

Transient Workers Count Too  
2012 Annual General Meeting

## Committee Report

### Management Committee

Russell Heng	President
Noorashikin Abdul Rahman	Vice-President
Alex Au	Treasurer
Yew Kong Leong	Secretary
Roderick Chia	Member
Debbie Fordyce	Member
John Gee	Member
Shelley Thio	Member
Wang Eng Eng	Member

### Subcommittee Heads

Research	John Gee
Direct Services	Shelley Thio
Communications	Alex Au
Fundraising	Russell Heng
Human Resource	Russell Heng

### Staff

Kenneth Soh	Community Worker
Vincent Wijesingha	Executive Director (until 31 October 2011)
Mansura Sajahan	Office Manager (until 10 February 2012)

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Over the course of each year, TWC2 engages in a wide variety of activities that either directly or indirectly support our objectives as an NGO concerned about the condition of migrant workers in Singapore, whether or not this is through the direct provision of assistance to workers in need, through research or engaging interested parties like government agencies and employers/employment agencies; or through public education.

This committee report provides an overview of some of these activities in 2011. It is divided into two main sections: activities that took place around the organization's core areas of direct services, research, and advocacy; and the various organizational matters that supported these activities — engagement with partners, fundraising, human resource issues, and communications.

### **PART I: CORE AREAS**

#### *Direct Services*

One of TWC2's core area is the provision of assistance to migrant workers who face any kind of hardship. For example, when they are subjected to abusive employment conditions, suffer injuries and need to seek workers' compensation, or are out of work on a special pass while awaiting legal settlement. Over the course of the year, TWC2 sees many of such cases and they are referred to us through (a) our telephone helpline, (b) the helpdesk at the Cuff Road Project, and (c) partners such as HOME and foreign embassies.

Here are some important 2011 figures at a glance:

- We received 450 calls to our helpline.
- 1458 new cases were filed through our Cuff Road Helpdesk. This is lower than the 2092 cases filed through the same means in 2010. Of these new cases in 2011, 55% were injury cases, 28% were company cases (problems relating to their employers), 14% were overstayers, while the rest fell into the miscellaneous category.
- As in previous years, the majority of cases attended to by our direct services programmes came through the Cuff Road Helpdesk

The Cuff Road Project continues to remain a central platform of TWC2's direct services programmes. Apart from using it as a way of reaching out to and assisting migrant workers facing hardship, it is an important humanitarian gesture for us because many attendees do not have the means to financially support themselves and are therefore have little access to a basic right, which is food. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated the fourth anniversary of the Cuff Road Project, and this event saw the participation of 230 jobless migrant workers. Apart from the free meal, they also received a goody bag containing essentials like toiletries and a sarong. We thank everyone who donated in any form towards this event or to the Cuff Road fund in general.

Some Cuff Road figures:

- By the end of 2011, the Cuff Road Project served over 260,000 meals since it was first launched
- On the average we served about 1600 meals a week. We started 2011 with over 2000 meals served a week. This number dropped to around 1200 in the middle of the year, before climbing back up to the 1800 mark at year's end.
- Each meal cost around \$2 per person
- At the beginning of 2012, TWC2 has about \$130,882 left in the Cuff Road fund. This compares with the \$154,096 we spent on the Cuff Road Project in 2011.

While the Cuff Road fund started off financially stronger in 2012 than in 2011, there are a few concerns about its sustainability. St Ignatius Church was previously sponsoring Friday dinners, but it has since withdrawn its support. This now constitutes an additional cost of \$1000 per month, which means we would have 6-7 months of funding for this programme. In February 2012, we

witnessed an increase in the number of Cuff Road attendees. We will need to make a decision about how to manage this issue.

Since the types of cases we see are quite varied, the types of resources we need to use vary in terms of amount of attention and money that are required. Some cases need only the intervention of our community worker, such as when there is a dispute between a worker and his or her employer. Other cases may require more financial resources, such as in legal disputes or injury cases in which workers cannot afford the hefty legal or medical bills. Some of these are handled pro-bono by our partners like TSMP Law. In other cases we depend on the Emergency Fund, which in 2011 became repurposed as CAREFund (Compassion and Relief for Emergencies Fund). This fund assists workers who are in need of urgent medical treatment, provides them with means to communicate with family members overseas, to travel locally, as well as to provide them with accommodation, when employers do not or are unable to do so.

