Preserving our rural heritage is an investment in the future
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Until recently, I had never been to paddy rice fields in Hong Kong. To be completely honest, I was a little surprised to learn that farmers are still growing this crop – a staple of the Chinese diet for millennia – in urbanised Hong Kong.

But rice farming is making a comeback in the beautiful, remote 400 year old Hakka village of Lai Chi Wo. These paddy fields were deserted a few decades ago as the villagers had left their ancestral homes to earn a better living elsewhere in the world. Today, green shoots of rice stand in the water. In a few months, the fields at Lai Chi Wo will turn an astonishing golden colour as the harvest nears. More villagers have returned and newcomers have moved in, drawn by the tranquility and simplicity of rural life just outside our fast-paced city.

The revitalisation of Lai Chi Wo demonstrates how much is possible when local residents, academia and the private sector work together to care for Hong Kong’s living past. For me, though, projects like this also make clear why investing in our heritage, environment and community is not a peripheral activity or luxury for a large company: it’s actually fundamental to our place in society.

The concept of corporate sustainability has come a long way in Hong Kong in recent years. But some people still regard it as something “nice to have” and somehow distant from a company’s day-to-day business itself. I disagree completely.

A company like HSBC derives its right to operate from the community around it. We have developed a living, reciprocal relationship with the people of Hong Kong over the last 151 years. Throughout this time, we have been supported by the community and are, in turn,
supported the community. No bank or any other company would last long if it simply sold products and took profits. Business is more than that; it is human and it is often emotional.

To succeed over a long period of time, there has to be a relationship of trust between a company, its customers and the wider community. Trust is built on many foundations, but one of the keystones is confidence that the company you are dealing with is committed to your community for the long term and has priorities beyond immediate gains.

Of course, a company has to invest in its business itself to make this clear. But investing in what we all have in common – our heritage, our environment and our community – is also a powerful way of expressing long term commitment. It signals confidence about the future and a broader outlook than merely focusing on today’s profits. It nurtures trust, which is the foundation of all prosperity.

In this context, corporate sustainability is not just the source of nice photographs for the company website and annual report. It is core to a company’s relationships with its community and therefore its business prospects. This is increasingly widely recognised in Hong Kong, where listed companies will soon be required by Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited to disclose information on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG).

A recent HSBC study also found that investors barely cared about ESG a decade ago. Now the tables are turned. Thirty per cent of professionally managed assets in the world today acknowledge ESG in some way.

As an international financial centre, it makes perfect sense for Hong Kong to respond to investors’ changing expectations and develop a more sustainable financial market that also places a value on what companies do in their communities. There is a clear recognition here, too, that these activities matter to the long term future of a company.

Supporting rural heritage projects in particular can enable companies to establish a very special kind of connection with their customers and communities. Simply put, it shows that a company cares about a shared history and a shared sense of place with the people it depends on and serves.
Rural life in Lai Chi Wo may seem very distant to us in Hong Kong today, but it was typical of communities in the area over hundreds of years. Today, places like this are a rare and vital link to an age before skyscrapers, stock exchanges and smartphones. Whether or not our own ancestors came from villages like this, it is in a sense where Hong Kong came from, and is therefore an important touchstone for all of us who call this place home today. Our heritage is our story, and our story is what binds us together and gives meaning to our community.

You may ask why an old Hakka village and its six hectares of rice paddies and farmland should matter in practical terms today, beyond satisfying our nostalgia for a bygone age. I would argue that we have much to learn from our heritage and our environment that can benefit Hong Kong today.

Traditional farmers lived in harmony with their environment, channeling rivers to irrigate their crops, using manure to fertilise their crops and doing the painstaking work of establishing terraces for rice cultivation on Hong Kong’s hilly ground. It was a harsh life without most of the comforts that we take for granted. I am not for a moment suggesting we should go back to this way of life, but it is equally obvious that our own system has its limitations.

Globalisation and international trade have brought enormous benefits to the world, including Hong Kong. But the rapid growth in prosperity since the Second World War has also created extreme pressure on our environment as we consume and waste more and more. The impact is already being felt in Hong Kong. One of the academics involved with Lai Chi Wo told me that they were having to adapt traditional paddy rice farming methods that had worked for previous generations because Hong Kong’s climate has become warmer and wetter.

A community that reduced pollution by using organic farming methods, effectively recycled waste and made use of natural resources in a sustainable fashion surely holds valuable lessons for us today. I hope the ecological experts and volunteers working at Lai Chi Wo
today will gain new insights into how we can sustain the health of the land and ecosystems while practicing eco-agriculture.

Preserving our rural heritage is especially valuable to us city-dwellers in Hong Kong. Few of us spend any time around farms or rivers. Our food is largely imported and our waste disappears in garbage trucks. As a result of the extraordinary progress of this city since Lai Chi Wo was last a thriving community, we have become isolated from our ecosystem. But although we are often cut off from it, we are still users of one and the same environment. This is something that I was inspired to reflect on when I walked around Lai Chi Wo and I hope others who visit to hike and enjoy the scenery will take the same opportunity.

Demonstrating a commitment to sustaining this environment is another idea that is sometimes considered a luxury compared to a company’s day-to-day business. Like other aspects of corporate sustainability, though, I would argue that it is fundamentally important and good business sense. For any company with a long term vision for the future, taking steps to reduce negative impacts on the environment is totally rational.

In this remote corner of Hong Kong, they are now able to harvest rice twice a year thanks to the collective efforts and devotion of all the programme participants. For companies in Hong Kong, there is another harvest to be reaped by investing in our heritage, environment and communities. This is a real and meaningful way of supporting the future of Hong Kong – and that of all our businesses here.

The four-year ‘Living Water and Community Revitalization Programme’ in Lai Chi Wo aims at achieving sustainability by restoring a village community in Hong Kong. This is the first eco-agriculture and heritage programme in Hong Kong. It involves initiatives that address 13 out of 17 Sustainability Development Goals set out by the United Nations.

The programme is supported by HSBC and led by the HKU Kadoorie Institute (HKU-KI). The Programme Steering Committee includes the Conservancy Association, Produce Green Foundation and the Hong Kong Countryside Foundation.

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