



Partnerships and governance: Struggle, cooperation, and the role of NGOs in welfare delivery for the homeless in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the actual status of homeless support in Hong Kong, amidst the current welfare reforms, and analyzes how homeless support NGOs are currently positioned in the delivering of social welfare, especially now that social welfare is becoming increasingly devaluated in the postcrisis era. By paying attention to the various forms of government partnerships, this article will also set forth arguments on the theorization of Hong Kong as a shadow state and consider the outworking of this process in the case of a residual welfare system. It will do so by exploring the partnership status between homeless support NGOs and the Hong Kong Special Administration Region government.

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Introduction

The new political and economic reality after the hand-over to China in 1997 not only left its mark on Hong Kong's welfare system (Chan & Chu, 2002), it also paved the way for a change in governmental practices, resonating with the neoliberal state strategies of a “small government” (Chen & Pun, 2007) that gradually retrenches its welfare responsibilities (Lee, 1999; Wong & Lou, 2008). This retrenchment is based on the general belief that welfare problems can be dealt with more effectively by devaluating government services and encouraging the private market (Chen & Pun, 2007), revaluating (Confucian) kinship obligations (Chan, 1998), and promoting the concepts of self-help and volunteerism (Newendorp, 2008). These, then, become the new discursive guidelines that the government utilizes to counter the aggravating “budgetary woes” of the Asian financial post-crisis period (Goodstadt, 2009).

On the other hand, the retrenchment of social welfare responsibility is a delicate matter, for welfare restructuring may damage the government's legitimacy, especially keeping in mind that the development of the social welfare system in Hong Kong is contextualized against the public unrest incidents of the late 1960s (Tang, 1998; Wilding,

1997). The common strategy, then, to maintain legitimacy is to offload the responsibility of service delivery to non-state actors, predominately the non-profit sector (Lake, 1997 cited in Lee, 2005; Trudeau, 2008). Such processes of decreasing welfare provision and spending, and the transfer of these functions to the non-profit sector have been conceptualized as the emergence of a “shadow state” (DeVerteuil, Lee, & Wolch, 2002; Lake & Newman, 2002; Milligan & Conradson, 2006; Trudeau, 2008; Wolch, 1990) and of new collaborative partnerships (Elwood, 2004; Martin, 2004; Song, 2009). The “shadow state” theory lays out the multiplicity of service-providing NGOs that have overtaken public sector functions, operate outside traditional democratic politics, yet remain under government control. Such control is enforced through contracts and funding provisions, giving rise to criticisms that NGOs become purveyors of government ideals in order to retain scarce funding sources and, hence, compromise their autonomy (Dolhinow, 2005). They thus become mere “agents of the state” (Leung, 2002). While this is certainly the case in various partnerships, the overall reality should be approached more cautiously as these partnerships prove to be more complex than that of merely embracing government ideology. To this end, Trudeau (2008) has argued for a more “relational view” within this concept, in order not to overlook the negotiating capabilities and independent strengths these NGOs possess.

In contrast to the drastic downsizing and restructuring in Anglo-Saxon welfare states, to which the “shadow state”

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concept has been generally applied, Hong Kong has been adopting a residual welfare policy ever since the creation of its social welfare system, which means that it has maintained a small social security budget and strongly sticks to the ideologies of self-reliance and family dependency. Nonetheless, and despite its relatively small budget, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government (HKSAR) has undertaken several efforts to save on social security expenditures, such as reducing benefits and introducing workfare. In line with these efforts, it has also delegated some of its previous responsibilities by means of outsourcing to NGOs (Chan, 2009). Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of NGO–government partnerships in Hong Kong and how these can be situated in the “shadow state” theory, now that the HKSAR’s residual social welfare system and expenditures have constantly been subjected to budget cuts. In order to do so, it will focus on how the delivery of welfare services for the homeless over time has been conceptualized and how the dynamic relationships between the government and related NGOs have influenced the actual landscape of homeless support. By doing so, it will seek to raise some arguments on how this interplay constitutes particular forms of social governance in the era of social welfare retrenchment.

