

3 ISSUES PER YEAR
STARTING FROM 2016

The China Review

Volume 15

Number 2

Fall 2015

An Interdisciplinary
Journal on
Greater China

Special Issue

Poverty in a Rich Society
—The Case of Hong Kong



Included in the
Social Sciences
Citation Index



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中文大學出版社

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.chineseupress.com
HONG KONG, CHINA

ISSN 1680-2012



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Special Issue

- 1 **Introduction: Poverty in a Rich Society—The Case of Hong Kong**
Maggie Lau (Guest Editor)

Articles

- 9 **My Experience Researching Poverty over the Past 35 Years**
Nelson W. S. Chow
- 23 **Poverty in Hong Kong**
Maggie Lau, Christina Pantazis, David Gordon, Lea Lai and Eileen Sutton
- 59 **Setting the Poverty Line: Policy Implications for Squaring the Welfare Circle in Hong Kong**
Florence Meng-soi Fong and Chack-kie Wong
- 91 **Health Inequality in Hong Kong**
Roger Y. Chung and Samuel Y. S. Wong
- 119 **Enhancing Global Competitiveness and Human Capital Management: Does Education Help Reduce Inequality and Poverty in Hong Kong?**
Ka Ho Mok
- 147 **Is Poverty Eradication Impossible? A Critique on the Misconceptions of the Hong Kong Government**
Hung Wong

Book Reviews

- 171 *Electoral Politics in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Protest, Patronage, and the Media.* By **Stan Hok-Wui Wong**
Shen Yang
- 174 *The Great Wall of Money: Power and Politics in China's International Monetary Relations.* Edited by **Eric Helleiner**
and Jonathan Kirshner
Zhaohui Wang
- 177 *Chinese Politics and International Relations: Innovation and Invention.*
Edited by **Nicola Horsburgh, Astrid Nordin, and Shaun Breslin**
Kai Chen
- 180 *Chidao de wenming (Late Comer to Civilization).* By **Yuan Weishi**
Yang Li

Is Poverty Eradication Impossible? A Critique on the Misconceptions of the Hong Kong Government

Hung Wong

Abstract

The first official poverty line for Hong Kong was announced by the new Commission on Poverty during the Poverty Summit on 28 September 2013. However, Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, stated at the same event that “poverty eradication is impossible.” Based on their misconceptions about poverty, Hong Kong government officials believe that poverty in Hong Kong can only be alleviated but not eradicated. This paper reviews the misconceptions of the government about wealth disparity and poverty, definitions of poverty, and the target of poverty alleviation. Using examples from the United Nations and the United Kingdom, this paper argues that with specific time-bound targets, political will, and the coordinated efforts of society, absolute poverty in Hong Kong can be eradicated, while relative poverty can be reduced as far as possible.

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1. Introduction: Attitude of the Hong Kong Government towards Poverty

Could poverty in Hong Kong be eradicated? Both the colonial government under British rule and the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) adopt a passive and weak role when facing the deteriorating poverty problem. Based on neo-classical ideology, both of them believe that poverty in Hong Kong could only be alleviated but not eradicated.

During the colonial era, the key strategy of the Hong Kong government for dealing with poverty was to ensure social stability by providing income support to the poor households through the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme and to the elderly through Old Age Allowance. After 1997, the HKSAR government has followed the view of the colonial government and considered that the best way to improve the living conditions of the poor households is to provide them with education and job opportunities.

In the year 2000, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa, who is the first Chief Executive (CE) of the HKSAR government, officially admitted that poverty was a serious problem. This was the first time that the government made an official announcement in contemporary Hong Kong. In his 2000 Policy Address, Tung acknowledged that the Asian financial crisis had made an impact on the community, particularly on lower-income families, some of whom had suffered a substantial drop in their income. Tung pledged that he would focus on the plight of low-income families in the coming years.¹

Civil society groups in Hong Kong had continuously advocated the establishment of an inter-departmental commission that would resolve the poverty problem in a coordinated and comprehensive way.² Before his resignation, Tung Chee-hwa finally accepted this suggestion in 2005. He decided to set up a “Commission on Poverty” (CoP), which was to be chaired by the Financial Secretary and composed of government officials, legislative councillors, and representatives from the business sector, civil society, and academics. The first CoP was established in February 2005.

Nevertheless, Mr Donald Tsang’s administration was not devoted to tackling poverty issues. The first CoP failed to propose any macro policies or programmes to address the structural causes of poverty in Hong Kong due to the government perspective on poverty eradication.

For instance, the HKSAR government repeatedly refused the urge from civil society groups to set up a universal pension scheme for elderly people and to review whether or not the level of CSSA was adequate to cover the basic needs of CSSA recipients.

The poverty alleviation strategies and policies proposed by the first CoP were almost similar to those of the colonial government. The CoP only suggested a few short-term, piecemeal, and remedial poverty alleviation policies, namely strengthening poor people's work incentives by introducing a pilot transport support scheme, promoting the development of social enterprises, strengthening the collaboration among different departments in delivering training and employment assistance, and establishing the Child Development Fund.³

The HKSAR government began to admit the seriousness of the poverty problem by establishing the first CoP, but its intention and political will to eradicate poverty in Hong Kong was still lacking. Last but not least, the first CoP had neither provided a concrete definition and measurement of poverty nor proposed any poverty line for Hong Kong. Without an official poverty line, it would be problematic to monitor the progress of poverty alleviation, not to mention the aim of poverty eradication.

