

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Department of Social Work

SOWK3340

(2018-2019 Term 1)

Term Paper

Policy Analysis on Municipal Solid Waste Charging

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Submission Date: 10<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Topic: **How Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) charging proposed by the Environment Bureau demonstrates food injustice problem in Hong Kong**

1. Introduction

It has been a huge debate on whether the government should implement mandatory charges on Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) for Hong Kong residents, in order to reduce the seriousness of solid waste problem and promote the sustainable waste management in Hong Kong by the HKSAR government. (Environmental Protection Department, 2012) Since 2005, the Environment Bureau has proposed a policy framework of implementing “polluter-pays” principle that creating economic incentives for residents, which is simple but effective and economic tools. (Environmental Protection Department, 2012) Yet in recent years, the government is criticized by Non-Governmental Organizations that the government kept postponing the implementation of the MSW charging as the mandatory charge for residents aimed at relieving the problem of landfills in Hong Kong. (Green Power, 2018) On the other hand, some claimed that MSW charging would not reduce the amount of solid waste as mentioned by the Environment Bureau, but also implies burden for the well-being and economic pressure on grassroots.

The following essay aims at exploring the current problems, the rationale and objectives of the policy, followed by analyzing the effects and implications of the MSW charging policy, based on the public interest and an interview with the social worker from one of the Food Banks in Hong Kong.

*Keywords: Municipal Solid Waste, Food Recovery, Food Bank, Environmental Justice, Food Justice, Redistribution, Janitors, Livelihood of grassroots, Reducing responsibility of state*

2. Objective of MSW charging policy and current situation of solid waste

In 2005, the Environmental Protection Department seen the problem of MSW, while the debate was to find possible locations for the expansion of landfills purposed to cope with the increase in accumulated amount of MSW produced by Hong Kong residents. (Green Power, 2018) On the other hand, rather than continuing the problem of the production of MSW, the government seek alternative to reduce the root cause of the huge amount of waste, which is implementing MSW charges to the public, that is mandatory for modifying the behavior of residents and raise

the public awareness of the necessity of reducing waste at source (源頭減廢). (Green Power, 2018)

In the Policy Address of 2018, the Chief Executive mentioned the amendment bill of MSW charging policy would finally be introduced to the Legislative Council. (HKSAR Government, 2018) As stated in the Hong Kong Blueprint for Sustainable Use of Resources, the direction of government is to reduce the amount of solid waste and prevention for over-consumption. (Environment Bureau, 2013)

The government kept educating the public that every resident should realize their responsibility in reducing Municipal Solid Waste in the Policy Address 2018, the Environment Bureau has also aimed at promoting the participation of the public in accepting the MSW charging. (HKSAR Government, 2018 & Environment Bureau, 2013) Without the support of the public on the implementation of mandatory charging of MSW, the amount of waste and environmental problem could not be solved as the government aimed at promoting behavioral and culture change of residents and the community, to reduce the waste they produce. (HKSAR Government, 2018)

The role of the government is to implement the charging of MSW in pursuit of the objective of reducing 40% of the average amount of solid waste per head. (Environment Bureau, 2013) As stated in their plan of implementing the MSW charging policy, the factor of consideration is the per capita municipal solid waste disposal rate per day and the recovery rate of municipal solid waste. (Legislative Council, 2015) According to the data provided by the Environmental Protection Department, the per capita domestic waste disposal rate has keep declining between the period of 2001 and 2016, while the per capita disposal rate of MSW had first dropped, but rebounded to the level of 2003 in 2016. (Environmental Protection Department, 2017) The focus of the MSW charging was barely on the responsibility of residents and their domestic waste, as the objective of the policy was to reduce MSW and stating the datum of per capita disposal rate of MSW as the highlight of the problem statement. (Environment Bureau, 2013) The implementation of MSW charging seemed to reduce the overall waste amount in Hong Kong and relieve the pressure of landfills. However, the government overlooked the responsibility of commercial sector in reducing waste, as the implicit objective the MSW

charging policy of the government to change the focus of the responsibilities to domestic waste and hence implement MSW charging policy.

