Concern for the Community

A few years ago, a woman came to tell me that her husband had tried to protect an old lady from a robber. The robber stabbed and killed her husband. The Government said that his death did not come into any of their compensation categories. I tried to persuade the Government, but it was useless, as they always came back with the same reply. Eventually I published the story in the press, and numerous offers of help came. One man actually agreed to support her family for a year.

As a result of that, the shamefaced government finally gave ex-gratia compensation, and later brought in a new system of awarding damages to persons injured in criminal attacks.

We are often told that Chinese people will stand by and watch a murder, but not lift a finger to help. I am sure that this is not a lack of concern, but that there are reasons. I can only say that I would find it difficult not to do something in those circumstances. Concern often should be a spontaneous reaction that makes us forget our own safety.

However, the case of the man who was killed when protecting the old lady shows that concern is a spontaneous thing, and that in some circumstances people may forget themselves and their safety in order to save others. History is full of such examples.

This story gives us another sideline on the subject of concern. Was it right for me to expose this case in the newspaper? I had only one purpose in doing so, that is, to call for public support for the widow. If I had just tried to get some public assistance for her, without fighting for the principle involved, the matter would have been forgotten, and the law would have remained unchanged. The victim would have gone unrecognized.

So what is the concern we must show for the community? Should it be by giving to a charitable cause, or offering some voluntary service now and again? Or should it be an effort to change the system to a more just one? On this, opinions vary.

The easy way out, of course, is to give money and feel we have done something — presuming we have money to give. Yet, this in my opinion is rather irresponsible, as one can never be sure that the money is being used for the right purpose; one never becomes involved and never gets informed in such cases. Moreover, by donating money, one can never change the latent injustices of our society and bring about a more fair distribution of this world's goods. Yet, there are times when donations are urgently required, to fill in the gaps until legislation is changed.
I would like to set out the various motives people may have for helping the community, so that we may consider ourselves, and whether we are doing all we can and should do.

1. **Neglect:** It is true that there are some in this community who care for no one but themselves. I sometimes get them in my office asking for (better) housing, though most of that type already have housing and they are wanting BETTER housing, more space for their families. There is a scarcity of better housing, and a long waiting-list for more space in housing estates. Some can get it by paying a sum of money to a corrupt official. Others may come to my ward office and say that they want a "quick" turn. I always tell them that quicker for them means slower for someone else. I explain that even if I could help them to jump the queue, I would not be interested in so doing. Without this selfish attitude, much more could be done. I hope the time will come when overcrowded tenants will get together and make a joint complaint about their living conditions, as only then will they make an impression. So long as they are willing to pay for favours, and so long as they just want to jump over someone else's head, we will get nowhere, and of this I am trying to convince those who come to me for help.

2. **Opportunists:** I think these are even worse than the people who are neglectful of others. These are people who actually join a church or a charitable organisation to see how they can use it. It is an absolute fact that many of the so-called civic leaders who sit on Government bodies and councils as unofficial members are people who have paid a large donation to become directors of a charity. Having become known through that charity for the good work done by the organisation, they attend many civic functions, and eventually find themselves appointed to one of the Government councils. This brings prestige, better business, social status, a sense of power, and invariably, prosperity. In this way one can rise to fame on the handicapped, the destitute and the deprived, outcasts for which there is always an organisation to be used by the opportunists. I never realised this potential for fame until I came to Hong Kong and saw it. I remember one very well known person in HK who one day addressed the blind, then were anything about their ways. I actually heard him say, "I saved you from the gutter. What do you expect from me." If you have noticed that he got his own advancement, perhaps the blind sometimes see more clearly than we who have eyesight.
3. The Genuinely Concerned

Although Hong Kong may be one of the most complex societies in the world, may be one of the most selfish and money-loving, the most transient and lacking in feelings of belonging and therefore of long-term responsibility, yet I doubt if there is any place where so much is done by voluntary work - to fill in the gaps left in Government service. There is scarcely an area of need in Hong Kong that is not served by voluntary bodies and supported by community contributions.

The handicapped, the sick, the drug addicts, prisoners - I cannot name them all - not an area exists that is not served. Most of the education in Hong Kong is provided by voluntary bodies. The Government has always encouraged this, partly because it does not want to take the responsibility and partly because anything the Government does costs twice the price because of red tape and regulations requiring unnecessary paper work and staff.

If people are hurt in a typhoon, contributions come rolling in. If a sad case is published in the newspapers, money is there at once.

This all shows that there are people who really care, people who may not belong here, but feel they are getting too good a share in the cake and they want to share it, I suspect too that many contributions come from bad consciences - those who are making too much money here feel they can salve their consciences by giving; while corrupt persons can easily get rid of their surplus cash this way.