Chiu suggested that the poverty alleviation policy initiatives were influenced by the local business sector, which had been enjoying the special protection of the government for a long period.⁴ The HKSAR government even extended this protection from local capital to transnational capital and minimized the role of the government towards poverty alleviation. Furthermore, the policies were constrained by the fiscal principles of low tax and balanced budget as laid down in the Basic Law of Hong Kong. Thus, the government could not implement a more progressive tax system to generate the increased revenue that would be needed to finance various poverty alleviation programmes and projects.

Under such constraints and limitations, the political will of Tsang's administration to alleviate poverty was extremely low. In June 2007, after only two years and four months in operation, the first CoP was dissolved leaving many unfinished agenda items and tasks.

In facing the escalating poverty problem, Mr. Leung Chun-ying, who is the third CE of Hong Kong, took a more dynamic attitude towards the issue than his predecessor Donald Tsang. In 2012, in his election manifesto as CE, Leung declared that solving the poverty problem was one of his top agenda items and that he was committed to

reinstating the CoP. After the election, Leung set up the second CoP in December 2012. After ten months of operation, the second CoP launched the first official poverty line in Hong Kong.

On 28 September 2013, the CoP organized a Poverty Summit to announce the introduction of the first poverty line in Hong Kong. At the summit, Leung Chun-ying stated that poverty alleviation policy should be guided by five principles, the fifth one of which is themed, “poverty eradication is impossible.”⁵

Using these five principles is a strategy to manage the expectations of the public. The Chinese title of the CoP, “Poverty Alleviation Commission” (扶貧委員會 *fupin weiyuanhui*), hints that the fundamental aim of the HKSAR government in setting up the CoP is to “alleviate” but not “eradicate” poverty in Hong Kong. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “alleviate” means “make (suffering, deficiency, or a problem) less severe,” whereas “eradicate” means “destroy completely; put an end to.”

The declaration that poverty cannot be eradicated not only demonstrates a political tactic of the Hong Kong government, but also reveals the government officials’ misconceptions about poverty. First, the government muddles up the concept of wealth disparity and poverty. Second, they rigidly adopt a single definition of poverty while rejecting the two-tier definition of poverty. Third, they merely employ an income-based poverty line to distinguish the poor from the non-poor but do not adopt the concept of deprivation to measure social disadvantages faced by the poor. Fourth, they do not set up clear targets for poverty eradication or reduction. An elaboration and discussion of these misconceptions will be made in the following sections.

2. The First Misconception: Wealth Disparity and Poverty

In addition to asserting the five principles of his poverty alleviation policy, at the first Poverty Summit on 28 September 2013 Leung also announced that “wealth disparity between different classes, which is a relative problem, is an unavoidable fact. Complete eradication of wealth disparity or even poverty is impossible and should not be our policy objective.”⁶

Leung’s statement above muddles up the concepts of “wealth disparity” and “poverty.” “Wealth disparity” and “poverty” are two distinct concepts in the social policy field. “Wealth disparity” or “wealth

inequality” can be described as the unequal distribution of assets within a population.⁷ Serious social implications of wealth inequality include increased health and law-and-order issues, and, in extreme cases, will lead to disorder and revolution.⁸ Poverty, however, is the reflection of a situation wherein people lack the resources required to meet their basic needs. Poverty can be identified by comparing the income received with a threshold (or poverty line) that reflects a judgment on how much is required to meet existing needs, or by observing the commodities obtained by people given their available resources compared with the existing views on its consistency with an acceptable standard of living.⁹

Civil society groups in Hong Kong believe that the aims of poverty eradication policy should be the elimination of the poverty phenomenon or the unacceptable standards of living of poor people, but not the elimination of “wealth disparity.” Civil society groups have never advocated for an equal share of wealth or assets among citizens to eliminate “wealth disparity.” On the contrary, they have been advocating the eradication of poverty only.

After the Poverty Summit, Legislative Councillor Fernando Cheung criticized Leung for not declaring a war on poverty. Mrs. Carrie Lam, Chief Secretary (CS) for Administration and the Chairperson of the second CoP, defended Leung’s stand. Lam claimed that, “I believe it is difficult to get rid of poverty completely. There’s no society that can claim to have absolutely no poverty problems.”¹⁰ Carrie Lam’s claim vividly demonstrated that “poverty eradication is impossible” was not only Leung’s personal statement, but rather a general belief held by senior government officials.

The primary motive of the government for declaring that “poverty eradication is impossible” was political. First, it was an open response to the business sector’s claims about the rise of welfarism in Hong Kong. Second, it was a tactic to manage the over-optimistic expectations of citizens regarding the outcomes of poverty alleviation policies.

Since becoming the CE, Leung Chun-ying has been criticized by the business sector for his tendency towards “welfarism.” To counteract such criticism, Leung delivered the following speech, “In my election manifesto, I stressed the wealthy development of the whole society. All citizens should get protection for their basic living, but what I said is not ‘social welfarism’ or ‘welfarism’. The reliance of citizens on government welfare is not an effective way of solving their problems; citizens should rely on themselves to handle poverty fundamentally.”¹¹ After the

Poverty Summit, Carrie Lam reiterated that welfarism and high taxation were not suitable for Hong Kong.¹²

The assertions made by Leung Chun-ying and Carrie Lam affirmed that the HKSAR government would maintain the current taxation system and the “small government and big society” ideology. Thus, the anti-poverty policies are only “alleviation” in nature with limited budgets and resources. The action of the CoP would lead to neither social reform nor a drastic social change like the War on Poverty. In other words, the anti-poverty policies were short-term, piecemeal and distant from the ideal of the complete “eradication” of poverty.

