

Home comforts

Paul Yip says HK's public flats enhance people's well-being, but the allocation system requires reform

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying renewed his pledge to rebuild the housing ladder and play a more active role through the provision of public housing to tackle soaring property prices and rent, following the veto of the electoral reform proposal. Indeed, the provision of public housing provides an important buffer for low-income families. Renting privately is unaffordable to many, and the prospect of buying is remote at best, given that it would take the average person more than 14 years of saving every cent to afford an average-sized home.

Hong Kong offers an interesting Asian case study, since the city is highly connected to the global economy and shows similar trends to other world cities with regard to housing scarcity and urban inequality. Public rental housing constitutes the largest part of our public housing programme. Hong Kong currently operates the largest public housing system among cities in the capitalist world. More than two million residents live in public rental housing (30 per cent of the population) and nearly 1.4 million (17 per cent) in subsidised home ownership flats.

In its 2013 report, the government stated that support from its provision of subsidies (mainly in the form of public housing) has led to a reduction in the overall poverty rate, from 14.5 per cent to 9.8 per cent. Scholars examining housing here point out that the city's success and position in the global

economy are partly a result of the extensive public housing programme, which contrasts sharply with the laissez-faire policy regime that Hong Kong is often associated with.

Furthermore, when factors such as social fragmentation, the number of elderly in an area and district income levels are taken into consideration, living in public



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There are other benefits, too. First, public housing estates in Hong Kong are usually properly maintained and managed by the Housing Authority. The associations in Western studies between public housing and health disadvantages may be due to the poorer conditions of the estates

themselves. This underlines the importance of not only delivering public housing, but also maintaining and improving the stock – showing that a rethink is needed in the debates on public housing in some Western cities.

Public housing should also be seen as an in-kind benefit that represents a transfer from market-level rents to subsidised rents. This indirectly increases households' disposable income and potentially expands material assets relevant to people's health and well-being. In addition, the Home Ownership Scheme has enabled households to directly accumulate capital within the public housing sector. Those who own their property under the scheme are allowed to resell to those eligible for public housing, or pay the land premium cost and sell on the open market.

Second, the wide presence of public housing in high-quality locations means there is not the same stigma typically associated with public tenants in a Western context. There, housing and location-related stigmas may limit

opportunities in life and could be detrimental to health. But with a significant proportion of the population living in public housing estates, many of which are well connected by public transport, that may not be the case here. Also, if tenants feel secure living in public housing, it may help them cope with social stress.

Third, there is evidence that social cohesion is higher in public housing estates in Hong Kong, which also contrasts with experiences in the West. Our public housing policy gives priority to applicants living with their families. It therefore follows that living in public housing offers possibilities for improved well-being with more family support compared with the low end of the private rental sector. The Housing Authority says there were close to 270,000 applicants on the waiting list in December, suggesting that public housing is, in general, highly desirable here.

Fourth, as in other global cities, access to housing and transport is a crucial determinant for quality of life in Hong Kong, and a stable, strategic public housing programme may be an important

policy mechanism to guarantee higher levels

well-being in the community. It is very unfortunate that the previous administration under Donald Tsang Yam-kuen suspended public housing and the Home Ownership Scheme, as this is one of the major causes of the current under-supply of housing. Public housing constitutes a stepping stone for upward social mobility; unfortunately, that link has been broken in the past decade.

It is important to make these precious commodities available to those who need them most. A recent audit report revealed that the income of some 200,000 households living in public housing was above the median level. Clearly, with 270,000 on the waiting list, there are more needy cases out there. Abuse and misuse of public rental housing is a real concern. The whole tenure system of public rental housing needs to be re-examined.

Providing a decent living space for the hard-working community should be a priority of any responsible government, and no government should survive on income from high land premiums. The electoral campaign got us nowhere and consumed lots of goodwill and resources. Let's now return to the basics.

The government should at least honour its pledge to improve the livelihood of the population. The community at large should also work together to ensure Hong Kong has a better future with an enhanced well-being for all.

