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Social welfare, social capital and social work: personal reflection of a Hong Kong Social Worker

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Abstract

This paper shares the reflection of the author as he observes that welfare systems are now attracting more controversies in public debates. He senses that social work profession is becoming marginalized by various mainstream sectors, as it fails to get involved in new and alternative solutions to deal with challenges of welfare and economic transformation. The paper traces the changing conception of social welfare, welfare state, and social work. The modern definition of social work and its core purposes have distinguished social work from the narrow conception of social welfare. The conception that social welfare is social work is therefore misconceived. Although social work encompasses a range of core purposes, an important link is still missing in the international definition, which is social capital building. Social capital is about networking relationship with trust, mutuality and reciprocity, which enables networks to work together more efficiently and effectively than individuals and individual networks acting alone. The paper gives the pilot experiences of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administration Region. The Fund aims to build social capital at community levels by providing direct grants to collaborative projects of NGOs and the private sector, as well as government subvented NGOs willing to transform itself to adopt the social capital building approach. The experiences illustrate that social workers have to adopt a paradigm shift to equip themselves with broad helping perspectives and multi-skills in order to become an effective social capital builder and avail themselves as partners of all sectors in the society in dealing with challenges of the modern times.

Introduction

This paper shares the reflection of the author as he observes that welfare systems attract more controversies in public debate. The social work profession too is becoming marginalized by various mainstream sectors. Social work has to find the missing link that connects itself with the modern era. The reflection begins with the debates on social welfare at times of society's rapid transformation, and the public misconception that social work is social welfare. The reflection suggests that social work as a profession should include building social capital as one of its core purposes so that it could truly serve all peoples of a society.

Traditional and prevailing conception of social welfare

Social work has often been taken as a synonym for social welfare. However, the term social welfare has a very loose meaning, and may mean different things in different jurisdictions in the world. In Hong Kong welfare provisions are often taken as those services operated, funded or monitored by the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government. It is obvious that as a tradition most social work graduates will look for jobs in welfare services. However, this trend is changing and the change is caused by a range of complex factors, both internal and external to the social work profession. It also reflects a change in policy directions and approaches in welfare provisions. Such changes will have profound impact on social work profession and these will be discussed below.

Social welfare and welfare state

Social welfare generally refers to states' services designed to protect citizens from the economic risks and insecurities of life. The western style social welfare programmes were installed in response to industrialization in urban cities. Over the decades, a general consensus is reached that states are responsible for protecting all those unable to care for themselves for whatever reasons. Social welfare is a matter of right rather than of need. Financing of states' social welfare programmes basically comes from public revenue. In this regard, social welfare is one of the systems of transfer payments to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. As the format and nature of social welfare programmes becoming more comprehensive and diversified, covering increasingly more sectors of the society, meeting more identified needs; the earlier version of social welfare has changed substantially in the modern era.

In the modern era social welfare is often interpreted with a broad meaning to include

public provisions of education, health, housing and public assistance. In this manner, it is more appropriately connected to the conception of the welfare state. In an ideal welfare state the government plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens, based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a reasonable standard of life.

Reforming the welfare system

The ideal welfare state where the state is the key player perhaps never exists. It has been suggested that, based on European experience, the markets and welfare systems are linked in different ways (Ferge & Kolberg, 1992), resulting in diverging experiences in handling market failures (e.g. prolonged unemployment), and welfare cut. The shifting of the burdens of care to informal caring systems when confronted with an uncertain modernization of the economy has given rise to a possibility in restructuring the relationship between the state, economy and civil society to facilitate the transformation from a welfare state to a society of well being (Evers & Wintersberger, 1990).

For specific service sectors, e.g. in the sector dealing with the care for the elderly, there emerges a common agenda for the reform, which is characterized by a shift from standardized to tailor-made care arrangements; more supportive services for informal family carers; better coordination between services in a pluralist welfare system; and greater investment in service planning and management (Kraan et al., 1991). There is also increasing recognition for the need to search for a better balance and mix of providers from state, civil society and the private sector. The debate and dilemma caused by conflicting values and principles among providers of different sectors would continue, as well as search for ways to pay for cost of care, and require more policy research (Evers & Svetlik, 1993; Evers, Pijil & Ungerson, 1994).

