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The Hon. Mr. John KC Lee GBM SBS PDSM PMSM
Chief Executive of the HKSAR
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The Government of the HKSAR
Tamar, Hong Kong

23 August 2023
By e-mail
(ceo@ceo.gov.hk and
policyaddress@cepu.gov.hk)

Dear Mr. Lee,

2023 Chief Executive Policy Address

On behalf of The India Association Hong Kong, I would like to submit our policy proposals for your forthcoming Policy Address.

We are taking the liberty of following up on suggestions made by the India Association during the Policy Address Consultation Session on Social Welfare held on 9 August 2023. We also make some additional suggestions in relation to employment, care for the elderly, integration and racial harmony.

Language difficulties facing Non-Chinese communities

We would like to start by acknowledging the Administration's efforts in relation to issues facing the non-Chinese communities in Hong Kong in terms of language education.

In particular, we are grateful for the focus on ethnic minority educational issues in the 2014, 2018 and 2019 Policy Addresses. We also welcome the contents of the Education Bureau's Circular No. 8/2020 entitled "*New Funding Arrangements for Enhancing Support for Learning and Teaching Chinese for Non-Chinese Speaking Students*". Finally, we note the contents of EDB Circular No. 99/2023 with respect to the waiver of the "subsidised examination fee" for eligible non-Chinese speaking students.

There is therefore no question that the Government's heart is in the right place and also that it has devoted significant resources to the issue. However, as you will be aware, the question of Education Support Measures for Non-Chinese speaking ("**NCS**") students was a key focus within Report No. 76 of the Director of Audit on the results of value for money audits which was tabled in the Legislative Council on 28 April 2021 ("**Audit Report**"). This made recommendations in relation to increased supervision of funding support, capacity building for teachers and monitoring the effectiveness of other support measures.

If we were to pick a single word that is key in explaining the difficulties faced by the ethnic minority communities, that word would be "language". It is the inability to read and write Chinese and, in some cases, to speak Chinese that is preventing ethnic minorities from fully participating in the workforce and from accessing public services. It is also a key factor in inter-generational poverty.

This is of key importance not only to the concerned individuals but also to society as a whole. After all, if non-Chinese permanent residents cannot properly integrate into the workforce, there is a high likelihood that many will become a burden on the state.

Given that the Audit Report highlights that the proportion of NCS students within the system is growing and has now reached 3.4%, we would like to make some suggestions in relation to the future measures to be adopted in relation to this issue.

In our respectful submission, this is not a problem that can be fixed at the school level through funding. Instead it needs a coordinated effort at the governmental level.

It is also not a problem that can be avoided by simply recognising overseas qualifications for entry into university. Even if NCS students can get into university on the basis of GCSE qualifications, this is not going to be enough to get them a job in the local employment market.

Policy suggestions

Any solution needs to address the reality that NCS students simply cannot get enough exposure to the Chinese language in their home environment. Parents of NCS students recognise the importance of Chinese in Hong Kong but simply do not have the language skills (and also often lack the financial resources) to help their children.

Government policies also need to address the fact that, according to the findings of a January 2020 study by the University of Hong Kong and Oxfam:[1]

1. 3 in 5 teachers are not confident about teaching Chinese to ethnic minority students; and
2. 93% of primary school principals had difficulty in employing staff with relevant skills.

Our policy suggestions are therefore as follows:

- Centralising responsibility for addressing Chinese language support for NCS students. It should not be left to teachers at individual schools to design courses and materials themselves. We would stress that there is a need for support not just in Chinese language but also other subjects taught in Chinese such as Mathematics and General Studies.
- In the short term, there needs to be a mechanism for sharing the resources that are available so that each school does not re-create the wheel.
- Teachers should be encouraged and incentivised to acquire relevant professional qualifications for supporting non-Chinese speaking students.
- Technology should be used in the creation of bespoke learning resources (see further below).

Use of technology in Chinese language teaching

From experience with my own young children in a bilingual school, the following tools provide significant support that can help achieve high levels of fluency.

[1] See https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3046920/hong-kong-schools-struggling-teach-chinese-ethnic-minority

- Reading pens (and also books with QR codes linking to MP3 files with recordings made by native speakers) which help us teach our children Chinese characters even though we can neither read or pronounce them.

- Apps and games which help our children learn how to write characters.

- Tutors who support their language acquisition by engaging in regular everyday conversation with them.

- Integration with Chinese speaking students and a desire on their part to be able to speak Chinese with their friends.