In fact, the contribution of commercial and industrial sector to the total amount of solid waste disposed in Hong Kong at landfills in 2016 was not far less than that of domestic waste. With reference to the Hong Kong Waste Treatment and Disposal Statistics, commercial and industrial waste accounts for 26% of the total waste disposed at landfills, while 41% of the total wastes are domestic waste. (Environmental Protection Department, 2017) Furthermore, the quantity of domestic solid waste disposed at landfill has been slightly reduced from 2001 to 2016. (Environmental Protection Department, 2017) On the other hand, there was a double in the amount of solid waste disposed at landfill produced by commercial sector. Hence, the government was intended to raise the problem by diverting the attention of the public to the responsibility of reducing domestic waste, but omitting the responsibility of the commercial sector to reduce their amount of solid waste as well. In this sense, the implementation of MSW charging could not create equal social relations, but shifting the responsibility towards domestic waste.

### 3. Viewing the issue of MSW in a wider perspective

Social policy aims at improving the well-being of people. (Duncan, 2005) In this context, MSW charging aims to reduce the solid waste and ameliorate the living environment of Hong Kong residents. The implementation of MSW charging could also preserve the livability of Hong Kong for our next generation.

In a broader context, the issue of solid waste does not just reflect the problem of consumption behavior that people did not reduce solid waste from the sources, but also injustice in redistribution of usable resources and inadequate government role in supporting the recycle industry.

When it comes to the angle where the government views the problem of solid waste, the government did not focus on how to allocate suitable resources appropriately. Refer to Hong Kong Waste Reduction Website (2016), more than one-third of the solid waste disposed by Hong Kong residents was food waste in 2016. Furthermore, the proportion of commercial food waste in overall food waste has been increased from 2015 to 2016. (Hong Kong Waste

Reduction Website, 2016) In principle, those food waste are reusable and could be collected by the community and redistribute to those in need, which 98% of the food waste and food without defecation would be disposed to landfill, which we are wasting 3,600 tons of food which could originally serve for the grassroots. (Food Grace, 2009 & Chan, 2011) However, the government did not focus on the redistribution of food waste to those in need in order to reduce the amount of solid waste and the contribution of food waste to the pressure of landfills.

Apart from environmental problems caused by the disposal of food waste, social problem is another issue related to MSW. The distribution injustice and unaffordable cost of food also ceiled the quality of life and rights to have better living environment of the poor. (周永新, 2014) The government did not perform its role to facilitate the redistribution of usable resources to reduce the amount of solid waste and the seriousness of food waste problem. But also overlooked the problem of distributive injustice of necessities in Hong Kong.

The cost of commodities in searching for food has been risen continuously, reflected by the Consumer Price Index, the category A in food in October 2018 has been 10% more than the level of September 2015. (Census and Statistics Department, 2018) From 2000 to 2014, the price of vegetable has been doubled, which strongly affects the choice of pursuing a healthy lifestyle for grassroots. (HKSAR Government, 2015) Between, food cost accounts for a half of the overall expenditure of the bottom 25% household in Hong Kong per month, which averagely costs \$3861 each month in 2014-2015 that causing food insecurity for the poor. (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2017) Once food waste could be accurately redistributed to the people in need, the livelihood of the grassroots could be improved by achieving distributive justice in food and also reducing the amount of solid waste. The underlying cause of famine and low quality of life of the grassroots are the low responsibility of the government to redistribute food resources and the initiate tolerance of waste by the Hong Kong government. (Chan, 2011)

After the physiological needs of residents under the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs being fulfilled, the policy could hence raise the issue of educating the public about the environmental problems undermined by the solid waste issue. (Maslow & Lewis, 1987) As a social worker who viewing the policy, promoting the interaction between socio-economic and environmental crises that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth, as well as develop

empowering and sustainable relationship between people and their environment should then be raised through the MSW charging policy. (Dominelli, 2012)

#### 4. Strategy of the MSW charging

Originally, the government bears the role of providing solid waste dumping services for the residents in Hong Kong. Upon the implementation of MSW charging, the government would outsource the responsibility of handling the environment shifting from the state to the society. (Globalization Monitor, 2017) As stated by the government, MSW charging is a type of economic incentive, which implies that motivating residents to produce fewer solid waste to enjoy the reward of paying less penalties as a punitive policy. (HKSAR Press Release, 2018 & 鄧廣良, 1999)