Paul Yip is a professor of social work and social administration at the University of Hong Kong

Let's move on: social issues need attention

Alice Mak says what's done is done on the political front, and it's time to work on livelihood matters such as housing, working conditions for women and helping youth to develop

While the 28 legislators who voted down the government's political reform package must be held accountable for their actions, we will be doing Hong Kong a great disservice if we let ourselves continue to be mired in acts of finger-pointing and filibustering.

A better option would be to put aside our political differences and work together on improving our economy and other more pressing social matters. In the past two years, the Federation of Trade Unions has become embroiled in a political stalemate and, as a result, has seen its competitiveness erode. Much to the dismay of the FTU and the general public, labour rights issues have been ignored and livelihood matters put on hold due to frequent filibustering from the opposition. We have always believed that the only way we will be able to make our government listen to the voices of the city's residents and its working class is through universal suffrage. It is indeed a shame that Beijing's proposal, despite having strong backing from the general public, was voted down.

However, we must move on and work for a better Hong Kong. It will require collective wisdom from the government and all political parties to take steps together in mending fences. The pro-establishment camp should do some self-reflection and work together, even closer than before. The opposition should stop sabotaging policies and work accountably, as is expected of them.

In a gesture of "working constructively" with the legislature, the government's establishment would postpone the discussion of establishing the Science and Technology Bureau, and submitted funding requests for 11 projects on improving our economy and livelihood, including subsidies for the elderly, better pay for civil servants, and waiving one month of rent for public housing tenants. But there are more items that require our urgent attention: developing a diversified economy, finding land for more housing, increasing opportunities for our youth to develop, improving working conditions for women, tackling an ageing population, narrowing the wealth gap and



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standards working hours. These are all worthy matters to work on.

Improving women's working conditions is certainly a pressing matter. A lot of Hong Kong people now face what I would call a "triple-high" problem – high rent, high living costs and high education costs for their children. In addition, they also suffer long working hours, which gives women a hard time balancing their working and family lives. This is why the FTU has pushed many times for the government to make it a priority to set a maximum of 44 working hours a week, and overtime compensation at 1½ times the regular salary. Only then will our women – with other family-friendly assistance such as more day-care centres, and more job opportunities – be able to join the workforce without sacrificing their family lives. Incorporating about 520,000 women back into the local workforce would relieve much of the labour shortage pressure facing society today in the tourism, retail and service industries.

Aside from tackling these labour-related matters, we must also pay more attention to our young people. It is obvious that a lot of the city's young people care about political development in Hong Kong, and it is very clear that the government must value their views when implementing future policies. It is a daunting task to solve all these issues at once, but we must endeavour to do so. To that end, increasing young people's social mobility and solving their housing problems would be a good start. More public housing must be built faster, and families making HK\$16,000 to HK\$30,000 a month should get more assistance to buy their own flats.

With all these tasks waiting to be solved, Hong Kong can no longer afford to be stuck in an impasse. While many of us may hold different political views, we must put them aside and work together to build a better Hong Kong. Enough time has been wasted on empty political talk while nothing is done on the social front. It is time for Hong Kong to move on.

Alice Mak Mei-kuen is a legislator for the FTU



Hong Kong must also work hard to tackle the ageing population and narrow the wealth gap. Photo: AFP



Education is crucial to break the cycle of domestic violence

Moses Mui says HK's women should feel safe in their own homes yet the reality is often different: they suffer emotional as well as physical abuse. That needs to change, by fostering respect

For many people, the mention of domestic violence evokes disturbing images of women battered by their drunken husbands. But the abuse doesn't have to be physical: it can be perpetrated emotionally and psychologically through repeated intimidation, belittlement and humiliation, as well as the denial of necessities and resources. This less evident form of harm, inflicted on the spouse or intimate partner, can be equally, if not more, damaging to the mostly female victims and other family members.

In Hong Kong, the official figures reflect only part of the problem. Last year, the police reported 1,669 criminal cases of domestic violence, most of which were physical in nature. But the Social Welfare Department reported 3,917 cases of spousal battering last year, and that doesn't count others involving emotional and psychological abuse. It seems a number of cases have slipped off the radar screen because the victims are afraid of abusers' vengeance or are put off by the "blame the victim" stigma.

