

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

Recommendations on COVID-19 Relief Support for Disadvantaged Racial Groups

Background

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has been communicating closely with the Nepalese, Pakistani and migrant worker communities to address their difficulties in going through the pandemic. A submission¹ (Annex II) was subsequently made in August 2020 for the Policy Address Public Consultation to recommend policy measures for providing support for the grass roots racial minority community amid the pandemic and removing barriers faced by children from racial groups in education.

2. In the last three months, the EOC held a series of e-meetings with other racial groups, including African, Filipino, Indonesian, Sikh and Sri Lankan, to understand their concerns amid the health crisis. Some of the concerns raised are common to the general Hong Kong population such as layoffs, mental stress, etc., while some are longstanding issues particular to the racial minority population, for example, difficulty accessing necessary public information. Still other concerns were specific to certain communities, like language barriers faced by a few smaller-size and linguistically unique groups, people stuck in Hong Kong or their place of origin due to travel restrictions, etc. In general, members of the racial minority communities are suffering from similar issues alongside many Hong Kong people in the pandemic. However, their increased vulnerability and less available resources have put the racial minorities in a more disadvantageous position.

Financial Impact

3. South Asians, South East Asians and Africans are disproportionately employed in tourism-associated and customer service industries, such as catering, hospitality, airline ground support, music bands, etc. which are the hardest hit by the global travel ban and social gathering restrictions. One distinct example is the Filipino musician community, 90% of whom have been out of a job for over 6 months.

¹ <https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/202083117121350799.pdf>

4. Many people across different racial communities in these industries lost their livelihoods well before the Government rolled out the Employment Support Scheme. Workers who were laid-off before the scheme was announced have been left out by this relief measure intended for employers to retain their employees.

5. Besides, long-standing concerns related to Chinese language proficiency further exacerbate the employment situation of many racial minorities in these difficult times. As the hard-hit global economy pushes more and more Hong Kong's businesses to turn to the local and Mainland markets, it is highly probable that unemployed racial minority members who are commonly less or not proficient in Chinese will take longer to return to the workforce and those who are still employed are more vulnerable to being replaced by Chinese employees.

6. While stronger financial impact is reported in certain racial minority communities where larger family sizes and single earning members are common, almost all the racial groups we met with cited examples of financial hardship faced by their members, such as failing to pay rent, relying on charities for food, struggling to afford the internet expense for their children's online lessons, etc. Basic rights of many families are threatened. Without swift financial assistance to go through this crisis, intergenerational poverty will be their inescapable fate.

Public Health Impact

7. Both global and local COVID-19 lessons have taught us that unfaltering vigilance across all sectors of society is key to outbreak control. Socially disadvantaged groups if not given adequate attention and resources will likely be a weak spot in the defense. Equipping these groups with proper protection is actually essential to safeguarding the whole population.

8. Information gap is detrimental to the health protection of disadvantaged groups and language barriers put grassroots racial communities at a further vulnerable position. In this regard, the EOC appreciates the swift action from the health protection authorities in attending to this language need by widely publicising key official infection control and prevention measures in Chinese and English, as well as in some racial minority languages, which is crucial to effective containment of the pandemic. However, language barriers still caused a pocket of the racial minority community to be less informed and left out of some important healthcare measures. Accurate and updated information in core minority languages is undoubtedly the top priority in plugging the gap.

9. Some smaller-size linguistic groups, e.g. French-speaking Africans, Sri Lankans, Tamils, etc., may be overlooked in health or relief related information dissemination. Their long-existing language barriers may also deprive some community members of the understanding of how to navigate the public service system. They may not know whether and where to ask for advice and support beyond their racial group. Naturally it is not expected that the health protection authorities translate all their instructions into every minority language. A suggestion is to identify and equip English speaking members in these groups to share important information in their own language within their communities.

10. Disparity in access to safety information is particularly apparent in certain economically disadvantaged groups such as South Asian and South East Asian housewives and senior citizens, and foreign domestic workers. People, Chinese or non-Chinese, may not rely solely on official announcements for public information. Advice often comes from unofficial sources such as news and digital media, which are shared through informal channels like social media or online messaging platforms. Local information through these sources always comes in Chinese, and are inaccessible to grass roots racial minority families. For these disadvantaged groups, NGOs and other community support groups play a crucial role in the dissemination of such information as well as in lending support to those not reached by official channels. Amid the outbreak, these organisations have been struggling to carry on this important role due to tightened social distancing measures and depleted resources. Without additional support from the Government in funding and resources, they may not be able to sustain their vital services.

11. It is critical that no pockets are ignored or left out of the pandemic control measures be it safety information or health support such as free testing or distribution of protective gear. Given the high risk associated with any community spread, the health authorities need to be aware of community channels and the most effective tools of communicating with all sections of society including the racial minorities.

