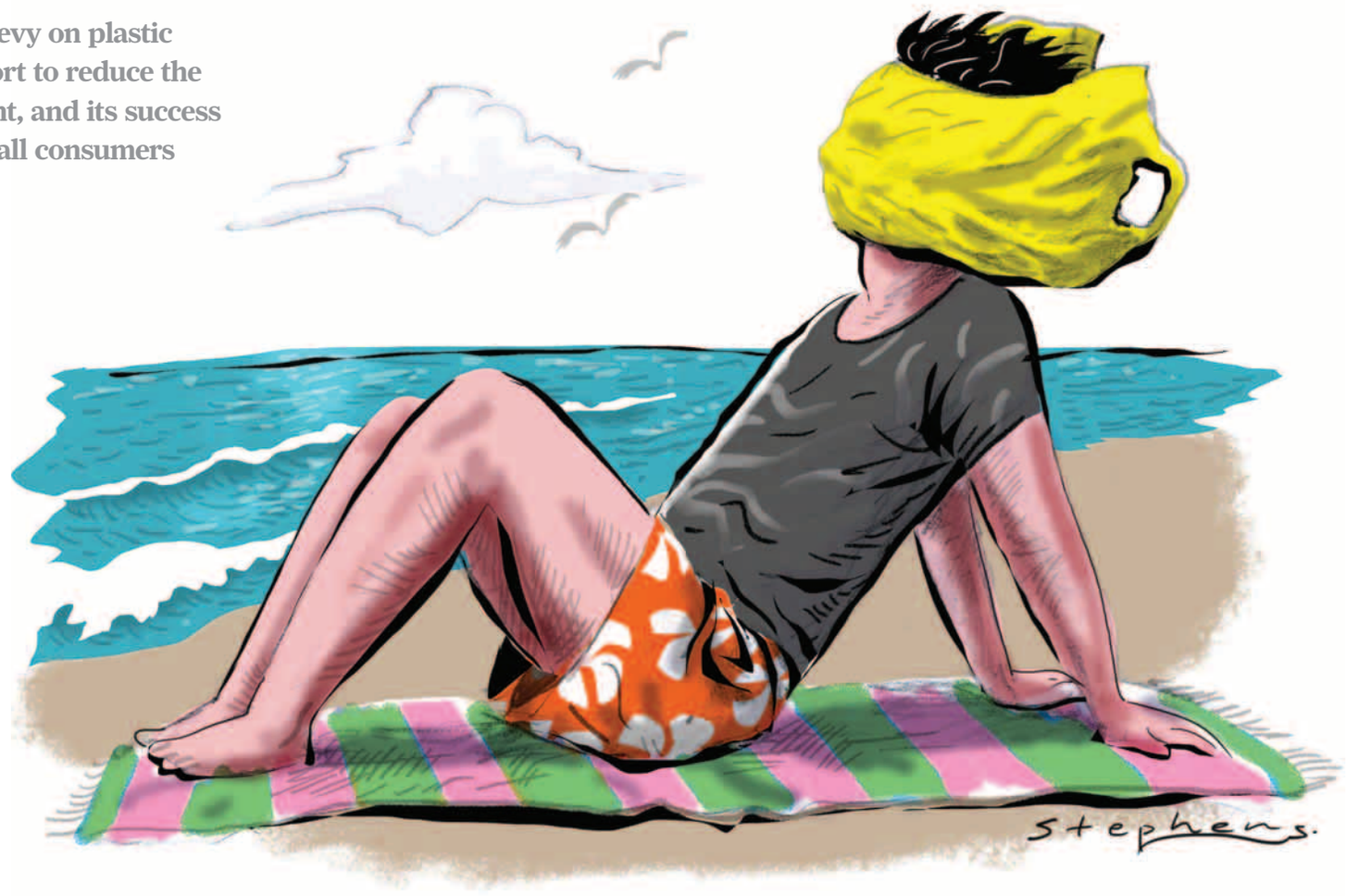
INSIGHT

Big-picture view

Gilly Wong says Hong Kong's levy on plastic bags is but part of a global effort to reduce the use of this environmental blight, and its success will depend on the support of all consumers



As responsible consumers, Hong Kong people understand that we all have to make small changes in our consumer decisions to allow society to continue consuming goods not just for now, but forever. This is the core idea behind the Consumer Council's strategic direction advocating sustainable consumption. We therefore support the thinking behind the plastic bag levy and hope for its success. Reducing our use of plastic bags won't be the only solution to saving the world, but it is a step in the right direction.

