

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Views on Digital Inclusion and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

(Written Submission to the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting,
November 3, 2003)

Introduction

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service and its agency members believe in social justice and equality, and affirm the intrinsic rights of every individual. The society is obliged to provide individuals with the basic social and economic resources to develop their potential. In an information society like Hong Kong, the Council has the duty to ensure that life chances of the disadvantaged population would not be compromised for the benefits brought by rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT). Instead, advancement in ICT should be used in building a more just and inclusive society, in which basic human rights of the disadvantaged groups to education, employment and freedom of information could be realized.

Together with allies both within and beyond the social welfare sector, the Council has been promoting digital inclusion in the last few years. The first part of this document recapitulates the Council's views on the matter, which has been expressed on multiple occasions in public. It also provides a high level review of the various program areas of digital inclusion and suggests service gaps that need further attention.

In February this year, the Council attended the Asian Regional Conference for WSIS in Tokyo, together with two other NGOs from Hong Kong. We came to realize that digital inclusion is only one of the many important issues in information society. We believe that since those issues are going to have serious impact on the well being of everyone in society, they should deserve much more discussions across different sectors. As a consequence, two roundtable discussions have been conducted amongst NGOs and views on how Hong Kong should respond to the WSIS agenda exchanged. The second part of this paper is an account of the Council's position on the matter, which is supported by a number of NGOs attending the roundtable discussions.

The Council's views on Digital Inclusion

- 1) The driving force of digital inclusion is social justice. We believe that all citizens, regardless of their physical and mental ability, places of origin, gender, race, class, religion, ethnicity and language. Disadvantaged groups are digitally excluded for a range of reasons. Skill deficit is only one of them. The purpose of digital inclusion programs should not therefore be confined merely to increasing the computer literacy within the population. In a broad sense, to enable all citizens to benefit from the development of information communication technology should be the ultimate purpose of digital inclusion programs.

- 2) Having said that, computer literacy is still the most commonly accepted measurement of the digital gap. Quantitatively, the digital gap in Hong Kong, as compared to other cities in the world, is smaller. The number of people using computers and accessing Internet has also been increasing. Qualitatively, the gap is believed to be serious because in society with a higher computer penetration rate, the life chances of the computer illiterates will be more hampered, as compared to the more fortunate computer literate group.
- 3) The HKSAR Government and NGOs have been conducting a number of digital inclusion programs. The effort paid has to be acknowledged. However, we would like to see the government to take the lead in promoting an even more computer literate society, both for the sake of social development and economic reasons. Affordable and universal access for all should be an explicit long-term policy objective, clearly spelt out in the IT strategy of Hong Kong.
- 4) It is worth noting that Singapore has been implementing a National IT Literacy Program aiming at equipping citizens from retrenched workers, unemployed, homemakers, retirees/senior citizens, to the working class such as factory operators, taxi-drivers and even the professionals such as lawyers, architects, engineers, doctors etc. with basic information-communication literacy by year 2010. We have a need in Hong Kong to establish specific and realistic computer literacy targets for different disadvantaged groups. We would like to work with the government in establishing these targets and putting in place corresponding program plans to achieve them.
- 5) Digital inclusion could be examined in 4 different areas, namely a) Infrastructure; b) Capacity Building; c) Design for universal access and d) Specific content for disadvantaged groups.
 - a) **Infrastructure** refers to the extent to which basic equipment and Internet connectivity are accessible to the disadvantaged groups. The Government has established one Super Cyber Centre in Kowloon and another smaller one in the New Territories. More support in providing Internet access points in the community is needed. We suggest the government to consider establishing at least one Community Cyber Centre (CCC) in each of the 18 districts, for providing free public access to Internet. These CCCs, having the space, technology and conspicuity in the community, should also be the focal point for other digital inclusion programs to take place at the district level. For example, a number of NGOs have been operating computer recycling programs, at various scale and coverage, to allow disadvantaged families to use computers at home. The Council is working with big hardware and software vendors to facilitate such programs. The CCC could form a base for collection and refurbishing of old computers, for volunteers in the community to congregate and support each other, and for basic training to be delivered to beneficiary families.