The technology to support children is there and it is not expensive. Private tutors may not always be feasible for individual families but can be replaced with after-school support in a larger group. What is really required is 2 things:

First - a commitment to use the available technology to create tools that can support Chinese language learning. In this regard, we urge the Government to take the lead. Whilst significant, the number of affected students is too small for local publishers to invest in providing the necessary audio support which is needed.

Second - a belief that high levels of Chinese fluency on the part of NCS students is achievable provided that appropriate support is given and if NCS students are properly integrated into mainstream schools.

The long-term goal must be for NCS kindergarten students to develop levels of Chinese fluency sufficient for them to thrive at mainstream schools. However, in the short-term, there is an **urgent** need to support older NCS students for whom such a goal is not realistic. A bespoke curriculum for Hong Kong's NCS students is sorely needed. As explained above, this needs to be much higher in level than the international qualifications currently used for NCS students because strong Chinese is what the local employment market demands.

Employment

Hong Kong's ethnic minority communities were particularly vulnerable to job losses during the coronavirus pandemic. This was a symptom of a wider problem which will persist even now that the virus is largely defeated, unless action is taken. We would propose the following:

- Enhance the available resources at the Labour Department to assist those who are not fluent in Chinese.

- Design courses for youth not fluent in Chinese to help them enter other industries such as accounting, marketing, design and maintenance.

- We suggest efforts should also be taken to ensure the availability of vocational training courses in English as well as Chinese as many adults who are not fluent in Chinese are unable to access the existing vocational training courses.

- We would also like to see Chinese language courses for adult non-ethnic Chinese become more accessible and better publicised. For instance, information could be

disseminated through organisations associated with Hong Kong's various ethnic communities, including our own.

- We recognise the importance of a trilingual and biliterate civil service but hope that the Government will lead by example and hire more non-ethnic Chinese Hong Kong people into the civil service. We welcome the on-going review of language proficiency requirements since 2010 which has led to 53 civil service language requirements being lowered and urge that this process continue.

- We also suggest that we consider the experience of other bilingual jurisdictions such as Canada where each civil service position is analysed to consider whether bilingual proficiency is required. Even where bilingual proficiency is required, consideration is given to whether language requirements must be met at the time of appointment or satisfied later through language training at government expense.

- We say this not just because it is desirable that the composition of the civil service should look like Hong Kong. In addition, there may be particular benefits in increasing cultural diversity in certain departments such as the Police, Customs and Immigration which frequently deal with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

Care of the aged

Members of the ethnic minority communities consider Hong Kong their home. Therefore many ethnic minority elderly are spending their twilight years in Hong Kong. Of these, most have extreme difficulty in Mainstream Elderly Homes for the following reasons:

1. Linguistic needs as many are not fluent in Chinese, some are not fluent in English.

2. Dietary needs both in terms of usual cuisine and sometimes specific needs for instance for Halal or vegetarian food.

3. Religious needs for instance with respect to prayer rooms or accommodating fasts.

4. Cultural needs which in part reflect the language abilities referred to above but also impact entertainment and activities for the residents concerned.

We therefore urge that the Administration give thought to the following:

- In the short-term, to improving access to information on care homes for ethnic minority elderly in English and other languages. For instance, the Social Welfare Department website (in English) provides a list of elderly community centres and a list of care homes but there does not appear to be a link to the websites and no information on what services are provided or how to apply.

- In the longer-term, to consider whether it is possible to designate an elderly care home or a section within a few care homes to cater for the non-Chinese speaking communities of Hong Kong.

Integration and Racial Harmony

There is much yet to achieve to foster integration and racial harmony in society. Our specific recommendations are as follows:

- Publicity campaigns should be run showing pride in a diverse Hong Kong.
- Training courses among frontline staff in the civil service should be formulated to promote understanding of the various cultures of different ethnic minorities.
- Information about different cultures and religions should be incorporated into the education curriculum.

Conclusion

We make these suggestions because of our community's long history in Hong Kong and our recognition of the important role our city plays in the nation and internationally.

We are convinced that Hong Kong's best days are yet to come. Hong Kong's Indian and other ethnic minority communities hope to play a part in the exciting opportunities that will be created going forward by the "Greater Bay Area" initiative.

We are confident that under your leadership, Hong Kong will develop policies that ensure that each and every resident can perform to their potential and, equally importantly, contribute to a city of which we are all proud.

Yours sincerely



Vishal Melwani
President
The India Association Hong Kong