

## Motion 2

The government should map out policies to ensure basic living standards for children in poverty

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## **I. Preamble**

Children are the driving force for the advancement of our society. Only children who are morally decent as well as mentally and physically robust can lead our society onto a broad path of success; without them the future of our society would be nothing but complete bleakness. It is thus beyond question that our children should be placed under adequate care and protection.

While goods and materials are always in ample supply in Hong Kong, there is nevertheless a yawning gap between the city's rich and poor. Recently it is reported that Hong Kong now ranks at the top of all the developed cities in the world in terms of poverty gap ratio. It is a place where the rich can keep wasting their food, and the poor never know when their next meal will be.

Under Article 27.3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations, States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.

Our group is not suggesting that every child in Hong Kong should enjoy an affluent life; yet this is what is happening before our very eyes: children in poverty are living in extremely hostile environments, with some even having to wander the streets of the city to collect paper cartons and aluminium cans to help out their families. How greatly has these children suffered, both physiologically and psychologically!

Their basic needs of clothing, nutrition, housing and transportation are not satisfied; their rights to live and develop are deprived. These have a profound impact on the growth of children in poverty. The government should address this issue directly and take a greater sense of urgency to map out policies which will ensure basic living standards for these children.

## **II. The Living Conditions of Children in Poverty in Hong Kong and Current Government Policies on the Issue**

Before attempting a sketch on the situation of children in poverty in Hong Kong, we must first make it very clear what the term "Children in Poverty" refers to. While the government never did make an official decision as to where the poverty line should be drawn, academics have proposed that the line should be set in conformation to the qualification criterion for receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA). The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) has defined a family earning less than half of the median household income per month as living under the poverty line.

According to the Living Conditions and Expectations of Children Survey released in December 2003 by the HKCSS, more than 260,000 children in Hong Kong are living in poverty, constituting 24% of the children population. Compared to a ratio of 17% back in 1991, the situation has apparently deteriorated. Statistics accumulated up till July 2003 show that the number of child recipients of CSSA is already seven times of what it had been a decade ago. All these figures reflect a worsening problem of child poverty that demands our urgent attention.

Poverty seriously undermines the physiological and psychological development of children. According to the findings published by the Society for Community Organization on the Living Conditions of the Children Recipients of CSSA Survey, nearly 75% of the families interviewed customarily spread a portion of food that normally serves one meal over two or more meals; in some cases even up to four meals. 40% of the interviewed families said they have had experience of starvation, out of a lack of cash to purchase foodstuff. Children who are not taking an adequate diet will suffer from malnutrition. Their growth is stunted; they fall ill more easily. In such instances when they do fall ill, out of financial considerations they would very often take patented medicines instead of going to private clinics. Or they would choose to go to public hospitals, which require long hours of queuing, or, in worse cases, choose to simply ignore their illnesses. The survey also discovered that children who live in partitioned rooms or bedspace apartments may suffer abnormal development in their spinal cords due to a severe lack of manoeuvrable space.

Moreover, a survey conducted by HKCSS shows that around 30,000 impoverished children are now living in small partitioned rooms, bedspace apartments (also known as caged homes) and places alike. Their average living area per person is only 22 square feet, the smallest among them a mere 10 square feet, a far cry from the standard of 70 square feet set by the Housing Authority. Children living in such dwellings have to share facilities such as toilets and kitchens with other tenants, constituting an extremely unfavourable mode of living, not to mention a complete lack of privacy. Furthermore, the hygienic conditions of these places are poor and the environments usually heavily polluted. Adding in a rowdy neighbourhood where the children are easily subjected to malignant influence and bullying from malicious individuals, it is little wonder that they are often in want of a sense of security.

Apart from a favourable studying environment, children in poverty also lack computers which would otherwise facilitate and support a diverse mode of learning, and this proves to be a great inconvenience for their studies. According to the Survey on the Living Standard of the Children on CSSA, only about 30% of the interviewees attended tutorial classes although as high as over 60% considered themselves in need of it. The main reason for this is the high tuition fees which are beyond the capabilities of these impoverished households. The need to purchase textbooks and reference materials are proving a heavy burden too for impoverished families, with their annual raise in prices and the frequent release of new editions. Moreover, these children are unable to join extra-curricular activities they are interested in, thus undermining their physical and psychological developments.

More importantly, among the children in poverty in Hong Kong, 20% have to help their family collect paper cartons and empty cans for petty cash as a means of livelihood. Nevertheless, quite a number of these children professed a reluctance to apply for CSSA even though they are eligible for assistance, for they found it humiliating. Faced with financial difficulties, money is often a cause of worry for them, and they tend to develop a dislike for their present way of living. It is thus obvious that the issue of poverty has a detrimental effect on impoverished children, not only physiologically but also psychologically.

Though the government is currently offering CSSA to households in need, the categories of payments covered are both inadequate and inflexible. Children in poverty cannot truly benefit from the scheme. In 1999, the Social Welfare Department slashed the standard rates by 10% to 20% based on the number of members in a household and cut down the types of special grants, i.e. grants for monthly telephone fees, purchase of spectacles and dental

treatment, long-term supplement and re-accommodation grants. In 2003, there was a further reduction of 11.1% in standard rates and rent allowance was cut by 15.8%, single parent supplement and meal allowance for full-day students by 11.1% and grants to cover school fees by 7.7%. In essence, a four-person household has suffered a 40.1% cut in total CSSA payments in the two reviews and the adjusted standard rates amount to a mere \$5,090. The monthly payment to cover the living expenses of a child is only \$1,275 which is a staggering 31.6% shy of the minimum standard of living in Hong Kong.

