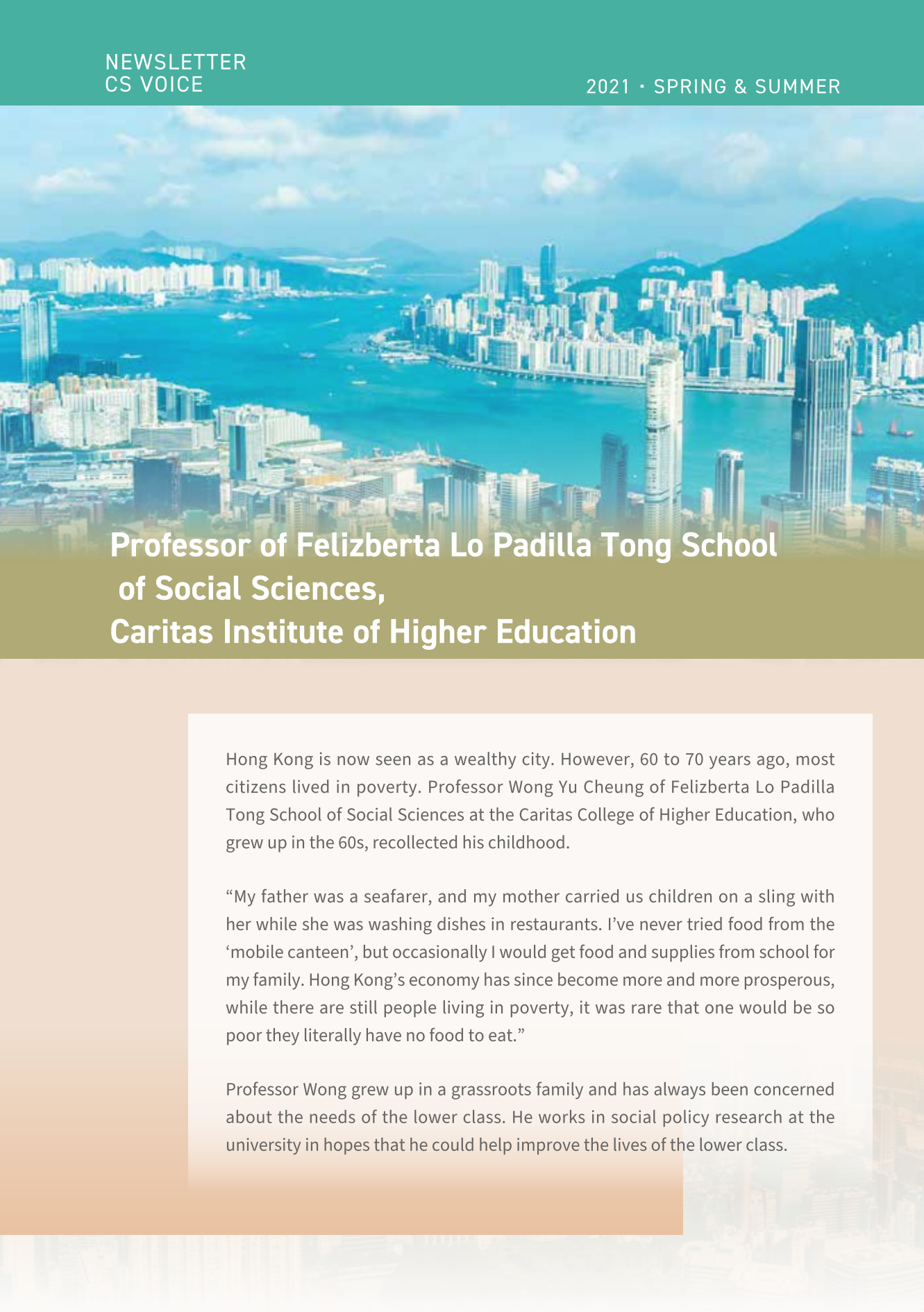


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Is Food Assistance Only for The Food-Less?

