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The Public Administration and Policy – An Asia-Pacific Journal (*PAP*) is a semi-annual refereed journal jointly sponsored by the Hong Kong Public Administration Association and SPEED, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Journal is devoted to the integration of theories and practice of public administration and management, with special emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. *PAP* seeks to play a useful role in contributing to the improvement of public sector management by highlighting issues, problems and solutions through efficient and innovative management of public services. Academics, government officials, and executives in non-profit and business organizations are welcomed to contribute articles to the Journal. Through the new Emerald platform, we look for articles related to the latest regional development such as the One Belt One Road initiatives and impacts of digital and artificial intelligence on public governance.

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# Public Administration and Policy

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## Introduction

In 2019, PAP moves into the second year to have online publication and global dissemination on the Emerald Insight platform in open access. There is no charge for authors and readers of this journal. We welcome academics, students, practitioners and managers in non-profit and business organizations to contribute papers relating to public administration and management in the forms of research papers, case studies, commentaries, and viewpoints to the journal. We plan to publish some special issues in the coming two years. A special issue on Corruption Scandals in Asian Countries has been scheduled for publishing in early 2020.

There are two viewpoints and four research papers in this issue. It begins with two viewpoints, first, China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA): a new development opportunity for Hong Kong by Siu-kai Lau, and second, The global rise of "fake news" and the threat to democratic elections in the USA by Terry Lee. It is then followed by four research papers. The first research paper is A scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart cities in Indonesia by Arif Budy Pratama and Satria Aji Imawan. The second one is Empowerment through participation in local governance: evidence from Union Parishad in Bangladesh by Nasir Uddin. The third one is How to improve parenting by training: the 6As Positive Parenting Program in Hong Kong by Fiona W.L. Yip, Diane Zelman and Adrian Low. The last research paper is Complaints on abortuses handling: policy recommendations for Hong Kong by Celine S.M. Cheng and Amanda P.Y. Lau.

## China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

Before going to the summary of the papers, it might be useful to provide an overview of China's development for its GBA.

Back on 1 July 2017 at the twentieth anniversary of establishment Hong Kong Special Administrative Region under China, witnessed by President Xi Jinping, the National Development and Reform Commission and the governments of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao signed the Framework Agreement on Deepening Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Cooperation in the Development of the GBA in Hong Kong. The Framework Agreement sets out the goals and principles of cooperation and establishes the key cooperation areas in the development of the GBA. Since then, the relevant Central Government departments and the three governments have strived for policy breakthroughs with an innovative and open mind in taking forward the development of the GBA jointly.

The GBA comprises the two Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, and the nine municipalities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province in South China. The total land area is 56,000 km<sup>2</sup> and the total population is around 70m in early 2018.

The development of the GBA is a key strategic plan in the China's national development blueprint with great significance in the implementation of innovation-driven development and commitment to reform and opening-up. The objectives are to further deepen cooperation amongst Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, fully leverage the composite advantages of the



three places, facilitate in-depth integration within the region, and promote coordinated regional economic development, with a view to developing an international first-class bay area ideal for living, working and travelling. It is envisioned as a match for other bay areas of San Francisco, New York and Tokyo with good potential to become not only the Silicon Valley of the East but also Silicon Valley and Wall Street combined within the same megalopolis.

Most recently, the promulgation of the 50-page Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao GBA on 18 February 2019 by China's State Council, signified a new milestone in the development of the GBA. The Plan covers the period from now to 2022 in the immediate term and extends to 2035 in the long term.

Being the most open and international city in the GBA, Hong Kong is known for its status as international financial, transportation, trade centres and aviation hub as well as its renowned professional services. It plays an important role in the GBA Development. The Outline Development Plan supports consolidating and enhancing Hong Kong's status as an international financial centre, as well as strengthening its status as the global offshore renminbi business hub and its role as an international asset management and risk management centre. It also supports the establishment of a platform for investment and financing to serve the Belt and Road Initiative and help mainland enterprises set up capital operations and corporate treasury centres in Hong Kong. Professor Siu-kai Lau will further elaborate on the development opportunities for Hong Kong in the next viewpoint.

### Summary of articles

The following is a brief highlight of all the papers in this issue:

- (1) The first viewpoint is Siu-kai Lau's China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao GBA: a new development opportunity for Hong Kong. The "Belt and Road Initiative" has been China's important development strategy in recent years. The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao GBA plan is a key component of the strategy. The strategic goal is to develop the GBA into the most open, market-oriented and innovative centre of economic growth in China. As an integral part of the GBA, Hong Kong is expected and supported by the Chinese Central Government to develop into a hub of the GBA, and, leveraging on Hong Kong's status as an international metropolis, to connect it as a whole with the world. The GBA plan provides Hong Kong with a unique opportunity to move into a new and higher level of economic development. In order to take advantage of the Project, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government needs to play a more proactive role in its socioeconomic development and to strengthen its capacity to mobilize societal participation in the GBA development.
- (2) The second viewpoint is Terry Lee's The global rise of "fake news" and the threat to democratic elections in the USA. To define "fake news" and where it fits among the larger schema of media hoaxing and deception, popular culture and academic studies converged following the 2016 US presidential election. Perhaps the most influential among these descriptions was the impact of social media. The rise of new media outlets as hubs for news consumption are deteriorating the boundaries between news, "fake news" and advertisements, with damaging effects to democracy. In light of the recent elections in the USA, many fear "fake news" has gradually become a powerful and sinister force, both in the news media environment and in fair and free elections. Such fears stem from the idea that as news consumption increasingly occurs via social media sites, audiences are finding themselves more likely to be drawn in by sensational headlines and therefore to sources lacking accuracy and legitimacy. Such a scenario draws into a question of how the general public interacts with such outlets and to what extent and in which ways individual responsibility should govern the interactions with news outlets in social media. Essentially, "fake news" is changing

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and distorting how political campaigns are run, ultimately calling into question of legitimacy of elections, elected officials and governments. Social media has increasingly been confirmed as an enabler of fake news, and continues to project its potentially negative impact on democracy.

- (3) The third paper is Arif Budy Pratama and Satria Aji Imawan's research paper on A scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart cities in Indonesia. This paper aims to develop and validate a scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives in Indonesia. The study employs a mixed method approach to achieve its research objectives. An exploratory study, consisting of literature review and qualitative interviews with key informants, was conducted to develop an initial instrument for measuring bureaucratic readiness. An online survey of 40 civil servants involved in smart city programmes in the Yogyakarta City government was then administered to test the instrument's validity and reliability. It finds that the perceived bureaucratic readiness can be measured through four dimensions: commitment of the upper echelons; legal support; information technology resources; and governance. The proposed scale provides an alternative instrument for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives. However, there are limitations on this research. As data were only derived from one city government, they were relatively small in scope. This study not only provides a better understanding of bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives, but also proposes an assessment tool as a practical means of assessing bureaucratic readiness. The quantification of readiness is beneficial for putting smart city programmes into practice, as it allows smart city managers to assess the internal bureaucracy's level of readiness. It also allows managers to mitigate and further policy agendas and thereby improve the bureaucracy's support for smart city programmes. This article contributes to smart city research by reaching beyond the technological perspective and focussing on local government bureaucracy. It proposes a systematic way to develop a means of measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city programmes.
- (4) The fourth paper by Nasir Uddin is Empowerment through participation in local governance: evidence from Union Parishad in Bangladesh. The traditional concept of people's participation through their representatives is gradually changing to the mechanism of direct participation of community people in the local governing process. In coupling with these, the constitution of Bangladesh and the local government acts guarantee to foster the direct participation of people in the formation of local bodies and development programmes. This paper explores the avenues of people's participation in local government, particularly the Union Parishad in Bangladesh and evaluates the empowerment of local community through those avenues. Adopting a broad descriptive and analytical approach, this paper assesses the relationship between participation and empowerment of local community. The study finds that local government institutions, particularly Union Parishad has many mechanisms through which people participate in decision-making process. It is believed that participation of community people in local government institutions not only is an opportunity for them but also an apparatus of empowerment. Hence, the process of empowerment is entrenched in the notion of participation. It is evident that the people at grassroots level have been participating in Union Parishad in diverse arrangements, but the effectiveness of these participations in terms of empowerment is still meager and even lacking. Very few researches were undertaken to assess the people's participation in local government. More significantly, no single initiative was undertaken to assess how empowerment of marginalized people happened through these initiatives as empowering community people is the key objective of it.

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- (5) The fifth paper is How to improve parenting by training: the 6As Positive Parenting Program in Hong Kong by Fiona W.L. Yip, Diane Zelman and Adrian Low. Research suggests that children in Hong Kong are at elevated risk for emotional problems. Authoritarian parenting, a common parenting style in Hong Kong, is a critical factor associated with childhood mental health problems. This study evaluated the effectiveness of the 6As Positive Parenting Program (6As) in modifying parenting attitudes, reduction of parenting stress and increasing self-efficacy in positive parenting, among a sample of 82 Hong Kong parents. 6As focusses on prevention by instilling positive parenting beliefs and principles, thereby reducing reliance on authoritarian and related parenting styles. The programme was evaluated by using a controlled pre-post treatment design. Outcome measures were the Chinese Child-rearing Beliefs Questionnaire, Parental Stress Scale, Parenting Self-efficacy Scale, and participant feedback. ANOVA and correlation were utilized to detect treatment effects and relationships between degree of change among measures and subscales. As a result, relative to the control group, the 6As Positive Parenting program significantly changed parents' parenting attitudes, reduced parenting stress, and increased self-efficacy in positive parenting. In total, 97.6 per cent of the participants agreed that the program is a good fit for Hong Kong culture. Findings suggest that positive parenting can enhance the parent-child relationship and reduce parental stress. The results support governmental, non-governmental organizational and community focus on positive practices for parenting training in Hong Kong.
- (6) The last research paper is Complaints on abortuses handling: policy recommendations for Hong Kong by Celine S.M. Cheng and Amanda P.Y. Lau. This paper reviews cases about complaints of abortuses handling in Hong Kong, and proposes policy recommendations to help comfort parents with respect and dignity towards abortuses. The study uses a systematic review of articles/newspapers related to the practice and regulation of abortuses handling in Hong Kong and overseas countries. Also, point of views among stakeholders are selected from: newspapers, patients' groups, Hong Kong SAR Government's websites, radio programmes' interviews, related organizations' websites, blogs from legislative councilors and lawyers. Since parents suffered from miscarriage before 24 weeks' pregnancy are increasingly willing to share their experiences and struggled for arranging a legal funeral for their children, Hong Kong SAR Government is able to understand these parents' needs and hence set up more "Angel Garden" in both the public and the private cemeteries. Yet, the provision of funeral and cremation services are still not comprehensive. Existing measures from Mainland China and overseas countries in handling abortuses and providing support for parents are analyzed. More critically, ethical concern on handling abortuses as one of the clinical wastes is further included in the discussion. Although all less than 24 weeks' fetuses cannot be given any Certificate of Stillbirth, respect and dignity can still be presented towards their parents by flexible regulation. After discussing the related measures on handling abortuses from other countries, some of their humane regulations are deemed feasible and are recommended for Hong Kong.

**Peter K.W. Fong**

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**About the Editor-in-Chief**

Professor Peter K.W. Fong, PhD (New York University), is the President of Hong Kong Public Administration Association and Editor-in-Chief of *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal*; Managing Director of Peter Fong & Associates Ltd. and Principal Consultant of Investport Ltd. He teaches the DBA Programme and supervises doctoral students of the School of Business, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. He also holds advisory and visiting Professorships in several Mainland China universities, namely Tsinghua, Renmin, Tongji, and Tianjin Universities. He is a member of Hong Kong Institute of Planners, Planning Institute Australia, and Chartered Institute of Logistic and Transport. He was formerly a Fellow of Judge Business School, University of Cambridge; Director of EMBA programme at HKU Business School; Associate Professor, Department of Urban Planning and Urban Design, HKU; Executive Vice President and Professor, City University of Macau (formerly AIOU); Honorary Professor, China Training Centre for Senior Civil Servants, Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security, PRC; Studies Director, Civil Service Training and Development Institute of the HKSAR Government; Visiting Scholar at MIT; and Consultant of the World Bank and Delta Asia Bank in Macao. Peter K.W. Fong can be contacted at: [fongpeter@netvigator.com](mailto:fongpeter@netvigator.com)

# China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area: a new development opportunity for Hong Kong

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) Strategy is an important component of the “Belt and Road Initiative” of China. The purpose of this Project is to develop the GBA into the most open, market-oriented and innovative pole of economic growth in China. The GBA Project provides Hong Kong with a rare opportunity to diversify its industrial structure and to move into a new and higher stage of economic development.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Being an integral part of the GBA, Hong Kong is expected and supported by the Central Government to develop into a hub of the Area, and, leveraging on Hong Kong's status as an international metropolis, to connect the Area as a whole with the world.

**Findings** – China's Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Project is a major national development strategy and is a major part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Hong Kong is going to play an important role in the Project and will benefit from it enormously in the future in terms of economic growth and the upgrading of its industrial structure. However, in order to take full advantage of participation in the Project, the way Hong Kong is governed, particularly the government's role in economic development, has to be modified significantly.

**Originality/value** – In order to take advantage of the Project, the Hong Kong SAR Government has to play a bigger and more proactive role in Hong Kong's socioeconomic development and to strengthen its capacity to mobilize societal participation in the Project.

**Keywords** China, Hong Kong, Development opportunities, Greater Bay Area

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

In the past, there was always an old saying that Hong Kong was a piece of “blessed land”. When it encountered difficulties in development or faced “bottlenecks”, new development opportunities will emerge, hence paving the way for elevation to a new development stage. The post-Second World War history of Hong Kong has proved the validity of such saying. At the end of the Second World War, having been occupied by Japan for three years and eight months, Hong Kong was economically bankrupt, and people's livelihood was horrible. Soon thereafter, the East-West Cold War broke out, followed immediately by the Korean War. As a result of the temporary absence of the USSR in the United Nations, the USA and her allies obtained the approval of the UN to send armies to the Korean peninsula, as well as impose economic embargo on China. As a British colony, Hong Kong had to follow suit and to cut off economic and trade relationship with Mainland China. The import-export trade of Hong Kong, which used to be the economic lifeblood of Hong Kong, was hit extremely hard.

HKPAA



However, “fortunately”, soon after a lot of capital, enterprises, talent and skilled workers surged into Hong Kong. These factors, in combination with Hong Kong’s own financial system and industrial base, propelled Hong Kong into the modern industrial age. At that time, the economy of the West began to recover. Under the leadership of the USA, a global liberal trade regime was built. Hong Kong’s manufactured products thus were allowed to enter the western markets very rapidly. Hong Kong’s post-War industrialization became the major force in producing its “economic miracle”. In the 1970s, as a result of rising cost of land, labour and energy, the labour-intensive industries of Hong Kong were in a dead end. The colonial government and various sectors of Hong Kong were worried, and they began to find a way to diversify Hong Kong’s industrial structure. However, no consensus was reached, let alone taking action. Besides, under the policy of “positive non-interventionism”, the colonial government would not play the role of pushing for industrial diversification even if the consensus was there. When Hong Kong found itself in the bind, in 1979 China decided to pursue the “reform and opening up” strategy. A large number of Hong Kong’s “sunset industries” rushed into the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong and expanded the scale of operations, taking advantage of the cheap land and labour there. A lot of the originally small and medium-sized entrepreneurs were transformed into big entrepreneurs in no time. Admittedly, the rapid “deindustrialization” of Hong Kong had left a large number of manufacturing workers without stable employment, but the process however enabled finance, real estate and services to become the pillars of the Hong Kong economy.

After returning to China, facing the fierce competitions from the Mainland and other emerging economies, the narrow base of Hong Kong’s industries is inevitably one of its deficiencies. Many people with insight fully realize that Hong Kong’s original industrial structure can only bring low economic growth. With the increasingly severe disparity between the rich and the poor and the limited social mobility opportunities to satisfy the demands of the youth, Hong Kong’s political and social stability tend to be threatened. In view of this, the former Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Mr Tung Chee Hwa proposed a development concept of “integration” between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Area in 2003. In 2009, Mr Tsang Yam Kuen, another former Chief Executive of Hong Kong, advocated to develop the “Six Industries With Comparative Advantage in Hong Kong” (education, healthcare, testing and authentication, environmental protection, innovation and technology, cultural and creative) by riding on the vast market from the Mainland. Yet another former Chief Executive, Mr Leung Chun Ying, was particularly active in strengthening the economic integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland.

However, there was a lack of consensus among various sectors and even inside the government on the government’s role in promoting economic development and industrial transformation. Some Hong Kong people, especially the opposition parties, had obstructed the “integration” between Hong Kong and the Mainland primarily for political reasons. Besides, the external environment was not favourable for such development. Hence, only limited progress was made in the related work. At that moment, the Central Government introduced a number of policies and measures to benefit Hong Kong with a view to promoting its economic development and industrial transformation. Those measures have been quite helpful to boost the economic growth of Hong Kong. However, it has little effect in promoting the industrial transformation. Today and for the foreseeable future, Hong Kong’s economy will face tough and unpredictable challenges including trade protectionism and the resistance of the USA and some Western countries to China’s rise. Notably, after returning to China, the economic and trade exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland have become increasingly frequent, and Hong Kong has participated in the five-year economic and social plans of the country. These are undoubtedly beneficial to Hong Kong. However, in order to achieve a breakthrough in economic growth and industrial transformation, Hong Kong must acquire a new engine that can generate a new momentum.

From the perspective of the macro trend of world and historical development, there is ground to believe that the development strategy of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) will be the new engine which enables Hong Kong to embark on a new level and foster the continuous growth of its economy in the long run. Active participation in the development of the GBA will not only allow Hong Kong to upgrade itself, but also enable Hong Kong to make new and unique contributions to the progress of the country's development. If Hong Kong is able to seize and make good use of the new development opportunities brought about by the development of the GBA and thus making itself look afresh, the saying that Hong Kong is a "blessed land" will be further confirmed.

### **The country provides a new engine for Hong Kong's growth**

The importance of the development of GBA and its strategic significance to Hong Kong can be elaborated in several ways.

First of all, nowadays, economic competition does not take place only among countries, but more vigorous competition emerges among metropolitan regions all over the world. Different cities within the metropolitan region are relying on advanced transportation, transport and communication networks, smooth flow of people, logistics, capital flow, services, information and technology flow, close collaboration and complementary advantages, alignments of systems and policies, uniformity of standards and qualifications to generate strong aggregate effects. These effects will greatly enhance the economic energy of the whole metropolitan region where the cities are located. The aggregate effects will also boost up the development of the surrounding regions and the entire country. The country with strongly competitive metropolitan regions, especially those clustered around a large bay with convenient transportation, will have the ability to compete globally. The metropolis in the Bay Areas that centred at New York and San Francisco of the USA, as well as Tokyo of Japan, are the best examples.

The GBA has nine Mainland cities on both sides of the Pearl River as well as Hong Kong and Macao, an area of 56,000 square kilometers, a large population of 70 million people, advanced manufacturing industry and a high degree of openness. It has the necessary qualifications to compete with other Bay Areas. In order to achieve long-term sustainable development in the future, Hong Kong cannot "fight single-handedly" and must rely on and utilize the huge development capacity provided by the GBA.

Second, the New York, San Francisco and Tokyo Bay Areas are basically the results of "natural" growth, after undergoing years of competition and cooperation between cities, resulting in the survival of the best in the regions. The US Government has only played limited leading role in establishing the economic zone in the Bay Area. The Japanese Government, however, has assumed a more prominent role in the planning stage. The situation in China is different. The development strategy of GBA is a major national development strategy that President Xi Jinping has personally planned, personally deployed and personally promoted, thus reflecting the strong determination and ambition of the Chinese government (Xinhua, 2019, 22 February).

From the perspectives of deepening the China's reform and opening up; transforming the its development strategy, encouraging technological and institutional innovation, breaking through the "middle-income trap", building the Eurasian community through the "Belt and Road Initiative", establishing new economic growth poles with broad radiation capabilities, and the long-term development of Hong Kong, the development of GBA has extraordinary strategic significance. The GBA has developed transportation networks, with strong complementarity between cities, common language and culture, long-term cooperation experience, and in possession of an international metropolis, Hong Kong, which has robust international ties. Hence, with the joint effort of the central and local governments, it is possible to enhance the competitiveness and outbound openness of the whole region through economic integration, complementary advantages and division of labour. As a

centre, the GBA's radiation will cover the South China region and become a powerful driving force for the overall development of the country.

The GBA is the intersection of the "One Belt" and the "One Road". It is the hub of the Maritime Silk Road. It can strengthen the linkages between China's coastal cities and cities in Southeast Asia and South Asia; and will play an active role in building the Maritime Silk Road. The GBA will also enable Hong Kong to integrate more fully into the country's development. Leveraging on its unique advantages of "One Country, Two Systems", Hong Kong can contribute to the country and pave the way for the GBA to further link up with the world.

Third, the "Outline Development Plan for the GBA" stipulates that the major functions of Hong Kong are to "consolidate and strengthen its status as the international financial, shipping and trade centre; strengthen its status as an offshore renminbi business hub, international asset management centre and risk management centre; develop finance, trade and commerce, logistics and professional services towards the high-end and high value-added direction; forcefully promote innovation, science and technology; cultivate newly emerging industries; build up Hong Kong as the centre of international legal and arbitration services; and construct an even more competitive international metropolis". It requires that Hong Kong, being one of the four core cities in the GBA together with Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Macao, with comparative advantages such as well-established institutions, sound legal system, abundant talents, free information circulation, advanced financial and service systems and extensive international contacts, should be capable of performing various pivotal, coordination and central functions in the GBA (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, Hong Kong SAR Government, 2019).

Throughout the years, Hong Kong has participated in various economic development cooperation projects with Guangdong, Shenzhen, the Pearl Delta region and pan-Pearl Delta region. Although considerable results have been achieved, there remains a lot of shortcomings. In the past, the conception and motivation of various economic cooperation between Hong Kong and the Mainland were mainly initiated by the Mainland's local governments and Hong Kong, while the former was more aggressive than the latter. The Central Government basically played the role of encouragement and cooperation, and its exertion of leadership, level of involvement and national policy support were low. Due to conflicts of interest, diverse degree of enthusiasm, different paces of work, different roles of governments, diversity in goals and direction, and especially differences in systems and norms, the collaboration between Hong Kong and the Mainland often resulted in a condition of "big thunder and little rain". Regrettably, the attitudes of Hong Kong appear to be more passive when compared with the strong quest and enthusiasm of the Mainland.

The development of GBA is different from those collaboration projects between Hong Kong and the Mainland in the past. It has been incorporated into China's key development strategy. As such, its ability in mobilizing the enthusiasm of the Central Government, local cities and Hong Kong is much higher.

### **Hong Kong should not "drop the chain" and never "drag other people's hind legs"**

Fourth, unlike various types of cooperation between Hong Kong and the Mainland in the past, the Central Government has played a major role in leading, planning, mediating, coordinating, promoting, implementing and preventing vicious competition, and has also taken up the role of "resolving difficulties and disputes". The "Outline Development Plan for the GBA" has vividly reflected this. In particular, it is essential that the Central Government should continue to formulate and introduce various special and preferential policies in response to the development of the GBA, thus allowing it to explore, try and innovate boldly in institutional and policy innovation and to accumulate experiences for deepening the China's reform and opening up strategy. The Central Government also hopes to strengthen

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exchanges with other countries of the world in the fields of economics, trade, finance, investment, science and technology through the development of the GBA. The development of the GBA will impress upon the foreign investors and enterprises that China will not adopt unilateral and protectionist policies as some developed countries do, but, on the contrary, it will try its best to optimize the development of globalization, the establishment of an international free and fair trading system and the development of a multilateral system.

