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## Coordinating government silos in Hong Kong

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### Abstract

The literature on silos in government often focuses on their failure to engage effectively in horizontal coordination. While this is often true, silo-dominant administrative systems may still find ways to overcome or prevent incoherence in government. The problem is not so much with the structure of silos but with the lack of effective coordination mechanisms between them. Therefore, it is important to identify what mechanisms may enable silos to work successfully with each other and under what conditions, to avoid the political and administrative costs of radical reform. Using Hong Kong examples, we distinguish three different types of coordination and examine their effects on silos: informal or semi-formal coordination, where administrative elites and professionals use *quid pro quo*s to overcome coordination problems; formal coordination where political expectations, directions and monitoring may mitigate problems; and remedial policymaking where failure is addressed. The Hong Kong case reveals that effective changes may be made by strengthening existing

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coordinating mechanisms and extending them to the implementation level in a silo-dominant system. Radical reforms may improve coordination but they run the risk of political instability and service disruption.

**Keywords:** government structure; coordination; collaboration; silos; Hong Kong.

## Introduction

A silo is a hierarchical organisation that maximises vertical coordination at the expense of horizontal coordination. It is inward-looking and self-contained with little regard for outcomes other than those which affect its own narrowly conceived goals (Tett 2015:16–17). Silos get a bad press. Much of the academic literature deals with their evident failures to share information, resolve jurisdictional disputes with other government organisations and coordinate effectively (Christensen and Lægread 2007). They are criticised for the resulting ‘departmentalism’ (Gulick 1937), ‘tunnel vision’ (Rosenbloom et al. 2010:33), and their tendency to focus on limited objectives (Bezes et al. 2013). Their inability to overcome these problems often has poor outcomes, such as delays in decision-making, duplication of resources, inadequate service delivery, failure to resolve cross-cutting ‘wicked problems’, and difficulties in collaborating with non-governmental actors. This has prompted calls for the silos to be broken down, blown up or otherwise destroyed (Froy and Giguère 2010; Tett 2015:21–24). Some scholars do, however, emphasise their resilience, their importance within the formal organisational structure, and the need for vertical coordination in decision-making processes (Peters 2015).

We contend that, despite their many failings, silo-dominated systems may still be able to function effectively and mitigate the worst effects of poor horizontal coordination. In many Asian countries, for example, silos are particularly valued for their ability to deliver goods and services efficiently. Despite widespread recognition of the problems associated with them, in places where silos are embedded in the political system and given credit for rapid economic development, there is little appetite for radical reform (Scott 2020). If such reforms were to be introduced, they might include, inter alia, breaking up the large departments that characterise many Asian bureaucracies, creating less hierarchical structures, encouraging more upward communication, and reforming personnel practices by making many more positions contractual. All these measures are potentially contentious

and could be politically and administratively costly. Moreover, there are questions about whether such substantial organisational changes necessarily result in improvements. One of the most favoured solutions in the Western experience—breaking down the silos into specialised agencies—may simply replicate their problems on a smaller scale (Elston 2013). We suggest instead that silo-dominant systems may reduce dysfunctional outcomes by strengthening horizontal coordination mechanisms. It is important to identify what these mechanisms are, how they enable silos to work successfully with each other and under what conditions.

The Hong Kong Government is an appropriate arena to investigate these conditions because, since colonial times, it has had a highly centralised, hierarchical administrative system composed of large departments, often operating more or less autonomously. Although new statutory bodies have occasionally been created, silos have continued to provide the core functions of government. The change of sovereignty has made little difference. In 1995, two years before the handover, the Chinese Government announced publicly that, in the interests of stability, the civil service system would remain the same. In 2002, a system of politically appointed heads of bureaus was introduced but this affected only a few positions at the apex of government; the administrative structure did not change.

This continuity of structure means that problems of horizontal coordination have historically been addressed in largely similar ways and that, consequently, we can draw on case studies over a long period. To identify appropriate cases, we adopted a three-stage process. Initially, we interviewed senior government officials, including a former director of audit, a former ombudsman, and the then director of the efficiency unit, and asked them to describe cases of success and failure in coordination involving two or more government departments. We then examined the documentary evidence contained in the director of audit and ombudsman investigative reports, Legislative Council panel and committee minutes and reports made by other monitoring bodies that focused on structural issues, coordination problems and their proposed remedies. We then selected cases for in-depth analysis, concentrating on the specific mechanisms that have been used to address horizontal coordination issues.