According to neo-classical ideology, the government believes that wealth disparity is a necessary evil, a part of social reality, and a kind of hardship that can motivate the poor to work hard. This neo-classical ideology could be traced back to the governance philosophy of the colonial government. Chris Patten, the last colonial governor of Hong Kong, expressed in his final Policy Address in 1996 that, “quite deliberately, our welfare system does not exist to iron out inequalities. It does not exist to redistribute income.”¹³

China resumed its sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997. Colonial rule ended, but this colonial neo-classical ideology did not end concomitantly. In his Policy Address in 2000, the first CE, Tung Chee-wah, stated that, “unfortunately, the wealth gap is an inevitable phenomenon in the course of economic development. It is not unique to Hong Kong.” Tung also emphasized the safety net function of social policy “for those who have suffered setbacks, they should be given further opportunities to succeed.”¹⁴ He claimed that, “the social security system we have put in place serves to ensure that the poor can meet their basic needs. It is, however, difficult to narrow the wealth gap in the short term.”¹⁵ However, in the same address, Tung admitted that, “such a social policy, which stresses good will and equal opportunities as its fundamental values, is complementary to the laissez-faire economic policy we follow.”¹⁶ This clearly illustrates that even after Hong Kong has entered the post-colonial period, the dominant governance philosophy is still liberalism and laissez-faire.

All in all, the HKSAR government fails to distinguish between the concepts of wealth disparity and poverty. On many occasions, government officials (as in the case of Leung Chun-ying’s speech at the Poverty Summit) intentionally substituted the concept of “wealth disparity” for “poverty” or vice versa while making their claims. Owing

to their neo-classical ideology, these government officials believe that wealth disparity is an inevitable or even desirable social phenomenon for the economic development of a capitalist society. Following this line of thought, wealth disparity cannot be and should not be eradicated. This assertion is then transferred to the concept of poverty and its eradication. Therefore, by muddling up the two distinct concepts of “poverty” and “wealth disparity,” government officials regard the two distinct ideals of the “eradication of poverty” and the “eradication of wealth disparity” as the same thing.

3. The Second Misconception: A Single Definition vs. The Two-Tier Definition of Poverty

a. Relative Poverty vs. Absolute Poverty

Poverty is such a complicated social phenomenon that the social disadvantages faced by the poor should be understood and defined in multiple dimensions. The HKSAR government’s second misconception about poverty lies in the definition of poverty and the poverty line. The second CoP adopts a single definition of poverty and defines poverty together with “relative poverty.” Therefore, by claiming that “eradication of poverty is impossible,” Leung Chun-ying and Carrie Lam are actually proposing that “eradication of (relative) poverty is impossible.” In the following discussion, points will be made on the differences between a single definition and a two-tier definition of poverty.

The second CoP adopts the concept of relative poverty in defining the first official poverty line of Hong Kong, which is set at 50 per cent of the median household income by household size. Household income, which is defined as the household income before policy intervention (i.e. removing the impact of taxation and cash transfer), is used as the basis for measurement.¹⁷

Accordingly, the poverty situation in Hong Kong in 2012 was characterized by 541,000 poor households or 1,312,000 persons (19.6 per cent of the population) before policy intervention. After cash transfers from the social security schemes, the number of poor households and persons decreased to 403,000 and 1,018,000 persons (15.2 per cent of the population), respectively.¹⁸

Why did the CoP prefer the term “relative poverty” rather than “absolute poverty” in defining the poverty line? During the Poverty Summit

in 2013, Carrie Lam explained the four underlying reasons for choosing the “relative poverty” approach. First, unlike the concept of “minimum subsistence” or “basic needs,” the relative poverty approach would be more consistent with the level of economic development of Hong Kong and the principle of enabling all strata to share the fruits of economic development. Second, the same approach was adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), which would enable international comparisons. Third, this approach was used by NGOs, such as the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) and Oxfam Hong Kong, so it would gain high recognition in the community. Fourth, the data were obtained from the monthly General Household Survey, which would be in line with the principle of cost-effectiveness.¹⁹

According to the *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012*, the HKSAR government reported the different views of members of the CoP and claimed that, “most views supported adopting the concept of relative poverty as it is simpler and easier to understand...However, some considered it necessary to set a ‘protection line for basic living’ for Hong Kong based on an absolute poverty concept so as to identify individuals living in severe poverty, i.e. failing to maintain a subsistence living or meet basic needs. As a first step, the CoP considered it appropriate to set a relative poverty line.”²⁰

b. Single Poverty Line vs. Multiple Poverty Lines

Hung Wong, author of this article, who had been one of the members of the Social Security and Retirement Protection Task Force of the second CoP, proposed setting up a “protection line for basic living.” Based on the budget standards approach, this protection line for basic living would list the necessity goods and services for a basic standard of living for a household in Hong Kong.²¹ The income or expenditure needed for a household to meet its basic needs can then be calculated.

However, this suggestion was rejected by the government on the grounds that “it would be difficult to form a broad consensus if only those living below the minimum subsistence level are regarded as poor.”²² Another reason suggested by the government was that income data (for defining relative poverty) could be obtained from the monthly General Household Survey whereas the expenditure data (for defining absolute poverty with the budget standards approach) could only be collected once in a five-year period.²³

Selecting the “relative poverty approach” to define a poverty line is not a problem itself, but the HKSAR government’s decision to adopt and stick to a single definition of poverty with the “relative poverty approach” is problematic. My own suggestion is to adopt a two-tier definition of poverty using both the “absolute poverty approach” and the “relative poverty approach” and to set up multiple poverty lines targeting different policy objectives consequentially. In essence, adopting a two-tier definition of poverty is a common practice in other countries and by international agencies.

