

Topic: The Impacts of Societal Factors on the Development of Self-Help Groups for the Disabled Persons in China: A case study of Beijing¹

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Abstract

In recent years, the development of groups with emphasis on mutual-aid and self-reliance among service recipients has been advocated as an important strategy to reconstruct the social services in China's welfare reform. As a result, self-help groups for the disabled persons (SHGDP) have gradually developed because of their significant social welfare function for meeting individual, group and community needs. Based on the case study of HTY, a self-help group for the physically disabled persons in Beijing, this study explores the societal factors that contribute to the development of SHGDP in China. The qualitative method was employed to conduct the study. The results showed that legitimacy and relational density are the important societal factors that affect the capacity of SHGDP to attain external support for their development. The policy implications for the development of SHGDP were also

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discussed.

Key words:

Self-help group, rehabilitation, organizational development, Chinese social welfare

Introduction

In recent years, with the continuing emphasis of self-reliance and mutual help among social service recipients, there has been a growing number of research and practice in relating to development of self-help groups in the western world. Indeed, some scholars advocate that ‘mutual-aid and cooperation have been a standard to measure the community life’ (Borman, 1979, p.16), and the self-help group will be ‘the most favorable choice’ (Barlow et al., 2000, p.53) to cure the psychological illnesses and resolve social problem in the coming decades.

Since 1990’s, the weakening of the unit-based system and the surging of social problem have contributed to the increase of novel social welfare needs. The social welfare system has faced unprecedented challenge, which demands for greater social service. Under such circumstance, different kinds of self-help groups, including the SHGDP, which based on social solidarity and mutual aid of civil society in the field of social service are emerging. They become an alternative option to cope with social problems and meet personal needs.

According to the data ‘the second national sample survey of the disabled persons’² in

² Seen in http://www.cdpc.org.cn/sytj/content/2007-11/21/content_74902.htm, 07-05-08. And all the data didn’t included the disabled persons in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

2006, there were more than 70.5 million families having disabled member, which is about 17.8% of the total number of families in China. However, there is no systematic statistics or research materials on the situation of the SHGDP, either in Beijing or in China as a whole. Based on the very limited available information, there are no more than ten SHGDP in Beijing. The current development of SHGDP is still at the embryonic stage. The groups are mostly in a small number and size, and lacking of social support. The societal factors including the unfavorable social context and management policy are assumed to be the key constraints. This paper aims to explore the societal factors that affect the development of SHGDP in China.

Literature review on self-help group development

The formation of self-help groups is primarily based on the common needs of the people with similar problem, and their willingness to share information and seeking mutual support. Katz (1993) said, 'self-help groups are member-designed support groups and organizations for the people who experience a common problem, illness, or condition' (p.5). This definition is used widely by many succedent scholars and World Health Organization. With reference to Katz's definition, in this article, the SHGDP is defined as the grassroot NGOs which are formed spontaneously by the people with disability, in which they commit themselves to resolve their common problems.

In western societies, the studies on the development of self-help groups began in 1970's. There are two perspectives: the internal perspective and the external

perspective. The former one regards the function of the group as the key reason for development, and the latter one assumes that the societal change contributes to it.

The internal perspective argues that the participation in the self-help groups results from the self-help groups meeting people's needs in social support, applied information and sharing emotional experience (Bennett, DeLuca & Allen, 1996; Koroloff & Friesen, 1991; Madara, 1997; Phillips, 1990). Through empowerment in the group activities, members attain the improvement in personal, interpersonal and social aspects. Moreover, the internal characteristics of the self-help group are also seen as the reason of its development. Maton (1988) found that the role difference, order and leadership affect members' participation and evaluation of the self-help group. King, G., King, S. and Law (2000) also pointed out that 'effective and firm leadership, the community connection ability to attain the necessary resource, practical assistance and transfer, and the desire to change the activities to adapt the varying needs' (p.236) have had impact on the longevity of the self-help group. In other words, the internal organizational function of the self-help group affects its survival and development.