Welfare reform and government–NGO partnerships in Hong Kong

Ever since and even before Hong Kong developed its residual welfare system in the postwar period, it has been tremendously dependent on the voluntary sector for social service delivery. This dependency relationship has taken various forms over time and is a result of the evolving social, (geo)political, and economic conditions that existed over the years (Lee, 2005; Ng, 2006; Sawada, 2002; Tang, 1998). In fact, the establishment of the Social Welfare Office (the forerunner of the Social Welfare Department (SWD)), was originally foremost a means to liaise with voluntary agencies in order to secure sources for social welfare delivery¹. Although a difference in approach existed toward Chinese civic organizations and Western church organizations (see Lee, 2005), these voluntary agencies enjoyed a favorable position and were able to secure foreign funding. These funds were transferred from overseas churches, as the enormous increase of Chinese refugees in the postwar period aroused concern in these quarters. However, as the population became less transient and Hong Kong entered into economic prosperity in the latter half of the 1960s, these funds would afterward gradually decrease. Hong Kong’s social security was created in 1971, after the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s. Promoting social stability has always been important in Hong Kong, both in order for the colony to secure its geopolitical legitimacy from communist China, and to uphold an optimal environment for investment, since Hong Kong is completely dependent on the economic market (Wilding, 1997). The 1970s and 1980s were also a time when voluntary agencies would become more

¹ In order to facilitate the interaction with voluntary agencies, a coordinating non-statutory body was established under the name of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS).

Table 1

The number of street sleepers 1984–2009.

1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
971	NA	1333	1319	1343	1133	1009
1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
1073	1131	NA	1030	NA	1023	1019
1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
726	783	819	1150	785	529	463
2005	2006	2007	2008	2009		
NA	NA	335	358	421		

vocal in their activities, and started advocating against social injustices. Within the social service sector, this advocacy was also presumably influenced by the increasing number of social workers that graduated from social work courses,² who had come into close contact with student movements.

The SWD’s, 1979 White Paper, “Social Welfare in the 1980s”, marked the active involvement of the government in the field of social welfare (Wong, 1984). In adopting a residual welfare character aimed at supporting the most vulnerable groups – the poor, elderly, and disabled – the government assumed an “ultimate responsibility” to ensure satisfactory standards and a range of social services (SWD, 1979), as opposed to a welfare system to counter social inequality.³ With the dwindling overseas assistance, social welfare programs were no longer funded under a discretionary grant system but were now calculated on the basis of a standard cost funding system. The White Paper also set out a clearer delineation of the “division of responsibility” to “ensure targets are met and resources effectively used” regarding the delivery of social welfare services (emphasis added). In short, the government intended to decrease the relative autonomy of the voluntary agencies operating any kind of welfare program (Wong, 1984, p. 53). As NGOs were struggling to secure financial sources in the light of decreasing overseas funds, they became more reliant on the government. Nevertheless, the expansion of social welfare service and the climate for social engagement spurred the voluntary agency sector toward a further expansion, being described as the “big bang of expansion” (Tang, 1998) or “honeymoon period” (Ng, 2006). As we will see later on, the roots of the early development of homeless support services are situated within this time period.

Although the pressure for the expansion of social welfare was due to political and social factors,⁴ the increasing budget and economic revenues were instrumental to sustaining the rising costs of Hong Kong’s welfare system. Statistics show the increasing expenditures on social

² See Wong (1986), on the shortage of social work manpower and the introduction of academic social work courses.

³ Chan (1998, p. 282) illustrates this fact by showing that although able-bodied, unemployed persons aged 16–59 became eligible for social assistance after 1978, these categories actually remained excluded from these programs because of complicated application procedures and the fact that their access to welfare could hardly be considered a right.

⁴ Importantly, these developments also need to be contextualized against the decolonization accord reached between Britain and China in 1984 that presumably could result in an unstable political environment, thereby negatively affecting foreign investment and the colonial government’s legitimacy with respect to its citizens. Regarding volunteer organizations, Sawada (2002, p. 249) argues that increased political participation through the introduction of direct elections and an enhanced environment for social participation had a great impact on the extent of their social services. Moreover, as new structural poverty groups arose out of shifts in Hong Kong’s urban and demographic structure such as redevelopments and an aging society, more organizations started focusing on human rights and empowerment.

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