

**Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Home Affairs**

**Issues Related to the Language Support Services for Ethnic Minorities**

**Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission**

**Purpose of the Paper**

This paper provides the views of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on language support services available for ethnic minorities (EMs) in Hong Kong.

**EM Interpretation Service in Public Service Provision**

2. Language is a vital factor in the integration of EMs into the society. In 2018, *A Study on Ethnic Minorities' Awareness and Satisfaction towards Selected Public Services* released by the Commission on Poverty on EMs' attitude towards public services concluded that language and communication were the major barriers to the access to public service for poor EMs. Over half of its respondents in poor South Asian households were not aware of services provided by support service centres for EMs. 15.5% respondents had difficulties accessing government services, and most of them attributed this to the absence of EM language translation services and problems in communicating with government staff.

3. Currently, the Government has been funding Hong Kong Christian Service to provide free interpretation services in 8 EM languages at its Centre

for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents and another social enterprise, Hong Kong TransLingual Services (HKTS), was established to offer interpretation services in 19 languages. However, the services are not widely and consistently used by the EM community members because they are unfamiliar with the services and/or uncertain about their service level. Besides, there is currently no uniform standard in recruitment requirements, qualification accreditation, skill training and quality assurance among the service providers, leading to prominent practice and quality discrepancy. Many practicing interpreters/translators (I/Ts) simply take it as a short-term, part-time or freelance job.

### **Concerns Raised in COVID-19 Pandemic**

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought up some major concerns in relation to the availability of interpretation and translation in EM languages, in a quality and timely manner. During the initial stages of the outbreak, there was limited information on wearing masks, hygiene practice, travel arrangements and quarantine measures translated into EM languages, leaving many EMs felt confused as to why people were queuing up for surgical masks and hand sanitizers.<sup>1</sup> By the time they realized how and why protective gear matters, supplies had run short and prices had rocketed.

5. The quality of translation service is another area of concern. Official information on health protection and quarantine measures were initially published in Chinese and English only. Information later became available in

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<sup>1</sup> South China Morning Post, *Coronavirus: Hong Kong's ethnic minority leaders slam government over handling of outbreak*, 9 February 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3049683/coronavirus-hong-kongs-ethnic-minority-leaders>

languages more commonly used by EM communities, such as Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Sinhalese, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese. However, translation conducted in some EM languages was at times incomplete and inaccurate. It makes the EM community more vulnerable to the virus as they could not make informed decisions to protect themselves.

6. Another issue to raise is the readiness of the interpretation services in COVID-19 pandemic. The Hospital Authority has engaged HKTS to provide interpretation service for EMs long before the onslaught of COVID-19, advance booking requirements remain a major hurdle for those seeking immediate assistance. This is particularly problematic given the high transmission ability of COVID-19 in mild or asymptomatic patients, any delay in interpretation service for EM patients will unreasonably increase the infectious risk for healthcare workers and undermine the overall containment effort through cutting off the global and local virus transmission chain.

7. The EOC appreciates that the Hong Kong Government has taken measures to rectify the above situations. We also recognizes the existence of a service gap in facilitating EMs' linkage with the mainstream community which needs to be filled up. More importantly, there is a need for a fundamental shift in the mindset of policymakers to recognize that the well-being of EM community is closely tied to the interests of the larger community, and an inclusive approach is key to resolving our crises, be it COVID-19 or other social issues.

## **Recommendations**

8. At present, the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality (“Guidelines”) provide guidance to all Government bureaux and departments as well as related organizations (collectively referred to as “public authorities”) so that people of Hong Kong, regardless of their race, enjoy equal access to public services. The Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (“CMAB”) is responsible for coordinating and maintaining an overview on the implementation of the Guidelines in the Government as a whole. It is therefore incumbent upon CMAB to:

- (a) Establish a mechanism to ensure that all public authorities shall implement the Guidelines within their policy and programme areas, including identification of the language service needs of service users, introduction of the availability of and proactively offer language services to service users, arranging appropriate language services to those in need. Public authorities also need to monitor the implementation progress, collect data, conduct review, and make changes to the policy and measures if needed.
- (b) Strengthen the Guidelines to provide more guidance on the need for public authorities to translate their service information into EM languages in a timely and accurate manner, having regard to factors such as the importance of the information (e.g. health and safety information), the frequency of service use by EM community and the effectiveness of informing and encouraging EMs to use the services, etc.

- (c) Shift the mindset of senior management and frontline staff in public authorities to appreciate the cultural differences and the special needs of members of different racial groups, enabling EM's access to public services without impediments.

9. Apart from that, to improve the quality of interpretation and translation service in the long run, the EOC commissioned a research team in December 2018 to conduct a project titled “*A Study on Potential Model for Accreditation and Regulation of Interpreters and Translators (I/Ts) in Ethnic Minority Languages in Hong Kong*”. This project primarily aims to explore the possibility of establishing an accreditation and regulation system for I/Ts working in EM languages and how such a system should be implemented. Below are some topline recommendations proposed by the research team:

- (a) The Government shall be tasked with setting up an accrediting and regulatory body and provide funding support to its operation.
- (b) The accrediting and regulatory body established by the Government shall serve the functions of conducting assessments, maintaining a registry, developing a code of ethics, handling complaints and exercising disciplinary actions.
- (c) Professional and properly accredited I/T training courses shall be provided to practicing I/Ts as well as individuals who wish to pursue their careers in interpretation and translation, with a view to enhancing the professional image and providing clear career pathways.

## **Conclusion**

10. Undoubtedly, language barrier forms a significant part of the plight faced by EMs, which requires concerted effort on the part of the Government and its agencies to help overcome, paving the way for EM's integration into the community.

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Equal Opportunities Commission

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