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By Hong Kong Federation of Women

Hong Kong, China NGOs Advancing Healthcare Equity and Global Impact

Given the persistent impact of COVID-19 and the resurgence of flu and other outbreaks, there is an urgent demand for international partnerships to advance medical research, prevention, and care. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) leverage Hong Kong, China (HK)'s robust healthcare infrastructure to address health disparities. By monitoring government policies, delivering services in the Guangdong-HK-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), and extending expertise through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these NGOs ensure equitable access to healthcare and foster global health advancements.

1 Ensuring Equitable Healthcare Distribution

Hong Kong, China's NGOs play a critical role in overseeing government healthcare policies to ensure resources are distributed equitably, particularly to underserved communities. NGOs like the Hong Kong, China's Council of Social Services collect data on healthcare barriers for low-income groups and ethnic minorities, using community feedback to identify inequalities. They also gathered community feedback to highlight inequities, such as limited access to personal protective equipment or testing in crowded, low-income areas. NGOs help monitor the public healthcare system, managed by the Hospital Authority (HA), which provides subsidised care (~USD12.77/day for hospital stays, with 95% of costs covered by the Hong Kong, China Government), to ensure high-quality care, accessibility, and efficiency.

Subsequent to the concerns, the Hong Kong, China Government has launched the "Pilot Scheme for Supporting Patients of the HA in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area," in May 2023, allowing Hong Kong, China citizens with scheduled follow-up appointments at HA outpatient clinics to receive subsidised consultations at the University of Hong Kong, China (HKU)-Shenzhen Hospital, a comprehensive public hospital providing healthcare services, research, and teaching, fully invested by the Shenzhen Government and managed by HKU since July 2012.

At the same time, NGOs supplement the Government of HKSAR in providing such services. In addition to public hospitals, NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières Hong Kong, China and Hong Kong Red Cross operate community clinics, organise health promotions and educational activities, and provide health assessments, hygiene kits, mobile clinics, and free dental check-ups, for the elderly, ethnic minorities, refugees, and for women. During COVID-19 restrictions, Hong Kong, China-based NGO Food Angel delivered meals to isolated elderly, tackling food insecurity as health-related issue.

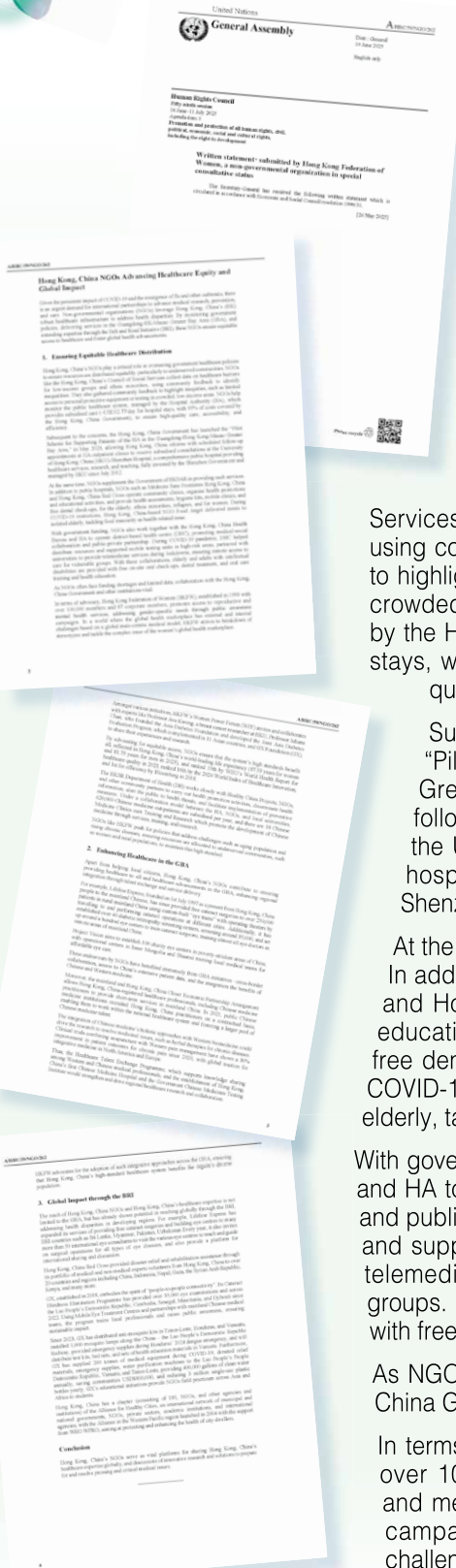
With government funding, NGOs also work together with the Hong Kong, China Health Bureau and HA to operate district-based health centre (DHC), promoting medical-social collaboration and public-private partnership. During COVID-19 pandemic, DHC helped distribute resources and supported mobile testing units in high-risk areas, partnered with universities to provide telemedicine services during lockdowns, ensuring remote access to care for vulnerable groups. With these collaborations, elderly and adults with intellectual disabilities are provided with free on-site oral check-ups, dental treatment, and oral care training and health education.

As NGOs often face funding shortages and limited data, collaboration with the Hong Kong, China Government and other institutions vital.

In terms of advocacy, Hong Kong Federation of Women (HKFW), established in 1993 with over 100,000 members and 87 corporate members, promotes access to reproductive and mental health services, addressing gender-specific needs through public awareness campaigns. In a world where the global health marketplace has external and internal challenges based on a global male-centric medical model, HKFW strives to breakdown of stereotypes and tackle the complex issue of the women's global health marketplace.