### *Research*

Following the 2011 AGM, TWC2 sent out an appeal for anyone who was interested in taking part in the Subcommittee's work to come forward. We had four volunteers. We proposed to work on studying the costs migrant workers have to bear in coming to Singapore and how long it takes them to pay off their placement costs, but we recognized very quickly that this was too ambitious, given our resources. We narrowed our aims to focus on the costs and benefits of migration for Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore. To do this we prepared a questionnaire and got it translated into Bengali, and tried it out with a group of workers, and then reworded it and shortened it a little to make it more accessible. A first series of interviews, with 70 questions, was carried out at Changi Airport from September to November. Many questionnaires were incompletely filled in, so we tried again in December, this time with a 15-question survey, and interviewed 193 workers. This was supplemented by 40 interviews in Little India using the detailed questionnaire.

The Research Subcommittee is currently working on completing the report, but an initial report has already been drafted and we will shortly be ready to go public with it. The findings are likely to be a valuable resource in getting a better deal for migrant workers in general and construction workers in particular. They highlight the high cost of placement, the fact that most Bangladeshi workers are unable to repay their placement costs within their first contract period of one year, and the prevalence of the practice of demanding kickbacks for jobs and contract renewal in the construction industry.

We thank the team members who have worked on this report: Katie Rainwater, Grace Baey, Wajihah Hamid and John Gee, as well Mr AKM Mohsin, who handled a great deal of translation work on the questionnaires, Debbie Fordyce for her advice and cooperation, and the volunteers who, at various times, came in to help with surveying and translation.

Following the AGM, we will be looking for more people to join the Research

Subcommittee and considering future projects.

The EXCO also contemplated creating an Editorial Subcommittee, but this did not come into fruition in 2011. The job of getting information out regularly has tended to take over, with a minimum of consultation and oversight. Going forward, the ideal would be to bring together a team who can commit the time needed to it, but otherwise, the most practical thing would be to try to expand our pool of writers and contributors. At this time, such activities are overseen by the Communications Subcommittee.

### *Advocacy*

Although we continue to provide assistance to migrant workers through our direct services programme, such gestures are only of immediate impact to these affected workers. There are, unfortunately pre-existing and longer term issues that have either directly or indirectly contributed to their plight. TWC2's advocacy programme is thus an attempt to address these issues, whether or not it is through public educational campaigns or constant contact with governmental agencies to call for change in national law or bureaucratic procedures.

This year (2012) we witnessed the achievement of a major advocacy platform: the passing into law of the mandatory weekly day off for foreign domestic workers. This is major milestone since it was a major issue for TWC2 since it was formed. Such an achievement was of course not possible without the activities of parties interested in the same platform (some were in parallel, others in collaboration with us). While this outcome was the result of many years of work, we feel that the release of the Day Off Research Report in June 2011, which was in collaboration with UN Women, contributed to this.

In 2011, there were also a number of other important advocacy activities:

- In March 2011 we attended different meetings with the US Embassy and the US Trade Representative on issues of human trafficking and migrant labour
- In June 2011, John Gee attended the International Labour Conference in Geneva, at which a Domestic Worker's Convention was adopted. John also spoke at various other seminars running alongside the main event.
- In August 2011, John Gee attended the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' consultation session on Singapore's Universal Periodic Review
- In November 2011, we hosted a visit by Minister of State for Manpower, Tan Chuan Jin, to the Cuff Road Project

## **PART II: ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT**

### *Engagement with Partners*

Activities involving external partners are part of our normal routines at TWC2. Each year we interact with students at all levels, host interns, give interviews to the news media, solicit help from volunteers and donors, and speak at lectures, seminars and conferences.

- In January 2011 we had a dialogue session with representatives of Embassies of Burma, Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia
- We attended a three day session organized by Migrants Forum in Asia in April
- Hosted interns from Hong Kong University in July
- Organized the International Migrants Day celebrations on December 18<sup>th</sup>, which saw not just the participation of migrant workers but also partners like ITE College East, foreign diplomats, and various corporate and public sponsors.

### *Fundraising*

TWC2 entered 2011 with major concerns with fundraising. In the past we have received generous donations from longtime donors like the Lee Foundation. They provided TWC2 with funds for operational expenses as well as to run the Cuff Road Project. However, such funding has become harder to come by. In July 2011, TWC2 faced a crisis because donors had become more specific about the nature of their donations. While money continued to come in to directly pay for Cuff Road meals, not much was given to support operational expenses and cover administrative costs. We put in more effort to solicit donation; and we produced a new donation brochure. We subsequently received an \$81,000 contribution from the Kwan Imm Hood Cho Temple in Waterloo Street, which we used to launch the CAREFund (Compassion and Relief for Emergency Fund). We also received pledges to pay for two social workers.