In what follows, we discuss different types of coordination based on Mattessich's theoretical framework, attempting to locate the Hong Kong experience within it. We then consider the Hong Kong Government's bureaucratic structure, seeking to establish where the fault lines lie and where problems of coordination have arisen. Finally, we analyse three coordinating

mechanisms—informal coordination, political direction and remedial policymaking—which have been valuable in preventing or mitigating the failures in horizontal coordination arising from a silo-dominated system.

## Cooperation, coordination and collaboration

Silos seek to ensure that they can perform their functions and achieve objectives without reliance on other departments and agencies. They will not usually engage in coordination *ab initio* but will coordinate if there is sufficient central political commitment to the objective and if sufficient resources are provided. Willingness to coordinate with other silos is often short-lived, however (Roberts 2011). Following Mattessich et al. (2001:39), we divide possible interactions into three categories: cooperation, coordination and collaboration (Table 18.1). This division is based on the extent of contact between different organisations. *Cooperation* is defined as an informal relationship without any commonly defined mission, structure or planning. It requires the least amount of contact, involving some form of ad hoc information-sharing or continuous communication on a particular issue. Participating organisations do not necessarily have a common goal and retain their discretion over the extent to which they will cooperate. *Coordination* is a more extensive form of contact which is based on some common goals. Contact may be structured or unstructured, formal or informal, routinised or ad hoc, with no requirement for shared authority or decision-making power. Coordination may involve the commitment of resources in joint or multiple attempts to resolve a problem (O’Leary 2015). *Collaboration* entails the most extensive, structured and routinised contact. It requires an organisational commitment, comprehensive planning and pooled resources and involves continuing coordination. By definition, collaboration is not usually the preferred option of silos seeking to retain jurisdictional monopolies and control over their resources.

It is conceivable that organisational relationships may evolve gradually from cooperation to coordination and then to collaboration. However, in silo-dominated governments, cross-cutting issues are likely to be resolved, if at all, at the cooperation and coordination stages. In Hong Kong, silos do sometimes cooperate and coordinate successfully, but there is little collaboration in Mattessich’s sense of the term. The question is how and why silos engage in cooperation or coordination and with what success.

**Table 18.1: Cooperation, coordination and collaboration: Definitions and characteristics.**

	Definition	Characteristics
Cooperation	An informal relationship without any commonly defined mission, structure or planning.	Information-sharing; sometimes with promises of future closer links. Authority rests with individual organisations.
Coordination	A more formal relationship, with an understanding of a commonly defined mission.	Some planning, division of roles and commitment of resources. Authority still rests with individual organisations.
Collaboration	A mutually beneficial, well-defined and durable relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals.	New structure with full commitment to a common mission. Comprehensive planning and pooled resources. Authority defined by the common structure.

Sources: Adapted from Mattessich et al. (2001:39); O'Flynn (2009).

## Hong Kong's government structure

In 1973, the McKinsey consultants recommended changes for reforming the Hong Kong Government that aimed to resolve the problem of horizontal coordination, but which left the silos system substantially intact. A line was drawn between policy branches (later called bureaus) which would make policy and departments which would implement it (McKinsey and Company 1973). Departments that were likely to need to coordinate were grouped under the same policy branch. In practice, however, they remained hierarchically organised, relatively autonomous from central government and each other and focused on achieving the efficient delivery of goods and services within their exclusive jurisdictions. This structure persisted during and after the change of regime because bureaucratic stability was highly prized by both the British and Chinese governments. Problems of horizontal coordination have consequently been largely similar, in principle if not in form, and have been addressed in similar ways.

