



天主教香港教區
教區勞工牧民中心 - 九龍

**Submission to the Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities
on Accessibility of the South Asian Ethnic Minorities to Financial Assistance
Schemes for Primary & Secondary Students**

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Even though the government has instituted the ‘financial assistance for primary and secondary students’ scheme to help those in need, it is difficult for the South Asian ethnicities to have access to the relevant information. The Diocesan Pastoral Centre for Workers – Kowloon (DPCW-KLN) conducted a research on acquisition of information on the aforesaid scheme 2015 / 2016. Our research lasted from May to June of the year 2016 and a total of 134 persons of South Asian Ethnicities aged 15 or above were interviewed. The results reveal that :

Research Findings

1. Leaflets in the language of ethnic minorities look like waste paper

Although the Education Bureau has translated the “Household Application for Student Financial Assistance Scheme” leaflets into six languages of the ethnic minorities (Indonesian, Hindi, Nepali, Tagalo, Urdu, Thai and Tagalog), only 5.94% of them obtained leaflets in their first language from the school more often than not they cannot reach the parents of the ethnic minorities. It is not only a waste of existing resources, but also a deprive of the rights of those families to apply for assistance under these schemes because of their inaccessibility to the relevant information

2. 95% of ethnic minorities facing difficulties seldom seek help from school

The research reveals that 94.44% of the respondents expressed that they encountered difficulties during the application. These difficulties include the complexity of the application procedures (68.06%), their illiteracy in Chinese and English (65.28%). Even though confronted by difficulties, most of the respondents were not supported by neither the government nor the school. 64.82% of the applicants who had not sought help from their schools were not aware that schools could render them assistance.

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46.30% of them could not communicate with the school and so did not ask for help. Eventually, respondents who planned to apply sought help from DPCW-KLN (48.61%) and relatives (30.56%), or complete the application forms themselves (25%).

3. Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities unable to support

Although the government has financed six support service centres (SSCEM) and two sub-centres for ethnic minorities, the research found that the rate of seeking help from the SSCEMs is as low as 9.86%. Among these interviewees, 68.75% said that they did not know these centres could provide assistance. 42.19% of them expressed that they could not communicate with the support centre. Though the government professed that the establishment of the SSCEMs is to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities into the community, and enhance their access to public services, the effect is far from satisfactory.

Cases

Mr. I revealed that he first applied for the household application for student financial assistance three or four years ago when he was in secondary three. He learnt of this scheme only after he visited DPCW-KLN. Before that, his father had to borrow money from friends to buy textbooks and school uniform due to financial insolvency. Moreover, they also had to cut back on expense on food and other commodities. Therefore, the government should at least publicize the scheme using different languages of the ethnic groups.

Mrs. N said that the aforesaid scheme only came to her notice when her friends and relatives informed her. However, the complexity of the application procedure, her low level of proficiency in Chinese and English and the need to submit too many documents made her endeavor prove futile. Her husband could not render much help in this matter due to his long working hours. Since she had to borrow money from friends to sustain the family's daily expenditure, she could not afford the expense for her children's paid extra-curricular activities.

Mr Y who is studying Secondary 5 applied for financial assistance under the scheme the first time this year. He related that he has been playing in public parks since childhood because he needn't spend any money. While other youngsters enjoy fashionable amusement or playthings, he never asks his parents to buy them for him, let alone pay for taking part in extracurricular activities. He is going to participate in the Diploma of Secondary School Education examination next year. Although he feels that his academic achievement is not satisfactory, his family cannot afford the tutorial fees.

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Recommendations

DPCW-KLN pointed out that the objective of the government's "Financial Assistance Schemes for Primary & Secondary Students" is to relieve poor families with children attending schools of their financial burden, irrespective of their races. Unfortunately the government's failure to effectively use the resources and understand the difficulties of these ethnic groups during the application lead to the loss of their equal rights of access to the relevant information. As a result, the family members have to tighten their belts so that they can pay the school fees and buy textbooks and exercise books. Therefore DPCW-KLN would appeal to the government to:

1. Provide schools with "Household Application for Student Financial Assistance Scheme" leaflets in six ethnic minority languages

Although the Education Bureau has published the leaflets stated in the paragraph heading, more often than not they cannot reach the parents of the ethnic minorities. It is a waste of existing resources. Furthermore, since these parents failed to receive the relevant information due to language barrier, their children miss the opportunities to improve their studying environment. DPCW-KLN urges the Education Bureau to supply these leaflets to schools on their basis of their needs, so that they have equal opportunities to obtain information on poverty alleviation.

2. Employ local ethnical minorities to help publicize

At present certain government departments have ambassadors for ethnic minorities to provide support to their compatriots. For example the Labour Department has since September 2014 hired ethnic minorities as employment services ambassadors. They serve at the job centres of various districts for a period of six months, helping their compatriots to seek jobs. Furthermore, the Labour Department's Work Incentive Transport Subsidy Division has employed a few of these ambassadors to assist their compatriots to apply for the subsidy, answer enquiries and provide other support services. DPCW-KLN would suggest that the Education Bureau refer to the measures taken by the Labour Department, employ the ethnic minorities as service ambassadors to hold briefing sessions at different schools to disseminate the relevant information.

3. Collaborate with schools to help parents of ethnic minorities complete application forms

Nowadays, the Working Family Allowance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistant Agency (WFSFAA) and nongovernmental bodies which help the ethnic minorities collaborate to provide form-filling support service to them. Such services are also available at the job centres under the Labour Department and the Integrated Family Service Centres of the Social Welfare Department. The aforesaid arrangement has solved the problems of the ethnic minorities' inability to fill the application forms to certain extent. DPCW-KLN would propose cooperation between the Education Bureau and schools which enroll students of ethnic minorities to organize support services. With the help of

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services ambassadors, students of ethnic minorities may be provided with form-filling facilities and follow-up actions on their application.

4. Translate samples of the ‘Household Application for Student Financial Assistance Scheme’ application form into 6 languages of ethnic minorities

After years of striving, non-government bodies succeeded in persuading the Work Incentive Transport Subsidy Division of the Labour Department to translate ‘samples of application’ for the latest Incentive Transport Subsidy scheme into three languages of the ethnic minorities. The sample teaches them how to complete the application forms and the relevant documents required. It demonstrates that ethnic minorities who are illiterate in Chinese and English can, based on the sample, fill the application forms themselves and submit the necessary documents. DPCW-KLN suggests that this is a good example for the Education Bureau to follow.

5. Put assistance in completing ‘government finance assistance’ application forms within the parameter of Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities (SCEM)

The ‘Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2014’ revealed that only 13.9% of the families of South Asian Ethnicities with children had made use of the SCEM. According to our experience, apart from lack of knowledge of the duties of the SCEM, the fact that the services provided do not meet their needs is another important reason for the low rate of use. Helping the ethnic minorities to acquire government financial assistance is first and foremost for them. Hence DPCW-KLN suggests putting assisting ethnic minorities to complete government finance assistance application forms into the job parameter of the District Offices under the Home Affairs Department.

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