

**Perception and Utilization of the CSSA:
a Study on the Views of the Public and the Lower Income
People**

A Joint Research Project

by
Hong Kong Programme
Oxfam Hong Kong

&
Centre for Social Policy Studies
Department of Applied Social Sciences
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Prepared by

Centre for Social Policy Studies
Department of Applied Social Sciences
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

July 2007

Executive Summary

Background of the Study

1. With the joint effort of the the Oxfam, the Hong Kong Programme (OHK) and the Centre for Social Policy Study of the Department of Applied Social Science, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (named the Centre hereafter), the study was designed to assess the public perception on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) and to evaluate this policy intervention adopted by the Government on providing basis assistance for the low income people.
2. The study starts from the belief that “Access to Social Security is a fundamental Social Right” and that it is essential for the society to provide a functional and effective social security net to cushion against contingencies in social living.
3. However, it is always believed that welfare fosters a culture of dependency that go against the social expectation of self-reliance in our society. This has been complicated by the economic downturn in recent years, which boosted up the number of welfare beneficiaries and the public expenditure of welfare. Some argue that it is not financially feasible to sustain the poor through public expenditure and call for more restrictions and mean testing on applicants.
4. It is obvious that the pressure and prejudice, if any, on CSSA recipients, especially with the able-bodied recipients and new migrants, thus undermining its fundamental policy goal of social security.

Objectives

The study is therefore with the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the general perception of the public on CSSA and in particular on Low-income Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA);
2. to explore people’s propensity to utilize CSSA as a remedy to themselves in case hardships occur;
3. to identify the negative stigmas and / or stereotypes, if any, the general public have on CSSA recipients and in particular Low-income CSSA recipients;
4. to explore the perception of those who are unemployed or with low income on CSSA and Low –income CSSA by case interviews or focus group method;
5. to understand how professionals working with low income workers and the unemployed perceive the usefulness, effectiveness, and

limitations of CSSA and Low-income CSSA;

6. to analyze the effectiveness and limitations of CSSA in providing social security protection for those in needs;
7. to recommend measures to improve CSSA arrangement and to supplement the inadequacies of CSSA in assisting the poor and the working poor; and
8. to highlight the direction for overall improvement in social security policy in Hong Kong.

Study Design

5. The study consists of three components complementary to each other:
 - a. A territorial wide telephone survey on general public perception on CSSA.
 - b. In-depth interviews and Group Discussion with low income workers
 - c. Focus Group Discussion session with frontline social workers.

Major Findings

6. 1,026 respondents were interviewed by structured questionnaire through a telephone survey. With the following major findings:
 - a. It is observed in the telephone survey that the public in general are positive to the social security and they realize the social function of CSSA in assisting people in financial needs. The majority of the respondents (80%) thought that CSSA could help Hong Kong citizens who are financial in need. In addition, 79.2% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is a basic right for a citizen to receive financial support from the government, like CSSA when he or she is in need.
 - b. On the other hand, it is worthy to note that 60% of the respondents perceive the CSSA as the last resort to their financial problems and over a third (33.4%) of the respondents said that they would not apply for the benefits even if they or their families were in financial hardships.
 - c. It is more alarming that most of the people who did not intent to apply for CSSA cited “do not want to dependent on the government” (79.5%) as the reason, indicating that a greater part of the respondents saw receiving welfare benefit as a sign of “dependence” and “reliance”. Another one-third (30.5%) of respondents do not want themselves and/or family members to be looked down by other people. This indicates that there are perceivable prejudices against welfare recipients held by the public.

- d. On the other hand, many of the respondents have misinformation on CSSA recipients. For instances, over half of the respondents mistakenly perceive that the unemployed (56.9%) and new migrants (61.3%) constitute the major proportion of the CSSA recipients. However, the fact the “unemployed “cases only represented 12.9% of all total number of cases,. While the cases are the new arrivals, it is only 10.8%, 31,952 of 295,333 cases in the period of August of 2006.
 - e. The survey found that 59.6% of the respondents tended to have an idea the abuse of CSSA was a serious problem.
 - f. Most of the respondents who do not know directly about the CSSA recipients expressed that they got the information from “television” (75%) and the “newspaper” (71%). It seems that the information is mainly sourced from media. *These misinformation and misconception are positively correlated with the exposure to media reports on CSSA* as respondents aware more on CSSA information in media tends to agree more that “most CSSA recipients are new migrants and “the CSSA abuse is serious in Hong Kong”
7. The study team conducted twenty-four individual interviews and a group discussion processes with people either living on low wages, unemployed or who had been applicants or recipients of CSSA. A focus group discussion with professional social workers engaging with low paid workers or working for Intensive Employment Assistant Projects was also arranged. These are some major findings:
- a. Social assistance was perceived by most as the last resort safety net, the propensity to utilize is low and the reasons for using it are always some of the most desperate living situations, for instance, long term unemployment, serious illness and family commitment.
 - b. Even for working poor people held a very conservative and restrictive attitude on CSSA.
 - c. Self-reliance is still a social norm, a social expectation, as well as a personal commitment of most people, as many of the respondents show intention to earn their own living. On the other hand, people felt miserable and despairing to stay at home. A general “dependency culture” and a “reliance attitude” could not be identified among the interviewees.
 - d. It is apparent that the influences of mass media and public discourse on CSSA and related issues had been important in shaping the public image of CSSA. New reports were often quoted as their sources of information. One of the highly-cited reports was the tsunami couple.
 - e. Discrimination, prejudices, stereotypes as well as misconceptions are all widely existing in the community. Even significant portion of poor people themselves hold negative valuations on CSSA and CSSA

recipients. CSSA recipients are frequently referred to as comprising mostly of able-bodied lazy people and new migrants