The external perspective emphasizes the significance of the change of the social environment and social condition. The breakthrough of the medical technique, the transfer from the institutional care to the family care, services decreasing because of the economic constrain, and the family-centered social service doctrine all contributed to the emergence and development of the self-help group as a social phenomenon (Humm, 1997; Kessler et al., 1997).

Wituk, Shepherd, Meissen (2002) conducted a survey on the factors affecting the survival of the self-help groups by random sampling 388 ones from over 2000 self-help groups in Kansas, USA. They found that external resources and group characteristics are the main factors. The external resources included national and local self-help groups, professionals and so on. The group characteristics refer to the leadership partition, enrollment and organizational activities. The results showed that the most significant variables of group survival are the number of first time attenders, average group meeting attendance and length of group existence. These three variables were found not only related to the group's internal function, but also closely related to societal factors, such as legitimacy, external resource and so on.

In other words, the study of the survival and development of self-help groups must be put under the framework of the social environment and policy system. It is because the self-help groups' activities have to be supported not only by the group's own effort, but also various community resources and institutional arrangement.

Hence, when it comes to the study of self-help group in China, the characteristics and the function of the self-help groups are main focus, such as the emotional support function of the self-help group for the people with cancer (Chen, 2001), the improvement of members' social capital in the self-help groups for the disabled persons (Xiong, & He, 2005), the empowerment of the self-help groups for the AIDs patients (Xiang, & Cheng, 2007). The perspective of these studies almost pay attention to inner group, and little take the insight into the whole developmental environment of the self-help groups, which is the safeguard of the realization of their

valuable function. In the author's opinion, the unique social context---primitive development of NGOs and civil society, imperfect social welfare system, and low professionalization of social work, must be taken into consideration when we understand the development of the self-help groups in China. The varied institutional environment is the key difference between the development of self-help groups in China and in the West. It is the reason why this study focuses on the impact of the societal factors on the development of SHGDP.

Method

Being an exploratory study, HTY, a SHGDP in Beijing was selected for the study. HTY was chosen because of several unique characteristics: 1) its social context---Beijing has more social resource and systematic social policies for the development of SHGDP; 2) it is one of the earliest SHGDP in Beijing; and 3) it has operated for more than 20 years. The description of HTY can be learnt from the information of its website:

'HTY is an organization by the disabled people and for the disabled people. Being the first grass-rooted group for the disabled persons, it set up in 1982 as a club.

Self-reliance and mutual-aid are the tenet of club. Since it can't register as a mass organization, the club is seen as a group without legitimacy for a long time. In order to settle this problem and attain better development, the club registered as an enterprise on 2003 and renamed HTY. '(<http://www.hty.org.cn/guanyu.asp>)

The qualitative method was used to explore and facilitate a thorough comprehension

on the impacts of the societal factors on the development of SHGDP. Data was collected by interview, participation observation and documentary review in September and October 2008. Four core members (Mr. W, Mr. B, Mrs. Z, Mrs. L)³ of HTY were invited for a face-to-face in-depth interview. The primary interviewing questions focused on the organizational development, the impact of legitimacy and group relationship on the development of HTY. Each interview lasted for around 90 minutes and was audio-taped with the consent of the interviewees. The observation included the daily operation and group activities of HTY. The relevant policy documents were also reviewed and treated as an important part of the data. The data analysis was assisted by using the NVIVO 8.0.

Results

After analyzing the interviewing data, it was found that legitimacy and relational density are the two most important societal factors affecting the development of HTY.

1. Legitimacy

The broadly defined concept of legitimacy refers to the discussion of social order, rules (Weber, 1998; Rhoads, 1991), or regulation system (Habermas, 1989). While the narrowly-defined one is used to understand the governmental type (Weber, 1968) and political order (Habermas, 1989). However, both definitions believe that legitimacy means ‘recognition and acceptance because of according with some rules’ (Gao,

³ Mr. W is the director of HTY; Mr. B is the member since the club set up and in charge of website establishment of HTY; Mrs. Z is the active member and the accountant; Mrs. L is also active member and in charge of rehabilitation projects. All of them are members of core group of HTY, which held conference in the constant time to discuss their daily work.