As the world is shrouded in the gloom of “de-globalization”, China has become a major force in promoting more equitable “globalization” and a new international economic order. In the past, Hong Kong was thriving because of “globalization” and now it is the victim of “de-globalization”. China’s “new globalization” strategy, which is based mainly on the “Belt and Road Initiative”, the development of GBA and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, will definitely benefit Hong Kong.

Fifth, in formulating the development strategy of the GBA, Hong Kong’s current economic and social livelihood “difficulties” and long-term sustainable development in the future have always been the major concerns of the Central Government. The development of the GBA will, to a certain extent, enable Hong Kong to revitalize itself through the “integration with China’s overall development”. In the past, the beneficial results of cooperation between Hong Kong and the Mainland have fallen into the hands of large consortia and professional elites. The development of GBA, on the other hand, is aimed at sharing the benefits widely among people from different classes, for all walks of life, and for people from different generations.

President Xi Jinping once pointed out that “the integration of Hong Kong and Macao into the overall national development is the basic obligation of ‘One Country, Two Systems’, and it is the requirement in the era of reform and opening-up. It is also a new direction for Hong Kong and Macao to explore, to open up new development space, as well as the objective requirement for them to add new development momentum. The implementation of the development of the GBA is a major plan that we have made with long-term vision in the light of the overall situation. It is also a major decision to maintain the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and Macao”.

The appointment of Mrs Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, as a Member of the Leading Group for the Development of the GBA chaired by Vice Premier Han Zheng is the first time that a Hong Kong Chief Executive entered into the central leadership group. In particular, it also denotes the important role of Hong Kong in the development of the GBA. The Central Government has also indicated that the opinions of the Hong Kong SAR Government should be fully respected in the development process of the GBA. The Central Government has placed high hopes on Hong Kong’s participation in the development of the GBA and has been fully supportive and helpful. In future, when assessing the performances of the Hong Kong Chief Executive and the Hong Kong SAR Government, their courage, responsibility, ability and achievements in the development of the GBA will certainly be key criteria.

In fact, for the Hong Kong SAR Government and the community of Hong Kong, how to seize and utilize the opportunities brought about by the GBA, how to fully realize Hong Kong’s unique role in promoting the development of the GBA, are unprecedented challenges. It entails new philosophy of the governance of the Hong Kong SAR Government and the adjustment and innovation of the cooperative relationship between the government and the society.

For the Hong Kong SAR Government, all the former and current Chief Executives have indicated that they will not blindly follow the “non-intervention” policy for the economy, but will “take appropriate actions” or being “appropriately proactive”. However, in reality, the government is still very cautious and moves very carefully in promoting economic development, fostering industrial transformation and handling social conflicts. Its fiscal management policy has not actually got rid of the shackles of the past.

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In the development of the GBA, the Hong Kong SAR Government must work with the Central Government and other cities in the region to formulate specific plans, launch cooperation projects, and establish the necessary infrastructures to enhance the smooth flows of various elements. Under the premise of respecting “One Country, Two Systems”, Hong Kong should actualize the alignments of the systems, rules and policies and work jointly with all parties, including the international community, in introducing the development and opportunities of the GBA. Hong Kong should also work harmoniously with the other cities in the GBA. It should not “drop the chain” and should never “drag other people’s hind legs”, as such malpractices will affect the development progress of the entire GBA (Lau, 2017).

The working experience of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge is a good example showing the relatively sluggish working process of the Hong Kong SAR Government. The strength of the Hong Kong SAR Government is administrative management and policy implementation, but it is relatively weak in terms of long-term planning, macro thinking, strategic thinking and policy research. The Hong Kong SAR Government needs to quickly diminish its weaknesses. Otherwise, it will be difficult for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong to put forward valuable opinions and suggestions on the development of GBA in the Leading Group. The Hong Kong SAR Government can continue to be an “appropriately proactive” government, but the so-called “appropriately” should be pitched at a higher degree of “appropriateness”. This means that it should be more proactive, more enterprising and forward-looking in the participation of the development of the GBA.

In specific terms, there are several aspects in which the Hong Kong SAR Government has to act upon.

First of all, it has to fully realize that while Hong Kong’s importance in national development is declining and its industrial structure is in urgent need of transformation and upgrading, the development of the GBA has a major strategic significance for the future development of Hong Kong.

Second, the Hong Kong SAR Government should intensify its efforts to explain the importance of the GBA to all walks of life in Hong Kong. At the same time, it should dispel some people’s misunderstandings and doubts thus removing the internal resistance blocking Hong Kong’s active participation in the development of the GBA.

Third, the Hong Kong SAR Government needs to change its past “sloppy” attitude towards its cooperation with the Mainland. It should actively strengthen its communication and cooperation with the governments of the cities in the GBA, and seek joint development projects with them. It should also promote the alignment of systems, laws, transportation, public policies, professional and industrial entry standards, living conditions and lifestyles between Hong Kong and all the cities, thus making the GBA truly a common home for Hong Kong people and the Mainland compatriots.

### **The government should adjust its mentality and be fully participative**

Finally, the Hong Kong SAR Government must reposition its role in economic development and get rid of the negative attitude of “positive non-intervention”. It should enhance its initiative and leadership in the promotion of economic development. To this end, the philosophy of fiscal policy of the Hong Kong SAR Government should also be adjusted. For example, whether the Hong Kong SAR Government could eliminate the hindrances of the past and put more financial and administrative resources into the GBA to support Hong Kong people’s development in the Mainland; to assist Hong Kong people in dealing with difficulties and problems encountered in the Mainland; and to subsidize some cooperation projects between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Otherwise, Hong Kong’s participation in the development of the GBA will be highly limited. In the past, the cooperation projects between Hong Kong and the Mainland in Nansha, Hengqin and Qianhai were not as good as expected. One of the reasons is precisely because Hong Kong failed to put a lot of money and

resources into those projects. Therefore, the fiscal policy of the past that Hong Kong's public funds should not or cannot be used in the Mainland has been outdated when participating in the development of the GBA.

The development of the GBA is a common endeavour of the government and the community. The market, private enterprises and professional communities are going to play a more critical role than other parties in the Mainland. It was often reflected in the past collaborations between Hong Kong and the Mainland that the Hong Kong SAR Government lacked the ability to promote the participation of private enterprises and individuals. As such, the results could hardly satisfy the other parties. In the process of developing the GBA, the relationship between the government and the society also needs to be adjusted. The Hong Kong SAR Government should provide a policy environment, resources, information, education and training, and service support that are conducive to civic participation. At the same time, it should establish sustainable and close relationships and collaborations with various sectors of the community, especially the industrial and commercial organizations, statutory bodies, professional organizations, education and training institutions, social groups and youth organizations. This will enhance the government's ability in mobilizing private resources and coordinating public and private resources, and thus playing positive and proactive leadership.

All in all, the development of the GBA is a new development opportunity that Hong Kong must firmly grasp. It is also an opportunity for Hong Kong to enhance its position in the rise of China. The Hong Kong SAR Government has to adjust its thinking in governance and policy and to strengthen its role and function in Hong Kong's economic and social development.

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# The global rise of “fake news” and the threat to democratic elections in the USA

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The global rise of “fake news”

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Since the end of 2016, “fake news” has had a clear meaning in the USA. After years of scholarship attempting to define “fake news” and where it fits among the larger schema of media hoaxing and deception, popular culture and even academic studies converged following the 2016 US presidential election to define “fake news” in drastically new ways. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In light of the recent elections in the USA, many fear “fake news” that have gradually become a powerful and sinister force, both in the news media environment as well as in the fair and free elections. The scenario draws into questions how the general public interacts with such outlets, and to what extent and in which ways individual responsibility should govern the interactions with social media.

**Findings** – Fake news is a growing threat to democratic elections in the USA and other democracies by relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people, in order to influence their voting plans and their behavior.

**Originality/value** – Essentially, “fake news” is changing and even distorting how political campaigns are run, ultimately calling into question legitimacy of elections, elected officials and governments. Scholarship has increasingly confirmed social media as an enabler of “fake news,” and continues to project its potentially negative impact on democracy, furthering the already existing practices of partisan selective exposure, as well as heightening the need for individual responsibility.

**Keywords** The USA, Fake news, Democratic elections

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Distinguishing between news and “fake news”

As the World Economic Forum (2013) recently warned, a kind of so-called “digital wildfires,” i.e., unreliable information going viral online (fake news) could be noted as one of the biggest threats faced by governments and societies. The debate surrounding “fake news” has been around for decades – although often defined by different names – and only recently has the term been popularized. The *Miriam-Webster Dictionary* (n.d.) explained that “fake news” has been in use for over 125 years but has recently taken on new meaning. It defined “fake news” as a kind of news that is “frequently used to describe a political story, which is seen as damaging to an agency, entity, or person.” Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) noted the related topics have been “extensively covered” by literature in economics, psychology, political science and computer science. Scholars have, for the past decade, analyzed the ways in which entertainment may have an impact on politics. Particularly, the satirical nature of talk shows, such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*, has drawn into question how entertainment-driven news may impact the political landscape. In his study on entertainment television and politics, Holbert (2005) defined *The Daily Show* as “a program that embodies the fake news subgenre.” He further defined the genre as one which “represents programming where either the program’s central focus

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or a very specific and well-defined portion is devoted to political satire.” This emphasizes a particularly important point that the most common fake stories revolve around politics, and we cannot undermine the impact this has had on societies.

Across democracies, “fake news” has flourished in current political climates, producing misinformation on social media platforms. It has served to diminish the credibility of mainstream news networks, dividing the general public further, both ideologically and on the mere acceptance of the fact, providing credence to ideological claims of “fake news.” Only recently debated, “fake news” has been a component of political strategies since the beginning of modern political practice. The distinction, however, lies in the characteristics of the modern information age, where almost everyone enjoys online access and is able to generate and spread content. Finneman and Thomas (2018) defined the rise of “fake news” as it currently exists as a result of “the rise of the internet as a source of information and the ability for anyone to post content online to reach an audience.” Social media channels like Facebook and Twitter in this regard enable relatively economical, user-friendly ways to propagate materials on a global scale.

Scholars, however, are elaborating on this definition of “fake news,” claiming that there needs to be a broader analysis which takes into account the relationship between fake and hard news (Balmas, 2014). Among some emerging definitions include Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) who defined “fake news” as “news articles that are intentionally and veritably false and could mislead readers” in addition to Finneman and Thomas (2018) who argued that “fake news” “is not, by any reasonable standard, ‘news’ but rather an attempt to deceive through the mimicry of traditional journalism.” Additionally, Johnson and Kelling (2018) defined the term as “content that is deliberately false and published on websites that mimic traditional news websites.” It is this last definition which hints at one of the major issues currently affecting the relationship between “fake news” and the public: social media.

### **The impact of social media**

In 2016, Facebook user numbers per month reached 1.8bn and Twitter numbered 400m; this was reinforced by a Gallup poll which indicated that there was “a continuing decline of ‘trust and confidence’ in the mass media” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). “Fake news” has become dominant across platforms, and the biggest factor behind “fake news” stories’ success is their high level of social engagement. Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, the public’s engagement with “fake news” through Facebook was higher than through mainstream sources (Silverman, 2016, November 16). A post-election survey conducted by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found for the month before the 2016 election, people reported spending 66 min each day “reading, watching or listening to election news” – 38 percent was on social media. Diehl *et al.* (2016) conducted the first study in 2016 to help demonstrate the relationship between news consumption and persuasion in social media, and since then, studies on this relationship have increased and further extended to the realm of “fake news.”

The relationship between “fake news” and social media is especially important when taken into consideration with the identity factors and political partisanship which govern many of our interactions on these platforms. Social networks connect us with other like-minded people. Our networks of Facebook “friends” or Twitter “followers” generally consist of people who share our values and beliefs. These values may be social, political or economic; the information we share through these networks helps define who we are and what we believe in. Earlier scholarship often saw this characteristic of social media as a positive attribute – they argued that by enabling access to a plethora of opinions and ideas, the general public would become exposed to differing views which would thus either alter their views or enhance their own beliefs through educating them on the opposition (Keele and Wolak, 2008; Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004). In a study conducted by Diehl *et al.* (2016), it was argued that “a large diverse network of social connections should naturally lead to a higher volume of competing or conflicting views, and ultimately more ambivalent attitudes.” However, this study was notably taken up

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for those pre-2016 elections, and new scholarship is showcasing a trend toward increasingly selective viewing. Spohr (2017) noted, for example, many theorists argued at the advent of the internet that such a platform would increase exposure to political differences; yet, as he sums up, “this optimistic assumption does not seem to have materialized.”

In fact, studies are showing a rise in what scholarship terms “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles.” Pariser (2011) popularized the term coined as “filter bubbles” to define selective viewing on social media, leading to increased political polarization. With the launch of Facebook and Twitter in 2006, theorists have increasingly concerned with these issues, arguing that online news would enable “like-minded citizens” to form these “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” in which “they would be insulated from contrary perspectives” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). This identity is therefore reinforced through reading similar news stories shared via social networks, confirming our ideas and biases. Herein lies the underlying force that propagates false information and further polarizes societies’ partisan. However, individual preference is not the only issue. Social media algorithms are still actively working against the idea of positive debate. The Dutch website mediawijsheid.nl, which informs citizens about “safe and smart use of (digital) media,” reports that companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter use algorithms to determine what content will be displayed based on previous searches and likes (Leakat, 2018, March 20). It implies some content remains out of sight, while others are constantly displayed, thus an example of the “filter bubbles.” Scholars have argued this “algorithmic curation” results in placing users “in echo chambers of our beliefs” and thus actively contributes to increasing polarization and the spread of “fake news” (Spohr, 2017). Such one-sidedness of information undoubtedly leads to the development of a less critical attitude, which is quite fundamental to the functioning of democracy.

### **Political polarization and individual responsibility**

The impact of social media on a country’s political psyche cannot be underestimated. Increasingly, political polarization is perpetuated by media bubbles, creating environments where individuals are not exposed to conflicting perspectives challenging their beliefs. Spohr (2017) related this to the spread of “fake news,” as platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow for news stories to be published shared “without fact-checking and editorial mechanisms in place.” Additionally, Anand (2017) argued that the political polarization of social media is the fault of “sorting based beliefs,” when “viewers watch news programs and channels whose positions match their tastes and beliefs.” He explained, “we watch what we believe, but what we don’t watch, we don’t believe.” Therefore, individuals create their own media filters through viewing programs aligning with their beliefs due to confirmation bias, a rejection of “valid information that is not consistent with our beliefs.” This self-imposed media bubble is as a result reinforced and perpetuated using algorithmic filters on Facebook and Google to bring users content that aligns with presumed interests based on search histories and personal associations. However, studies have shown that individual choice has more of an effect on exposure to differing perspectives than “algorithmic curation” (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015). The individual’s tendency to exhibit “selective exposure behavior” and “confirmation bias,” as it is often referred to, ultimately increases ideological polarization, and this proves extremely important when analyzing individual responsibility in a culture which perpetuates “fake news.”

Both ideologically and factually “fake news” was created by and has since served to perpetuate, the increasing political polarization among the general public across nations over the past several decades. In 2016 “post-truth” was named as the *Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year* as “word or expression chosen to reflect the passing year in language.” This was found after “language research conducted by Oxford Dictionaries editors [revealed] that use of the word post-truth has increased by approximately 2,000 percent over its usage in 2015” (BBC, 2016, November 16). Post-truth, an adjective, is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that

appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2016). It is within these circumstances, that “fake news” has gained prominence, disconnected from a singular reality, devoid of objectivity and preying on the emotions of a politically polarized the general public. In 2018, Clinton asserted that “fake news can have real-world consequences” (Wendling, 2018, January 22). Perpetuated by what the USA termed “alternative facts,” “fake news” has validated multiple realities divided by ideology, increasing political polarization among citizens. The production of factually “fake news,” “fake news” that is factually inaccurate, validates the claims of ideologically “fake news,” factual news that is deemed false for ideological purposes, increasing political polarization and making it more difficult for citizens to discern fact from fiction. Without such objective, accurate and credible sources of information, it is impossible for every citizen to share the agreed upon premises necessitated by democratic debate, threatening the legitimacy of any and all democratically elected governments.

Furthermore, such “filter bubbles” which social media spawns and “fake news” encourages continue to have drastic consequences for political partisanship. Recent studies showed that Democrats and Republicans are equally 15 percent more likely to believe “ideologically aligned headlines” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Perhaps more striking in the reality, Bishop (2008) argued that as citizens gravitate toward insulated, like-minded groups, there increase a “growing intolerance for political differences [...] and politics so polarized that [...] elections are no longer just contests over politics, but bitter choices between ways of life.” Borrowed the further elaboration from Gentzkow (2016), claiming that this leads not only to a less discussion but also to a society where people “hold overwhelmingly positive views of their own co-partisans and highly negative views of those on the other side of the political spectrum.” Ultimately, the spread of “fake news” allows for increasing partisan politics and also pressures for individual responsibility in navigating emerging news platforms via social media.

In many countries such as the USA, the political polarization of the general public has been exploited by media companies in an effort to increase profits through sensationalizing news media, serving to perpetuate the dissemination of both factually and ideologically “fake news.” This has been accomplished through targeting audiences utilizing sensational news material not based on importance to an objective reality, but rather the desired subjective reality of their viewership, furthering this idea of the “filter bubbles.” Anand (2017) argued that “the media did exactly what it was designed to do, given the incentives that govern it. It’s not that the media sets out to be sensationalist; it’s business model leads it in that direction.” Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) summarized so by stating that “fake news” arises as a result of it being “cheaper to provide than precise signals;” thus, one of the main motivating factors of “fake news” is that news articles spread on social media generate significant advertising revenue when users click and are redirected to the original site. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2008) further pointed out the danger of polarization, explaining that “competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers.” Ultimately, the major media companies are characterized as capitalist enterprises with fiduciary responsibility to their shareholders, creating legal obligations to generate profit. Since profit is mostly, if not fully generated through advertisement revenue, which increases with ratings, the content of the news is dictated by what generates the highest ratings. In this regard, citizens are treated as consumers, and more importantly, “fake news” continues to drive the media marketplace, resulting in an increased polarization.

### **“Fake news” and the 2016 US presidential election**

By the time of the 2016 US presidential election, Pew Research Center found that 77 percent of adults who used the internet used social network sites compared with 16 percent in 2006 (Perrin, 2015, October 8). Clearly, the environment surrounding the 2016 election was fundamentally different from any other in the American history. The populace of the USA had become increasingly divided over the past few decades and it also made “fake news” transforming as a popularized term. “Fake news,” as Finneman and Thomas (2018)

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asserted, “soared” during the election, it would always lead to the result of increased distribution access and a decline in trust in the mainstream media. Issues such as “filter bubbles” are especially relevant during the election, as partisan politics continue to divide the nation along the ideological lines. Such an election held in 2016 is a typical example of the effects “fake news” that can have on a population and highlights the ways in which it is disseminated and consumed, allowing for a better understanding of the possible effects “fake news” may have in the future.

Importantly, the 2016 US presidential election shows that the great importance of ideology in “fake news.” In 2014, a Pew Research Center (2014, June 12) survey result found that “Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades.” This is evident by the fact that “92 percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat and 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.” More recently, in 2016, Pew Research Center (2016, April 26) found that increasingly over the past two decades, “highly educated adults – particularly those who have attended graduate school – are far more likely than those with less education to take predominantly liberal positions across a range of political values.” “Based on an analysis of their opinions about the role and performance of government,” they found that, “more than half of those with postgraduate experience (54 percent) have either consistently liberal political values (31 percent) or mostly liberal values (23 percent),” while “fewer than half as many postgrads – roughly 12 percent of the public in 2015 – have either consistently conservative (10 percent) or mostly conservative (14 percent) values.” Thus, “fake news” would have a disproportionate impact across ideological divides, and this can be seen in the number of pro-Trump vs pro-Clinton “fake news” stories. In a study conducted by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), they accumulated a database of “fake news” stories and reported that within this database, i.e., 115 fake stories to be pro-Trump were shared on Facebook 30m times while pro-Clinton ones only amounted to 41 and were shared 7.6m times. Essentially, differences in ideology have further translated into clear differences in dissemination and consumption of “fake news.”

The then US President Obama stated in the current, politically polarized climate that “everything is true and nothing is true.” Acknowledging the presence of “alternative facts,” he said, “ideally, in a democracy, everybody would agree that climate change is the consequence of man-made behavior, because that’s what 99 percent of scientists tell us [...] and then we would have a debate about how to fix it.” Previously, he explained, “you’d argue about means, but there was a baseline of facts that we could all work off [however] now we just don’t have that” (Remnick, 2016, November 28). In other words, that 1 percent of scientists can be regarded as representing factually “fake news” that provides the necessary doubt to facilitate validity to the ideological claim that climate change is fake or a hoax. This disagreement ultimately negates the possibility of democratic debate. Another relevant example is the US President Trump’s use of “fake news” to discredit the investigation into the collusion that allegedly took place between the President Trump campaign and the Russian Government. In February 2017, President Trump issued a tweet stating that “Russia talk is FAKE NEWS put out by the Dems, and played up by the media, to mask the big election defeat and the illegal leaks!” (Trump, 2017, February 27). Using “fake news” as a sensationalist distraction, President Trump tried to discredit the coverage of the Russian collusion investigation, claiming it was a diversion away from the poor electoral performance of the Democratic Party in 2016. The portrayal of “liberal media” as “fake news” is a prominent theme in the rhetoric of President Trump and his mouthpieces in right-wing media and not just used to discredit the media over single issues. Ideologically, “fake news” insinuates the mainstream “liberal media” only covers the issues suiting their interests. During his political rally in Cedar Rapids, in June 2017, President Trump roused the audience through his claims that “phony NBC [...] will never show the crowds” that turn

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out for his political events, joking that the “liberal media” turns off the camera as soon as he says something they do not like (Carlson, 2017, June 22).

Finally, the 2016 US presidential election indicated ideologically “fake news” as validated by the presence of factually “fake news.” This can be understood perhaps most famously in that of the accusation involving Russia producing factually “fake news” aimed at influencing the legitimacy of the US elections and its democratic process. In her article, “Russia has Weaponized Fake News to Sow Chaos,” Reston (2017, May 12) pointed out that “since Trump’s election, experts report, the Kremlin has doubled down on its dissemination of fake news,” utilizing a “loose network of hackers and state media outlets, Twitter bots, and bloggers” to pump “out a steady stream of digital disinformation.” In addition, factually “fake news” is also produced and disseminated by members of the US Government, primarily President Trump. “PolitiFact” kept saying that, “since the *Tampa Bay Times* started *PolitiFact* in 2007, no other major politician has a worse record for accuracy, with more than 70 percent of [President Trump’s] claims rated Mostly False, False, or Pants on Fire” (Drobnic-Holan, 2016 December 13). Leonhardt and Thompson (2017, December 14) similarly criticized “President Trump’s political rise was built on a lie,” and that after meticulously documenting his lies, they found that he told a falsehood every day for the first 40 days of his presidency.