An Interview with
Professor Wong Yu Cheung



An aerial photograph of Hong Kong, showing the dense urban landscape with numerous skyscrapers and residential buildings. The city is surrounded by water, with mountains visible in the background under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The image is used as a background for the top half of the newsletter.

Professor of Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education

Hong Kong is now seen as a wealthy city. However, 60 to 70 years ago, most citizens lived in poverty. Professor Wong Yu Cheung of Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences at the Caritas College of Higher Education, who grew up in the 60s, recollected his childhood.

“My father was a seafarer, and my mother carried us children on a sling with her while she was washing dishes in restaurants. I’ve never tried food from the ‘mobile canteen’, but occasionally I would get food and supplies from school for my family. Hong Kong’s economy has since become more and more prosperous, while there are still people living in poverty, it was rare that one would be so poor they literally have no food to eat.”

Professor Wong grew up in a grassroots family and has always been concerned about the needs of the lower class. He works in social policy research at the university in hopes that he could help improve the lives of the lower class.

“Food Insecurity” — An Overlooked Concept

Speaking of food assistance, Professor Wong immediately pointed out an essential but often overlooked concept—“food insecurity”. “It refers to the lack of resources (such as money) affecting the amount of food consumed by a person, or altering one's eating habits. The instability in food sources causes difficulty in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This differs from ‘starvation’.”

“Starvation” refers to hunger or even death due to the lack of food. “Food insecurity” can cause malnutrition and anxiety about not having food to put on the table. “When the government implements social security policies, they envisage different types of assistance for recipients so that they would not run out of food to eat. However, they have not considered the impact of the ‘food insecurity’ on people’s lives.”

Professor Wong said that food expenses account for most grassroots families' already low income. “People would divide one meal into several meals, for fear that they will have no food for the meals to come. Some families would initially worry about not having enough money for food, but come to accept the fact, and even change their eating habits. For example, they might buy food that is lower quality but cheaper, or eat only two meals a day, in order to reduce food expenses.” These are all living examples of people living with food

insecurity; they don’t necessarily come from poor or famine-ravaged countries. Here in Hong Kong, people who worry about putting food on the table every day have always existed.

The Grassroots Population and The Demand for Food Aid

People in Hong Kong lived in poverty and hardship after the Second World War. Fortunately, foreign organisations came to Hong Kong to provide much aid in the 50s and 60s. “Before 1971, Hong Kong did not have welfare programmes that directly distributes money, supporting the needy is a role usually taken up by churches or other voluntary organisations. It wasn’t until the government launched the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) that churches and voluntary organisations let go of their roles.”

Professor Wong said that after the Reform and Opening-up of mainland China in the 70s, factories in Hong Kong started to move northwards. The economy made the shift from being driven by the manufacturing industry to the service industry. The less-educated and lower-skilled workers found it difficult to make a living. This coupled with the lack of employable skills of new immigrants to Hong Kong, caused the number of poor families to surge. “Although some people are helped by

the social security system, many families were not benefited because of the strict requirements for CSSA applications. Most of their income was used to pay rent, and their lives were poverty-stricken.”

In the 80s, economic growth of Hong Kong was starting to stabilise. However, the problem of poverty didn't see much improvement. The financial crises of 1997 and 2008 seriously impacted the local economy, unemployment was at a record high, making the situation even worse for grassroots families. Professor Wong believed that food assistance and other types of subsidy schemes are in great demand due to the high living expenses and the great number of people living in poverty, but the current amount of subsidy is insufficient.

Today, Hong Kong's poor population is nearly 1.5 million. Even after government interventions via welfare policies, there is still a population of 0.6 million living beneath the poverty threshold, who are in need of all kinds of assistance, “be it rent allowances or food assistance, anything to help them alleviate the burdens of daily expenses.”

A year of pandemic has accelerated global economic downturn. The unemployment rate in Hong Kong has risen to a height of 7.2%, people who are above the poverty threshold are also facing great stress.



“Many sports coaches, aestheticians, masseurs, and tour guides are suddenly unemployed. Even if they could seek out jobs in alternative fields, such as working in food delivery, their income is greatly decreased. At the same time, they must continue to pay rent or mortgage, their daily expenses cannot be simply reduced. Moreover, their financial situations were not too bad before the pandemic, or they might have a certain amount of savings, making them ineligible for welfare schemes.” In addition to rent, food is the main expenditure of many families. Therefore, Professor Wong believed that this group of “temporarily poor” people are in desperate need of support.

