



For information on 17th November 2015

**Submissions to the Legislative Council Subcommittee on Poverty
to discuss “Poverty Problems of Ethnic Minorities”**

1. **Introduction**

The poverty rate of ethnic minorities has risen from 17.3% in 2001 to 23.9% in 2011 and the working poor situation of ethnic minority groups was more serious than that of Hong Kong as a whole. Amongst the 8,100 low-income ethnic minority households, 63% were considered as working poor¹ compared to 41% total in Hong Kong. The two groups with the largest poverty population were children aged below 15 and elderly 65 or above. The government claims that appropriate support could promote upward mobility and break the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty. However, the measures introduced and support available is far from effective and sufficient. The government must tackle the urgent poverty situation of ethnic minorities.

2. **Unfair admission mechanisms in kindergartens deprive needy children for quality education**

As noted in “Children First – Right Start for All”², it is important that ethnic minority children integrate into the local kindergarten system “for early exposure to Chinese in an immersed language environment to facilitate their transition to local primary schools”. However, in the 2014/15 school year, only 42% of the total non-Chinese speaking (NCS) children in kindergarten attended kindergartens under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) that offer local curriculum. In Unison’s 2015 research³, we found that 71% of the PEVS kindergartens surveyed used Cantonese in admission interviews, indirectly screening out NCS children. Not only does it constitute indirect discrimination under the Racial Discrimination Ordinance, it may add financial burden to needy families and deprives ethnic minority children of the chance to an early education which is conducive to learning Chinese.

We urge the government to ensure and monitor kindergartens especially those under PEVS to adopt non-discriminatory, open and just mechanisms, in all admission-related aspects including admission procedures, admission criteria, and language of interviews and emphasize that kindergarten system should be “fair and inclusive, acting against child poverty and educational disadvantage”.

3. **Lack of support to ethnic minority parents and students in kindergartens**

Unison noted that 76% of PEVS kindergartens surveyed provided Chinese notices only⁴. The research data also reflected that those kindergartens under PEVS likely have less support for ethnic minority students in Chinese learning. Such language barrier between kindergartens and parents and the need to provide learning support often deter kindergartens to accept ethnic minority children, stripping these children of an otherwise free and quality early education.

¹ *Poverty in Focus 2013: Poverty Situation of South & Southeast Asian Ethnic Minorities*, Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2014.

² Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education, 2015.

³ *Research on Kindergarten Support and Attitude towards Ethnic Minority Students in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong Unison, May 2015.

⁴ Ibid



Kindergarten education should cater for the diverse needs of children, including their family and cultural background in response to the growing diversity of Hong Kong⁵. We ask kindergartens to provide equitable measures in early childhood education to allow ethnic minorities integrate into the mainstream society. Ethnic origin (and socio-economic condition) should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential and kindergarten education should be strengthened with improved language training, standardized outcomes, and enhanced teachers' professional development to deal with multiculturalism⁶.

4. **Inadequacies of Chinese learning support**

The inadequacies of Chinese language teaching in the public school system have led to low Chinese proficiency of ethnic minorities, exacerbating problems in areas of further studies, employment, access to information and social services as well as integration to the mainstream society. According to the Special Needs Group Task Force of the Committee on Poverty, the “Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework” (the Learning Framework) is an effort to enhance upward mobility of ethnic minorities. However, there is very little new in this Learning Framework compared with pre-existing piecemeal initiatives that can render this Learning Framework effective in honoring ethnic minorities' right to education and employment. The Learning Framework lacks concrete guidelines for implementation. Teachers have to develop their own curriculum and teaching materials and there is no benchmark in the levels of Chinese for different grades. The government has not set any stage learning objectives. The lack of accountability severely undermines the effectiveness of the Framework in giving ethnic minorities equal opportunities to learn the Chinese language. Parents commented the lack of school information on language support and measures to help ethnic minority children learn on an equitable basis.

We urge the Government to formulate a comprehensive and adequate “Chinese as a second language” policy with a concrete policy goal, an implementation plan including teachers' training, output indicators, and a transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanism as soon as possible. Progress and evaluation of the Learning Framework should be made accessible to the public to improve accountability and understanding in the effectiveness of additional funding and the Learning framework.

