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Poverty Blights the Hopes of Hong Kong

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Hong Kong is notorious for its income inequality. Unfortunately, the government is loath to get to the root of the wealth gap.

The vast majority of the poor in Hong Kong are less educated and unskilled migrants from mainland China. Devoid of permanent citizenships, they are deprived of public pension, unemployment benefit and, above all, subsidized public housing during their first seven years of residence in Hong Kong. Stigmatized as ill-bred, they are usually frustrated and dejected in job-hunting. Their bitter struggle with the grim reality easily renders their offspring equally uncompetitive and destitute. This inter-generational poverty has greatly widened wealth gap and further complicated the longstanding social rivalry and feud in the city.

Even the life of the permanent citizenships without work is also harrowing in Hong Kong. With the aid of meager public pension, they



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can only afford to **reside in filthy cubicles and even rusty cages.**

Public housing is acutely inadequate. Even though these pensioners file an application for public housing, it takes at least five years to secure a relatively decent flat usually on the outskirts of the city. To await a public flat is a torment of another kind to the underprivileged. To live on the outskirts of the city will make their downtown job-hunting much more hopeless to them.

Worse still, the scrapping of homeowner scheme in 2003 has made the better-off tenants hesitant to jettison their public flats in favour of private properties. This further aggravated the paucity of public housing for the needy.

The housing policy of the government has unreasonably tilted in favour of the wealthy. To buoy the property market, Hong Kong Housing Authority has shied away from building more public houses on Hong Kong island and in Kowloon over the past decade. Instead, their land has been usually auctioned for the building of luxurious residential skyscrapers in the best interest of property tycoons and the rich.

Indifferent to the appalling living conditions among the poor, the government itself has tarnished the image of Hong Kong as one of the most prosperous, glittering and developed cities in Asia. It is high time that Hong Kong Housing Authority resumed the homeowner scheme as well as speeded up the building of public houses in the city. Only when the government put tycoons' interests aside can the disadvantaged no longer live in squalor.

Questions for both Hong Kong Housing Authority and Town Planning Board:



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(1) Has the Hong Kong Housing Authority shied away from building more public house estates in West Kowloon, especially Yau Tsim Mong, over the past decade?

(2) Are Hong Kong Housing Authority planning to build more public estates in West Kowloon? If so, where? Any plan to do it in Yau Tsim Mong?

Questions for Social Welfare Department:

(3) Has Social Welfare Department attempted to tackle the problem of cage dwellings? If so, how?

(4) What is the number of cage dwellings in Hong Kong? What is its number in West Kowloon?

(5) Can the Social Welfare Department come up with a way to help pensioners and the people on low incomes secure decent flats instead of cubicles in Yau Tsim Mong?

I will be deeply grateful if Hong Kong Housing Authority, Town Planning Board, Social Welfare Department can attend the meeting of District Council of 22 April 2010 in respond to my above questions.

CHAN Wai-keung (陳偉強議員)

Yau Tsim Mong District Councillor



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Put tycoons' interests aside so the poor don't live in squalor

Hong Kong is notorious for its income inequality. Unfortunately, the government is reluctant to get to the root of the wealth gap.

The vast majority of the poor in Hong Kong are less educated and unskilled migrants from the mainland.

They cannot get permanent residency, therefore they are not entitled to a public pension or unemployment benefit.

Also, during their first seven years of residency in the city, they do not qualify for public housing.

They face being stigmatised because of their status and efforts to find a job often prove fruitless.

They face a particularly grim reality. Their children do not fare much better and face similar problems finding work.

This inter-generational poverty has led to the gap between rich and poor getting wider. This leads to further complications in the social problems that beset Hong Kong.

Even for permanent residents without work, life in this city can be a harrowing experience.

With their meagre pensions, the best accommodation they can hope for is a filthy cubicle or a cage dwelling. Public housing here is inadequate and the problem is acute.

Pensioners in this plight can file an application for public housing, but it takes at least five years before they are offered a decent place to live and then they will be on the outskirts of the city.

If people are still trying to find work, then such a location is of little help as they have to travel to the urban areas to get a job.

Worse still, the scrapping of the Home Ownership Scheme in 2003 has meant that better-off tenants are hesitant about moving to private flats.

This makes the shortage of public flats even worse.

The government's housing policy favours the wealthier members of society.

Over the past decade, the Hong Kong Housing Authority has shied away from building more public housing on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon in order to help the property market.

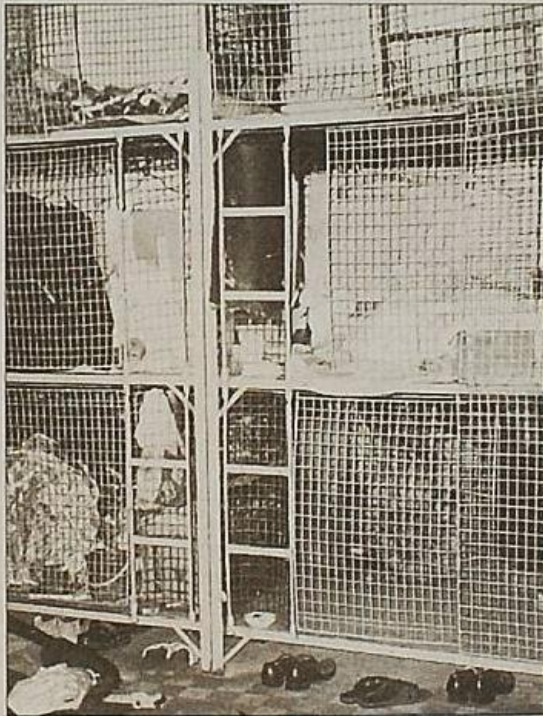
Instead, government land is auctioned off to developers and luxurious residential high-rises are erected. It is the property tycoons who benefit.

Our government appears to be indifferent to the appalling living conditions experienced by people on low incomes.

It has tarnished the image of Hong Kong as one of the most prosperous and developed cities in Asia.

The HOS must be restarted. In addition, the government must commit to building more public housing estates in the city.

Chan Wai-keung, Yau Tsim Mong district councillor



The government appears indifferent to the appalling living conditions of the poor. Photo: SCMP Pictures