

## **EO Files (November 2015)**

### **“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”**

#### **Can Hong Kong break the cycle of ethnic minority poverty?**

*York Chow says schools, employers, the civil service and other official bodies can all help to end the exclusion and underachievement that entrenches poverty across generations*

On 17 November, the Legislative Council’s subcommittee on poverty will examine the specific situation for ethnic minorities. This is a positive sign that policymakers are increasingly recognising that Hong Kong’s ethnic minority communities are at risk of being, or staying, impoverished. Indeed, this situation deserves careful consideration and policy response.

Earlier analyses by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and other non-governmental organisations have highlighted this concerning situation. According to the 2011 census, more than half of ethnic-Pakistani Hongkongers live below the poverty line – significantly higher than the average poverty rate of the whole population at around 20 percent. When broken down by age, the problem is no less serious. The ethnic minority child poverty rate stood at 33 percent in 2011 – far higher than the comparable figure for the total population of 25 percent.

Poverty is a multi-faceted issue, for its causes and effects go far beyond how much money one has. It is also about opportunities and access – to education, jobs, and necessary services such as health care or housing. A child who is born into poverty is more likely to face social disadvantages, which perpetuate the impact of poverty over generations.

For many ethnic minority Hongkongers, the problem begins in education, starting as early as the pre-primary stage. Many parents wish to send their child to a kindergarten offering a local curriculum, in order to enable the child to learn Chinese. However, some kindergartens provide school information or conduct admission interviews in Chinese only, which poses significant barriers for many non-Chinese applicants.

Currently, ethnic minority children attend kindergarten at a far lower rate than Chinese students. This means that a considerable number of ethnic minority children may lose out on a crucial time to nurture their Chinese language skills, which is a key determinant of their future prospects in the city. Consequently, by primary school, a language gap is already in place. Without adequate and systematic support that fully recognises their specific needs as second- or third-language learners, this gap will likely persist and widen as they continue their education. Subsequently, at present, fewer ethnic minority students are able to gain admission to higher-band schools and universities. These factors will have a long-term impact on their ability to find gainful employment later.

We have called on kindergartens to embrace diversity and inclusion in accepting ethnic minority students. The Education Bureau has also pledged to bridge the communication gap between the schools and ethnic minority families, encourage kindergartens to admit more minority students, and foster an inclusive school environment. Due to these efforts, we hope to see the situation improve in the near future.

Those looking for work also frequently report facing discrimination and other hardships. Many job advertisements demand high-level Chinese proficiency, even if it is clearly not inherent requirements of the job. This means that ethnic minorities are often relegated to certain roles and industries with lower pay, more tedious or dangerous work, and few opportunities for advancement. A considerably higher proportion of the ethnic minority community presently engage in lower-paying elementary occupations, compared to the whole population.

Educational inequality facing ethnic minority Hongkongers, as well as the subsequent barriers to employment opportunities, continue to be key concerns of the Commission, as it has real impact on their ability to break the cycle of poverty. We have named this one of our strategic working priority over the last few years, and it will be our theme of this year's EOC Forum, the Commission's major annual public engagement exercise, on 24 November.

Over the last few years, the Government has taken welcomed steps to address some of these issues. This includes the recent survey to look at households with

South Asian school children and their poverty situation. Results are expected before the end of 2015.

Nevertheless, a more comprehensive policy solution, starting from the pre-school level, remains needed. Certainly, there are some key areas for priority action. For instance, the bureau can provide more support for minority parents in the school selection process, and resources should be put in place to enable students of all backgrounds to learn and succeed together. Such resources must be monitored to ensure their allocation towards measures supporting education and social integration.

The Government can also do more to hire ethnic minority Hongkongers into the civil service. As of latest statistics available, Hongkongers of ethnic minority background make up only around 2 percent of civil servants. I have been advocating for the Government to reconsider the Chinese-language requirements for certain jobs and recognise third-language capabilities in the recruitment process, particularly in roles that provide direct service to the public. For example, having more ethnic minority health-care professionals can surely enhance the efficiency and cultural sensitivity of services provided in our hospitals, as well as to lessen the reliance on interpreters and ensure that public services are accessible by all.

I have also urged that additional language skills be recognised and alternative Chinese qualifications be consistently accepted in admissions to tertiary institutes, including to subdegree courses. School and university administrators should, moreover, proactively ensure that there is no inadvertent race discrimination in other areas of campus life, including in residence hall policies or student activities. Employers should also determine whether their Chinese-language requirements for different jobs are truly necessary.

Certainly, more can be done to enable our ethnic minority communities to access social mobility.

Equally importantly is the acknowledgement that we are all, whatever our ethnic background, a part of Hong Kong and contributors to our collective future. Beyond economic hardships, many ethnic minority Hongkongers continue to face daily the biting indignity of exclusion and marginalisation in this city they call home. Mother Theresa once said, “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the

most terrible poverty.” Surely, all of us can help to end discriminatory behaviour, and ensure that no one in our city suffers such poverty.

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