The 12 largest departments in the Hong Kong Government (Table 18.2) have remained stable in structure and in proportion to the rest of the civil service. The Housing and Hospital Authorities have been hived off, although the departments remain part of core government. Some public bodies have been created to deal with specific issues (Painter 2012), but the government remains highly centralised. It has always believed that speedy

implementation is better realised through a well-defined hierarchy rather than through semi-autonomous agencies or more collaborative mechanisms. It has never adopted key new public management prescriptions such as the disaggregation of large government departments into smaller, single-purpose organisations or the adoption of flatter structures (Van der Walle and Hammerschmid 2011). On the contrary, the Hong Kong Government takes some pride in its ability to deliver public services efficiently and cost-effectively through different departmental hierarchies.

**Table 18.2: Strength (by staff numbers) of the 12 largest departments in the Hong Kong Government, 2020.**

Department	Strength	%
Hong Kong Police Force	33,245	18.7
Fire services	10,695	6.0
Food and environmental hygiene	10,524	5.9
Leisure and culture services	9,516	5.4
Housing	9,131	5.1
Immigration	8,817	5.0
Customs and excise	7,112	4.0
Correctional services	6,631	3.7
Health	6,526	3.7
Social welfare	6,229	3.5
Education	5,466	3.1
Post office	4,866	2.7
Others	58,898	33.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>177,656</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Civil Service Bureau (2020).

The government has flirted briefly with practices that might promote more coordination, such as outsourcing, but its main reforming efforts have been to try to improve responsiveness (Scott 2010:98–118). In 2000, the then chief secretary for administration, Anson Chan, said that she favoured more ‘joined-up’ government. However, the examples she gave were improvements in service delivery, not more fundamental reform (Chan 2000). In 2012, the then chief secretary for administration, Carrie Lam Yuet-ngor (later Hong Kong’s chief executive), also made ‘joined-up’ government one of her top priorities. She said that ‘the Government tends to be compartmentalised ... different bureaus and departments work in their own silos, so my role is to ensure that [they] act in concert as a joined-up

government' (Civil Service Newsletter 2012). The focus in both cases was the unresponsiveness of the silos to public demands rather than the wider aim of improving horizontal coordination. Generally, administrative practices, including budgetary reforms and extending the functions of existing large departments, have tended to strengthen the silos. Personnel practices favour retaining staff on permanent terms. Most civil servants stay in their departments for their entire careers and are strongly acculturated into the kinds of administrative behaviour that result from working in a hierarchical, self-contained system.

The Hong Kong Government's structure is not designed to aid more extensive horizontal coordination. Hierarchical systems, as Wegrich and Štimac (2014:48) observe, result in 'limited capacity of the centre to process information'. The Hong Kong Government tends to compound this problem. If greater coordination is thought to be required, its common response is often to create a new organisation and then place it under the hierarchical direction of a silo. For example, after the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak, the Centre of Health Protection was established under the Department of Health. Similarly, after concerns about food safety, a Centre for Food Safety was created and placed under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department.

The mistrust of autonomous and specialised agencies has its roots in historical experience and failed experiments with such agencies. Some services were originally delivered by an Urban Services Department which was notionally run by an elected Urban Council. However, the government believed that the council was badly run, corrupt and not sufficiently accountable. From the late 1960s onwards, it sought to dissolve the council, an aim that was eventually achieved in 2000. The post-handover administration did create some new devolved agencies but there were serious management and financial problems in some cases (Director of Audit 2007a, 2007b). Problems of coordination between the Hospital Authority and the Department of Health during the SARS epidemic in 2003, which were exacerbated by the tensions between the powerful medical professionals and civil servants, reinforced the official view that more centralisation was a better option than creating devolved agencies (SARS Expert Committee 2003:103–09).

Aside from the difficulty of ensuring coordination, specialised agencies may not represent a better way of resolving the problem of horizontal coordination. Elston's (2013) study of British executive agencies suggests that the sins of the silos may be replicated in single-purpose, specialised

agencies. Tett (2015:16–17) also notes that behaviour such as failing to share information can be found in different organisational forms. If that is so, then it is not the silo as an organisational form that is the problem but rather the kind of administrative behaviour that may be encouraged within it.

What is evident is that silos are unlikely to disappear. They are embedded in government perceptions of how the public service should be run, valued as a necessary constituent part of institutional stability and seen as an essential means of providing efficient services. If conditions are favourable, as the Hong Kong Government's experience suggests, silos may also be able to coordinate successfully even without the formal structures, comprehensive planning and pooled resources for collaboration. What kinds of conditions are necessary to foster success in horizontal coordination?

