

Social Welfare Department

8/F., Wu Chung House
213 Queen's Road East
Wan Chai

July 21, 2015

Ref: Complaints on Food Coupons

Dear Sir,

Refugee Union appreciates and thanks you for your decision to introduce food coupons instead of bags of food for the assistance provided to the refugees. We appreciate your determination to bring about positive change in this area of assistance despite opposition for change from some quarters.

However our concerns are drawn to the conditions imposed on the coupons. During our previous meetings after the launch of the coupons, the refugee community have continued to vigorously protest the manner in which this program was rolled out. The imposition of conditions on the food coupons is being perceived in bad faith by refugees. There is a general consensus and acceptance within the refugee community that cigarettes and tobacco ought to be prohibited items. However we disagree with other conditions of use imposed in exchange with the coupons.

All the prohibitions imposed on the coupon ought to be removed with immediate effect. Refugees in Hong Kong are not allowed to work. We do not have any source of disposable income. We do not have purchasing power and therefore to restrict us on the coupons means that we cannot buy anything else except food. Human beings need more than food to survive. We have children and family members whose needs and wants exceeds the punitive conditions of use.

The Refugee Union hereby humbly requests your office to revisit and reevaluate the effectiveness of this policy with a view to streamlining them and their condition of use which are punitive, oppressive and discriminatory in their current format. The differentiation of coupons issued to the refugees from the other coupons issued by Wellcome in terms of color and their purchasing restrictions to the users profile discriminates against a group of people who already feel rejected and unwanted by society. Refugees are of the view that this amounts to racial profiling to segregate us from the local society as it clearly depicts us as a defined category of people. It is commonly known that Wellcome supermarkets have their own standard kind of coupon in current use. Why go to the length of designing and printing new versions instead of issuing the same ones to refugees?

Refugees idea of food coupons is a situation where when a claimant walks into a supermarket he/she should be able to purchase everything in that store as needed, as long as he has the means (coupons) to do so in exchange of items desired. The only acceptable exception should be cigarettes and alcoholic items. Furthermore the fact that Halal food cannot be widely purchased with the coupons constitutes religious discrimination, which is not only in violation of the law, but also an incentive to the trading of coupons and the proliferation of practices that already occurred previously with the in-kind system.

Is the SWD's ultimate objective to "prevent destitution" or rather to create the conditions for political forces to claim that the system is abused in a bid to politicize the matter?