Empowerment in the Caritas Federation for senior citizens

Kong Sang LOU
Mei Yuk, Doris YU
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By

LOU KONG SANG

YU MEI YUK, DORIS
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Table of Content

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
2. Background and Empowerment in Hong Kong ................................................. 2
3. Elderly Empowerment .............................................................................................. 3
4. Rationale for “Empowerment” Model ................................................................. 4
5. Practical Experience: Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens ......................... 7
6. Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 15
7. Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 15
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1. Introduction

According to the Hong Kong population projection the proportion of the population aged 65 and over is projected to increase markedly, from 11.7% in 2003 to 27% in 2033. This increase is expected to be gradual between 2003 and 2015 (14.3%) and it will then be followed by a period of rapid growth to 27% in 2033 (Census and Statistics Department, 2004). Concomitant to the rise in elderly population, the demand for community and residential services that meet their specific needs is also expected to increase. The success of meeting these needs depend on the cooperation of various parties: individuals, non-government organizations, private sector and the government. In particular the leadership provided by the government is crucial in moving towards achieving active ageing.

The Hong Kong Government has taken a proactive approach in creating and developing different types of services to meet the needs of the elderly. One of the strategies adopted by the government is through funding the activities and services of non-governmental organizations that benefit the elderly. Caritas is one of the organizations that benefited from this funding. In providing services to the elderly, Caritas Services for the Elderly has adopted empowerment, an approach that has been widely applied in
different services under varying circumstances by service providers in Hong Kong. “Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens” is formed as a result of applying empowerment in elderly service. So far, the success is encouraging to users of services as well as staff serving the organization.

2. Background and Empowerment in Hong Kong

Solomon examined the empowerment concept in empowering the Black People in the USA (Solomon, 1976). Cox and Parsons (1994) defined “Empowerment” as an approach combining both personal and political strategies to help older people realize their full potential. Empowerment means giving legitimate authority (i.e. power) to make a decision, perform a role, and to enable people to exercise that authority, perform a role (Cox & Parsons). Yip (2004) suggested that the model may need adaptation in Chinese communities. A culturally sensitive empowerment model for Chinese communities may have to be gradual and harmonious (Yip).

In Hong Kong, the discussion and application of “Empowerment” started in the 90’s. Parsloe (1995) discussed the application of the concept of empowerment as a social work method. Wong and Lee (1996) suggested that there are three dimensions of empowerment for community work in Hong Kong. The first dimension is to enhance ability and awareness of marginal groups. The second dimension is to reconsider or to reassess “power” as a social relationship for which its main aim is to change the unjust power relationship between dominator and the dominated. The third
dimension is about constructing a new world-view so as to create a new concept of power relations (Wong & Lee). Cheung, Kam, Chan, and Leung (2001) explored the empowerment issue for various deprived groups such as the poor, the elderly and the chronically ill. Chan and Chan (1999) used the empowerment concept to formulate an intervention project for divorced women in Hong Kong. According to Yeung, Cheung and Chow (2003), the effects of empowerment has proved to be successful in sustaining elders, informal caregivers and even professionals quality of life and substitute various community service.

3. Elderly Empowerment

Harvey (2001) discussed about how to empower frail elderly in a nursing home. He reminded institutions that their elderly residents are full citizens who enjoy the same right as other people and the fundamental right to individual freedom. Therefore, there should not be two sets of rights for elderly people, based on whether they live at home or in an institution. Pratt (1995) pointed out that questions related to the empowerment of seniors in an organizational context are not easy to answer. Research relating to group internal dynamics, has yet to be undertaken, at least with respect to organizations currently active (Pratt).

Fenge (2001) considered the implication of “empowering” practice with older people within community care, exploring the restrictions placed on this by policy and practice, and how a postmodern perspective may
encourage the participation of older people and ultimately empower them. Chapin & Cox explored the empowerment-oriented and strengths based practice with older adults who face physical, mental and resource related challenges in later life. Both approaches stress work across various levels of practice (personal, interpersonal and political) and the potential of older adults to be active participants in decisions and actions that affect their quality of life (Chapin & Cox, 2001).

Wong, Chiu, and Chiu (2003) discussed about how to implement empowerment in an elderly home at Hong Kong. They suggest that the empowerment work can be implemented at four different levels: the Personal Level, Group Level, Organizational Level, and Community Level.

4. Rationale for “Empowerment” Model

The Concept of Elderly Empowerment in Government Policy

The concept of empowerment is endorsed by the government of Hong Kong as documented in several Government documents. Empowerment is mentioned in the Five Year Plan for Social Welfare Development in Hong Kong under “Elderly Service Specific Objectives” paragraph (g):

...to educate the public on the process of ageing and to empower the elderly to continue to participate in the community, so that old age can become a positive and
In a study conducted by Law (2001, p. 21) on “Re-engineering Community Support Services for the Elders”, he observed the following:

*Participation of service users should be emphasized as a matter of right and empowerment. This principle is about maximizing the human resources of the elderly, particularly the young olds.*

In addition, the Social Welfare Department of Hong Kong has set out in the objectives and scope of services for District Elderly Community Centre enshrined in Service Specification of Community-based Service for the Elders the element of empowerment that should be adopted in various areas as follows:

- “Preventive and development level - educational and developmental groups, activities and programmes including community education on healthy ageing and life-style, life-long learning, empowering and protecting the elders, and competence enhancement training workshops;”
• **Elders’ involvement in service operation (1 of the 13 Services of Neighbourhood Elderly Centre)** - involving and *empowering* the elders in the service planning and programmemes implementation of the centre.