In 1995, an international agreement to recommend a two-tier measure of “absolute” and “overall” poverty was reached at the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development by the United Nations (UN) in the hope that it could be adopted by different countries. Even countries where absolute poverty no longer existed found it easier to accept an international two-tier approach.²⁴ According to the same World Summit, absolute poverty is defined in terms of “severe deprivation of basic human needs including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.”²⁵ On the other hand, overall poverty is defined as “including not just lack of access to basics but also lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social, and cultural life.”²⁶ This two-tier approach to defining poverty is commonly understood as the UN definitions of poverty.

The HKSAR government does not follow this two-tier approach to defining the poverty line. Rather, they follow the OECD’s approach. To compare the poverty situations in different countries, the OECD introduced the concept of “relative income poverty,” which is measured by a poverty rate and a poverty gap. “The poverty rate is the ratio of the number of people who fall below the poverty line and the total population; the poverty line here is taken as half the median household income,”²⁷ which is referred to as the international poverty line and is known as relative poverty.

However, the OECD’s approach to defining poverty is criticised for being “not scientifically based.”²⁸ In their research report “Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain,” Gordon et al. elaborated that the UN definitions of poverty “relate not just to how much money people have, but to whether it is enough for them to maintain a minimum acceptable way of life.”²⁹ They argued that “cash income is a key factor, but is not the only indicator of people’s access to goods and services. For example,

possession of different kinds of assets is equivalent to an additional income; by adding to people's resources, it raises their standard of living and their access to goods and services."³⁰

The standard of living could be measured in two ways. The first approach is by measuring consumption expenditure (as in the budget standards approach)³¹ while the second is by using deprivation indices, which is based on items of which people are deprived because they could not afford them. Gordon et al. advocated the measurement of poverty in terms of "deprivation" of goods, services, and activities, which would be defined by the majority of population as the necessities of a modern life.³²

c. The Level of CSSA as a Normative Poverty Line

The colonial government of Hong Kong had never defined a poverty line. However, by setting up the CSSA scheme, formerly known as the Public Assistance (PA) scheme, it used the concept of absolute poverty to define poverty indirectly. The CSSA Scheme, which was first established in 1971 as the PA scheme and has been known by its current title since its name was changed in 1993, is the major income support scheme in Hong Kong. It provides a safety net for vulnerable people living in absolute poverty. Families who receive CSSA are required to pass stringent income and asset tests. Supposedly, under this safety net, poor people would be able to sustain their daily living.

The normative objective of establishing a poverty line is to set up a socially recognized basic living standard. The government should have the "base-line responsibility" for uplifting the living standard of its citizens who live below the basic living standard. As quoted from the official website of the Social Welfare Department of the HKSAR government about the CSSA, "the CSSA Scheme provides a safety net for those who cannot support themselves financially. It is designed to bring their income up to a prescribed level to meet their basic needs." The above-mentioned policy objectives of the CSSA scheme clearly demonstrate that the government is held responsible for fulfilling the basic needs of CSSA recipients. To the author, it implies the government's responsibility to eradicate absolute poverty in society. In this regard, the level of CSSA protection could be looked upon as a normative poverty line.

A logical follow up question is whether or not the level of the CSSA is adequate for the basic living of the poor households in Hong Kong.

The only official research that addressed the adequacy of the CSSA level based on the “basic needs approach” was conducted by the government in 1996. As a result of this research, standard rates for able-bodied adults and children were increased. No similar research on this issue has been conducted by the government since then.

Using the budget standards approach, Hung Wong was commissioned by the HKCSS in 2004 to examine whether the level of CSSA was adequate or not. This research reported that the level of CSSA could not meet the basic needs of families living in Hong Kong.³³ Moreover, according to a survey conducted by the HKCSS in 2008, 55.8% of food assistance scheme users were CSSA recipients.³⁴ It also found that more than 23 food assistance schemes have been established in Hong Kong in the past ten years.³⁵ These observations show that the CSSA protection level was not high enough to meet the basic needs of some CSSA recipients.

In sum, whether or not the CSSA level, being the de-facto normative poverty line, is adequate for meeting the basic needs of the poor households is questionable. Worse still, by setting the poverty line with the relative poverty approach in 2013, the HKSAR government has hidden the seriousness of the poverty problem in Hong Kong.

The CoP adopts the monthly household income as the basis for measurement to define the poverty line. Poverty thresholds are set at 50% of the median monthly household incomes of different sized households: one-person, two-person, three-person, four-person, five-person, as well as six and more persons. The CoP does not adopt any equivalence scale, so in calculating the poverty rate and poverty gap, there are six poverty thresholds in Hong Kong corresponding to six different household sizes. The six poverty thresholds in 2012 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Poverty Thresholds for 2012 in Accordance with Household Size

Household size	Poverty line
One-person households	HK\$3,600
Two-person households	HK\$7,700
Three-person households	HK\$11,500
Four-person households	HK\$14,300
Five-person households	HK\$14,800
Households with six persons or more	HK\$15,800

Source: Adapted from the Government of the HKSAR, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012* (Hong Kong: Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2013) p. 4, Figure 2.1.

Table 2: Comparison between the Poverty Line and the Average CSSA Payment by Household Size in 2012

	1-person	2-person	3-person	4-person	5-person	6-person ⁺
Average CSSA Payment	HK\$4,500	HK\$7,200	HK\$9,400	HK\$11,200	HK\$13,000	HK\$16,000
Poverty Line: 50% of the median household income	HK\$3,600	HK\$7,700	HK\$11,500	HK\$14,300	HK\$14,800	HK\$15,800

Source: Adapted from a presentation by Carrie Lam at the Poverty Summit on 28 September 2013.

