

Respect for the right to housing to the grassroots in Hong Kong

Living in Hong Kong is never an easy matter. The high rise of private property price to \$8840 per square feet making the aspiration “owning a home” is never realistic. For the grassroots, owning a flat is a dream which may not be realized in their life. Other than owning a home, the grassroots can either renting an apartment or applying for the public rental housing scheme in order to have a space for home. The latter solution sounds safer as that is the scheme provided by the government instead of the instable private market. In fact, some unjustifiable and frequent changes of housing policy sometimes are pushing the grassroots in the vulnerable state. Here would take the tackling means of “under-occupied” by the government in comparison of Hong Kong and UK as the examples to illustrate how our government does not respect for the right to housing to our grassroots in Hong Kong.

According to the Article 25 of the The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by United Nations: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

Public rental housing seems a stable housing security for the grassroots to enjoy the right to housing in Hong Kong. In fact, a group of tenants – “under-occupied” are suffering from the instability of the frequent change of the “under-occupation” policy by shrinking the under- occupation standards. Policy now only offers one way for the tenants to go – move. Once a tenant is being defined as an “under- occupied”, he/ she is inevitably forced to move within the three choices of small apartments offered. Otherwise, tenancy would be terminated if the tenant does not accept the offer.

Here, we come to a question: is it the only solution to address the issue of “under- occupation”? Obviously not. United Kingdom shares the same issue with us. 10% of tenants who are living in social rental housing are being identified as the “under- occupied” while the proportion in Hong Kong is accounted for only 0.01%. Although both Hong Kong and United Kingdom are facing the same issue, the practices among two places are totally different:

1. The definition of “under- occupation”

Hong Kong	United Kingdom
The area of the flat in relation to the number of tenants in the household	The amount of bedrooms in relation to the number of tenants in the household. The area is not a matter.

2. The measures to address the issue of the “under- occupation”

Hong Kong	United Kingdom
1. Move	1. Reduction of housing benefit/ benefit cap (Bedroom tax) 2. Add members by approval Can be family members/ friends 3. Take a lodger 4. Move
2. Add members by HA approval	
3. Gain exceptional approval from HA	
4. Tenancy termination	

3. Exemption for elderly

Hong Kong	United Kingdom
1. Elderly who are aged 70 or over	1. Elderly who are in pension age: >62
2. People who are aged within 60- 69 would be put as the last consideration	

Unlike Hong Kong, there is no relationship between the area of the flat and number of family members in the household to define under- occupancy in the United Kingdom, but the number of bedrooms. The space required for a person is justified through the Housing Health and Safety Rating System in the United Kingdom instead of nothing in Hong Kong. Psychological concerns such as privacy and social interaction are being emphasized when it comes to the definition which Hong Kong would not take into account. In addition, the standard of the internal floor area available now was set in 1992 without any renewal. Is it fair for the tenants to be constrained and ruled by an outdated standard which cannot response to the need of the improvement of living standards in recent decades?

One of the “eye- catching” points of the “under- occupancy” policy in the United Kingdom is the respect for the will of tenants. Several choices are given to the under- occupied including punishments and incentives alike to address the issue. The main point here is that the United Kingdom would respect for the will and the right to housing of tenants even she would like to better utilize the public resource. No

arbitrary measure is offered for the tenants in the United Kingdom to move even they are being defined as the “under- occupied” by the government. Rather than being “rational” in tackling the problem, the United Kingdom would consider the values and reasons for the tenants to stay at “home” instead of move. In contrast, those proposed by the United Kingdom are not the consideration part for the Housing Authority to formulate and evaluate the “under- occupation” policy. The measures offered for tenants in Hong Kong are not humanized and even arbitrary. It is ridiculous solely one option is provided for them: compulsory transfer; without respecting the will of human.

Strange exemption for the elderly is being provided in Hong Kong as one of the strategies of the “under- occupation” policy. Unlike the United Kingdom where the exemption for the elderly is linked up with the pension age: 62 years old, Hong Kong formulated the ludicrous grey area of the exemption for the elderly aged between 60- 69. Though the Housing Authority claimed that those elderly who aged between 60- 69 would be regarded as the non- prioritized under- occupation households and placed at end of the transfer list, it cannot secure the elderly for not being removed in the future. Such grey area inserted the meaningless pressures and worries for the elderly as they are living in the place where it is unstable and unsecure. They have to worry they will be one of the victims in the future once there is again with a policy amendment. They have to imagine and worry about what they can do once they are being defined. Is it fair for the elderly – those who contributed their life to construct the prosperity of Hong Kong, to bear the policy failure caused by the Housing Authority?

Home is the place where people to live, to gain the security and to preserve the memories with their important significant. It is a unique place which cannot easily substitute by another. Therefore, here, I call for the cancellation of the “under- occupation” policy – to secure the home for people, to respect the will of people, to realize the right to housing instead of making thousands of amendments which is unfavourable and unfair to the tenants.

Thank you.

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