

立法會

Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)1973/10-11(06)

Ref: CB2/PL/HA

Panel on Home Affairs
Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 10 June 2011

Vibrant people, harmonious community activities

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the "Vibrant People, Harmonious Community Activities" ("VPHCA") programme, and summarizes the concerns and views of Legislative Council ("LegCo") Members on the subject.

Background

2. To counter the severe impact of the 2008 global financial crisis on Hong Kong's economy, the Financial Secretary announced on 29 May 2009 a series of relief measures, including a proposal to allocate a one-off sum of \$180 million ("the Fund") to 18 districts for providing more community tours and leisure activities, so as to foster community building, enhance social cohesion, promote cultural and sports activities, stimulate consumption and domestic demand, and create business opportunities for local tourism. The proposed Fund was discussed by the Panel on Home Affairs ("the Panel") on 13 November 2009 and approved by the Finance Committee ("FC") on 22 January 2010.

3. The distribution of the approved \$180 million was as follows -
 - (a) 108 million (60% of the Fund) would be equally shared by the 18 District Councils ("DCs"), which would use the funding to support local organizations in organizing community activities to promote local culture and arts, sports, local tourism as well as a caring and inclusive society;
 - (b) \$45 million (25% of the Fund) would be allocated to the Home Affairs Department ("HAD") and relevant government departments, in consultation with the DCs concerned, for centrally coordinating the launching of programmes around the themes of "Sports for All", "Arts for All", "Cultural/Ecological Tourism for All" and "Care for All", with a view to promoting the spirit of sportsmanship, arts appreciation and festive atmosphere. Individual DCs might submit or refer proposals to HAD to apply for extra funding to launch cross-district or cross-sectoral programmes around these themes; and
 - (c) \$18 million (10% of the Fund) would be for the employment of contract staff to assist DCs and HAD in implementing the above programmes and activities. The remaining \$9 million (5% of the Fund) would be for publicity and contingency.

4. According to the Administration, it would draw up guidelines, modeled on the "Manual on the Use of District Council Funds" with suitable modifications, on the use of the \$108 million by DCs for community activities. DCs would also be advised to follow the principles of "continuity", "professionalism" and "inclusiveness" in launching such activities.¹

5. In addition, an assessment panel comprising non-official members with expertise in the relevant fields (e.g. sports, arts and culture, and tourism) would be appointed by the Secretary for Home Affairs to advise the Director of Home Affairs on the broad allocation of the \$45 million under HAD's disposal.

¹ "Continuity" means in terms of project nature, priority should be given to projects which seek to plant seeds for more activities of a similar nature in future. "Professionalism" means in terms of organizers, priority should be given to local organizations which possess the necessary experience, capacity, resources and know-how relevant to the thematic community activities. "Inclusiveness" means in terms of participants, priority should be given to community activities targeted at the underprivileged.

The assessment panel would be responsible for endorsing the proposed vetting criteria, broad allocation to government departments and thematic programmes submitted or referred by DCs, as well as monitoring the progress of the approved programmes/activities.

6. The community activities under the Fund, collectively known as the VPHCA programme, were conducted by HAD, with the support of DCs, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, from 20 June 2010 to 27 March 2011. Over 700 VPHCA were held to promote four elements, viz. "get into vitality", "get into creativity", "get into harmony" and "get into discovery".

7. According to the Administration, HAD would coordinate a summary of the community activities under the Fund to the Panel at the end of the 2010-2011 financial year.

Members' concerns

8. The Fund was considered by the Panel in November 2009 and FC in December 2009 and January 2010. Members' views and concerns about the Fund are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Objectives

9. Some members considered that the Fund was intended to, among others, enhance the popularity of the pro-government camp at the district level. They were also concerned that the community activities under the Fund were too broad-brushed, lacking focus and without a clear target group in mind. In addition, there was a possible overlap of many community activities under the Fund with the existing ones organized/funded by government departments, DCs and other publicly-funded bodies. Members considered that as DCs already had funds for organizing community activities, the Fund should be used to support more worthwhile activities, such as the creation of employment opportunities at the district level. The Administration should also leverage the existing establishments/mechanisms by providing them with additional funding to foster programmes around the themes mentioned in paragraph 3(b).

10. According to the Administration, the objectives of the Fund were to support diversified community activities, promote sports, culture and arts, cultural/ecological tourism and a caring and inclusive society. The beneficiaries would be members of the public. The one-off Fund sought to create short-term jobs and stimulate the local economy through community activities, which would plant seeds for more diversified activities of a similar nature in future.

Scope

11. Some members considered that group and family activities should be organized for children and young people to promote their well-being and family value. Small-and-medium-sized arts groups should also be supported to stage arts performances at public open spaces, community centres and schools, with a view to promoting a long-term relationship between these arts groups and the local community. Members put forward some suggestions for the Administration's consideration. These included according higher priority to community activities which would help promote economy and create jobs; proposing more thematic activities for DCs to facilitate the best use of the Fund; and encouraging cross-district participation of voluntary agencies and non-governmental organizations of the arts and culture sector in organizing the relevant programmes.

12. The Administration advised that it would consult DCs on the use of the Fund, with a view to ensuring that the district activities organized would meet the objectives of the Fund as well as the needs of the local community. The promotion of family value and community cohesion was one of the objectives of the Fund and district activities would be organized along this line. Small-and-medium-sized arts groups would also be encouraged to organize workshops on the arts and culture in various districts.