Table 2 shows the discrepancy between the poverty thresholds which are based on the relative poverty approach and the CSSA payments which are based on the absolute poverty approach. It demonstrates that the average CSSA payment levels for one-person and six-person households are above the poverty thresholds of the corresponding households. The average CSSA monthly payment for a one-person household in 2012 was HK\$4,500, whereas the poverty threshold for a one-person household was HK\$3,600. In other words, the living standard of a one-person household CSSA recipient, which is based on the absolute poverty approach, is higher than the newly formulated poverty threshold for a one-person household, which is based on the relative poverty approach. This demonstrates that the level at which the relative poverty line is set for a one-person household is extremely low, and even lower than the average CSSA payment set at the subsistence level living standard by the government.

Generally speaking, it is expected that a poverty line based on the relative poverty approach should be higher than the CSSA level based on the absolute poverty approach. However, this is not exactly the same case in Hong Kong. Only the poverty thresholds of two-person, three-person, four-person and five-person households do follow this expectation whereas those of the one-person and six and more person households do not.

The main reason behind such a discrepancy is that many one-person households are single elderly persons who have little or no income. Thus, half of the median income for one-person households is

as low as HK\$3,600, which is not enough for the basic living of a single person in Hong Kong. The underlying problem is that the current formulation of poverty thresholds in Hong Kong does not include any equivalence scale to calculate the impact of the number of household members and family structure on the poverty thresholds.

A high percentage of one-person and two-person households are elderly singles and elderly couples, so these households have fewer members of working age. Thus, the rise in the poverty thresholds of one-person and two-person households would lag behind the rise in the poverty thresholds of those households with more members. Under the current formulation of poverty thresholds for various household sizes, members of small household size families, mainly the elderly, could not enjoy the income increase of households of other sizes. In other words, due to the absence of an equivalence scale, the one-person and two-person households are placed in a disadvantageous position. This finding contradicts the claim of Carrie Lam, who suggests that the benefit of relative poverty is “enabling all strata to share the fruits of economic development.”³⁶

d. Multiple Poverty Lines

The foregoing discussion clearly shows the complexity of the poverty problem and thus it is not desirable to adopt a single definition of poverty. It is also obvious that the calculation of a relative poverty line without using an equivalence scale places some poor households (particularly the one-person and two-person households) in Hong Kong in a disadvantageous position.

The shortcomings of having a single definition of poverty based on the relative poverty approach could easily be solved if the HKSAR government would adopt a more flexible stand by allowing more than one definition of poverty and then more than one poverty line. The author would suggest using the two-tier approach, as proposed by the UN. In brief, under this two-tier definition of poverty, the multiple poverty lines should be composed of the “protection line for basic living” and the relative poverty lines. The “protection line for basic living,” which is formulated by the budget standards approach, is the minimal level of the multiple poverty lines. Following the approach of the EU, the relative poverty lines, which are formulated at 40%, 50% and 60% of the median household incomes, are poverty lines set at

different levels to measure and monitor the situations of the poor households that are in poverty to different extents.

4. The Third Misconception: Lack of Poverty Reduction Targets

a. Hong Kong Government Lacking Overall Goal for Poverty Reduction

During the Poverty Summit in 2013, Carrie Lam summarized the four strategies for poverty alleviation adopted by the CoP after setting up the poverty line. First, she reiterated that employment was the best route out of poverty, so the government should continue to grow the economy and create employment opportunities, particularly for the upward mobility of young people. Second, the new measures for supporting the working poor families should be pro-employment and pro-children. Third, targeted improvements to the CSSA system should be implemented to encourage able-bodied recipients to be self-reliant and to strengthen support for school-aged CSSA recipients. Fourth, groups with special needs could be assisted through cash assistance, support services, and the regularization of effective programmes funded by the Community Care Fund.³⁷

In his 2014 Policy Address, Leung Chun-ying further elaborated that the poverty alleviation policy of the government was to “encourage young people and adults to become self-reliant through employment, while putting in place a reasonable and sustainable social security and welfare system to help those who cannot provide for themselves.”³⁸ To alleviate poverty, the government proposed a concrete cash allowance programme for the “Low-income Working Family” (LIFA), which is granted on a family basis and is tied to employment and working hours to encourage self-reliance. The asset test for the LIFA is set at the same level as that of public rental housing, which was HKD 455,000 for a 4-person household in April 2014. There is a two-tiered income threshold for the LIFA. The first tier is set at 50% of the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income (MMDHI) while the second tier is set at income exceeding 50% of the MMDHI but not higher than 60% of the MMDHI (see Table 3).³⁹

Table 3: Cash Allowance Programme for a “Low-income Working Family” (LIFA)

		Family Basic Allowance		Child Allowance
		Working Hours per month		Each child under the age of 18
Ordinary Family		> 144 hours but ≤ 192 hours	> 192 hours	
Single Family		> 36 hours but ≤ 72 hours	> 72 hours	
First Tier Income Band	< 50% MMDHI	HK\$600	HK\$1,000	HK\$800
Second Tier Income Band	50%—60% MMDHI	HK\$300	HK\$500	

Source: See Note 39.