Levies on plastic bags and partial bans are common in other countries. Take Ireland. Though not usually seen as a trailblazer in environmental policy circles, Ireland, in March 2002, became the first country to introduce the plastic bag levy. It is currently 22 euro cents (roughly HK$1.80) per bag – almost four times Hong Kong's rate. It is collected by retailers and paid into the government's environment fund, which is earmarked for funding litter and waste management.

Here in Hong Kong, only large retailers hand over the levy to the government; smaller retailers keep the money. This simplifies administration. The fact that, in Ireland, the revenue was earmarked for environmental purposes rather than feeding retailers' profits or general taxation is an interesting point of difference with our own scheme.

The main reason for the levy in Ireland was to reduce the nuisance from plastic bags blowing around the countryside, or caught in bushes and trees. And, in this respect, the policy was a great success. According to the Irish government, the use of single-use plastic bags has dropped by 95 per cent, from 1.2 billion a year. This is similar to the 90 per cent reduction in plastic bag usage since 2009 achieved by Hong Kong in the first phase of the policy.

In Ireland, before the levy, plastic bags accounted for 5 per cent of litter but this had dropped to 0.22 per cent by 2004 and it has stayed low since then. Shoppers' behaviour changed, and it stayed changed, unlike some other anti-waste initiatives that use only information or voluntary plastic bag take-back schemes retailers offer.

Britain has phased in the introduction of the single-use plastic bag levy, starting with Wales in 2011, Northern Ireland in 2013 and Scotland in 2014. England will introduce the levy this autumn. This progressive introduction through the different political administrations of the UK created an interesting controlled experiment in policy. The early introduction in Wales resulted in a reduction in use of carrier bags of 81 per cent between 2010 and 2012, while during the same period in England (where there is no levy) usage rose 12 per cent, putting pressure on the government to finally announce in June last year the introduction of English legislation.

The Irish plastic bag levy is broadly seen as a success and has been widely copied throughout Europe, Africa and many US states. In 2002, Taiwan introduced legislation banning the distribution of ultra-thin bags and retailers now levy a charge for thicker bags. South Korea implemented a wide-ranging ordinance which prohibits large stores from free distribution of plastic bags. Singapore is debating doing the same.

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So, what did Ireland get right? First, it spent a lot of time communicating with stakeholders, especially retailers, to ensure the legislation would be understood. It introduced it to all retailers – big and small – at the same time, reducing possible confusion for consumers.

Then environment minister Noel Dempsey championed the tax. At the launch, he said that the prevalence of plastic bags "suggests that we are careless of our environment, and of the environmental image we convey", and he condemned "our insatiable use of free plastic bags".

Exclusions from the tax were kept to a bare minimum – reusable bags that cost at least 70 cents, small bags used for fresh fish, meat or poultry (whether or not they are packaged) and small bags for loose fruits, nuts, sweets, vegetables or cooked food. Customers were encouraged to report retailers that did not charge them a levy to the local government enforcement team.

The Hong Kong policy builds in many of these features, though the exemptions seem slightly more complex than in Ireland and the different treatment of retailers between phases one and two makes the policy appear more complicated.

We understand that, here in Hong Kong, some retailers are charging more than the statutory level of HK$0.50 per plastic bag or applying it for goods that are outside the scheme. They are free to do this. But when they do this, they should make it clear to consumers that it is their company policy to go beyond the ordinance to ensure they do not undermine the public's confidence in the policy. Many consumers are confused by the exemptions (why only plastic bags and not paper bags? Why is loose food exempt, but not loose non-food items like plants?), or the manner in which the policy was enforced in the early stages.

None of us like to see plastic bags blowing through the country parks, washed up on our beaches and polluting the environment. Consumers everywhere by and large understand the idea of the "polluter pays principle", even if they don't use such language.

Plastic bags are not a major use of our depleting fossil fuel resources, but they do persist in landfill sites for many centuries. And they are an all-too-visible example of the casual way in which we sometimes disregard our environment and the resources it provides us.

So our main message to consumers is to play a part to save the environment and start taking their own reusable bags when they shop.

