

ABSTRACT

China is undergoing significant social transformation caused by the development of a market economy. In order to meet the challenges caused by this fundamental transformation, China needs to adjust and reform its social structure. This calls for collaboration and partnership between public, private and voluntary sectors. More responsibility must extend to voluntary social services organizations driven by and serving local communities.

SHARING THE BURDEN —A Need for Developing Voluntary Sector in China

by Yaping Li

SOCIAL BACKGROUND

China is in a process of critical economic, social and political transition. The main theme of this transition is to establish a market economy. At its core, further reform requires the transformation of the role of government. Certain functions and responsibilities that until now were exclusively carried out by government have to be transferred to other sectors — the market, or the “third sector” comprising voluntary social service organizations. This transformation aims at developing adequate social service mechanisms that fit the market economic system, in which different institutions play different roles and share responsibilities to meet the needs of society. This transformation will also make the government more able to function effectively in the provision of public goods.

To complete this tough but important and significant transformation we need to explore how to adjust China’s present social administration and public policies, as well as obtain practical knowledge and implementation skills. Communities could share many social responsibilities and burdens. To push forward community service in urban areas at this moment is part of the search for transforming the role of government. The main purpose of

this effort is to coordinate and integrate various kinds of social forces and resources, and also to strengthen the service capacity of local communities. To achieve this goal, China needs to develop voluntary social service organizations.

Voluntary social service organizations are mobilizers of social resources. They can share generic social responsibilities, and at the same time play specific roles. The community should directly deal with social problems and issues, as well as deliver services. This is what has been commonly understood in China as “socialization” of social service.

However, because of the original “work unit welfare system” and lack of mature voluntary organizations, especially community-based organizations, government has remained the only institution to promote community service. The main work of community service is still in the hands of government. This factor is putting a brake on further reform in China.

History has clearly shown that the social service system that best fits a market economy is a combination of diversity and pluralism. To build a healthy society, social institutions, such as government and voluntary organizations, should assume their respective responsibilities,

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complementing and supervising each other. By recognizing this and actively promoting the development of social organizations according to China's social, political and economic situation, we can then appropriately push forward people's participation in the community. The role of voluntary organizations is critical.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Market mechanisms may effectively meet the needs of individual consumers, but cannot deal well with public goods. Intervention with non-market mechanisms is required to overcome this market failure.

As a public goods provider, the government is naturally concerned to satisfy the majority, whose support it needs, and is often unable to meet certain specific needs of the minority. This is where government fails. Both market and government failures can be seen in China's social situation today, which is why we need another mechanism – the voluntary social service organization.

A rational social service system basically comprises three sectors: the public (government), private enterprise and commerce (the market), and voluntary social service organizations (voluntary sector). These have different roles. The role of government is to ensure basic social welfare and security, which is fundamental to the whole social system. The market serves those who can afford to buy. The voluntary social service organization, based on its mission and function, provides professional services to satisfy the special needs of social groups. These three sectors should work hand in hand as partners. They are a whole genetic set. If they are well integrated, the general capacity of society to cope with social problems is greatly enhanced.

Government, through law and policy-making, provides macro organization, management and development of social services. Industrial and commercial enterprises return part of their profits to society through social service organizations, pro-

viding an important social service resource and improving their public image. Voluntary social service organizations, with the support and participation of the other two sectors, deliver services to the social groups that neither the government nor the market may be able to reach. At the bottom line, this collaboration cultivates the important value of philanthropy in a society.

PRESENT REALITIES & FUTURE TRENDS

Throughout several years' practice, we may consider that the voluntary sector can at least play the following roles in China for a time being. First, voluntary organizations with the support of the government and market, can provide special services to social groups or those in areas that government and the market will not be able to cope with. This is an important part of social service resources.

Secondly, the voluntary social service sector can serve as a "buffer zone" between residents and government. It will reduce the direct conflict between people and government. In particular, when voluntary social service organizations use professional methods of social work in communities to help residents make rational decisions about how to meet their own needs, it will to a certain extent, prevent some kind of social tensions.

Third, voluntary social service organization's involvement and participation in communities can gradually alter and overcome the role conflict involved when a sub-district, or neighborhood, committee acts as government administrator, enterprise manager and social service provider. This is a critical matter for improving the quality of community work in a sub-district/neighborhood level in urban China.

Fourth, voluntary social service organizations are part of professional service institutions in the modern social service system. Since voluntary social service organizations rely on mobilizing various

social forces and integrating social resources, it is easier to become a pusher and advocate for promoting professional social work, which is so much needed in China at this moment.

Government and voluntary organizations should work together as partners. Voluntary organizations are currently very weak in China. The public's understanding of volunteerism and the role of social service organizations is still vague. As a matter of the fact, voluntary action in China is still coerced in many ways. It is thus too early to identify precisely the respective roles and functions of government and the voluntary sector, but it is certain that China needs to develop voluntary social service organizations in its long process of transition. In recent years China has made great progress in this respect, but further investigations are needed in theory and in practice, along with the process of ever-deepening reform. In order for China to complete the transition to a market economy, more responsibility must devolve to voluntary social service organizations driven by and serving local communities.