

## Plenary II

### Topic: Social Framework for the Development of Volunteering



## Partnership between Civil Society and Business Sector in Promoting Volunteerism

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### Abstract

Employer supported volunteerism has been replacing traditional cheque writing philanthropy for business. In many cases, companies support employees going out into the community and getting personally involved. This helps build lots of small bridges between different parts or sectors of our society, transforming a collection of buildings into a community. Employer supported volunteerism is a social engagement process, through which we join together to build a new spirit of community.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all very much for inviting me here today. And a big welcome to all of you who have come to this conference from outside Hong Kong.

Let me start by telling you a bit about myself. I work for a financial services group. I am president of the insurance arm of the group, and I am a director of the banking branch.

I am also a member of the Legislative Council, Hong Kong's law-making body, where I represent the Insurance industry. Also, I am a member of the Executive Council, which is basically the policy-making body of the Hong Kong Government.

So I am a businessman and a politician.

I am also involved in some other public work, which is probably just as important in many ways. I serve on the boards and councils of a university here, Lingnan, and of the local Oxfam. In particular, I am the Chairperson of the Hong Kong Council for Social Service, which is an umbrella group covering over 300 welfare agencies.

Working with the Council has given me a valuable opportunity to see this community – Hong Kong – from a different angle. I have talked with people I probably would never have met otherwise. And it has made me think about issues that I might not have considered so seriously in the past. One of those issues is volunteerism.

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Volunteering is a fundamental act of citizenship in a caring community. In Hong Kong, as on other parts of the world, volunteerism contributes to our quality of life. In 2004, more than 460,000 people registered as volunteers in the Volunteer Movement of the Social Welfare Department. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service estimates that these volunteers offer more than 10 million volunteer hours a year, and over 4 million people have benefited from their services.

Indeed, we see volunteers everywhere: in our hospitals, coaching our children, providing services for the elderly, helping out in schools, caring for the underprivileged, as well as sitting on boards of voluntary organizations. Many of the services we take for granted in Hong Kong would not be available without volunteers. They give their time, energy, creativity and expertise to help make Hong Kong a better place to live in, making the difference between a city and a real, living community, with people doing something to improve their surroundings and help others.

Traditionally, in the past, most of the volunteers have been women, students, or young people who were not in full-time jobs. Even though some working adults were involved in volunteer activities, they did it in their own time, independently of their employers.

However, that trend has been changing. In 2002, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service launched the Caring Company Scheme. Our mission is to build a caring community spirit by cultivating corporate citizenship and partnership between the business and social service sectors.

Last year, 679 companies were awarded the right to display the Caring Company logo, and we expect that figure to jump to nearly 1,000 this year. For many of them, volunteerism supported by employers is an important feature of their corporate community involvement.

They are lending their support to employee volunteers through various means of encouragement and recognition. In some cases, volunteer efforts are taking place during business hours. In some cases, it means offering use of companies' space and facilitates for

volunteer events. And it sometimes means providing opportunities for employee volunteers to work together. Over 100 of these companies have established corporate volunteer teams and have organized regular activities for deprived groups. The workplace is becoming a valuable source of potential volunteers.

I would like to share three observations about this trend.

First, human resource management is emerging as the key driver of corporate community involvement. Companies in every industry face growing competition for the best employees. People want to work for companies that reflect and support their values, and they are receptive to employers who offer opportunities to work in the community.

Many chief executives consider their community programmes to be important in recruiting and retaining skilled employees, in boosting loyalty and morale, and in improving motivation and productivity.

For example, we have HSBC, which won the Total Caring Award of the Caring Company Scheme. HSBC has taken a lead in employer-supported volunteerism. Wayfoong Volunteers comprises over 1700 HSBC employees who contributed more than 37,000 hours to various types of community work in one year. They provided tutoring and adaptation lessons to South Asia women and children, and other services for newly arrived immigrants in Hong Kong.

My second observation is that employer-supported volunteerism promotes social cohesion. In past years, Hong Kong's economy has gone through some difficult times. Some individuals and families have experienced uncertainty, stress and hardship. Some people have demanded that government should do more, while others have worried about the welfare system taking away people's incentives to work.

We have seen serious gaps in understanding and mistrust between different sectors of our society. And the Caring Company Scheme is intended to help reverse that trend, and improve mutual understanding and social cohesion. We encourage individuals and organizations from different parts of society to make contact, to help each other, to learn from each other, and to get a real sense of what this community needs.

By doing this, individuals make a real difference in building a more inclusive and fairer society, where people ask what they can do to help rather than simply blaming government or organizations for doing too much or too little.

One example is a cosmetics company, which has partnered with a local NGO. They organized grooming workshops for middle aged, socially disadvantaged women. These women in some cases have suffered domestic violence, and they suffer from a serious lack of self-esteem, so they need help to prepare them to get back into a productive life as part of the work force.

Staff from the cosmetics company volunteered to help these women with making themselves

up and looking good – and feeling good. But they also got time to share their own life experiences, and to learn from others. Both the volunteers and the women gained from this sharing process. So employer-supported volunteerism can encourage social harmony and solidarity.

Third, employer-supported volunteerism has broadened the scope for partnership between business and social service sectors. Increasingly, companies are engaged with NGOs in providing volunteer services to the community. They are focusing on fewer NGOs, but are prepared to work more closely with them. They are drawing on more of their business resources to provide support, which can help enhance the capacity of NGOs.

In many cases this means giving NGOs' clients access to corporate resources like training or skills. But also, we are seeing companies sharing business expertise with the NGOs. This is in areas such as human resources management, IT, finance, accounting, public relations, legal, organizational management, and so on. The NGOs are facing cuts in government funding and other challenges, and modern management techniques can make a big difference to them.

Other companies are seconding staff to NGOs to conduct strategic planning exercises, to help internal reengineering, develop staff training packages or develop new revenue generating opportunities. To help the development of the tertiary sector, some companies even get their staff to sit on advisory committees or boards of NGOs.

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Ladies and gentlemen, the idea of the Caring Company Scheme is to match companies of all sizes with welfare organizations in partnerships. By encouraging the private sector to build bridges with NGOs and their clients, we hope that in their own ways they can help to create a more inclusive and fairer society.

It's important that we in Hong Kong develop this movement. We need a less-divided, more united society. In the long run, we can't have prosperity where the business community, the middle class and the grassroots simply want to take from each other. We can't have a stable society where the people on the fringes, with no voice, are simply ignored and left behind.

Hong Kong is currently debating how we can have a more democratic system in the future. One thing we will need is a society where people ask what is in the interests of "us" rather than "me". We need an environment where people want what's best for the community, rather than simply for their own little group. To get there, we need to build bridges. We need individuals from different parts of society to make contact, to help each other and to learn from each other. Through employer-supported volunteerism, we can build a new spirit of community.

Thank you very much.