Gilly Wong is chief executive of the Consumer Council

Party of one

Alice Wu says it's time that HK's political parties, which claim to champion democratic development, began to practise it themselves

With all the words that have been devoted to discussing political reform in Hong Kong, perhaps too few have focused on an essential component of democracy: political parties. Notwithstanding the fact our chief executive is required to have no political affiliation, the debate must involve an honest look at our political parties.

Just last week, one of the city's oldest and largest parties, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, not only elected its first female chairperson, but also finally completed the process of handing over the reins of power to the next generation. Leadership succession is an important milestone in a party's development. But it has mostly been something that many have found easier to talk about than do.

The other old and large party in Hong Kong – the Democratic Party – has been aiming, since its electoral setbacks in 2012, to put a younger person at its helm, but has had no success.

If we believe political parties to be essential to a democracy, then we must examine whether they do in fact contribute to creating the political conditions and healthy institutions needed for democratic development. Some see parties as incubators that nurture the people's political competence. So far, it is hard to say whether what we have in Hong Kong measures up.

We see, unfortunately, that the pan-democrats have developed a habit of being unable to work past their differences. The grouping has grown in size, but only by splitting into factions. There are many reasons for that, but it is certainly partly due to the Democratic Party's failure to change, accommodate and be responsive to internal as well as external demands. A healthy and strong opposition is essential to democracy. Political parties' ability to withstand external and internal pressures is a test of their leadership.

Differences and competing opinions are an important part of the democratic process. Political groups that can foster an inclusive democratic culture, and have put in place procedures and systems that accommodate deliberation and inclusive decision-making, serve the purpose of meaningful political progress. If only a handful of veteran leaders retain power, then supporters and the general public are robbed of new ideas and better choices.

One measure of success for political parties, irrespective of their ideological leanings, is their ability to organise differences, create common ground and help foster a better understanding of issues and solutions.

Stable and legitimate democratic institutions, of which political parties of every stripe are an indispensable part, are the pillars of any democracy. We must move beyond these parties' rhetoric of championing democracy and examine their health, demanding that they practise what they preach. Democracy is meaningless unless Hong Kong's political parties themselves encourage development and reform, can resolve conflicts in a sustainable manner, and revitalise the democratic process.

Alice Wu is a political consultant and a former associate director of the Asia Pacific Media Network at UCLA

Liberal studies helps foster open minds, rather than creating radical students

Stephen Chiu and Trevor Lee say the focus on balance may temper activism, as research shows

Months after the end of the "umbrella movement", its student leaders continue to shine in the international media spotlight. Alex Chow, Lester Shum and Joshua Wong have become household names.

Apparently, today's students are playing a vanguard role in protest politics.

Many people have sought to explain why this "post-90s generation" have taken a radical turn politically, and some members of the political establishment have pointed to the introduction of a new compulsory subject at senior secondary level – liberal studies.

Liberal studies became part of the curriculum in 2009. Since then, it has been blamed for opening the floodgates, allowing radical ideas into the classrooms and prompting students to take their views to the street. Among its six modules, one – "Hong Kong Today" – covers the topical issues concerning citizenship, identity, rule of law and socio-political participation.

Conservative politicians and commentators have expressed serious concern over the politicising effect of liberal studies. There have therefore been calls to overhaul the curriculum in several ways, including trimming the political content and even making it an elective subject, rather than a core one.

More recently, a number of officials – in Hong Kong and on the mainland – have denounced teachers who, according to these officials, have used their classrooms to promote left-wing political causes. However, this was not what we found in our in-depth interviews with 36 senior secondary students from 15 schools and 20 core members of Scholarism who had taken classes in the subject. Liberal studies had little impact on student activism, the survey showed.

Firstly, most respondents said liberal studies helped them develop a more all-round and in-depth understanding of controversial political issues and disputes that made them "think twice" when considering taking any action.

Secondly, student activism is likely to be dampened – not encouraged – by the prevailing exam-oriented attitude towards liberal studies.

For the majority, the exclusive motivation to study the subject was to secure a high grade

For the majority of the students, the exclusive motivation to study the subject was to secure a high grade.

Respondents were often drilled, through assignments and tests, on exam skills that encourage them to consider multiple points of view, balance the positive and negative aspects of an issue, and offer a rebuttal to each argument in an essay-type answer.

Surprisingly, even those politically engaged students from Scholarism we spoke to had similar experiences of the gap between knowledge acquisition and political participation.

While they said that the politics-related content and in-class discussions of controversial issues had enhanced their political knowledge, they also admitted that their main purpose for study was to pass the exam.

