

## 董事局報告 Board of Directors' Report

### 苗圃助學、廿年有約

## 20 Years of Sowers Action has a Date with You

十九年前苗圃人曾寫下了苗圃的使命，表達了我們在中國發展中所應擔當的角色和責任，我們深信——中國會進步，必定能夠將人口包袱轉化成智力資源；其中有賴教育培養國民的素質。

十九年來，我們為達到這個目的，在籌款形式和助學範圍不斷嘗試，不斷創新，不斷接受考驗。於是有了這一點成績，讓人欣羨，而期間，不為人知的苦處，卻有口難言。如果您是有心人，助學其實是苦中作樂的事，相信您不會認為這是言過其實吧。

毋庸諱言，苗圃助學有眾多的難處。其一苗圃屬於境外團體，但又自行釐訂了許多資助標準，要受助一方遵守。內地政府認為最妥善的做法是，香港人在香港籌款，然後交給他們代理就是了，但您同意嗎？況且在現行體制下，苗圃未能在內地註冊為「非政府公益團體」，在實際運作上，仍然需要政府多方面的配合。於是碰上效率高，明白香港要求的地方單位，我們的工作就有保證。相反，苗圃就被擠在捐款人和地方的夾縫。今屆發生了兩件無法履行建校協議的事件，都是因重建 512 地震後損毀的學校，問題出在簽訂協議後校方再與另一家簽約，主要原因是人家的捐款比苗圃多，要求也低，我們已成功從其中一間學校取回撥款，另一間執筆

19 years ago, founding members laid down Sowers Action's mission and spelled out its roles and responsibilities in the context of China's development. With the belief that transforming China's population burden into an intellectual resource has a pivotal role in China's development, we reaffirm our commitment to help China provide better educational opportunities to its younger generation.

Fostering an innovation mindset and accepting new challenges, Sowers Action has scored some successes that were the envy of our peers. Over the years, we have tried different ways of fund-raising and broadened our scope of educational aid. However, along the way, we have also gone through untold misery and hardship at times of challenge and controversy. I believe that a devotee of Sowers Action's undertakings could not agree more that our educational aid projects are arduous tasks, tasks for seeking joy in adversity.

We have experienced numerous difficulties in operating our service of educational aid. In the first place, as a "non-Mainland" organization, Sowers Action has retained its rights to impose its own conditions on the granting of educational aid. Beneficiaries in Mainland China must honor their promise to comply with the conditions attached. For the local government, Sowers Action does the fund-raising, hands over the donations and then leaves them to take charge is the most convenient way to handle the donations. However, Sowers Action does not agree. And our donors do not agree.

Under the current legal setup, Sowers Action is not eligible to register itself as a "non-government charitable organization"; and so, we do need help and cooperation from the local government for our operation. The point is that the local parties (local authorities, educational department together with the beneficiary) we deal with are key factors in the success of a project. Success is assured if the local parties we are dealing with are efficient and ready to understand what we expect in terms of quality and effectiveness. Otherwise, we would be caught between the donors and the local parties.

In the current term, we are compelled to have two school building projects scrapped. Both are reconstruction projects in the area where the 512 earthquake struck. The problem is that the local parties signed an agreement with us, and yet later on they accepted donations from another sponsor in view of a larger amount of funds with fewer strings attached. Thus far, we have successfully recovered the funds from one of the schools, while litigation is under way with the other.

Secondly, let me talk about an unhappy incident happened in the earlier part of the year. Unlike most charitable organizations, which follow the standard practice of reserving for operating expenses a certain percentage of donations received, Sowers Action uses donations exclusively for educational aid. This means that funds for operating expenses have to be raised separately.

