

14 April 2014

**Submission to the Subcommittee on Poverty on
“Measures to support ethnic minorities in relation to employment
and integration into the community”**

Please kindly find below our views on the captioned subject for consideration by the Subcommittee on Poverty at the meeting to be held on 25 April 2014.

Background

Christian Action is a Hong Kong registered charitable organization (Charity no. 161383), established in 1985. Our mission is to serve those who are poor, disadvantaged, marginalized, displaced or abandoned, aiming to give them hope, dignity and self-reliance. Our clients include unemployed adults and disadvantaged youths, new arrivals, ethnic minorities, refugees, asylum seekers, foreign domestic helpers and migrant workers, orphans and abandoned children in Qinghai. We also provide social enterprise services.

Our Ethnic Minorities (“EM”) programme bridges the gap between the local Hong Kong community and people of other ethnicities, which also include refugees, foreign domestic helpers and migrant workers who are living in Hong Kong, creating opportunities for them to understand each other and to facilitate their integration into the society. Our programmes include family and youth services, recreational and educational programmes, language classes, after school tutorial classes, individual and group counseling, ambassador groups, paralegal services, as well as community participation (which includes cultural sensitivity training) and employment support and training to help them adapt to the environment and overcome difficulties in integrating with the larger Hong Kong community.

Poverty and EM

1. There are about 451,200 ethnic minorities in Hong Kong and around 113,815 are South Asians or Southeast Asians such as Indians, Nepalis, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Sri Lankans, Filipinos and Thais¹. The poverty rate of the EM population, excluding the population of foreign domestic helpers, has increased from 17.3% in 2001 to 23.9% in 2011. Compared to the poverty rate of 20.4% in 2011 for the whole population², this is considerably high.
2. Although Hong Kong has finally established its first official poverty line in 2013, more need to be done as regards what measures could effectively tackle the poverty-related issues, including EM-specific poverty issues, and how to measure their effectiveness.
3. Reasons abound for this level of poverty of EM in a city like Hong Kong. Due to their unique culture, most EM family units are large as compared with the locals - some are extended families of a couple with 3 or 4 children which means a total of 6. This is not uncommon for EM. What’s more, again because of their cultural background, very often only the man of the family is the sole income earner. Women are encouraged to remain at home to look after the children and the household. Even if they wish to go out to work to contribute their talents and potentials to the community, unfortunately, most EM families could not afford to employ domestic helpers to help take care of their children or elderly to facilitate them to join the labour force. They may not feel comfortable to leave their children in day care centres due to the lack of EM-friendly facilities and support and staff working in these centres may not understand their unique culture and religion, thus creating communication barriers or event conflicts. Some do not even have the will and confidence to work because they are not educated or trained. Some wish to work in the industry they are trained but their qualifications are not recognized in Hong Kong.

1 The Hong Kong Council of Social Service “Poverty Situation of South and Southeast Asian Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong” December 10, 2013

2 Same as footnote (1)

4. As for men who are the sole breadwinner of the family, they may have to take up two to three jobs to meet their family's expenses. They may not have the time to upgrade their skills and attend training to get a better job. And such retraining courses are mostly conducted either in Cantonese and English which they may not fully understand. Sometimes, due to the lack of promotion in their own language, EMs may not even be aware of such training opportunities.
5. Whatever these families earn are hand-to-mouth and at times not enough to meet their food, housing, transport and medical expenses which keep rising at disproportionate levels in contrast to their family income. They have no means of repaying loans they might have borrowed to make both ends meet, let alone savings for retirement or their children's future education expenses.
6. This is a vicious cycle of poverty and while the locals are also facing the same situation, as shown in the numbers relating to poverty, it appears that due to the various reasons enumerated above, in particular large family units, language barriers and information block, as well as stigma and discrimination, EM strike a tougher bargain.
7. The Government of Hong Kong can definitely devise more measures to support EM in relation to employment and integration into the community and at the root of it – education – to lift our EM youth out of this vicious inter-generational poverty cycle. In general, it is imperative that the local community and EM have a good understanding of each other's cultures and traditions and therefore multi-cultural education, cultural sensitivity training and civic education should form the backbone of any measures taken by the Government and in collaboration with the private sector, NGOs and civil societies.

Supportive Measures in relation to Employment

8. The Government should take the lead and help EM overcome the barriers and difficulties mentioned above by being a role model. While we appreciate the Government has taken the initiatives to recruit certain number of EM staff in some Government departments, it should review the current and relevant policies and practices more regularly and proactively and remove or lower the Chinese language requirements and employ more EM as its staff at various Government departments as appropriate. This could be done by way of a quota system as an affirmative action whereby a prescribed percentage of jobs are allocated for employing EM. Mere setting up enquiry counters and putting leaflets in EM languages is not sufficient to promote the wide variety of services and training that the Government has injected efforts and funding to formulate and implement. EM staff or those speaking EM languages are required to be physically present to answer any queries that EM may have.
9. This model of quota system may also be considered by the private sector and the Government should provide more incentives or subsidies to employers taking on EM as their staff or to those who want to provide a more EM-friendly workplace environment.
10. In order to release the EM women into the workforce, the Government could provide more EM-staffed and EM family-friendly child care, after school care and neighbourhood support services so that EM women will feel more at ease leaving their children at these centres and go out to work. In fact, in its Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP) service, more incentive or encouragement could be given to EM women to be those "carers" or "nannies" so that they can earn some money looking after others' kids while their own are with them.
11. The Government can encourage upward mobility of EM by facilitating them in equipping themselves with computer technology through providing subsidies for purchase of computers and training on its use. This would also assist the EM women to possibly work from home if because of circumstances beyond their control, they are unable to go out to work.