“Food Assistance” is More Efficient When Implemented by NGOs

At the end of last year, HKCS partnered with fellow organisations to launch the “Jockey Club Food Assistance Programme” to provide transitional assistance to those in need via innovative methods, such as delivering food through online ordering platforms. Professor Wong said that this kind of food assistance programmes implemented by NGOs can fill service gaps, helping the “temporarily poor” through these desperate times.

In terms of implementation, Professor Wong thought that other than greater efficiency, food assistance programmes run by NGOs have other additional benefits. “If the government wants to distribute food, they must first set up a rigorous process for approval, which is very costly. If the approval process is done by NGOs, they can contact people in need through their own network and promptly provide services, making the execution much more efficient.”

Food Assistance VS Monetary Aid

“Food assistance has become a window for social services. Social workers from NGOs contact people in need in the process, through it they can understand more about their emotional or familial situation and whether they would need further assistance, thus promptly refer them to appropriate services.”

Professor Wong added that it is very important for people from different social classes to understand what social welfare entails. “For example most of the middle class who are facing unemployment during the epidemic may feel like social welfare is only for the lower class, having nothing to do with them. But through food assistance programmes, the middle class have a chance to directly experience the need for social welfare and the different organisations involved, they might discover that there are activities or services that suit themselves or their families. They may initially be unwilling to accept the fact that they need aid, as they have never had the need for such help from others, it may feel like pity to them.”

Professor Wong believed that compared to monetary aid, food assistance makes the recipient feels better, and the help is more direct and substantial. It feels like there’s less distance between them and the recipients. People make connections in the process of food delivery, through which they can express care and empathy.

In addition, food assistance creates employment opportunities. “NGOs need to distribute food, and the food needs to be cooked and processed beforehand,” Professor Wong explained.

Is it feasible to replace food delivery with food stamps then? “That’s also feasible. Recipients use ‘food stamps’ to buy food in supermarkets. NGOs don’t have to deal with food storage and other issues, cost is therefore reduced. Moreover, food assistance seems to be less likely to be abused, and public perception for it is better than direct delivery of cash.”

Food assistance indeed has an immediate comforting effect on some low-income families. In recent years, there has been an increase in food assistance programmes, what does that implicate for the overall development of our society?



“For most scholars in social policy, food assistance should not exist. If there is an intact and adequate social security system, such as unemployment aid that can help ensure a certain amount of income for the unemployed for a period of time, there wouldn’t be a need for food assistance. However, there are always people in the society who fall through the gaps of the social welfare system. These people outside the “aid net” have neither CSSA nor housing allowances or other subsidies. They have a heavy financial burden, and food assistance can help reduce their expenses.”

Getting to The Root Cause

A general food assistance programme only lasts for eight weeks, and one has to wait half a year in order to receive food assistance again. Are those in need really helped?

“Food assistance is fundamentally short-term, because long-term assistance should be handled by the social security system from the government’s point of view. However, even if people in need can receive various allowances, their lives are still very difficult. There must be an appraisal process for the levels of CSSA and other allowances to ensure that recipients are able to sustain a reasonable quality of life. If the social security system is not improved, the demand for short-term support such as food assistance will never cease to exist.”

Among the most advanced economies, Hong Kong has the widest disparity between the



rich and the poor. The situation in many developed regions is similar to that of Hong Kong, but with government intervention, the disparity between the rich and the poor has improved a lot. On the contrary, Hong Kong government’s intervention is limited, and the disparity between the rich and the poor is among the highest in the world—the epidemic has further exacerbated the problem.

The poor population in Hong Kong is relatively high, which is mainly related to the issue of rent. For people above the poverty line, their standard of living may not be good either. After all, housing is still a big part of expenditures for many families. If the housing problem is not resolved and the financial burden of the grassroots is not reduced, the need for food assistance will never cease to exist.