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EXPERIENCES OF SAGE**

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# **ELDERLY PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT: EXPERIENCES OF SAGE**

**KAM LEE LAM  
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## **1. Background & introduction**

The Hong Kong Society for the Age (SAGE) established in 1977 is one of the well-known Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in responding to the rapid growing elderly population and the welfare needs of the senior in Hong Kong. Its services include Care and Attention Home, Elderly Hostels, Elderly Centres, Day Care Centres, Home Care Service. etc. The mission of SAGE is to ensure the elderly to have dignity and reasonable comfort in their old age. In 2008, SAGE aims to provide distinctive services to the elderly, i.e. elderly participation and empowerment (Homepage of Sage: <http://www.sage.org.hk/eng/ideal.htm>). This paper focuses how Sage as an elderly organization in Hong Kong empower older persons through active participation.

In the past, the term “client” was widely used to describe those who approached SAGE for service or assistance. It was later changed to “Service User” or “Service Recipient”, a more appropriate term to describe the relationship as SAGE moves more towards the philosophy of a customer-oriented approach. However, the usage of this term implied a power relationship between the service providers, meaning those who “give”, and the service recipients, meaning those who “receive”. Therefore,

the situation has been changed in order to emphasize “partnership” instead – a term that is devoid of status hierarchy with a fair chance of participation for both parties, which could result in a win-win situation. It is anticipated that there will be an even more progressive approach to include service users as “decision-makers”, so that they can have more say in deciding the type and mode of service provision, as well as in allocating resources. These changes not only denote the significance of enhancing the customers’ dual roles of being “partners” and “decision-makers” in the process of service provision, but also emphasize the importance of encouraging their participation through empowerment

With rapid development in information and technology, distinguish to before, the participations of the Hong Kong elderly are no longer conservative and invisible nowadays, this development promotes and enhances the active role and self-awareness in society among the elderly. Throughout the advocacy, guidance, and support of many community services in SAGE, it helps to echo the active involvement of the elders in the community. This involvement leads the elders becoming more aware of their collective strength and the power of voicing their concerns about social issues that directly or indirectly affect their own life and well-being. From SAGE experience, Elders’ involvement can be seen from the active roles they play in the organization and operation of different committees, including “Service Users’ Councils”, “Canteen Service Management Committees”, elder learning platform, etc., all these participation definitely enhance the well-being of the elders .

However, elderly participation is still relatively low as regards to the whole society, and there exists considerable room for improvements at the policy-making and decision level. For example, at present, most elders' involvements are mainly through invitations. Their opinions are generally sought on specific issues such as elderly education and welfare. From time to time, maybe, elderly representatives from different sectors of the community are invited to participate in focus group discussions initiated by the Elderly Commission of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, an official agency that is responsible for advocacy and policy decision-making concerning elderly welfare. Sometimes the elders themselves run some self-organized groups at local level, such as "The Hong Kong Association of Senior Citizens", which helps play their active roles in sensitizing the Government and the community towards elderly-related issues. With these examples, how could we identify the benefits of the elderly participation? How do the elderly being empowered? A theoretical framework of participation and empowerment with a real experience in SAGE is going to explain in the next part.

## **2. Objectives & benefits of Elderly Participation**

Many minority groups such as the elderly and those underprivileged encounter adverse social conditions due to their lack of knowledge with dealing with some of these social situations. To some extent, these situations lower their self-esteem and also the motivation to get involved or to compete to the society. In order to transform their learned helplessness and “pseudo-consciousness” that are currently affecting their well-beings, empowerment that promotes participation of elderly and the gaining control over their lives is of utmost importance. According to Solomon (1976), empowerment is a process where a social worker engages in a set of activities with a client. Their aims are to reduce the powerlessness that has been fostered by negative valuations caused by being members of based on membership in a stigmatized group. So, by facilitating the elderly to participate and to be involved, their sense of helplessness and social isolation can be reduced, and at the same time, their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth can be strengthened. The benefits of empowerment and participation can be summarized as follows:

From individual level, through the process of participation and empowerment, the elderly could gain self respect, and possess higher self esteem and a sense of efficacy over their own lives. Empowerment also helps to reduce the negative appraisals they have of themselves, attain a sense of critical awareness, and improve their interpersonal skills during the process they become wiser users of resources.