The 2016 US presidential election saw the rise of “fake news” and ultimately the effects it can have on the US populous. Social media created platforms for dissemination and consumption, spaces which fundamentally adhered to the increasing division of partisan politics. “Filter bubbles” were employed and factually “fake news” was used as a tactic for political gain. Quite a great number of commentators have gone as far as to suggest that Trump should have not become president were it not for the influence of “fake news” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Despite the effects of “fake news” on the 2016 election still needing extensive research, one cannot underestimate the new power wielded by “fake news” on the US psyche. In this, scholarship is increasingly turning to this pivotal moment in the American history, in order to analyze the growing influence of “fake news” on the democratic process and on the continued fracturing of partisan politics.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Ultimately, the effects of “fake news” can have detrimental consequences for the government of a polity and its democratic process. To be simple, the entire political process of democracy is based on reliable information. With large-scale and widespread dissemination of “fake news,” this crucial foundation has been more or less violated. As a result, citizens are not always able to form well-considered opinions and hence make rational political decisions. Such a result is an increasing correlation between viewing “fake news” and attitudes of inefficacy, alienation and cynicism toward politics (Balmas, 2014). One of the dangerous consequences that factually “fake news” has on the US democracy is that people often confuse or conflate the two distinct types of “fake news,” factual and ideological, providing validity to ideological claims of “fake news.” This has left the populace in the USA unwilling to trust the mainstream media and becoming more politically polarized, resulting in individuals adhering to alternative sets of facts, or worse, not knowing what to believe. “Fake news” at this point diminishes the possibility of democratic debate and the subsequent legitimacy of the democratic process. It also presents a destabilizing capacity which effects citizens’ trust in policies, governments or even in democracy as a whole. Perhaps more debilitating, such destabilization would lead to the result in tensions between citizens and in citizen–media interactions. Bishop (2008) argued in his popular book “fake news” creates communities that act as feedback loops where we are “hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read [...] and the neighborhoods we live in.” Such political polarization creates immense consequences for the success of democracy, as individuals are utilizing the destabilizing properties of “fake news” to propel partisan politics.

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This validation of ideological “fake news” without questioning confuses the general public. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, “a majority of the United States adults – 62 percent – get news on social media, and 18 percent do so often” (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016, May 26). This is taken into account alongside another survey found that “about two-in-three adults in the United States (64 percent) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.” This trend is equally prevalent among both the Republicans and Democrats and is also “shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations, and most other demographic characteristics.” Perhaps most interesting, the same survey found that although many Americans recognized the confusion that may be brought about by “fake news,” most reported that they were at least somewhat confident in their ability to discern a fabricated news story fact from completely made up: 39 percent reported that there were “very confident,” 45 percent were “somewhat confident,” 9 percent were “not very confident” and only 6 percent were “not at all confident” (Barthel *et al.*, 2016, December 15).

Even with great confidence, individuals find it difficult to discern “fake news” from the real ones. In 2016, there was a study conducted by Stanford University students at the elementary, high school and college levels tested students’ ability to discern real news articles from “fake news” articles. Its findings obviously pointed out a thing that while past regulation relies on publishers, editors and subject experts, the advent of the internet practically eliminates the need for this. Though many people assume youngsters “fluent in social media” are “equally savvy about what they find there,” the study concluded the opposite. Researchers, therefore, pointed out that “more than 80 percent of students believed that the native advertisement, identified by the words ‘sponsored content,’ was a real news story.” Most alarming scenario was that “over 30 percent of students argued that the fake account was more trustworthy because of some key graphic elements that it included” (Donald, 2016, November 22). Such a study draws serious questioning regarding the value placed on social media and its influence on reporting, ultimately showing how accessibility can more or less translate into drastic consequences for democracy.

In a long run, the most damaging effect of having “fake news” is its negative consequences on liberal democracy. Edsall (2017, March 2), in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, justified his view the delegitimization of the democratic process in the USA brought about by “fake news” could be signaling a coming “democratic failure or transitioning toward a hybrid regime.” This regime would keep “the trappings of democracy, including seemingly free elections, while leaders would control the election process, the media, and the scope of permissible debate, [resulting in] a country that is de facto less free.” The future of democracy in an age of “fake news,” as a result, does not seem to be promising. Since then, media has been an underestimated value to democracy, and citizens are becoming increasingly aware of its impact on worldviews. Apart from to highlight sources of news on social media platforms or better articulations of sources on television news, it seems any attempt to prevent factually “fake news” would result in an act of censorship, while inaction would result in the further dissemination of misinformation. With more information being learned through news studies, there can be no doubt the detrimental effects “fake news” has on both societies and democracy – the question scholars, governments and citizens now must wrestle with is how to combat the issue.

### **Many options, but no solution**

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) summarized the problem when they wrote that “it is both privately and socially valuable when people can infer the true state of the world.” Scholars are continuing to suggest new ways to address “fake news” in the media. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) argued that social planners should increase information about world affairs while simultaneously increasing incentives for consumers to “infer the true state of

the world.” Others proposed the responsibility falls on technology companies to redesign algorithms that encourage “fake news” and “filter bubbles.” Still, some still insisted that it is absolutely one of the government’s duties to properly regulate “fake news,” creating laws that would make willfully authoring and/or distributing false and deceptive news stories punishable. In the USA, there currently exist 27 states with fraud statutes in place. Whether such statutes will pass muster at the constitutional level remains to be seen. The argument follows that while the retention of such laws may conflict with the currently dominant interpretation of the First Amendment, retention, as expected, could be helpful to a kind of better-functioning democracy and meanwhile civil society. The question thus remains if we, the audience, are responsible for filtering what we read and/or share or whether the responsibility falls on the government of a polity.

Increasingly, yet, social commentators are calling upon the individual to take more responsibility in filtering news. Matahari Timoer, a member of the Jakarta-based internet watchdog ICT Watch said, “our digital life has entered a dark age, that is why we need people to do their part as a lantern to light up and fight this dark period” (BBC, 2017, April 8). Spohr (2017) also encouraged people obtaining information needs to be “a conscious act of seeking out diverse sources.” In a seminal book entitled “Public Opinion,” Lippmann (1922) similarly stated, “we are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.” Since “fake news” continues to threaten our democratic process and further divides the populace, it has become increasingly critical to have counter-attack such an issue from an institutional level to an individual one. Regardless of algorithm changes or by government law, responsibility still, to an extent, falls on most of the people. As many now conclude, the only way to combat both factual and ideological “fake news” is by educating the general public with the necessary information to come to their own deductive conclusions, increasing an individual’s ability to discern fact from fiction.

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# A scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart cities in Indonesia

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Perceived  
bureaucratic  
readiness for  
smart cities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to develop and validate a scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The present study employs a mixed method approach to achieve its research objectives. An exploratory study, consisting of literature review and qualitative interviews with key informants, was conducted to develop an initial instrument for measuring bureaucratic readiness. An online survey of 40 civil servants involved in smart city programmes in the Yogyakarta City government was then administered to test the instrument's validity and reliability.

**Findings** – Perceived bureaucratic readiness can be measured through four dimensions: commitment of the upper echelons, legal support, information technology resources and governance.

**Research limitations/implications** – The proposed scale provides an alternative instrument for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives. However, as data were only derived from one city government, they are relatively small in scope. Future research can be conducted for generalisation by replicating this study in other cities, thereby measuring its effectiveness in other contexts and settings.

**Practical implications** – This study not only provides a better understanding of bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives, but also proposes an assessment tool as a practical means of assessing bureaucratic readiness. The quantification of readiness is beneficial to putting smart city programmes into practice, as it allows smart city managers to assess the internal bureaucracy's level of readiness. It also allows managers to mitigate and further policy agendas and thereby improve the bureaucracy's support for smart city programmes.

**Originality/value** – Literature sometimes underestimates the role of bureaucracy in smart city implementation while overly stressing stakeholders, vendors and technology. This paper attempts to contribute to smart city research by reaching beyond the technological perspective and focusing on local government bureaucracy. None of the extant literature provides a scale for measuring bureaucratic readiness. The study thus proposes a systematic way to develop a means of measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city programmes.

**Keywords** Scale development, Smart city, Perceived bureaucratic readiness

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The rapid development of cities may result in such complicated urban problems as housing, sanitation, pollution and environmental issues, as well as congestion, crime, etc. Recently, smart city initiatives have emerged to overcome these negative effects of urban development. However, implementing smart city programmes is not an easy task; rather, it is dilemmatic as cities often face challenges during the process. One obstacle commonly found in smart city initiatives is a lack of governance arrangement (Praharaj *et al.*, 2017), as well as technological



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determinism in which information and communication technology (ICT) is regarded as the central tenet of smart city implementation (Hollands, 2008).

High-tech features of ICT, such as internet of things (IoT) (Hui *et al.*, 2017), big data (Lim *et al.*, 2018) and artificial intelligence (Kumar *et al.*, 2018), have significantly influenced smart city development. Indeed, digital technology – especially information technology infrastructure and expertise (Yarime, 2017; Yeh, 2017) – has contributed much to the development of smart cities. However, too much reliance on technology tends to result in non-technical aspects, which are also important during smart city planning and implementation, being neglected.

This paper attempts to scrutinise smart city initiatives by reaching beyond the technological perspective and focusing on government bureaucracy as an important actor in smart city initiatives. To date, little effort has been made to examine how ready city government bureaucracies are to execute smart city policies. The implementation of smart city programmes can be considered as a transformational process, through which changes are applied to promote a better and higher quality of life (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018). Many empirical studies show that organisational readiness matters in the process of change (Oreg *et al.*, 2011; Vakola, 2013), and that failed organisational transformations sometime happen due to unreadiness and inertia (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993). Thus, it is important to assess organisations' level of readiness when they attempt organisational transformation.

In the context of change management, negative reactions and limited acceptance from staff and organisation are likely to hinder change programmes (Hwang *et al.*, 2016). The link between technology and successful programmes indicates that employees' acceptance is a predictor of successful implementation. A study by Yeo and Gold (2015) showed that organisational actors interpret and enact technology in a cross-boundary context during e-government implementation. They find that actors' acceptance, avoidance, adaptation and interpretation of technological complexities and task interdependency are related to e-government implementation.

This study proposes the development of a systematic scale to measure perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives. Perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives is defined as civil servants' beliefs, attitudes and intentions regarding the extent to which smart city programmes can be implemented in their jurisdiction. To determine readiness level, a quantitative measurement for bureaucratic readiness may offer a valuable instrument for assessment. Since organisation members are among the most important agents in organisational activities (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993; Todnem By, 2007; Oreg *et al.*, 2011; Vakola, 2014), this scale will draw on bureaucrats' perceptions of readiness. In other words, it will focus on the internal perceptions of the civil servants who execute smart city policies at the local government level. As such, the research question can be formulated as follows:

*RQ.* What dimensions shape perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives and how can they be measured?

An empirically tested instrument for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness is the main research output of this present study. This will enrich discussion of smart cities within the context of public bureaucracy. From a practical perspective, researchers and public managers can use this instrument to determine bureaucratic readiness in urban governments' smart city initiatives. The term "bureaucracy" is used to denote the Indonesian government, which is characterised as hierarchical and law based, with professional civil servants and specialised technical knowledge of rules and procedures (Pratama, 2017; Wihantoro *et al.*, 2015).

This paper begins by exploring smart city implementation in the context of Indonesia to position this concept as a research theme in a research setting. It will then present the initial measurement scale, synthesised from the literature review, qualitative interviews and expert-practitioner validation. The next section presents the results of an empirical

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test of the initial scale using an online survey, indicating scale development, validity and reliability. Last, the results of this study are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications.

### **Understanding Indonesia's smart cities: a practical perspective**

The Minister of Communication and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia's Regulation No. 14/2016 narrowly defines smart cities as digital or electronic cities. This definition does not match clearly the current debates on smart cities, which are recognised in terms of multi-dimensional aspects of urban governance and development. More comprehensive concepts and definitions of smart cities come from non-governmental organisations that deal with smart city projects. For example, the Indonesian Association of Intelligent Initiatives defines smart cities as initiatives for improving city residents' quality of life by managing city resources in a more effective, efficient, innovative and integrated way. This concept, called the smart city framework, supports sustainable development goals, including economic, social and environmental ones. Every domain has its own cluster and services, such as smart mobility, smart energy and smart health. This framework also distinguishes between e-government and smart cities, with smart cities being defined more broadly than e-government. A comprehensive approach is also proposed through this framework. Focus must not be given only to technical aspects, such as building ICT supports. The implementation of smart cities ought to consider social approaches, including smart government, smart living and smart society.

From a national development planning perspective, smart cities should promote city branding, such as the best products, human resources, society, culture and e-business, as well as the development of innovative and entrepreneurial human resource skills. This perspective is enshrined within the National Medium-Term Development Plan, 2015–2019. In substance, smart cities do not only enable ICT, but also seek to develop a better environment, society and economy. Given the various practical concepts of smart cities, this research does not rely on an exact definition; rather, it tries to explain the essence of the smart city concept. In this study, smart cities can be regarded as city initiatives, comprising of both technical and non-technical dimensions, that seek to deliver public services in smart ways.

### **Theoretical lens: linking PORC and organisational capability**

Organisations need both capacity and capability to achieve successful change. The concept of perceived organisational readiness for change (PORC) has contributed to the study of change management since the 1970s (Cinite *et al.*, 2009). PORC's central argument is that change processes may be better understood by focusing on the assessment of organisations' members rather than outsiders. This premise has long been supported by empirical studies in various fields such as health and medical care (Weiner and Lee, 2008; Shea *et al.*, 2014), technology (Vakola, 2014), education (Zayim and Kondakci, 2015), cloud computing (Yang *et al.*, 2015), e-government (Koh *et al.*, 2008; Yaghi and Al-Jenaibi, 2017), big data (Klievink *et al.*, 2017) and public sector (Cinite *et al.*, 2009).

Another construct associated with change management is the ability for change. In the literature on organisations and management, change is regarded as a capability; as such, organisations must have the requisite capacity to deliver it (Altmann and Lee, 2015; Schweiger *et al.*, 2015; Sune and Gibb, 2015). From a digital governance perspective, organisational capability matters in facilitating the implementation of digital governance. Klievink *et al.* (2017) discuss the capacity to use big data in the public-sector drawing on such fields as IT adoption, IT implementation, innovation adoption, dynamic and core IT capabilities and big data application. These dimensions can be elaborated through practical assessment of organisational capability, particularly within the areas of IT governance, IT resources, internal attitudes, external attitudes, legal compliance, data governance and data science expertise.

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Previous studies have advised that employees' perceived readiness and capacity to use organisational resources contributes to organisational readiness. As such, the literature on PORC within the public sector and the concept of organisational capability will be the main resource for this study's construction of a scale.

### *Setting*

This study was conducted in the Yogyakarta city. This city was chosen due to its recognition as an adopter of the smart city concept. It has received several awards: first, Yogyakarta city received an award as one of the best smart city adopters from Rating Smart City Indonesia in 2017; second, it received the Best Smart Governance award from City Asia, Inc. Given this recognition, the Yogyakarta city government – especially its readiness for smart city programmes – is worthy of study.

To provide a clearer picture of Yogyakarta's smart city initiative, it is important to briefly describe the current state of its smart city implementation. Yogyakarta initiated its smart city programme a few years before the national "100 Smart Cities" movement was endorsed by the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Public Work and Housing, Ministry of National Development Planning and the Presidential Office in 2017. Yogyakarta's smart city policy has strongly emphasised smart people.

One of its key projects is the Jogja Smart Service application, covering five categories: information and complaints covering all regions of Yogyakarta; data and information services, covering upcoming events, tourism sites, problems and job vacancies; partnerships with other sectors; general information about Yogyakarta, from the district to the village level; and emergency services, consisting of medical and firefighting services. Like other smart city initiatives, vendors and IT consultants have played an important role in developing Yogyakarta's smart city programme. However, the city government has acted as a principal on behalf of citizens. This also means that the local government is not only a contractor, but also has a responsibility to guarantee the accountable implementation of the smart city programme through its organisational and managerial mechanisms.

### *Data, methods and procedures*

Many scholars have proposed steps through which researchers can develop scales (DeVellis, 2016; Gerbing and Anderson, 1988; Hinkin, 1995; Nunnally, 1978; Rossiter, 2002). For instance, DeVellis (2016) proposes eight general steps for developing a valid measurement instrument: determine clearly what you want to measure; generate an item pool; determine the format for measurement; have the item pool reviewed; consider the inclusion of validation items; administer items to a pilot sample; evaluate items; and produce the final measure. Rossiter (2002), meanwhile, formulated a simpler method called COARSE: Construct definition, Object classification, Attribute classification, Rater identification, Scale formation and Enumeration and reporting. The procedure is adapted from both of these models and synthesised to two phases.

First, qualitative research was conducted from February to May 2018. Qualitative data were collected by interviewing three key civil servants from the office of communication and informatics. This stage used a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. A set of exploratory factors was identified and synthesised with the literature as an initial draft of a bureaucratic readiness scale. Before the pooled item generation stage, academics and practitioners were consulted to improve the robustness of the initial draft.

Second, an online survey was conducted from May to June 2018 to test the validity and reliability of measurement scale. Double translation, from English to Indonesian and Indonesian to English, was conducted in the data collecting process. Respondents were civil servants involved in the smart city programme, selected using the random sampling method. Targeted respondents were ( $n = 70$ ), with a response rate of 57.1 per cent. As such, a total of 40 civil servants ( $n = 40$ ) were in the sample group. Regarding the sample size, this study follows

Wolf *et al.* (2013), who recommend a sample size of 30–460 for a simple model in structural equation modelling (SEM). Respondents were 65 per cent male and 35 per cent female, with 95 per cent in lower-middle positions in the bureaucracy and five per cent in the upper-middle management level. In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents had undergraduate degrees (75 per cent) followed by post-graduate degrees (15 per cent) and associate degrees (ten per cent). Ages ranged from 21 to 43, with a mean of 27.5 and SD of 4.36.

The procedure of this study can be seen in Figure 1.

## Results

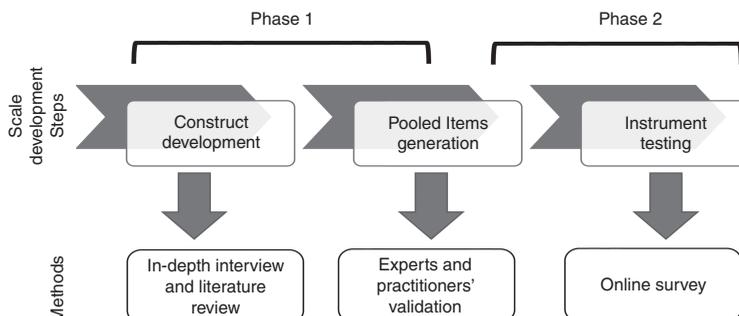
### *Phase 1: scale drafting*

Based on the exploratory qualitative in-depth interviews about how civil servants perceive smart city readiness as a transformative process, a set of aspects constructing bureaucratic readiness were identified. Based on civil servants' insight, perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city programmes may be determined based on the following aspects.

First, political and administrative commitment: one of the most important facets in the implementation of smart city policy is strong political will from the city mayor as the political leader of the city government as well as managerial commitment from the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. The political power of the mayor and his policy decisions are perceived as pre-requisites for smart city policies, while managerial commitment is an operational power in smart city policies. They believe that commitment from both is the key to achieve bureaucratic readiness. Commitment from superiors also means that the mayor, as the top leader of the smart city, must emphasise the application of smartness in public service delivery. Other informants stressed not only political commitment but also managerial support, meaning that the superiors who lead their project should support smart city implementation.

Second, laws and regulations on smart cities play an important role in perceived bureaucratic readiness. In the civil law tradition, laws and regulations are the source of government actions. Implementing agencies need to be backed by regulations whenever they operate. Current smart city policies in Indonesia, however, lack a specific definition, and as such the distinction between the electronic government and smart cities is blurred, thereby hindering the implementation phase. Another issue is related to policy coordination and synchronisation among multiple levels of government, which has occurred as a consequence of decentralisation in Indonesia. This system has given local government the autonomy to develop and design urban governance, resulting in cities having diverse policies and strategies.

Third, IT infrastructure – physical infrastructure and technical expertise of civil servants – is a major asset in smart city programme implementation. The combination of hardware and software is not all that is needed in technological-based governance; the local government bureaucracy must be ready to maintain IT infrastructure and expertise. Self-maintenance and low reliance on vendors were also major concerns of interviewees.



**Figure 1.**  
Research procedure

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Fourth, strategies and structures designate the ways in which city governments achieve their smart city aims and scopes, while structure leads to the availability of smart city operationalisation. Strategies designate the core objectives of smart city implementation and how to achieve them. As organs and machines, structures support and implement strategies that are approved by all stakeholders.

### *Scale construction*

This study defines perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city programmes as civil servants' beliefs, attitudes and intentions regarding the extent to which smart city programmes can be implemented in their jurisdiction. Building on the concepts of PORC and organisational capabilities, as well as grounded interview data, perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives can be determined through four dimensions. The first dimension, commitment from the upper echelons, was modified from the commitment of senior management to change. The scale has drawn from the PORC construct (Cinite *et al.*, 2009), which consists of four items. Since the scale has been tested as a reliable and valid instrument, wording was modified to emphasise the commitment of leaders. For instance, the word "senior management" was changed to "upper echelon" and the substance of commitment was calibrated from "change" to "smart city". Therefore, commitment from the upper echelons was measured by four items: upper echelons are decisive with respect to the smart city programme; upper echelons have bought into the smart city programme; upper echelons determine the course of the smart city programme and consistently promote it on official occasions; and there is a champion of the smart city programme at the highest echelon of the organisation.

The other three dimensions were adapted from the concept of organisational capability for big data use (Klievink *et al.*, 2017), in which grounded data are similar to this concept. The aspects of legal compliance, IT resources and IT governance were given special attention, since they represent smart city features. The legal support dimension entailed five items: the smart city programme has legal standing; there is no regulation overlap in smart city implementation; the bureaucracy has the ability to design a legal compliance strategy; the bureaucracy has the ability to implement a legal compliance strategy; and the bureaucracy has the ability to monitor and evaluate a legal compliance strategy. Meanwhile, the IT resources dimension was measured through three items: there is sufficient IT infrastructure to support smart city implementation; there is sufficient maintenance of IT infrastructure; and there is sufficient IT expertise to implement the smart city programme. Last, the smart city governance dimension was measured through six items: we have clear strategic planning for the smart city programme; the bureaucracy has the ability to design a smart city strategy; the bureaucracy has the ability to implement a smart city strategy; the bureaucracy has the ability to maintain a smart city strategy; the smart city programme has been supported by a well-defined structure; and previous processes will be smoothly integrated into the new system in which the smart city will take place.

A set of pooled items, consisting of 18 statements, were then discussed with academics specialising in Indonesian bureaucracy from Tidar University and 2 practitioners from the Yogyakarta city government. This process was administered to determine the validity of pooled items. Of the 18 items, only 1 item, from the governance dimension, was recommended to be removed from the initial scales. It was "The bureaucracy has the ability to maintain a smart city strategy". Finally, the initial scale for measuring bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives was created using 4 dimensions and 17 items (Table I).

