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Evidence-Based Policy driven by the scientific point of view – a Hong Kong covid-19 experience

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This article identifies conditions that were relevant to the implementation of principles of the evidence-based thinking (EBP) model in Hong Kong in 2020.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: By employing public policy analysis the article discusses whether the scientific perspective truly prevailed over the political perspective in the first months of the pandemic in Hong Kong, and whether this represented a lasting change. In the Hong Kong case study both quantitative and qualitative approaches are employed, as well as participant observation, throughout content analysis of the source material.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The EBP concepts discussed in the first part of the text encompass four perspectives on public policymaking – including scientific and political perspectives. The article then examines the 2003 SARS epidemic and the relationship between it and the institutional preparedness and trust in scientific knowledge in Hong Kong during the covid-19 period. The article provides a case study of the management of the pandemic crisis in Hong Kong during early months, demonstrating the visibility of scientific experts and government actors and their influence on public policies.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The article shows that in Hong Kong, during the initial period of covid-19 pandemic, the scientific perspective indeed dominated the process of formulating and communicating public policies. However, this dominance was limited in time.

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CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

While the scientific perspective was prominent in Hong Kong and had a strong impact during the first weeks of the pandemic, the return of political control over public policy that occurred in mid-2020 signals that this episode was not a systemic change in Hong Kong, but it certainly highlighted the conditions under which an EBP process might re-emerge in the future.

KEYWORDS:

Evidence-Based Policy, public policy, Hong Kong, covid-19

At the peak of the covid-19 pandemic exacting its toll on the Hong Kong public health system, as well as its society and economy, there appeared a single question which silently reverberated throughout the city until it was given an outright formulation in the popular newspaper “South China Morning Post” opinion article “As Hong Kong fights to contain the coronavirus, Carrie Lam must not distance herself from her public” (Wu, March 30, 2020) followed by an even more straight-to-the-point piece “Where is Carrie Lam?” (Han, and Duhalde, April 6, 2020). The centre of interest both for the journalists and for the general public at this difficult time were the whereabouts of the embattled leader of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s Government – Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor. What was even more surprising was that, with the Chief Executive allegedly absent from public view, other actors took it upon themselves to deliver political solutions and to communicate those solutions to the inhabitants of Hong Kong. Those actors were public servants and scientists. Such perspective on that turn of events made the general public in Hong Kong witness public policy formulation and communication as described in the concept called the Evidence-Based Policy. For many Hong Kong inhabitants that was probably the very first time that the notion of Evidence-Based Policy became a household term.

The idea of Evidence-Based Policy (EBP), being both postulative-normative as well as summative-evaluative is being professed by its actors and – in consequence – often wrongly perceived by the general public as the process in which the world of politics bows before the world of science, the process where politicians listen to research-based expertise and accept the solutions put forward by the authors of

particular research in order to mould those solutions into a workable political outcome. The reality of the EBP model in action is a little bit different – more and more political and social scientists (Head, 2008) tend to admit that the EBP is still a process dominated by the politicians' point of view (political lens), which only incidentally is being powered by input from the world of science (research lens) or the world of practical implementation (public managerial lens). Thus it is quite interesting to observe the situation in which the political body actually took a proverbial bow and allowed the scientists to take the front seat in policy formulation as well as communicating those policy solutions to the general public. This atypical EBP model enactment became the new norm in Hong Kong for a few weeks during the covid-19 epidemic outbreak in early 2020. This article intends to provide answers to several research questions, such as: Is it true that – as the mass media stipulate – in the crucial days of struggle with the pandemic, the political elite in Hong Kong practically abdicated the exercise of relaying the public policy in a form of comprehensive and coordinated communication through government-controlled channels? Why did the political elite in Hong Kong allow for the scientific point of view to prevail in policy formulation and communication? Can this turn of events in Hong Kong be described as a sustainable, systemic public policymaking change (which would signal a possibility for future EPB model change towards the one in which it is truly the scientific lens that is driving the process of policy design)? In order to answer this set of questions, a thorough analysis of relevant source material (video recordings and transcripts of government press conferences and media appearances by scientific experts) was undertaken¹ as well as critical analysis of theoretical concepts

1 In the political culture of Hong Kong, just as in the political culture of China, it is of utmost importance whether a person is present at important political events or press conferences. The person who is allowed to be present at such events – especially the person who is not a public-relations officer but is allowed to speak on behalf of the government – is associated with having the influential governance position in a particular matter which stems from their importance for agenda setting, policy formulation and/ or implementation of particular governance solutions. Thus it is extremely important for the analysts of political life and governance of the People's Republic of China to pay attention to who performs this function of presenting the policies and government stances to the general public. Therefore, the main analytical investigation adopted for the purpose of this article

behind the idea of EBP, together with participant observation of the events unfolding in Hong Kong prior, during and after the covid-19 outbreak, which took place in the period of 2019–2020.