### **III. Suggestions**

Taking into consideration what was mentioned earlier about the living conditions of children in poverty and the corresponding government measures, our group suggests that the government should map out policies as soon as possible as to where to draw the poverty line and how various government departments are to collaborate in the effective deployment of available resources on targeting the needs of children in poverty, in particular taking a greater sense of urgency in addressing the more pressing issues in that regard. In addition, our group would also like to make the following propositions:

Firstly, vacant Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats should be converted into Public Rental Housing (PRH) flats and leased to impoverished households. On average, it normally takes a Waiting List applicant six years to be allocated a PRH flat in the urban area. Within that duration children in the family would have probably grown up; but since they have to live in small partitioned rooms throughout the stage of active physical growth, studying in the absence of proper desks and chairs, they are more prone to health problems including short-sightedness and scoliosis. With the government's decision on a moratorium on the sales of HOS flats, 25,000 such flats are now left vacant. Government rents, management fees and maintenance fees incurred have already added up to 120 million Hong Kong dollars. We suggest that the government should lease these flats to impoverished households and shorten the waiting time of those on the Waiting List so that children can enjoy a healthier living environment as soon as possible.

Secondly, we suggest a re-implementation of special grants for purchase of spectacles and dental treatment under CSSA. According to a research conducted by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2003, 70% of local school children aged 17 or below were short-sighted, with the proportion climbing from 10% in primary one to 70% in secondary five. For years Hong Kong has preceded the world in the ratio of school children with short-sightedness. As to date there is still no cure for short-sightedness, the most economical remedy for this deficiency is to wear spectacles. Our group proposes that the government should help children in poverty by reintroducing the special grant for the purchase of spectacles, for there is little chance that these low-income households can afford them. On the other hand, school dental care service provided by the Department of Health only covers primary school students. Impoverished secondary school students consequently are often forced to give up dental care.

Thirdly, the government should increase the level of resource input for social welfare organizations. Social welfare organizations have the greatest chances to come into contact with households in poverty, and therefore they understand very well their needs. At present, many social welfare organizations have implemented various programs targeting the needs of impoverished households and their children, and these include the recycling of used

computers, establishing of food banks, recycling of second-hand items and free tuition classes. If more resources can be allocated to these organizations, it will benefit a greater number of impoverished children.

Fourthly, a “smart-card” scheme should be adopted to provide children in poverty with product sponsorships and shopping discounts. The government could take the lead to coordinate the program, enlisting the support of commercial firms to offer children sponsorships and discounts. This would help conserving government expenditures as well as fostering an air of mutual support within the community. We believe that the “smart-card” scheme can function flexibly in helping to improve the lives of children in poverty. Vetting is required for the issue of smart cards followed by regular monitoring and reviews by the government in order to ensure that the cards will not be abused.

Fifthly, public transportation companies should introduce more concessions for children, such as a reduction or even exemption of KCRC train fares. The high transportation fares in Hong Kong have deprived children in poverty of many opportunities to go out for sightseeing and museum tours. They are only familiar with the community area in the vicinity of their dwellings. Nowadays, even senior citizens enjoy various fare discounts, therefore we believe that as another underprivileged community within the society, children in poverty should enjoy equal treatment.

These are a few suggestions we made, taking on a children’s viewpoint, on the ways through which the living conditions of children in poverty can be improved. We sincerely wish that the government would consider implementing these suggestions. We also urge the government to start right now, to embark on the policy making process with an aim to helping children in poverty attain basic living standards.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Though Hong Kong is a metropolis of international significance, the chasm between the rich and the poor is widening by the day, and the issue of children in poverty is in particular a cause for concern. The lack of social and government support has deprived these children of the chance to participate in extra-curricular activities, unlike their luckier peers. Their dwellings are appalling. Without the money for food, they are malnourished and they never know when their next meal will be. Some of them even have to collect cartons and empty cans as a means of maintaining a livelihood. As aforementioned, these are of the government’s doing – their total disregard for the basic needs of these children, their repeated cut backs for support and subsidies for them.

We believe that children are the pillars of our future society; they are responsible for the creation of a better future. If the needs of children are not fully catered for, how will all-round development be possible? To help the underprivileged communities in society is the spirit of welfare that a government should have. We sincerely hope that the government will consider in detail our five suggestions: 1) to convert vacant HOS flats into PRH flats and lease them to impoverished families with children; 2) to re-implement special grants for purchase of spectacles and dental treatment under CSSA; 3) to allocate more resources to social welfare organizations in order to help impoverished households and their children; 4) to launch a “smart-card” scheme to provide children in poverty with sponsorships and discounts for daily necessities; and 5) to encourage public transportation companies to offer concessionary fares

to children in poverty. Although these suggestions may not be a cure-all for the problem of children in poverty, they will definitely prove to be an invaluable support for their daily needs.

I, on behalf of the 20 Child Councilors, move the motion “The government should map out polices to ensure basic living standards for children in poverty” be passed.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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The Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong - Cheung Sha Wan Integrated Services Center  
Hong Kong Playground Association - Tsing Yi Integrated Youth Services Centre  
Hong Kong Playground Association - Mongkok Integrated Youth Services Centre  
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