The strategy of the Environment Bureau is strongly affected by the New Right in determining social need and implying social effects of the policy. (Fitzpatrick, 2011)

First, the responsibility of the state reduces, that they expect individual and different households should bear the responsibility to reduce waste, in order to reduce the deterioration of the environment. The government minimized their support in handling the solid waste. However, the strategy of the MSW charging is to stabilize the market and keep the competitiveness of commercial sector to maintain their business due to the government is maintaining low charges for the commercial sector. As a result, the market supremacy keeps in Hong Kong which the individuals should bear the responsibility for the market to pay for the solid waste, although the number of solid waste is inversely related to the increase of solid waste produced by the commercial and industrial sector in Hong Kong. The commercial sector has to actually pay for the solid waste they produced, but the government barely focus on making the discourse on the responsibility of individuals and households. (蘋果日報, 2017/3/21)

For the implementation of MSW charging, there would be 2 types of charging method, with “charging with the volume” and “charging with the bag”. (HKSAR Press Release, 2018) Residents must use the plastic bag distributed and purchased from the government to contain their solid waste, which purposed to measure the volume and amount of solid waste each individuals would dispose every day. (Environment Bureau, 2013) There would be constraint during the implementation of the policy, since not every mansions in Hong Kong are equipped

with complementary waste dispose procedures, i.e. hiring contractor janitors to handle the plastic bags containing solid waste. After the implementation of the MSW charging, frontline cleaning staffs would face dilemma from households and the government, that fear of breaking the law if they still help to collect the solid wastes not using the plastic bags provided by the Environment Bureau. (Globalization Monitor, 2017) On the other hand, if they refused to collect the solid waste dumped without using the plastic bags provided by the government and dumped in undesignated areas, the hygiene problem would be worse. An example demonstrating the working pressure of the janitors could be the modification of the size of street rubbish bin in 2016 by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the size of rubbish bin has been reduced by 51% and solid waste with larger size should not be dumped outside the rubbish bin. However, frontline street cleaner do not have choice and have to clean the illegal solid waste dumping as well. (香港 01, 2016/6/6)

On the other hand, many households living in tenement buildings would dump their solid waste on the street, just next to the rubbish bin since they do not have another choice to handle their wastes produced. Upon the implementation of MSW charging, it is noticeable that whether there would be more residents trying to dump their solid waste on the street in order to save themselves in paying the MSW charge. Under this sense, the working environment and pressure of frontline janitors would be more serious causing by the implementation of MSW charging.

The government has also been introducing the MSW charging without sufficient support, the alternative of solid waste dumping would be recycling of resources. However, the government had not provided sufficient support of the recycling industry to receive the sudden boom of recycle products. Another problem raised would be the lack of role of government in initiating and promoting the recycling industry and behavior of Hong Kong residents. With the privatization of recycling industry, the Hong Kong government just encourage the society to change their behavior but did not support the establishment of recycling industry and turn into the mainstream choice of residents to handle their solid wastes as reusable resources. Refer to Hong Kong Waste Reduction Website (2018), Community Recycling could be an alternative partially supported by the government in encouraging recycling behavior in the community, but the ECF Community Recycling Centres and the Non-governmental Organization's support station of community recycling were still rare, which could not perform the major role of

government in encouraging residents to recycle reusable resources. (Hong Kong Waste Reduction Website, 2018)

The government has been relying on the private sector to remediate public environmental and social problem – Municipal Solid Waste and its effects to our well-being. The Hong Kong government keep the role of source recycling is performed by the private organizations, and making the discourse of the economic efficiency to attract private organization to be interested in recycling industry. (盧日高, 2015) With reference to the International Green Purchasing Network (2006), the Japanese government performed an active role in the establishment of recycling network, and even introducing mandatory recycling other than solid waste charging by public service. This could not just reduce the grey area under the MSW charging policy, but also solving the solid waste in the long term but providing comprehensive alternatives to residents.