Although the CoP and the HKSAR government have proposed new initiatives, such as the Low-income Working Family Allowance, they failed to set the overall goal or targets for poverty reduction, not to mention poverty eradication. For instance, Lam was criticized by the councillors at a meeting of the Legislative Council for failing to set a poverty alleviation target. Legislative Councillor Emily Lau commented that “not setting a [poverty alleviation] target out of fear of not being able to reach it...is not a good reason.” Legislative Councillor Lee Cheuk-yan asked the following question: “How do we monitor the government when there is no target?”⁴⁰

In response to the criticisms of the Legislative Councillors, Carrie Lam answered that, “most people understood the administration’s commitment to dealing with poverty, but that setting a target was not practical as government funds needed to be distributed prudently.”⁴¹ On another occasion, Lam explained that “the administration had been reluctant to fix an overall goal of poverty alleviation to ensure a flexible allocation of resources to non-cash benefits.”⁴²

The HKSAR government’s reluctance to set up clear poverty reduction targets was stated repeatedly in senior government officials’ speeches or reports since the launch of the first official poverty line. For instance, the *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012* explicitly stated that the “poverty line should not be linked directly to the means-tested

mechanisms of social assistance schemes.”⁴³ Moreover, as mentioned above, Leung Chun-ying announced that “poverty eradication is impossible.”

The absence of clear targets for poverty reduction is rooted in the government’s belief that poverty could not be eradicated as well as the government’s lack of political will and determination to eliminate poverty. However, the experience of the UN and the UK show that clear time-bound poverty reduction targets, the targets themselves, and the policies that the targets lead to could be the keys to attaining success in eliminating poverty.

The case of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the UN demonstrates that eradication of absolute poverty could be achieved whereas the case of the UK shows that reduction of relative poverty could also be achieved to some extent. The sections below will elaborate how the poverty reduction targets could be achieved in these two cases and propose the reduction targets to be implemented in Hong Kong.

b. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

In September 2000, world leaders adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which built up a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty. They set out a series of time-bound targets to be achieved in 2015 that became known as the MDGs. The eight MDGs, which ranged from halving extreme poverty and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS to providing universal primary education, formed a blueprint of the agreement among the leading development institutions in the world.⁴⁴

Eradicating extreme poverty continues to be one of the main challenges of our time, and is a major concern of the international community... The Millennium Development Goals set timebound targets, by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion—while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability—can be measured...The Goals are ambitious but feasible and, together with the comprehensive United Nations development agenda, set the course for the world’s efforts to alleviate extreme poverty by 2015.⁴⁵

—United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, summarized the three essential characteristics of the UN MDGs. First, it was a joint effort and

concern of the international community. Second, it set time-bound and measureable targets for progress in reducing poverty, hunger, and other development goals. Third, the goals were feasible and set a course for the world to alleviate extreme poverty.

The first goal was to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The sub-goal was to halve the proportion of people whose income was less than US\$1.25 a day between 1990 and 2015.⁴⁶ The target of reducing the extreme poverty rate by half was achieved in 2010, five years ahead of the 2015 deadline. In developing regions, the poverty rate decreased from 47 per cent to 22 per cent between 1990 and 2010; reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty by 700 million.⁴⁷

Clear time-bound targets, which provided the objectives, the blueprint, and the commitment for international and national government bodies and civil society to join hand-in-hand in the poverty eradication campaign, would be the key to the success of the MDG framework. Cutting the rate of extreme poverty in half in 25 years seemed impossible at first. However, it was fully realized in just 20 years. The contributing factors to the success of poverty eradication are the setting up of concrete and time-bound targets as well as effective policies and measures to achieve the target.

c. UK Child Poverty Act

In 1999, Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister of the UK, declared the target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eliminating child poverty by 2020 in the UK. During the first decade of the millennium, the UK government created a new child-targeted assistance, invested in adding early-year intervention to programmes that would help sole parents find a job, offered a wide range of actions that would increase incomes, and provided tailored services to help the families living in poverty.⁴⁸

In 1999, about 340,000 children (26 per cent of all children) were living in relative poverty. To achieve the target of the Child Poverty Act, the number of children living in relative poverty should be lowered to fewer than 170,000. The Child Poverty Action Group reported that “child poverty reduced dramatically between 1998/9-2011/12 when 1.1 million children were lifted out of poverty. This reduction is credited in large part to measures that increased the levels of lone parents working, as well as real and often significant increases in the level of benefits paid to families with children.”⁴⁹

The achievement of the Labour Party in getting 110,000 children

out of relative poverty within 10 years was a significant success for poverty eradication policies and programmes. The initiative was carried on by the movement of civil society to formalize the commitment of a single party into a multi-party agreement as a “Child Poverty Act” that would urge the government to concentrate its resources and attention on eradicating child poverty.

In 2003, the End Child Poverty (ECP) Coalition brought together a wide range of non-governmental bodies committed to eliminating child poverty by 2020. Civil society groups throughout the country delivered services, mobilized client groups, and lobbied decision makers with the aim of ending child poverty. The civil society groups had successfully lobbied the support of different parties. Eventually, Parliament passed the Child Poverty Act in 2010.

The UK Child Poverty Act 2010 set four income-based targets to be met by 2020.⁵⁰

1. Relative poverty. less than 10 per cent of the nation’s children living in relatively low income families. Low income is defined as an equivalized net income below 60 per cent of the UK median.
2. Combined low income and material deprivation. less than 5 per cent of children living in material deprivation and low income families. Low income is defined as an equivalized net income below 70 per cent of the UK median. Material deprivation is defined as going without the goods and services considered necessary to have a decent standard of living.⁵¹
3. Absolute poverty. less than 5 per cent of children living in absolute low income families. Absolute low income is defined as an equivalized net income below 60 per cent of the 2010/11 median income adjusted for price.
4. Persistent poverty. less than 7 per cent children living in relative poverty for a long period; that is for at least three out of the previous four years.

The Act required the British government to publish a strategy outlining its plans to meet these targets and to ensure that no child experiences socio-economic disadvantage.

