

**The government should formulate policies to ensure basic needs for  
development for children in poverty**

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## **I. Introduction**

Hong Kong is a city known for its prosperity and affluence. With most families being able to afford their daily expenses, the majority of children here enjoy an affluent life with not much to worry about. Yet in this small city, there are sadly still a lot of children who are living in impoverished conditions that are unimaginable to many others.

According to Clause 1 of Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it clearly states that states parties shall recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Thus every child should receive basic needs for his/her development. "Basic needs for development" refers to the minimum basic requirements in terms of housing, healthcare, psychological development, education and extracurricular activities. These are rights every child should have. We therefore urge the government to formulate more comprehensive policies in order to achieve the standards as mentioned.

## **II. Current Status**

Hong Kong does not have an official benchmark of poverty. 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. Children who live in such families are considered "children in poverty". There are a total of 260,000 children in poverty at present, constituting about one-quarter of Hong Kong's children population.

No doubt the living standards of children in poverty, in every aspect, are much worse than an average family. According to a study by the Hong Kong Social Workers Association, there are about 30,000 of such children living in small partitioned homes. The average area is 22 square feet, a far cry from the standard of 70 square feet set by the Housing Authority. Not only is it small, but hygienic conditions are poor and the neighborhood is rowdy. Moreover, findings by the HKCSS on the Living Conditions of the Children Recipients of CSSA show that close to 40% impoverished children have had the experience of starvation which leads to malnutrition and stunts their growth during adolescence. In such instances when they fall ill, out of financial considerations they would choose to simply ignore their illnesses.

Poverty also deprives a child of an all-rounded education. Children in poverty are unable to afford the purchase of reference material and the use of computer and internet. In 2005, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Unit (HKPTU) did a research on this issue. Results show that about 40% Hong Kong students only participate in extracurricular activities once a week

and 20% of the children in poverty have no participation at all, and they, therefore, are unable to gain a balanced development. The same report also shows that about 40,000 impoverished children in Hong Kong do not have computers at home, illustrating the fact that resources are extremely inadequate for them.

The psychological development of children in poverty is also a key issue. They have relatively low self-esteem, making them especially prone to psychological illnesses. The findings of a survey conducted by Boys' and Girls' Club Association showed that about 72% of children in poverty feel insecure and more than 10% admitted that they have had thoughts on committing suicide.

With the setup of the Commission on Poverty, the government pays more attention to the problem of gulf between rich and poor, but the situation is still extremely serious. There is no time to lose in improving the living conditions of children in poverty. We therefore sincerely hope that the government would take note of our pleadings and give these children a hope and a future.

### **III. Suggestions**

#### **Living Environment**

##### 1.) Imposing Tighter Restrictions on Well-off Public Housing Tenants

At present, Hong Kong has 630,000 public rental housing (PRH) tenants, about 3% of them are considered as well-off tenants and they have to pay double rent. We suggest that the threshold household income of double-rent paying tenants should be lowered from the current 3 times the Waiting List income limit to a range between 2 and 2.5 times the limit in order to speed up the moving out of these high-income PRH tenants and encourage them to purchase Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats. If they refuse to do so, their public housing tenancy should be terminated. Furthermore, income and asset assessment for current PRH tenants is only conducted every 10 years and therefore, we propose that this cycle should be shortened to 5 years.

##### 2.) Speeding up the Reconstruction of Public Housing

We suggest that the government should expedite the reconstruction of interim housing to public housing in order to shorten the waiting time for PRH, making it possible for more impoverished families to move in as soon as possible.

## **Healthcare**

### 1. Extending School Dental Care Service (SDCS) to Secondary School Students

Private dentals charge high prices for their services. The government should extend SDCS to secondary school students, and students joining would only need to pay a consultation fee of HK\$20 each time.

### 2. Food Bank

We propose that the government should set up a food bank for the impoverished. The food can be donated by business sectors or volunteers. After processing and quality-checking, the food can be distributed by charity organizations. In the long run, the food bank has to be developed into a city-wide system in order to ensure that all children in poverty would be taken care of and provided with a balanced diet.

## **Education**

### 1. Teaching Resources Centre

This idea draws its reference from existing schemes run by government and voluntary organizations. Items of collection in the resource centre include software and hardware for learning purposes, e.g. computers, reference material, stationery and exercise books. There will be two methods of collection: i) second-hand goods will be collected through a network of social organizations established by voluntary organizations or social services units in the government; and ii) new goods will be collected by the Education and Manpower Bureau which will appeal to businesses or direct suppliers for donations. In addition, the government should also help to promote the resource centre and allocate more resources to it to facilitate its smooth operation.