Changing conception of social welfare in Hong Kong at times of economic transformation and financial crisis

The term social welfare today has never attracted so much controversy as before in the history of Hong Kong. During the decade before the change of sovereignty in July 1997, Hong Kong had benefited from a distorted and bubble economy. Its public welfare expending had increased many fold, so was the role of the government. During this period, many new welfare provisions were created to meet emerging social issues and problems, without giving due regard to the integration and interfacing of old and new

provisions, as well as their long term sustainability. Soon after 1997, Hong Kong began to feel the impact of the Asian financial crises, to be followed by the collapse of the real estate market and the acute challenges of economic transition. As a result the unemployment rate hits historical heights, and the economies' contraction continues unabated. The Government is now facing a crisis that if its historical budget deficit cannot be reverted, the financial systems will be under severe challenges from international financial communities. At the same time, the quality of life in the community is deteriorating rapidly. More people are choosing or forced to live on public assistance, number of single parent families and divorced families are increasing rapidly, number of family violence cases is increasing, and more young people are living idly without work and schooling. Hong Kong can no longer afford to rely on its traditional welfare approach to deal with all these challenges. Public sentiments towards the welfare system have changed. First, there was a public outcry that low salary earners are earning less than those people, with similar family background, receiving public assistance; more people are tempted to stay away from paid work, and fall into the social security net. The saying that welfare breeds dependency rather than serving its original function of social protection for the needy has become a popular news item, although the true picture of the background of all the people on social security is not entirely that simple. Second, welfare services are no long taken as free services. Fee charging as well as finding ways of raising funds from non-government sources have become standard requirements. Third, social welfare should not be the sole concern of government, NGOs, and service recipients. It should be owned and shared by other sectors, the rich and the elites. Welfare system should not segregate the rich and the poor, but bridging them through networks of common concern. Fourth, sustainability of welfare provisions has gained a critical place in policy agenda. Sustainability refers to the continued capacity of operation without relying solely on government funding, but with support from non-government funding sources.

Social work, not social welfare

Social work profession began its mission in arguing that social welfare was not charity. It has adopted empowerment and well-being of individuals, groups and communities as its core practice. Social work is to be grounded on social justice, guided by perspectives that are developing and critical, nurturing people's strength, and empathizing human diversity. Social work as a synonym of social welfare is an incorrect perception. Modern social work has in fact shelved away the concept social welfare.

The International Council on Social Welfare (2003) adopts a mission statement which is “to promote forms of social and economic development which aim to reduce poverty, hardship and vulnerability throughout the world, especially amongst disadvantaged people. It strives for recognition and protection of fundamental rights to food, shelter, education, health care and security. It believes that these rights are an essential foundation for freedom, justice and peace. It seeks also to advance equality of opportunity, freedom of self-expression and access to human services.” It is important to note that the term social welfare does not appear in the mission statement, but rather social and economic development.

International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers define international social work in July 2001 that it “promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.” In line with this definition, IASSW’s discussion document on global qualifying standards for social work education and training (The Joint Committee of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and IFSW, 2002), identifies the following core purposes of social work:

- Facilitate the inclusion of marginalized, socially excluded, dispossessed, vulnerable and at-risk groups of people;
- Address and challenge barriers, inequalities and injustices that exist in society;
- Assist and mobilize individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their well-being and their problem-solving capacities;
- Encourage people to engage in advocacy with regard to pertinent local, national, regional and/or international concerns;
- Advocate for, and/or with people, the formulation and targeted implementation of policies that are consistent with the ethical principles of the profession;
- Advocate for, and/or with people, changes in those structural conditions that maintain people in marginalized, dispossessed and vulnerable positions;
- Work towards the protection of people who are not in a position to do so themselves, for example children in need of care and persons experiencing mental illness or mental retardation within the parameters of accepted and ethically sound legislation.

Clearly, social work’s core purposes as defined above avoid an association with the

narrow meaning of social welfare. They address issues of inclusion and social protection, challenge societal barriers, and advocate for and/or with people at risk and in need. However, the general perception of social work still clouds by a traditional social welfare conception. Such a perception distorts public understanding of the true nature of social work. It renders social work less capable to deal with controversies over welfare reform at times of economic transformation.

A more careful analysis of the list of social work's core purposes explains why public misperception of social welfare still prevails. To some extent, the traditional conception of social work is still visible in the core purpose definition. Social work is defined in a manner associating primarily with and for people who are marginalized, at risk, or people in need. Social workers are seen functioning primarily within the NGO sector, with expertise focusing in helping skills and roles. Social work prides itself with humanitarian values, and dissociates itself from private market systems and values.

In the modern era, we are witnessing social workers functioning in many sectors of the society, including the private sector. They have multi-skills, and take on posts in a wide range of settings. They may be employed in formal caring systems, but their intervention extends into the private market, and informal caring systems. They have a broader role to ensure a seamless interface between sectors to build a total caring system in the society.

Apparently, a change of paradigm of the social work profession is needed, so that it will work in partnership with all sectors and all systems in society in order to deal with any challenges at the micro, meso or macro levels.