2000, p.102). In line with these definitions, the legitimacy of self-help groups can be defined as the recognition and acceptance of the group by the surrounding environment. The subjects of the recognition and acceptance include state, government sectors and agents, non-governmental organizations and the individuals. Among the current social administration system in China, legitimation is the key problem of the NGOs, and the SHGDP is certainly involved. The data revealed that there are two kinds of legitimacy: political legitimacy and cultural legitimacy (Barron, 1998; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Scott et al., 2000), which will be respectively examined in the following sections.

1) Political legitimacy

The political legitimacy resulted from the government and legal authorities (Aldrich & Baker, 2001). The registration of societies is the significant embodiment of the political legitimacy. SHGDP, being a kind of NGO, should be registered as a society in China. However, according to the ‘Societies Management Ordinance⁴’, the organization that will be registered as society must affiliate to a formal organization as a sponsored unit. In fact, it is very hard for the grass-rooted NGO (including SHGDP) to satisfy this provision. More importantly, only one organization in a particular field can be registered in the same district. Usually, the quasi-governmental organizations, e.g., the Federation of Disabled Persons at all levels⁵, such as China Federation of Disabled Persons, Beijing Federation of Disabled Persons and so on. This makes no

⁴ Seen in the website of Non-governmental organizations Authority:
<http://www.chinanpo.gov.cn/web/showBulletin.do?id=16084&dictionid=1202>, 19-05-08.

⁵ They are governmental non-government organization (GONGO). They are societies but have strong administrative color.

room for the registration of the other non-governmental organizations for people with disabilities. Under this situation, SHGDP have to register in other field such as the Trade and Industry Authority in the name of the commercial organization in order to realize legitimation. As a result, industrial and commercial registration has become the mainstream strategy of the grass-rooted NGOs to get their political legitimacy in China. For example, Mr. B said, *'a foundation sponsor us some initial capital to register in 2003, so we realize this transformation.'* Similarly, Mr. B stated, *'the reason of registration is to have legitimacy to accept the donation from others. For not having an bank account, we can't issue the certificate of the donation. So we must settle the problem of the identity. Only have we attained the legal identity, we can't realize the tenet of the organization.'* This strategy helps the SHGDP to attain the legal identity, external resource, which benefit to their development. Ms. Z said, *'after registration as an enterprise, we can do more things through applying for the foundation projects. In this process, we learn a lot. For example, how to apply for the foundation projects, and how to organize the big events, etc.'*

However, this malposed political legitimacy of registration as an enterprise for a SHGDP implies many questions. It is detrimental to the long-term development of SHGDP, and brings much trouble to the institutional development. First, enterprise identity is not consistent with the characteristics of NGO, which creates problem of asking for tax exemption. For example, Mrs. Z said,

'I have consulted with the exemption procedure. It's hard to reach it and involves complex procedure. Fortunately, most sponsors only require the receipt instead of

the invoice. Various answers are given by the tax collectors on how to deal with the tax problem. Can the donation be seen as the income? We can't do just follow the staff. If there is a clear policy, it will be much better.'

However, in order to reduce the operation cost, SHGDP tried to evade tax by using illegal accounting practice, which makes the director of HTY (Mr. W) anxious. He stated,

'It has some impact on the project management and daily running, which presents on the tax and account. In the account aspect, there is few project supports the rent and staff salary, so we have to change the items in the account to charge these parts. Tax is another big issue because of registration as enterprise. The foundations have various demands. Some of which have the need of the invoice, others have not, and all that we can do is to make different bills. The nature of this action is to make false account. In my eyes, it is harmful to the development of SHGDP in the long run.'

Besides, being one enterprise, SHGDP is not required to accept the internal and social monitoring, which may lead to deviate from its original non-profit making goal.

