

Foreword

Until recently, when I look back at our public discussion of poverty, I am still disturbed by the persistence of a strong sense of unwillingness to recognize the existence of the problem in Hong Kong. For a long time, it was simply assumed that rapid economic development in the early post-war decades had brought about affluence and, through the trickle-down effect, people from different social classes had been able to benefit from phenomenal economic growth. If poverty was an issue at all, it was largely a consequence of individuals' personal failure – they did not work hard enough to earn their living. Opportunities were abundant and thus there was no excuse for people of not being able to catch up with their peers. The question of poverty has always been denied and, for those who are trapped in poverty, they should take a good look at themselves and reflect upon their own work attitude. Such a perception of poverty is strongly buttressed in government's policy thinking in many areas of its work and in ordinary people's perspective of social welfare. Poverty is an abnormal state of social affairs, an exception rather than a part of the social reality.

A lot has changed since the mid-1990s. First, economic restructuring was no longer considered to be a temporary and transitional social phenomena and its longer term social impacts (from growing flexible employment to the rise of the working poor) were seen as a part of major structural change in Hong Kong's economy. Second, that there existed a significant portion of the working population employed in low-paid jobs was recognized as part of our social reality and these poorly paid employees simply would not disappear by repeating the official rhetoric of Hong Kong being a land of opportunity and upward social mobility. Gradually, it has been recognized that poverty constitutes a part of the so-called deeper contradictions inherent in Hong Kong social and economic development.

The Commission on Poverty was set up in 2005, terminated in 2007, and re-established in 2012. The official Poverty Line was published in 2013, aiming at informing the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region about the poverty situation, facilitating policy formulation and assisting it in assessing policy effectiveness. While these measures are, no doubt, responses to the changing socio-economic environment in Hong Kong and they represent the government's efforts in recognizing the existence of the problem, a lot more would be required in order to ensure that poverty would be more effectively dealt with. In this regard, this book on "Poverty in a Rich Society: The Case of Hong Kong" is an important and original contribution to the reflections of our understanding and analysis of the question of poverty as well as related government policy. This collection of academic papers covers a wide range of issues, such as health and social networks, and a multi-dimensional approach is underlined. Deprivation is critically re-examined and the official policy and measures are discussed and debated from different perspectives. This volume serves the purpose of promoting evidence-based policy analysis and discussion. It is also a good example of how social sciences can inform our understanding of key social issues and assist us in identifying new directions of policy thinking.

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