Meanwhile, some women do not realise they are suffering emotional abuse. In a patriarchal society such as Hong Kong, the perception that women are

inferior to men is still an accepted norm. Some women – young and old, across economic and educational levels – are resigned to the fact that they will be yelled at or picked on by their husbands, and that they should put up with their partners' demands, however unreasonable they are. Other women have given up any hope of leaving an abusive relationship. In particular, for those whose husbands control the access to money or who have young children, leaving the family doesn't seem a realistic option.

Since domestic abuse rarely happens just once and tends to increase in severity and frequency, we cannot address each violent episode as a standalone occurrence. We have to break the cycle of violence once and for all. To do so, we need to move the discourse into the mainstream. The government needs to put the spotlight on the issue. Resources should be allocated to raise awareness of emotional and psychological abuse through, for example, media campaigns and educational talks in housing estates and community centres. The public should be aware of the warning signs of domestic violence so that victims or those who know them can reach out for help at the first sign of abuse.

Fostering a culture of appreciation for women in society is crucial. More schools should have activities that promote gender equality for children to learn how to acknowledge and respect the strengths and weaknesses of both genders. The business sector can play a part too.

Both traditional and social media need to act responsibly in dealing with domestic violence. The reproduction of images of abuse or the depiction of the incident in an animated video may downplay such violence. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups recently engaged youths to produce a series of microfilms about the dangers of spousal abuse. The project is playing an important advocacy role for secondary school students, who are the target audience.

Emotional and psychological abuse affects women where they are supposed to find the greatest comfort and safety – in their homes. Victims are often diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Children who are raised in abusive homes suffer emotional and psychological trauma and may believe that violence is an effective way to resolve conflicts.

To prevent emotional and psychological abuse of partners or spouses and encourage victims to seek help, let us work together to raise awareness and instill a culture of respect for women.

Moses Mui is chief officer (family and community service) at the Hong Kong Council of Social Service

A tale of two debt defaults

Kamila Lahrichi wonders whether Greece, on the brink of a euro-zone exit, can learn anything from Argentina's saga, which is still playing out

Greece seems to be following in Argentina's footsteps, after it missed its critical debt payment on June 30, shut down its banks and imposed capital controls a day earlier. The South American nation is still battling with its creditors over its 2001 default on a US\$100 billion sovereign debt – the largest in history. It then plunged into crisis. Argentina implemented severe foreign currency controls to tackle haemorrhaging foreign reserves. Today, it is locked out of international financial markets and suffers from 40 per cent inflation.

Similarly, cash-starved Greece had to repay €1.6 billion (HK\$13.8 billion) to the International Monetary Fund by June 30 or default. The euro zone is thus experiencing an existential crisis – the Greek default threatens its membership in the union.

Both Athens and Buenos Aires suffer from the same economic symptoms, namely, an overvalued currency, skyrocketing unemployment rates and unreliable statistics. Yet, Greece could learn from Argentina and step back from the abyss.

First, living beyond one's means is unsustainable. For decades, Argentina turned a blind eye to its public deficit. Creditors are now putting pressure on both nations to cut public spending. Like Argentina, Greece had to adopt austerity measures, laying off tens of thousands of public workers and making concessions on pension spending. These

measures sparked massive protests in both countries.

Another lesson is that denial is counterproductive. Argentina is Latin America's third-largest economy with US\$33 billion in reserves. Although it could repay its debt, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner refuses to play by the rules. Last month, she said her government would not pay back its bondholders – coined "vulture funds" – who did not accept the terms under which the debt was renegotiated.

In addition, the Argentine case shows that turning to new lenders, such as China or Russia, could be an option. Argentina also demonstrates that a country can overcome defaulting on its sovereign debt. From 2003 to 2007, it grew by 8 per cent a year, and unemployment decreased from 20 per cent to 8 per cent.

Even so, there are differences. When Argentina defaulted, its deficit was 3.2 per cent of its gross domestic product; it is 7.8 per cent for Greece. Argentina also boasts the world's second-biggest shale gas reserves. Greece cannot rely on natural resources.

Finally, when Argentina abandoned the one-to-one peg with the dollar in 2002, it did not disrupt people's lives. But quitting the euro would bring Greece an unprecedented recession.

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