

AGENDA 8

User Participation and Response of the Profession

With the democratic development in Hong Kong, the social services sector has been focusing on encouraging user participation in the past 20 years. During these years of development, despite some significant progress, many fundamental problems, such as the level of user involvement, the mode of user participation, the will of social workers and the coordination between institutional systems, still need to be handled. A discussion centered on user participation and response of the profession has important implications to both social work and social development.

Major Trends

1. Social work emphasizes self-determination of the service users. One of the roles and functions of social workers is to guide the users to make a decision with options available. In practice, user participation is indispensable at different stages, such as assessment, planning, implementation, and termination of the case. The initiative of the users during the process affects the effectiveness of intervention and problem solving.
2. User participation is closely linked to social development and democratization of political system in Hong Kong. And it is irreversible. In the coming future, the voice of the users will receive more attention in public governance and policy formulation. Moreover, with the proliferation of education and information, information is more accessible to the users. It will have a great impact on the past mode where the government could ignore public opinion.
3. At present, many non-government organizations (NGOs) provide self-financing services and set up social enterprises. The profit and loss of these businesses greatly depends on the expenditure of the clients. The voice and the participation of the service users (clients) surely play a key role in the process of service delivery.
4. User organizations, like patient self-help groups, have been blooming in recent ten years. Not only do they express their views on existing services, but also actively present proposals and strive to participate in different advisory machineries, bringing users' voice to the mechanism of policy formulation on a larger scale and in a more systematic way.
5. The advisory machinery of the government, the board and the governing committee of statutory bodies and the executive committee of non-government organizations all appoint users to take part in policy making and make some suggestions for governance. This trend is getting more and more common.

Concerns

1. There are different levels of user participation, including informing, consulting, partnership and user control. The government, decision-making bodies and non-government organizations often express that they have provided some channels for user participation. However, most of them just rest on the stage of consulting. In order to accommodate users' viewpoints in policy and service planning, the design of user participation mechanism should be a concern.

2. What we request is “user-managed participation” but not “managed user participation”. That means service providers sincerely build a partnership with the users and promote user participation in decision making, but not deliberately manipulate user participation mechanism.
3. User participation triggers a reflection on the power relations between the users of welfare services and professional social workers. On the premise of user participation, it is worth discussing the interpretation and definition of the social worker profession. This can prevent practitioners from monopolizing knowledge and services, which hinders further progress in user participation.
4. Now, many user organizations change from service users in the past to today’s service providers. How to support these user organizations to address the potential conflicts between these two roles requires attention.

Challenges Ahead

1. User participation is not independent of other service systems. In short, user participation is affected by the policies of service providers and different systems, for example, social welfare and health care. User participation, service provider and service system are three interlocking gears. If one of them stops, all gears will be restricted. Today, user participation has already taken a step forward. Service providers should set up appropriate mechanism to further user participation.
2. The more the social work profession puts emphasis on monopoly of knowledge, the more likely users’ ability will be belittled or undermined. Social workers should reflect on the meaning and value of helping people to help themselves and helping themselves to help people.

Possible Actions

1. We should push for setting up user council and further suggesting the government to formulate policies and measures for user participation. User participation should be enforced as the necessary element of policy making and service administration.
2. Appropriate assistance, such as transportation allowance, document translation and related training, should be provided for the users to avoid excluding them the mechanism on economic and other cultural grounds.
3. The boards of all non-government organizations should be encouraged, perhaps by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, to provide a certain proportion of seats for as service users.
4. In social work training, the concept and practical operation related to user participation should be included in the curriculum. Also, the serving experience and opinions of the welfare services users should be incorporated into the courses and learning materials so as to set a good example for future social workers.

How do you think about the themes/topics above? Are there any other themes left

out that you would like to raise? What are other issues or problems related to this Agenda that you think should be explored and discussed?

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