CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ACROSS SOCIAL GROUPS

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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Executive Summary

1.1. Social justice has become one of the values that take prominent place in our society during the past decade. In our survey of newspaper articles we noted that the term social justice “公義” was used in 13 newspaper articles in 1998 whereas the figure rose to over 400 in 2010. While people are being more aware of the subject; however, they seem to feel unsatisfied with the status of social justice in the society. A prolonged perception of injustice by the citizens damages the trusts and harmony both between the government and the public and among different social groups. Consequently, it may even affect societal development. In this project we conducted three studies to explore how the general public perceives social justice in Hong Kong.

1.2. Study 1 was a focus group study in which we interviewed the general public. A total of 11 focus groups were conducted between May 2011 and June 2011 with a total of 87 participants. They spanned a wide spectrum of social classes that included (a) property owners, (b) property buyers-to-be, (c) people who have been working for more than ten years after school to capture the post-70s and earlier generation in the work force, (d) people who have been working for fewer than 10 years after school to capture the post-80s for the relatively junior workforce, (e) current college students who represent the post-90s generations, (f) social welfare workers who work closely with under-privileged, (g) elderly people 60 years old or above, (h) disabled people, (i) people living in cubicle apartments or public housing, (j) new immigrants from the mainland, and (k) ethnic minorities. We also conducted a forum with scholars in which we shared with them our preliminary focus group findings in order to get their informed feedback.

1.3. In general, focus group participants were particularly concerned with housing and welfare issues. On housing, participants reported that housing needs of the general public has not been addressed. This is an issue of distributive justice that insufficient public housing and suspension of Home Owners Scheme provide no assistance to low income people who cannot afford to buy private properties.

1.4. On social welfare, participants appreciated the basic safety net provided by the welfare system; however, two lines of injustices that conflict with each other ensued. On the one hand, the under-privileged class desired the Government to increase the current level of assistance that it could provide a living with dignity. On the other hand, some focus group participants reckoned that the current level of subsides were already excessive. These participants were also concerned about the inability of the system to tackle abuses of the welfare system. Participants expected the Government and social workers to rectify procedural injustice in the welfare system.

1.5. Focus group participants appreciated and valued the current status of anti-corruption ethics in Hong Kong. They considered that Hong Kong has been relatively free of rampant brides or corruptions when compared with other countries. This is an aspect of procedural justice that Hong Kong people are proud of and treasure. When looking into the future, participants showed concerns about losing freedom of speech.
1.6. Study 2 was a media analysis in which we content analyzed newspaper articles. We analyzed three newspapers that spanned across the political spectrum, namely Apple Daily (蘋果日報), Ming Pao Daily News (明報) and Wen Wei Po (文匯報). We selected articles in the past 13.5 years from January 1998 to May 2011 in which the keyword “justice” (公義) appeared. We identified a total of 1620 articles through the Wisenews database that were relevant to the discussion of societal issues. Articles with the term “justice” but addressing issues outside of Hong Kong or those of an entertainment nature were excluded. Two people coded each article.

1.7. The five most frequently discussed social issues on newspapers were (a) judiciary issues, (b) political development, (c) resource allocation, (d) basic human rights and (e) freedom. Moreover, procedural justice, compared with distributive justice and interactional justice, has been the most frequently discussed subtype of justice. Whereas activists, the general public and political parties were more concerned about their opinions being taken into consideration, the Government and professionals were more concerned about applying the same principles across people and across time.

1.8. There is also a noticeable time trend that the general public and political parties have increasingly been more vocal on expressing their social justice concerns. On the contrary, professionals show a downward trend in speaking less and less on social justice issues over the years.

1.9. It may be perplexing at first to note that the Government has most frequently been depicted in newspapers as an oppressor of social justice. As found in the focus group study, participants tended to consider that any social issues unresolved were faults of the Government. Therefore, the inefficacy of the Government in addressing social issues may have been perceived as “oppressing” social justice. However, the Government has been blamed less as an oppressor of social justice in recent years. The privileged class; however, has increasingly been taking the blame for oppressing social justice.

1.10. Study 3 was a telephone survey in which we interviewed 1002 Hong Kong residents on 30 closed-ended items that spanned across 12 themes related to social justice, namely (a) wealth gap (貧富差距), (b) housing (住房問題), (c) political system (政制發展), (d) for the good of citizens (為市民謀福利), (e) policy execution (政府施政), (f) welfare (福利政策), (g) medical (醫療政策), (h) employment (就業), (i) Judiciary (法治), (j) education (教育), (k) freedom (自由) and (l) Anti-corruption ethics (廉潔).

1.11. We also asked respondents to rate the overall status of social justice in Hong Kong on a 0-to-10 scale with the item “Overall speaking, if you are going to rate the extent of social justice in Hong Kong on a scale of 0 to 10, how many points would you give?” Results showed that 58% of participants rated Hong Kong as socially just (6 to 10 points), 23% of them rated Hong Kong as unjust (0 to 4 points) and the rest were neutral (5 points) on the issue. The top 3 most socially unjust areas were (a) wealth gap, (b) housing issues and (c) political system; the three most socially just areas were (a) anti-corruption ethics, (b) freedom and (c) education system.
1.12. Not a small percentage of telephone survey respondents (20%) considered the wealth gap acceptable. We can see from focus group results that attitudes towards the poor were ambivalent. While some focus group participants were sympathetic to the plight of the poor that more social welfare should be channeled to the needy in order to provide them with an adequate living, some focus group participants also felt that the needy might not have worked hard enough in order to turn their circumstances around. Taking the mean rating and importance score of wealth gap into consideration, we conclude that the Government should make wealth gap the top-most priority to be addressed as one of the root causes of perception of social injustice.

1.13. Across the results of the three studies, the telephone survey confirmed the focus group findings that anti-corruption ethics and freedom were regarded as the most socially just aspects in Hong Kong. Anti-corruption is essentially an instantiation of procedural justice that brings about an environment that is free from biases. As echoed from media analyses that consistently across years and spokespersons, procedural justice has always been the most prominent aspect of social justice that people care about. Hong Kong has come a long way to be internationally known as a pioneer in anti-corruption, dedicated efforts should be put in to ensure that the achievement in anti-corruption will not slip away.