13. There was a view that the Administration's efforts in promoting arts and cultural activities at the district level had all along been inadequate. Members called on the Administration to provide regular funding for such activities, if the activities launched under the Fund proved to be useful in promoting arts and cultural developments in the local community. The Administration advised that while the Fund was one-off in nature, it was willing to gauge views from the community about future funding proposals on arts and cultural activities.

Effectiveness

14. Concern had been raised about the numbers of jobs that would be created directly or indirectly by the community activities under the Fund, and whether such activities could stimulate personal consumption and domestic demand. According to the Administration's estimation, the community activities would create some 3,000 employment opportunities in various sectors. Through the implementation of such activities by DCs, there would be positive impact on local economy, particularly consumption in transport, food catering and retail businesses, etc. Some community activities, such as cultural/ecological tours would encourage cross-district interactions, and with the training of local tour guides, the long-term impact on local tourism would persist.

15. Noting that \$18 million had been earmarked for employing contract staff to assist DCs and HAD in implementing the community activities, members sought information on the job nature of the contract positions and whether the Administration would accord priority to employing students, fresh graduates and "After 80" youngsters for these positions. The Administration advised that it would employ contract staff to support community activities centrally organized by government departments, and to provide assistance to community activities supported by the portion of the Fund for DCs. These positions would create job opportunities to youngsters.

16. There was a view that some DCs might use the funding to hold large-scale opening and closing ceremonies and to hire professional performers/pop singers for variety shows, which were not conducive to attaining the objectives of the Fund or serving the best interests of local communities. DCs should encourage performances by local organizations rather than engage commercial event organizers to stage events at high costs. The latter arrangement might also be susceptible to corruption, given the non-transparent fee structure of pop singers/professional performers. DCs' use of the Fund should be subject to monitoring by the Audit Commission, and the Administration should undertake not to grant funding for large-scale opening and closing ceremonies, especially those organized in partnership with production companies.

17. In the Administration's view, opening and closing ceremonies served an important purpose of promoting community involvement in a joyful atmosphere, and they were only part of the community activities supported by Fund. The Administration would publicize well-organized community involvement activities to DCs and activity organizers for their reference. In line with the established practice, information on the itemized expenditure of DC events supported by the Fund would be available for public inspection at the secretariat offices of DCs.

18. Some members were also of the view that there should be more stringent guidelines requiring the use of less costly and more environmentally-friendly materials as souvenirs for community activities. To enhance the effectiveness of the \$108 million for DCs, it should be allocated according to the population size of each district rather than evenly distributed among the 18 DCs.

19. The Administration assured members that it would exercise vigilant control over the use of the Fund for community activities. Apart from the even distribution of the \$108 million to the 18 DCs, the centrally-coordinated community activities funded by the \$45 million under HAD's disposal would include cross-district activities, which would benefit residents in districts with a larger population size.

Sustainability

20. The sustainability of government funding to community activities upon their conclusion was of concern to members. They considered that the one-off Fund might not achieve the purpose of community building, which required on-going efforts. They were concerned whether the Administration would provide further funding to DCs to support community activities if the projects under the Fund proved to be successful. In members' view, as the grassroots population might not benefit from the economic recovery, continued funding for diversified community activities could sustain the jobs created at the district level.

21. According to the Administration, the Fund served to encourage well-organized community activities at the district level, and these activities

would become a benchmark for DCs to follow in future. If DCs identified some successful activities under the Fund, they could decide to provide continued support to these activities through their annual provisions from the Government.

Monitoring

22. Some members expressed worry that the \$108 million for DCs might be used as a tool to offer favours to pro-government parties and organizations. In addition, if most members of a DC belonged to one political party, these members might dominate the funding allocation process and this would result in favoritism. The Administration was urged to step up control measures to ensure that the funding would be allocated prudently and fairly based on clearly-defined selection criteria and subject to effective monitoring. There was, however, another view that members should have trust in the integrity of DCs, and should not seek to exert excessive control over DCs' operation in the use of the Fund.

23. The Administration advised that DCs would consider the backgrounds and track records of the local organizations applying for the portion of the Fund under DCs' disposal, so as to ensure that they had the required expertise, ability, experience and resources to organize the proposed community activities. The guidelines prepared by the Administration would provide the framework for the administration and control on the use of the Fund by DCs. There would be four dimensions of the monitoring mechanism, viz. the requirements set out in the funding guidelines including the submission of project completion reports to the secretariat offices of DCs, visits of DC members to the programmes/activities, public scrutiny, and reporting to the Independent Commission Against Corruption where necessary.

24. Members enquired whether DCs would give reasons for unsuccessful applications from local organizations for the Fund, and whether there would be a mechanism to deal with appeals against the decisions of DCs. The Administration advised that DCs would provide reasons for unsuccessful applications, and complaints could be filed to the relevant DC or HAD.

Relevant papers

25. A list of the relevant papers with their hyperlinks at the LegCo's website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
9 June 2011

**Relevant papers on
Vibrant people, harmonious community activities**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Financial Affairs	29.5.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs	13.11.2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	4.12.2009 (Item 2)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	22.1.2010 (Item 2)	Agenda Minutes (Part 1) Minutes (Part 2)

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