

**Social Capital and Volunteering in Modern Ageing Cities:
Building Intergenerational Inclusion**

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Dear Prof. Painter, Prof. Kwan, Dr. Ko, Prof. Ng, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

May I begin by sharing with you a story of an elder, Lady Ng, reported in a local newspaper. Lady Ng is a “full-time” senior volunteer who does 3,000 hours of voluntary work per year. She starts doing voluntary work at 8:30 in the morning until 11:00 at night, seven days a week. Except spending about 8 hours at home per day, all her time is devoted to voluntary work. Lady Ng serves different types of people, including the mentally retarded, dementia patients, elders living in Care and Attention Homes for the Elderly, people being tried by the courts, drug abusers, wives of prisoners.....etc. and etc. To service recipients, be they old or young, male or female, ill or retarded, she never says “no”. She gives up a leisurely life at home and has taken up such a challenging and rewarding task in her elderly years. Though Lady Ng is an experienced volunteer, she also has some difficulties in her voluntary life. Once, she visited an elderly man at home. That old man was quite stubborn and rejected her, sending his fierce dog to threaten Lady Ng. Lady Ng responded, “I am not afraid of dogs. I patiently talk to you. If you like this, then accept it. If not, I will go away. I come with the intention to show my concern to you.” After listening to this, the old man softened his attitude and Lady Ng succeeded in talking to him for 8 minutes this time. After more contacts with the old man, his stubborn attitude was melted by Lady Ng’s kindness and patience. Now, Lady Ng and this old

man become very good friends.

Reflecting upon her life as a volunteer, Lady Ng concluded, “ Being a volunteer is happier than having my career in the past. In the past, I had contact with the upper class people, with conversations centering around making money, socializing and showing-off. However, being a volunteer, you can find the true meaning of genuine love, tolerance, acceptance and concern. The satisfaction and happiness that this brings is concrete and more real!” Lady Ng’s story reflects the themes of this conference, linking together social capital, volunteerism, ageing and building intergenerational inclusion.

Besides financial capital and human capital, social capital is another form of capital which is important for the smooth operation of the economy and society. ‘Social capital’ has been one of the most widely discussed and researched upon sociological concept in the last two decades. It attracts attention and arouses interests not only from sociologists, but also from economists, policy studies experts, policy-makers, social workers as well as community leaders.

Many issues and themes related to social capital have been discussed and written upon. Let me begin, however, with the Chinese classics and cite from Mencius, who says, I quote “Respect the old members of my family and also those of other families. Protect my youngs and also other people’s youngs.”¹ This is line with the Confucian philosophy “[M]en did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained.”² These

¹陳永楨、陳善慈編 <漢英對照成語詞典>, p.239, 570

² Translation by the Chinese Text Project, available at < <http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/>>.

Chinese teachings underpin the building of social capital, mutual aid and volunteerism in the Chinese society. Their influence on the philosophy underpinning many charitable organizations in contemporary Hong Kong which represent a form of social capital is still strong and visible

Though social capital exists in all societies, its level of availability varies from society to society. This varying level of social capital in different societies may take different forms as well as being embedded in different social institutions. For example, informal mutual aid in the neighbourhood might be prominent in 7-storey old type of public rental housing estates in 1950s and 60s Hong Kong, whereas nowadays in Hong Kong, we have more organized formal voluntary services organized by the government and NGOs, while informal mutual aid among neighbours diminishes when compared to a few decades ago as some Hong Kong people may not even know their neighbours living on the same floor of their residence nowadays.

Putnam identified a general decline in levels of social capital in the contemporary society, with people spending much time in front of the television screen, thus having less time sustaining social networks. With the growth of the use of internet, people in general, especially the younger generation, may be spending more time in front of the computer than in front of the television screen in the 21st Century. However, this does not necessarily imply the demise of social capital. The level of social capital may be sustained; yet taking a new form----one being built upon the cyber world; instead of having 'bowling clubs' as sustainers of social fabric, one being suggested by Putnam, people may create and maintain social networks in or resting on the virtual world, for example, forming computer games clubs, maintaining msn networks etc. These forms of social networks are common among the younger generation of Hong Kong. Such new forms of social network may extend beyond

immediate social circles and national boundaries, adopting a global colour, for example, using the internet to establish global network to recruit volunteers and solicit donations for disaster rescue in a particular part of the world.