## **Coordinating the silos**

Hong Kong has had its fair share of failures arising from a lack of horizontal coordination. Some could well have cost lives, such as in the SARS and COVID-19 epidemics. Others have been costly and potentially dangerous. For example, the construction of two major railway lines and the failure to deal adequately with the problems of seepage in private housing. Still others, such as the maintenance of footpaths near public parks, cleaning up after typhoons and a repaired road that was not opened for 18 years (Yeung 2017), have caused considerable inconvenience to the public. Yet amid the failures, there have also been instances of successful coordination between departments which have resulted in favourable outcomes. Three mechanisms—informal coordination, political direction and remedial policymaking—have helped to overcome some intrinsic problems and to enhance horizontal cooperation and coordination.

### **Informal coordination**

In the Hong Kong Government, although seniority often determines promotion, civil servants' career prospects are generally framed by their performance within a department. Consequently, there is an incentive to ensure that the hierarchy functions effectively and that services are delivered efficiently. But there is very little motivation for civil servants to address problems requiring cross-departmental action and some risk



in doing so because most issues concern resources and jurisdiction. There are, however, two sets of decision-makers—administrative grade officers and professionals—who have more incentive to initiate and engage in coordination with other departments.

The administrative grade is the policymaking elite within the Hong Kong Government. It is composed of about 600 civil servants who serve in 13 policy bureaux and over 30 departments (Civil Service Bureau 2020). They owe their loyalty to the central Hong Kong Government rather than to any bureau or department and are subject to transfer every few years. Members of the grade are selected partly on their expected ability ‘to get things done’ on which their promotions may depend. They are highly paid and, provided they perform, can expect to rise quite rapidly to very senior positions. Apart from their policy formulation role, administrative officers may also coordinate the provision of government services at the district level or act as the officer responsible for developing and implementing joint projects between departments. Departmental officers, by contrast, are not usually transferred outside their departments.

Under colonial rule, the administrative grade had a significant impact in enhancing horizontal coordination, as two historical events illustrate. In the late 1970s, the government decided to build three new towns in the New Territories. Implementation involved coordinating many different government departments and ensuring that the plan did not fall behind schedule (Hayes 2012:100–14). Administrative officers played a critically important bridging role between the silos. They succeeded partly because they had backing from senior officials and partly because they were able to trade favours with other administrative officers to ensure speedy completion of projects. Had there been no horizontal coordination, it is unlikely that the colonial government would have been able to move swiftly enough to complete its public housing and infrastructural projects in the New Territories on time.

Between 1975 and 1980, approximately 200,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in Hong Kong by boat and sought asylum. The influx of refugees was felt in every part of the public service but the government was slow to react to the crisis. It was faced with such problems as incompatible communication systems in the police force and the departments of immigration and customs and excise, preventing officers from talking to each other, and cumbersome and time-consuming protocols for deploying resources. Administrative officers, however, were able to bypass the

protocols because they knew that they had political support for action. They circumvented regular procedures in the expectation that favours would be returned by other administrative officers to help quickly settle the refugees in more humane conditions.

To persuade silos to coordinate, it is often necessary to have mediators willing to engage in action which corresponds with the achievement of wider political objectives. The administrative officers provide some leavening of the departmental disposition to keep new developments in-house. But there are relatively few administrative officers at the mid-to-senior levels of the departments and their influence is consequently limited. It has been further diminished by the introduction of political appointees in the post-handover period. Until 2002, administrative officers could aspire to become policy secretaries, the head of the bureaus. Thereafter, although former administrative officers were often appointed as policy secretaries, they had to resign from the civil service, were appointed on contract, and could be dismissed by the chief executive. In 2008, political appointees were also introduced in the bureaus with the specific intention of taking over the political role of administrative officers. These appointees, however, are specifically prohibited from playing a coordinating role in the civil service. In a fractious political environment, middle-level administrative officers in the departments have less incentive to risk their careers by engaging in horizontal coordination; concentrating on managerial duties within the department is believed to be less risky.