In October 2014, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCP) published its second State of the Nation 2014 Report.⁵²

The Report claimed that the social recovery needed to get Britain back on the track to abolishing child poverty had not happened. Instead, it predicted that “2020 will not mark the eradication of child poverty.”⁵³ The lesson of the UK shows that other than having clear time-bound targets for poverty reduction, the targets themselves, the political will of the policy makers and the support of the general public are equally important in order to achieve the targets of poverty reduction.

d. Targets for Poverty Reduction: The Future of Hong Kong

Based on the experiences of the UN and the UK, it is suggested that reduction targets for absolute and relative poverty rates as well as those for deprivation for the whole population and different age groups in Hong Kong should be developed. Reduction targets as listed below are proposed for further discussion and consideration:

1. Relative poverty. in the next 10 years, the ratio of the population experiencing relative poverty (having less than 50 per cent of the median household income) after the income transfer from the government should decrease from 19.6 per cent (pre-intervention in 2012) to 10 per cent (after-intervention in 2022). In the next 20 years, the relative poverty rate of the elderly should be decreased from 33.3 per cent (pre-intervention in 2012) to 10 per cent (after-intervention in 2032).
2. Combined low income and material deprivation. in the next 10 years, less than 5 per cent of Hong Kong’s children will live in material deprivation and low income families. Low income is defined as an equivalized net income below 60 per cent of the HK median.
3. Absolute poverty. in the next 10 years, less than 5 per cent of the elderly will live in absolute poverty. Absolute poverty is defined as the expenditure level for meeting the basic needs of the CSSA recipients.

5. Conclusion

Although the HKSAR government set up the second CoP and has launched the first official poverty line, its commitment to eradicating poverty in Hong Kong is still lacking. After setting up the major poverty

line, the CoP is expected to formulate other poverty lines such as the “protection line for basic living” to reconfirm the government’s obligation to eradicate absolute poverty but it has not yet done so. However, to the public’s disappointment, the government insists on its short-term, piecemeal and remedial approach to handle the poverty problem. In this regard, the author would suggest that the government should take a more proactive and committed stand towards poverty eradication by setting time-bound targets and long-term poverty reduction strategies.

Clear time-bound targets for poverty reduction would enable the government to draw on more resources to speed up the implementation of poverty alleviation policies. Long-term poverty reduction strategies should aim at preventing poverty relapse and developing the ability of individuals and families to escape from poverty.

Poverty eradication is not an idealistic dream. This goal has been a solid policy objective for international and national governmental bodies like the UN and the UK. With specific time-bound targets, long-term poverty alleviation strategies, the government having sufficient political will, and the coordinated efforts of society, absolute poverty in Hong Kong can be eradicated while relative poverty can be reduced as far as possible.

Notes:

1. Chee-hwa Tung, *The Policy Address 2000: Serving the Community, Sharing Common Goals* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong SAR Government, 2000).
2. For example, Cheuk-yan Lee of the Confederation of Trade Unions requested the formation of the Commission of Poverty on 11 December 2003 (reported in the Hong Kong Economic Times, 12 December 2003, A38); and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service suggested forming a Commission on Poverty to solve poverty and elderly poverty problems on 26 July 2004 (reported in *Tai Kung Pao*, 27 July 2004, A08).
3. See Commission on Poverty, “Report of the Commission on Poverty” (Hong Kong, Commission on Poverty, 2007).
4. Sammy Chiu, “Local Policy in Global Politics: The Limit of Anti-poverty Policy in Hong Kong,” *Journal of Social Policy and Social Work*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2003), pp. 171–203.
5. The Chinese version of Leung’s speech can be found at <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201309/28/P201309280278.htm>.
6. Ibid.
7. Most authors consider wealth as asset, but some may consider wealth

- includes both assets and income. See Peter Saunders, Hung Wong and Wo Ping Wong, "Deprivation and Poverty in Hong Kong," *Social Policy & Administration*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2014).
8. John Walsh, "Wealth Inequality," in *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*, edited by Mehment A. Odekon (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 1160–1161.
 9. Peter Saunders et al., "Deprivation and Poverty in Hong Kong," pp. 556–575.
 10. *Hong Kong Standard*, 30 September 2013, p. 2.
 11. See Note 5.
 12. See Mary Ma, Editorial of *Hong Kong Standard*, 30 September 2013.
 11. Chris Patten, *Hong Kong: Transition 1996 Policy Address* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1996), para. 78.
 14. See Chee-hwa Tung, *The Policy Address 2000*, para. 48.
 15. *Ibid.*, para. 83.
 16. *Ibid.*, para. 50.
 17. Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012* (Hong Kong: HKSAR Government, 2013), p. 2.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
 19. Carrie Lam, "Setting of the Poverty Line and Analysis of the Poverty Situation," presented at the Poverty Summit on 28 September 2013, http://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/pdf/analysis_eng.pdf.
 20. Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012*, p. 5.
 21. For details of the budget standards approach, see Jonathan Bradshaw, Deborah Michell and Jane Morgan, "Evaluating Adequacy: The Potential of Budget Standards," *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol.16, No. 2 (1987), pp. 161–181.
 22. See Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012*, p. 2.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 24. This document of the World Summit for Social Development can be found at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd/text-version/agreements/poach2.htm>. Discussion about the two-tier concept of poverty can be found at David Gordon, Laura Adelman, Karl Ashworth, Jonathan Bradshaw, Ruth Levitas, Sue Middleton, Christina Pantazis, Demi Patsios, Sarah Payne, Peter Townsend and Julie Williams, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*. (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000), p. 9.
 25. United Nations, *The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action: World Summit for Social Development 6–12 March 1995*, (New York: United Nations Department of Publications, 1995), p. 57.