To society, very often, a society's negative perceptions towards the elderly also pose problems and hindrances to the elderly. Therefore, it is important to empower the elderly through learning in order to bring benefits to the individuals and create a positive image of the elderly. Empowerment aims at redistributing the existing power to be more equitable, it enables different social groups in the community to cooperate with each other, and it minimizes deprivation, and avoids oppression (Cox & Parsons, 1994). Therefore, Individual empowerment should go hand in hand with collective empowerment so that the society at large can create an environment that promotes respect and equity for the senior citizens.

### **3. Experience of elderly Participation at SAGE**

It has long been the practice of SAGE to place emphasis on elderly participation. This has traditionally been organized into three levels. They are:

1. Personal Level --- changes in personal value and understanding of one's own basic rights and obligations.
2. Interpersonal Level --- participation in centers, residential homes or at community levels on issues concerning decision-making and service improvement.
3. Community Level --- advocacy of policy and structural changes for the benefit of the society at large through having dialogues and lobbying with the government, political parties, professional bodies, and other stakeholders.



Based on the concept of an eight-rung ladder of citizen participation proposed by Arnstein (1969). SAGE has adopted a five-level participation model as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of Participation

5 <sup>th</sup> Level	The Highest Level of Participation – Shared Decision Making
4 <sup>th</sup> Level	Participation in Management
3 <sup>rd</sup> Level	Involvement in the Planning & Implementation of Organizational activities
2 <sup>nd</sup> Level	Proactive Attitude in Expressing Opinions and Feedback
1 <sup>st</sup> Level	The Lowest Level of Participation - Observer

Based on this model, SAGE has added various channels in different areas to allow the elderly to be involved. The approach that SAGE has adopted was to encourage them to participate in a variety of activities and forums, below will manifest in more details.

#### First Level of Participation – Getting Involved as Observers

SAGE organizes elderly education programmes based on the concept of life-long learning, like “learning is fun” and “elders are capable of further learning”, etc. In this program, topics about health education, civic education, social responsibility in sense of elderly group will be covered. Apart from this, skills learning workshops like the use of information

technology and pursue of hobbies like dancing, etc. Through participation and observation in those activities, elders are more well-informed of their rights, choices and related community resources.

### Second Level of Participation - Proactive Attitude in Expressing Opinions and Feedback

In order to ensure those programmes can meet the needs of the elderly, annual surveys are conducted in SAGE to elicit information from these elderly users. Through such surveys collection, the elderly are encouraged to participate actively on matters that affect them both directly and indirectly. In SAGE, they also conducted a User Satisfaction Survey to collect feedbacks and opinions from elders, carers and their family members for service improvement. After evaluation, their viewpoints were taken into consideration by the Annual Business Plans of SAGE.

Beside of this measurement, from time to time, SAGE also conduct Elderly Opinion Surveys to collect elders' opinions and feedbacks on topics concerning elderly policies, welfare and social issues. Their ideas and viewpoints are published in the mass media and forwarded to Governmental Departments or relevant agencies for consideration.

### Third Level of Participation - Involvement in Planning & Implementation at Organizational Level

At this level, participation is about the involvement in those planning and implementation. In SAGE case, it is encouraged through various channels: SAGE Senior Council (SSC), Elderly as Tutors Training Programme, and volunteering. The establishment of SAGE Senior Council, a central mechanism comprised of elderly representatives elected from different branches of SAGE, aims at creating elders' awareness and concern, initiating discussions on related social issues, and taking an active role to advocate policy and welfare changes in the territory (please refer to appendix I, it shows the structure of SSC). Through the *Elderly Tutors Training Programme*, one hundred members of the elderly with special skills and knowledge have been trained to be tutors. They learned teaching skills, classroom management, and design of teaching programmes. These tutors are assigned teaching duties, some on a part-time basis, after they finish their training. In teaching, they find their sense of self-worth and at the same time contribute towards the community.

Another way to participate is through volunteering. The elderly volunteers form their own groups to provide assistance to those who are in need of help or to promote the pursuit of interests and hobbies. Examples of groups that have been formed and are active include: the Sunshine Drama Club, the Pine Senior Volunteer Group, the SAGE Tseun Wan Senior Choir

Centre, the Service Committee and the Alumni of SAGE College. The elder volunteers manage the groups, and plan and implement service projects on their own, with social workers as the advisers.