In the Service Specification of Community-based Service for the Elders, Service Operator of DECC and/or NEC is required to invite users to form users’ councils. These councils should meet on a regular basis to evaluate the performance of the services with record of meetings, and enhance communication and sharing between Service Operators. Empowerment is obviously applied where user’ councils are able to influence decision making with respect to services that affect their life and well-being.

*Users’ Participation and Empowerment*

Caritas, Hong Kong is one of the Non-governmental Organizations in Hong Kong. Caritas Services for the elderly is one of the services under Caritas Social Work Services Division which provides community care and support services to elderly aged 60 or over. It is essentially a movement of understanding and concern, of caring and service, of human development and solidarity. The ultimate goal of Caritas is to guide older people towards self-development and to enable them to gain confidence to overcome difficulties that they encounter in life leading to improved self-esteem, well-being and quality of life.
Caritas believes that through the various programmes and services - residential care services, in-home care services and centre services, as well as encouraging the participation of users, promoting self-help and mutual help in service delivery, it is able to achieve its goal. All these will not be possible without applying the concept of empowerment and participation.

5. **Practical Experience: Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens**

The establishment of Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens in 2003 was a cornerstone to empower the elderly users at organizational and community levels in addition to the personal and group levels. It took about ten years for preparation and gradual development for the Federation to be at its present state of development. Feedback from both service users and staff on the achievement of the Federation has been positive and encouraging.

*Historical Development of the Federation*

The development of Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens can be divided into three stages: the Preparatory Period, the Development Period and the Consolidation Period.

*The Preparatory Period (From 1993 to 1997)*

During this period, both the elderly and staff were given training in order to expose and to equip them with the knowledge of user empowerment and participation. At the same time it is also the aim of Caritas to instill the
value of empowerment and participation. For the staff, four training programmes on promotion of empowerment with the elderly were organized. They are as follows:

a. The Feasible Method to Promote Elderly Right
b. Knowledge and Skills for Organizing Social Action
d. The Way to Encourage Elderly to Voice Their Opinion and the Setting up of a Service Users’ Federation.

For the elderly, training and support were provided to encourage them to participate in the planning and implementation of services by themselves and for themselves. Moreover, the culture and atmosphere for participation and empowerment was also created and uplifted through various channels and mechanisms. They are as follows:

a. **Response to Social Issues**
   The elderly deliberated the “Health Promotion Consultancy Paper” and participated in a petition and a forum. They were also involved in an opinion survey for the “Elderly Retirement Plan”. In addition, they participated in a “Government Policy Address Forum”.

b. **Trainings for the Elderly**
   Three “Elderly Rights Promotion Programme” were held at different districts to promote the knowledge and culture of Elderly Rights. A
“Representatives of the Service Users Training Kit” was published in 1997 and distributed to each service unit for implementing the training programmes for their representatives.

c. *Elderly Service Policy Research*

Five “Elderly Service Policy Research Group” were formed to research about five aspects of Elderly Policy: Health, Social Welfare, Social Security, Housing and Transportation. Two group discussions were conducted for the elderly members of the “Elderly Service Policy Research Groups” so that they could exchange their opinions about the policies. An “Elderly Service Policy Forum” was held in 1995 and Government Officials were invited to share and listen to the opinions of the Elderly.

d. *Preparation for setting up “Service Users’ Federation”*

Three “District Sharing Meeting for the Members and Residents of Service Units” were held for the elderly to share their opinions about setting up Users’ Councils and Federation. In 1996, A “Service Users’ Federation in Hong Kong” forum was also held for the elderly to understand the current operation of the Service Users’ Federations in Hong Kong.
The Development Period (From 1997 to 2002)

During this period, each service unit developed its Service Users’ Councils in line with the pace and needs of their service users. Half of the service units have formed their Service Users’ Councils with inputs from service users. The important role of the elderly was being nurtured at the various Users Councils. The service units that are unable to form users’ councils are the Home-Help Service (re-engineered in 2004 and re-named Integrated Home Care Service Team). This is because users of the service are mainly frail elderly who have difficulties in self-care and are home-bound, as well as a relatively high case turnover rate. Instead, only some focused group meetings are held to gather information and opinions.

In early 2002, in order to sustain this “Elderly Movement” and further empower the elderly, Caritas Services for the Elderly decided to set up a Service Users’ Federation comprising services users, volunteers and family members. It was hoped that the Federation can become a forum for the elderly so that they could motivate and strengthen users to improve service qualities at organizational level and actively participate in elderly policies at community level.

