

Uphill struggle

Su-Mei Thompson welcomes government moves to create a more level playing field for women in society, including those unveiled in the policy address – but will they prove to be effective?

The recent policy address touches on many issues that local women's groups have been working to address. These include turning a gender lens on policymaking, helping women carers stay in the workforce and empowering women in poverty to be more economically self-reliant. We now need detailed and thoughtful implementation of the outlined approaches.

From this year, all government departments are required to refer to a "gender mainstreaming checklist" when formulating major policies and initiatives. Basically, they will have to confirm that they have examined gender-segregated data and have consulted women's associations on the likely gender impact.

However, we know from our own research that there are significant gaps across the government in the collection and analysis of key data – including on teenage pregnancies, household spending on childcare and elderly care, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic minority women – which make it more difficult for effective policies to be developed.

In addition, gender experts must be utilised, to allay the suspicion that departments will merely pay lip service to the checklist. Here, we need to build the talent pool of officials who understand gender issues and can join the dots between data and policy formulation to create a more level playing field for women.

The policy address also proposed to increase women's representation on advisory and statutory bodies from 30 per cent to 35 per cent. However, a closer look at the make-up of these groups reveals that while, overall, women comprise more than 30 per cent of the total, some 147 of the 470 bodies have fewer than 30 per cent women and 30 boards have no women at all. More must be done to encourage the laggards.

Furthermore, the positive impact of women's involvement would be even bigger if the government committed to setting targets to address the shockingly low representation of women in functional constituencies – they hold just two of the 35 seats – and in the Legislative Council more generally, where women make up just 16 per cent of lawmakers.

This is important for many reasons, not least because of the substantial global body of research showing that women legislators are more likely to prioritise women's, children's and family issues, and the environment.



The government has also said it will encourage employers to offer part-time jobs that appeal to women with caregiving responsibilities. However, if part-time work is to become more prevalent, our employment laws need to be amended, as, currently, employees who work less than 18 hours a week are not entitled to many of the benefits and protection under the Employment Ordinance.

The emphasis in the policy address on enhancing care services should also be helpful to working mothers (and fathers).



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Full-day kindergarten services and additional childcare subsidies, plus more residential care places for the elderly, are all positive steps. Without suitably qualified people, however, implementation of these programmes will be problematic. Hong Kong has tended to rely on an imported underclass of foreign domestic helpers to provide care services without investing in or encouraging the development of local professional carers.

The government appears to have recognised the problem by announcing that funding will be forthcoming for 1,000 places on a new scheme to encourage young people to become elderly and rehabilitation carers. For the scheme to succeed though, we need a shift in mindset – from one where a stigma is attached to care services as a potential career. Improving the professional status of the industry is an important step.

At the same time, it is only right that we acknowledge the vital role played by migrant workers as carers. Currently, our employment conditions for foreign domestic workers lag behind global standards promoted by the International Labour Organisation. More humane policymaking in this area would benefit us all.

Many non-governmental organisations have expressed their disappointment at the new proposed minimum wage level of HK\$32.50 per hour. According to research, taking inflation into account, the subsistence wage level for an average worker is at least HK\$39 per hour. This is particularly salient for women's groups because women tend to make up the greater proportion of the working poor, given their preponderance in low-wage jobs such as caring, cleaning and catering.

Another concern of grass-roots groups is the current lack of Mandatory Provident Fund protection for the one million or so low-income workers, part-time staff, housewives and the elderly.

Apart from the working poor, Hong Kong has a depressingly large number of

individuals who are struggling just to get on the job ladder. However, the one-line reference in the policy address to the importance of promoting employment for the underprivileged feels like a hastily included afterthought.

If, for example, the government could accelerate efforts to accredit holders of mainland vocational qualifications to do comparable jobs in Hong Kong, this would greatly help the many marginalised female new arrivals from the mainland who struggle to find work.

The policy address contains some substantive suggestions for how to improve the lot of women in Hong Kong, although many could have been more ambitious.

It is also disappointing that the government did not address the key recommendations from the recent United Nations review of the status of women in Hong Kong, including extending statutory maternity leave to be in line with global standards and giving better protection to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

While progress on these fronts remains elusive, at least women's groups can take heart that the policy address shows the government recognises the importance of creating brighter prospects for women and girls from all walks of life, to boost economic growth and enhance social development and inclusion in society.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation and a member of the Equal Opportunities Commission

Fallow no more

David Akers-Jones says after years of neglect, Hong Kong's agricultural land looks set to be given new life under a government push for farming

One of the recent clutch of government policy consultation documents is devoted to an exciting revolution. At long last, the sleeping beauty of our agricultural sector is to be roused and a new world of flourishing farmland will rise from forgotten fields.

