

Agenda 4

Ethnic Diversity

Globalization and fertility of early settlers continue to increase the ethnic diversity trend in Hong Kong. People on the move, whether they are transient or permanent migrants, are entitled protection from racial discrimination and treated equally. In Hong Kong skin color has salience and is interconnected with economic and social status. It is undeniable that race remains, at the level of everyday experience and social representation, a potent political and social category around which individuals and groups organize their identity and construct politics.

Trends and Concerns

Ethnic minorities do face different forms of racial discrimination in Hong Kong. Generally, ethnic minorities faced barriers in areas of education, employment, housing, health care and social participation in the community. A multitude of factors have contributed to social exclusion of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. Discriminatory practices and attitudes towards ethnic groups may be due to misunderstanding and cultural biases.

On the other hand, structural barriers to inclusion exist in various social policies and institutional provision which create hurdles to their access and utilization. For example, inability to read or write Chinese already precludes ethnic minorities' access to education and career opportunities, and public and social services. Their religious and cultural practices also differ from social norms of the mainstream. It is unlikely for local communities and organizations to make accommodations for ethnic minorities to their own inconvenience and extra costs.

Challenges Ahead

Discrimination and social exclusion affect Hong Kong in the long and short run in many ways. Ethnic entrapment may bring forth a vicious poverty cycle to the ethnic communities. Children of ethnic minorities may be less likely to progress to a higher level of educational attainment, and they are even barred from receiving professional or vocational training skills for the job market. Their families would also have difficulties to make use of public services and be updated of current affairs because of their inability to read Chinese. Social exclusion of minority groups is detrimental to social harmony and societal well being.

With the rising local concerns and international trends on racial equality, it is important for Hong Kong to strengthen its mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities and social equality for different sectors of the community regardless of their place of origin, skin color or languages. The Hong Kong government should develop specific policy goals and guidelines on the promotion of racial harmony and social inclusion so as to fall in line with the world trend and global standard of human rights and social justice. In fact, instead of regarding ethnic diversity as a social burden, ethnic groups with their native language proficiency and cultural heritage can be taken as a social asset to help build Hong Kong as Asia's World City.

Possible Actions

1. Promote racial equality and combat racial discrimination

The lack of statutory duty on public bodies towards promoting racial equality makes the Race Discrimination Ordinance passively guard against racial discrimination rather than actively promote racial equality. There must be a specific timeline and action plans for the various exempted bodies to meet the requirements of the RDO. The government should consider to establish a Race Equality Commission as in the example of the UK. The UK Race Equality Scheme, which imposes a general statutory duty on specified or listed governmental or public bodies to carry out their functions with due regard to the need to eliminate racial discrimination and to promote racial harmony and equality, could provide a good referencing point for Hong Kong. There should be active public education and practice guidelines for different sectors of the community to adopt non-discriminatory practices and culturally sensitive measures in their daily interactions with people from different walks of life and ethnic origins.

2. Formulate comprehensive social policies to ensure fair chances and social inclusion of ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities are having fewer chances in educational and career advancement. The lack of a comprehensive ethnic diversity policy makes ethnic minorities unable to position themselves in society and may eventually be further socially and culturally marginalized. Ethnic diversity is a relatively new policy arena in Hong Kong, and the government lacks vision and determination to deal with an increasingly socially diverse population in Hong Kong. Different government departments present ad hoc and piecemeal measures which are shortsighted and unable to address the increasing number and diversity of ethnic minorities. Thus a comprehensive policy on ethnic diversity should be developed as a long term policy directive. More thorough research and social analysis should be conducted on the socio-demographic profile and needs of different ethnic groups. The policy should spell out clear principles, policy goals and operational guidelines for different policy bureaus to address the needs of ethnic minority groups under their respective policy arena. There can be regular report on the statistics of inclusion, e.g. no. of ethnic minority people and their ranks in the workforce of the government, public organisations and major businesses.

3. Enhance collaboration between ethnic groups, stakeholders, private sectors and the government

Ethnic groups and different stakeholders should be widely consulted and actively involved in the policy planning process. Effective platforms which possess policymaking power should be set up to facilitate communication among stakeholders, effectively allocate resources, avoid overlapping of services and enhance collaboration with different sectors in the promotion of social harmony and inclusion. The government can actively involve ethnic minorities in consultative bodies on relevant social issues. Involvement of ethnic minorities in consultative bodies on relevant issues.

4. Strengthen the social capital and capacity of civil societies

Ethnic communities have immense strength and cultural capital with their family cohesion and religious backgrounds. Social workers and NGOs can work with these communities to further enhance their social capital and capacity through bridging and linking them with other community stakeholders, government departments and policy planners. Services and policies should target at empowering ethnic minorities themselves to identify key issues and maximize their own potential and community resources in enhancing social inclusion. Social workers and NGOs can provide training and resources to ethnic minority groups to organise services or community studies in the ways that they regard as culturally appropriate. The government and policy planners should be in close contacts with service providers/users and ethnic minority representatives and listen carefully to their voices and understand their needs and value them as a core part of Hong Kong society. Only in this way can social policy agenda and service provisions be culturally relevant, effective and inclusive. Ethnic minorities are civil societies and partners to the government and other sectors of the community. Given an appropriate social environment and culturally friendly policy practices, a culturally diverse Hong Kong society can hopefully prosper and achieve a win-win situation within the Asian Context in the global world.

5. Sector's accountability to uphold human rights and equal opportunity principles

First to prepare our future social work practitioners to work with people of differing ethnic background, training on diversity is essential. Secondly, training institutions should also provide courses specifically to train ethnic minorities to become social work practitioners. Thirdly, NGOs and practitioners' self-regulation is equally important; a guideline on equal opportunities practices for social services should be developed. Such inclusiveness in social services could facilitate practitioners' engagement with the ethnic minorities and could further help to build capacity and increase participation.

6. Equal access to education and employment opportunities

Educational attainment and employment opportunities are interconnected. The Government should ensure children of different ethnic background have equal access in education and training both at school and in the community. It is important to have Chinese as a Second Language Policy to ensure ethnic minority children could learn Chinese effectively. To enhance employment opportunities, the Government should take the lead to employ ethnic minorities and also to relax the Chinese language criteria for civil service recruitment in order to demonstrate the Government's appreciation towards ethnic diversity. The Government should report statistics on ethnic minorities' employment.

7. Facilitate access and remove language and social barriers

The government can consider ring-fencing funding for the promotion of equal access in education and training for ethnic minorities both at the school level and in the community. For example, ethnic minorities should be helped to learn the Chinese language in school and in the community. On the other hand,

interpretation services for ethnic minority communities should be provided in public and social services. Resources should be provided for the training of interpreters. Information of public and social services should be available in languages commonly used within major ethnic minority communities. Workers with the relevant language skills should be employed in public and social services in districts with high concentration of ethnic minority population or to provide cross-district services.

8. Increase the visibility of ethnic minority

Images of ethnic minority communities should be included in publicity materials of public and social services, productions of mass media and in school textbooks. Members of these communities should also be invited to major social and cultural events at territory level and district level. Their contribution to the Hong Kong society should be recognized through different channels. More information on the cultural and religious practices of ethnic minorities can be disseminated through various channels at societal and community level. Local Chinese children and young people can also benefit from sharing and befriending people from a diverse social background in their schooling or community activities. Promotion of mutual understanding through cross-cultural events, such as ethnic food festivals, visits to cultural venues should be encouraged. More resources and support should be provided to support these social and cultural exchange activities.

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