### *Phase 2: instrument testing*

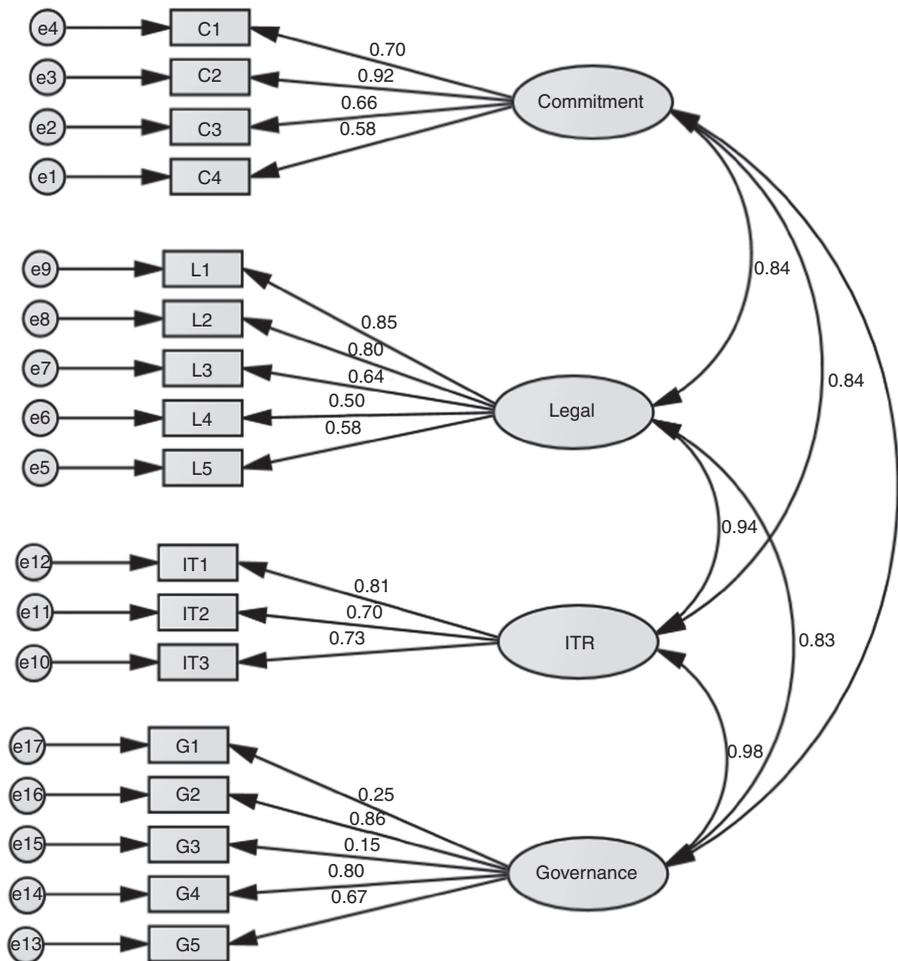
To test the initial measurement scale, SEM was applied due to its fitness for assessing the scale and its dimensionality. Researchers typically prefer to measure latent constructs, rather than the content of a set of items (DeVellis, 2016). The use of SEM is one means of simultaneously

Quote/first order codes	Second order codes	Literatures codes	Dimensions
"[...] the mayor has a commitment to improve the quality of public services, as indicated by integrated, simple, transparent and accountable service delivery. How can that be improved? By utilising information and technology, with a special focus on the smart city programme JM/06/05/2018"	Political and administrative Commitment	Perceive Organisational Readiness to Change/PORC (Cinite <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	Commitment of the upper Echelons
"[...] while my manager is rather technical in action, he is a spearhead working with the mayor for the smart city and city branding programme. Further, Echelons 3 and 4 are reminders of the smart city roadmap" ITH/08/05/2018			
"[...] the regulatory framework for smart city should be comprehensive, from the national level to the sub-national level. It gives us a standing point to execute the policy using local government authorities [...]" AR/10/05/2018	Regulatory framework and legal standing	Capability in digital governance (Klievink <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	Legal support
"[...] we are committed to continuously building IT infrastructure because it is a main value of our city's smart city programme, as is civil servants' skills. Technological developments must receive an expert response. Technology is evolving; human skills must also evolve [...]" SRW/15/05/2018	IT infrastructure and expertise	Capability in digital governance (Klievink <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	IT resources
"[...] the most important point to be considered in the smart city project is the availability of IT experts. Why? Because the government, as a contractor, requires project sustainability. If experts come from the outside, we will lose this sustainability as experts leave the project. I analogise it like this: the civil servant should hold the 'key' to computer programmes instead of non-civil servant experts [...]" SS/13/05/2018			
"[...] strategy deals with vision and mission statements, as well as target designs and action plans. The way the government sets its strategy is very crucial, as it is the soul of the policy and programme. In Yogyakarta, strategy is linked to city branding as a counterpart of the smart city initiative. This gives a strategic direction and value to smart city implementation [...]" EM/21/05/2018	Governance strategies and structures	Capability in digital governance (Klievink <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	Governance

**Table I.**  
Construct building  
based on interviews  
and literature

accommodating the measurement of multiple dependence relationships between constructs and dealing with construct dimensionality (Noar, 2003; Farooq, 2016). The maximum likelihood of estimation was used for normality assumptions. The initial model consisted of 4 dimensions and 17 items, and their factor loading was estimated through AMOS – a statistical software package for SEM produced by SPSS. It can be depicted in Figure 2 and Table II.

Model validity can be measured using construct validity and goodness-of-fit (Farooq, 2016). Goodness-of-fit can be determined using three indices: absolute fit indices (RMSEA, GFI, RMR), incremental fit indices (CFI), and parsimony fit indices (AGFI). The model-fit from this initial model achieved the following output: CMIN/DF: 1.562, RMR: 0.129, GFI: 0.692, AGFI: 0.583, CFI: 0.819, RMSEA: 0.120. The default model indices did not indicate goodness-of-fit. For improvement, item purification was conducted by dropping items with a small factor loading. Five items with a factor loading of less than 0.60 were dropped: there is a champion of the smart city programme at the highest echelon of the organisation; the bureaucracy has the ability to implement a legal compliance strategy; the bureaucracy has the ability to monitor and



**Figure 2.**  
Initial measurement  
model and its  
factor loading

evaluate a legal compliance strategy; we have clear strategic planning for the smart city programme; and the bureaucracy has the ability to implement a smart city strategy. After these items were dropped, a modified model with goodness-of-fit was reached. It was shaped by 4 dimensions and 12 items (Figure 3 and Table III).

The model-fit indices improved significantly after item purification. First, the absolute fit indices, denoted as the extent to which the model fits the sample data, were assessed through RMSEA, GFI and RMR. The RMSEA improved from 0.120 to 0.07, which achieved the cut-off value of 0.08, while the GFI improved from 0.692 to 0.81, which was close to the acceptable value of 0.90, and the RMR from 0.12 to 0.10. Second, incremental fit indices, which showed how well the specified model fits compared to alternative baseline models, were reviewed through the CFI value. After dropping the five items with low-factor loading, the CFI improved from 0.81 to 0.96, meaning that it reached the cut-off value of CFI (> 0.9). Other indices, such as TLI, were acceptable at a value of 0.94. Third, parsimony fit indices deal with overall discrepancy between observed and implied covariance, and are also associated with model complexity. In this study, the AGFI is relatively low, despite having improved from 0.58 to 0.69. Another measure of

Constructs	Definition	Items
Commitment of the upper echelons	Degree to which upper echelons have commitment on smart city programme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Upper echelons are decisive with respect to the smart city programme</li> <li>2. Upper echelons have bought into the smart city programme</li> <li>3. Upper echelons determine the course of the smart city programme and consistently promote it on official occasions</li> <li>4. There is a champion of the smart city programme at the highest echelon of the organisation</li> </ol>
Legal support	Degree to which bureaucracy can adjust smart city programme into regulation and legal system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. The smart city programme has legal standing</li> <li>6. There is no regulation overlap in smart city implementation</li> <li>7. The bureaucracy has the ability to design a legal compliance strategy</li> <li>8. The bureaucracy has the ability to implement a legal compliance strategy</li> <li>9. The bureaucracy has the ability to monitor and evaluate a legal compliance strategy</li> </ol>
IT resources	Degree to which bureaucracy is capable design, develop and maintain proper IT infrastructure and expertise to facilitate smart city programme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. There is sufficient IT infrastructure to support smart city implementation</li> <li>11. There is sufficient maintenance of IT infrastructure</li> <li>12. There is sufficient IT expertise to implement the smart city programme</li> </ol>
Governance	Degree to which bureaucracy is capable to design, develop, and maintain smart city strategy, decision making and responsibility structures, supporting organisations, including integration of systems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. We have clear strategic planning for the smart city programme</li> <li>14. The bureaucracy has the ability to design a smart city strategy</li> <li>15. The bureaucracy has the ability to implement a smart city strategy</li> <li>16. The smart city programme has been supported by a well-defined structure</li> <li>17. Previous processes will be smoothly integrated into the new system in which the smart city will take place</li> </ol>

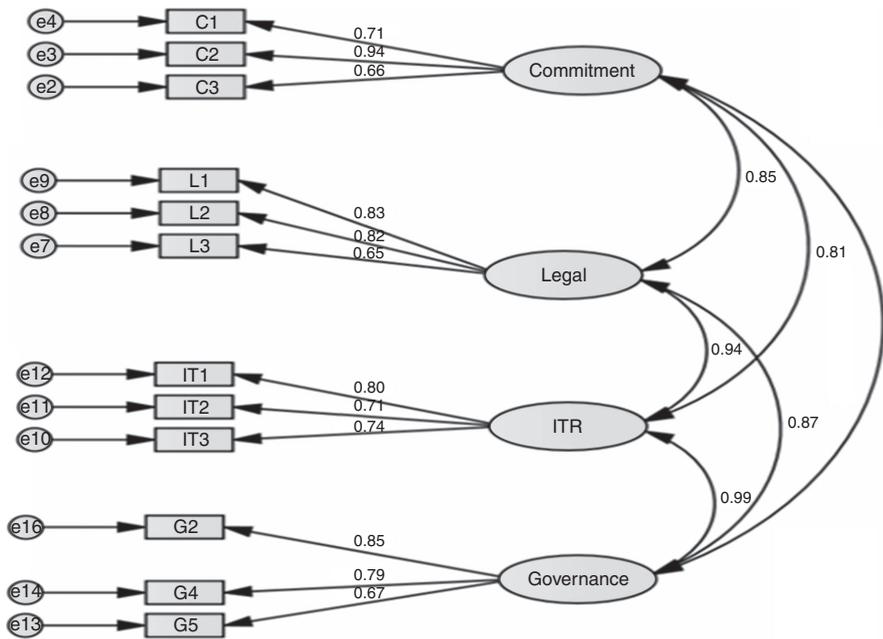
**Table II.**  
Constructs, definition  
and items

parsimony fit is CMIN/DF: 1.21 was acceptable, since a good value ranges from one to three. Given the above indices, the purified model was acceptable as a good fit.

Reliability assessment can be assessed by calculating composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). CR is mostly used in SEM testing, which measures internal consistency. CR and AVE were calculated in each dimension. This study follows Hair *et al.* (1998), who suggest that it is better for all CRs to have a value greater than 0.6 and all AVEs to be above 0.5. This means that more than half of the variance observed is accounted for by the hypothesised constructs. CR and AVE calculations were done manually, using an Excel spreadsheet, because AMOS does not provide for CR and AVE calculation. AVE was assessed by summing the square of the factor load divided by numbers of items. The following values were achieved:

- commitment from upper echelons has CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.60;
- legal support has CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.59;
- IT resources has CR = 0.79 and AVE = 0.56; and
- governance has CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.59.

Since the CR and AVE for all constructs in the model were acceptable, evidence of good internal consistency was found.



**Figure 3.**  
Item purification  
model with factor  
loading of each item

Dimensions/items	Factor loading
<i>Commitment of the upper echelons CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.60</i>	
1. Upper echelons are decisive with respect to the smart city programme	0.71
2. Upper echelons have bought into the smart city programme	0.94
3. Upper echelons determine the course of the smart city programme and consistently promote it on official occasions	0.66
<i>Legal Support CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.59</i>	
1. The smart city programme has legal standing	0.83
2. There is no regulation overlap in smart city implementation	0.82
3. The bureaucracy has the ability to design a legal compliance strategy	0.65
<i>IT resources CR = 0.79 and AVE = 0.56</i>	
1. There is sufficient IT infrastructure to support smart city implementation	0.80
2. There is sufficient maintenance of IT infrastructure	0.71
3. There is sufficient IT expertise to implement the smart city programme	0.74
<i>Governance has CR = 0.81 and AVE = 0.59</i>	
1. The bureaucracy has the ability to design a smart city strategy	0.85
2. The smart city programme has been supported by a well-defined structure	0.79
3. Previous processes will be smoothly integrated into the new system in which the smart city will take place	0.67
<b>Notes:</b> Core indices of model-fit CMin/df = 1.21; GFI = 0.81, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07	

**Table III.**  
Summary of final  
measurement scale

### Discussion

A smart city programme can be assumed to be a transformational process in which a city government shifts its mode of governance to become smarter in delivering public services. This study is mainly built from the change management literature, especially the concepts of organisational readiness and organisational capability. This study has produced a

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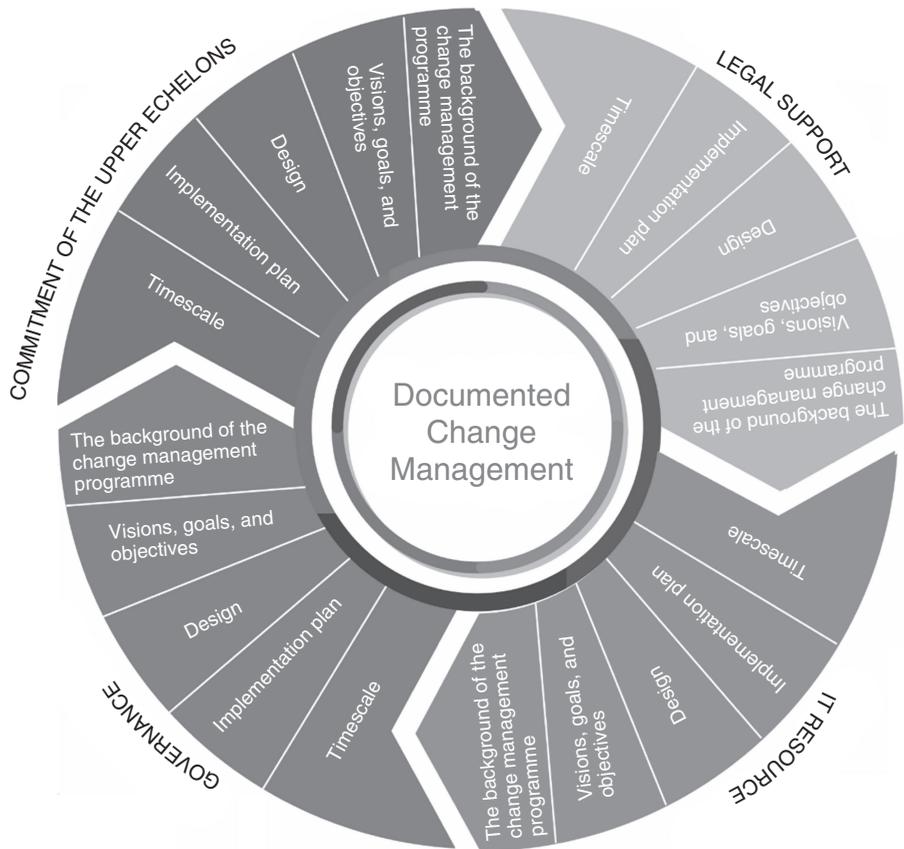
multi-dimensional construct of perceived bureaucratic readiness to contribute to smart city debates, especially on how bureaucracies engage with smart city policies and programmes. The findings of this study also support the human-centred paradigm, which believes that acceptance, adaptation and employee mindset play important roles in programme implementation (Cunningham *et al.*, 2002; Oreg *et al.*, 2011; Vakola, 2014). Thus, instead of relying on external assessment, focus is given to internal perspectives of readiness, providing a clearer understanding of the bureaucracy's readiness for smart city initiatives.

As transformational development, smart city programmes should undergo a change process. One prominent theory for explaining change is theory of change (ToC), which emphasises how social and political changes evolve in society (Stein and Valters, 2012; Valters, 2014). Regardless of the various definitions used in different disciplines, the common understanding of ToC posits that the logic of specific change can influence the outcome of desired change. This means that change should be planned in a systematic way to promote new management practices (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Van der Voet *et al.*, 2016).

To successfully transform bureaucracy through its smart city programme, the Yogyakarta city government must design a change management blueprint to guide its bureaucracy. Furthermore, the institutional factors, specifically how managerial actions and strategies implemented within organisations, affect the transformation process in which change occurs. Successful change management is related to the degree to which organisations are ready to face the change itself (Napier *et al.*, 2017). Following Price and Chahal (2006), planning and well-documentation of change management which includes: the background of the change management programme; vision, goals and objectives; the design of the change management programme; implementation plan; and timescales, matter in the process of transformation.

Given a valid and reliable scale for measuring bureaucratic readiness for a smart city programme, the Yogyakarta city government and other local governments may consider four dimensions of readiness in its programme implementation. First, the commitment of the upper echelons, including both the mayor and senior civil servants, is very important in ensuring bureaucratic readiness. The support of the upper echelons is very beneficial in strategic policy decisions and planning. This concept is also connected to recent debates on leadership and change management in the public sector (Van der Voet *et al.*, 2016), which emphasises transformational leadership during reform and transformation processes. Second, clear and comprehensive regulations for smart city initiatives may give smart city implementation a powerful legal standing. Regulatory framework is perceived as necessary for putting smart city policy into action as the bureaucracy must be backed up with legal and written regulations. Third, since smart cities are strongly highly linked to technology, IT resources – the degree to which the bureaucracy is capable of designing, developing and maintaining IT infrastructure and the expertise to facilitate a smart city programme – need to be taken into account. Fourth, the degree to which the bureaucracy can design, develop and maintain strategies, decisions and structures to support smart city policy may contribute to the degree to which the bureaucracy is ready to implement a smart city programme. All of these four dimensions should be integrated with the five elements of documented change management within change management plan to promote readiness. The framework illustrates the integration of perceived readiness and change plan documentation (Figure 4).

Another significant element is capability, meaning that the organisation (city government) must have the requisite capacity to deliver change. Referring to the bureaucratic readiness construct, capacity building for civil servants may focus on such areas as smart city policymaking and strategy, IT expertise and security, governance, collaboration and institutional development. In the public-sector context, capability is rather different than in the private sector (Andrews *et al.*, 2016). This is due to environmental differences that must be addressed properly. Capacity building for bureaucratic readiness, thus, must be integrated with the existing capacity building framework in the local government context. The administrative



**Figure 4.**  
The integration  
of perceived  
readiness and  
documented change

and regulatory framework for capacity building, training and educating civil servants should be aligned with the national and regional civil service systems.

Managerial implications can be drawn from our proposed measurement scale. Smart city managers can utilise the multi-dimensional construct of bureaucratic readiness and its scale to assess how ready the government bureaucracy is to implement a smart city initiative. This means that the scale gives the bureaucracy diagnostic power to self-assess readiness for smart city implementation. Furthermore, by mitigating the weaknesses of the perceived bureaucratic readiness metric, smart city managers can design further interventions that enable them to achieve a higher level of readiness.

### Conclusion

Recalling that the objective of this study is the development and validation of a scale for measuring bureaucratic readiness in Indonesia's smart city initiatives, a scale comprising 4 dimensions and 12 items has been prepared. The validated items are as follows: first, commitment of the upper echelons dimension consists of three items: upper echelons are decisive with respect to the smart city programme, upper echelons have bought into the smart city programme, upper echelons determine the course of the smart city programme and consistently promote it on official occasions. Second, the legal support dimension consists of three items: the smart city programme has legal standing, there is no regulation

overlap in smart city implementation, and the bureaucracy has the ability to design a legal compliance strategy. Third, the IT resources dimension consists of three items: there is sufficient IT infrastructure to support smart city implementation, there is a sufficient maintenance of IT infrastructure and there is sufficient IT expertise to implement a smart city programme. Fourth, the governance dimension consists of three items: the bureaucracy has the ability to design a smart city strategy, the smart city programme has been supported by a well-defined structure and previous processes will be smoothly integrated into the new system in which the smart city will take place.

The final scale for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness for smart city initiatives has been tested empirically and meets the validity and reliability thresholds. Consequently, this scale provides an alternative instrument for measuring perceived bureaucratic readiness when local governments intend to implement a smart city programme. Smart city planners and senior public managers may consider this proposed instrument to assess the bureaucracy's perceived readiness before and during smart city implementation. However, this instrument has a model generalisability issue, since data were only derived from one city government, which is relatively small in size and scope. Thus, it can only be generalised to cities with relatively similar contexts. Future research can be conducted by replicating this study in other contexts and settings, including different cities in different countries. Also, this study did not verify convergence validity, which examines the relationship of perceived readiness with other associated constructs. Future studies with a convergence validity test may improve the robustness of this model.

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# Empowerment through participation in local governance: the case of Union Parishad in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The traditional concept of people's participation through their representatives is changing to the mechanism of direct participation of community people in the local governing process. In coupling with these, the Constitution of Bangladesh and the local government acts guarantee to foster the direct participation of people in the formation of local bodies and development programs. The purpose of this paper is to explore the avenues of people's participation in local government, particularly the Union Parishad (UP) in Bangladesh, and to evaluate the empowerment of marginalized community through those avenues.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a broad descriptive and analytical approach, this paper evaluates the relationship between participation and empowerment of local community based on the review of secondary sources of information.

**Findings** – The local government institutions, particularly UP, has existed many mechanisms through which people participate in decision-making process. It is also believed that participation of community people in local government institutions is not only an opportunity for them but also an apparatus of empowerment. Hence, the process of empowerment is entrenched in the notion of participation. It is evident that the people at grass root level have been participating in UP in diverse arrangements, but the effectiveness of these participations in terms of empowerment is still meager and even lack.

**Originality/value** – Though a long time has passed after introducing these participatory mechanisms, very few studies have undertaken to assess the people's participation in local government. Additionally, no single initiative was undertaken to assess how empowerment of marginalized people happened through these initiatives as empowering community people is the key objective of it.

**Keywords** Bangladesh, Participation, Local government, Empowerment, Union Parishad

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Popular participation in governance that affects their lives is an indispensable part in contemporary democratic society. Globally, decentralized approaches have been adopted as a sustainable solution for local community that improve service delivery, accommodate marginalized community in governing process and allow citizens to participate in formulating and implementing the decisions, development plans and policies. The perceived benefits of decentralization are greater access to decision makers, higher level of participation by various social groups in decision making and accountability of decision makers (Andersson *et al.*, 2004). Local people are empowered directly through decentralization as of involving local people, including civil society in planning and implementing public programs and policies (Roche, 2010; Uddin, 2017). Participation by the local population is a requisite ingredient in development activities because it integrates people's experience, knowledge and commitments in the development process, while upholding democratic values (Panday and Rabbani, 2011). Popular participation in decentralized governance is seen as a dynamic process by which



people influence the direction and implementation of a development program with a view to upholding their well-being in terms of income, self-growth, independence or other values they cherish (Denhardt *et al.*, 2009; Martinelli, 2005). Particularly, the inclusion of poor people and other traditionally excluded groups, including females in priority setting and decision making, is also imperative to ensure that limited public resources build on local knowledge and priorities (The World Bank, 1994). The people's participation in local governing process has immense benefits for the local institutions as well as the community. It appears both to reveal preferences and to keep costs down (Bird, 1995). Additionally, participation not only empowers people but also empowers local government officials to develop ways by which effective participation may occur (Koenig, 2005).