EVIDENCE BASED POLICY – A THEORETICAL MODEL AND ITS PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

The notion of making policy choices informed by the input produced by well-learned experts, master-craftsmen of many trades or artists cum inventors was not unknown in human history. Archimedes counselling the elites of Syracuse about novel ways to repel the invading Roman army or Leonardo da Vinci serving as chief military engineer for Cesare Borgia are only two of a number of names that come to mind as the examples of this proto-EBP approach. The modern day idea of EBP is commonly defined as “the search for usable and relevant knowledge to help address and resolve problems” faced by public policy-makers (Head, 2008, p. 2). It was in that context that the 1970s and 1980s New Public Management paradigm of public administration produced the postulates regarding the need for improvement concerning the way that the particular policy-making processes are performed. Strong emphasis was put on the necessity of obtaining relevant research from the world of science in order to achieve better results in particular governmental departments. The 1990s saw this idea begin to evolve – especially in the UK – towards the Blair-era joined-up government concept, which stressed the importance of treating challenges faced by public administration in a holistic way (UK Cabinet Office, 1999; Wells, 2007), opposing the worldview of departmental EBP of the previous decades. Those developments in the theoretical framework of the EBP meant that, as time progressed, various scientific disciplines as well as various methodological approaches were considered as relevant towards the goal of obtaining the scientific evidence for making policy choices and implementing them. Thus, where once only the sciences and quantitative methods

is centered upon the media visibility and official appearances of various actors of Hong Kong’s political, administrative and scientific spheres. See: Sun, 2007; Lin, 2024; Cheng, 2020.

were considered useful for that purpose, in time the humanities and social sciences – with their acceptance of qualitative methods – were also gradually recognised as substantial additions to the body of knowledge that policymakers may rely upon. The post-1990s version of EBP is then more open to community engagement, consultations being performed with all those who are deemed as relevant stakeholders, encouraging other than governmental actors in the process of policymaking, such as non-governmental organisations or business sector entities (Osborne, 2007; Casey, 2004).

All the above-mentioned theoretical and methodological disputes and differences notwithstanding, it is the common view of experts in the field of EBP research that it is not the scientific knowledge which dominates the praxis of policymaking based on the data scientifically obtained and meticulously prepared through the use of proper analytical tools. What is even truer, when describing the way that policy decisions are being made, it needs to be said that policymaking takes the form of negotiating various points of view, combining various lenses, through which the collected and analysed data are being further processed in order to produce the outcome, which ultimately may be presented to the general public as a policy programme (Hemmati, 2002; Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, & Barnes, 2003). There are basically four such groups of lenses, which let us perceive seemingly the same “evidence” in very different ways: the scientific, the political, the practical-implementation and the stakeholder/end-user lenses (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2009). The very nature of policy-making, which obviously sets this process the closest to the world of politics, results in the political lens being employed most often, and in a most intense way, while analysing what evidence is relevant for the process and how to make use of such a distinguished body of evidence.

Having said that, it also needs to be noted that every scientist and every expert willing to embark on the journey of providing counsel to public administration should be aware that the research basis put in front of the decision making political bodies or individuals is usually only just that – the base upon which a detailed policy, a particular social, economic or political solution, is being made. The research-derived evidence usually does not tell policymakers what actions they ought to precisely undertake (Davies, 2012). We should

even stress that true research-derived evidence cannot give policy-makers such detailed guidelines concerning what to do and what to avoid, simply because of the very nature of science and the scientific research process itself – every good research does not claim that it brings about all the answers to a particular question, every research reserves a margin of uncertainty to its findings, the margin which can be explored by a new theory or a new paradigm, which would explain the research questions in a better, more complete way. That is exactly why scientists cannot and – what’s more – should not expect that all their findings will be implemented by the policymakers exactly how the research paper phrased them.