- f. People without having the need to apply for social assistance will be more easily influenced by hearsay and prejudiced ideas on CSSA recipients.
- g. Most of the interviewees who had used the welfare provision described the application procedure as humiliating and intimidating. Some claimed that their applications were always delayed and mishandled, while others claimed their applications were thwarted and rejected by social security officers with bad manner. Some accused the social security officers for lacking of empathy to the applicants.
- h. Some social workers interviewed complained that some officers tend to insult and threaten the applicants by making unreasonable requests, while others attribute it to the heavy workload of caseworkers.

Recommendations

In summary, the present study confirms that there are widespread prejudice and misconceptions among members of the public on “welfare recipients”. The study also confirmed that the conservative attitude towards social security, compounded with the lack of social consciousness on the basic social right to social protection, have been exerting undue pressure for those in hardship and has undermined the appropriate and proper use of CSSA as a measure for one to transit their hardship and to actualize their social right to social security.

- 8. In light of these, the following recommendations are put forward by the study:

8.1.1 To Prevent Discrimination Against Social Security Recipients

- a. *To Foster a Positive Attitude towards CSSA Recipients*

It is recommended that the government should cultivate and foster a more positive attitude on CSSA instead of accusing those who are being benefited or who should be targeted beneficiaries. The government needs to educate the public on the rights of citizens with genuine need in claiming the welfare provision and let the society know more about the social functions of CSSA.

- b. *To Combat Inappropriate Discrimination on Welfare Recipients*

It is recommended that the government should reformulate its policy, reconsider its strategy, and be more cautious and reasonable in public expression on issues concerning CSSA. The government should step up efforts in increasing the transparency of the CSSA policy by

promoting the policy justifications of the CSSA system and to create proper attitude towards income disparity. On the other hand, the department concerned should *deliver news about CSSA on a more comprehensive manner to ensure relevant information is properly communicated.*

8.1.2 To Promote a Positive Image Among the Public of CSSA Recipients in Media

- c. It is quite apparent that most low-earning CSSA recipients were actually treating low-earning CSSA as a temporary means for escaping from the harsh demand from the labour market. It is necessary to let the public recognise the significance of Low Income CSSA, the government should take positive steps *to confirm the vitality of low income CSSA*, so as to encourage better use of this as a remedy for earning below the subsistent level. *and prevent the misunderstanding*
- d. The media should consider the impacts of their reports in creating negative images of CSSA recipients. *We call for the media to pay careful attention when it comes to reporting news about CSSA recipients. In addition, we call for the media to report relevant news stories in a balanced manner to prevent and reinforce the stereotyping.*

8.1.3 To improve the service delivery of existing system

- e. Results from our findings suggest that the administration and operation of CSSA has turned out to be obstacles for potential service users.
- f. The study team observe that it is fair to infer that the perceptions of CSSA held by the public can not be separated from the default of the social security system itself. The system itself is in a large extent relevant to the way the system be perceived by the public. We recommend the government to reconsider the different components of social security system, for instance, *the Employment Incentive Scheme (IEAP)*

8.1.4 To Review and Reform the Social Security System in Hong Kong

- g. It is obvious that the existing social security system is becoming less and less capable to deal with all kinds of social risks. The system itself is over-reliant on a single mode of public assistance in form of CSSA to cater for all welfare demand. The *government is therefore urged to reposition itself and to formulate proper policies on all these fronts* if it really has an intention to develop a more harmonic society

8.1.5 Proactive Labour Market Interventions

- h.** It is recommended that the government should consider a more balanced approach on public service provision and labour market intervention on the working poor issue, and to make low income CSSA an inalienable right for all. For instance, the government should consider seriously adopting the minimum wage as a regulative measure with the ultimate goal of treating workers fairly, and with an instrumental goal to reduce pressure on public finance.

Conclusion

- 9.** The economic recovery in the last three consecutive years have bought with recorded high economic growth since 1997, while the total number of employed people has also reached the historical peak in Hong Kong. However, it is also apparent that the income disparities are ever expanding, the issues of poverty, low income and working poor are now intermixing together as a complex web of social and economic phenomenon needing immediate social attention as well as actions. From a humanistic point of view, it is intolerable to allow a significant portion of our population staying in that desperate situation for extended period. From a pragmatic perspective, the existence of a consolidated underclass is also by no mean a healthy development of a society as the possibility of social instability and class confrontation would be seeded to upset the long term prosperity of Hong Kong. The above mentioned recommendations are therefore put forward, with the wish that the situation of those less advantaged sector of our society could be eased on one hand, and to maintain a balanced development spur of Hong Kong on the other hand.

--- End ---