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From pupil to teacher: Macau overtakes Hong Kong as the regional role model in ageing policy

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Photography: Eric Tang

Back in the colonial era, the Portuguese Macau Government handled city management less comprehensively in comparison to its British Hong Kong counterpart, such that Macau has mostly looked to Hong Kong for inspiration in policy making, as both cities share a similar culture. Such a trend has basically remained unchanged even after the return of sovereignties of both cities. However, while elderly policy development has stagnated in Hong Kong, Macau has already caught up or even pulled away. What is the next step for Hong Kong? And how has Macau's foresight shown the way forward for Hong Kong's ageing policy?



While Hong Kong stagnates, Macau takes over

Hong Kong is a mature society, and its governance efficacy has been well appraised both locally and globally both before and after its return to Chinese sovereignty. Many of Hong Kong's policies have become the standard to follow for various governments in the Asia-Pacific region, with countries and regions such as Singapore and Macau sending delegates over to learn, especially Macau which has followed Hong Kong's footsteps closely. Amidst the global trend of population ageing, which has also affected Hong Kong and Macau, both cities must face the challenges of elderly care.

However, Hong Kong tackles elderly issues only when they become imminent and without long-term planning. Even though this former British colony has set up mechanisms such as the Elderly Commission to coordinate elderly related issues, it is merely a paper tiger which can advocate measures, but cannot draft policies on its own initiative, nor demand help from government units or other organisations. As a result, Hong Kong's efforts on elderly care are fragmented, short-sighted and unplanned.

In contrast Macau, which houses a far smaller population, has recognised the impact brought by population ageing. Although starting later than Hong Kong, the ex-Portuguese colony has gone further in its care for its aged citizens with policies that are more comprehensive and continuous. From as early as the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region, its government has listed elderly services as one of its priorities, and set up the goal of "establishing an inclusive society where elderly are 'well-cared', 'well-belonged', and 'well-participated'." In 2013, the Chief Executive of Macau Fernando Chui Sai On pledged in the Policy Address that the Government would establish an "Interdepartmental Research Group of the Macau Old-age Security Mechanism" to evaluate how Macau elderly fared in areas including health, housing and retirement protection, so as to draft relevant policies and to formulate a decade-long action plan.

Since the publication of the *White Paper on Social Welfare into the 1990s* in 1991, there has not been any long-term strategic planning on the welfare of Hong Kong's senior citizens, whilst Macau is now formulating a holistic policy plan to deal with ageing issues, by setting up an Old-age Security Mechanism that is both pioneering and courageous not only in the Asia-Pacific region, but also globally. In ageing policies, Hong Kong has now become the student, rather than the teacher, of Macau.

Macau bureaus joined hands to face ageing challenges

With citizens having longer lifespans, a birth rate at low levels for extended periods and post-WWII baby boomers entering old age, Macau is seeing its ageing population skyrocket. The proportion of elders amongst its people is expected to rise from less than 10% in 2012 to over 20% in 2036, a threefold increase within a quarter of a century. When such a demographic change makes the working population smaller while the dependent population bigger, does Macau have the resources to sustain such an enormous older population, and do the resources meet the needs of the grey-haired?

The Macau SAR government knows very well that if it cannot grasp in time the full picture of older citizen's needs and make corresponding preparation, there will be a great impact on society as well as the wellbeing of its elderly. Yet ageing issues involve many social aspects that are interrelated and mutually influencing. Fortunately the targets of government and citizens align in establishing an ageing-friendly society. Therefore, the Chief Executive of Macau Fernando Chui has pledged to form an interdepartmental research team in his *Policy Address 2013* to develop an integrated old-age security mechanism.