#### Forth Level of Participation - Participation in Management

The fourth level of participation aims to expose the elderly to management. In SAGE program, although the senior do not act as management group, they are encouraged to participate by giving their views and opinions on matters that are related to their well-being throughout activities and programs. At the Users Consultation Conference, the elderly are encouraged to participate. This forum is an annual event for the elders in SAGE to voice out their needs and give their views on service development. It serves as one of the major sources of inputs for further service planning and implementation to SAGE and to the HKSAR Government.

Another avenue in SAGE that the elderly could participate in is through the District Advisory Committee. In SAGE, there are various District Advisory Committees for discussion of service delivery, such as hostel management and meal service, are set up in different branch offices of SAGE. So, the elderly are given the opportunity to give their opinions and suggestions to improve the quality of the services for the elderly.

## Fifth Level of Participation - Decision Making

At present, it is more realistic to conclude that elderly participation in SAGE covers the first four levels. As a step towards future development, it is planned that some of the seniors can be elected as representatives to the Management Board. This can be made possible by providing more training and exposure to the elderly as well as fostering elderly participation in a continuous and sustainable manner.

### **4. Future Development**

In view of the rapidly ageing population, we can no longer treat ageing lightly and government would not be solely responsible for it. As more and more well-educated and healthy seniors are advancing into the elderly segment of the population, it is anticipated that they will be articulating their demands for their rights to welfare benefits. The growing influence of mass media and accessibility of information will obviously raise the social consciousness of the seniors towards achieving their objectives in the different aspects of life. The more democratic the society is, the more likely they will actively participate in bargaining for their own interests. According to Gelfand (1999), advancement of elderly participation and enhancement of quality of life cannot be accomplished with a tunnel vision. The issues for the aged have to be considered in totality and not separately from those for other populations. Failure to balance the demands of the

various age groups could imply continued competition for social and monetary resources. In here lies the need to have a more coordinated and integrated strategies to promote the well-being of the elderly by adopting the concept of active ageing, which involves participation.

The experiences of SAGE illustrate that empowerment and participation can bring about personal growth among the elderly, development of human capital potentials, greater awareness about issues relating to ageing, and promotion of a less biased but more positive view of elderly in society. The activities by SAGE have also resulted in improved social and physical environment for the elderly.

With better facilities that include a better system for information dissemination and encouragement for more active participation, the “Grey Power” is surely advancing, not only among the existing cohorts of seniors, but also among the middle-aged groups and many others around us, i.e., the upcoming new generations of grey population. Just as in the case of other ageing and advanced communities, such as the United States, the political strength of older persons is growing and is already proving to be a major force in political life. Along with the political influence of the elderly, there comes a new sense of self-respect and respect reciprocated by others. We now have to recognize the seniors’ abilities to impact public issues (Butler et al, 1998).

It is the aspiration of SAGE to advocate for more active participation and empowerment among the elderly, especially since it is never an easy mission as the journey ahead is full of challenges. It is a growing concern that efforts towards promoting empowerment and participation among the elderly have to take into consideration the many issues that confront us. Among them are: the rapid growth of the older population, prolonged life expectancy, delayed retirement, multiple needs and expectations from current and upcoming cohorts of older adults, increase diversity in social-economic characteristics, and the emerge importance of older adults in the political environment. Last, but not the least, it is our philosophy to uphold the belief that elders are no longer dependent and ignorant, but are entities with self-determination, strengths, resourcefulness and capability of contributing to society, albeit with limitations just as in the case of other age groups. In this regard, it calls for a more supportive and facilitative social environment that allows healthy and successful ageing.