Mr. W said, *'In fact, the director doesn't want to improve the organizational monitoring arrangement, which would limit the power of the director. Some self-help groups have trapped into the trouble of doing what one says. It is possible to turn the group into the ways of seeking personal interest. That will enlarge the internal conflict.'*

2) Cultural legitimacy

The cultural legitimacy refers to the acceptance and recognition from the society

(Ruef & Scott, 1998). In China, the cultural legitimacy of self-help group refers to the understanding and acceptance on the social function by the whole society. The perception of the governmental staff, professional and general public toward SHGDP is the key indicator to measure their cultural legitimacy. HTY is well-known among the circle of NGOs, but the general public has little notice to it. For example, Mrs. Z and Mr. W stated,

'We are well-known among NGOs, and their members will take part in our mass activities. But the influence in the disabled people and the public is limited (Mrs. Z).'

'The award from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provides a chance for our (HTY) further development. At least, China Federation for the Disabled People didn't awkward us. There is still a long way to gain the total recognition. (Mr. W).'

With more activities ongoing, HTY can gain acceptance from other NGOs and the foundations, which may increase their financial support and human resource in turn. But the welfare function has not fully recognized by the government and the public. Much can be done to improve the cultural legitimacy.

2. Relational density

The relational density creates social support, legitimacy and external resource. HTY can't live without the interaction with other related organizations such as the governmental organizations and its agents, there were three types of institutional relationships revealed in the data:

1) Institutional Relationship with China Federation of Disabled Persons at National

Level

The government and its agents have utmost importance on the survival and development of HTY, which determine its living space. Just as what Mr. B stated, *‘Certainly state policies and the development of China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF)⁶ carry great weight on our development. They are macro context. The restriction related to NGOs has gradually cut down.’*

The ongoing communication and cooperation with CDPF encourages the recognition from the CDPF. As Mr. W said, *‘It is a process to have acquaintance. In the last few years, we had some cooperation with CDPF, most of which was favorable. They thought that we are useful in many fields.’*

2) Institutional Relationship with Beijing Federation of Disabled Persons at Local Level

Located in Beijing, HTY is in touch with Beijing Disabled Persons Federation (BDPF). Compared with CDPF, BDPF has less interaction with HTY. HTY is treated as rival and threat. For example, Mrs. Z said, *‘They do not approve us, and think that we robbed them of the limelight.’* Similarly, Mr. B stated, *‘They always wants to offer amnesty with us. In fact, our existence gives them much pressure.’*

At present, the benign interaction between the disabled persons’ federations of all levels and HTY has not been fully built. HTY regards more cooperation as the

⁶ China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF) was set up in March 1988, building on the basis of China Association for the Blind and the Deaf-mutes and China Welfare Fund for the Handicapped. It has branch offices in the province, city, district/country, and street/township and belongs to the government supported non-governmental organization (GONGO). The disabled persons federation has much state resource and in charge of the welfare of the national disabled persons.

important direction to attain acceptance and resource. Mr. W said, *'I think that we and the disabled persons' federations of all levels have common ground and cooperation base. Though we have different operation mode, we all serve the disabled people. Only depend on the resource they have, we can go further. How to realize the cooperation in the better way needs more accumulation of experience.'*

Because of the limited recognition and cooperation, the disabled persons' federations at the local levels, being the government agents, have given little support to the development of SHGDP. The primary reason lies in the political perspective of the disabled persons federations and different operation system between administrative practice and NGO working style.

3) Institutional Relationship with the International Foundations

The international foundations are the most important source of funding for the development of HTY. Mr. W said, *'We have conducted a few projects collaborating with the international foundations. Most of the projects responded favorable. We have established good relationship with a few international NGOs, such as Canada Civil Society, the World Bank, Oxfam, Mi Suer Foundation, and so on.'* Mrs. Z also stated, *'This year we have 3 to 4 projects in hand, funding is more than before.'*

Besides the financial support, the project cooperation prompts HTY to perfect its structure and rules, and to improve its working ability. Mrs. L said, *'We learned a lot through the projects. The members become more competent, and the organization turns more formal. The demands by the foundations encourage us to change and set up a series of rules.'*

However, the funding from the international foundations is not constant and stable. It can't guarantee the basic needs of the self-help groups, such as office rent, staff salary and so on. Mr. W said, *'The projects are either big or small. The big one may last for one year; the small one may only a month. We often worry about what we can do if there is no project to do. Now we are lucky to have 3 to 4 projects this year, but how about next year? It is very uncertain. We must look for various ways to attain the funding.'* Therefore, the unstable financial resource is harmful to the further development of SHGDP.

