

主旨: Submission
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Dear sir / madam,

We are professionals serving Hong Kong's children. We are pleased to contribute our views to the formulation of population policy for Hong Kong. Please find attached our submission titled "Invest in the Early Years for Sustainable Development".

Yours faithfully,

A Group of Education, Health & Social Care Professionals

23 February 2014

Secretariat of the Steering Committee on Population Policy
Chief Secretary for Administration's Office

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We are professionals serving Hong Kong's children. We are pleased to contribute our views to the formulation of population policy for Hong Kong. Please find attached our submission titled "Invest in the Early Years for Sustainable Development".

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(Please see a list of names at the Annex)

Invest in the Early Years for Sustainable Development

Introduction

We agree with the Steering Committee on Population Policy that a sustainable population policy should have the vision of enhancing our human capital to sustain Hong Kong as Asia's world city. Among the five proposed ways to address these challenges, we would like to focus on "the need to set a proactive policy to build human capital for sustainable development of the society"¹.

Investment in Early Child Development

Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, in her Lancet article² (May, 2013), pointed out that ".....investment in early child development is essential, not only for good health but also for sustainable development", as "the first three years of a child's life are a time when a child has the greatest plasticity for growth and development, even under adverse circumstances." In terms of economic efficiency, research evidence also supports early investment. According to Professor James Heckman³, economist and Nobel laureate, the optimal policy is to invest more in the early years, which must, of course, be sustained to be effective. Later remediation for early disadvantage is possible, but much more costly to achieve the same outcome than early investment. If the intervention is too late, when people's level of skill is too low, it becomes economically inefficient.

For cost-effective investment in the early years, research has identified three areas which are critical to laying the foundations for healthy child development and life-long well-being, viz. (i) stable, responsive and nurturing caregiving with opportunities to learn; (ii) safe, supportive physical environments; and (iii) appropriate nutrition.⁴

The Hong Kong Situation

Currently, middle class children receive massive doses of early enriched input, while children from more disadvantaged families do not. Furthermore, there are children who are exposed to chronic adversities such as poverty, neglect, abuse, family violence, parental mental illness and substance abuse. They are at risk of learning and behaviour problems which will likely result in low education attainment and economic productivity, poor physical and mental health, or even welfare dependence and criminality. The society will have to foot the bill for these consequences. There is local evidence showing 5-year-old children of low income families had lower school readiness and greater risk of developmental vulnerability as measured by the Chinese Early Development Instrument.⁵ To improve the outcome of the whole child population,

as well as to reduce inequalities among different socioeconomic groups and to increase social mobility for the disadvantaged, the principle of “proportionate universalism”⁶ should be adopted in policy formulation and service provision. This means that actions have to be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.

Currently in Hong Kong, there are a range of services for preschool children and their families, including maternal and child health services, childcare services, kindergarten provisions, as well as family services, child protection services and the Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS) for needy families. However, many of these tend to be fragmented as there is a lack of clear policy objectives to guide the integrated development of systems and practices, as well as mechanisms to ensure that implementation of programmes and services are cost-effective and that they are able to meet the needs of different families.

Our Suggestions

To build human capital for sustainable development, we urge the government to formulate policies to ensure that every child gets the best start, through the provision of evidence-based interventions⁷ such as integrated family support (building parent capability to improve child outcome) and high quality early education and care, that are proportionate to the needs of families. It is remarkable that the long-term positive impact of high quality early education and care on disadvantaged children is particularly prominent.

To achieve these goals, inter-sectoral actions among the social, education and health sectors are vital. An inter-disciplinary steering body, with strong leadership from the relevant bureaux and departments, and participation from relevant sectors of the community, should be set up to devise strategies and plans that ensure every child gets the best start; oversee the research and development of programmes and services; as well as monitor the effectiveness of their implementation.

In passing, we would like to raise a note of caution on the proposal of making more accessible and affordable childcare services to encourage female homemakers to rejoin the workforce. If the care to be provided by these services is exactly what is currently provided in most childcare centres in Hong Kong, which is restricted to basic physical care such as feeding, maintaining hygiene and safety, but without the stable and responsive relationship with caregivers or positive learning experiences, the cognitive, emotional and social development of the future generation of children will suffer.

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Annex

	Name	Qualifications/Profession	Sector
1.	Dr. Au Yeung, Henry Cheuk-Lun	MBBS(HK), FHKAM(Paed)	Health
2.	Dr. Becher, Yvonne	MClin. Psych, Ph.D. (Ed)	Education
3.	Dr Chan, Ching Hai Charles	PhD, FHKPS, FHKPCA, Hon. Fellow, HK PolyU	Education
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5.	Ms. Chan, Debby	Social Worker	Social
6.	Dr. Chan, Edward Ko-Ling	Ph.D.	Social
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14.	Dr. Chao, Nicholas	FRCS (P.Surg), FHKAM (Surg)	Health
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