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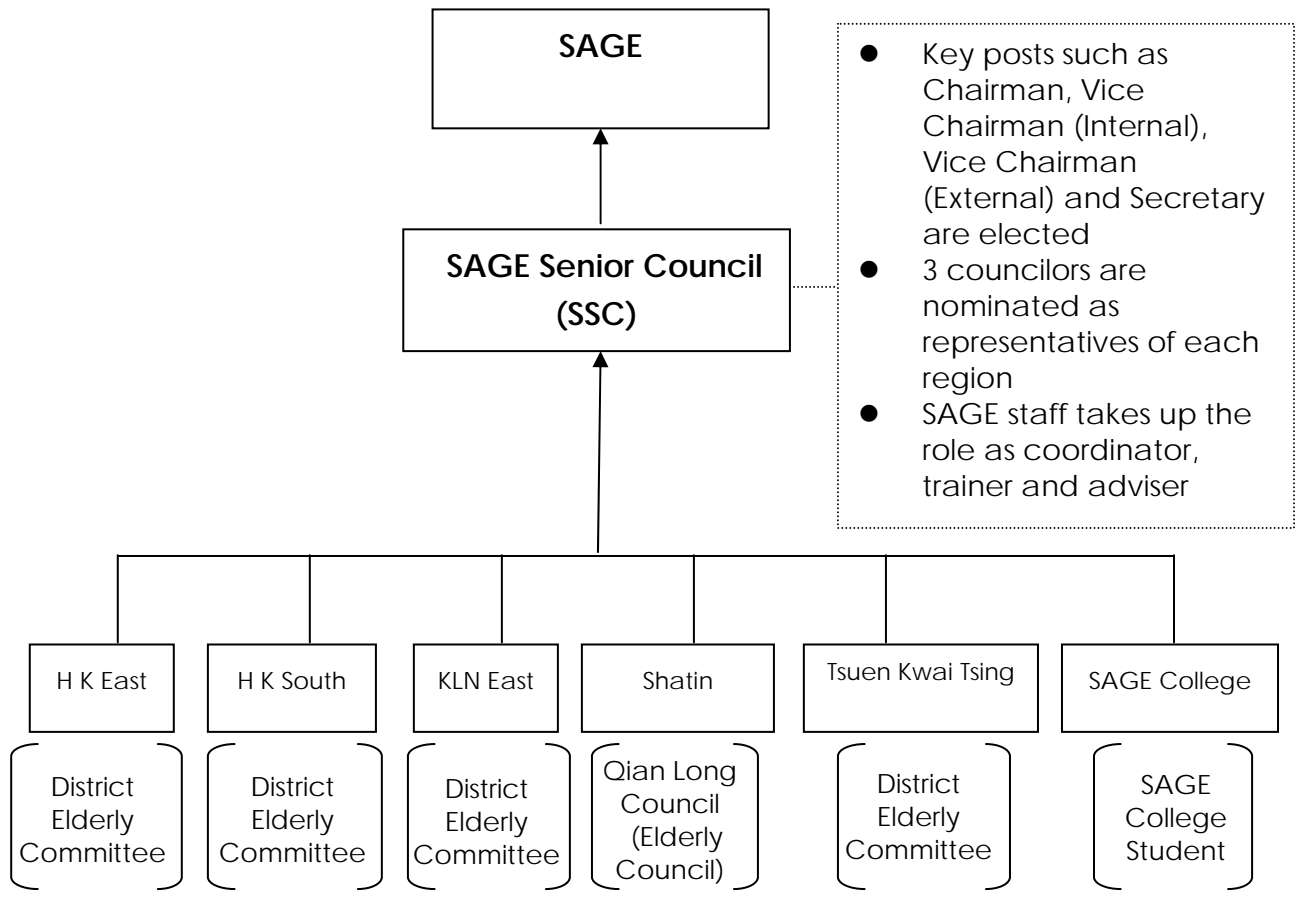
## **SAGE Senior Council, Hong Kong Society for The Aged**

### **香港耆康老人福利會 長者中央議會**

**SAGE Senior Council (SSC)** is an alliance of Hong Kong Society for The Aged (SAGE). It has been established since November of 2004. The objective of the SAGE Senior Council is to mobilize more public support for the well-being of the elderly through active participation and advocacy by and for the seniors themselves. The councilors come from six different regions or departments of SAGE, of which three members are elected from elders of the regions. The total number of councilors is eighteen. They hold their office positions for 2 years. The key posts are decided by votes of councilors. Their age ranges from 62 to 83. Among the councilors, three of them are wheel-chair users and six are living in residential homes while the others are community dwellers. Below would be the organization chart to SSC.

\*\* Is there any significant example to show the value of elders in this council?

## Structure of SAGE Senior Council



## **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.

### **OUR MISSION**

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

### **OUR OBJECTIVES**

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us :

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