

## **AGENDA 10**

### **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 practice 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 of social work intervention, 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. In societal sphere, user participation is closely linked to social development and democratization of political system in Hong Kong. In an irreversible democratic movement, the voice of the welfare service users will receive more attention in public governance and policy formulation. Moreover, with the proliferation of education and information, accessibility of information to the users will create greater demand for transparency and openness on government policy making.
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 volume of sales to the service users. The voice and the participation of the service users as consumers 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 look for is “user-managed participation” but not “managed user participation”. That means service providers sincerely build 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. The premise of user participation calls for serious reflection on the definition of social worker professionalism and legitimate knowledge in helping, with a view to reconstruct the power relationship between welfare service users and professional social workers.
4. Members of user-led organizations change in role from service users to service providers or managers. How to support members in these user-led organizations to address the possible conflicts between these two roles requires attention.

### **Challenges Ahead**

1. User participation is not independent of other systems in the ecology of service provision. In short, user participation is affected by the policies of service providers and different related systems, for example, social welfare and health care. Service users, service providers and service policies are three interlocking gears. As service users have taken a step forward towards greater involvement in service planning and provision, 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 neglected and marginalized. Social workers should reflect on the meaning and value of helping people to help themselves in social work professionalism.

### **Possible Actions**

1. We should push for furthering the formulation of policies and measures for user participation in governmental and non-governmental organizations. User participation should be incorporated as the necessary element of policy making and service administration.
2. We encourage governmental and non-governmental organizations to develop various platforms within the organizations to enable service users to communicate their service experiences and views without difficulty.
3. Appropriate assistance, such as transportation allowance, document translation and related training, should be provided for the users to avoid excluding them from the mechanism on economic and other cultural grounds.
4. In social work training, the concept and practical operation related to user participation should be included in the curriculum. Also, the service 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.

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