

## A PERSPECTIVE OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE IN HONG KONG, CHINA



### Agency for Volunteer Service

*The Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS) established in 1970, is a non-profit organization dedicated to playing a proactive and pivotal role in building a civil society and caring community through the promotion and development of sustainable volunteerism. AVS aims to develop partnership with all sectors of the community to mobilize and facilitate individuals, groups and organizations to provide value added and quality volunteer service in Hong Kong.*

### The Evolvement of Volunteer Service in Hong Kong

In the early days, the main focus of volunteer service in Hong Kong was to solve poverty problems and to fulfill the tangible needs of the deprived. Into the 1960s, to address youngsters' psychosocial needs, the government actively supported youth recreational programmes and other youth services, which provided many volunteering opportunities.

In 1970, Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS) formerly called Association for Volunteer Service, today's, was established under the support of the Government. The aim of the Agency was to promote and develop sustainable volunteer service for the well being of society.

As the community further developed in the 1980s, the government emphasized promoting citizen involvement through community building. The participation of volunteer service was to mobilize community people in shaping a caring and responsible society. Meanwhile, to further enhance mutual care and support at neighborhood level, the concept of 'Community Care' was developed. Since then, the roles of volunteer participation and their value of contribution to the society became more significant.

In the 90s, rapid changes of political, economic and social complex caused great challenges to our society. The function of volunteer service has also brought very positive impact. The cost-effectiveness of volunteer service in solving social problems had also been highly recognized. At the same time, the scope and work focus of AVS was also changing conducive to meeting the needs of the society.

Into the new century, volunteer service had been supported and promoted by various sectors within the locality. NGOs, businesses and volunteer organizations have played

an active role to stimulate, strengthen and support citizen volunteer involvement in building a better quality of life for the needy. People from all walks of life including students, working adults, housewives, elderly, professionals, corporate employees, disabled persons, family as a whole, etc. actively participate in volunteer service. In partnership with different sectors to extend the scope and diversity of volunteer service, more and more large scale, pioneer and innovative volunteer service projects in response to community needs were initiated by AVS to fully exercise the great potentials and expertise of volunteers as well as to bring more long-term impact to the society. The notable ones over the past several years were the Family Volunteering Scheme co-organized with the Committee on Home-School Co-operation of the Education and Manpower Bureau, the Cultural Services Volunteers Programme in partnership with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Hopeful School Project in serving the deprived student in Mainland China with the sponsor of business corporate donors, etc. AVS also spearheaded a Golden Age Retired Persons Volunteering Programme to enable volunteers to make the best of their skills and talents.

To celebrate the International Year of Volunteers (IYV), AVS initiated to set up the IYV Steering Committee in Hong Kong with membership from the government and 16 organizations of the social service, business and professional sectors. Response to IYV was profitably rewarding, hundreds of organizations joined the immense promotional campaign. A series of promotion campaigns were launched. AVS had solicited support of media in offering free announcement, advertisement and feature on newspaper, bus body and video show, TV on Mass Transit Railway, web sites and the Television Broadcasting Ltd etc. It helped build the momentum to arouse public concern, to encourage and support volunteerism within the locality. The Universal Declaration on Volunteering endorsed in IYV and the Global Agenda for Action on promotion and publicity, networking and partnership, facilitation and support, and recognition which indeed, paved a milestone for AVS to further promote and develop sustainable volunteerism in Hong Kong.

In the spring of 2003, in response to the outbreak of a mysterious epidemic SARS in Hong Kong, AVS in collaboration with the Radio Television Hong Kong launched the SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign. Despite the risk of infection, over 6,000 volunteers signed up for AVS Campaign just in a few days. Over the next three months, more than 45,000 volunteers had taken part in the fighting of SARS all over the community, assisting public health education, caring the under-privileged and providing logistic support to community organizations. All volunteers from various sectors and organizations had entirely no hesitation to contribute what they could, in cash or in kind, courageously gave time and talents to fight against the battle. Those critical moments surely would leave an extremely unforgettable experience to the people of Hong Kong. To AVS, the mobilization of volunteer forces to fight SARS was a historical event provoking insights and reflections in further promoting volunteerism.

## The Demand and Supply of Volunteers

Since the establishment of AVS, the role of referring volunteers to where they are needed has become increasingly vital. In the past 35 years, the Agency helps bridging the needs and resources between volunteers and service organizations. We have put our greatest effort in balancing the “demand and supply” of resources, but there are definitely many challenges as well. In fact, we have received comments from some volunteers that their service opportunities were limited, and their strengths and interests could not be fully developed. On the other hand, some organizations told us that they lacked the help of volunteers. As a result, how to better match volunteers with organizations has always been our main concern.

### *Extending the boundaries and scope of volunteer service*

In response to the needs of the society, volunteer service in Hong Kong has been constantly changing in terms of the service goals, types, nature, roles and expectations on volunteers. AVS has also been transforming herself with the pace of the society. The following description of our work illustrates the significance and critical time for us to go through in facing the development of volunteer services within the locality.

Over the years, AVS has been exploring various ways to extend its service areas. Apart from volunteer referral service to match individuals wishing to offer with those organizations requiring volunteer service, we have launched pioneer volunteer projects directly managed by volunteers to meet emerging community needs. Moreover, we take active steps to mobilize all sectors of the community to get involved in volunteering. Meanwhile, demonstration projects on effective volunteer programmes are attempted to develop self-managed service teams, so as to better utilize volunteers’ specialties and talents for enriching and extending services for the needy.