In the 1960s, when I was first posted to Yuen Long as district commissioner, the exodus of farmers had already begun and Chinese restaurants had started to sprout in European cities. A fleet of jumbo jets, developed by an enterprising leader from San Tin in the northwest, carried farmers and their families to this new Eldorado in the West. In 1968, I painted a view of Pat Heung, yellow with ripening paddy, and every day I drove to work from Tuen Mun to Ping Shan through beds of water chestnut.

In distant Kowloon, at about the same time, another revolution was taking place. Kwai Chung valley was being reclaimed from vegetable fields and docklands were moving from Kowloon to container terminals lining the shores of Kwai Chung, known to old salts as Gin Drinkers Bay.

A crucial footnote in the consultation document mentions the ruling in the case of Melhado versus the attorney general, to the effect that the term "agricultural" was descriptive only, and thus agricultural land could be used for storage. After the conclusion of the case – after which, sadly, there was no appeal – agriculture no longer meant farms and fields, and it led to the landscape being piled high with containers, old cars and anything for which there was no home in urban Hong Kong.

Alas, there was no matching effort to make land available for container storage. Instead, we boasted that Hong Kong was a container port with a throughput the envy of the world, and not the worst spoiler of agricultural land in our part of the world.

The result of this failure is that, when we wish to develop our new town, Hung Shui Kiu, we have to get rid of, or resite, thousands of container boxes. The Melhado decision was a godsend to our landowners: no more back-breaking toil in paddy planting, our absent farmers were now able to lease out their ancestral land for container storage or dispose of it for land speculation.

One might ask: what happened to the old agricultural policy of the government department with an annual budget for decades of more than HK\$1 billion? In fact, it has been struggling to do all the things set out in the so-called new policy, to bring fresh ideas, machinery, compost, new breeds and seeds, all things they have been doing since the end of the second world war.

Now, we have a chief executive who grows his own vegetables, and agriculture has its champion in Government House. Not only that, the global green awareness has infected Hong Kong and the new policy proposes to create a green park, a mea culpa for the environmental sins we have committed. For once we have a vision. However, an Agri-Park by itself is fine but what about the districts and their councils? Surely, they can point out the plots of land among the high-rises in their areas large enough for local enthusiasts to cultivate, and to bring the benefit of societal changes for organic food up to the people in concrete boxes?

David Akers-Jones is president of the Business and Professionals Federation of Hong Kong

Beijing must look beyond subsidies to improve the lot of Chinese farmers

After the publication last week of China's preliminary economic data for 2014, much fuss was made over the greater contribution of the services sector to overall growth.

However, one equally important statistic was overlooked.

According to the figures, agriculture's share of gross domestic product fell to 9.2 per cent from 9.4 per cent in 2013 (this figure was itself revised down from an initial estimate of 10 per cent), and the downward trend is likely to continue.

This is an indisputable outcome of China's economic restructuring. At the same time, the numbers accentuate the unfair treatment of rural and urban areas in official policy, and the so-called "san nong problem" – the three rural issues of agricultural industry, farmers' livelihood and countryside concerns.

This is because the cheap farm labour that has given Chinese growth such a boost has by now been exhausted, absorbed by its industries. China has reached the famed Lewis Turning Point.

How Beijing deals with its san nong problem will determine whether the country can escape the middle-income trap that awaits it. Thus, we eagerly await the release of the "No 1 central document", the leadership's annual policy document which is expected this year to focus on the san nong problem, as it has for the past 11 years.

China's san nong problem is unusually complicated. It's partly inevitable, given the current stage of China's development, and partly the result of its peculiar

Hu Shuli says China can unleash the creativity of its agricultural sector by modernising it – through market development and rights protection



administrative system. Since hukou registration was introduced in 1958, China has adopted a clearly demarcated, dual system of administering its rural and urban areas. Notwithstanding the changes made over the past three decades, the system has survived largely intact for 60 years.

The problems are numerous: a huge and widening income gap between city and village; outdated rural management;



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lack of basic infrastructure in the farming industry; the inadequate provision of public goods in the villages; and so on. Meanwhile, the slow pace of land and hukou reform has also held back overall reform and urban development.

It's true that farm harvests have grown for 11 consecutive years, but how much longer can this last? The outside environment is rapidly changing. Within China, problems created by an

investment-led development approach are beginning to emerge.