Considering the importance of fundraising, we reviewed our fundraising processes. In the past, fundraising was handled in an ad hoc manner by various EXCO members because no specific person was appointed to directly oversee this responsibility. In July 2011, an attempt was made to formalize fundraising processes with the creation of the Fundraising Subcommittee, headed by Russell Heng. The first meeting was held on 4<sup>th</sup> July with seven volunteers. However, none had any fundraising experience, and as the subcommittee has had no further meetings, it is effectively defunct.

Nonetheless, as we entered 2012, the financial situation improved. While no donations we received were the result of the work of the Fundraising Subcommittee, we realize that it is important that we find ways of relaunching it. Unfortunately, due to the shortfall in staffing in the TWC2 office, Russell has had to take on the administrative work left by the departure of the Executive Director and Office Manager. Understandably, getting a proper fundraising strategy on track for 2012 will be challenging.

## *Human Resource*

At the 2011 AGM, TWC2 had a staff strength of three fulltime employees. Executive Director Vincent Wijesingha resigned and left the organization on 31 October. Facing a tight financial situation then, the Exco decided not to replace the Executive Director and save on the wage bill. Russell Heng agreed to serve as Acting Executive Director until a permanent solution was found.

In February 2012, Administration Officer Mansura Sajahan also left the organization for other career opportunities. A decision was taken by Russell Heng in his role as Head of Human Resource Subcommittee and Alex Au (as treasurer) to divide the full time position into two part-time portfolios: Accounts Officer and Administration Officer. Each of them will work 3 days a week. By the end of February, these replacements have been recruited and will start work in late March/early April.

TWC2 managed to find funding for a second social worker and has recruited an Assistant Community Worker to help the current Community Worker. Moving into the rest of 2012, TWC2 will have a staff strength of two fulltime and two part-time employees.

To handle all the work done by TWC2 at the moment, the Human Resource Subcommittee recommends a strength of five fulltime employees: an Executive Director, two Social Workers, and two Administration Officers. With this number, TWC2 Exco members will not have to be so involved in the day-to-day running of the office and can concentrate more on guiding the organization strategically. Also for a five member staff, TWC2 will need to relocate to a larger office.

## *Communications*

Following last year's AGM, the EXCO also created a Communications Subcommittee. Previously, communication matters were handled by Sha Najak, who resigned in March 2011. We decided not to replace that position, but to use EXCO members and volunteers to help drive our efforts at disseminating information to stakeholders and other parties interested in TWC2 work. Alex Au was appointed head of the Subcommittee.

At present, TWC2 information is communicated through various channels. We continue to electronically publish our weekly bulletin, *On the Move*, as well as our bimonthly newsletter. Both are transmitted to members by email. The TWC2 website has also been another important information channel, and while it is constantly updated with relevant news, our concern has been that it has not been serving us well. This is because the website was organized as an online corporate brochure intended for those who wanted to know more about the organization itself, or for those who were already familiar with and sympathetic to our cause. In October 2011, with the help of designers and programmers who gave up their time over a particular weekend, we launched our new website. Our

new strategy here was to centre the website around events and stories about migrant workers, rather than organizational information. That way we hope to reach a wider audience and to constantly communicate problems and issues that still exist in Singapore and the kinds of work TWC2 will still need to do. The website is also integrated with Facebook and other social media so that the stories can be shared and further disseminated.

Obviously maintaining a website such as this requires much editorial effort and we have our volunteers to thank. The website still needs further development, so we would appreciate help from any volunteer who has programming skills and is well versed with Wordpress.

Apart from its publications, TWC2 also communicates with the public through face-to-face engagements. Over the course of the year, we have been giving an average of two to four talks, usually by an EXCO member. In the last few months, we spoke at schools, universities and at the National University Hospital. Understandably there is still much more work that needs to be done in TWC2 communications. We still need writers who are competent in English or Chinese, photographers, videographers, and editors. For our outreach, we can still do more with the police and medical professionals, because these are people whom our clients come up against in sometimes unpleasant situations. So we would appreciate members who have contacts that can help us get a speaking engagement with groups such as these. We hope to make more inroads into religious organizations, professionals, and business people.

## **CONCLUSION**

For TWC2, 2011 was what one might call a routine year. We engaged in activities that we have, for long, identified as fundamental to the provision of direct services, the conducting of relevant research and advocacy. We would like to have done more, but this was difficult considering the financial and staffing challenges we faced. This, however, is not necessarily a major issue. We needed periods of time like this that would allow us to consolidate our visions and streamline our organizational processes. As usual, an organization such as this needs the constant support of volunteers and members, and we sincerely thank all those who have given up their time to support our activities. We look forward to working with them in the coming year and warmly encourage others to come forward and contribute in any way they can.