A key concept is missing from the list of social worker's core purposes, which is about social investment or social capital building. By including this concept, the change of paradigm of the social work profession may be facilitated, and the change will be seen in at least the following areas:

- from a helping perspective to a comprehensive social development perspective
- from problem orientation to social capital building
- from compartmentalized care to total care, interfacing between formal and informal care, and the private sector
- from service delivery to capacity building and long term sustainability
- from a helping skill professional to a multi-skill professional

Why Social Capital

Social capital does not have an absolute meaning which everyone agrees. Like other social sciences concepts, it has its opaque dimension, and allows a range of interpretations (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). Still, several major development organizations have attempted to give a defining framework. OECD (2001) extends its interests from human capital to include social capital and its impact on sustainable social development; and defines social capital as ‘networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’. Asian Development Bank endorses Carroll’s (2001) definition as “those social relationships that help people to get along with each other and act more effectively than they could as isolated individuals”. The World Bank (2003) considers social capital to be a major factor affecting the sustainability of its world poverty eradication programmes.

The key ingredients of the relationship in social capital are trust, mutuality and reciprocity. Social capital may be found in institutions and organizations, as well as in cognitive domains. It may have different forms and scope of coverage at micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. Table 1 and Figure 1 below will illustrate these dimensions of social capital.

Social capital may be seen as similar to other development concepts such as community development, community building and participatory development. However its emphasis in the quality of relationship among all networks concerned, and also its application in a wide range of sectors have given social capital a new meaning and guidance for practice. The practice of building social capital and its measurement at field level has been documented by Grootaert and van Bastelaer (Eds, 2002), in the fields of agricultural and forestry, education, health and nutrition, microfinance, urban development, water sector. The illustrations indicate the rich dynamics of social capital, involving organizations of many forms and activities of a broad spectrum.

The social work profession has always been involved in social capital building, but such involvement has not been given due recognition when the state plays the dominant role in providing care. At times of economic transition such as the case in Hong Kong in recent years, social capital building has surfaced as the key alternative to traditional welfare provision. Including social capital building as one of the core purposes of social work will certainly facilitate social workers taking on a more active role in engineering economic and welfare transformation. Hong Kong has installed a special fund to promote

social capital building at the locality level in 2002. The experiences of this Fund is worth noting below.

Hong Kong's Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF): An alternative to traditional welfare approach

The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region set up a Community Investment and Inclusion Fund in August 2002 by to support the collaborative efforts of community organizations and the private sector. The fund aims to encourage mutual concern and aid among people; to promote community participation at the local level; and to support cross-sectoral programmes to develop social capital. Given these objectives, the CIIF expects to: (1) promote community participation, mutual assistance, support and social inclusion provided through strengthened community networks in the community which will in turn help reinforce the sense of belonging in the community, enhance the social networks of individuals and families, broaden the support base available to assist them to resolve their problems and address common concerns; and (2) encourage and facilitate cooperation between organizations of different nature (such as non-governmental organizations and the private sector), as well as cross-sectoral collaboration (such as welfare agencies and education organizations) in social networking and community support projects. To accomplish these goals, the Fund encourages bottom-up solutions that seek to promote the development of social capital, and by supporting local or territory-wide community projects initiated by the community itself. This would ultimately promote joint efforts between community groups, corporate bodies or professional groups and the Government to contribute to the social well-being. CIIF not only differentiates itself from traditional government funding for social welfare services. It gives priority to joint efforts of NGOs and the private sector that does not have government funding, as well as encourages traditional government funded operations to change its approach in dealing with local challenges. The following two illustrations will highlight the significance of CIIF in the context of welfare reform and economic transition.

Working with disconnected youth: the central government approach and the CIIF approach

Disconnected youth has become a major concern in Hong Kong at times of high unemployment. These are young people leaving school at early age because of their rejection of the school system or vice versa, and are unemployed. They become idle at home, marginalized by the mainstream society, and getting closer to unlawful gang

activities. Government set up a special fund to create a few thousand number of short term low salary jobs to be delivered by NGOs, so that these young people will become involved and connected. However there is no follow up planning when the fund is exhausted in about 6 months except to wish that the economy will pick up in time to create enough jobs to reabsorb this large number of young people. Social workers in the NGOs are involved as job designers and also monitoring the delivery of these jobs. The NGO's role is rather limited and the flexibility for social workers to work on a more in-depth approach to ensure long term impact on these young people is lacking.

At the same time the CIIF provides a one off grant to support a project which also aims at helping disconnected young people. The project aims to mobilize adults with trade skills to serve as masters, and disconnected young people recruited will be their students. The one to one or two relationship is like master and apprentice. The masters not only teach skills, but also serve as role models and mentors for these young people. The masters are recruited from adults with a marketable trade skill as well as an attitude and capacity to serve. The organization works closely with school networks, local government as well as trade organizations to involve them in the planning and delivery. The network relationship thus established aims to involve all key and concerned parties in the community. They all share a sense of ownership of the issue, as well the solution, and a commitment to support the project on a long-term basis. The initial impact has been rather positive and the character transformation of the disconnected youth served by the project has become cover stories of some media. .

