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### **Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities**

#### **Poverty Problem of Ethnic Minorities**

1. The comprehensive nature of the Administration's recent efforts at seeking to understand the poverty situation of ethnic minorities is most welcome. As the findings reveal, there are distinct issues across ethnic groups and intra-ethnic groups and thus, the complexity of the issues that impact the circumstances of distinct groups cannot be ignored. The Administration's progress in disaggregating the data based on some of these key indicia such as ethnicity, household size, gender, etc., reflect this understanding.

#### ***Ethnic Minority Households living in Poverty***

##### Size Matters

2. Relative to the total number of households of six minority groups in Hong Kong, a large proportion of them having a household size of four persons or more. Only 30% of Hong Kong's population has households with more than four persons. However, in all South Asian groups except Indonesians, the number of households with more than four persons is significantly higher, with a median of 5 persons per household.

##### Median Monthly Household Income

3. With the exception of Indians, the median monthly income of ethnic minorities is generally lower than that of the whole population. The situation among Pakistani households warrants special attention. The median monthly household income for Pakistanis in a 4-person household is significantly less than other ethnic minority groups and that of the population as a whole. If we correlate this with the household size figures, Pakistanis are the most likely to have the largest families with 4 or more members with the lowest corresponding increment in terms of monthly median household income to support this family size if calculated on a per person basis. On a relative scale, ethnic poor are considerably worse off compared with the poor in the whole population.
4. This can be explained in part by the fact that ethnic minority households have fewer breadwinners. However, employment rates, occupation levels and income levels continue to demonstrate the sizeable gap between ethnic minorities and the overall population, with distinctions reflected along lines of ethnicity, gender, age. This, in turn, is exacerbated by the lack of integration of ethnic minorities as a group into the mainstream education system due in large part to the language barrier, the lack of oversight of school admission and language teaching in kindergarten and primary levels.
5. Since a very high percentage of male ethnic minorities work in elementary occupations compared to other Asian and White males, meaning that ethnic minority men are less likely to hold managerial

or administrative positions or be employed as professionals compared to males from other Asian ethnic groups or Whites, there are lower income levels among this group. Along gender lines, ethnic minority women are even less likely to be hired in these capacities (with the exception of Pakistani women in the category of Professionals and Associate Professionals). The gendered nature of elementary occupations is even more significant in the case of Indonesian and Filipino women, over 90% of who are engaged in such occupations, accounted of course, in large part by the domestic worker population of Hong Kong.

#### Poverty Rate Disaggregated by Ethnicity

6. Applying the poverty line definition to income data, based on the respective poverty line for a 1-person household, a 2-person household, a 3-person household and a 4-person household, the average poverty rate of South and South-East Asians was 23.9%, higher than that of the whole population of Hong Kong at 20.4%. Among the 6 minority groups, the poverty rate was highest among Pakistanis (51.1%), who were living in low-income households, followed by Indonesians, Thais, Filipinos and Nepalese.

#### Working Poor

7. In 2012, 5,099 out of the 8,100 low-income ethnic minority households were working households, reflecting a working poor rate of 63.0%. This is much higher than the working poor rate of the whole population (41.0%). Moreover, the working poor rate was higher in **all six ethnic minority groups** compared to the Hong Kong Chinese population. The Nepalese households' poverty levels were the highest, followed by Pakistani, Thai and Indian households in terms of the working poor.

#### The Povertisation of Gender: A Critical Flashpoint for Ethnic Minority Women

8. Furthermore, there is a critical gender gap here as well. Ethnic minority women, in particular, Pakistani women are likely to be living in conditions of extreme poverty compared with their male counterparts but also compared with their counterparts in other population groups (other than a very small percentage, who, when highly educated, are in professional occupations and at managerial or associate levels. This is reflected by data on income levels disaggregated by ethnicity and sex.

#### Poverty by Age

9. The problem of child poverty is serious among ethnic minorities. From 2001 to 2011, the ethnic minority child poverty rate increased from 23.7% to 32.5%, with a total of 8,863 children living under poverty. The child poverty rate of the Hong Kong Chinese population was lower by 7%, at 25.0%. **One third** of ethnic minority children aged 0-14 live in situations of poverty. **Nearly a quarter** of all youth aged 15-24 live in situations of poverty.

#### Rates of Change & Relative Change

10. There is an increase of the poverty rate among different ethnic minority groups from 17.3% in 2001 to 23.9% in 2011. While the poverty rate of the total population of Hong Kong has also increased, the rate of increase in poverty was much lower for the overall population compared with the rate of increase for ethnic minorities, particularly the Pakistanis and Nepali communities, who experienced a staggering increase.
11. Ethnic minorities' knowledge gap is reflected again in anti-poverty social service measures. The Catholic Commission Minimum Wage Report found that respondents generally showed poor awareness of several major social welfare policies aimed at poverty alleviation. **Language and bureaucracy** were highlighted as the primary barriers. Aside from language difficulties (i.e.

information not in an intelligible language), significant proportions of the respondents also stated that **the complexity of the application forms** (42.1%), **difficulty in communication with government staff** (31.6%) and the fact that **government staff cannot help** (28.1%) posed barriers to access to these social services.