This year, we held the event "Cycling for Education" with the initial aim of raising funds for operating expenses. This is the first time ever for us to hold such an approach to raise operating fund. This arrangement, misunderstood by some people, triggered the "Cycling Incident". Regrettably, the incident was distorted by the media to be something like: "misappropriating funds for educational aid" or "administrative overheads of a fund-raising event exceed half of donations as large amount of donation received will go to the charity's overall operating expenses." Since nowadays any message can be widely transmitted in the blink of an eye via the



時還在訟纏中。

其次我們堅持助學捐款百分百用於助學，而非一般慈善團體的做法，從捐款中抽出若干個百分比作為機構運作費，因此苗圃的運作費用需要另外籌措。一直以來，苗圃有舉辦獨立活動去籌募機構運作費，或以事先聲明的比例形式辦活動，同時籌募助學捐款和機構運作費。但今屆卻發生了「單車事件」，媒體認為這個活動「挪用助學捐款」，或「既然一部份捐款會用於機構運作，因此這個活動的行政支出超過總捐款額的一半」。因為今天電子傳訊的普及，任何訊息可以在一瞬間被廣泛傳播和發酵，加以苗圃只是一個小機構，並沒有話語權的廣播器，因此百詞莫辯，這對苗圃的傷害自然是大的。

從這件事的聯想令我不寒而慄，一個訊息可以在一刻間被傳遞至千萬人而真假不辨，可以在電訊網絡裏重複炒作和擴散，傳訊者又不會比對事實和加以驗證。我們漸漸生活在一個只要有「據悉」，就可以不問事實；一個謠言，就可以令群眾起哄的社會了。人們能善用科技，但不經意卻散播了黑白難分的訊息，還加上灰色的語言。您會否因此對人的信任度下調、疏離甚至關係異化？一旦如此，靠互信為基礎的義工團隊何以集結？以信託為本的慈善團體何以生存？

其三比較容易明白，苗圃雖然強調「義工主導」，即是除了職員外義工會同時負責大部份工作，但在512地震災難後，為了迅速回應建校

electronic media, Sowers Action, a nondescript sort of an organization, is, of course, defenseless in this incident. Our clarification on the matter went unheard; we have no means to make ourselves heard. The damage to the organization is done; that, in fact, is no small damage.

An association to the incident terrified me. I realize that a message can just be transmitted to thousands of recipients in a split-second, forwarded, distorted, and disseminated over the communication network without the senders caring a damn to verify its truth. And while we are quick to make use of technology, we are apt to disseminate inadvertently messages in obscure language for which the right and wrong of what they said are hazy. Isn't this awful? It seems to me the society we live in has become a society easily hyped by a single rumor; a society in which the majority of people take for granted the truth of anything labeled "it is reported" or "it is said". Does this aura make you feel less trust in people, make you feel estranged from the society, make you feel a growing sense of alienation from affections? My worry is that if our trust in people diminishes, how could an organization like ours that operates on the mutual trust among volunteers be able to survive.

The third matter I want to talk about is related to staffing. Sowers Action lays stress on "rule by volunteers". Indeed, our organization operates under minimum amount of staff and relies considerably on volunteers to conduct most of its tasks. But after the 512 earthquake, there was a need for us to increase the number of our staff, in order to handle a sharp rise in the number of school rebuilding projects. When these projects are subsequently completed, the amount of donations is expected to drop back to the normal level at around HK\$35 million annually. However, our operating expenses will be staying at around HK\$5 million, as we still need the extra staff hired to follow up the completed projects. And we aware it may be no longer true that the ratio of the former to the latter will be kept under 10:1, our benchmark for many years.

For most management, cutting cost and reducing headcount would normally be done to fix the situation. But it is not easy for us to do so. Sowers Action has more work than our volunteers could ever be able to shoulder. And among the volunteers working for us, while little accomplishment is to be expected from uncommitted members, those who are committed are

需求，過去三年擴充了負責建校事務的職員隊伍，當這批學校相繼落成後，在建學校的數目和募集的助學款額又回到正常水平，估計每年的捐款和資助數將維持在3500萬，但相比約500萬的機構運作支出，便沖擊了苗圃一向堅持規定兩者不超過十比一的收支比例。