To realise the difficulties that researchers need to accept if attempting to influence the world of policymaking, it is also worth considering that the scientific research base can be used by policymakers in three various ways: instrumental, conceptual and symbolic (Beyer, 1997; Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, & Abelson, 2003, p. 228). When thinking of the instrumental way of utilising research findings, one has in mind the situation in which the conclusions from a particular scientific project or publication are being applied almost completely – in a basically unchanged form, including all the most important details uncovered by the scientific intervention – by a policy practitioner. That such a way of using the research – portrayed as extremely desirable by the world of science itself – is also extremely rare, can be confirmed by the fact, that the publications and essays dedicated to the phenomenon of research not being applicable, or not being perceived by policymakers as worthy of trying, is exceptionally extensive.

The road definitely more often travelled for research discoveries being used by the world of policy and politics – however, not always easy for outright recognition – is for particular elements of a given scientific work to be used in a conceptual way. It means that only a part of the original research effort is being used by the world of practitioners – usually the most significant idea and a set of detailed conclusions resulting from it. Those are transformed from their original setting in a particular system of knowns and unknowns accepted for the purpose of research activity by a researcher – and put to work in another system with the factors determining the system being the result of a conscious choice informed by a particular political need and made by a particular group of policymakers.

The third of the ways that the research effort can be applied in policymaking practice is the situation when the general outline of a particular policy has already been determined by policymakers and the scientific findings are being used in a purely symbolic way – for the purpose of winning the hearts and minds of the populace, which will be the recipient of this particular set of public policies. Such symbolic usage of particular research can mean of course, that authors of a given research may find their names tied to the result, which would have never crossed their minds.

We can thus stress one more time, that what is especially rare when it comes to evidence-based policy, is a turn of events that causes the EBP-theoretical order of importance for particular evidence-perception lenses to change. As Head observes, governments seem to perceive the need to employ rigorous research lenses, seem to notice that a particular problem warrants employing the predominantly scientific point of view, only in those rare cases when some specific circumstances happen to co-exist in the same place at the same time. Those circumstances are:

- public authorities recognising a particular situation as a crisis or a matter of utmost urgency,
- political body possessing a sufficient mandate to regulate in the sphere of public administration, which is connected with a particular crisis or urgency,
- politicians finding out that the priorities standing behind a particular political grouping, which forms the government are coherent with the course of action that should be taken concerning the crisis or urgency,
- scientific experts of substantial stature are willing to dedicate their time and names to providing counsel to the politicians,
- there is a history of successful prior cooperation between the world of politics and the world of science,
- public opinion expresses the need to hear opinionated judgments on the crisis or urgency from somebody else than the politicians (Head, 2008, p. 8).

To sum up, it is extremely rare for the political point of view to allow other perspectives to take the front seat. Hardly ever there comes the time when all or even most of those factors outlined above come together in one place at the same time. Nevertheless, that is exactly

what came to be in Hong Kong in the first half of 2020, during the covid-19 outbreak.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EBP-RELATED EXPERIENCE IN HONG KONG – LESSONS LEARNED FROM SARS 2003 EPIDEMIC

Before going into details of the events from 2020, it is important to understand how the special relationship between the world of politics, the world of policy implementers, the world of end-users (general public) and the world of science, came together to recognise that, only by mutual recognition and close cooperation, it is possible to achieve a desired outcome concerning a public health policy existential threat. Such an existential threat emerged in 2003, in the form of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which introduced to southern China and Hong Kong new public health challenges and the need to overcome them in an innovative, scientific-based way.

It needs to be stated that, in the view of subsequent researchers writing on the topic, at the outset of the epidemic in Hong Kong, its authorities – both from the political and medical fields – underplayed the risk of infection to the city’s general population (Füller, 2016; Hartley & Jarvis, 2020). For the first two weeks after the first identified case has been submitted to the hospital on March 4th 2003, the government’s message was basically unanimous: the new disease did not present any real threat to the city, as it was confined solely to a group of patients, their visiting relatives and medical staff of only one medical facility: the Prince of Wales Hospital (Hung, 2003, p. 374). When, in the second half of March 2003 the new cases started to appear daily in their dozens – including the Hong Kong Government’s Hospital Authority chief executive dr Ho and the infamous community outbreak at Amoy Gardens housing complex² – it became all too clear that the threat is real indeed and that it has already entered the