A Working Group was then set up to plan and prepare for the setting up of the Federation in May 2002. In July 2002, a consultation forum was organized. Representatives from each unit provided constructive ideas about different aspects of setting up the Federation. They also agreed that a
“Provisional Service Users’ Federation” should be formed in which the representation of the Provisional Federation should comprise one representative from each unit and two representatives (one elderly and one volunteer/family member) from each elderly home and District Elderly Community Centre.

The “Provisional Service Users’ Federation” was then set up in August 2002. It was mainly responsible to work out the functions, structure, and operational details of the Federation.

Consolidation Period (From 2003 onwards)

The “Provisional Service Users’ Federation” functioned smoothly for one year. The service users were then ready to set up the Federation. It was officially named “Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens”. Eleven Standing Committee Members were elected on June 18, 2003 by the General Committee Members which was represented by Users’ Council or representatives of all service units. An Inaugural Ceremony was then held on September 29, 2003.

From September 2003 to June 2005, the members of the “Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens” had participated in different programmes. With regards to policy issues, members of Caritas Federation actively participated in various forums and discussions. They discussed about the “Central Waiting List for Long Term Care Service for the Elderly” with the Assistant Director and staff of the Social Welfare Department in October 2003. In December 2004, they participated in a policy forum with
representatives from three major political parties in Hong Kong and shared their opinions about elderly policies. Committee members of Caritas Federation voiced their needs and expectations at the “Chief Executive Candidate Policy Forum” in June 2005. They also participated in different interest groups, forums and consultation meetings such as the “Elderly Retirement Protection Federation”, “Hospital Authority Drug Formulary Consultation”, “Elderly Policy Monitor Federation”, and “Universal Design Transportation Consultation”. For service planning and participation, the members organized two “Elderly Walkathon” to raise funds, participated in various programmes such as “Caritas Evergreen Home Opening Ceremony”, “Elderly Carer Recognition Day”, “Caritas Cooking Competition for the Cook” and “Caritas Services for the Elderly Staff Reflection Day”.

In conclusion, the development of the Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens has gone through a gradual development from Preparatory period to Development Period.

*Feedback from Service Users*

The service users opined that the “Federation” provided an effective platform for them to discuss the rights and welfare of the elderly. However, they felt that they could have more exposure in elderly policies through participation in forums, consultations, petitions, meeting with government officials and Legislative Councilors. They also felt that their voices were
heard by persons/department concerned and felt that they could have more control over their rights. Caritas Federation also helped to strengthen solidarity among members so that as a group they are more cohesive. The Committee members also expressed that the “Federation” has broadened their mindset, built and improved their self-esteem and enabled them to be achieve self-actualization.

**Staff Feedback**

The Staff of Caritas Federation face some challenges in adopting empowerment and participation. Since service users come from a diverse background with differences in health status and needs for services, satisfying every member or user can be difficult. In addition, the location of the service centres are dispersed in different parts of Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories, hence requiring extra input, effort and time for liaison and meeting with service users. Improvements can be made with respect to communication so that more information can be gathered more speedily. For example, the participation of Committee members of the Federation at the Annual Staff Reflection Day for the Service in 2005 created a good platform for a dialogue between the Federation and frontline staff. The feedback obtained from staff about the event was positive as they indicated that they gained a better understanding about the functions of the Federation. In addition, they were delighted to find that their work and effort were recognized by the users.
In adopting the concept of empowerment and participation, staff members of Caritas Service face challenges in terms of service delivery which requires a fine balance. Some of the dilemmas are as follows:

a. *Striking a balance between the majority and minority in prioritizing services needs:* Since only a small percentage of users of Caritas’ services are active at the Federation and are able to put through their requests for services, the needs of the majority of users are not articulated directly to Caritas. This requires the staff to communicate and liaise with each of the units in order to set priorities in meeting the needs of the majority of users.

b. *Worker’s Authority versus Users’ Participation:* Staffs are required to spend time to consult users and obtain their opinions before implementation which results in long gestation of service delivery since the consultative process can be time consuming. In addition, the varied opinions and ideas also require analyses which give rise to further time pressure.

Despite these dilemmas, most of the staff recognized the personal development of service users and the positive impact of Federation in service development. The staffs are committed and are willing to support the continuous development of the Federation.
6. Conclusion

The practice of applying “empowerment” in Caritas Federation for Senior Citizens has been found to be encouraging and fruitful in enabling users to participate at the organizational and community levels albeit with certain limitations. In order to further develop the Federation and enhance the effect of empowerment, more has to be done. A two-prong strategy can be suggested: (1) staff development and training and (2) participation of the elderly through empowerment and participation which can be realized through training and personal development.

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Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University

HISTORY

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

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Lingnan University
Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

ISBN: 978-988-17854-8-0
Tel: (+852) 2616-7425
Email: apias@ln.edu.hk

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