In spite of this, I do not think that donations are the answer to the problem of need in the community. The sick should be cared for without having to rely on charity. All the work that charities do out of compassion are things that the community is entitled to as of right. I would make only the one provision, and that is that the one who expects rights should also be one prepared to undertake responsibilities too: I do not believe in nurturing parasites.

4. My Own Effort

In criticising voluntary work as being a salve rather than a solution, I am including myself. Let me tell you a little about my work in my Urban Council Ward Office.

Every week I interview about 120 cases. Nearly 70% are asking for housing or better housing. If the applicants have been treated unjustly, I can fight and often win their case. If they are wanting something that policy does not permit, I can do nothing except explain the policy. This
explanation of policy does not satisfy the applicant, nor does it satisfy me. The policies are often short-sighted, and they are invariably not intended for the good of the people, but for expediency for the Government. If they fall down in their building programme, they just meet the deficiency by bringing in a new policy of deleting tenants, or limiting the amount of space allocated.

Whenever I explain the policy, my conscience is troubled, because I know it is creating a social problem about which I can do only one thing — namely, fight it out in committee meetings, and invariably fail. Those who sit on the committees do not interview people like this, so they pass policies from pieces of paper, not from problems of people. Very frequently in a policy meeting I form a minority of one against what I know will hurt more families. When I go to my ward office, I am the one who then has to explain the new bad policy, and bear the brunt of the people's anger about it. I find it most frustrating, and it is more frustrating now since the big housing programme was promised than it was before the promise was made. I have learned that a promise of more housing really means: "We are going to have less housing, but we will keep you happy with promises."

Occasionally I can score a victory — always minor. For example, I managed to get a decision, after two years of effort, to install electricity in hut areas. The programme is dragging along slowly, with all kinds of excuses for delays. I managed to get a new per capita system of assessing income for housing, after three years of reasoning. I succeeded in persuading the H.D and the SWD that allocating housing to blind people in Yuen Long when all their lives they had lived in the city was cruel — and it took years to do that, and another year or two for the policy to filter down to the officials dealing with cases. When young people come to me and say, "It's no use asking the Government to do anything. We've asked and they take no notice," I remind them that I fought corruption for nearly twenty years before the Government admitted that I was telling the truth all along. The Government knew it, but was unwilling to admit it because admission would have demanded action.

Among cases coming to my ward are social welfare cases, and my current battle on that subject is to get public assistance for unemployed men, especially those without families. If they have families it is bad enough that they are told to eat a share from their children's food allowances; but if they are single they have absolutely no way out when they become unemployed, except to steal, commit suicide, or die of starvation — the Government has given them no way, in spite of the fact that they were the ones who built up our economy.

I am dealing with two special cases at the moment, both outside the scope of
public assistance because they are under 55. One is slightly mentally
deficient or inadequately, and no one would dream of offering him a job during
the present surplus of labour. I have to keep him alive while fighting for
public assistance for him. There is another, a normal man except that he
has not been living for the past five years, having three operations
on his stomach, and TB. He has not been getting public assistance on medical grounds,
and was told to report to the SWD as soon as his TB was declared
inactive. Being an honest man, he went and reported as soon as he was declared
non-infectious, though he still looks in very poor condition. He was then told,
"Good. Now you're better — go and find a job. There will be no more public
assistance for you." He is single, and at present is living on anything his
friends are prepared to give him. I can give him money — I could keep thousands of families in the same way
if I had enough money. But that would never solve a problem that belongs to
the Government, and therefore belongs to the community.

Many legal cases also come to me. A few years ago I had a big battle with
the Government about the system whereby an accident victim can claim no
insurance after an accident unless he can prove that the driver was careless.
The driver does not have to prove the pedestrian was careless. This situation
was especially bad because I knew that accidents involving Chinese people
were fixed up by police, who extort money from drivers with threats of serious
driving charges, but once the money is paid, the case for the victim is
dropped. After years of struggle, the Government promised that there would
be a no-fault scheme to compensate all victims regardless of liability.
Now this so-called economic crisis has stopped that too. I find it strange
that we have money for anything involving business, but none for schemes for
the welfare of the workers, who are usually the victims of society.

From this you will see that in the ward I can only right the blatant wrongs
where policy has been unfairly carried out, but I can do something to struggle for
policy changes. It takes a long long time, and at present we are moving
backwards, not forwards.

It is inspiring to know that William Wilberforce did not convince people against
slavery in a short time. Nor did the Trade Unionists win their victories except
through hard work and suffering. The question I often ask myself has been
asked throughout the ages, and it will continue to be asked until the community
wakes to its collective responsibility — How Long? How Long?
I have come to the conclusion that the only way to come to terms with our unsettlement is to do what we know we have to do and ignore the consequences. I firmly believe that all potential psychiatric problems can be solved if people will set themselves free from fear of consequence, free from the stigma and serve the community by tackling its ills at the roots, not just by putting on pretty little patches.