Specialist teams, which are a feature of most large bureaucracies (Serrat 2017:711–16), may fill the void in such situations. In Hong Kong, they are a relatively recent development, representing a change in the composition of the civil service although not its structure. Under the colonial government, the civil service had many employees at the lowest levels but relatively few senior or professional personnel. In 1988, for example, 23 per cent of the civil service, mainly labourers and artisans, were on the Model Scale 1 pay scale (Civil Service Branch 1988); by 2020, only 4 per cent were on the Model Scale 1 pay scale (Civil Service Bureau 2020). The government now has many more middle-level and senior professionals. When multidimensional projects are implemented, professionals are assembled in teams to discuss the issues, plan the approach, complete the task and are then dissolved. The role played by specialist teams helps to mitigate the worst aspects of horizontal coordination in a silo-dominated system. Potential problems that might arise from the lack of formal collaboration can be prevented by informal coordination mechanisms.

## Political direction

Despite the hierarchical system, political decision-making at the top may not always provide enough direction or monitoring of horizontal coordination and implementation (Peters 2015:47). For issues high on the agenda, there may be sufficient political will to ensure coordination; for more enduring policy issues requiring coordination, political attention is likely to be more sporadic; and, for minor issues that fall between the jurisdictional cracks, there may be difficulty in persuading the centre to take action at all. In this section, our principal concern is with unresolved issues that require central direction and monitoring.

In 1973, the McKinsey consultants observed that ‘once a departmental proposal has been approved there is virtually no control over whether implementation is carried out efficiently or on time’. Joint programs required large meetings of senior staff from all departments involved (McKinsey and Company 1973:12, 15). A fundamental assumption of the government has been that an approved policy can be implemented through the hierarchy without much further monitoring. This assumption may be justified if the issue is contained within the silos. Effective vertical coordination through the span of control is often sufficient to ensure that mistakes are detected. Horizontal coordination is an entirely different matter. Here there is very often little commitment from the department. Left to their own devices, silos may well allow projects involving horizontal coordination to wither on the vine. Two examples illustrate the difficulties.

Water seepage is potentially a major problem in Hong Kong where the vast majority of the population live in apartments. The Housing Authority deals with public housing complaints and appears to be reasonably efficient in dealing with them (Legislative Council Panel on Housing 2014). It is in private sector housing where most problems have arisen. Complaints about seepage in those cases rose by 70 per cent from 17,405 in 2007 to 29,617 in 2015 (Director of Audit 2016). Private owners can seek government assistance if their neighbours are not cooperating in solving a seepage problem or the source of the seepage is not clear (Office of the Ombudsman 2008b). Three departments are involved in rectifying problems: the Buildings Department (BD) which supervises contractors employed to detect the source of the seepage; the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) which makes the initial inspection and may issue nuisance notices to uncooperative neighbours; and the Water Supplies Department which deals with leaking pipes.

In 2006, the government created a Joint Office (JO) composed of staff from the BD and the FEHD to handle complaints. However, the number of complaints continued to rise and the ombudsman eventually decided to conduct a direct investigation into the JO. Her report describes the difficult relationship between the departments in the JO:

JO is a loose assortment of BD and FEHD staff in uneasy partnership. Neither BD nor FEHD is in a position to exercise proper authority over all JO staff, or to take full responsibility for JO's performance ... the disjointed organisation is hardly conducive to the two grades ... working together efficiently or communicating effectively and cultivating a mutual bond in service. (Office of the Ombudsman 2008b:9)

There was no acknowledged head of the JO with 'formal authority and clear lines of command over staff secondment and office management' (Office of the Ombudsman 2008b:9). Subsequent investigations revealed that there was friction between the FEHD and BD staff over investigations on seepage and on follow-up measures. In 2016, the Director of Audit observed that there were declining, rather than improving, success rates in determining sources of seepage and resolving problems, that there were anomalies in the exchange of information between departments, and that the JO did not collect information consistently from its 19 district offices (Director of Audit 2016). By June 2020, when the ombudsman conducted yet another direct investigation, the JO had 23,403 outstanding cases of which 8,437 dated from before 2019. The ombudsman concluded that the staff might 'work in silos, lack coordination and lack determination to resolve problems in the absence of a coherent management structure' (Office of the Ombudsman 2020:6).