- b) **Capacity Building** programs refer to those targeted towards increasing the ability of the disadvantaged groups in acquiring, managing and understanding information in society. Information literacy is as important as computer literacy in tackling digital divide. The government-initiated IT Awareness Program has a considerable participation rate and reputation. We suggest that it should be expanded to a full-scale training program for basic computer literacy and information literacy. In addition, we also see the need for the training to put more emphasis on problem solving and trouble-shooting skills. And for those who might lack the ability to trouble-shoot for themselves, especially at the beginning of the learning curve, professional technical support and encouragement is much needed. We appreciate the establishment of IT Easy Link, which is a free public hotline service for tackling computer problems. Unfortunately, we have come across so many disadvantaged persons, senior persons for instance, who lack the ability even to articulate their problems over the phone. We are convinced that a community-based support service is necessary to address the special needs of these people. A number of NGOs are attempting to set up such services in the community, mainly with the help of volunteers. We look forward to the support from the government and the private sector in such initiatives. We can see great synergy effect if IT Easy Link, the Community Cyber Centres, the computer recycling programs and the community technical support initiatives could be coordinated or integrated.
- c) **Design** for universal access refers to both software and hardware. On the software side, we appreciate the effort in making all government websites accessible to the visually impaired. We suggest the government to go one step further to encourage and support all public bodies and NGOs to have their websites and/or applications for public use converted to universally accessible. We also suggest that for applications used by the public, universal access should be the major criterion for granting funds. Assistive technology, both in the area of hardware and software, should be a priority in government support for funding, especially in the area of Research and Development. We are aware that most government funds operate under the criterion that funded projects should eventually be self-financed. We would like to point out that due to the financial capability of the disadvantaged groups, such criterion could sometimes be very inhibiting to the development of assistive technology and should therefore be relaxed considerably in special circumstances.
- d) **Content** specific to disadvantaged groups is a significant part of the equation as far as digital inclusion is concerned. Information specific to the interest of disadvantaged groups has to be put together in a user-friendly format. A long term goal, however, should not only be content-*for*-the-disadvantaged but also content-*by*-the-disadvantaged. The experience of Cybersenior website (<http://www.cybersenior.org.hk>) indicates that when members of specific disadvantaged groups

congregate in the cyberspace, they would form networks pertinent to mutual support and benefits. And eventually, via sharing of views and opening up discussion on special interest areas, they would become content provider themselves, instead of passive information seekers and receivers. From a social work perspective, this empowerment process would bring about increase in self-efficacy, expanded social life and psychological well being. Both the Singapore and some local governments in Mainland China have portal sites for disadvantaged groups established or supported by the government. We applaud the HKSAR government's support in establishing the portal site for people with disabilities. We would like to urge the government to extend similar support to other disadvantaged groups. The Council and its agency members are ready to discuss with the government in the priorities and timelines for such support.

- 6) A just and inclusive information society should be a goal shared by all stakeholders in society because it is beneficial to everyone in the long run. While acknowledging the leading role of the government, the Council and its agency members see the importance of cross-sectoral partnership in the pursuit of a digitally inclusive society. Based on its Caring Company network with the private sector, the Council is working on a Digital Solidarity Fund initiative. The Fund aims at sharing the ownership of digital inclusion targets with all stakeholders across different sectors. It will receive donation, both in cash and in kind, from enterprises as well as financial support from the government. The Fund Committee, composed of representatives from different sectors, will consider applications for digital inclusion programs, according to a set of clearly delineated, commonly accepted guidelines. Initial feedback from the private sector has been positive. We look forward to the support of the government, NGOs and general public in this initiative.

