakeholders, including indigenous villagers, property owners, developers and the powerful Heung Yee Kuk.

A solution should be found that will, as far as possible, be fair to all. Hopefully, the stakeholders will put the public interest and the interest of Hong Kong first, and their self-interest second.

The government should provide the necessary leadership with vision, wisdom and courage to face this vital issue which will affect generations of Hong Kong people.

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