#### 5. Effects of MSW charging

In terms of redistribution of status quo, the grassroots would suffer after the implementation of MSW charging since they have fewer choices. For the privileged, they could choose not to modify their behavior and lifestyles that the MSW charging would not be an important factor for them to consider. However, for the grassroots, they might consume cheaper daily necessities but those might account for over-packaging that the waste would be a problem for them to consider. Very likely, the choice of daily life for the grassroots would be changed in order to reduce their monthly expenditure since monetary cost would always affect the life choices of grassroots. (Census and Statistics Department, 2018)

Under the MSW charging, the government would not provide exemption for low income working family and Comprehensive Social Security Assistance recipients. (Environment Bureau, 2013) Under the “polluter pays” principle of MSW charging by the government, the relative cost of the grassroots is higher. The MSW charging would become a tool of oppressing the livelihood of grassroots since they have fewer living choices and their quality of life reduces under such implementation of MSW charging. The MSW charging reflects that solid waste is not just an environmental problem, but also a problem about the injustice and inequality in the distribution of resources and the conditionality of the policy. As a debatable policy, MSW charging should consider its side effects to households with low income to allocate resources

for them equally and avoid their status quo and life choices becoming further fewer. The grassroots are already moderate in their expenditure and choices to satisfy their physiological need, the MSW charging should not decompose the rights of grassroots to have a better choice of life, which is their basic living needs. (Maslow & Lewis, 1987) The government should also not be blaming the responsibility of individuals in reducing solid waste, but considering the structural cause that exploits the life of underprivileged, which are distributive justice and the possibility of reuse and donation of suitable resources. (周永新, 2014) Otherwise, the MSW charging would cause the effect of increasing the seriousness of relative deprivation, that the choices and quality of life of grassroots would be further worsen than the rest of the society. (趙維生、陳錦華、余偉錦, 2010)

An unintended effect of the implementation of MSW charging is the reducing of opportunity of the grassroots. Currently, there are Non-Governmental Organizations that receiving reusable wastes from households and restaurants, that enabling women to involve in the collection of food and food processing. Restaurants would donate the food stated with “Best before” but the condition of food is still acceptable for eating to those food banks, then those food banks would use those donated resources to produce lunch boxes and the grassroots in the community benefits, because they would save the cost of purchasing food. Food for Thought established by the Tin Shui Wai Community Development Network is one of the organization which organized community residents to perform self-sufficient platform for collecting and processing food, which could redistribute suitable resources to the poor and also reduce the seriousness of waste problem. The responsible social worker of the platform, Ms. Leung Wai Yan (Ah Leng) has shared during my interview that those food recycling and redistribution organizations are not exempted from the MSW charging.

Once they receive some defect foods and foods which are not suitable to the stage of processing, they would have to dispose those resources that may bear in the MSW charging as well. With reference to the “A Food Waste & Yard Waste Plan in Hong Kong 2014-2022” published by the Environment Bureau (2014), Hong Kong people threw away about 3,600 tonnes of food waste every day with one-third from food-related commercial and industrial sources including restaurants, which accounts for around 1,100 tonnes in 2011. Ah Leng afraid that upon the implementation of MSW charging, some restaurants would treat food collection platforms as another rubbish collection points since restaurants could free from paying a huge amount of

MSW charging if they “donate” the food waste to Food for Thought. It seems that the users of the food platform would benefit from the sudden increase of food resources. However, Ah Leng shared that they might not be suitable if too many food is donated to the platform since they have insufficient resources to process the food, hence have to waste some food and suffer from the MSW charging if those food collection organizations could not have exception of MSW charging. In the long run, the grassroots also suffer since the food collection organizations might turn down due to the economic pressure caused by the MSW charging.

## 6. Conclusion

The government has reduced their role in protecting the livelihood of grassroots due to the implementation of MSW charging that disempowering the grassroots that having fewer choices of live. The MSW charging has also created the discourse of the responsibility of the individuals in the amount of solid waste in Hong Kong but not focusing on the commercial sector which also contributes to the problem. The solid waste problem is not just an environmental problem but the privatization, resources for recycling and distributive justice. All in all, the government should review the assessed social need and utilize the reusable resource to maintain the quality of life of the underprivileged, as well as promoting the civic awareness of reducing waste, to improve the well-being and the living environment of the society.

(Word count: 3405)

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