### 2. Advancing the Payment of Textbook and Stationery Grant

During family visits and interviews, we often heard children in poverty expressing the hope that the textbook and stationery grant scheme can be improved. To minimize the inconvenience caused to students who purchase textbooks in groups, primary school students in particular, and to save their families borrowing money to buy textbooks, we suggest that applications for textbook and stationery grant by primary students as well as Forms 1, 2, 4 and 6 students should be processed and handled earlier so that these students can obtain the grant in June, rather than Mid-September to October, which is the schedule the scheme now follows.

## **Extracurricular Activities**

In terms of subsidies for extracurricular activities (ECA), we suggest that the government promote the use of ECA coupons. Children with the need for subsidies can apply for such coupons and participate in ECAs organized by the government (such as the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Music Office) and other non-government organizations (NGOs). Students can choose to participate in various kinds of activities according to their own preference, and at the same time, schools can also reduce its workload in organizing ECAs. At present a lot of NGOs offer ECAs for students. If the government subsidizes existing on-going ECA programs, it will help to fully utilize resources already existed in the community. The government should also offer travel subsidy for impoverished students enrolled for ECAs so that they would not be prevented from taking ECAs simply because of the high transportation costs involved.

## **Mental Status**

### 1. Combating Misunderstanding about Poverty in Society

There are still major misconceptions of poverty in society. For example, many people think that being poor means being lazy, assuming that the impoverished receive assistance without doing any work at all. In order to clear up these misconceptions in society, the government should enhance the public's understanding of this problem and be a role model in setting a proper attitude.

### 2. Launching the "Love and Companionship for a Needy Friend" Scheme

Children in poverty are often deprived of love and care, leading to detrimental psychological problems. With regard to this, we propose the launching of the "Love and Companionship for a Needy Friend" scheme which helps establishing a close family-like relationship between impoverished families and volunteered families, thus improving the psychological conditions of the improvised child and his/her family members. The scheme will be run in the "family-to-family" mode. Qualified voluntary couples will be assigned to impoverished families who join this scheme. Through family visits or related activities, the volunteers will try to understand the actual needs of these families and build up a close and friendly relationship with them. At the same time, social workers will partner with volunteer families and conduct periodic reviews with them.

## **Commission on Poverty**

### 1. Formulating Long-term Objectives and Policies to Alleviate Poverty

The Commission on Poverty has laid down plans for alleviating poverty such as the Mentorship Fun Project, the Adopt-A-School Project, etc. However, these plans only serve to

help alleviating the issues brought about by poverty without giving substantial financial support to children in poverty, thus failing to tackle the root of the problem. The Commission on Poverty should formulate long-term objectives and comprehensive policies such as a ten-year plan and a five-year midterm plan to decrease the number of children in poverty and eradicate the problem of poverty.

#### 2. Setting an Official Benchmark of Poverty

The Commission of Poverty should, without delay, set a benchmark of poverty so that the affected target groups can be identified and concrete policies can be formulated to solve the problem.

#### 3. Formulating Policies in the Best Interests of Children

The Commission of Poverty, when introducing policies related to children, should have children's best interests at heart and take into full consideration of their needs and feelings.

#### 4. Let Children Representatives Join the Commission on Poverty

The Commission lacks voices of children. We, therefore, hope that children representatives will be allowed to join as members who, in turn, make the Commission an efficient channel for the government to understand the actual needs of children.

#### 5. Encouraging Cross-sector Cooperation

The Commission on Poverty should organize more cross-sector cooperation and encourage the business sector to participate in alleviating poverty. It should join hands with members of the social welfare sector to map out poverty alleviation policies at district levels.

### **Conclusion**

The chasm between rich and poor in Hong Kong is a depressing problem. Behind the glamour of wealth and affluence in this city, how much thought and care have we given to the underprivileged communities in society? Without adequate support from society, impoverished children are bounded within their small homes without knowing whether they will have enough to eat. They have to bear the cold and pitiless stares of society. All these have detrimental effects on their physiological and psychological development. Children of today are the pillars of our future society. There is no time to lose in helping impoverished children secure their needs for a healthy growth and development. We therefore urge that the government should lend an ear to children and consider seriously the suggestions we have provided.

I, on behalf of the 15 Child Councilors, move the motion “The government should formulate policies to ensure basic needs for development for children in poverty” be passed.

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