Government is urged to involve more local stakeholders in devising redevelopment plans during an urban renewal strategy review, conducted by Development Bureau in the next few months.

New input of a change in government strategy has been found in the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)’s Kwun Tong Centre project. Dr Issac Ng Ka-chui, one of the non-executive directors of URA said the government incorporated the community’s aspirations into the final design of the Kwun Tong project like making adjustments to the building height and increasing the proportion of green area.

“URA has tried to work more on public consultation like setting up a Kwun Tong office to organise exhibitions, seminars and workshops for the public and there are district advisor committees to collect public’s opinion,” Dr Ng said.

A lecturer from the division of social studies at City University of Hong Kong, Dr Ng said the role of URA to carry out the redevelopment projects has changed since the establishment of Development Bureau (DB) last year. While DB is responsible for formulating the government’s vision on city regenerating policies, URA is the authority to implement the strategy.

“URA is under the supervision of DB, so the government policy or attitude changes towards a more humanistic approach to urban renewal strategy. We need to adjust our ways to do the job,” he said.

Dr Ng said a rethink in strategy had partly been prompted by oppositions drawn from local communities towards certain redevelopment projects like the demolished Wedding Card Street in Wan Chai (Lee Tung Street Project) and Trainers Street in Mong Kok (Sai Yee Street Project).

Dr Ng added more bottom-up approaches would be involved in making urban renewal plans. ‘Reviewing the possibility of more local stakeholders’ involvement in the projects, more choices for the compensation package such as shop for shop, house for house option in future compensation policy,” he said.

However, he said that it was difficult to quantify the influence of public opinion since constraints vary in different redevelopment projects.

In an interview with Varsity, Tommy Yuen Man-chung, deputy secretary at planning and lands branch of the DB spelled out a list of government considerations for redevelopment that would be included in the review. They include: how to engage people during the early stages of planning, preserve the community relations, re-develop the industrial areas, the inter-relationship between town planning and city regeneration, and the format of individual proprietor participation.

Vincent Lai Ting-kwok, assistant secretary at urban renewal of the DB said public consultations were generally conducted in two ways. "Submitting objection to projects before implementation is the legalised way to collect public opinion. Some exhibitions and workshops will also be held to encourage the local residents and shop owners to express their concerns," he said.
However, Mr Lai said the latter approach has not yet been standardised but both the government and URA have been trying to work towards this approach, thus giving more opportunities for the public to voice their opinion.

One of the most common complaints from the affected residents is that re-development projects are destroying the community relations in the area.

“At present, there is no well-rounded strategy to relocate the affected residents except giving them the option of cash compensation or re-housing arrangement provided by the Housing Authority,” Mr Yuen said.

“However, whether the strategies can lead to maintaining the connections within the community cannot be generalised as it still needs to undergo the review,” he said. He gave the example of the 72-74 A Stone Nullah Lane project which is also named as the Blue House project preserved both the buildings and community network since the value of heritage conservation could be recognised and identified easily by the public.

Lee Wai-ying, a professional consultant from the department of geography and resource management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong said preservation must consider the problem of continuity that can preserve an area’s unique characteristics.

“For the Nga Tsin Wai Village project in Wong Tai Sin, it is important to show the vitality of the area after combining the historical and modern elements, such as the proposed conservation village park designed to resurrect the ambience of the village is only a fragmented representation of the village life,” Dr Lee said.

Dr Lee said the blend of new buildings and monument must aim at keeping the village’s spirit alive. “It can be achieved through building design such as using more traditional materials and understated colours,” she said.

“...there is no well-rounded strategy to relocate the affected residents...”

She also said that although the village houses could not be restored, preserving the temple and individual buildings did not equal heritage conservation since the attractions would be scattered.

Dr Lee also mentioned that a small redevelopment project was relatively easier to carry out since both the money and time required for property acquisition were reduced.

“Renewing a small district area can induce private developers to actively purchase surrounding properties for development. Thus, the district needs not rely solely on the government support,” she said.

However, Dr Lee said diversity is a vital element in long-term redevelopment projects so that the district would have a sustainable strength. “Diversity not only in terms of land use but in building form and population distribution,” she said.

She explained that a district should include both residential and commercial buildings, modern shopping malls and open market, thus encouraging people from different social class to live in the same area.

“If an urban renewal strategy lacks diversity in town planning and compensation methods, it cannot satisfy the different needs of affected residents, tenants and shop owners,” she said.