

Social challenges and climate action #2:

Community Dialogue: Extreme weather hit hard welfare and health care workers and the vulnerable people

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The welfare and health care workers, who attended our second and third community dialogues respectively, coincidentally revealed that the extreme weather in Hong Kong have directly affected the health and safety of the vulnerable people and themselves. More protection and training are needed for both welfare and health workers so that they can be better adapt to climate change and equipped to support the vulnerable people.

As part of the Paris Watch programme¹, CarbonCare InnoLab (CCIL) planned a series of community dialogues with citizens active on various social issues to stimulate the community-level discussion on the relationship between social and climate change issues. The dialogues are designed to incorporate the concept of a “Just Transition,”² which ensure that climate policies are mindful of the need to protect those members of the community vulnerable to job loss, job restructuring or price increases that may occur during a green transition. “Just Transition” principle also puts emphasis on a participatory and inclusive adaptation process while various stakeholders are facing different impacts resulted from climate change.

CCIL held a community dialogue in July 2021, with members of Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS), the biggest association of Hong Kong’s welfare sector, and another dialogue in August 2021, with members of health care sector, green groups and academics. Both of them identified the climate change impacts on their own sectors, and discussed potential policy measures and practices at community level. A total of 45 people participated in the two dialogues. The dialogues seek to incorporate climate changes issues into community work, enabling both service users and providers to participate in climate policy advocacy. Coincidentally, both dialogues identified health impacts in our communities as their top concerns resulted from extreme weather.

Welfare and health care sector in need for climate awareness raising

Climate change has widespread impacts on welfare sector, while the community members are suffering from extreme weather and therefore bearing a higher health risk. However, so far only 9 out of the 494 institutional members of HKCSS attend to climate change issues. There is an urgent need to better understand the climate impacts on welfare sector and therefore their role and capacity in providing necessary support, particularly for those frontline welfare and health care workers who are taking care of the disadvantaged every day.

¹ Other aspects of the Paris Watch programme monitor Hong Kong's climate mitigation and adaptation performance as a city in accordance with the spirit and letter of the Paris Climate Agreement and in comparison with other Asian cities. Another element of the project trains young people on youth participation in international climate conferences and other initiatives in relation to sustainable development.

² “Just Transition” was included as a key principle in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change: “Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities.” (Please refer to

https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf)

With the emerging climate impacts, both welfare and health care workers are facing a much bigger workload and pressure. Under the Just Transition principle, the welfare and health care workers should be included and their voices should be heard in the transition process. The dialogue provides a platform for them to express their concerns on job security and safety and the ways towards a Just Transition.

During the dialogue, there is a consensus that heat stress among all other extreme weather events gained the highest popularity when welfare and health workers are working with their communities. The participants revealed that heat stress among other climate impacts hit hard on the elderly people, who are receiving little support for relief and comfort. The other issues include food poisoning, skin allergy, respiratory problems, and in some cases, heart attack and cardiovascular diseases, and mental illness under the hot, humid weather condition. The growing population of mosquitoes and parasites due to the increased precipitation and moisture pose serious hygiene risks.

There are already studies showing the correlation between heat stress, mortality rate and the occurrence of health issues and hospitalization in Hong Kong. Recovery of patients will also be affected.

With all these ongoing threats to the elderly and vulnerable people, the welfare and health care workers who provide support to them are also highly exposed to the same imminent threats, which should not be ignored as well.

Unlike disciplined services such as police and firefighting who are obliged to provide emergency relief, there is a growing need for the frontline welfare and health care workers to directly deal with the problems the vulnerable people are facing and suffering over the impacts of extreme weather. But the climate threats are new in the work environment of welfare and health care workers. Without sufficient knowledge, training and support, the welfare and health care workers find it difficult to handle the requests from the communities and therefore face much bigger pressure and workload. For example, there are more cases requesting for support concerning the impacts from heat stress, typhoons, and rainstorms. Extra workload includes cleaning and repair work at public facilities, distribution of relief items after the climatic events, which was beyond the limited capacity and budget of the welfare and health care workers.

A growing need to transition, upskill welfare and health care sectors

To adapt to the situation, the participants expressed that additional equipment and training are urgently required to support the relief actions. Equipment could range from fans and hygiene packs, food relief, cash and coupons, to the provision of energy-saving ventilation equipment. In addition, the welfare and

health care workers should also receive trainings on Occupation, Safety and Health (OSH), First Aid and even Disaster Relief and Reduction. Additional budget and resources from the government is needed to support all these equipment, training and services. Besides, much stronger protection for the welfare and health care workers should be considered, including counselling services, additional human resources and other fringe benefits.

In order to make the relief work more energy efficient, the welfare and health care workers should also receive training on how to balance the need for heat relief and energy saving. They could then also lead the climate change and energy saving education programmes in communities.

There is also a need to connect the university researchers, medical practitioners and welfare and health care workers, and enable regular sharing of data and information from the research on the relations between extreme weather and health. This will help the community gain a better understanding, tracking and research updates of the health impacts of climate change, especially in relation to vector-borne diseases, cardiovascular diseases and mental illness.

Participants also indicated rooms for improvement, such as retrofitting climate resilience in the existing structures, and incorporating climate impacts into consideration in maintaining the mutual community care network.

In conclusion, climate change impacts have been escalated and emerged as an imminent social threats, rather than simply an environmental threat, that our communities are already facing. Probably as a Hong Kong urban dweller, we have been educated with some level of crisis resilience. However, climate change impacts have been growing beyond our resilience levels and are already impacting the most vulnerable people. Welfare and health care workers and all other related professions should be equipped with the new skills, knowledge and resources how to better tackle the climate change impacts that already penetrate into their routine services.

Author's Profile

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Annex

CarbonCare InnoLab invited different groups and experts (45 people in total) to participate in the second and third community dialogue (in no specific order):

Participants of the second community dialogue (Welfare Sector):

- Hong Kong Youth Association
- Hong Kong Workers' Health Centre Ltd.
- New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association
- Oxfam Hong Kong
- The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong Tai Wai Youth Integrated Service Centre
- Greeners' Action
- Tung Wah Group of Hospitals
- Green Earth
- Sik Sik Yuen (a religious charitable organization worshipping Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism)
- Kowloon City Baptist Church Neighbourhood Elderly Centre
- DACARS Ltd.
- Hong Kong Association for the Disabled and Health
- Fu Hong Society
- International Crossroads Association Ltd
- Islands Women's Federation Limited
- Yan Oi Tong (a charitable organization)
- Engineers Without Borders (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd.
- Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Association Limited
- Hong Kong Playground Association
- International Cultural Exchange Co., Ltd.
- Community Cultural Development Center Co., Ltd.
- Hong Kong Lutheran Society

Participants of the third community dialogue (Healthcare Sector):

- Hong Kong Society for Rehabilitation
- Christian Concern for the Homeless Association
- Stewards

- St. James' Settlement Wan Chai District Elderly Centre
- Oxfam Hong Kong
- Hong Kong Society for Community Organization
- Hong Kong Red Cross
- Health in Action
- Civic Exchange
- Institute of Future Cities, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Central and Western District Council
- Clean Air Network