### Key Observations

12. These figures highlight precisely why one cannot apply generalised policies for poverty eradication across the board. As is clear from the Administration's paper, different ethnic minority groups have different types of needs impacting their situation differently. These needs must be understood through a nuanced lens and treated accordingly in order to provide poverty alleviation measures that are responsive.
13. Although the Administration's paper reflects that the poverty alleviation measures have been effective in reducing the extent of poverty, there is a crisis in waiting if we do not address the question of sustainability of poverty alleviation measures which depend nearly entirely on cash injections and allowances.
14. For a systemic problem such as poverty, creative and systemic solutions are required to prevent and pull families out of the cycle of intergenerational poverty and a host of other social ills we now know await low-income and working poor households, particularly in relation to health, ageing, life satisfaction, etc.. While Hong Kong is replete with cash reserves, such reserves are not infinite and must be better utilised for investment with high returns and this means, investing in its human capital.
15. The first and most urgent step is to conduct a comprehensive review of how members of the Hong Kong community end up in poverty in the first place and to track their progress once they enter the government's radar for service provision. If recipients of services targeting poverty alleviation or eradication persistently remain below the poverty line over several years and their situation fails to improve or if particular groups routinely feature as part of those living in poverty, the Government needs to recognize the **specific markers to identify early on those 'at risk of poverty' or 'at risk of poverty entrenchment'**. There is a need to delve deeper into the situation of the worst-off groups and understanding the factors that render them the most vulnerable to conditions of poverty in the first place *before* they get ensnared in the cycle of intergenerational poverty.
16. The **Government's understanding of the extent of poverty and its root causes and impact** on the capacity of the affected communities to have their basic needs and human rights met is indispensable to **inform targeted policy-making in different sectors**. **Current measures appear to be broad and too general and as such, fail to tackle the needs of ethnic minorities living in poverty**. For example, the focus in recent years has been to provide translation services to enhance access to government services. However, this assumes that ethnic minorities are aware of the services available in the first place. Moreover, this fails to focus on the underlying causative factors that make it more likely for ethnic minorities to end up in a situation of poverty.
17. The Government has, in recent years and particularly since late 2014, begun to take a more bottom-up approach to addressing the information deficit problem. In the Commission on Poverty report entitled "The Home Affairs Department's improving support for ethnic minority integration," the government lists out several policies such as the establishment

and expansion of local service centres for ethnic minorities, the setting up of “youth units” at all service centres and an Ambassadors Scheme for ethnic minority youths. The stated goals of such policies are to engage ethnic minority youth, to foster a sense of community through sports and cultural activity programs organized by the service centres and outreach “youth units” and to provide referrals to other government services and NGOs when needed. Perhaps with a view to the particularly pressing needs of the Pakistani and Nepalese communities, the Home Affairs Department has also established Community Support Teams specifically targeting these two ethnic communities.

18. These are welcome developments, though the effectiveness of these initiatives are yet to be assessed, especially given the lack of published information on the day-to-day duties and recruitment policies for government officials involved in the administration of such initiatives. Questions also remain as to whether these initiatives can or will be scaled up – for example, the “youth units” comprise 22 staff members to cover the whole of Hong Kong, and there are to date only some 30 Youth Ambassadors, though more are in training.
19. The Government has been responding to the problem of the language barrier by increasing the provision of translation service online and in the public. While commendable, translation services alone will not resolve all existing problems faced by ethnic minorities. For example, government policy is to upload translated documents onto pages in official government websites, which are themselves only available in English and Chinese. The Government does not track data concerning the literacy level, computer literacy and Internet access, which are needed to assess policy effectiveness. The following figures reveal the scale of the problem (with a population of 60,000+ in the period where these figures are from):
  20. Translation services are rarely used:
    - 14 times for the Housing Department and Labour Department together in 2012-2013;
    - only 102 times for telephone; and
    - 49 times for escort interpretation services at the Social Welfare Department in 2013-2014 (3.5% and 10% of the total usage rate respectively).
  21. Of course, in order for translation services to be effective, ethnic minorities must know where to seek help and not be discouraged from doing so by other barriers to information and access such as discriminatory treatment. This remains a critical issue given the lack of effectiveness of the Race Discrimination Ordinance and the relatively loose application of the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau’s guidelines on maintaining racial harmony.
  22. There could be many reasons for the under-utilization of the CSSA and SSA schemes, such as unawareness about entitlement and preference to rely on oneself. In the case of ethnic minorities, there may be extra hurdles. Begum, a 38-year-old Pakistani woman, reported that she could not apply for CSSA because of the lack of a bank account.
  23. The generally low application rate for government subsidies among ethnic minorities is also reflected in the Catholic Commission Shadow Report. Of the 149 ethnic minority individuals surveyed for the report, **73.8% had not applied for CSSA**. A similar proportion of the working poor – **73.5% – also refused to take CSSA**. Furthermore,

**individuals who applied for the Work Incentive Travel Subsidy Scheme and the Student Financial Assistance Scheme only comprised 6% and 17.3%** of the respondents respectively. The report suggests three possible reasons for this phenomenon: **the self-reliant attitude** of ethnic minorities, **language barriers** and cumbersome application procedures or the **inability to meet a condition** which is difficult for this group to fulfil.