² Amoy Gardens, a cluster of high-rise tower blocks with 10,000 inhabitants, located in Hong Kong Island, was a SARS outbreak “hotspot” – with 329 cases (out of which 33 were fatal). This case have brought to Hong Kong the practice of locking down whole tower blocks – the horrifying experience which was still vivid in the

city's population. The explanation for such a slow response in crisis management that has been subsequently given by the government's representatives underscored the prevailing need to limit panic in the city's general population (we could clearly discern the policy practitioners' lens in that explanation). Taking into consideration Hong Kong's special relationship with China (as its SAR – Special Administrative Region), a number of commentators (Western media and Hong Kong independent journalists like those from Hong Kong Free Press) pointed to the fact that at that time it was also the political factor, which played an important role in not approaching the threat openly in the initial phase of the health crisis. According to those commentaries, the political lens has been applied – presumably, since it has never been explicitly confirmed by any government official – because of the unwillingness on the Hong Kong Government's side to draw public's attention to the fact that the threat came to Hong Kong from the territory of Mainland China (Ngok, 2004, p. 108). What we can also say of that initial seemingly inadequate governmental reaction is that it overtly disregarded the scientific-based advice from medical experts (not the least – those working onsite with the SARS patients) which emphasised the need to close the Prince of Wales Hospital for other-than-SARS cases.

After the shockwave of the SARS crisis subsided, there came the time for the aftermath and lessons-learned exercise. In that respect the Government of Hong Kong SAR seemed not to disappoint. Admitting the inadequate response to the initial phase of the health crisis, the ruling elite agreed to call upon the panel of experts, to analyse the government's response and to advise the best ways to deal with the similar turn of events in the future. This panel of experts – the SARS Expert Committee – was set up in the final stage of the health crisis, on 28th May 2003, comprising eleven experts (seven of them coming from the international community, two – from Mainland China and the remaining two experts being local professionals from Hong Kong). Among the many recommendations that have been made by the panel and have been duly implemented by the Hong Kong

collective memory of Hong Kong inhabitants at the time of covid-19. See: Hartley & Jarvis, 2020, p. 413.

Government, three stand out as regarding the development of stronger ties between the world of science and the world of policymaking:

- establishing the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) – a body consisting of health experts and medical practitioners, placed within the structure of a relevant governmental department, which would be made responsible for the prevention and control of communicable diseases as well as for advising the government during the course of future epidemic outbreaks;
- drawing attention to the need of strengthening the coordination between the government and Hong Kong academic community in the exercise of data and information sharing for the purposes of conducting research and (resulting from research implementation) contingency planning;
- enumerating particular research areas important for management of future epidemics, which need to be nurtured by the Hong Kong academic community supported with public financing of those research efforts (SARS Expert Committee, 2003).

PUBLIC HEALTH AND ECONOMY RELATED POLICY FORMULATION AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN HONG KONG DURING 2020 EPIDEMIC OF COVID-19

The first two cases of the novel coronavirus infection, later to be renamed as SARS-CoV-2 (the viral agent being the cause for the disease known in the media as covid-19), were identified in Hong Kong on 22nd January 2020 (Cheung, January 22, 2020) and confirmed the following day. At that time the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Mrs Carrie Lam, was absent from Hong Kong, taking part in World Economic Forum in Davos. In her absence, some partial containment measures were taken up by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, who on the 23rd January presided over the third meeting of the interdepartmental Steering Committee – a body comprising representatives of various Hong Kong Government departments. The Committee was set up already on 6th January 2020 for the purpose of facilitating information exchange and coordinating response measures, when the initial signals about the new

disease started arriving in Hong Kong from Wuhan (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, January 6, 2020).

The 24th of January saw probably the very first roll-out of scientists presenting their point of view directly to the public during the joint meeting of two expert bodies – the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases (comprising 14 scientists) and the Scientific Committee on Infection Control (comprising 18 scientists) – both functioning as advisory panels for the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health. It is noteworthy that this particular meeting concluded with issuing a set of recommendations, that later on have been used by public authorities as the most substantive measures in fighting covid-19. Among those recommendations made and announced by the scientific advisory bodies one can find:

- The general public is advised to wear a surgical mask when taking public transport or staying in crowded places. It is important to wear a mask properly, including hand hygiene before wearing and after removing a mask.
- Passengers who have stayed in an aircraft within two seats surrounding a confirmed case or on a train in the same row or two rows in front and behind of the case during the symptomatic phase are classified as close contacts for quarantine.
- Close contacts should be quarantined for 14 days.
- Confirmed cases can be released from isolation when their clinical conditions improve and afebrile, and with two clinical specimens tested negative for novel coronavirus taken at least 24 hours apart (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, January 24, 2020).

