

## **Hong Kong must see its young ethnic minorities as an asset, not a liability**

**By Prof. Alfred Chan, Chairperson EOC**

As the world gets ready to mark another International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which falls on 21 March, it may be a good time to take stock of the racial landscape in Hong Kong.

Though still predominantly homogenous, the demographic mix in Hong Kong has seen an increase in the numbers of non-Chinese in the last 10 years. According to the 2016 Population By-Census, the number of ethnic minorities increased significantly by 70.8% over the past 10 years, with increases owing to higher numbers of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers, followed by South Asians and Whites. Ethnic minorities now make up 8% of the total population and 3.6% of the population not including foreign domestic workers. An interesting characteristic of the ethnic minority population is that the median age is lower than that of the whole population by 7.2 years.

I look at these statistics in a positive light. Many of these ethnic minority youth we consider Hong Kong their only home. A lot of them were born here and/or have spent a majority of their lives in Hong Kong, a fact reflected in the 120%-increase from 38, 042 in 2006 to 81, 964 in 2016 in the number of ethnic minorities born here.

Another interesting finding is related to their Cantonese language skills. In 2016, 64.3 per cent of ethnic minorities aged 5-14 were able to read Chinese, although the level of their reading skills is still lower than that of their ethnic Chinese peers. Yet, this is significant, given that language is the biggest barrier for many ethnic minorities in employment and higher education.

With the younger generation better placed to overcome this barrier, it is imperative that all support be given so that they can join the workforce on an equal footing. Currently, many ethnic minorities only know the basics of Chinese, which many employers consider inadequate.

For years, the Equal Opportunities Commission has been urging the Government, notably the Education Bureau, to help ethnic minority students learn Chinese more effectively. This pool of ethnic minority Hong Kongers can help mitigate the adverse impact of an ageing working population that is expected in the coming decades.

Unfortunately, many ethnic minority households are struggling. According to the government's Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016 released last month, between 2011 and 2016, ethnic minority poverty rates show increase both before and after policy intervention and are higher than the rates of the general population. Within the ethnic minority communities, the poverty rate of South Asians, particularly Nepalese and Pakistanis, was higher than the others.

Worryingly, the number of working poor has increased. The major cause is seen as lower employment earnings due to lower education attainment and skill levels. Larger household size is another factor that contributes to poverty for those holding a job.

In addition, unemployment rates among some ethnic minority groups, such as Pakistanis and Nepalese, were higher than that of the overall poor population.

While relief measures may assuage the situation somewhat, serious focus needs to be given to the younger generation of ethnic minority communities so they can be lifted out of the cycle of poverty. Both the private and public sectors have to sit up and take a good hard look at this resource pool and make sure they are equipped to participate in keeping Hong Kong competitive and economically stable.

It is not just skills that they need to be equipped with; it is also the emotional connection with Hong Kong and their feelings of loyalty to and solidarity with Hong Kong that need to be nurtured. The government, through its policies on education, employment, service provision and others should aim to endow this group of future workers with all they need to carry the banner of Hong Kong as an efficient international financial centre.

To ensure this, several things need to be fixed.

First, Chinese language learning for ethnic minorities in schools has to be improved. Right now, the situation is less than satisfactory. In addition, those who

missed the opportunity at school should have other means of acquiring the language skills needed to land a job. This is an area that, despite years of trial and error, still requires much work.

Secondly, employers should review their recruitment policies to ensure the requirements stated for a job are commensurate with the actual needs. Additionally, employers should be ready to provide on-the-job skills and language training to give a leg-up to ethnic minorities who might otherwise fit the bill. Project Gemstone and similar initiatives pioneered by the police and Correctional Services Department are demonstrating many win-win possibilities.

Finally, the Government, as the largest employer in Hong Kong, should include a measure for racial diversity in its hiring policies. Earlier this month, the Chief Secretary for Administration announced that 22 new grades will lower their Chinese language proficiency requirements (LPRs), bringing the number of grades that have lowered/will lower their Chinese LPRs since 2010 to 53. We hope this will inspire public organisations, businesses and trades, and other sectors of the community to increase employment for ethnic minorities.

Hong Kong has an inherent advantage in competing for the development projects under the “Belt and Road Initiative” in its ethnic minority youth, as many of them are familiar with the diverse cultural environments of the belt and road countries. With nurturing, they could be Hong Kong’s strength for regional and international development.

Hong Kong’s greatest resource is its people. To achieve economic and social prosperity, this resource must be tended to and developed. If a whole section of this valuable human resource is ignored or left behind, not only is it short-sighted, it is also counterproductive.

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