A second instance of failure of political direction occurred in the Mass Transit Railway Corporation's (MTRC) construction of two railway links. The MTRC is a semi-autonomous corporation, 75.6 per cent owned by the Hong Kong Government. In constructing the links, both of which ran through densely populated areas, the corporation had to deal with numerous government departments, which caused significant delays. Coupled with construction problems, the cost of the first 26-kilometre link between Hong Kong and the Mainland Chinese rail network blew out from an original HKD39.4 billion to HKD84.4 billion, then the most expensive railway line in the world. The cost of the second link, an internal subway connection, increased from an initial estimate of HKD79.8 billion to HKD97.1 billion, surpassing the first link in cost per kilometre.

In 2019, the government appointed a commission of inquiry into the causes of the delayed completion and cost overruns of the second link. The commission found that, while there were many construction problems, the government had to bear some responsibility for the failures because it should have been an 'active participant' rather than a 'passive bystander' (Hartmann and Hansford 2020:200). The commission identified 12 bureaus and departments with which the MTRC had to deal on a one-to-one basis and recommended that there should be a single point of contact instead. It proposed measures which would link data from all parties and reduce wasted or duplicated effort and also supported the development of a more collaborative culture, the creation of a senior leadership forum to oversee major projects, and 'a comprehensive review of the way in which the government monitors and controls major projects' (Hartmann and Hansford 2020:201).

Do centralising measures resolve problems of horizontal coordination? In both the seepage problem and the rail links cases, more central oversight might have identified issues before they deteriorated into costly mistakes. But there is still a need for more effective coordination at the implementation level itself. In highly centralised systems, permitting discretion to deal with immediate problems may not always be granted, resulting in delays as information is transmitted upwards through the hierarchy. As the McKinsey consultants observed, coordination between silos is likely to drift because the political priority of the issue tends to be forgotten. Departments left to themselves usually place issues requiring coordination at the bottom of their agendas. An administrative officer given authority as head of the JO might have resolved differences between departmental personnel, stressed the mission of the office and ensured that vertical coordination with the 19 district offices was improved.

Strengthening horizontal coordination at the implementation level must be accompanied with the authority to act. Where there is clear intent from the central government to pursue a course of action, it can usually persuade or insist that departments work together. But where the issue is not regarded as critically important, political direction is often missing. The heavy emphasis on line implementation needs to be supplemented by improved monitoring of coordination when programs or projects are being implemented. Leaving coordination to the silos alone is likely to founder in a morass of conflicting departmental objectives and regulations.

## Remedial policymaking

It may be difficult for reformers in a central government to question the autonomy of the silos unless they have pressing evidence of defects in implementation. By the time these defects become apparent, however, central policymakers may have moved on to other issues. Hong Kong is fortunate to have effective monitoring agencies in the ombudsman and the director of audit. They provide the kind of information (and ammunition) which may be used to re-examine an issue and thus belatedly strengthen horizontal coordination. We refer to this as remedial policymaking.

In 2001, the Hong Kong Government set up an integrated call centre (ICC) to provide a one-stop shop for enquiries and complaints about government services. Twelve departments joined the scheme which was run by the Efficiency Unit (EU), an agency reporting directly to the chief secretary for administration. Although the ICC was a significant improvement in complaint handling over departmental hotlines, there were still numerous complaints about insufficient follow-up action and the misdirection of calls to departments. In 2003, the ombudsman launched a direct investigation, which revealed tensions between the departments and the call centre. Departments complained that they were being pressured by the EU to join the system and to surrender their departmental hotlines (Office of the Ombudsman 2003:53). The ombudsman recommended that greater attention should be paid to individual departmental requirements and suggested that they be allowed to opt out of the scheme. As the EU pointed out, this would have undermined the whole idea of a one-stop shop (Office of the Ombudsman 2003:viii).

By 2007, complaints about the ICC were increasing and the ombudsman decided to conduct another investigation. Many of her recommendations concerned problems of dealing with 3 million calls per year but there were also observations on interdepartmental relationships and the departments' view of the ICC. One issue was the extent of the service. Although there were now 20 participating departments, six major departments, including the police, were still outside the system. Some departments wanted to join the scheme but the ICC had staffing constraints and could not accommodate them. Departments were also using the ICC as a shield, communicating with each other through the call centre and attempting to shift responsibility in controversial areas such as illegal waste disposal and slope safety (Office of the Ombudsman 2008a).