對很多管理人來說，只要能削減支出，減省人手，便不成問題，可惜苗圃義工人少事繁，這並不是苗圃特有的現象，不上心的義工成不了事，上心的有時又特立獨行，難以隨眾，加上經過了回歸前後認中愛國的高峰，今日社群心可能正步向低谷，一句「生活逼人」已將很多人招手到個人的事業路上，所以我們要以義工取代職員有事實的困難。雖然如此，過去一年，在編制上也作出了調整，主要是減少香港資助事務的職員數目。隨著將雲南昭通辦事處遷往昆明，我們立即增加內地職員人手。香港方面，亦擴充了宣傳推廣的隊伍，希望借此帶來籌款額上昇和減低落實資助項目的支出。值得一提的是，這次調動並沒有影響我們對資助項目的監控能力，因為與此同時，我們啟動了試驗已久的「項目管理程式」，將跟進服務電腦化。

其四是，內地在2004年起醞釀，到2006年間切實執行「撤併」行政區，令很多一師一校的教學

sometimes too independent minded to mix well with a group. Moreover, there is a downtrend for the community's patriotic passion and sense of national identity has set in following the peak formed around 1997. People's enthusiasm is now replaced by a strong pressure to "earn a living", and keeping one's job is the most urgent business for most everybody. Such circumstances make it hard for us to replace regular staff with volunteers.

In the past year, adjustments have been made to our personnel, mainly in reducing the number of staff who handle aiding affairs in Hong Kong while the promotion and publicity team is expanded. On the Mainland, with our Yunnan office in Zhaotong relocated to Kunming, we have increased the headcount of our mainland staff to follow up school projects. We hope that this arrangement will help us raise more funds and reduce the expenses for monitoring projects that have been confirmed.

I should emphasize that these changes would not affect the quality of monitoring our projects. This is because with the launching of the "Project Management System", piloted for months, we have our follow-up services computerized.

The next matter I want to talk about is the merging of administrative zones and thus merging of schools in Mainland China. The policy was first heard in 2004, but merging did not take place until 2006. It has forced the closing down of many "teaching site" with a single teacher, pianxiao (primary schools that offer only part of the primary curriculum), and village primary schools.

Since the general public including Sowers Action knew nothing about the new policy before its enactment, most people are of the opinion that Sowers Action should not be held accountable for the consequence of the change in policy. No matter what, the closing down of some of our schools are harsh facts difficult for us to accept. We understand that our donors, especially those who have made donations for commemoration purpose, may suffer an emotional loss. Let me make a point of the fact that we feel much the same way they feel.

In order to get a full picture of the current situation, we have decided to conduct inspection of all the schools built by us before 2007. This undertaking will help us learn about the overall situation as well as the emerging needs of those schools that are still in use.

點、片小和村小面臨被「殺校」。事實上在政策出台前，大部份人並不能夠得悉，所以認為苗圃不需要對政府政策的變動負上責任，但易地而處，作為捐款人，特別是一些為紀念而捐獻學校的人，情緒上仍然是難以接受的。因此為了掌握全貌，苗圃決定排查所有在 2007 年前建成的學校，希望也藉此知悉仍然在使用學校的情況和新的需要。

撤併一方面造成苗圃要面對上述的問題，另一方面，學校撤併集中到一處辦學，意味著學校的規模會有所增加，於是隨著地震後各地的建校抗震級別的提高和工料價格隨通脹上揚，現時重建一所學校，百萬元人民幣已經是慣見的數目，轉成港幣，變成百多萬元。過往捐款人多數慣捐廿萬元港幣，但今日動輒要幾十萬元，造成了很大的勸捐困難。況且政府不是已經宣稱「兩基普及」和「學校危房改造」基本完成嗎？又因為國家財政收入足夠支付，已經將教育經費預算提到發達國家水平，令我們在解釋需求上，也產生了很多困難。事實卻是內地很多窮區的學校仍然需要我們這些援助，於是為了形成耀目的新宣傳點，我們已經將資助範圍擴展到條件仍然十分匱乏的「特殊教育」方面，簡單來說，即是殘障和孤兒教育，在這裡可以欣然告訴各位，我們在雲南臨滄、保山和德宏的特教學校已經在興建中。

學校不能沒有教師，尤其是特教學校還涉及心理輔導等，於是在過

The merging of schools implies expansion in the size of the average school. The catastrophe of 512 earthquake also calls for higher standard of seismic safety for building new schools. And since prices of construction materials have been going up due to inflation, the figure for rebuilding the average school nowadays is around RMB 1 million, which is more than HK\$ 1 million. In the past, making a donation in a lump sum of HK\$200,000, a donor could build a small commemorative school. But now this is no longer possible. This makes our fund-raising task a lot harder.

