

The role of civil society in Hong Kong

Roy Njuabe

Local organisations can significantly assist with service provision, integration and advocacy.

In Hong Kong it takes years to process asylum claims and during this time asylum seekers are not allowed to work to provide for themselves, and receive little assistance from the state. Compared globally, Hong Kong has the lowest recognition rate of refugees: about 0.7%. Even when they receive refugee status, individuals are not granted right of residence in Hong Kong, and are instead referred to UNHCR for resettlement to a third country.

The majority of asylum seekers used to receive HK\$1,000 (US\$128) per month from the state for accommodation rental, paid directly into their landlord's bank account, and could collect food worth HK\$300 every 10 days from selected shops. However, Hong Kong's high rents made it difficult for asylum seekers to find even a tiny room with the amount they were provided, and many asylum seekers ended up living on the streets or in substandard huts in remote areas of the New Territories.

In response, the Vine Church and other large churches established a network of support to help asylum seekers by topping up the rental assistance provided by the government to an amount that was at least sufficient to rent a tiny room in the city. In addition, some churches started raising awareness among the local community of challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers and of the benefits they can bring.

To counter negative media stereotyping, the churches organised for groups of refugees and asylum seekers to visit schools, local churches and community organisations to share not only the challenges they faced

but also their skills. For example, a team of African drummers and dancers shared their skills with different youth groups around Hong Kong, while an asylum seeker with farming skills supported the production of crops for local consumption. Such initiatives break down stereotypes and instead show that refugees want to contribute to the community.

Refugees were their own ambassadors, and our outreach programmes gradually changed the perspectives of local residents towards refugees. Some residents joined public campaigns demanding that the government create a better welfare system for refugees. In addition to our outreach in the local community, churches and NGOs in Hong Kong also wrote letters to the government, engaged in street protests and provided legal assistance for refugees. All these campaigns, coming from different sectors of society, put pressure on the government to improve their policies towards refugees and asylum seekers.

Although it has been slow, some progress at least has been made. The government has increased the monthly rental assistance to HK\$1,500 and food assistance worth HK\$1,200 a month is provided in the form of a food card which can be used widely across the city.

Hong Kong's civil society will continue to play an important role in helping refugees to integrate, make a living and share their talents and skills, in order that they may plan their futures and live with dignity.

Roy Njuabe njuabe.roy@gmail.com
Programme Manager, The Vine Community Services Limited www.vcsl.org



Roy Njuabe



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