On 25th January, after its Chief Executive came back from Europe, a number of new important anti-epidemic measures were undertaken by the Hong Kong Government and announced at a press conference (e.g. naming the viral outbreak as an “emergency” – the highest warning tier on a three-part scale set up for Hong Kong, which consequentially caused the closure of the biggest tourist attractions in the city until further notice). One of the decisions taken upon the return of Ms Lam to Hong Kong was to establish a panel of four world-renowned scientists who would have direct access to the highest echelon of decision-makers in Hong Kong Government, answering directly to the Chief Executive herself and enjoying the

possibility of counselling the Chief Executive without the need to go through bureaucratic intermediaries (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, January 26, 2020). The members of that panel of experts started taking over an increasing share of press sheets and screen time in the weeks to come.

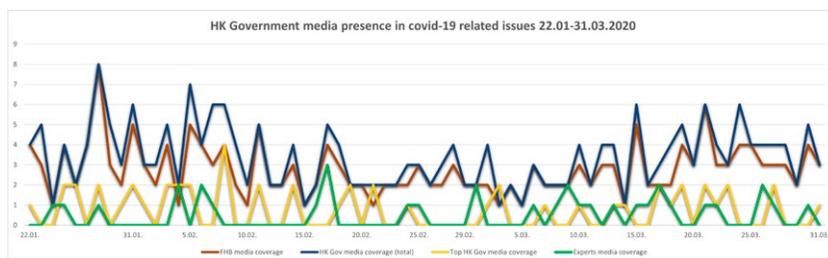
The chair of the panel of experts was given to Professor Gabriel Leung – the dean of the University of Hong Kong’s Faculty of Medicine and the Founding Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Control established at the University of Hong Kong. His strong presence in the media could already be observed at the very moment of bringing the panel to life, since he was actively participating in the press conference of Chief Executive, sitting by her side, during which the information about the panel of experts was disclosed. The other members of the expert advisory panel included equally well-known scientists recognised worldwide as prominent experts in microbiology and viral diseases: Professor Yuen Kwok-yung – the Chair of Infectious Disease at the Department of Microbiology of the University of Hong Kong (due to his research achievements in the times of SARS epidemic named as an “Asian hero of the year” by “Time Asia” magazine), Professor David Hui Shu-cheong – the Chairman at the Department of Medicine and Therapeutics, Professor of Respiratory Medicine at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (well-known for his clinical engagement in managing of severe cases during the SARS outbreak in 2003) and Professor Keiji Fukuda – an American expert in influenza epidemiology, the Director of the School of Public Health at the University of Hong Kong (and – until 2016 – the WHO Director for the Global Influenza Program).

Those two instances of allowing the scientists to take the front seat in the process of public policy formulation and public policy solutions communication are clear evidences of Hong Kong Government’s attempt at swift devising of networks and partnerships with civil society in order to produce creative and adaptive environment for what is known in the public policy analysis as turbulent problems (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing, 2021). It is also worth stressing that those government’s attempts at putting the up-to-date academic ideas of crisis management into practice was strongly correlated in time with the influential public management concepts of that period such

as: pragmatism in public management, iterations of prototyping, testing and revision of public policy responses or the need to create “robust” incremental strategies which can provide the answers to turbulent problems that are prone to rapid change (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2021; Ansell & Boin, 2019)³.

It needs to be said that the media presence of both the advisory panel experts as well as scientists advising CHP under the two scientific committees framework described above, was not dominant during the early period of developments concerning containment of the covid-19 threat – in absolute numbers. During all that period of time, counted from the first cases appearing in Hong Kong on 22nd January until the end of March, the authorities in Hong Kong prepared daily press releases as well as organised televised press conferences during which public servants appeared before the journalists and gave the notice-of-the-day information as well as answered the questions. The actual breakdown of media-related activities undertaken by the Hong Kong Government officials of different ranks in order to address the various issues related to the public health challenges imposed by the threat of covid-19 is as follows:

Figure 1. Hong Kong Government media presence against scientific experts official media presence for covid-19 related issues (22.01-31.03.2020)



Source: Author’s own research.