Discussion and conclusion

The case study of HTY shows that the social ecological environment with constant change weights much of its survival and development. Registration as an enterprise has the significant impact on its political and cultural legitimacy and seeking support from community resource and international foundations. There are several points to be further discussed:

First, adaptation and survival.--- According to the organizational ecology, Adaptation is the process whereby organizations adjust their routines and structures to fit turbulent environmental conditions (Carroll & Hannan, 2000). The transformation of HTY from a club to an information centre was the result of environmental adaptation. It is a kind of attempt to get off the hooks. The dynamic of this transformation is to search for the survival and development, and the organizational type has been the main one to attain survival. So there must be some measures to create open

environment for the SHGDP's survival, in which they can freely choose to be an informal group or a formal organization.

Second, political legitimacy and development.--- Political legitimacy has been the bottleneck of the development of HTY. In socialist China, government monitors the operation of various NGOs, and social organizations. The policy and management practice of the government and its agents play an essential role in the development of SHGDP. American scholar Salamon, L. M. argued that 'the key factor determining the development of the third sector is the relationship between the NGO and government' (2002, p.59). According to organization ecology, the institutionalization emphasizes the impact of the legitimacy and social support on the organizational establishment and development (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Regulation of the institutional actors has directly impact on the survival and development of the organization. Being the important institutional player, the government has right to open up the new organizational niche and revise the institutional arrangement to support new organizational type (Aldrich & Marlene, 1994). SHGDP can't register as a society (social organization) due to administrative constraints of government policy on society's registration. Registration as enterprise is the realistic strategy to get legal identity, and to gain formal status for seeking external funding support. However, it also encourages violation of the normal practice of claiming for tax exemption. Moreover, it also leads to the misunderstanding of the non-profit making service nature of the SHGDP. Hence, policies should be formulated to guide and improve the management system for the self-help groups, such as the registration system,

monitoring mechanism and transfer system, and make all of them as a comprehensive system.

Third, cultural legitimacy and development. --- SHGDP is accepted by other organization for the disabled persons and the foundations because of its cultural legitimacy. However the recognition from the government and the public is still limited. The primary reason lies in the low social awareness and community support. So, there should be some measures to launch more public education and social advocacy. This will help to improve the self awareness and ability of the disabled people, and enhance the public recognition on the SGHDP.

Fourth, the relational density and development.--- The disabled persons federations at all levels and the international foundations are key relational institutions to HTY. According to organizational ecology, the relationship between relational density and establishment rate is inverted U-shaped. The relationship refers to the number of the formal relationship among the organization member and of key institution in the organizational environment (Baum & Mezias, 1992). The key institution includes governmental agents and community organization in the organizational population environment. This relationship can affect the organizational competition in the resource and legitimacy. The recognition by the community and governmental agents can enhance organization legitimacy and ability to attract the consumers and resource (Baum & Oliver, 1996).The cooperation between SHGDP and the disabled persons federations just begin and need more exploration. Moreover, since the international foundations are the principal financial support to the SHGDP, more channels must be

explored.

In conclusion, the organizational development of self-help groups in society is about its role and position in the public administration. The public administration should be a multivariate and multidimensional interaction, in which the government, market and NGOs have shared responsibility. In this extent, the persistent interaction between state and civil society, between government and NGO, between public organization and private organization is important. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate supportive policies to deal with the role and position of the SHGDP. For example, establishing the cooperation system among the government, SHGDP and the foundations; setting up the clear-housing for the SHGDP; making clear support of the government, such as funding, premises and so on; modifying the function of the disabled persons federations with emphasis on monitoring, resource distribution and supporting for the SHGDP.

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