### *Promotion and Quality Enhancement*

With great emphasis on propagating volunteerism, AVS organizes a range of promotion and public educational programmes including volunteer recognition programmes and celebrations of the International Volunteer Day and Global Youth Service Day each year. Thousands of volunteers were mobilized to participate in mass volunteer campaign so as to raise the public concern and immense support from various sectors. In 2001, AVS conducted a Study on Public Reception and Perception of Volunteer Services. It was found that 62% of the respondents had organized or non-organized volunteer experience. 22% had participated in organized volunteer service, while 55% in non-organized volunteering/mutual aid activities. The result revealed that volunteerism in Hong Kong was accepted and recognized by a majority of the public.

To strengthen volunteers’ capacity and to ensure the quality and professionalism of volunteer service, AVS established a Volunteer Training and Development Centre in

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2003 to provide diversified training for volunteers, and volunteer organizations as well. A new package named VQ (Volunteer Quotient towards Volunteer Quality) Sustainable Training was introduced so that volunteers having attained 3 levels (Beginner, intermediate and Advanced ) of training in a progressive manner would be awarded formal certification. Moreover, training packages would be tailored for volunteer organizations on request and publications on training manuals, resource kits and training tools were developed as reference guide for volunteer management. AVS has also been actively engaged in the exchange of volunteering experience and provided consultation and technical support to newly setup volunteer groups.

## **Professional Development of Volunteerism**

In the past, many government and non-government organizations spent the effort on organizing volunteer services in serving the needy in the community. In catering for various community needs, there has been a great diversity of volunteer services. Nonetheless, there should be greater communication and coordination among organizations in order to avoid duplication of efforts and have better utilization of resources.

### ***Effective Management of Volunteer Resources***

In recognition of the lack of proper training and consolidation of experience for volunteer users, AVS has been providing consultation service and professional advice for organizations, helping them managing volunteers more effectively. At the same time, in order to improve the effectiveness and further develop the resources of volunteer pool, we organize professional training on working with volunteers, including the courses on Volunteer Service Management and other skills-training workshops.

In recent years, we have published a series of resource kits and practice manuals on volunteer management for social workers, hospital staff, school teachers and sports leaders, etc. so as to guide those organizations that require the help of volunteers to make the most out of their resources in contributing to the society. With the partnership of UNDP China Office, AVS also extended the training programmes to NPOs in China Mainland to strengthen their capacity on volunteer organization and management. We believe that this initiative is vital to the volunteering development of both places and further collaboration is anticipated in the future.

### ***Active Networking and Exchange***

In February 2004, AVS took the lead to set up the Hong Kong Council of Volunteering (HKCOV) which is made up of organizations and representatives from social, professional, business and religious sectors. It constitutes a platform for concerted efforts to advise and consider measures conducive to promoting volunteerism in Hong Kong.

Internationally, AVS is a cooperating organization of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and the focal point of UNV activities in Hong Kong, AVS promotes and recruits qualified professionals to provide expert service and to support sustainable development of developing countries. AVS is the Hong Kong Representative of International Association for Volunteer Effort, sending representatives to attend international and regional conference to exchange and network with volunteer organizations abroad. In November 2005, AVS will host the 10<sup>th</sup> IAVE Asia-Pacific Regional Volunteer Conference in Hong Kong. The Conference with the theme of '*Volunteerism – A Driving Force for Community Building*', is intended to propagate the value of volunteerism, and raise public awareness of the importance of volunteering as a moral and civic responsibility that helps enhance social cohesion and contributes to a caring and harmonious society.

### ***Volunteer Recognition and Accreditation***

Volunteer is the capital of society and is the essence of building a caring community. Volunteers, out of free will, devote their time and talents for the benefit of others. To recognize volunteers' contributions and their achievements, and to raise volunteer profile and social recognition on volunteerism, AVS supported by the HKCOV, has launched the Hong Kong Volunteer Award in 2005, to award the outstanding volunteers who have given out distinguished services, to propagate the value of volunteerism and facilitate the development of sustainable and quality volunteer service in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, professionals play a very important role in Society. They can make a big difference to the life of the people and to the economic and social development of community. One of the factors to Hong Kong's past success is due to the professionals playing an active part in the society. Professionals seek perfection in their endeavours and their services to the community constitute an important part of the fabric of Society. Thus, advancement of the cause for the profession and commitment to serve the community deserve serious recognition. In 2005, AVS together with HKCOV and professional bodies, initiated a Professional Volunteers Accreditation and Recognition scheme, aimed to recognize the services of a professional for his own profession and to the community and in turn encourage his further participation in the development of the profession and voluntary community service.

## **Conclusion**

We firmly believe that volunteerism is a way of life. Volunteers constitute part of the social capital of our society. Volunteering benefits both the helped and the helpers, pertaining to building of a caring community. Volunteerism exists in every society in the forms unique to its social and cultural context. Hong Kong people are generally regarded as sensible, pragmatic, instrumental and even materialistic and money-minded.

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However, it is evident that we also have loving hearts and passion to the community, and ready to help the needy with their talents and resources. Once there is a need visibly coming up, we will never fail to give a hand. Even though the economy was in poor shape, billions of dollars could still be raised just over weeks of time in fighting SARS and supporting the relief work of Tsunami disaster in South Asia. That is a way of life of Hong Kong people - people tend to have strong desire to give a hand to help the needy who are in crisis situation, demonstrating increased volunteer spirit, solidarity and sense of belonging to the community.



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