Recently, the local government in Bangladesh has started to exercise democratic and participatory governing processes at grassroots level. There are some formal mechanisms of ensuring community participation in planning, implementing and monitoring. It is expected that civic participation in local decision making takes place as the elected representative are supposed to be accountable to the people for the money paid by the local citizens as taxes. Citizen might complain about their local government and the services and try and change them but that usually revolves around voting out incumbents, not moving. Moreover, it would require substantial numbers of people or businesses to relocate to influence government to alter its policies and services (Hamilton, 1999, 2012). Similarly, the Union Parishad (UP) as a unit of local government institutions ensures effective participation of all stakeholders and promotes community empowerment and produce improved service delivery and sustainable decisions. The provision for people's participation has opened up a new avenue for the general people other than people's representatives to work for the local government bodies. The rationality for incorporating popular participation mechanisms in UPs is that local people are expected to engage directly with UP to identify and solve their problems relating to their livelihoods, and to bargain with the UP functionaries. At the same time, the elected representatives are supposed to be able to identify their areas of priority needs, and make sustainable decisions with the help of local expertise. Simultaneously, transparency and voters' trust on elected functionaries are likely to enhance through dissemination of information on income, expenditure, project beneficiary list, project list and so on.

Various recent studies have shown that popular participation in the affairs of the local government bodies are significantly increasing in an effective manner and people are trying to make their presence felt and their voices heard. It is indeed argued that elected officials are interested and focus on efficiency in service delivery and less concerned with fostering means of public participation (Zeemering, 2008) because people's participation at the local level has remained controversial as of the existence of the patron–client relationship in the rural society. Moreover, the structure of the UP is such that the chairman has a disproportionate role in decision making, and the general ward members or women of the reserved seats play a secondary role. Procedurally, ward assemblies or committees can make recommendations to the council and the council makes the decisions. However, in the case of decision making in the council, the chairman is the final authority (Sultan, 2018). Indeed, many of participants have complained that their views are disregarded by the chairman (Panday, 2008). Local government being a sub-system of national government, female's involvement and representations are also essential for a political point of view. They play a special role in representing women's interests and responding to their needs (Panday, 2008, 2013; Nazneen *et al.*, 2014). They are participating in the UP meetings in various public forums and also raising different issues concerning budgeting and planning, project implementation and scheme selection (Sultan, 2018). But other studies have also shown that female-elected representatives face various structural and attitudinal barriers (Panday, 2008; Nazneen and Tasneem, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to assess the progress of regime opening in terms of people's participation in UP and reveal the factors

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hindering the reform. This paper is descriptive and qualitative in nature based on secondary sources of information, attempting to examine the empowerment of grassroots people through the mechanisms of popular participation adopted in the UP in Bangladesh. In this regard, this paper initially conceptualizes broad two themes, namely, empowerment and participation, and discusses the local government structure in Bangladesh, together with historical overview of UP. The paper also critically evaluates to what extent those mechanisms in UP activities empowered locals to hold service providers accountable and transparent to them, along with special emphasis on female participation.

#### *Conceptualizing empowerment and participation*

Participation and empowerment are crucial elements for socio-political development of any nation. Empowerment is regarded as a process of external and internal change. The external change is known as political empowerment which finds expression in the ability to act and to implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process whereas the internal change is the person's sense or belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems (Parsons, 1988). Empowerment happens on an individual, organizational and community level that may be termed as individual, organizational and community empowerment. Individual empowerment is an expression on the individual level of a multi-leveled process which may be applied to organizations, communities, and social policy (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). Community empowerment is a social action process by which individuals, communities and organizations gain mastery over their lives in the context of changing their social and political environment to improve equity and quality of life (Wallerstein, 1992). Individual change is a prerequisite for community and social change and empowerment (Wilson, 1996). There are four mechanisms that are important to empower poor people, increasing their freedom of choice and action in different contexts. These mechanisms, namely, access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and local organizational capacity, are closely intertwined and act in synergy (Narayan, 2002).

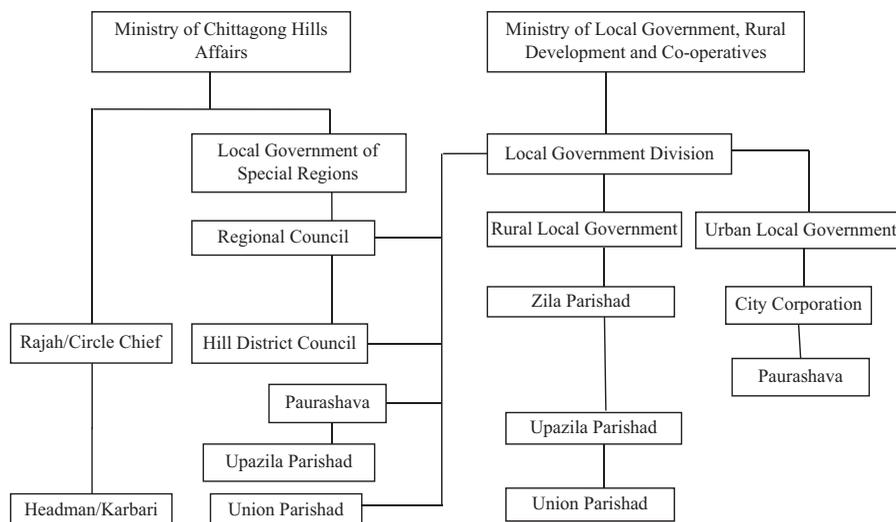
People's participation is one of the core issues of democratic and decentralized governance. Participation is a means of exercising influence and bargaining power, when it creates an environment through distribution of power and ownership among the officials and the ordinary people (Isham *et al.*, 1995). The World Bank (1994) defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them. Moreover, Bhatannagar and Williams (1992) also define participation as a function of information through which people can come to share a development vision, make choices and manage activities. Finally, people's participation is the process by which members of a society share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to the community (Roberts, 2004). In addition, participation within organizations is considered to be an important component of the overall participatory process (Vigoda and Golembiewski, 2001). It is also argued that access to information, accountability and local organizational capacity is also imperative through the inclusion and participation of community people at local government level.

In Bangladesh, UPs have several direct (when citizens are personally involved and actively engaged) and indirect (when citizens elect others to represent them) avenues of popular participation which make the local government more accountable and transparent to the community. The direct avenues are, for example, setting up participatory budgeting (open budget session), community based meeting (*Ward Shava*), standing committees and others special committees, and access to information (Local Government Division, 2009; CPD, 2013). Additionally, the election is the only mechanism of indirect participation of local people in governing system. Besides, a UP has been entrusted with the responsibilities to

run the village court system. The present form of a local court gives the more opportunity of people's participation in the adjudication process. For example, the victims and offenders have an active role and right to participate in the choice of the adjudicators, since the parties themselves nominate four out of the five members of the forum (Khan and Rahman, 2009). Particularly, the key objective of the courts is to provide and ensure justice for all at root level as well as protect rural poor people through empowering community people, particularly women, poor and disadvantaged groups to seek remedies for injustices (Sarker, 2013). All these provisions are made for involving people in the decision-making process, and in ensuring accountability and transparency of the total process.

### Local government structure in Bangladesh

The existing structure of local government in Bangladesh is nothing but a result of changes during successive regimes. The constitution of Bangladesh preserves the provision of elected representative bodies at all levels of administrative tiers with powers to prepare budgets, maintain funds, impose taxes, and implement plans for public services and economic development (Government of Bangladesh, 2008). The administration of Bangladesh is divided into nine administrative units called divisions. Each division is split into several districts which are further subdivided into Upazila (sub-districts). Each sub-district is further divided into several unions, except for those in metropolitan areas. At present, there are two distinct types of local government institutions in Bangladesh: one for rural areas and the other one for urban areas. The local government in rural areas represents a hierarchical system consisting of three tiers: UP at the village level, Upazila Parishad at the sub-district level and Zila Parishad at the district level, while urban local government are the city corporation for large cities and the Paurashava (municipality) for small towns (CPD, 2013). There exist separate laws for each tier of local government. In the three hill districts of Chittagong hill tracts, the system of local government appears iron fisted and more complicated one because of the existence of dual governing system. Here traditional local government is functioning under the circle chief along with the general system (Barkat *et al.*, 2015). Figure 1 shows the existing structure of local government in Bangladesh.



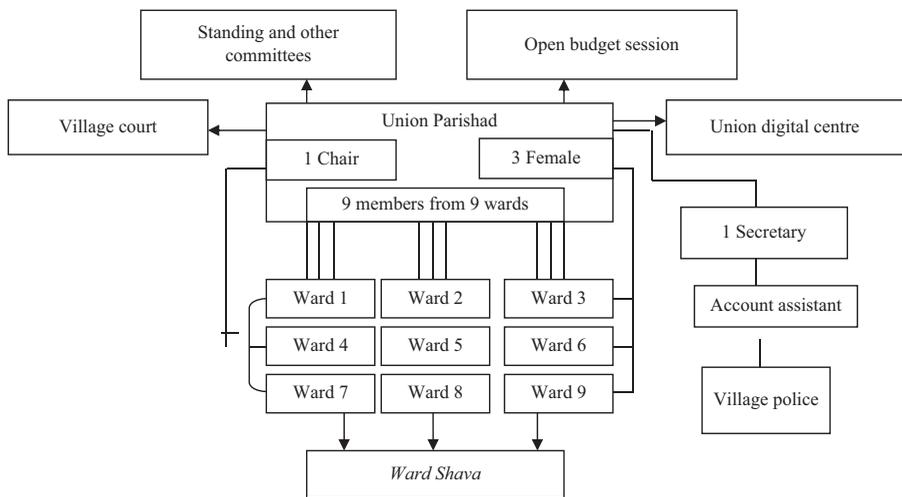
Source: Barkat *et al.* (2015)

**Figure 1.**  
Local government  
system in Bangladesh

The composition and functions of city corporation and municipality are more or less similar. A city corporation has comparatively more wards and wider jurisdictions than municipality. A city corporation or a municipality consists of a mayor and councilors. Like other local bodies, one-third of the total seats are made reserved for women councilors. The number of councilors is fixed by the government depending on the size of the city. The mayor and councilors of municipality or city corporation are directly elected on the basis of adult franchise for the tenure of five years.

The first tier of rural local government in Bangladesh is Zila Parishad which, in fact, is the apex local government institution. The elected chairman (but now selected by the government) is the executive head of the council. He is assisted by 15 members of whom five seats are reserved for female members. The Upazila Parishad is considered as most significant tier in terms of strengthening local government as far as decentralization and devolution of power are concerned (Barkat *et al.*, 2015). Currently, each Upazila council has an elected chairman and two vice-chairmen of whom one is reserved for female. All representatives are elected through direct popular election. The elected chairmen of the UP and mayor of municipality (if any) within the sub-district level and the one-third of female member who are elected among elected female members of UP and municipality become the members of the Upzila Parishad. The government officials at sub-district level are the ex-officio members of the council without having a voting right (Figure 2).

The UP is the bottom tier of the local government institutions in Bangladesh which provides services to citizens at their doorstep. According to the provision of the Act, a union is divided into nine wards which are considered as its jurisdiction. A UP is made up of 13 members having 1 chairman and 9 elected members and 3 female members from reserved seats (Local Government Division, 2009). To assist necessary supports to UP, there is a provision for one secretary and one computer operator cum accountant and ten village police, including Dafadars. The Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 is the milestone in the history of Bangladesh aiming at to ensure people's empowerment and good governance in the governmental organizations. This Act confers UP to perform more around 40 functions, which included civic and public welfare, infrastructures, revenue, development and judicial under limited capacity. The UP is the only local government body that has been operating for decades with regular elections (Sarker, 2003).



**Figure 2.**  
Organizational and  
functional structure of  
Union Parishad

**Source:** Modified from local government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009

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### People's participation in UP: historical perspective

The local government in Bangladesh has been found in the subcontinent since ancient time, but appeared as a representative character during the British rule in India (Barkat *et al.*, 2015). The people's participation in local development works remains deeply rooted in the dynamics of the evolution of local government bodies. Local government institutions and the mechanism of people's participation with those agencies have changed in tune with the changes of the socio-political situation. In ancient time there were autonomous and self-sufficient institutions popularly known as village republics where the common people had access to involve in the decision making process (Litvack *et al.*, 1998; Siddiqui, 2005). The concept of village republic was later transformed to village panchayet where local people could also discuss their affairs with the central employees.

During the British rule in India, numerous attempts were experienced to encourage community engagement in the local government institutions. In these respects, the first attempt was the village *panchayet* consisting of five local people to appoint village police under the Village Panchayet Act of 1870 (Siddiqui, 2005). After then, the union committee under the Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885 and later the union board under the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 were substantiated to ensure people's participation at grassroots level. Though these Acts were called self-government, these bodies were not self-governed rather controlled by the central government directly or by proxy (Sarker, 2006). The real purpose behind the introduction of local bodies was seeking support from the natives at the local level while denying their participation at the central level (Morshed, 1989). In addition, there were no formal mechanisms or institutions for civic participation or citizen's voice in local government (Rahman *et al.*, 2004). During the Pakistan period, four tiers of local government system were introduced under the basic democracy order of 1959. The union council, consisting of elected representatives from each unit, was the basic foundation for people's participation in the governing process. But rather than serving the people, these people's representatives served the government officials to continue their power exercise (Siddiqui, 2005; Sarker, 2006).

After the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971, the local government bodies in Bangladesh have experienced significant changes in their structure and functions in concurrence with constitutional spirit as well as several successive governments in Bangladesh undertook a number of reform efforts aiming to increase people's participation in the governing of local government process (Panday and Rabbani, 2011). Particularly with the change of government in 1976, 1982, 1991, 2001 and 2006, there were changes in the structures and nature of people's participation in local government (Waheduzzaman, 2010). But the Government of Bangladesh is endlessly striving to make local government institutions more operative and participatory. Among other reforms, the Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 (and subsequently amended later) was the milestone initiative of the government in the history of UP. The local people in rural Bangladesh have been participating in development programs in different forms, but the effectiveness of these participations is still low (Aminuzzaman and Sharmin, 2006).

### Empowerment through participation: an assessment

The Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 ensures the provisions for inclusion of local residents and elected representatives in different committees, meetings, *Ward Shava* and other activities of the council (Table I). People's participation in decisions and development works that has an effect in their lives is, therefore, perceived as an instrument of empowerment because local people get empowered to raise their voices in government decisions (Denhardt *et al.*, 2009; Holzer and Kloby, 2005).

Avenues	Composition and meeting	Functions/jurisdictions
Open budget session	One open pre-budget and one final budget meeting in a year by incorporating local people; meeting: 60 days before the financial year	Major functions are to discuss and debate budgetary priorities; and prepare a budget for the next year and approve previous budget
<i>Ward Shava</i>	A <i>Ward Shava</i> consists of each ward with all the voters; The respective UP member and female member will act as chairman and adviser, respectively; each ward to organize at least two meetings annually; and the quorum: five percent of the total voters of that ward	Among 7 functions and 4 responsibilities: reviewing all the development activities and providing necessary support; facilitating development planning; preparing and transferring final lists of SSNP beneficiaries and overseeing the progress of schemes; and uniting people of the ward, building organizations and social awareness programs and arranging sports and cultural programs
Village court	A court consists of a chairman and four members: of four members, two members from community people out of UP; and meeting: at least once in a week	A court can deal with cases of criminal and civil natures, where the amount sought for compensation falls below or equal BDT 75,000 (US\$900)
Standing committees and others	13 standing committees on specific functional matters lead by a UP member with five to seven members and other co-opt person; and organize meeting at least bi-monthly	Monitoring the activities of service providers and giving feedback to the general people; give planning support to the service provider and monitor the implementing process; and provide regular reports to the UP
Local election	UP election held after every five year interval	Direct avenues to make the representative accountable
Access to information	Every citizen has the right to obtain information from the UP in any time	Provide the information upon the citizen's request; and UP publishes the Citizen's Charter

**Table I.**  
Avenues of people's participation in UP

### *Open budget session*

Participatory budgeting is the process of inviting citizens to a public meeting to discuss budgetary priorities. Participatory budgeting describes the process in which citizens engage in debate and consultation to contribute to defining the balance of expenditures, investments, priorities and uses of public resources. The national and local government bodies arrange participatory budgeting to use information by the public in order to affect revenue and expenditure decision making (Vergara, 2002). Earlier, the budget making process in UP was highly centralized. There was no scope for people's participation. But, the Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 established a formal mechanism of people's participation in policy making process and budgeting at local level. As per UP Act 2009, the UP is required to organize two open budget sessions every year, once in February and once in April. The UP informs and invites the community people irrespective of gender, sex, caste, class status to participate in the session. In the budget session, the UP generally shares the proposed budget, including income and expenditure and revised budget, and invites feedback from participants. It is to be noted that the proposed budget is prepared based on the recommendations of *Ward Shava*. Then, the participants discuss on budget and provide their comments and recommendations to incorporate in the final budget. After incorporating feedback from the open budget session, UPs approve the final budget in their full meeting. The final budget is then made public by hanging it in the notice board.

The aim of the open budget session is to discuss and debate the UP budget to ensure the representatives' accountability through people's voices. The open budget session is one of the most imperative tasks of UP which entails projection of income and expenditure of the

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UP before the people. People can raise questions, queries and make comments on any of the issues of the proposed budget and plan (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). Open session creates an opportunity for local people to address their demands as well as to participate in the decision-making process and development activities, and make the council accountable for their work (Chowdhury, 2018). The local people also feel honored to have access in local bodies. Conversely, it also creates scope for the UPs to mobilize more local resources by creating awareness and motivating local people to pay their taxes. It also gives them an opportunity to have support from community in implementing development projects as they can show credible transparency and accountability in their activities through open budget sessions (Rahman *et al.*, 2004).

### *Ward Shava*

*Ward Shava* is another formal mechanism for participation in UP that enshrined detailed in the Act (Articles 4–6). *Ward Shava* is a citizen gathering, composed of all individuals enlisted in the voter list of a ward, and conducts meetings chaired by the respective ward member under the advisorship of female member. According to the Act, there is a provision for arranging two open meetings a year at every ward level by ensuring a sufficient number (at least 5 percent of total voters) of participation from local people. To ensure the attendance of *Ward Shava* members, the UP circulates a public notice at least seven days before the meeting takes place. During these meetings, information on current development activities, financial affairs and schemes are provided to allow citizens to evaluate the activities of UP. Furthermore, the *Ward Shava* can propose projects, prioritizes schemes and development programs to be implemented, identify and prioritize the beneficiaries of social safety net programs, review UP reports and identify shortcomings (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). After incorporating feedback from participants, the *Ward Shava* put forward a report to UP.

*Ward Shava* is an effective mechanism for encouraging people to express their opinions and views about UP activities. It ensures people's participation in the development planning process and makes the local representatives accountable to them. *Ward Shava* meetings have been conceived as a forum for the unheard voices of the deprived people, especially village women, which is supposed to give them voice to raise their problems to UP system. In the meeting, they have the opportunity to exchange information and opinions on community affairs. Community budgets would be a typical example of public hearings. This mechanism is considered as an important tool to raise citizen's concerns in front of elected officials and bureaucrats, thus providing important feedback to the officials regarding citizens' experiences and views.

### *Village court*

An UP is entrusted to resolve petty disputes both civil and criminal at local level through a village court under the provisions of the village courts Act of 2006. The village court is a quasi-judicial and semi-formal court. The village court is governed by the UP under the leadership of the chairman, along with the other four members, of whom at least two from UP members. There is also a provision of choosing two persons, one from each party, in forming a five-member judge panel from outside of the elected representatives to represent them. There is legal guidance as to decision making of both the village courts. So, legally, there is no scope for making an arbitrary decision, nor is there any scope for the village leaders to poke their nose in the decision making (Islam, 2015). The open forum hearing system is helping to enhance increased sense of ownership over the local peace building process and promotion of communal harmony. Given the fact of resolving matters related to the interest of women or minorities, the provision of incorporating a woman member has made mandatory in the law. There are claims that

these Shalish systems are largely unfair, biased, anti-poor and ant-disadvantaged people. To fight this bias and prejudice in the Shalish system, and to provide the economically poor and vulnerable rural people with alternative justice systems, the village court was introduced quite a long time ago (Islam, 2015).

The underlying principle of the village court is that disputant parties can discuss their problems openly without hesitation, in an attempt to reach an amicable and sustainable decision, thereby helping to restore broken relationships. Availability of the judicial system at local level is the most important mechanism for empowerment. The village court is the best alternative for local people where they get justice in a very nominal expense and in a cordial and informal atmosphere due to over burden cases and inadequate access of poor people in the formal justice system. Moreover, many grievances which are never accessed to the formal justice system due to its formalities and for the cause of expense can be resolved through village courts and that would contribute substantially in establishing a rule of law (Local Government Division, 2010). It can also mention that the village court is closer and within easy reach of the villagers and, hence, geographically accessible to the poor and disadvantaged community of rural people as of the village court takes place at the UP complex, which is mostly located at the center of the union.

#### *Standing committees and other committees*

Another formal mechanism of participation is the committee system of UP. The Article 45 of the UP Act provides provision for establishing 13 standing committees on specific matters. As prescribed in law, a standing committee is headed by one UP member together with five to seven members. Moreover, there are provisions for incorporation of general people as co-opted members in standing committees and other committees of UP. Officials of different government offices can become members of different committees. Each standing committee has to meet every two months, but emergency meetings can be arranged any time. Basically, the members of standing committees organize regular meetings among themselves to address the problems of the committee in their respective sectors, locality and find out the means and ways to resolve the problems in a structured manner. The head of the committee contacts possible members in order to invite them to participate; the invitation can be accepted or declined. The UPs are bound to deliberate and consider standing committee proposals and comments (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the project implementation committee and other local management committees like market management committee and school management committee are important mechanism for community people to participate and oversee the development activities of UP. These committees are formed mostly by local people.

The main functions of the standing committees are to provide the planning supports along with monitoring the activities and implementing process of service providers. In addition, it also provides regular report to the UP and gives the feedback to the general people based on their needs and demand (Local Government Division, 2012). For community empowerment, there exists a provision for getting a co-opts member from the community. The decision is made on the basis of opinions of majority present in the meeting. Additionally, for women empowerment, the chairman of one-third of standing committees is made reserved for them in UP. Moreover, the PIC and other management committees are the formal avenues for empowerment of local people in local government. These are formed to monitor and evaluate the development activities of UP.

#### *Access to information*

People's right of access to information has a legal and constitutional basis in Bangladesh. The Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience, speech and expression as one of the fundamental rights. Additionally, the right

to information Act and the Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 (Articles 78–81) recognize the people's right of access to information and ensures legal provisions for free flow of information. The access to information is not limited by any law that prevents information disclosure. According to the law, every citizen has the right to obtain information from the authority and the authority is obliged to provide the information upon the citizen's request. Similarly, the provision of the citizen's charter is incorporated in local government acts and makes it mandatory for establishing at every tier of local governments in Bangladesh. Under the Act (Article 49), the UPs are directed to adopt a citizen's charter with description of various types of services, terms and time limit for specific services; assurance of service; complaint address if failed rendering service and so on. The simple objective of the citizen's charter is to empower the citizen in relation to public goods and service delivery. Through the citizen's charter, citizens become well informed about their rights and entitlements. They can exercise considerable pressure on service providers to improve their performance. The availability and dissemination of information empower people. Since all powers of the Republic belong to the people, it is necessary to ensure right to information for their empowerment and accountability of the concerned establishment. To ensure free flow of information, the websites of all departments and information centers at district, Upazila and union levels have been set up (MRDI and Asia Foundation, 2013).