Note. The graph presents aggregated data for: Food and Health Bureau lower-tier officials presence in the media (red), Hong Kong Government lower-tier officials presence in the media (dark blue; data including all of the FHB media coverage as well), top Hong Kong Government officials media coverage (yellow), and experts media coverage (green).

³ It is also worth noting that CE Carrie Lam was known for her unique fondness of using the “robust” adjective (being also the keyword in publications by Christopher Ansell) in her speeches and conversations.

(yellow; including press releases and press conferences by Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, Chief Secretary for Administration Matthew Cheung Kin-chung and Secretary for Food and Health Sophia Chan Siu-chee) and experts presence in the media explicitly approved and promoted by the government (green; experts from the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases, the Scientific Committee on Infection Control and a panel of four scientists advising Chief Executive).

It is worth noting that media presence covered in the graph refers exclusively to media coverage of the issues related explicitly to the covid-19 pandemic. That is why, for example, the press conferences dedicated to the issue of a health workers' strike, which obviously was related to the covid-19 situation but wasn't about the formulation and communication of public health policy, and therefore they have been excluded from this presentation. However, even without those media appearances, it is visible that the government did not disappear from public view – it was very much present in the everyday press releases which translated into a number of tweets as well as WhatsApp and Facebook messages daily. The general public surely could not say that there was no information being given to them by the government sources. The other question regards the level at which those governmental messages were delivered to the average Hong Kong inhabitant. The graph presents rather clearly that, starting from the first cases in late January, practically until the end of the period that is of interest to this research, it was mostly low-key officials – government clerks and policy practitioners – definitely not policy makers, who brought the government message before the general public. The impression that there were no leaders behind the steering wheel of the Hong Kong Government vehicle of response towards the covid-19 challenge thus warrants some merit.

When we compare the sheer numbers of appearances in the media of various government messages and the opinions or recommendations given by the experts recognised as governmental advisors (either from the “panel of four” or from the committees giving counsel to the CHP branch of Hong Kong Government) it is clearly visible that the quantitative measurement of media activities present a rather one-sided story: the one in which it is the government actors who dominate the discussion on the topic of how to deal with covid-19 threat in Hong Kong. In other words, it is not possible to say – as

a substantial part of the mass media would have had it at that time – that the scientific point of view has been omnipotent and that it was the scientists who took over running the country in those early days of fighting the pandemic in Hong Kong. It is also true however, that during those weeks and months which infused Hong Kong’s population with great fear and lack of trust in the government (leading to the buying spree observed everywhere in Hong Kong shops, the fighting erupting over scarce facemask supplies, the theft of hand sanitisers and even of toilet paper rolls) – not least because it was held responsible for not being able to provide the necessary supplies to the city’s inhabitants. As a result, it was the opinion of those few scientists that resonated the strongest in the public discourse. The qualitative analysis of what was said by the scientists and at what precise time it was said, gives us the reason to believe that it was the researchers’ optics that was given priority when it came to the formulation and communication of public policies in those moments of unprecedented challenge to public health safety. It also needs to be said that the Hong Kong Government did not oppose the high visibility of the panel of experts and, to a lesser extent, other scientists professing various courses of action deemed necessary to effectively fight the pandemic. A special government-run thematic website dedicated to the covid-19 effort was created very quickly and a prominent part of that website was a subsection dedicated solely to the opinions of the scientific experts (Coronavirus Gov HK, May 10, 2021).

The messages being shared by the experts, both during press interviews as well as in short movie clips uploaded from various local media onto the government website, may give us the idea of the sort of messages that have been professed by the scientists – as many of those messages have been subsequently turned into formalised public policy responses by the Hong Kong Government’s officials and policy implementors.