Over half of them had never participated in any protest before joining Scholarism. Looking back, none attributed their decision to join the group to having taken lessons in liberal studies. Instead, the group had got together initially to oppose the government's plan to introduce moral and national education in local schools.

In most cases, politicisation seemed to have intensified through their experiences in taking social and political action and through personal or online contact with activists.

In general, the heightening of political knowledge led to empathy towards the protesters' grievances. However, the training they received in liberal studies made them more circumspect about taking part in overt political engagement.

Only two respondents said liberal studies classes had a direct impact on their political engagement, crediting their teachers for inspiring them.

Looking at the findings, however, we believe politically radical teachers appear to be in the minority. The same could also be said of politically conservative teachers.

Despite the political significance that many observers have attributed to this new subject, one clear conclusion from our research is that liberal studies classes are far from being a hotbed for student radicalism. In Hong Kong, the school is nowhere near as effective an agent of political socialisation as the city's vibrant and ultra-open mass media, especially online and social media.

The emergence of student activism may be more a function of the increasingly polarised and radicalised political climate in Hong Kong.

In fact, the emphasis of liberal studies on multiple viewpoints, the complexity of politics, and the skills to verify dubious information (especially from the internet) may even have a "moderating" effect on student motivation to take part in political action.

Stephen Chiu is co-director of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and also the chair of the Curriculum Development Council-Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority Committee on Liberal Studies. Trevor Lee is a research associate at the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies

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Global education campaign must continue to aim high

Irina Bokova says ensuring access for all requires stamina – and funds

Fifteen years ago, world leaders made a promise to children around the globe that, by 2015, every child would have the chance to go to school. We promised "Education for All". The year 2015 has arrived, and 121 million children and youth remain out of school with minimal skills, particularly among the poorest and girls.

As a consequence, it is only natural that many might doubt the wisdom of putting our faith in new promises and goals for the new global development agenda to follow 2015.

Education for All was ambitious. Calling for anything universal is a challenge, especially for countries struck down by conflict, and those where infrastructure has to be built from scratch and cultural barriers surmounted.

Yet the drive to include every child paid huge dividends, helping 80 million more children and adolescents go to school since 2000. It is a huge achievement that two-thirds of the world's countries have closed gender gaps in primary school.

Many countries went out of their way to instigate innovative programmes and realised great results. Uganda scrapped school fees, for instance, and reaped huge rewards by seeing disadvantaged children enrolling in school for the first time. Brazil, Nicaragua and Mexico designed social protection programmes and helped close gaps between the rich and poor accessing education. India promoted midday feeding programmes and encouraged marginalised children to enrol.

These achievements must be celebrated widely. It is these successes that could drive other countries to follow suit and help achieve an even more ambitious vision for education by 2030.

As always, money matters to make a promise stick. A lack of funding to education has been a major barrier to progress over the past decade. Although many governments have substantially increased their spending on education since 2000, aid to education has stagnated since 2010, and a finance gap settled in and grew.

Targets and goals have been vital in helping us understand what works and what doesn't

The "2015 Education for All Global Monitoring Report" released recently by Unesco shows that, given current national spending and international aid, an additional US$22 billion must be found each year to achieve universal pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education by 2030.

We must seize this opportunity to mobilise new funds and improve how they are used. A failure to do so will see schools and classrooms not being built, teachers not being trained, and teaching materials fall by the wayside.

We have seen Afghanistan increase the percentage of girls attending school from 4 per cent to 87 per cent in 15 years. India reduced its out-of-school population by more than 90 per cent. Similar revolutions can happen elsewhere.

Turning to a new set of targets does not mean turning our back on unfinished business. On the contrary; the new education goal is deeply rooted in the continuation of the past agenda.

Achieving the new goal requires governments to make at least one year of pre-primary education compulsory. Education must be free: fees for tuition, textbooks, uniforms and transport must be abolished.

The skills young people acquire in each stage of schooling need to be prioritised to prepare them for the job market. And we must make sure we are teaching students about respect and tolerance, and how to bring about sustainable change.

Targets and goals have been vital in measuring progress and helping us understand what works and what doesn't.

All of this evidence must now help us to shape the sustainable development agenda after 2015 with education at its core. Education for All means exactly that and we will hold world leaders and governments to account until this is achieved.

Irina Bokova is director general of Unesco