#### *Local election*

The election is considered to be one of the key avenues of indirect participation that enables citizens to exercise their choice in running the system. In a democratic system, an election is a process through which the people elect their representatives, local and national, to formulate policy and to supervise its actions (Uddin, 2016). In Bangladesh, the citizens of the republic have voting right to elect representatives as well as the right to participate either directly or indirectly in governing process. The UP election is the biggest election in Bangladesh in respect of voters and volume of units. In the election of 2015, more than 60m voters have franchised their voting rights. A large number of voters irrespective of male, female, aged, disabled and minorities were seen in the polling center and took part in the ballot (Uddin, 2016). The response of the voters was encouraging as around 76.66 percent of voters exercised their rights while the UP poll held in 2011 was recorded 70 percent of voter turnout. This average turnout is recorded as highest among all levels of local government elections. In UP elections of 1997, more than 60 percent voters had cast their votes (FEMA, 1998).

The local government's election not only is a mechanism to pick up representatives and hence make their institutions accountable to the people, but also a means of people's empowerment. The citizens of Bangladesh are more aware and are participating more fully in electoral process. The UP elections show different voter turnout in different years. In addition, the average turnover fluctuates in the elections to same institution in different phases in the same year. It is indeed mentioned that voter turnout in UP elections are recorded almost always over 50 percent and in many cases even over 85 percent. Free and fair elections provide the most obvious accountability, but this is a rather blunt tool, exercised only at widespread intervals and offering only the broadest citizen control over government. Elected members are, periodically, required to seek re-election, giving constituents the opportunity to pass judgment on the activities of individual members and councils as a whole. Voters can retain or reject their governors. An elected representative becomes more aware of their role and responsibilities because of future aspirations for contesting in elections.

#### *Female participation and empowerment*

After the independence of Bangladesh, the females of the country were given voting right along with the provision for greater participation in national life. The constitution of

Bangladesh guarantees that equality of opportunity and participation of women in all spheres of national life. The constitution, furthermore, emphasize the state from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens. In 1997, the provision for direct elections for female was ensured to reserved seats in local level elections. The participation of female in the local government is also crucial to empowering and mobilizing female at the grassroots level so that they have a greater voice in the decision-making process. The government ensures the provision for one-third reserved seats for female in UP. Apart from the reserved seats, female can also contest for any of the general seats (Asian Development Bank, 2001). The introduction of the reserved seats for female has resulted in a substantial increase of female in local politics than ever before. This is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of female in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the government has already issued different executive orders to ensure female members' participation in various decision-making committees, including standing and others committee, and panel chairman of UP.

### Key challenges

Open budget meeting is one of the platforms at the grassroots for ensuring participatory planning. The existing budget preparation process is efficient, transparent and a vehicle for effective participation of the poor, women, vulnerable, and voiceless. However, this platform is not practiced widely rather exercised in a limited scale. The Ups, in practice, invite a few local elites and political leaders in a small in-house discussion and prepares a proposed budget based on discussion meeting. Additionally, the UPs tend to claim that *Ward Shava* is being organized on a regular basis in most of the wards, but it is difficult to find evidences and findings to support it (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016).

The *Ward Shava* system is not functioning the way it was perceived and envisioned in the Act. Although the *Ward Shava* is potentially an important space for citizens, its mode of operation is not spelt out in the law nor is any regulations provided for its working (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). *Ward Shava* has been very instrumental in sharing information about UP planning, budget and services for which the poorest are entitled. Several problems such as professional obligation, lack of personal interest, lack of awareness, political reasons and inappropriate meeting times discourage people's presence at the *Ward Shava* (Chowdhury, 2018).

Most of the UP representatives claimed that they have only formed standing committees. But most of the cases, the committees are not function effectively. Most of the members neither aware about the standing committees nor attend in the committee's meetings. There is also some overlapping of responsibilities in the committees (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). The main challenges of SCs are insufficient manpower, lack of terms of reference, limited scope of training and motivation of UP secretaries (Islam, 2016).

The actors associated with village court have limited knowledge about the rules and jurisdictions of village court. There is no training program for the UP functionaries for orientation on village courts. Moreover, village courts do not receive any budget allocation, limiting funds for logistics and documentation. It is also unclear how biased their decisions are, particularly given that the majority of the panel members are politicians. Although local elections may hold them accountable to the citizens in terms of providing fair judgments, they may be unwilling to rule against politically connected individuals.

UP is the institution for delivering information services to the local residents. However, very few of them get information on various services when they ask the chairman or secretary of UP. In most cases, reluctance was noticed on the part of the chairmen and secretaries to give access to information to UP members (Panday and Rabbani, 2011). Moreover, the websites of the UP provide broadly generalized information and do not update regularly. Additionally, people, particularly the vulnerable segment of society are

unaware of this law. They cannot relate the right to information with solution of the problems related to their life and livelihoods.

Although female representatives in recent days have had an increased voice at the community level and have gained social legitimacy in representing certain types of women's issues, their participation in the UP activities is limited in some cases (Nazneen and Tasneem, 2010). Gender division of labor, restrictions on mobility, lack of knowledge about local government functions, male resistance, conservative social values, lack of education and gendered nature of local-level politics all have limited women's effective representation and participation (UNDP, 2003; Nazneen and Tasneem, 2010).

## Conclusion

Participation not only helps local government institutions to reap the benefits of people's feedback on service delivery, but also revitalizes local democratic processes by genuine rather than token empowerment (Carley, 2006). In a decentralized governance system, there are many mechanisms through which people participate in the decision-making process. Popular participation in UP activities is particularly essential to develop the accountability of the local authority, make the program transparent and force the authority to follow the local laws. Moreover, people in the digital era are more involved and well connected with local institutions through electronic means. But all participation does not have equal weight or influence and the public is apathetic about involvement in local governance (Hamilton, 2012). It is indeed evident that successive governments in Bangladesh undertook numerous initiatives with an aim to increase popular participation in the local governing process. Among them, open budget, ward meeting, village court, standing committees and PIC, and right to information are notable features that have been incorporated in the UP. It can be said that the desired objectives of this avenues are yet to attain. It is also argued that participation sometimes may cause delays in the decision making or increases cost or brings conflict. In developing countries like Bangladesh where people are mostly illiterate, not united and not aware about their citizen rights are needed to be more empowered with more participation. Social values, belief systems and norms of rural society do not support the participation of the poor in social and political institutions. Empowerment without capacity building is meaningless as most UP representatives have inadequate knowledge and understanding on their roles and responsibilities and rules of budgeting, planning and managing resources. NGOs and development partners in Bangladesh have been highly regarded as organizers and mobilizers of rural people in terms of empowerment and developing awareness for participation in group activities (Hossain and Matin, 2007). It is expected that they would play a significant role over the period of time to make the UP an effective institution in the governing process. Thus, for making local government bodies effective, accountable, transparent and pro-poor, a strong political vision is necessary that would decentralize more power to local government bodies, would take necessary initiatives to build capacity of local government representatives and would also initiate a program to empower the people by building awareness *vis-à-vis* their political rights.

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# How to improve parenting in Hong Kong by training: the 6As Positive Parenting Program

The 6As  
Positive  
Parenting  
Program

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Research suggests that children in Hong Kong are at an elevated risk of emotional problems. Authoritarian parenting, a common parenting style in Hong Kong, is a critical factor associated with childhood mental health problems. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of the 6As Positive Parenting Program (6As) in modifying parenting attitudes, reduction of parenting stress and increasing self-efficacy in positive parenting, among a sample of 82 Hong Kong parents. 6As focuses on prevention by instilling positive parenting beliefs and principles, thereby reducing reliance on authoritarian and related parenting styles.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The program was evaluated using a controlled pre-post-treatment design. Outcome measures were the Chinese Child-rearing Beliefs Questionnaire, Parental Stress Scale, Parenting Self-efficacy Scale and participant feedback. ANOVA and correlation were utilized to detect treatment effects and relationships between the degree of change among measures and subscales.

**Findings** – Relative to the control group, the 6As Positive Parenting Program significantly changed parents' parenting attitudes, reduced parenting stress and increased self-efficacy in positive parenting. In sum, 97.6 percent of the participants agreed that the program is a good fit for the Hong Kong culture.

**Research limitations/implications** – A larger sample would have been desirable for this study. One factor that limited analyzable data was that some of the participating organizations enrolled participants into the program who did not meet research inclusion criteria. Furthermore, the size of groups varied from 5 to 16 participants, which may have produced different group dynamics that added variability to outcomes. Future 6As parenting program research should attempt to standardize group size or to directly compare the effectiveness of smaller vs larger groups. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the research was conducted during the primary school application period, which may have heightened the parenting stress for parents of younger children.

**Practical implications** – The results suggest that an enhanced belief in authoritative, autonomy and training strategies could reduce parental stress and shift parents' attitude toward a more positive approach in child-rearing.

**Social implications** – There is considerable need for a holistically designed parenting training that is culturally credible and sensitive.

**Originality/value** – Findings suggest that positive parenting can enhance the parent-child relationship and reduce parental stress. The results support governmental, non-governmental organizational and community focus on positive practices for parenting training in Hong Kong.

**Keywords** Hong Kong, Parenting stress, Parenting attitude, Parenting self-efficacy, Positive parenting

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

There is considerable research and popular interest in Hong Kong regarding the qualities of good parenting. Chinese mothers are portrayed as being highly involved in their children's studies, demanding and strict, and focused on training their children for optimal



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academic outcome, through psychological control and punishment (Dewar, 2011). A popular parenting model presented by Baumrind (1991) describes four mainstream parenting styles, namely, authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and non-directive, and Chinese parenting style has primarily been coined as authoritarian. Baumrind described such an authoritarian parenting style as status-orientated with expectations that children will behave with unquestioning obedience.

Research conducted in Mainland China and Hong Kong has indicated that authoritarian parenting is correlated with both children's externalizing problems (Zhou *et al.*, 2008) and internalizing problems (Siu, 2007). Externalizing problems include aggression, disruptive behavior, impulsivity and hyperactivity, whereas internalizing problems comprise over-controlled behaviors, such as social withdrawal, depression and anxiety (Achenbach, 1991; Cicchetti and Toth, 1991). Authoritarian parenting has been labeled as "harsh parenting," with harsh child-rearing interactions including parental violence (Tang, 1998), scolding or punishing the child for undesirable behavior (Zhou *et al.*, 2008), and demanding better academic results while simultaneously offering limited responses to the child's need for affection (Li *et al.*, 2013). This body of research has emphasized the need for parents in Hong Kong to change what was called their "negative parenting style" to one of positive parenting.

In 2000, Hong Kong SAR Government set aside 50m HKD (approximately US\$6.4m) for the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 school years to strengthen parent education. In 2001, the government further formed a steering committee on parent education to equip 300,000 parents with necessary parenting skills and the knowledge of how to provide a suitable environment and guidance to help facilitate the healthy development of their children. In the same year, the Department of Health launched the "Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)" in Hong Kong and evaluated its effectiveness (Leung *et al.*, 2003). Positive parenting provides "the child with non-disciplinary interactions and enthusiastic play where the adult follows the interest of the child, provides positive attention, and a responsive, sensitive and nurturing environment" (Reedtz *et al.*, 2011). Positive parenting strategies include reasoning, negotiation, and compromise, use of humor and incentives, use of no more than gentle confrontation, and behaviors that show parental warmth and address the child's needs (Gardner *et al.*, 1999). Proponents of positive parenting assert that parenting training can influence parents to change from a negative to a positive parenting style (DeRosier and Gilliom, 2007; Gardner *et al.*, 1999; Leung *et al.*, 2003, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2013; Reedtz *et al.*, 2011). This research showed that adoption of positive parenting could reduce parent-child conflict and improve parent-child relationship (Gardner *et al.*, 1999; Li *et al.*, 2013), children's social behaviors and conduct-related problems (Leung *et al.*, 2003; Leung *et al.*, 2009).

#### *The challenging environment in Hong Kong*

Considerable research has suggested that traditional Chinese culture has created an environment that encourages and even requires the practice of harsh parenting (Chan *et al.*, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2013; Tang, 1998; Zhou *et al.*, 2008). Despite the rapid integration of new cultural values, filial piety and "guan (管)" are still the core ethical codes of today's Chinese family. Based on these values, children are expected to behave as parents' property and must be obedient to their parents; otherwise, parents are justified in the use of harsh discipline (Tang, 1998). In Hong Kong, it is extremely challenging for children to acquire entry to desirable schools, especially the prestigious primary schools. If their children do not obtain satisfactory academic results, parents are more likely to enact harsh parenting (Li *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, Chinese parents may hesitate to praise their children due to traditional beliefs that excessive praise may cause their children's performance to decline, believing that praise creates children who are too proud and who will exert insufficient effort (Li *et al.*, 2013). Changing family structure may also account for the practice of harsh parenting. In two-wage families, parents may feel that it is imperative to spend their limited

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family time monitoring their children's academic results, interests and use of time, rather than providing emotional support.

Increasing research suggests that excessive focus on academic performance has led to parent-child relationship problems and children's behavioral problems. Siu (2007) referenced a finding to indicate 75 percent of primary school children are unhappy, primarily due to their academic performance. Research on youth suicide has reported that the top three reasons for young people's (aged 15–29) suicide attempts were poor academic performance, family relationships and romantic relationships (Mak, 2011).

This paper focuses on the potential benefits of positive parenting training for children in Hong Kong. Although parenting is a central life role that profoundly influences both children and parents' lives, Hong Kong couples who are parents or who expect to be parents have very limited access to formal parenting training. Parenting styles have been shown to influence children's problem behaviors (Aunola and Nurmi, 2005). Young (1994) and Bowlby (1988) showed that early caregiver interactions contribute to the development of early-life cognitive schemas, which are stable working models of the self and interactions with others. Young (1994) proposed that negative early childhood interactions can create early maladaptive schemas, which can act as self-fulfilling prophesies and increase vulnerability to numerous forms of later psychopathology (Hardt and Rutter, 2004). In contrast, positive schemas with the themes of self-efficacy, optimism, trust, success and worthiness support resilience and reduce child psychopathology (Keyfitz *et al.*, 2013). These findings are echoed by Martin Seligman (2007), a pioneer in the field of positive psychology, who noted that children's optimism and life success can be enhanced by modifying negative expression of emotions, negative explanatory style and criticism coming from parents, teachers or coaches.

The current research examined the effects of an existing positive parenting training program, 6As Positive Parenting Program in Hong Kong (6As). This program focuses on changing parenting attitudes about parenting goals and strategies. The positive parenting training program was developed based on a book entitled *How to be a Hero to your Kids*, written by McDowell and Day (2008). Parents participating in the training seminar learn two core beliefs in parenting, which are called limits and love, and the six principles (the 6As) of acceptance, appreciation, affection, availability, accountability and authority. Parents also may have the opportunity to learn behavioral skills in a two half-day workshop involving practice of 6As principles in their interactions with their children.

The 6As program is unique from other parenting training programs in its greater emphasis on attitude change rather than solely behavioral training. 6As program advocates an authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1991) which, unlike such an authoritarian style, is both demanding and responsive.

This program has been in existence and has been popular since 2006. Hong Kong Character City (2016) provided free 6As seminars for more than sixty schools in Hong Kong and more than 500 organizations and schools have participated in the program and other events promoting 6As Positive Parenting.

### **Purpose of the research**

This study represents the first formal controlled evaluation of the 6As Positive Parenting Program. This research aims to evaluate the program's effectiveness in changing parenting attitudes, reduction in parenting stress and self-efficacy in positive parenting in a sample of 82 Hong Kong parents. Considerable published research shows that effective parenting training can better equip parents to utilize sensitive and appropriate child-rearing strategies, which ultimately enhances family relationships and reduces parental stress.

Hong Kong Character City (2016), the agent for this program established in 2006, is registered as a private not-for-profit charity organization, and offers the program

with the overall objective of helping parents to nurture children via the inculcation of positive attitudes. This program was chosen by the investigator for the present study because the focus of 6As is different from other local programs, as it focuses on prevention and working on instilling positive beliefs and principles for parenting roles, rather than emphasizing interventions for emergent problems. The program is open to the general public and is not restricted to parents of children who exhibit challenging behaviors. The program has been well-received in many sectors, including, but not limited to, schools, corporations and the wider community. Until now, there has been no formal evaluation of its effectiveness. Understanding the extent to which participants feel that the 6As program model fits with Hong Kong Chinese cultural models of parenting was an additional goal of this study.

### Research method

In this research, individuals who attended the 6As program were evaluated prior to and following the program and their results were compared to a control group who did not participate, which was also evaluated twice over the same interval of time. Outcome variables were parenting attitudes, parenting stress, parenting self-efficacy and perceived cultural fit of the intervention. By incorporation of a variety of outcome measures, it was intended that the study would both evaluate the effectiveness of the 6As program relative to the control group, and also illuminate some of the mechanisms of change.

#### *Participants*

A total of 82 participants were recruited for the 6As intervention ( $n = 41$ , 28 women, 13 men) and a control group ( $n = 41$ , 30 women, 11 men). The final sample was selected from a larger group of 116 (60 participants in the intervention group and 56 participants in the control group) based on the following inclusion criteria: being a parent and the primary caretaker; being a Hong Kong Chinese local resident; having attained secondary school education level; living with the child(ren); completion of all study measures; having a 100 percent attendance record for those in intervention group; and having not earlier participated in the full 6As (seminar/workshop) program, although those with seminar experience only were accepted.

Table I provides participant characteristics. An independent-samples *t*-test showed that participant age did not differ between the intervention group ( $M = 43.54$ ,  $SD = 8.59$ ) and the control group ( $M = 41.83$ ,  $SD = 6.64$ ),  $t(80) = 1.01$ ,  $p = 0.32$ . For categorical variables,  $\chi^2$  analysis was conducted to evaluate group differences in demographic and parenting training history (Table II). These showed that family income was statistically significantly higher in the control group, and that the control group was statistically significantly more likely to have a child between the ages of three and six.

*Measures.* All measures were administered and completed in Chinese. Based on a power analysis, the statistical power for analysis in this study for ANOVA with the sample size of 82 in this study is 0.94.

*Sociodemographic questionnaire.* This questionnaire assessed participants' age, gender, education, the degree of prior parenting training experience over the past two years, monthly family income, age and number of children.

*Chinese Child-Rearing Beliefs Questionnaire – Chinese version (CCRBQ; Lieber et al., 2006).* The CCRBQ is a 36-item self-report scale divided into four subscales: a training scale (9 items), a shame scale (8 items), an autonomy scale (10 items) and an authoritative scale (9 items). The training scale measures the extent to which the parent values active socialization and moral socialization, by assessing their attitudes toward monitoring, regular reminders, modeling and other social learning strategies. A sample

	Intervention group	Control group
<i>Participated in any 6As before</i>		
Never	35 (85.4%)	39 (95.1%)
Seminar only	6 (14.6%)	2 (4.9%)
<i>Number of parenting trainings in 0–2</i>		
	31 (80.4%)	36 (87.8%)
<i>The past 24 months</i>		
3–5	4 (9.8%)	5 (12.2%)
≥6	4 (9.8%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Children's gender</i>		
Male	29 (50.9%)	33 (61.1%)
Female	28 (49.1%)	21 (38.9%)
<i>Children's age</i>		
3–6	24 (42.1%)	30 (55.6%)
7–10	14 (24.6%)	15 (27.8%)
11–15	19 (33.3%)	9 (16.7%)
<i>% families with children of age ranges</i>		
3–6	20 (48.8%)	29 (70.7%)
7–10	12 (29.3%)	12 (29.3%)
11–15	16 (39.0%)	8 (19.5%)

**Table I.**  
Participant  
demographic  
characteristics

	Intervention ( <i>n</i> = 41)	Control ( <i>n</i> = 41)	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
Participant gender			0.24	0.63
Male	13	11		
Female	28	30		
Participant education			0.83	0.66
Secondary	24	20		
University	15	19		
Professional	2	2		
Family income			24.54	0.000
≤\$15,000	13	1		
\$15,001–\$30,000	11	2		
\$30,001–\$50,000	8	18		
≥\$50,001	9	20		
Relationship between participant and child			0.24	0.63
Father and child	13	11		
Mother and child	28	30		
Total children			1.11	0.57
One child	26	28		
Two Children	14	13		
Three children	1	0		
Any girl child(ren) in the family	26	19	2.41	0.12
Any boy child(ren) in the family	27	29	0.23	0.64
Any child 3–6 years of age	20	29	4.12	0.04
Any child 7–10 years of age	12	12	0	0.1
Any child 11–15 years of age	16	8	3.77	0.05
Past 6As experience (seminar only)	6	2	2.22	0.14
Past experience with other parenting training	22	18	4.53	0.21

**Table II.**  
Demographic and  
parent training  
experience history  
across intervention  
and control group

item is “Close monitoring shows children you care.” The shame scale measures the use of shame specifically as a training approach for fostering the development of children’s social sensitivities. A sample item is “Shaming children helps them learn to behave.” The autonomy scale measures parents’ need to encourage, protect, and nurture children’s exploration, will, self-concept, expression, and autonomy. A sample item is “Parents should stimulate exploring and learning.” The authoritative scale measures awareness, respect and encouragement for children’s exploration and expression of ideas and emotions, encouraging parent–child communication, and recognizing parents’ and children’s rights. A sample item is “Parents should seek opportunities to praise children.” Each item is rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Lieber *et al.* reported subscale internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s) of 0.82, 0.66, 0.67, and 0.71 for the training, shame, autonomy and authoritative subscales, respectively, for a Hong Kong sample. The authors reported that factor analysis of the CCRBQ yielded a four-factor solution consistent with the four subscales (training, shame, autonomy and authoritative). Analysis of internal consistency in the current study yielded Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for the CCRBQ subscales training, shame, autonomy and authoritative belief of 0.87, 0.88, 0.81 and 0.85, respectively.

*Parental Stress Scale – Chinese version (PSS; Berry and Jones, 1995).* The PSS consists of 17 items rating current parental stress on a six-point Likert type scale (1, strongly disagree to 6, strongly agree). Example items are “I am happy in my role as a parent.” and “My child (ren) gives me a more certain and optimistic view for the future.” Seven items require reverse scoring. Leung and Tsang (2010) reported that the reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) of the full scale was 0.89. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of the PSS in the present study was 0.94. Berry and Jones (1995) reported that the PSS was significantly and positively correlated with both a common measure of child behavior problems (Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory intensity and problem subscales) ( $r = 0.44$ – $0.51$ ) and another commonly used measure of parenting stress, the Parenting Stress Index Total score ( $r = 0.75$ – $0.78$ ).

*Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale (CONF).* This scale was created for the purpose of this study to evaluate the degree to which participants believed they were able to practice the seven items that reflect the key objectives of 6As Positive Parenting Program. Example items are “I will support and coach my children in building their own sense of security and self-worth” and “I will spend time with my children that is focused on building a positive relationship.” Each item was rated on a six-point Likert type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.72 and 0.85 at pre-treatment and post-treatment, respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

*Feedback form.* A program feedback form was developed to assess participants’ overall satisfaction and their perceptions of the cultural appropriateness of the intervention for Hong Kong parents. The two statements are “6As Positive Parenting Program helps me to be a more positive parent” and “6As Positive Parenting Program could be integrated into Hong Kong Chinese culture.” Each item was rated on a six-point Likert type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

### *Procedure*

Before commencing participant recruitment, the approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Alliant International University. To protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned an identification number that was used on all study materials to match pre- and post- data. Participants in the intervention group were recruited from the 6As Positive Parenting Program promotional materials such as leaflets, cooperating organizations’ websites, by social workers and through other personal contacts. Most participants in the intervention group were recruited by the cooperating organizations:

Fairview Park Alliance Church, The Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council Tung Chung Integrated Services Centre, Life Lutheran Church Yuen Long, Sunshine Lutheran Centre and Elim Full Gospel Church. Program coordinators assigned by each cooperating organization were responsible for the promotional, organizational and screening activities, as well as enrollment within their respective organization. An enrollment form provided to the intervention group included a brief introduction of the study and requirements for participants.

Another enrollment form for the control group was promoted over WhatsApp groups, Facebook and parent groups. Interested potential participants were able to contact the investigator. If the potential participant met the screening requirements and indicated consent to participate, they were enrolled into the control group. After providing informed consent, enrolled participants completed study measures.

The intervention group participated in the 6As Positive Parenting Program which consists of nine hours of direct intervention (Table III) consisting of one seminar and two workshops delivered in a small group format. In total, there were six intervention groups, with between 5 and 16 participants each, conducted at five locations in Hong Kong. The corresponding author of this paper is a certified facilitator for the program who conducted seminars and workshops but was blind to all identifying information associated with questionnaire data.

Study measures were administered to the intervention group, immediately following the two-hour seminar (mid-test, and after completion of the entire program). The mid-test was administered for use as a conservative estimate of intervention effects if the participant

Session	Key beliefs	Topic/principles	Key concept	Key expected outcome
Seminar, 3 h	Love and Limits	Acceptance, appreciation, affection, availability, accountability and authority	1. Research briefing 2. Overview of 2 core beliefs and 6 principles of 6As 3. Importance of positive parenting	Parents plan for positive parenting
Workshop 1, 3 h	Psycho- education	Erik Erikson's eight stages of development and Kohlberg's stages of moral development	Children have different developmental growth needs	Parents are aware of the need for using different parenting techniques at children's different developmental stages
	Love	Acceptance	Unconditional love develops a sense of security and self-worth	Parents build security and self-worth
	Love	Appreciation	Sincere praise and affirmation develops a sense of significance	Parents help children feel significant
Workshop 2, 3 h	Love	Affection	Caring words and actions develop a sense of lovability	Children will feel cherished
	Limits	Availability	Taking time for your children develops their sense of importance	Parents will make time to be positive parents
		Accountability	By being accountable to your children, you teach them to be accountable, which develops a sense of self-discipline and self-control	Parents teach children self-discipline and self-decisiveness
		Authority	Authority administered with love provides boundaries for making right choices and develops a sense of self-decisiveness	

**Table III.**  
6As Positive  
Parenting Program  
outline

missed items in the post-treatment measure and this data was otherwise not used in analysis. The interval between pre- and post-questionnaires was two full weeks. Participants in the control group completed study measures at approximately the same time interval.

*Statistical analysis*

*Design.* The study utilized a 2 × 2 mixed-model design. Condition (intervention, control) was the between-subjects factor, and time of assessment (pre- and post-intervention) was the within-subjects factor. The *p*-value to reject the null hypothesis on key study analysis was set at *p* = 0.01

*Preliminary analysis.* Skewness and kurtosis statistics were computed to assess the suitability of the data for parametric statistics, with departures from normality defined as values of skewness or kurtosis less than -2 or greater than 2. In total, 12 individuals in the intervention group and 4 individuals in the control group did not complete individual items in some questionnaires. For the intervention group, missing values received corresponding scores for the corresponding mid-test item, and in the control group, missing items received corresponding item scores from the other assessment. Data were checked for outliers.

*Data analysis.* Group differences in demographic data were evaluated with *t*-tests (for continuous variables) and chi-square (for categorical values). Correlations between participant demographic characteristics and study measures were computed. To evaluate the 6As program effectiveness, individual 2 × 2 mixed ANOVAs were conducted to evaluate group (control vs intervention) by time (pre vs post) interaction effects for study measures.

**Results**

Skewness and kurtosis values were within criteria, and the data were determined to be appropriate for parametric analysis.

*Descriptive statistics for study measures*

Table IV provides the means and standard deviations for both the intervention and control groups at pre- and post-treatment intervals.

*Treatment results*

*Correlations between demographic characteristics and outcomes.* Table V provides correlations between demographic and outcome variables. Correlational analysis revealed statistically significant associations between the dependent variables and age, family income and parent’s education level. Educational level was negatively and moderately associated with the use of authoritative parenting, and family income was negatively associated with parental stress and parenting strategies of shame and authoritative parenting.

		Intervention group				Control group			
		Pre-treatment		Post-treatment		Pre-treatment		Post-treatment	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
CCRBQ	Training	5.04	0.42	5.26	0.55	4.91	0.51	4.86	0.50
	Shame	3.25	0.86	3.13	0.85	3.14	0.78	3.34	0.77
	Autonomy	4.72	0.51	4.81	0.58	4.66	0.59	4.71	0.51
	Authoritative	4.92	0.57	5.14	0.57	4.71	0.62	4.70	0.56
PSS		2.94	0.65	2.73	0.66	2.74	0.61	2.71	0.66
CONF		4.86	0.58	5.24	0.54	4.68	0.45	4.72	0.59

**Table IV.** Means and standard deviations of the parent-reported measures

**Notes:** CCRBQ, Chinese Child-rearing Beliefs Questionnaire; PSS, Parental Stress Scale; CONF, Parenting Self-efficacy Scale

*Treatment effects analysis.* The group (control vs intervention) by time (pre vs post) interaction effect was significant for three subscales of the CCRBQ: training,  $F(1, 80) = 9.882, p = 0.02, \eta_p^2 = 0.110$ ; shame,  $F(1, 80) = 5.481, p = 0.022, \eta_p^2 = 0.064$ ; and authoritative,  $F(1, 80) = 5.240, p = 0.025, \eta_p^2 = 0.061$ . The interaction effect for autonomy was not significant,  $F(1,80) = 0.128, p = 0.721, \eta_p^2 = 0.002$ , and neither were the main effects for Time  $F(1,80) = 2.259, p = 0.137, \eta_p^2 = 0.027$  and Group  $F(1, 80) = 0.533, p = 0.468, \eta_p^2 = 0.007$ . The interaction effect for PSS was significant,  $F(1, 80) = 6.739, p = 0.011, \eta_p^2 = 0.078$ , as was the interaction effect for positive parenting self-efficacy  $F(1, 80) = 11.001, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.121$ . The significant interaction effects show that participants in 6As differed from the control group pre- to post- treatment change in the parenting strategies of training, shame and authoritative parenting, as well as parental stress and parenting self-efficacy.

*Post hoc* tests using a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated a statistically significant increase from pre to post for the intervention group, but not the control group for CCRBQ training,  $p < 0.001$ ; authority,  $p = 0.005$ ; and self-efficacy,  $p < 0.01$ . There was also a statistically significant decrease in parental stress for the intervention group, but not the control group, i.e.  $p < 0.001$ . Interestingly there was also a statistically significant increase in CCRBQ shame, for the control group, but not for the intervention group.

*Relationships among change scores on study measures*

Pre- to post-intervention change scores on study measures were calculated separately for each group, and correlations between these difference scores were then computed, using a  $p$ -value of 0.01 to reject the null hypothesis. In the control group an increase in belief in shame as a child-rearing approach was positively associated with an increase in parental stress,  $r(41) = 0.433$ . In contrast, in the intervention group, greater increase in beliefs in training and authoritative parenting approaches, were both associated with a decrease in parental stress,  $rs(41) = -0.315$  and  $-0.331$ , respectively, and  $ps < 0.01$ . Taken together, these results suggest that positive changes in beliefs about training and authoritative parenting are related to a decrease in parental stress. Furthermore, it suggests that in the absence of intervention, parenting stress may tend to increase, as less effective parenting strategies based in shame are continued.

*The relationship between specific changes in beliefs.* Table VI presents intercorrelations of the change scores for study measures for the intervention group. For the intervention group, the degree of change in the four belief measures were moderately positively intercorrelated, with the exception of CCRBQ training and shame, which were unrelated to degree of change. This finding suggests that parents in the intervention group simultaneously developed a stronger belief in all of the domains. In this context, it is interesting to note that belief in

	Age	Education	Family income
CCRBQ			
Training	-0.19	-0.06	-0.15
Shame	0.06	-0.10	-0.23*
Autonomy	-0.19	-0.08	-0.21
Authoritative	0.00	-0.31**	-0.23*
PSS	0.02	0.07	-0.32*
CONF	-0.10	-0.06	-0.03

**Notes:**  $n = 82$ . CCRBQ, Chinese Child-rearing Beliefs Questionnaire; PSS, Parental Stress Scale; CONF, Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table V.**  
Correlations between  
demographic and  
outcome variables for  
full sample at pre-test

shame as a strategy significantly increased along with beliefs in all of the other domains except belief in training. The control group did not show this same pattern of correlations, as pre- to post-changes in these measures in the control group were small.

*Comparison with Lieber et al.'s (2006) CCRBQ study*

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the 2006 Hong Kong sample reported by Lieber *et al.* (2006) to pre-intervention data for the intervention sample, to contrast the samples and to examine whether there was change in child-rearing beliefs over the last decade. This showed that the current intervention sample scored significantly lower on belief in shaming ( $M = 3.25, SD = 0.86$ ) relative to the 2006 Hong Kong sample ( $M = 3.62, SD = 0.58$ ),  $t(266) = 3.43, p < 0.001, d = 0.59$ , and a significantly higher degree of belief in autonomy in this study's sample ( $M = 4.72, SD = 0.51$ ), relative to the 2006 sample ( $M = 4.39, SD = 0.52$ ) ( $M = 4.72, SD = 0.51$ ),  $t(266) = 3.71, p < 0.001, d = 0.64$ . No statistically significant differences were found between the samples in belief in training or belief in authoritative parenting.

These findings were similar for the control group. There was a statistically significant lower level of belief in shaming in the current sample ( $M = 3.14, SD = 0.78$ ) relative to the 2006 Hong Kong sample ( $M = 3.62, SD = 0.58$ ),  $t(266) = 4.56, p < 0.001, d = 0.78$ , and a significantly higher level of belief in autonomy in the current sample ( $M = 4.66, SD = 0.59$ ) relative to the 2006 sample ( $M = 4.39, SD = 0.52$ )  $t(266) = 2.97, p < 0.01, d = 0.51$ . No statistically significant differences were found in belief in training or belief in authoritative parenting.

*Overall feedback*

Participants ( $n = 41$ ) were asked for their level of endorsement of the statement "6As Positive Parenting Program helps me to be a more positive parent." Of the sample, 68.3 percent strongly agreed; 29.3 percent very much agreed and 2.4 percent agreed. No participants endorsed "disagree." Participants were also requested to evaluate the statement "6As Positive Parenting Program could be integrated into Hong Kong Chinese culture," and the result was 36.6 percent strongly agree, 53.7 percent very much agree, 7.3 percent agree and 2.4 percent disagree. The results suggested that parents found the program to be useful and that they felt that its core approaches and principles were culturally relevant.

**Discussion**

*Overall research findings*

Results of this study reflected that the 6As program changes parenting attitudes, reduces parenting stress, and increases positive parenting self-efficacy. Specific positive change in parenting attitudes were found relative to the control group in use of the strategies

**Table VI.**  
Intercorrelations  
between change  
scores for study  
measures for  
intervention group

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CONF	–					
2. PSS	–0.29	–				
3. TSI	0.13	–0.33*	–			
4. SSI	–0.02	0.09	0.01	–		
5. AUTO	0.03	–0.04	0.42**	0.46**	–	
6. AUTH	0.08	–0.31*	0.36*	0.46**	0.43**	–

**Notes:** CONF, Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale; PSS, Parental Stress Scale; TSI, CCRBQ Training Subscale; SSI, CCRBQ Shame Subscale; AUTO, CCRBQ Autonomy Subscale; AUTH, CCRBQ Authoritative Subscale; CCRBQ, Chinese Child-rearing Beliefs Questionnaire (Lieber *et al.*, 2006). \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

of training and authoritative parenting. In addition, belief in the use of shame as a parenting strategy statistically significantly increased in the control group and did not increase in the intervention group. Parents strongly endorsed the utility and cultural fit of the program. Taken together, these results provide strong support for the short-term effectiveness of the 6As program.

Correlational results of pre- to post-intervention change scores showed that the degree of change of beliefs in training as a parenting strategy, authoritative parenting style and belief in encouragement of autonomy were associated with decrease in parenting stress, suggesting that success in learning these key components of 6As made parenting more manageable. One critical consideration regarding the changes in parenting stress and use of shaming as a child-rearing technique over the two interventions is that this study was conducted during the primary school application period of March–June, and most parents in the control group had children aged between three and six years. It is possible that this intensified parents' concerns for their children's futures.

#### *Implications for public intervention*

Several positive parenting training programs have been successfully conducted in Hong Kong. These included Triple-P (Leung *et al.*, 2003; Li *et al.*, 2013) and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT; Hembree-Kigin and McNeil, 1995). These programs focus on parent skill training to improve child-parent relationships and to reduce children's problematic behaviors through positive reinforcement and praise. As these parenting training programs were imported from Western countries, whether they were culturally fit to local Hong Kong Chinese was often raised as a concern in the literature. For example, as for PCIT, such concerns included: Chinese parents might not feel comfortable praising their children; it was difficult for participants to exercise the right degree of praise because it was not part of their cultural practice; emphasis on praise might mean ignoring a child's negative behavior; and given that many family members had contact with children, it is challenging to ensure consistent practice among parents and extended family members (PCIT; Hembree-Kigin and McNeil, 1995).

In the current study, 97.6 percent of the participants in the intervention group agreed that 6As had an appropriate cultural fit to the local Hong Kong Chinese. Four possibilities may account for the high acceptability of the program:

- (1) The program promoted change of parenting attitude emphasizing a balance of love and limits, a belief system well aligned to Chinese tradition. Within traditional Chinese beliefs and values, training children for optimal academic outcomes is a typical expression of concern for children, as is implementing limits through psychological control and punishment (Dewar, 2011), both of which represent a largely negative parenting approach. The 6As program helps parents shift from negative to positive parenting, while maintaining the traditional vision of providing love and limits. Essentially, the program offered parents a parenting alternative that consists of building a loving relationship while continuing to provide structure and protection. Therefore, participants did not feel that the strategies were inconsistent with their essential values; instead, they perceived the new interventions as a change of approach to achieving their goals.
- (2) At the beginning of the first workshop, parents received a brief lesson about Erik Erikson's eight stages of development and Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Using age ranges to depict the significance of developmental stages is common in various cultures. In Chinese traditional culture, there is also a common understanding of expectations associated with different life stages.

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For example, people at the age of eighteen are considered an adult, and males are expected to be married and have successful careers by age thirty. The core Chinese parental belief “guan (管),” which means to govern, control and restrict, while also implying loving and caring, can be aligned with Kohlberg’s stages of moral development which suggest people have different needs for moral development at different ages, so parents are best served to adjust their strategies when implementing rules.

- (3) Parents learned skills for building loving relationships and coaching children on problem solving for daily challenges, as well as achieving personal growth at children’s different stage of development. The program did not endorse that parents ignore negative child behaviors. Both Lieber *et al.* (2006) and the current study indicated high correlation between belief in shaming as a child-rearing technique and other strategies, suggesting that correcting negative child behaviors by shaming continues to be utilized regularly by Hong Kong parents. The program encouraged a balanced approach for both praising positive characters and correcting problematic behaviors, and thus does not question the importance of correcting negative child behaviors that is central to traditional Chinese parenting.
- (4) Parents learned how to exercise their authority through offering several options to their children, prior to an event. If children do not stay within the provided limits, negative consequences were then implemented, keeping children accountable for their own decisions. The calm implementation of consequences replaced the approach of criticizing children, and from this perspective, parents are still able to experience themselves as authority figures, retaining hierarchy in the family. This honors the Chinese tradition which endorses obedience to authority as a core family value (Lau, 1997).

#### *Changes in parenting beliefs in the past decade*

A comparison between the current study and the sample of Lieber *et al.* (2006) found significantly lower levels of belief in shaming strategy and higher levels of belief in autonomy strategy for both control and intervention groups prior to the intervention. Although it is possible that these findings reflect different sampling procedures, these results might also suggest that although shaming is still a central Hong Kong parenting strategy, parents are increasingly applying more authoritative strategies that promotes autonomy. The Hong Kong Government initiated parenting training in the 1980s, founded the Steering Committee on Parent Education in 2000 and organized various parenting training programs, as well as promoting positive parenting through the Social Welfare Department and the Department of Health. In addition, various organizations such as NGOs and private companies have promoted parenting training programs. It is possible that new generations may enjoy more authoritative parenting training options that support children’s autonomy. For example, a number of popular parenting training providers in the private sector such as that presented by Lee (2007), Child Psychological Development Association and The Hong Kong Institute of Family Education were established after 2006. They promote positive parenting and happy childhood in general. Their charges for a parenting workshop are two to three times the charges of NGOs, which range from HKD 3,000 to 7,000 per course. Lower-cost parent training programs (approximately HKD 1,200) are also available. For example, Child Development Centre (2019) currently conducts the Triple-P Parenting Workshop for parents of children aged from one and half year-old to six plus at a low cost with financial aid available.

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### *Limitations*

A larger sample would have been desirable for this study. One factor that limited analyzable data was that some of the participating organizations enrolled participants into the program who did not meet research inclusion criteria. Furthermore, the size of groups varied from 5 to 16 participants, which may have produced different group dynamics that added variability to outcomes. Future 6As parenting program research should attempt to standardize group size or to directly compare the effectiveness of smaller vs larger groups. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the research was conducted during the primary school application period, which may have heightened parenting stress for parents of younger children.

### *Implications for future Hong Kong parenting training*

- (1) There is considerable need for a holistically designed parenting training that is culturally credible and sensitive. The teaching in the 6As Positive Parenting Program was developed by the founder of Hong Kong Character City Movement, and the founder is a local Hong Kong woman. Being a leading facilitator, I (i.e. the corresponding author of this paper) added a brief psycho-education unit on human developmental stages. Therefore, the current training design is conducted with consideration of evidence-based parenting approaches (authoritative parenting); integration with Hong Kong Chinese beliefs and values; and psycho-education regarding developmental psychology. Collectively, these factors likely produce training that best addresses parents' needs.
- (2) The results suggest that enhanced belief in authoritative, autonomy and training strategies could reduce parental stress and shift parents' attitude toward a more positive approach in child-rearing. It is hoped that future positive parenting training programs might continue to enhance family relationships and well-being and reduce the incidence of mental health difficulties faced by children in Hong Kong.

### *Implications for future research*

Future research which replicates this study and recruits a sizable sample, utilizes standardized group size and directly compares the effect of group size will further elucidate factors influencing the effectiveness of the 6As program for promotion of healthy parenting in Hong Kong. A larger sample size would also permit the evaluation of parent and family characteristics that mediate successful outcomes.

In the training, the importance of a consistent parenting approach between fathers and mothers was emphasized. However, mothers bear the primary child-rearing role, based on existing literature and as reflected by the small number of fathers in the current study. Future research comparing mothers and fathers using the present study measures will provide further information on the value of parent training for each parental role.

### **Policy recommendations for Hong Kong**

Evaluation of parenting training programs in Hong Kong has shown that successful programs help parents change their parenting style, reducing their children's problematic behaviors and enhancing the parent-child relationship. However, since the Hong Kong governmental strategic initiatives of 2000 and 2001, no further activities have been announced on the website of the Education Bureau, Department of Health or NGOs. In view of that, certain recommendations for Hong Kong SAR Government are proposed as follows:

- (1) To continue building up a positive parenting culture in Hong Kong, extensively promote positive parenting training through broad community channels, such as

within Department of Health of Hong Kong SAR Government and NGOs, through schools via parents' associations, and The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong for pre-marriage couples.

- (2) To ensure positive parenting programs promoted in the community are culturally fit to local Hong Kong Chinese. For example, Hong Kong SAR Government can tailor-make positive parenting training curricula or can modify imported parenting training programs to address the target audience's parenting beliefs, current parenting skills and understanding of children's stages of development.
- (3) To promote importance of the father's role in parenting, and encourage further collaborative efforts and consistent parenting styles between parents or caretakers, such as grandparents and/or domestic helpers.
- (4) To nurture younger generations to be positive parents by introducing more positive parenting concepts in sexuality education.

### Conclusion

This paper showed that the 6As Positive Parenting Program can effectively change parents' parenting attitudes, reduce parenting stress, and increase self-efficacy in parenting. Furthermore, results indicated that positive change in beliefs in autonomy, authoritative and training strategies of child-rearing are associated with reduced parental stress. However, a belief in the strategy of shaming in child-rearing is still common among Hong Kong Chinese parents, which may reflect that Hong Kong Chinese parents are still strongly influenced by the traditional collectivistic culture which focuses on instilling social sensitivities. It is believed that the 6As Positive Parenting Program strikes a balance between evidence-based strategies and accountability to the traditions of Chinese culture, while endorsing an authoritative parenting approach.

Although outcome measures were not entirely utilized to assess the degree of psycho-educational insight gained during the training intervention, based on the participants' verbal feedback and the investigator's observation, this component helped participants better understand children's developmental stages so that their communication style and content would correspond to the developmental stage of their children. Therefore, providing education on basic developmental psychology could enhance the effectiveness of positive parenting training.

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# Complaints on abortuses handling: policy recommendations for Hong Kong

Complaints on  
abortuses  
handling

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to review cases about complaints of abortuses handling in Hong Kong, and to further propose policy recommendations to help comfort parents with respect and dignity toward abortuses.

**Design/methodology/approach** – There is a systematic review of articles/newspapers related to the practice and regulation of abortuses handling in Hong Kong and overseas countries. Also, point of views among stakeholders are selected from: newspapers, patients' groups, Hong Kong SAR Government's websites, radio programmes' interviews, related organizations' websites, blogs from legislative councilors and lawyers.

**Findings** – Since parents suffered from miscarriage before 24 weeks' pregnancy are increasingly willing to share their experiences and struggled for arranging a legal funeral for their children, Hong Kong SAR Government is able to understand these parents' needs and hence set up more "Angel Garden" in both the public and the private cemeteries. Yet, the provision of funeral and cremation services are still not comprehensive. Existing measures from Mainland China and overseas countries to handle abortuses and to provide support for parents are analyzed. More critically, ethical concern on handling abortuses as one of the clinical wastes is further included in the discussion.

**Originality/value** – Although all less than 24 weeks' fetuses cannot be given any Certificate of Stillbirth, respect and dignity can still be presented toward their parents by flexible regulation. After discussing the related measures on handling abortuses from other countries, some of their humane regulations are feasible to be applied to Hong Kong.