In other words – it is visible that the Hong Kong Government enjoyed having the support of the advisory panel of experts and that of other renowned scientists and that their expert advice was allowed to be communicated to the general public by all the means of mass media being at the government’s disposal at that time. What’s more – it was the scientific point of view that played a crucial role in formulation of public health response policies.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the Hong Kong media stipulations that the initial phase of struggle with the pandemic has been met by the SAR political elite with absence in the exercise of relaying the messages on choices for public policy to the general population of Hong Kong, one must admit that the picture is more complicated than that plain journalistic contention. It is true that the most important messages, concerning the way that the public ought to behave in the face of the unfolding health crisis, have been transferred into the hands of scientists who, for a few initial weeks of the covid-19 outbreak, distributed those messages in the field rarely cultivated by that group – in the spotlight of the public relations stage. It is equally true however, that the number of meetings with journalists, press releases and messages placed on the internet by the Hong Kong Government representatives have been significant and – in quantitative terms at least – prevailing over the media presence exercised by the group of scientists.

While talking about the covid-19-related public policy formulation and its proliferation to the public at large, one should also notice that there is a profound role being played in Hong Kong in that respect by a number of non-state actors other than described above individual scientists effectively engaged by the government for the purpose of dealing with the initial phase of the outbreak. Among those non-state actors there is a prominent role of Hong Kong universities which needs to be mentioned. Apart from the fact that a vast majority of the scientists from the panel of experts advising the Chief Executive, as well as those filling the ranks of the advisory committees to the Centre for Health Protection, are employed in one of the renowned Hong Kong-based higher education institutions, it is the scientific prestige of those universities and the high esteem with which they are perceived by an average Hongkonger, that made it possible for the politicians to employ the Hong Kong science for public policy purposes in the first place.

It is easy to dismiss the influence of non-state actors while describing the official efforts of fighting the pandemic threat and its effects on the economy. In the Hong Kong context however, for presenting the full picture of those efforts, the participation of non-state actors cannot be omitted. It is the public-private partnership of sorts that

made it possible to boost the capacity of government testing centres. Only with the help of private clinics was it possible to pierce the invisible ceiling of 6 thousand test being performed per day in the public sector laboratories. It is equally important to remember however, that this cooperation between public and private sector – the cooperation which brought about the substantial quantitative improvement in testing and eventually (together with the manpower resources brought to Hong Kong by the PRC doctors) made it possible to fight off the third wave of covid-19 pandemics in Hong Kong in the summer months of 2020 – didn't happen at the beginning of the pandemic threat. This initial lack of cooperation can be explained by the relatively small number of cases that Hong Kong experienced during the first months of the pandemic which meant that the public sector bodies didn't think it necessary to ask private sector for help. On the other hand, it may be also perceived as revealing for the Hong Kong way of dealing with public policy, that only when the challenge to the public administration became too great, did it occur to the public sector to turn to the non-state actors for assistance.

The second research question, referring to the reason behind Hong Kong's political elite's decision to allow the scientific point of view to prevail in policy formulation and its communication to the public, demands a closer look at the social, economic, security and political background present in Hong Kong in the months prior to the covid-19 epidemic. The many months of continuous social unrest and growing tensions between a substantial portion of the general population and the government, resulted in the lack of trust in the officials themselves as well as their capability of facing serious communal challenges and resolving them. That might be the reason why the government made use of a group of experts from beyond the field of politics to lead the general population's response in the first days of the outbreak. That assertion however, could also mean that the whole process of policy formulation and its presentation has been premeditated and meticulously applied according to some unofficial blueprint prepared by the government circles for such an occasion. After the 2003 SARS epidemic, there already existed mechanisms of cooperation between the world of politics and the world of science. Mutual trust between the two has been established. As a result, when the time of the next emergency had come, the world of science responded in the way that

has been perceived as utilitarian by the ruling elite of Hong Kong. Knowing that the city, experienced by an earlier epidemic outbreak, was going to welcome the research-based arguments over the purely administrative and political messages, the Government of Hong Kong accepted that such a course of action, in which the scientific messaging was intertwined with the usual government media activity, was the best way of coping with the challenge ahead.