Psychological Impact

12. Nearly all the communities met with reported increased mental stress levels among their members. Loss of livelihood has understandably caused mental stress. The year-long fear of contracting the virus and constant concerns on health protection supplies and preventive routine are also taxing for everyone. In our meetings with some racial groups, women were reported with higher rates of mental

stress. They shoulder the responsibility of child care and most of those in the economically disadvantaged groups are not highly educated, many not fluent in English, let alone Chinese. When school campuses were closed for pandemic control for months, they struggled to keep their children positively engaged at home and follow online learning, adding further hardship to them.

13. On top of all the above, racial minority community members, who are very likely associated closely with their extended family back in their place of ethnic origin, are also concerned about the health risk they face. Lockdown, travel ban, quarantine requirements, etc., have made it difficult if not impossible to provide support for overseas family members, especially those staying in less developed countries.

14. Despite the heightened mental strain, many racial community members may choose not to go for mainstream counselling and psychiatric services because mental problems carry a stigma that may be much stronger in some communities as they are more closely knit and word can get around faster. Besides, many grass roots racial minority members are not aware of the available counselling and psychiatric services. Another obstacle goes back to the language barrier. English is not the native language of many grass roots South Asians and South East Asians in Hong Kong. Counselling sessions in English may be ineffective in communicating the problems and understanding the treatment. Cultural difference is also an issue as most Chinese practitioners may not understand the cultural and religious backgrounds of racial groups, while practitioners from the same culture are rare and only available in the private system.

15. This partially explains why racially disadvantaged group members like to seek support from within the community. However, the restrictions on religious gatherings and resource depletion of many racial organisations has weakened the safety net for seeking calm and relief. Psychological stress keeps building but support for the community dwindles and suitable professional service is unavailable.

Unique Challenges to Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs)

16. It is important that we mention another segment of the racial minority population that may need specific attention and tailor-made policies. FDWs who form the silent army that keeps Hong Kong running are often sidelined or even chastised in the fight against the pandemic with news of COVID-19 clusters in dormitories and social distancing challenges during their day off coming into focus. In looking into this issue, one has to understand that staying at home as the

Government has urged the public to do carries a totally different meaning for FDWs. The “home” is literally their “workplace”. For many FDWs, spending rest days at the workplace in the presence of their employer means working without rest and compensation and lack of access to the emotional support they get from fellow FDWs. Despite this, the majority of almost 0.4 million FDWs in Hong Kong as is the case with most Hong Kongers, have been following the outbreak containment regulations and helping to keep themselves and their employers’ families safe.

17. While adherence to the government’s social distancing regulations is absolutely essential and non-negotiable for everyone, in light of the live-in arrangement of FDWs, it falls on employers to provide their FDWs with a reasonable rest day environment at home in terms of the space and freedom to choose how to spend their time. To address the primary concern of many FDWs about losing their rest day if spent at their lived-in workplace, it is essential to remind all employers of the legal liability if they abuse their power and require their FDWs to work during rest days.

Recommendations

18. In the EOC’s August submission for the 2020 Policy Address Public Consultation, the following four key recommendations were made on COVID-19 relief support for disadvantaged racial groups:

- i. Launch dedicated relief programmes for families further disadvantaged by language and cultural barriers
- ii. Address cultural factors in developing, promoting and delivering relief and financial support programmes (for example, some Muslims may be averse to financial support schemes that involve paying interest; certain racial groups highly value self-reliance and may hesitate to apply for monetary assistance; etc.)
- iii. Make sure that information regarding the relief schemes in languages used by major disadvantaged racial groups are available and readily disseminated in the communities to encourage and facilitate their usage
- iv. Clearly instruct staff to actively cater to the needs for interpretation in handling enquiries and applications from disadvantaged racial groups

19. Riding on these suggestions, we recommend additional resources in the following areas to support disadvantaged racial groups and better equip them to go

through the pandemic:

- i. **Retraining:** It is very likely that currently unemployed members from disadvantaged racially groups may find it harder to get employed even when the economy starts recovering. What would be very effective in the long run is to help upskill them so they can find alternative employment. **Enough courses with language support should be provided by training organisations**, such as Employees Retraining Board, Vocational Training Council, Construction Industry Council, etc. **Strengthening the financial subsistence allowance** in some of these training programmes will also help keeping the trainees, Chinese or non-Chinese, in the courses until they finish. Otherwise, any short-term unskilled odd job can steer them away from their retraining and upskilling plan, totally defeating the purpose.
- ii. **Interpretation and Translation Services:** Demand for translating health protection instructions and outbreak control information into minority languages multiplied over the past year. Currently, many public authorities rely on the services of the Hong Kong Christian Service Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER), a Government-funded support service centre for EMs which also provides interpretation and translation service for EMs in getting access to public services. The crew of 20+ interpreters and translators for eight minority languages is stretched to the limit by the current inflated demand for health related interpretation, on top of their regular services for all public authorities. **Expanding CHEER's manpower and/or introducing additional crew** is essential for keeping the racial communities swiftly and properly informed of essential health and relief information. Meanwhile, as it is critical that all information be accurate and verified, resources should also be allocated to **put in place a quality assurance system** such that all translations will be done by quality practitioners accredited by reliable partners such as consulates or language experts. In the face of such an unprecedented and unpredictable pandemic as COVID-19, any delay or omission in giving clear instructions and attention to however small a community will be gravely damaging to the whole population.