**Keywords** Hong Kong, Policy recommendations, Handling abortus, Miscarriage

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

News about experiences and difficulties of the parents who lose their less than 24 weeks' child are increasingly reported, showing the inadequacy of handling these cases. Hence, procedures, practices and policies from other countries have originality/value to be studied whether they are suitable to be applied for Hong Kong's situation without violating the current policy. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part starts with the representative case of Kelvin and Angela, which has raised public concern in Hong Kong. Point of views from different stakeholders on this issue is discussed in the second part, which many of them agree that there should have policy changes to help such unfortunate parents. The third part is to discuss the current measures in Hong Kong, including an exemption case to reveal that there is still room to have discretion while handling these cases. Borrowed the experience from other countries' measures on handling less than 24 weeks' abortuses as well as services provided for their parents, certain recommendations which can apply to Hong Kong are made in the last part.



*Miscarriage*

Miscarriage is actually a common condition that even healthy women may experience during their pregnancy. American Pregnancy Association (2018) stated that during the childbearing years of women, the chance of having a miscarriage can range from 10 to 25 percent, and for healthy women, the average is around a 15–20 percent. Moreover, a woman who has had a previous miscarriage has a 25 percent chance of having another.

*Reasons for miscarriage*

American Pregnancy Association (2018) reported that the causes for miscarriage are varied and usually cannot be identified. During the first trimester, the most common cause of miscarriage is chromosomal abnormality and most chromosomal abnormalities are the cause of a damaged ovum or sperm cell, or due to a problem when the zygote went through the division process. Other common cause of miscarriage included hormonal problems, infections or maternal health problems. Moreover, improper lifestyle such as smoking, drug use, malnutrition or excessive caffeine intake increases the chance of miscarriage. In addition, maternal age is one of the contributing factors. The higher the maternal age, the higher the chance of miscarriage. Andersen *et al.* (2000) investigated that the risk of spontaneous abortion was 8.9 percent in young women aged 20–24 and 74.7 percent in those aged 45 or above.

*Psychological effect after miscarriage*

Most women may suffer from grief when they lose their child. Toffol *et al.* (2013) investigated that the experience of miscarriage may lead to bad psychological well-being and higher risk of having psychiatric disorders. Psychological well-being is associated with depressiveness and impaired functioning. Beutel *et al.* (1995) suggested that behaviors expressing the grief included but not limited to sadness, yearning for the lost child and searching for a meaningful elaboration of the loss. Although grief reaction is a normal process for the women to help them walk through the pain, grief with a strong sense of self-blame may result in “pathological grief.” Toedter *et al.* (2001) pointed out that “pathological grief” may cause difficulty in handling normal daily activities such as interacting with other people.

The five stages of grief proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross involve denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. When the women are in the stage of anger, they had been suffering from negative emotions such as shock, loneliness, frustration and irritability, etc (Sands Australia National Council, 2012). Adding to the problem, they cannot receive sufficient psychological support from the hospitals or medical staff and therefore they may blame on the medical staff and complain about not caring for their feeling.

**The case of abortus handling**

The most representative case is Kelvin and Angela’s one. This couple requested to retrieve the body of their son, Wally, in Princess Margaret Hospital after the miscarriage (Lau, 2017). The hospital replied that all under 24 weeks’ fetuses are not classified as stillbirth. Therefore, their request was rejected by the hospital since abortuses are classified as clinical waste that should be treated by the hospital (*Apple Daily*, 2017a). As a common practice, the dead bodies and abortuses with the Certificate of Stillbirth (Form 13) are only claimed by funeral service providers. However, all less than 24 weeks’ fetuses are not eligible to receive Form 13 and hence these abortuses fail to use the service from funeral service providers. Then, the hospital recommended Kelvin and Angela to seek help from the Muslim cemeteries or pet cremation services. Later, a spokesperson for Hong Kong Hospital Authority announced parents could take back the pregnancy remains, i.e., their less than 24 weeks’ children. Dramatically, the hospital apologized to Kelvin and Angela for recommending pet cremation service for their child.

Yet, the hospital insisted not to issue Form 13 to this couple since Angela only experienced 15 weeks' pregnancy before miscarriage (Lau, 2017). As a result, they failed to arrange a legal and general funeral and bury for their son even though they could take him back. The unpleasant event became a strong motivation for Angela to fight for modifying the regulation on Form 13 with the LegCo (*Apple Daily*, 2017a). Thus, they sought help from a lawyer, two Legislative Councilors and Catholic diocese. The diocesan board of Catholic cemeteries was also willing to help these parents. They applied amendment in planned uses of cemetery sites based on their religious beliefs, so that Wally could have a funeral ceremony in Catholic Diocese parish and the body could be placed in "Angel Garden" eventually.

### **"Little Baby Concern Group"**

Besides Angela, the founder of the group, Tse Mei-ye, also work hard to voice out for these abortuses. When more parents were willing to share their sad experiences on miscarriage as well as difficulties on arranging a funeral for their baby that under 24 weeks' pregnancy (Stand News, 2018), Tse established the "Little Baby Concern Group" to gather the parents with similar experience and offers bereavement council service and support to help the parents on retrieving their babies. Their members include the grief parents, their family members, relatives and people from different industries, such as social workers, counseling psychologists, teachers, nurses and different religious members. They share the same view of striving respect and care to the baby under 24-week pregnancy and against the measure of handling abortuses as clinical waste. Tse attended different types of discussion, conference, legislative council meeting and cooperated with legislative councilors to give suggestions on amending the current regulation to handle abortuses with respect and care the need of parents.

### **Point of views among stakeholders**

#### *Religious parties*

The hospitals' practice of handling abortuses as medical waste raises the public's concern because of an ethical issue behind this case. Although the less than 24 weeks' fetuses are not classified as human beings according to the current regulation, it is undeniable that the fetus is a life once living. The parents regard the fetus would be the member of their families. Thus, treating them as clinical waste is unacceptable. For the perspectives of religious groups, they treat the fetuses as human beings once being formed. For example, from Psalm 139:16, "your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book all my days were recorded, even those which were purposed before they had come into being," and from Muslin, Qur'an 5:3, "whosoever has spared the life of a soul, it is as though he has spared the life of all people. Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind" and from Roman Catholic, Didache 2:1-2 70 A.D., "you shall not procure [an] abortion, nor destroy a newborn child." It shows that their attitude to life that they have always valued life since life was blessed and created by god.

#### *Parents*

The parents reported that they felt helpless and angry about the arrangement since the current policy could not protect their rights and failed to give a human identity to their babies (Ming Pao, 2018a). Since the parents stated that they were not informed about the processes, they did not know that the abortuses would be handled as clinical waste and hence they did not request for taking back their children. When the parents realize their children were treated as clinical waste, they felt angry and blame on themselves, as well as those medical staff (RTHK, 2018). Although the parents can take back their children, it is still difficult to bury their babies under the current regulation, which implies these parents do not even have a place for remembrance of their children.

There are some reasons for parents having a bad impression toward the medical staff after experiencing miscarriage. First, there is no midwife for less than 24 weeks' labor. Women may lack of care during labor and also after birth since midwives are experienced in handling these cases and able to provide support and sense of security (Tam, 2018). Moreover, before 18 weeks of labor, there is no grief team for the parents, so that they may lack of mental support. Furthermore, a mother had an unpleasant experience with those medical staff, simply because one of the staff claimed that "it's just a puddle of blood, it's useless to reclaim it and cremate it," which made her felt heartbreaking. That is quite unacceptable that the attitude of the medical staff was indifferent by failing to show empathy toward the parents who just lost their children. The majority of complaints in patients' report would be attributed to the unsatisfied experience of hospital staff, mainly due to lacking care on patients' emotions (Hannebaum, 2014).

#### *Doctors*

Doctors can take a side on whether distributing Certificate of Stillbirth without bearing legal responsibility, but it will still be against the medical practice and rules of the public hospitals. In fact, doctors will respect the decision of the mother for arranging a funeral to their children since it does help to process grief (RTHK, 2018). Nonetheless, there is no room to adjust the standard of 24 weeks that fetuses are not classified as stillbirth; otherwise, it will break away with the international standard. Furthermore, it is impossible to revise the basic requirement to distribute Form 13. Even lowering the standard of number of weeks of pregnancy, there is still victims that fail to be distributed a Form 13.

#### *Legislative councilors*

Tam Man Ho, Legislative Councilor, raised three suggestions on this controversial issue. First, he suggested making an amendment on Cremation and Gardens of Remembrance Regulation, in order to let all less than 24 weeks' fetuses can be buried or cremated legally (Tam, 2018). Second, he recommended to set up gardens in three government's cemeteries on Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories, so that the parents will be able to hold a ceremony for remembrance of their children whatever they have religious beliefs. Third, the unclaimed abortuses in hospitals are expected to have cremation and Hong Kong SAR Government is better to set up a public cemetery for these fetuses.

Another Legislative Councilor, Cheung Chiu Hung, also showed his concern on this. He suggested medical staff members are required to provide sufficient information for the parents, in order to help them make a clear decision (Cheung, 2018). A mother shared her experience of receiving inducing labor. She said that she and her husband needed to decide whether they hoped to meet their child and how to handle the body within a short period after the surgery. Nonetheless, they did not receive details from medical staff and all the decisions have to be made within a short period of time. Mr. Cheung restated all medical staff should treat the parents with empathy and care, in order to provide them psychological support.

With regard to point of views obtained from distinctive stakeholders, their comments clearly indicate constraints on handling abortuses, indicating such a policy has a loophole to be currently implemented without flexibility in Hong Kong.

#### **Review of current measures in Hong Kong**

The Births and Deaths Registration Ordinance allows doctors to make their own decision on issuing the Certificate of Stillbirth." (Press Releases, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017) The current regulation does not specifically state 24 weeks is a restricted line to classify whether the fetus is considered as a stillbirth. However, Hong Kong College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and also Hong Kong

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Hospital Authority recognize the international standard on National Health Service to define stillbirth is a fetus reaches 24 weeks' pregnancy or more than 500 g for uncertain gestational age (Press Releases, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017). Fetuses before 24 weeks have not developed the vital organs and their lungs are not developed enough, so that they mostly perform low survival rate (Isle of Wight NHS Trust, 2017). All the unclaimed fetuses are treated as clinical waste in Hong Kong hospitals. Clearly, the procedure of disposal is the same as handling clinical waste. If the parents refuse their children to be handled as clinical waste, they are required to take back their children's bodies and therefore arrange burial or incineration service by themselves.

In fact, the number of receiving Hong Kong Hospital Authority's approval to collect the less than 24 weeks' abortus is merely 23 cases within three years (Hong Kong 01, 2018). A doctor explained that the low number was due to insufficient promotion on parents to reserve their rights for getting back the abortus (Hong Kong 01, 2018). Besides, different hospitals have different policies on retrieving the remains of abortus, so that it may confuse the couples who are willing to take back their children. Dr Cheung, Consultant of Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Prince of Wales Hospital pointed out that parents did not request to retrieve the abortus in the old days but nowadays people have changed their mind, i.e., better to hold a proper funeral for their babies (RTHK, 2018). Unfortunately, parents can only take back less than 24 weeks abortus but burial and cremation service providers refuse to provide them services.

A legal burial or cremation service for handling the abortus is only available in private service providers since the cemeteries and crematoria under Food and Environmental Hygiene Department do not accept the application for those less than 24 weeks' abortuses. The parents can merely choose services provided by the private sectors related to religious parties or pet cremation services. For instance, the "Angel Garden" providing comprehensive service for abortuses is now being under the government's surveillance. For the couples who do not have any religious belief or have other religious beliefs, they can only choose pet cremation services. However, the ash cannot be placed in the niches. Actually, not many couples were willing to choose to cremate their children by pet cremation services, because that is quite unacceptable their children were treated as pets. Besides, the expensive service fee for private pet cremation is also the parents' concern. Consequently, the twilight zone to help arrange cremation for abortuses by pet cremation is not too workable in our real-life context. A manager from pet cremation company remembered no one asked for cremation service for less than 24 weeks' abortus, the company was not able to handle these cases since its staff did not have a clear picture of the existing regulation in Hong Kong (*Apple Daily*, 2017b). In other words, the usual practice of funeral parlors should be always followed by those official documents from the government and/or hospitals.

### *Exemption*

Of all cases on this issue, Hong Kong SAR Government can still execute its exemptions, and Mrs. Chung and Mr. Chung's case was a successful one. The case is that Mrs. Chung underwent termination of pregnancy in a day before 24 weeks' gestation. Her husband tried to approach undertaker of burials, but his application was rejected due to lacking Form 13. Even with the help of chaplaincy, the hospital refused to issue Form 13. Public cemeteries rejected their application and then he discussed with another undertaker of burials whether pet cremation services could accept his application. Mr Chung complained that he could do nothing to help his wife and hence pet cremation service should be their only option. Fortunately, he received help from a Legislative Councilor, so that Food and Environmental Hygiene Department exercised its discretion to allow public cremation service and niche arrangement for his son. To be obvious, this

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case indicates the government has its discretion on handling legal burial of abortuses in public cemeteries without violating the law of Hong Kong, and more critically this case has become a precedent (RTHK, 2017).

### *Regulation*

As the current regulation never restricts the distribution of Certificate of Stillbirth on pregnancy week, so that doctor can make his/her professional judgment. If a doctor issues the certificate, the abortus will be signified as a stillbirth even less than 24 weeks, and such a being without doubt enjoys the same rights as a stillbirth under the current regulation.

However, the above-mentioned regulation may lead to certain controversies. The first controversy is the current regulation namely Offences against the Person Ordinance (Laws Compilation and Publication Unit, Law Drafting Division, Department of Justice, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2015). Since less than 24 weeks' fetuses are viewed as a body part or human tissue, abortion can be done before first 24 weeks' gestation when requirements are fulfilled. The pregnant women need to prove that the continued pregnancy will upset their mental health and also require approval from two doctors. After 24 weeks of pregnancy, abortion surgery can only be proceeded under two doctors' strong conviction that continued pregnancy would sooner or later threaten the maternal life. When the fetuses are larger than 24 weeks, they would have a higher possibility to stay alive. Therefore, stillborn children above 24 weeks can be claimed as a stillbirth that Hong Kong's regulation admits their human identity. In other words, getting approval of abortion after 24 weeks' pregnancy is more difficult than that of before 24 weeks' pregnancy.

The second controversy is that regulation of before 24 weeks pregnancy abortion will be affected. If the abortuses can receive Form 13 before 24 weeks' gestation, they are legally classified as stillbirth. Therefore, the regulation of abortion surgery before 24 weeks' pregnancy should be as strict as the standard of after 24 weeks' pregnancy abortion, which leads to more limitation on abortion of before 24 weeks' pregnancy. In addition, the mothers cannot receive medical termination of pregnancy by the reason of their physical or psychiatric problems, and physical or mental abnormality after 24 weeks' pregnancy.

The standpoint of not issuing a human identity for before 24 weeks' fetus is undoubted. Therefore, such an improvement plan toward this issue is better to focus on comforting the parents as well as being more sensitive to provide them support in the real-life context.

### **Regulation in Mainland China and overseas countries**

With reference to such a scenario in Mainland China, disposal of the less than 24 weeks' fetuses has meanwhile been a controversy. Ministry of Health of Mainland China announced the "Baby and Fetus Remains and Placenta Management Regulation," the management of remains of fetuses and babies needs to follow the regulation of Funeral Management Regulation (Hong Kong 01, 2018). In addition, handling of fetus remains should be done by parents. If such parents have difficulties, they can entrust the handling of fetus to a funeral department. Handling remains of fetuses and babies as clinical waste are forbidden.

In Australia, since all less than 20 weeks' fetuses are not recognized as human beings according to the law. Hence, Birth, Deaths and Marriages Registry would not issue any registration of birth toward such cases (Sands Australia National Council, 2012). As these fetuses are not eligible to have registration of birth, they do not have the registration of death either. Still, there is no constraint on how the parents handle the remains of their children. The way of handling the remains is up to parents' decision, including to take back their children and bury at home, buy the communal cremation services offered by hospitals, choose funeral services arranged by hospitals or simply organize private funerals. For psychological support, an organization called Sands has provided continuous support to

parents who did experience miscarriage, stillbirth and newborn death. A range of services is provided to relieve the pain of these parents. For example, “24/7 National Support Line and Email Support” is offered to let them share negative feelings and thoughts. If they want to have a face-to-face communication, they can opt for the “Live Chat” service. They can further join the local support groups to meet other parents who have the similar experiences. Apart from females, the organization also cares about males, i.e., the negative feelings of fathers. For instance, a dedicated line called “Men’s Support” is offered accordingly (Sands Australia National Council, 2012). Sands provides comprehensive services for the parents to cater for their psychological needs.

In the UK, Isle of Wight NHS Trust (2017) handed out a leaflet about preterm birth of before 24 weeks’ pregnancy. The leaflet provides information explaining its services before and after preterm birth. For instance, medical staff members are able to provide guidance for parents about different options after preterm-birth. Midwives would monitor both the physical and the psychological change of mothers, in order to offer mental support by comforting these depressed parents. After giving birth, the bereavement support can be provided to the parents, such as designing mementos by photographs and memory boxes. If the mothers hope, they can further request the Maternity Unit staff to provide the certification of birth with the detail of delivery date, time and weight of the baby. In addition, parents are allowed to visit their babies in the Chapel of Rest or decide to take back their baby to their home for a period of time. What deserves to mention is that the UK specifies the abortuses will be sent to Hospital Mortuary, which is different from places of handling as clinical waste. If parents are willing to conduct funerals for their children, “Born too Soon” service is noted prior option since it is simple and free of charge, or they can select private funeral services customizing arrangements. The content of the leaflet is based on two principles, focusing on respecting the maternal preference in addition to treating the deceased with care and respect.

Although both Hong Kong and the UK do not admit fetuses less than 24 weeks as a kind of stillbirth, the practices of the UK on handling abortuses are more humanizing that is able to show care to the parents and also respect to the abortuses. In this regard, mothers can receive both the effective communication and the clear procedures were provided by the government in their difficult times (Human Tissue Authority, 2015). With reference to the UK’s hospitals, their practices are worked out under the NHS guidelines as below. Medical staff members would provide documents listing all procedures of handling the abortuses and options for the parents, and the content of the document must be explained by the professionals. More critically, the decision on disposal of pregnancy remains absolutely depends on maternal decision. Parents are allowed to settle the burial for their children depending on their particular religious beliefs. If the mothers are not willing to receive any information and/or avoid involving in the choice of handling the pregnancy remains right after surgery, all the information should be prepared thereafter upon the request. Finally, the abortuses disposal must be treated by “Sensitive Incineration” rather than the same pathway of disposing clinical waste.

### **Policy recommendations for Hong Kong**

People may question why the parents insist in arranging a funeral for their babies. Although the baby lived only for a short time or died prior to birth, he or she is still a part of the family. Thus, a funeral service becomes an important part of the grieving process as it is an instrumental tool to express sorrow. What is more, funeral provides the final opportunity for parents accepting the unfortunate reality that their babies have gone, especially for the depressed mothers. As a result, arranging a proper funeral is considered as a chance for the depressed parents, other family members, and friends to express their love and “say goodbye” to the babies (Sands Australia National Council, 2012).

Professor Sophia Chan, Secretary for Food and Health of Hong Kong SAR Government, stated that the government has been carefully considering a series of proposed legislative amendments to better handle cases of arranging funerals for less than 24 weeks' fetuses (Ming Pao, 2018b). Starting from 2019, a non-profit private Tao Fong Shan Christian Cemetery is expected to provide 144 quotas for burial of abortuses for their members. Besides, Chinese Permanent Cemeteries will have its first "Angel Garden" and provide 219 quotas for burial, and with a garden for the scattering of cremated ashes for couples without any religious beliefs (Li, 2019). Yet, cremation of the babies' bodies still needs to be done by their parents (by using the pet cremation services). It is worth mentioning that Food and Health Bureau is planning the expansion of "Angel Garden" in other public cemeteries. Although there is a modification on burial for less than 24 weeks' fetuses, their parents still encounter difficulties to arrange a cremation for their children.

Modifying the related policies can be considered as one of the most effective approaches by having a Pareto improvement. For example, Mainland China and overseas countries have humanizing policy that able to show care to the parents and respect to the abortuses. Nowadays, 24 weeks is an unshakeable dividing line to determine whether the fetus is human and eligible to apply Form 13 in Hong Kong. A lawyer suggested having another Form, Form 13 A to make all less than 24 weeks' abortuses to recognize as "special existence," proving them they are under the legal abortion also but not being classified as stillbirths (RTHK, 2017). Hence, their parents are legal to arrange funerals for them in public cemeteries, and can opt for more choices for their children. To be obvious, modifying the policies can help couples who do not have religious beliefs or have other religious beliefs to choose the best option for their children. Besides, Form 13 A can help eliminate worries of private service providers of whether they are legal to "help" such depressed parents.

Apart from the improvement in legislation, hospital staff members are expected to deliver more care with substantial support, such as providing clear instructions and sufficient information toward parents. In public hospitals, nurses and doctors need to declare the further procedures on handling abortus with document signing to ensure that parents are fully understanding all details. In particular, medical staff members should clearly tell the couples whether they can take back the abortus, the procedure of taking back the abortus and how the hospital handles abortus if they choose not to take back their children. Clearly, it can help prevent the possibility of the couples who do not clear about their rights and the procedures of the hospital to handle the abortus. If possible, the information is suggested to be told before labor induction or prior to the termination of pregnancy. In a long run, training staff on handling the depressed parents' emotion and communication techniques are necessary. Nurses or medical social workers are always responsible to provide sufficient information for their final decision making and also follow-up consultation. When any medical staff members explain the related procedures to the parents, the earlier ones need to be aware of the wordings and care the feelings of them in the entire process.

Not only the hospital staff, but also Hong Kong Hospital Authority can help provide psychological support for parents in need. "Walking through Stillbirth" and "Walking through Miscarriage" are examples of patient groups held by the parents who did experience the loss of their less than 24 weeks' babies. The Hospital Authority can collaborate with certain Chinese charity communities to establish parental bereavement and grief consultation, in order to set up a platform for parents to receive mental support that help them go through the sadness. Once the outsourcing contracts nearly ends with contractors, the Hospital Authority can consider inviting professionals from universities and/or non-profit organizations by reviewing the existing disposal policy of pregnancy remains. A discussion for a medical professional committee on modifying how to handle the abortuses before 24 weeks' gestation can be formed to collect opinions from experts both inside and outside Hong Kong, i.e., from Mainland China and overseas countries. For

instance, the proposed procedures can refer to “Sensitive Incineration” of the UK’s NHS, which mentions separation of the abortuses and human tissues handling to show more respect and dignity to both parents and their children.

## Conclusion

The occurrence of miscarriage is common among pregnant women and the miscarriage rate can reach 20 percent. However, there is not enough care for those unfortunate women in Hong Kong nowadays. Angela and Kelvin’s case of being recommended to use pet cremation for their son initially raised the public concern on this controversial issue, and more people realized that all less than 24 weeks’ fetuses should be treated as clinical waste in hospitals. As for different opinions among stakeholders, not sufficient funeral services can be provided for the depressed parents and also medical staff members always fail to provide mental support to their clients. To be obvious, there are great rooms for improvement on medical staff’s attitude toward these couples and having more flexibility in arranging legal funerals or cremations for all less than 24 weeks’ fetuses. After studying both the current regulation and the practices in Hong Kong SAR, it is clear that the existing regulation is not comprehensive and has a loophole. Moreover, by taking Mainland China and overseas countries’ measures as a reference, their regulations on handling abortuses and support service from medical staff members provide better direction by showing more respect and dignity to both parents and their children. Although the less than 24 weeks’ abortuses are not classified as any human identity due to the legal constraint, flexibility can still be provided on handling abortuses as a kind of Pareto improvement.

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