The conjuring up of unique circumstances that allowed for the unusual practising of EBP model in Hong Kong seems now to have passed. After the initial period of a few weeks of Hong Kong Government seemingly hesitating, the Hong Kong politicians seemed to quickly regain control of policymaking process from the hands of scientific experts. The same might be said for communicating policy solutions to the general public of Hong Kong. After the second wave of covid-19 infections (May-June 2020) has been subdued and, after the period of 23 consecutive days with no local coronavirus transmission, a cluster of a few fresh local cases has been identified, the public policy response related to this situation was a very different one than the response employed in the period which has been the centrepiece of this article. The very first response that the press elicited from professor Yuen Kwok-yung of the University of Hong Kong (one of the members of academia who enjoyed the media spotlight during the first months of 2020) was that it was quite possible that the new cluster of infections would prevent the resuming of school (after almost 4 months of face-to-face teaching being suspended), which was already announced by the government. In the very same newspaper article however, the Hong Kong Government representative of a high calibre – Secretary for Education Kevin Yeung Yun-hung – contradicted this scientific opinion by saying that the plans for a phased resumption of in-class education remained unchanged (Lum, Cheng, and Lau, 2020). What's more – the next day saw an even more concerted effort at supporting the government's narrative against that having been given by this, seemingly mislead, scientist. Statements obtained from other scientific experts sitting on the panel advising the Hong Kong Government during the covid-19 outbreak, unequivocally supported the political point of view that "the reappearance of local covid-19 infections was to be expected rather than a premature cause for alarm" and "you cannot close schools forever" (Lau, May 14, 2020).

On 19th May 2020 Hong Kong Government announced the prolongation for another two weeks of covid-19-related social restrictions concerning the prohibition of gatherings in groups of more than 8 people (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, May 19, 2020), which at that time – in the absence of clear evidence that there was a real danger of coronavirus transmission in Hong Kong’s general population – had been widely expected to be lifted on 21st May. This decision was once again presented in the press conference as a decision taken “after considering the public and health experts’ concerns” (Cheng, Ting, and Cheung, May 19, 2020), thus trying to bring scientific evidence again to the foreground of a difficult governmental decision presented as a public health policy implementation. However, this particular case brought with it an unprecedented political burden, as the prolongation of social distancing measures until 4th June meant that the annual gathering of Hongkongers⁴ in Victoria Park, commemorating the Tiananmen Square events, would not be allowed to take place. It is worth observing that this particular governmental decision was not openly endorsed by any of the health and epidemiology experts, that were so vocal in the earlier stages of covid-19 epidemics in Hong Kong. It needs to be said however, that the very fact that scientific expertise has once again been presented as a rationale for a decision extremely difficult from the political point of view, speaks volumes for the heavy social impact of scientific evidence that was accumulated in February and March 2020. People learned to put their trust in scientific evidence as opposed to the decisions motivated purely or prevaillingly by politics, as it seems. This particular decision however, and its potential repercussions for social and political life in Hong Kong, carried with it so much notion of being negotiated not only, or even not primarily, through scientific lenses, that the governmental explanation of the scientific rationale for the decision was criticised by many Hongkongers

⁴ The term “Hongkonger” is specifically used in this part of the text as relating to a different community than the term “Hong Kong inhabitants” being predominantly used throughout this article. In relation to Victoria Park vigil one cannot use the term “Hong Kong inhabitant” for describing the vigil participants – as it is inadequate considering the social and political traits characterizing the people taking part in that event. The term “Hongkonger” is definitely better-suited for describing this particular collectivity.

as using social-distancing rules to stop the vigil in Victoria Park, as disguising politics in the costume of scientific evidence. Among the critics of the Hong Kong Government's decision to prolong the ban on gatherings for more than 8 people, there were also a number of well-heard voices presenting a scientific point of view contrary to the governmental decision (Leung, and Ng, May 20, 2020). This particular turn of events can be interpreted as the symbolic end of the dominance of scientific point of view in the formulation and presentation of public policy by scientific authorities. Both advisory panels for the CHP continue to function, but their opinions are no longer put in the spotlight of public communication events such as press releases or government press conferences. The situation is quite similar for the Expert Advisory Panel of four experts (headed by prof. Leung) which has seen its continuation and expansion to the number of six world-renowned scientists by the CE John Lee (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, June 13, 2022) (successor to Carrie Lam), but never again has it been placed in such a central position as in those initial months of covid-19 outbreak.

In view of the subsequent events, some of which have been described above, Evidence-Based Policy in Hong Kong seems to have returned to its classical model with political point of view trumping the other points of view exercised in the process of analysing the data for an evidence-based policymaking. Whether this means a permanent return to the dominant model of EBP implementation or whether the next urgent crisis situation will once again open the possibility for the scientific point of view to take centre stage, remains to be seen.

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