The cyber technology may facilitate the building up of volunteerism in modern societies in aspects such as recruitment, training and retention of, as well as service provision by, volunteers. No doubt, volunteerism helps building social capital. The SAR Government has long recognized the value and importance of volunteerism as social capital that facilitates the development of a harmonious society in Hong Kong. In the 2001 Policy Address, the Chief Executive stated “We want to work closely with the community and voluntary agencies in keeping with the people’s positive spirit of participation and service. Together, we will build a more harmonious and caring society.” In fact, ‘enhancing social capital’ was highlighted as one of the major policy directions of the Government in the 2004 Policy Address:

“The social welfare sector has been encouraging volunteerism, and has proposed many new ideas to involve the business community to participate in community affairs. In addition, we established the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund in 2002. These have sown seeds for a tri-partite partnership between government, the business community and the third sector (not-for-profit sectors). I have asked the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food to examine.....ways to develop this tri-partite partnership.....[and] seek to inculcate this concept in the community to help it to take root.”

Both informal voluntary services in the form of mutual aid and formal organized voluntary services may complement public services provision. In aging societies, volunteerism may form potentially great untapped resources to provide services that

complement the public elderly services which are in great demand because of the increased number of elders. The Government treasures very much the contribution of volunteers who serve through joining Support Teams for the Elderly which help to identify vulnerable elders, to show concern for elders through regular home visits and telephone contacts, to provide escort to clinic service as well as to refer elders for formal services such as counseling service, when necessary.

According to the “Study on Public’s Reception and Perception of Volunteer Services” (2002) commissioned by the Agency for Volunteer Service, the main hindrance for people’s involvement in volunteer work is the lack of time. Retired elders, not only have ample time for voluntary work, but may as well experience a smooth transition from paid work to retirement through involvement in voluntary services. With the advancement of medical technology, elders who are below 70, the ‘young-old’, may still be healthy and active. Senior volunteerism, not only will facilitate elders’ active ageing on one hand, but may also serve as a valuable potential source of human resources to society on the other hand, with the elders ‘utilizing’ their life-long experiences to help the young and the community. In Hong Kong, the Senior Volunteer Programme has been developed to encourage elders to become volunteers, to be continuously involved in the community and to serve other elders in need. In September 2008, about 4,300 elderly volunteers were recruited by 41 District Elderly Community Centres under the Senior Volunteer Programme while about 7,800 senior volunteers are involved in visiting vulnerable elders. The study commissioned by the Agency for Volunteer Service as well as other researches have shown that those with higher educational level tend to contribute more to both formal and informal volunteer services. With future generations of elders having a higher education level than the present generation in Hong Kong because of the implementation of free and compulsory education and the expansion of subsidized

tertiary education in previous decades, it may be expected that senior volunteerism may grow in future decades.

Senior volunteerism may further be viewed from another perspective---the perspective of fostering social inclusion of elders as well as intergenerational inclusion. John Gray (2000) pointed out that “in a society in which social status depends upon occupation few people can preserve autonomy if they are shut out from access to employment.”³ As employment is the most direct and common way of preserving autonomy and means of social inclusion, elders who no longer has employment may often feel isolated and may lack a sense of direction and a meaning of life. To be involved in voluntary services may enable elders to be actively involved in the mainstream community life in society, forming an alternative form of social inclusion of elders, replacing the role played by employment during their working life. By mingling with people of different age and class, senior volunteerism, and indeed all types of volunteerism, may assist the building of intergenerational inclusion as well as interclass integration, fostering the development of a harmonious society, as in the case of Lady Ng which I talked about earlier.

Social capital, volunteerism and aging are often discussed and researched upon separately. By linking these three concepts through the theme of intergenerational inclusion, this conference provides an opportunity for the development of a more holistic approach to research, policy-making and service provision, thereby bringing improvements in different arenas. I would like to thank the Department of Applied Social Studies at the City University of Hong Kong for organizing this conference in partnership with the Central Policy Unit. I would also like to thank the University of Macau and the University of Salford for co-organizing the event. May I take this

³ John Gray (2000) ‘Inclusion: A Radical Critique’ In Peter Askonas and Augus Stewart (eds) Social Inclusion: Possibilities and Tensions, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.26

opportunity to wish this conference a success, with each of us having a thought-provoking time and experience.

Thank you very much.