

Commission on Poverty

Strengthening Support to Children and Families – An Update

PURPOSE

The paper updates Members on the initiatives to strengthen our support to children and their families.

BACKGROUND

2. Since its establishment in May 2005, the Task Force on Children and Youth (“the Task Force”) has examined the existing policies and measures in relation to children and youth development, particularly those targeting at children from a disadvantaged background. Members noted that the Government has in place a wide range of universal health, education and other support services to children and their families. Children from needy families also receive additional support so that their family background would not prevent them from accessing to various developmental opportunities.

3. In terms of financial resources, the Government invests around 30% of the Government’s operating expenditure on services and programmes for children and youth, with a quarter targeted specifically at disadvantaged children and youth. Since 2005/06, the government has invested some additional \$200 million for strengthening child and family services.

TACKLING INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY

4. Against the background, Members considered that the following directions are important to improve the existing policies and measures: -

- (a) More emphasis should be placed on a *preventive approach*, through strengthened services for early childhood as well as screening mechanisms to identify high-risk children and families for early intervention.

- (b) Children from disadvantaged background may have relatively less *developmental opportunities*, and more targeted efforts should be made inside and outside schools to facilitate their development and growth, bearing in mind the need to avoid negative labeling.
- (c) Our policies in assisting children and youth should have a clear *family perspective*. Some families have fewer resources to deploy and networks to depend on in taking care of their children, and need special attention and support.
- (d) There is room for *better coordination and collaboration* across the health, education and social service sectors in order to provide more holistic support to children and parents, especially to those from a disadvantaged background at different stages of development.

0 - 5 YEARS

5. Prevention is better than cure. To tackle intergenerational poverty, it is important to cater for the developmental needs of children at an early stage. As announced in the Policy Address, the Government will invest additional resources to subsidise and upgrade the quality of *early childhood education*.

6. In order to identify and meet the varied needs of pre-primary children and their families, the Government introduced the pilot *Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS)* in 2005. The programme aims to identify children and families at risk, including children with physical, developmental and behavioral problems. A formal referral system was established between Maternal and Child Health Centers, public hospitals, Integrated Family Services Centers and pre-primary institutions at the pilot districts to provide the necessary interventions. The programme has received positive feedback from the community so far. A full review of the pilot programme will be completed in January 2007 and the Task Force would be briefed on the outcome. Pending the outcome of the full review, the Government will consider extending the programme to other communities in Hong Kong in phases.

7. *Parent education* is considered to be one of the ways to assist parents to take better care of their children. In order to have more understanding of the needs of poor and needy families in this regard and to facilitate better policy formulation, a Consultancy Study on the Promotion of Parent Education for Economically

Disadvantaged and Hard-to-reach Families in Hong Kong has been conducted to identify the special needs of disadvantaged parents and make recommendations on how to strengthen parenting support to them. The preliminary findings suggest that a “family policy” should be adopted to guide the long-term development of strategies for strengthening families. The Study Report would be completed in January 2007 and would be presented to the Task Force.

8. Parent education should not be limited to the teaching of skills and values, but the whole-person development of parents which are important to the effective performance of their parenting role. In this regard, the Women’s Commission (WoC) has promoted the *Capacity Building Mileage Programme* (CBMP) which encourages continued learning of women, helps broaden their perspectives and equips them with a positive mindset which in turn has a positive impact on their children and family members. The WoC plans to expand the CBMP and helps more women enhance their capacity, including strengthening quality parent education programme.

6 - 14 YEARS

9. The Government aims to provide children with quality education and developmental opportunities during their growth years so that they can be prepared for their future. All children enjoy 9 years of basic universal education. Children from needy families can apply for financial assistance to meet their schooling expenses in the form of fee remission, textbook allowance and travel subsidies. Small class teaching has also been introduced in primary schools with a high concentration of students from disadvantaged families since September 2005.

10. The Government has also committed a lot of resources to providing different kinds of developmental programmes for children and youth inside and outside schools. A recurrent \$75 million has been allocated from 2005 – 06 to implement the *School-based After-school Learning and Support Programmes* to enable schools and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise after school developmental activities for the disadvantaged students. The Task Force has been briefed on the progress of the Programmes and the adjustment made for 2006 – 07.

15 - 24 YEARS

11. The Government has in place different programmes to facilitate youths who no longer continue with mainstream education to pursue a career. Particular attention is

given to *youths not in education, employment and training*. The Labour Department will continue to strengthen the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme (YPTP) and Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme (YWETS). Two new youth resources centers will be established to provide a “one-stop” integrated employment service including career counseling, training and self-employment support to young people from 15 to 29 years old. The trial Transport Support Scheme to be launched in 2006/07 will also provide transport subsidies to encourage youth to participate in YPTP and YWETS. The Youth Sustainable Development and Engagement Fund has also been financing training, placement and employment projects targeted at the youths not in education, employment and training.

12. The Task Force has also recommended launching more targeted and intensive assistance to unemployed youths who have been on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) for a long time. The pilot “*My STEP*” project has been launched since October 2006, and a study on the profile of the participants is being conducted on the reasons of the prolonged stay on CSSA. The Task Force will be updated on progress at its next meeting.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT FUND

13. It is noted that there are different funding schemes¹ which can be tapped by NGOs and voluntary organisations to organise developmental programmes for children and youth. Nevertheless, the Task Force has also looked into the overseas experience in promoting child development, particularly the child development fund model which focused on the long-term personal development of children. At the CoP meeting held on 20 November 2006, Members were in general supportive of the initiative to explore the asset-building approach as a way to help promote child development and to tackle intergenerational poverty, and that this should be viewed as an additional measure on top of the existing services for children and youth. Given the divergent views on the different models, the Task Force will gather more community views on the subject in order to come up with the most suitable approach that would best suit the local needs. In the meantime, the Government would consider supporting some pilots in the short-term.

¹ Such include the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund, the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged, funding administered by the Commission on Youth and the Summer Youth Programme Committee etc.

ADVICE SOUGHT

14. Members are invited to note the initiatives in strengthening support to children and their families at different stages of a child's development.

Commission Secretariat
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