

FOCUS

Pursuing Continual Enhancement for Over Half a Century

Interview with Mr Chong Chan Yau, President of Hong Kong Blind Union

Mr Chong Chan Yau became blind at the age of six. When he was in Primary Six, he joined the Hong Kong Blind Union (HKBU) and broadened his horizons to the development and values of self-help movement of visually impaired people in foreign countries. Chong was so passionate about equal opportunities that right after completing HKCEE, he stood for election and was elected as a member of HKBU's Executive Committee (ExCo) in 1976, and the President in 1983.

Established in 1964, HKBU is the first self-help group founded and run by people with disabilities in Hong Kong. In 1970s, HKBU's focus was shifted from networking members to advocating the rights of the persons with visual impairment. With "Equality, Opportunities, Independence" as its mission, advocacy work was the core of HKBU's work and remains unchanged.

Chong has always been advocating the rights for visually impaired persons and promoting self-help groups' participation in government policy formulation. "We advocated the right for continued education, which was then recognized by the government in the White Paper. The government started providing resource teachers for visually impaired students to study in mainstream schools," said Chong as he looked back to his experience in responding to the government's first Rehabilitation Green Paper in the 70s. He was invited to join the government's Rehabilitation Development Coordinating Committee, the first time that an advisory committee had a member from self-help organizations. Chong also helped draft the section relating to the participation of persons with disabilities and their parents in the Green Paper on Rehabilitation Policies and Services in the 90s, which reinforced the role of self-help organizations in policy formulation.

In recent years, many self-help organizations have been developing social service initiatives. Chong opined that, "The uniqueness of self-help organizations is the participation of the disadvantaged groups. It doesn't matter whether the organizations' mission is achieved through advocacy, service, or education." He emphasized that the governing bodies of self-help organizations need to understand that their strength lies on articulating the needs of the disadvantaged and they may not have the knowledge and skills required for delivering services. He noticed that some organizations would invite professionals to join the board to strengthen their governance capacity.

Self-help organizations rely much on ExCo members to manage daily routines at the early stage of development. With increased resources, they may recruit staff to take up such tasks. Chong stressed the importance of a balanced relationship between the board and the management, where the board should learn to "let go". He suggested self-help organizations define clearly the roles and responsibilities for both parties, including lists of dos and don'ts for self restraint, and be reminded of the dynamic nature of accountability within an organization. He added that, "trust, clear policies and constitutions, common understanding in mission, consensus in operation, mutual accountability culture, etc, are crucial elements in harmonizing the relationship between ExCo and staff, nurturing the organization's development."

Chong has witnessed the establishment and growth of many self-help organizations during his service in the NGO sector throughout these decades. He encourages organizations to pursue continual enhancement and share best practices and insights in governance.



Chong (right) supported HKBU's Flag Day



Together with the ExCo members, Chong (second left) actively participated in advocating rights for the persons with visual impairment.