24. Across government sectors, the information deficit and language barriers are notable. 70% of ethnic minorities relied on friends and relatives to seek employment and only 5.5% of the respondents of a 2005 survey sought employment assistance from social welfare institutions. Of even greater concern was the indication of 58% of those surveyed stating that they did not know or were not sure which department to approach for assistance.
25. In terms of other barriers, it is very important to consider the ethos and cultural context in which such cash allowances or schemes for assistance operate. These have reportedly been the source of some strain and tensions in the home where male figures feel the stresses of providing for their families whilst being expected to be fully self-reliant and independent in terms of government subsidies and assistance. The sociocultural ethos dictates that reliance on such handouts is a sign of failure or weakness and is shameful.
26. The findings highlight the effects of poverty on ethnic minority cultures and vice versa. Traditionalist views towards gender norms remain intact and informal systems of support are lacking especially in the Pakistani community. CSSA, although viewed as essential for the financial survival of low-income families, was also criticised for eroding cultural, religious and family values and therefore, rates of application and receipt are comparably low when looking at the number of ethnic minorities and their households in poverty. A deeper understanding of the interrelationship between these issues is necessary to assist effective poverty alleviation efforts.
27. South and South-East Asians are analysed alongside Whites, Japanese, and Korean for policymaking in relation to ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong. This is clearly an undesirable approach as it is unspecific and overlooks the actual needs of the less affluent groups among ethnic minorities. More also needs to be done in terms of the administration of public services to ethnic minorities. Setting up special services allow flexibility in the operational design and implementation but may segregate services, making those services harder to run.
28. Therefore, initially, a mapping exercise is needed to better understand the extent of the problem and to design targeted interventions to deal with specific issues. At the same time, a macro-level approach that connects the different issues is also indispensable so as to ensure an improvement in the situation of ethnic minorities in terms of welfare and poverty in the longer run. Without a macro-level overview, poverty entrenchment cannot be tackled effectively. This will breed intergenerational poverty.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. Need for regular research, record, mapping and disaggregation of data on the situation of poverty in Hong Kong by ethnicity.
2. Current trends reveal deeply troubling impact of exacerbation of situation of poverty due to multiple deficiencies in core areas of life, particularly impact on education, employment, living conditions, health and prospects for upward economic mobility.
3. The figures reveal differences, however, between ethnic groups. There is a need for targeted interventions to address situation of specific ethnic minority groups. In some instances, there is a need for diversity mainstreaming by accounting for the impact of policies on ethnic minority communities.
4. There are visible signs of intergenerational poverty and entrenchment which are interlinked closely with issues stemming from systemic discrimination or structural problems in the education and employment sectors. These need to be immediately addressed. It is suggested that a **multidisciplinary taskforce** begin conducting an **impact assessment and evaluation of legal and policy measures in place in relation to the development of ethnic minority children and their life prospects and wellbeing** to tackle the problem early on before poverty risks materialise and become entrenched.
5. There is a need for more effective outreach strategies to enhance accessibility to existing services, including wider dissemination of information through appropriate channels. Current measures and efforts are clearly insufficient and inadequate.
6. There is a need to design **targeted interventions and services** to address specific needs of ethnic minority groups living below the poverty line or critically close to the poverty line.
7. Need to study the link between childhood poverty and other indicators (including education, employment, and health).
8. Need to identify individuals and families critically at risk of falling below the poverty line due to particular factors ('at risk' groups). **At-risk group identification** should facilitate identification of key indicators of poverty and help inform strategies to **break the cycle of poverty**.
9. Administrative guidelines pertaining to racial equality or general vocational course provisions are not enough to tackle a problem of this magnitude. There is a need for a **multipronged and multidisciplinary** approach using concerted **strategies** aimed at **addressing the root causes of poverty and marginalisation on a systemic scale**.
10. The appointment of ethnic minority members with specialised knowledge and expertise could be helpful to the Task Force of the Commission on Poverty that is working on vulnerable groups when it considers the impact of existing measures on poverty alleviation and what policies and approaches would assist with its objective of poverty prevention and alleviation in the long run.

11. It would be helpful if COP's work could gain further transparency by publicising its meeting documents and materials in English in addition to Chinese, particularly if the Task Force's work is to be scrutinised for its impact and relevance to the needs of one of the groups that fall within its mandate of review.
12. There is a need to develop a rights-based approach to inform policy-making to alleviate poverty.
13. Maintain and scale-up the current bottom-up initiatives to facilitate contact and integration of ethnic minorities into the local community.
14. Establish a high-level **Commission on Ethnic Minority issues** to understand from micro and macro perspectives the issues facing ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. All these issues are interlinked i.e. Poverty affects education and vice versa, employment, health etc. This needs to be information that is available to a single body to scrutinise where to begin remedying the structural flaws that perpetuate the cycle of poverty pertaining to particular groups.

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