- iii. *Community Support for Racial Groups*: Not just the availability of information but also proper dissemination channels and formats are determinants of how well the community is prepared. For instance, housewives and senior citizens with low education levels need simplified communication of important information using audio-visual aids and media. Whereas, for some smaller-size linguistic groups, language support is more available through digital messaging platforms and social media by English-proficient community members doing the translation. Racial minority organisations and NGOs have the important responsibility of customising and spreading the messages to all sections. In order to share their load, **more Community Support Teams for racial groups should be set up** in addition to the existing two for Pakistanis and Nepalese respectively so as to provide more coverage and not risk excluding the vulnerable within communities. For the immediate need, **ad-hoc grants should be considered for subsidising identified key racial organisations to publicise health, relief and public information** in a way that fits their cultural and language needs. Without these organisations serving as crucial hubs for information and support, outbreak control measures may end up as wasted effort simply due to missing links.
- iv. *Attention to Mental Health*: Experts warn that the global fight against COVID-19 may be a lengthy one. Unattended mental ill-health is detrimental not only to keeping people vigilant during this extended fight but also in recovering once the pandemic is over. To address the cultural and language barriers faced by disadvantaged racial groups in accessing mental health support, **dedicated units in the public medical and rehabilitation sectors should be set up** to cater to their special needs with practitioners trained in understanding and responding to the cultural differences in assessment and treatment. In this regard, **language restrictions in hiring practitioners and para-professionals should be reviewed so as to open up such vacancies to racial community members** who are qualified, proficient in the needed languages and familiar with the culture. It is also recommended to **introduce public-private partnership to allow mental health patients in disadvantaged racial communities to go to private specialists with strong credential and background of providing culturally and linguistically appropriate care**. Government subsidy could be considered for the needed medical care in these cases as the public sector

option may not be suitable or effective for reasons mentioned.

- v. ***Instructions to FDWs' Employers & Support for FDWs:*** It is important that FDWs' right to the one rest day per week is not impinged on, as this is important for their mental health and wellbeing. **Education for employers on FDWs' rights and enforcement against malpractice should be intensified** to deter them from taking advantage of their FDWs following the Government's stay-at-home advice. Once the COVID-19 crisis subsides, the underlying longstanding issue of gathering spaces should be addressed as a public health protection strategy for the future. **Appropriate space and venues for them to spend their rest day as well as regulation of dormitories** for their use during the period between contracts are continuing demands from stakeholders, but now may be the opportune time to start planning for them. After all, keeping this vital population safe, healthy and contented is essential to the wellbeing of Hong Kong as a whole.

20. The bases of the above concerns and many others raised by the racial groups we met with could be traced to various long-standing problems in education, employment, service access and racial integration, such as barriers in learning Chinese, racial bias among employers, unfair treatment in customer services, bullying and harassment in schools and workplaces, etc. Although we are not going to repeat the recommendations made in our August submission for the 2020 Policy Address Public Consultation, immediate attention and action by the Government in these areas is equally paramount not only for the sake of helping our racial communities going through the pandemic but also for tapping into their potential in contributing to the recovery of society.

21. Our discussions with diverse ethnic groups also reminded us of the heterogeneous nature of our racial communities. Policy makers and implementors should bear in mind to not simply lump them as one single group. Individual ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic characteristics and cultural needs should also be taken into consideration as far as possible in setting out any measures. This is particularly pertinent to smaller-sized but growing racial groups such as the Africans. Pandemic or not, their leaders need official data pertaining to their respective population to make assessment and plan for actions but they find that they are always categorized as "Others" in Government reports. A first step for the Government to fix this issue is to begin collecting statistics on these communities so as to better inform its policy directives.

Conclusion

22. While many in Hong Kong are facing hard times, it is important to acknowledge the plight of those who may be further disadvantaged due to circumstances including their race. The Government has rolled out several relief measures and is doing its utmost to help everyone. This submission is an attempt to throw light on some who may be falling through the cracks and being left out of support measures among the racial minorities. While most of the concerns and related recommendations are specific to COVID-caused circumstances, some recommendations relate to long standing problems which have become all the more acute now. Taking steps to solve them promptly would lead to long term benefits which will outlive COVID-19.

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