We urge schools to be transparent on the support measures they provide to enable ethnic minority children learn Chinese more effectively. Such information improves accountability of additional funding and facilitates parents in making school choices.

5. **Elimination of *de facto* racial segregation in school**

In 2014/15, there are public schools that admitted up to 98.5% and 98.7% NCS students⁷. This *de facto* racial segregation violates the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, resulting in harmful social and economic consequences for the segregated children and affecting integration and social mobility. Public schools with high

⁵ Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education, 2015.

⁶ Ten Steps to Equity in Education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008.

⁷ Replies to initial written questions raised by Financial Committee Members in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2015-16, Director of Bureau: Secretary for Education, Session No.:13, Reply Serial No. EDB139.



concentration of ethnic minorities cannot provide a Chinese language environment and do not seem to offer a challenging academic environment. “Students generally show poorer levels of academic performance and higher levels of dropout rates compared to the majority Chinese students. Most of them do not go to university and seem to make poor career choices with few opportunities for upward social mobility”.⁸

Segregated schools are barrier to upward mobility. We urge the government to take immediate and effective steps to eliminate the *de facto* racial segregation in the public education system including but not limited to:

- improve communications with ethnic minority parents and enhance information accessibility on available support measures, ratio of Chinese to NCS students, language learning environment, Chinese alternative exams, etc;
- provide cultural sensitivity training to school staff to promote an integrated environment to cater education and cultural needs of ethnic minority students; and
- use public announcements to promote the advantages of racially diverse schools.

6. **Alternative Chinese examination and applied learning should be a short-term measure and cannot replace an effective Chinese as second language curriculum**

In 2014, the government announced two new 2-year applied learning Chinese courses with focus on Chinese used in service and hospitality industries for secondary-four ethnic minority students. Although results of the courses will be accepted by some tertiary education institutes as alternatives for DSE Chinese examination, this move does not equip them with strong Chinese proficiency and steers students towards the service industry and low-skilled jobs, with limited upward mobility. These courses should only be short-term measures or for newcomers; the government should work towards a long-term strategy on Chinese learning for ethnic minorities.

7. **Limited quality education pathways for ethnic minority students**

Many ethnic minorities are employed in low-paying jobs and living at or below the poverty line. Education and vocational training are supposed to enhance economic opportunity and lift them from inter-generational poverty. However, students who do not acquire minimum university requirement have very limited choice⁹. Currently, “only 4 out of 160 vocational education programmes provided by the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education are conducted in English”¹⁰. Due to discrepancies in programmes’ medium of instruction, interview language and accommodations on Chinese compulsory courses, 71% of the 186 non-degree programmes surveyed is not suitable for students who do not have proficiency in Chinese and 50% of those programmes is not suitable for students who do not read or write Chinese¹¹.

The government should encourage vocational training programmes, such as the Yi Jin Diploma, Diploma in Vocational Education, Construction Industry Council and Clothing Industry to

⁸ *Low-Income South Asian Parents’ Concept of ‘Making it’ in Hong Kong*, Alka Sharma, 2012.

⁹ *Research on Ethnic Minority Students’ Access to Post-Secondary Education*, Hong Kong Unison, 2015.

¹⁰ *The Status of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong 1997-2014*, Chapter 3, p 13, Puja Kapai, 2015.

¹¹ *Research on Ethnic Minority Students’ Access to Post-Secondary Education*, Hong Kong Unison, 2015.



provide and increase programme taught in English to provide more opportunities for ethnic minority youth.

8. **Chinese classes for ethnic minority adults should be standardized and promoted**

Although there are many subsidized Chinese languages courses run by NGOs and government departments such as the Employment Retraining Board and Home Affairs (regional support centres) for ethnic minority adults, there is no benchmarking on the levels. There is no standardization of curricula in basic, intermediate and advanced courses.

We recommend the Home Affairs Department (HAD) set up a team to coordinate, promote, and ensure such course curricula are standardized so that adult students can take them at different centres convenient to their work places or homes and according to their schedules. Childcare service during class hours and transportation subsidy to and from the classes should be considered to accommodate needs of ethnic minorities. HAD should coordinate with relevant statutory bodies to provide accreditations of the courses qualifications so that their Chinese qualifications are recognized.