Over the next decade, the ICC's teething problems were largely resolved. Technology may have smoothed out some of the communication problems. From 2011 onwards, it was possible to download an application to make a complaint and receive a response without making a phone call. Departments also seemed to place more value on the ICC, which provided both initial contact with the public and speedy direction to the means of resolving the problem. By 2015, the ICC was receiving over 4 million enquiries and complaints and covered 22 departments (Efficiency Office 2022). The benefit of revisiting and remedying the kinds of problems which the ICC faced has probably not only made it more efficient but has helped to increase trust between departments and the centre.

Remedial policymaking may also result from the sudden elevation of an issue on the policy agenda. A case of domestic violence, for example, resulted in a political response that changed relationships between the police and the Social Welfare Department and affected the role of five other departments. In April 2004, in Tin Shui Wai, an immigrant mother and her three children were murdered by her husband, who subsequently committed suicide. The mother had sought help from the Social Welfare Department and the tragic outcome might have been attributed to the department's failure to share information. The panel which reviewed the case thought otherwise. It noted that Tin Shui Wai district had the highest rates of spouse abuse, unemployment and concentration of public housing. It looked carefully at the coordinating mechanisms and communication between the Social Welfare Department and other departments in the planning process, finding that the coordinating committee was ineffective (Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services 2004:38). The panel also recommended an improved and more formal referral system and more information-sharing between the Social Welfare Department and the police on domestic violence cases.

Following the Tin Shui Wai incident and the investigative report, domestic violence as an issue moved from departmental cooperation to more formal coordination. The role of departments was more clearly specified and expanded; the government provided additional resources; NGOs conducted research; the panel set up a subcommittee to consider the issue; and the domestic violence ordinance was amended (Lee 2008). The police were reluctant to become involved in domestic violence issues, but they did improve their coordination with the Social Welfare Department, establishing a 24-hour hotline connection to exchange information and advice (Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services 2007). Victims of

domestic violence were given more protection and offences were investigated although there were still claims that the police tended to minimise offences (Leung 2014; Hong Kong Hansard 2017:5234–41)

Despite the criticisms, the reforms were an improvement on past practice. The police gradually adapted their procedures and the item slipped down the policy agenda as cases classified as domestic violence showed slight declines (Hong Kong Hansard 2017:5240, Annex 1). Although coordination improved, domestic violence remains the kind of issue that could spark further controversy. Ideally, proper coordination between departments should be specified from the outset on such issues but that rarely seems to happen in silo-type situations. Remedial policymaking therefore becomes necessary to provide the political direction for a more effective coordinated future approach and to ensure that, when gains are achieved, major systemic problems will not re-emerge.

## Conclusions

Under a silo-dominated system, issues quite often drift into a bureaucratic stand-off between departments. Issues that continue to fester have detrimental consequences for servicing public demands and for the government's image. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong case suggests that silos can engage in effective horizontal coordination if the conditions are right. Three mechanisms to improve horizontal coordination have been identified: encouraging informal coordination, ensuring better monitoring of the implementation of political directives and learning from experience in remedial policymaking situations. If political direction is clear and committed and is followed through with appropriate coordination mechanisms at the implementation level, then positive results can be achieved. In the case of evident failures in horizontal coordination, there may be opportunities for remedial policymaking and the chance to rectify a problem permanently. Although silos often cause governance problems, radical reform to break them down often comes with equally negative consequence for institutional stability and service disruption.

Our study has implications for other silo-dominant administrative systems, particularly in Asia. Whatever measures might be adopted to improve horizontal coordination in such systems, a basic consideration is to retain the virtues of vertical coordination and to ensure that the structure and functions of the silos are consistent with that aim. At the same time, the



increasing complexities of government mean that the prospect of new issues falling between the jurisdictions of silos is very real. Horizontal coordination, for that reason, requires more attention from silo-dominated governments and more innovative ways of dealing with the kinds of administrative problems which it presents.

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