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12. The Government could provide support in setting clear guidelines in respect of overseas qualifications gained by EM, facilitate recognition and accreditation of these in Hong Kong and provide subsidies for application for accreditation.
13. Some EM have a lot of overseas experience and the Government could do much to capitalize on this invaluable experience in encouraging and developing more social enterprises for EM, for example, by granting seed money specifically for EM.
14. Some EM may feel discriminated when a local employee who does the same work as them is given better pay and benefits than they do. The Government should ensure transparency both within the Government and outside regarding matching of salaries to qualifications levels.
15. Some EM may afford the time but cannot afford the fees to upgrade their skills or enroll in training to get better-paid jobs. The Government could therefore assist by providing subsidies and even scholarships reimbursing all or part of the fees for those who have performed outstandingly.
16. EM living in the “poorer” areas of Hong Kong, not unlike the locals, do not wish to travel far to their workplace due to various reasons, one being the cost of travel. Although the Government has in place the Work Incentive Transport Subsidy Scheme (WITS), the income threshold is too low at around HK\$8,000 and therefore many families cannot benefit from it. This threshold should be increased so that more people are caught by it and can enjoy the subsidy.
17. The Government must strengthen the legislation and enforcement of its anti-discrimination laws to reduce, if not eliminate, instances of racial discrimination in the workplace such as unequal pay for equal work.
18. More needs to be done to prevent stereotyping of the jobs that EM are “good at” or can do in Hong Kong. The Government must do more to provide alternative options of jobs for EM to take on and to do that, provide them with more incentives to attend the training.
19. The general public needs to be reminded of the benefits of employing or working with EM while the EM must also be educated on the virtues of upgrading their knowledge and skills for the better future of their children. This can be done by EM in Hong Kong who are inspirational icons having achieved success and recognition in their career.
20. Both employers and EM need to be trained on each other’s culture and communication skills to enhance their working relationship.
21. Appropriate courses and vocational training need to be provided to EM working adults and non-school goers. As for those on the road to university, the Government could facilitate their admission by accepting alternative Chinese examination qualifications. There also needs to be clearer specifications of the Applied Learning course that has been proposed by the Government as well as details of the extent and acceptance by employers of such qualifications.
22. Encouraging children and youth to aspire to their dreams and of a decent future requires efforts on all fronts. Although the Government has made quite some initiatives, more can still be done, and EM teachers and leaders also play a significant role. However, EM youth themselves have to take the step to forge ahead and to inspire this, much more has to be done in terms of education which is a topic for other forum such as Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) policy. Suffice to say at this point that education - holistic education - is the stepping stone to employment, career advancement, personal growth and a better future thereby alleviating inter-generational poverty.

Supportive Measures in relation to EM Integration into the Community

23. Apart from education and employment solutions, EM have had difficulties in taking Hong Kong as their home as they may feel alienated and unwanted by the local community, be it because of language barriers or stigma and discrimination. More needs to be done in respect of their integration into the community, primarily in promoting awareness of both locals and the EM, particularly on the diverse cultures and behaviour of each community. EM must also make their own efforts to integrate into the society having made a conscious choice to live in Hong Kong and make it their home.
24. Much of the problems linked to poverty lie in the high expenses of living in Hong Kong, in particular, housing. Many EM are not aware of some of the schemes, loans, allowances or grants or some of the processes by which they can gain public housing due to incomprehensible literature promoting these. Some of them cannot read or understand English or Cantonese. This lack of knowledge needs to be remedied by the Government providing more material in EM languages in allowing EM to fully access its services. If EM staff cannot be made to be physically available to explain, interpretation services need to be ready at hand.
25. Should the Government wish to provide EM support services through NGOs and other external agencies which have the expertise in providing cultural sensitivity training, it needs to pump more funding for it so that agencies can input more resources to do so.
26. Through the mass media, the Government could further promote integration of locals and EM, for example, on some appropriate TV channels, present a culturally diverse environment interaction harmoniously in a school, neighbourhood, at work and/ or socially and encourage this to be turned into reality.
27. EM parents also need to be educated, most effectively through their religious leaders, to understand how they could strike a good balance between adaptation to the local culture and retaining their own culture.
28. There needs to be more effective cross-Bureau and cross-departmental collaboration and resolve because multi-cultural education and training involves many cross-cutting issues that cannot be handled by one department/ Bureau alone.

We appreciate that the Government has made some good initiatives to improve the lives of EM in Hong Kong but more needs to be done as detailed above. We trust our views and observations gathered from our valuable experiences serving the EM community are helpful.

Should you require any clarification or further information, please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Brian Wong, our Head of Humanitarian & Social Services (HK) Division, Social Enterprise Division at brian.wong@christian-action.org.hk, tel. 2716 8872 or Ms Leesha Khemlani, Manager of Humanitarian & Social Services (HK) Division at leeshakhemlani@christian-action.org.hk, tel. 3422 3820.

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