9. **Long term and sustainable measures to help employment of ethnic minorities**

Ethnic minority job seekers find the Labour Department (LD) services hard to access¹² due to language barrier and limited promotion. Moreover, higher education qualifications obtained in south, southeast and central Asian (and other) countries are often not recognized by employers, contributing to unemployment, low-paid jobs, and being trapped in the poverty cycle.

We urge the LD to better promote its services to ethnic minorities, hire ethnic minority staff, and, when necessary, provide interpretation services promptly. In terms of long-term strategies, the LD should provide job-matching services in order to bridge the needs of employers experiencing labour shortages and the needs of ethnic minority job-seekers. We ask the government to subsidize accreditation of overseas qualification for low-income groups and provide incentives for employers to hire minority job-seekers. These strategies can make the most of minority job-seekers' talents while encourage them to integrate into the Hong Kong society and move up socially.

10. **Social inclusion for new immigrants**

We urge the government to launch a comprehensive social inclusion programme for new immigrants so they do not fall through the crack, modeling on that for new arrivals from the Mainland in place before 2004, including the following measures:

- collect contacts and details of new immigrants by the Immigration Department, and distribute such information to regional support centres for ethnic minorities;
- mandate regional support centres for ethnic minorities to include outreach support to new immigrants;
- assess Chinese and English proficiency of new immigrants; and

¹² *Survey on the Government's Support towards Employment of South Asian Ethnic Minorities*, Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong – Diocesan Pastoral Centre for Workers (Kowloon), 2015.



- organize effective classes on Chinese and/or English languages and on the social system, resources, rights and protection, culture and values of Hong Kong; and provide incentives for them to attend these classes.

11. **Housing needs of ethnic minorities not met**

The Housing Authority does not and cannot cater ethnic minorities' needs when providing services. Ethnic minority families are generally subjected to a longer wait in the public housing scheme because of their larger family size and resident status of household members. Often, ethnic minorities have no choice but to seek private housing. Time and again, ethnic minorities face direct discrimination by landlords and real estate agents because of their race and color. Many ended up living in poor housing conditions paying exorbitant rent.

The government should continue the Community Care Fund "living subsidy for non-public housing and non-CSSA households" and work closely with the Equal Opportunities Commission to eliminate race discrimination and provide statistics on whether public rental housing has positively impacted on ethnic minority poverty alleviation.

12. **Increase the transparency and effectiveness of Commission on poverty**

The Commission on Poverty is supposed to review policies and explore new measures to prevent and alleviate poverty. However, ethnic minority residents of Hong Kong who cannot read Chinese find the Commission's work not transparent as some documents are only available in Chinese¹³.

To enhance the effectiveness of the Commission, we urge that meeting agenda, minutes and meeting documents especially of the Special Needs Group Task Force be made public and available in both languages and the Commission be more flexible and culturally sensitive towards ethnic minorities; e.g. parents to receive cash from the lunch subsidy programme¹⁴ to buy or prepare lunch for their children since not all schools can cater to ethnic minorities' special diets.

13. **More in-depth analysis on the ethnic minority elderly poverty issues is needed**

In 2011, the labour force participation rate of ethnic minorities (excluding foreign domestic workers) was 26% compared to 7% in the entire elderly population¹⁵. Despite such high labour participation rate, ethnic minority elderly was the group with the highest poverty rate at 34.6% with 2,299 elders. As elderly population will grow by around 15% in the coming 20 years¹⁶, more ethnic minority elderly statistics such as numbers receiving CSSA, Old Age Living Allowance, and Disability Allowance and proportion of non-CSSA elders with financial need are necessary for better policy planning especially in the context of healthcare and accommodation needs.

¹³ Meeting papers of Special Needs Group Task Force, http://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/sngtf_docs.html.

¹⁴ Currently, the lunch subsidy is directly transferred to schools for ordering lunch from lunch providers. Some ethnic minority students cannot benefit from lunch provides may not cater to their special diet.

¹⁵ *Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities*, 2011 Population Census Office, Census and Statistics Department, 2012.

¹⁶ Poverty Situation 2014, Commission of Poverty Summit, 2015.