26. See Gordon et al., *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain*, p. 10.
27. A definition of relative poverty by the OECD can be found in their iLibrary at <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/factbook-2010-en/11/02/02/index.html?itemId=/content/chapter/factbook-2010-89-en>.
28. See Gordon et al., "Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain," p. 8.
29. Ibid., p. 10.
30. Ibid.
31. Budget-standards can be derived from income data other than expenditure data, provided that income is enough to afford the budget. However, as the CSSA income may not be enough to afford the budget, expenditure data were used in determining the budget standards of the CSSA by the Hong Kong Council of Social Services in 1994 and 2006.
32. Ibid.
33. Wong Hung, *Xianggang jiben shenghuo xuyao yanjiu* (Study of Hong Kong Basic Needs) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2005).
34. Information on food assistance provided by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, http://www.hkcss.org.hk/cont_detail.asp?type_id=12&content_id=608#.
35. A list of food assistance schemes was collected by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in March 2013, http://www.poverty.org.hk/sites/default/files/FA_NGOprovi_1303_0.pdf.
36. See Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012*.
37. Ibid.
38. Chun-ying Leung, *2014 Policy Address: Support the Needy, Let Youth Flourish, Unleash Hong Kong's Potential* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR Government, 2014), para. 46.
39. Information summarized from the Administration's Paper on the Low-income Working Family Allowance of the Subcommittee on Poverty of the Legislative Council prepared by the Labour and Welfare Bureau for discussion on 27 May 2014. LC Paper No. CB(2) 1597/13-14(01).
40. *South China Morning Post*, 30 October 2013, p. CITY4.
41. Ibid.
42. *China Daily (HK edition)*, 3 October 2013, p. 2.
43. See Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2012*, p. 11.
44. Information about the eight Millennium Development Goals can be found at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.
45. Extracted from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>.
46. Ibid.
47. The latest achievement of MDGs can be found in United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014* (New York: United Nations, 2014).

48. Information about the ending child poverty campaign in the UK can be found at the website of the Child Poverty Action Group, *Ending Child Poverty by 2010*, <http://www.cpag.org.uk/ending-child-poverty-by-2020>.
49. “Child Poverty Facts and Figures” by the Child Poverty Action Group, <http://www.cpag.org.uk/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>
50. Information about the Child Poverty Act in the UK can be found at the website of the Child Poverty Action Group, *Child Poverty Promise and Child Poverty Act* at <http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/child-poverty-promise-and-child-poverty-act>.
51. The material deprivation (Child items) included: Outdoor space / facilities in which to play safely; Enough bedrooms for every child 10 years or over and of a different gender; Celebrations on special occasions; Leisure equipment such as sports equipment or a bicycle; At least one week’s holiday away from home with family; Hobby or leisure activity; Swimming at least once a month; Have friends round for tea or a snack once a fortnight; Go on school trip at least once a term; and Go to a playgroup at least once a week. See Stephen McKay, *Review of the Child Material Deprivation Items in the Family Resources Survey*, Research Report No 746, pp. 29–30, Appendix B, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214520/rrep746.pdf.
52. Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, *State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain*. (London: Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2014).
53. *Ibid.*, p. v.

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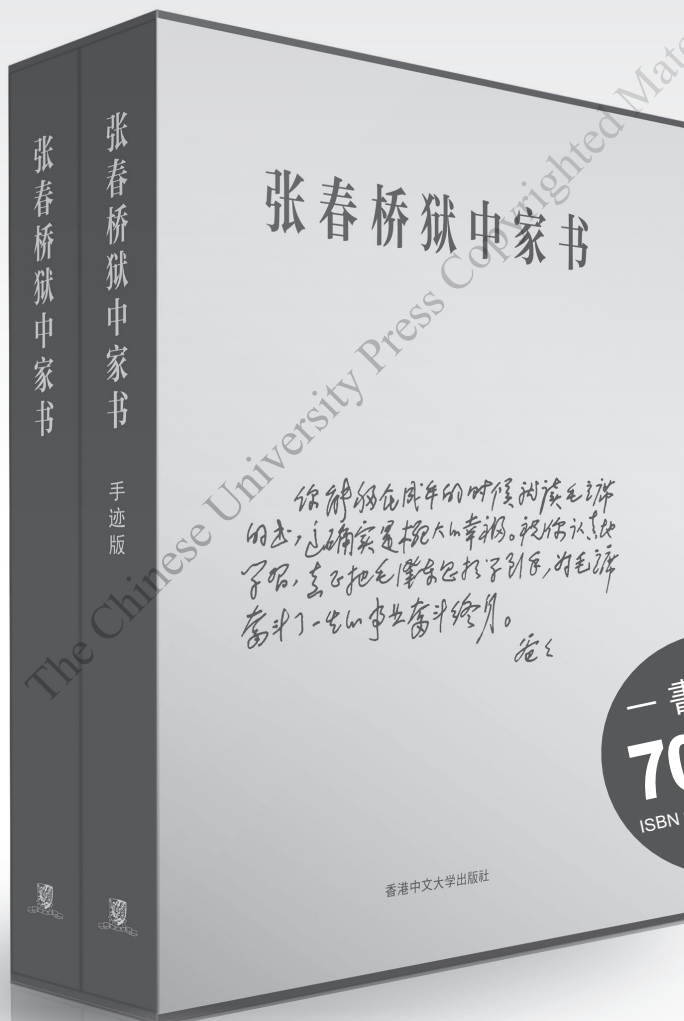
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2 (1997), p. 37.

Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 55–57.

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