Working with unemployed middle aged women

The situation of unemployed middle aged women is another major concern of Hong Kong. As a result of the economic transformation in Hong Kong during which a great majority of the manufacturing sector moved into China Mainland, a great number of middle aged women have been displaced from paid work. Some families have become dependent on government social security payment, adding more pressure to the already high level public spending. One of the projects of CIIF provides an insight to possible creative approaches. The project operator mobilizes some unemployed middle aged women who had experiences in raising children to work as accompanying persons of women during the first month of post-natal convalescence. They assist these new mothers in cooking nutritious food, in providing care to infants, and serve as active listeners. The services of these accompanying persons have found to generate a good income, and are rather popular especially among women with mild post-natal syndrome. This group of

accompanying persons is planning to form a cooperative to expand their network to a wider population of unemployed middle aged women. They network with doctors to get advice on how to work with new mothers and infants. The NGO responsible for the operation of the project has succeeded in creating an active and mutually supportive network among key stake holders in the community, e.g. hospitals and clinics to refer customers to their services. This network, through the social capital built up, is expected to continue on a self-financing basis in a rather short period.

Conclusion

The author's reflections on the social work experience in Hong Kong show that the traditional models are now found to be inadequate to deal with challenges of the modern era, brought about by the rapid economic and welfare transformation in our society. The social work profession, if continues to indulge itself in a within-sector role, functioning and focusing itself primarily with helping and advocacy purposes, may find itself increasingly marginalized by the mainstream society. The social work profession should demonstrate to the public that it is not about social welfare, and it has the capacity to deliver successful projects that are sustainable through social capital building among networks from cross sectors in the society.

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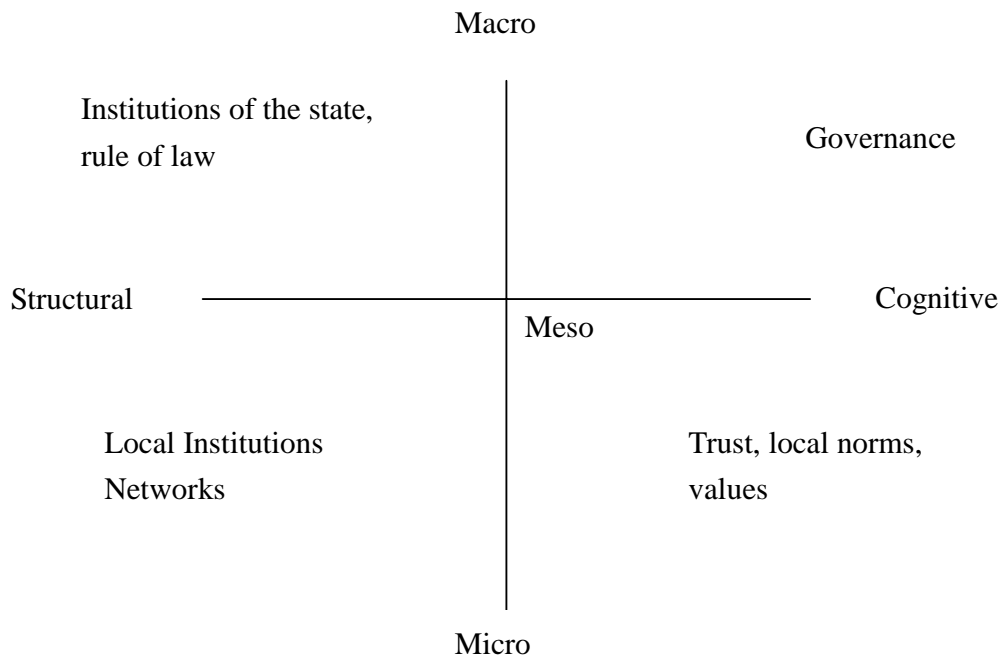
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Table 1 Complementary Categories of Social Capital

	Structural/Organizational	Cognitive/Attitudinal
Sources/Manifestations	Roles people assume Networks and other interpersonal relationships Rules and procedures that guide specific behavior	Values Attitudes Beliefs that guide generalized behavior
Domains	Social organization (informal networks, formal organizations)	Civic culture
Dynamic Factors	Horizontal linkages Vertical linkages Collective action	Solidarity Trust Image of the "other"

Source: Carroll, 2001

Figure 1. The Forms and Scope of Social Capital



Source: Grootaert and van Bastelaer , 2002, p 4.