International theories adopted for meeting local elderly needs

But how can we formulate such a mechanism? Developed countries such as those in Europe has experienced population ageing for over a century and are well experienced in tackling the issue. Governments adopt a model of interdepartmental collaboration where bureaus are respectively responsible for elders' health, economic well-being, transportation and social life, amongst other aspects. In 2002, 159 countries signed the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) at the Second World Assembly on Ageing of the United Nations and agreed on "older persons and development", "advancing health and well-being into old age", and "ensuring enabling and supportive environments" as the three prioritising directions for policy makers responding to elderly needs. Correspondingly, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also suggested an "Active Ageing Framework", identifying "health", "protection", and "participation" as the three main pillars in ensuring the wellbeing of elders. In the same year, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) launched the *Shanghai Implementation Strategy* to confirm the three priorities as stated in MIPAA while in addition stressing the importance of the domestication of ageing policies as well as their evaluation. The WHO has further published the *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide* in 2008, showcasing how social environment influences elderly wellbeing.

The Macau Government is undoubtedly forward looking in tackling ageing issues, in that it not only continuously pays attention to how population ageing affects Macau and the adjacent regions, but has also actively taken part in international discussions since the UN began to pay attention to the ageing phenomenon. Now Macau will try to adopt the aforementioned theories stemming from the international community, adjust them to suit local needs and challenges, draft a comprehensive elderly policy roadmap and require all related governmental units to formulate their 10-year-action-plans accordingly.

Ageing challenges from all areas of life

The health status of older persons is a consequence of the ageing process as well as the accumulation of life habits. The elderly of Macau are frequent users of health and social services, as the majority of patients with chronic diseases are elders while the number of dementia patients is also on the rise. The lack of medical staff, the overload of hospital capacity, the inexperience of geriatrics department, and the skyrocketing of medical expense, amongst other factors, will challenge the supply of medical resources and professional manpower of Macau.

The elderly should not be discriminated, whether because of experiencing unavoidable socio-economic changes or any other reasons. In Macau, the education level of the present elderly is relatively low, such that on the one hand they do not recognise their own rights and on the other they cannot be reemployed easily, leading to a lower socio-economic status. In addition, the cost of living in Macau rises rapidly and many older citizens are dependants of the social welfare system. Although the basic needs and dignity of the elderly are maintained for the time being, the above challenges will impact the welfare system in the long run.

Older adults should not and will not become stagnant even after entering the later stage of their life journey. They should have the same opportunity to self-development as other age groups. However, due to the poorer education level of the elderly, shortcomings in the continuous education system, insufficient voluntary or paid work opportunities and an unsupportive public towards an active ageing society, social capital cannot be accumulated and the aged find it difficult to play the social roles and obtain the related values they aspire to.

The wellbeing of elders is determined by autonomy and self-determination, such that it is necessary for the elderly to interact with the society through self-effort when possible. But when mobility declines as age increases, aged persons will face difficulties when they move around in their homes or the community. The Macau elderly face difficulties in using public transports, while ageing buildings are inappropriate shelters for the elderly. The steep and complex geography of Macau has also elevated the challenges facing the elderly.

Mutual responsibility to sustain wellbeing of elderly

In response, the Macau government will actively follow the principles of elderly contribution, elderly respect, self-provision, family responsibility, multipartite participation, sharing of risk, stringent finance, and sustainability, and make long-term planning in the four areas of "health and social services", "rights and security", "social participation" and "living environment". APIAS has been commissioned by the Macau SAR government in September 2013 to provide consultation services to the establishment of the Macau Old-age Security Mechanism. The project is in progress and it is anticipated that the fundamental policy directions for the coming aged society will be set out while a 10-year action plan for elderly services from 2016 to 2025 will be drafted.

The courage of the Macau SAR government in holistically tackling the ageing problem is highly appreciated, and their experience should be shared to the world. Meanwhile in Hong Kong, social welfare reform is relative slow compared with Macau. If Hong Kong continues to stagger in elderly policy, not only will Hong Kong fail to serve as the model of social welfare development in the region, but the unsolved local ageing problems will affect the wellbeing of older citizens and thus the harmony and stability of the society. Policy makers around the world should take prompt action to evaluate the effects of population ageing to their societies and make corresponding long-term plans.