The Council's views on Hong Kong's Participation in the World Summit on the Information Society

1. The World Summit of Information Society (WSIS) is an international commitment to a development-oriented Information Society that works towards the eradication of poverty and hunger, and the achievement of a balanced and comprehensive social and economic development for all. It is also a reflection of the fact that in light of globalization, and particularly in the context of cyberspace, no country or region could ever tackle effectively the many issues related to information society without joining hands with the rest of the world.
2. The Summit is an important and timely global event to address various human development issues facing Hong Kong that demand careful deliberations, prompt and proper responses and actions. For example, how should Hong Kong develop its human capital so as to harness its social development and economic growth in this information society? How should Hong Kong provide a vibrant atmosphere to nourish the creative industry and yet simultaneously ensure that intellectual property rights will not

compromise the rights of everyone to participate freely in cultural life and to share scientific advances and its benefits? That said, such deliberations, responses and actions should be sustained after the Summit.

3. The ultimate concern of the Summit is not only the development of information and communication technology (ICT). Instead, it should be ICT for the people. Hence, the information society that all governments in the world, including the HKSAR government, should strive to build is one that should:
 - a) benefit all the people and give full respect to their individual human rights and dignity;
 - b) encourage full and democratic participation of people;
 - c) recognize and affirm people's freedom of expression and from unjust censorship by any state or institution
 - d) promote social justice and inclusion, and eliminate all forms of discrimination and exclusion against people;
 - e) take care of the well-being of people of not only this generation but also the future ones.
4. In relation to digital inclusion, the information society should be one that:
 - a) provides universal and affordable access to information and information technology
 - b) allocates priorities to members of society who are in disadvantaged positions such as the illiterates or less educated and people with disabilities
 - c) allows cross-sectoral participation and adopts a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling digital divide
5. Hong Kong as an international city has its survival and development very much anchored to its ability in synchronizing with the global agenda. Since WSIS covers a wide range of issues which cast impact on almost all aspects of life, we see the need for the government to take a more proactive approach in its participation in the Summit by seeking not only to join the official delegation of China but also to reflect the current situation of Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region of China, in the Summit.
6. As suggested in the evolving documentation of WSIS processes, building up an inclusive information society should not be the sole responsibility of the communication and information technology arm of the government. In the context of Hong Kong, we believe it would require a specialized Commission to drive the mission, to follow up Phase I of the Summit and plan for, as a short-term goal, the Phase II of the Summit, which is to take

place in 2005 in Tunis. This specialized Commission should: a) promote the importance of a just and inclusive information society; b) identify local priorities and issues in relation to information society; c) devise program plans to address those priorities and issues; d) ensure timely and efficient implementation of those programs via coordinating with the program operators and other stakeholders such as related civil society organizations and government departments; and e) evaluate the outcome of those programs so as to ensure quality and inform further planning.

7. Under One-Country Two-System, Hong Kong should play a more active role in engaging the Pearl River Delta Region as well as the Mainland in building an inclusive information society for not only the people of Hong Kong but also the Mainland China. We request the government to make use of the existing communication platforms with the Mainland or to establish other platforms to facilitate cross-border efforts on the promotion of just and inclusive information society at both the policy level and the practice level. We consider Hong Kong as having an indispensable role in creating a freely and easily accessible, technology enabled information platform within the Pearl River Delta Region.
8. While the Hong Kong government should take part in the Summit, it should facilitate and support relevant organizations to participate in those events through keeping them informed of how it has been involved in the inter-governmental meetings and negotiation processes, and providing them with funding and all relevant information related to the Summit. We also suggest the government to report to the Legislative Council and the public at least half-yearly the progress and results of implementation of the local plan of actions.
9. While we acknowledge a key role for the government in driving the formation of a just and inclusive information society, we believe that the private sector and the third sector, i.e. the civil society organizations, must also share the ownership of this very important social development agenda. A concerted effort of different sectors is crucial in addressing the many important issues in information society. Heated participation in the two WSIS roundtable discussions held recently indicates that there exists a foundation for such cross-sectoral cooperation to flourish. We request that the government shall at all times work closely with the Legislative Council, civil society organizations and the private sector in the aforesaid planning and implementation process. The creation of a just and fair Information Society is such a golden opportunity for the government to regain the kind of solidarity and social cohesion in Hong Kong via engaging all stakeholders and at all levels in the process.

Contact Persons:

Mr John Fung, IT and Development Officer (Tel: 2864 2971)

Mr Anthony Wong, International and Regional Networking (Tel: 2864 2993)