On the other hand, isn't it the case that the Chinese government has claimed that the two "foundation tasks" — nine-year compulsory education and elimination of illiteracy among the youth — have basically been achieved, and so has been the task of renovating ramshackle school buildings? The government has also claimed that because national revenue has gone up, the nation's education budget has been increased to the level of that of the developed countries. These claims have the effect of giving us a tougher time to justify the need of our services and hence our existence.

Our knowledge is that despite the Chinese government has in fact appropriated more funds to support basic education, there are still many schools in China's poor regions that need our services. On the other hand, we also notice that "special education" which covers education for the disabled and orphans, is an area whose needs have continued to be taken lightly upon. We think it is time for us to extend our scope to cover this new area. From a strategic point of view, special education also provides a new attraction for publicity and potential donors. We are glad to announce that our schools for special education in Yunnan Province, at the three locations of Lincang, Baoshan and Dehong are currently under construction.

Schools cannot exist without teachers; schools for special education need even more professional services such as counseling. We think there's a need for us to do something with this demand of human resources. Since last year, we have gone ahead to explore what we can do in a number of areas including the teaching of English, counseling, and regular teacher training. Inviting relevant experts to give training to a bunch of selected groups in these areas is one approach we have taken; collaborating with mainland universities to provide the needed training is another.



去一年，苗圃在英語、心理輔導和常規師範培訓等多方面，邀請專家，以點帶面形式，以聯繫內地大學合作形式等，發展勢態日新又新。

其五，您可能留意到苗圃曾修改會章，將服務範圍推展到內地以外，有人說：「成大事以找到接班人為本」，如果苗圃還有繼續的價值，那麼透過為清貧學生補課而讓他們認識苗圃，這方法未嘗不可，問題是今日的青年人承擔能力較弱，這是否是一個合理的期望還有待驗證。有沒有接班人？從來魂牽夢繞，在心中揮之不去。

或者還有其六其七，然而苗圃人不是只拿著放大鏡看弊病，不談優點的人。說困難不過是為了夕惕若厲。畢竟，苗圃雖然缺點不少，但我們守著底線，沒有後退，已經十九年了。在中國經濟飛躍和苗圃廿週年前，我們繼續一往直前，只是為了展示一個目的，中國在發展中仍有未完成的助學工作。

2010-211 董事局主席  
蔡兆明 2011.7.9

I'm glad I'm getting close to the end of my report. You may have noticed that Sowers Action has revised its constitution to extend its services to all regions of China including Hong Kong. As the common saying goes — "great achievement is success in finding the right successor". Are there successors for Sowers Action? This question preys on my mind. If Sowers Action's operation still merits to be sustained, there's an idea we would like to try out. The idea is to recruit local tertiary students from poor family background and pay them traveling expenses to tutor primary students of poor families. This may be a way to make Sowers Action better known among our younger generation. But I am not sure if this is a realistic way to find successor of our work, because I have an impression that our young people of today may not have enough commitment to make it come true.

While it is not impossible to allow this account on adversities to go on further, let me remind you that it is for the purpose of alerting ourselves to potential pitfalls involved in our undertaking that I have been talking at length about adversities. When we know what could possibly go wrong, we are in a better position to avoid making gross mistakes.

Needless to say, Sowers Action is not flawless. In fact, we have not just a few weak links. But, it is not the brand of the Sowers to dwell on our own weaknesses and neglect our strength and competence. We give play to our superiority and potential. For 19 years, despite obstacles and setbacks, we persevere in our faith. Amid China's economic boom and on the eve of Sowers Action's 20th anniversary, we keep up sowing — sowing for educational equality, a task yet to be completed in the developing China.

Chairman, 2010-11 Board of Directors  
Choi Shiu-ming 2011.7.9