At their recent work conference on rural issues, policymakers identified four major problems. First, the prices of major farm produce are higher domestically than the global prices. Second, farming costs are steadily rising. Third, China is probably flouting World Trade Organisation rules, as initial calculations show it is granting more of the direct, trade-distorting subsidies to the farm industry than it is allowed to. Fourth, farmland degradation is becoming critical.

Beijing cannot subsidise its way out of these problems. It must overhaul farm management and unleash the creativity of its farms and farmers. As they stand, China's agricultural subsidies are already higher than America's, approaching the OECD average. There's a broad consensus within China that it cannot follow the Japanese and Korean examples of heavily supporting this sector.

Rural investment is a must, but the money must go towards improving basic infrastructure, boosting education and health provision in the villages, and investing in research and development. It must also promote market development. Elsewhere, this holds the key to modern agriculture; China can be no exception.

A year ago, the government abandoned its stockpiling programme for cotton and soya beans, opting instead to let prices fluctuate, subsidising farmers when incomes fall too low. This will help narrow the gap between local and global prices, as well as the gap between supply and demand.

In the first year of its pilot scheme, the plunge in cotton prices led to the problem of hefty subsidies. Despite the setback, the government must press on, making adjustments along the way.

In the days ahead, the government must begin to address the problem of property rights. Only an open market with low transaction costs and high protection for property rights can energise the farm sector. Unfettered powers at the top can result in the loss of land for millions of poor farmers – this is a lesson China must learn from history, its own as well as others'.

In the process of addressing the san nong problem, China must also consider the related issue of food security. For this, Beijing must widen its outlook and consider food security from a global perspective.

While food security meant self-sufficiency in the old days, today it means a diversity of sources, both local and foreign. The government must widen its import of food, and encourage local companies to invest abroad. This is the only way to ensure food security for China.

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Greece, Germany head for a euro-zone game of chicken

Stratos Pourzitakis says both will stand firm on handling of Greek debt

Syriza's landslide victory will be a game changer for Greece, either ending economic stagnation or leading to a euro-zone exit. Despite widespread optimism among Greeks that the new government can improve the economy and remain in the euro zone, in reality, the chances of a "Grexit" are very real: Syriza's anti-austerity agenda threatens to put Athens on a direct collision course with Germany.

After winning 149 seats in the 300-seat parliament, Syriza has formed a governing coalition with the right-wing party Greek Independents. The two diverse parties have found common ground in their anti-austerity rhetoric and hostility towards Germany and the troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Syriza's victory should come as no surprise in light of the mounting public dissatisfaction with the previous coalition of New Democracy and Pasok, which implemented the bailout austerity measures that Syriza calls "fiscal waterboarding".

Yet, the new government will face serious challenges. New prime minister Alexis Tsipras has pledged to renegotiate Greece's €240 billion (HK\$2.1 trillion) bailout programme and push for a new debt haircut. In response, European Union leaders have ruled out a new write-down. What is more, if it is to be included in the recently announced quantitative easing programme, Athens needs to reach a deal with the troika on the ongoing bailout programme.

Syriza has promised to boost public spending, re-examine investment agreements, and establish public companies. Apart from being questionable in terms of effectiveness, it is almost certain such policies will be rejected by the troika since they are not in line with the German doctrine of fiscal responsibility.

If Tsipras sticks to his guns, cutting ties with Germany will be inevitable, leaving Greece without access to cheap ECB funding. Inevitably, the Greek economy will come under stress, and in July and August, the government will be unable to



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repay €7 billion for bonds that will mature. At that point, a euro-zone exit would be the only feasible option.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble may not want to "lose" Greece, but they cannot afford to make substantial compromises as any concessions would be exploited by anti-austerity forces in Europe. The popularity of the Spanish left-wing party Podemos and British Prime

Minister David Cameron's pledge for a referendum on EU membership diminish the possibility of giving in to Greece's demands.

After all, with approximately 80 per cent of Greek debt now held by euro-zone governments, a Grexit does not spook markets any more. Merkel is also taking domestic politics into account; recent polls show that more than 60 per cent of Germans favour a Grexit should Athens renege on its bailout conditions.

In parallel, Tsipras has limited options because of the Eurosceptic faction in Syriza, which wants to leave the door open to a euro-zone exit. If Tsipras goes back on his word, the odds are that the faction would withdraw its support for the government, leading to new elections, with potentially disastrous consequences.

It appears Greece and Germany are heading for a very serious game of chicken. Who blinks first remains to be seen but if it isn't Germany, then Greece will be doomed, whatever else happens.

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