Amongst various initiatives, HKFW's Women Power Forum (WPF) invites and collaborates with experts like Professor Ava Kwong, a breast cancer researcher at HKU, Professor Juliana Chan, who founded the Asia Diabetes Foundation and developed the Joint Asia Diabetes Evaluation Program, which is implemented in 11 Asian countries, and GX Foundation (GX), to share their experiences and research.

By advocating for equitable access, NGOs ensure that the system's high standards benefit all, reflected in Hong Kong, China's world-leading life expectancy (87.53 years for women and 81.75 years for men in 2025), and ranked 19th by WHO's World Health Report for healthcare quality in 2023, ranked 16th by the 2024 World Index of Healthcare Innovation, and 1st for efficiency by Bloomberg in 2018.



The HKSAR Department of Health (DH) works closely with Healthy Cities Projects, NGOs, and other community partners to carry out health promotion activities, disseminate health information, alert the public to health threats, and facilitate implementation of preventive measures. Under a collaboration model between the HA, NGOs, and local universities, 620,000 Chinese medicine out-patients are subsidised per year, and there are 18 Chinese Medicine Clinics cum Training and Research which promote the development of Chinese medicine through services, training, and research.

NGOs like HKFW push for policies that address challenges such as aging population and rising chronic diseases, ensuring resources are allocated to underserved communities, such as women and rural populations, to maintain this high standard.

2 Enhancing Healthcare in the GBA

Apart from helping local citizens, Hong Kong, China's NGOs contribute to ensuring providing healthcare to all and healthcare advancements in the GBA, enhancing regional integration through talent exchange and service delivery.

For example, Lifeline Express, founded on 1st July 1997 as a present from Hong Kong, China people to the Mainland Chinese, has since provided free cataract surgeries to over 250,000 patients in rural Mainland China using custom-built "eye trains" with operating theaters by travelling to and performing cataract operations at different cities. Additionally, it has established over 40 diabetic retinopathy screening centers, screening around 35,000, and set up around a hundred eye centers to train cataract surgeons, training almost all eye doctors in remote areas of Mainland China.

Project Vision aims to establish 100 charity eye centers in poverty-stricken areas of China, with operational centers in Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi training local medical teams for affordable eye care.

These endeavours by NGOs have benefited immensely from GBA initiatives –cross-border collaboration, access to China's extensive patient data, and the integration the benefits of Chinese and Western medicine.

Moreover, the Mainland and Hong Kong, China Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement allows Hong Kong, China-registered healthcare professionals, including Chinese medicine practitioners to provide short-term services in Mainland China. In 2021, public Chinese medicine institutions recruited Hong Kong, China practitioners on a contractual basis, enabling them to work within the national healthcare system and fostering a larger pool of Chinese medicine talent.

The integration of Chinese medicine's holistic approaches with Western biomedicine could drive the research to resolve medicinal issues, such as herbal therapies for chronic diseases. Clinical trials combining acupuncture with Western pain management have shown a 30% improvement in patient outcomes for chronic pain since 2020, with global traction for integrative medicine in North America and Europe.

Thus, the Healthcare Talent Exchange Programme, which supports knowledge sharing among Western and Chinese

medical professionals, and the establishment of Hong Kong, China's first Chinese Medicine Hospital and the Government Chinese Medicines Testing Institute would strengthen and drive regional healthcare research and collaboration.

HKFW advocates for the adoption of such integrative approaches across the GBA, ensuring that Hong Kong, China's high-standard healthcare system benefits the region's diverse population.

3 Global Impact through the BRI

The reach of Hong Kong, China NGOs and Hong Kong, China's healthcare expertise is not limited to the GBA, but has already shown potential in reaching globally through the BRI, addressing health disparities in developing regions. For example, Lifeline Express has expanded its services of providing free cataract surgeries and building eye centres to many BRI countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, Uzbekistan. Every year, it also invites more than 50 international eye consultants to visit the various eye centres to teach and guide on surgical operations for all types of eye diseases, and also provide a platform for international sharing and discussion.

Hong Kong Red Cross provided disaster relief and rehabilitation assistance through its portfolio of medical and non-medical experts volunteers from Hong Kong, China to over 20 countries including China, Indonesia, Nepal, Gaza, the Syria Arab Republic, Kenya, and many more.

GX, established in 2018, embodies the spirit of "people-to-people connectivity". Its Cataract Blindness Elimination Programme has provided over 35,000 eye examinations and across the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Senegal, Mauritania, and Djibouti since 2022. Using Mobile Eye Treatment Centres and partnerships with Mainland Chinese medical teams, the program trains local professionals and raises public awareness, ensuring sustainable impact.

Since 2023, GX has distributed anti-mosquito kits in Timor-Leste, Honduras, and Vanuatu, installed 1,000 mosquito lamps along the China – the Lao People's Democratic Republic Railway, provided emergency supplies during Honduras' 2024 dengue emergency, and will distribute test kits, bed nets, and sets of health education materials in Vanuatu. Furthermore, GX has supplied 260 tonnes of medical equipment during COVID-19, donated relief materials, emergency supplies, water purification machines to the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Vanuatu, and Timor-Leste, providing 400,000 gallons of clean water annually, saving communities USD\$800,000, and reducing 3 million single-use plastic bottles yearly. GX's educational initiatives provide NGOs field practicum across Asia and Africa to students.

Hong Kong, China has a chapter (consisting of DH, NGOs, and other agencies and institutions) of the Alliance for Healthy Cities, an international network of municipal and national governments, NGOs, private sectors, academic institutions, and international agencies, with the Alliance in the Western Pacific region launched in 2004 with the support from WHO WPRO, aiming at protecting and enhancing the health of city dwellers

Conclusion

Hong Kong, China's NGOs serve as vital platforms for sharing Hong Kong, China's healthcare expertise globally, and discussions of innovative research and solutions to prepare for and resolve pressing and critical medical issues.