

THE CHOICE PREFERENCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE AGENCIES IN CHINESE AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMMUNITIES: AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK OF WELFARE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: Welfare management aims to foster a balance of power and cross-disciplinary synergy between the public sector and welfare actors at the macro level, while at the micro level, it seeks to create a synergistic impact on welfare outcomes. This logic is relevant to analyzing whether China has developed a public service system that prioritizes those most in need of support while integrating welfare quality with administrative performance in the process of outsourcing public services. As a community with both security and administrative needs, the sheltered housing community faces the dilemma of a lack of a welfare system in terms of its own welfare, public welfare, and the complexity of its residents. This thesis examines the extent to which the purchase of public services by the Public sector as a welfare delivery tool can avoid the "welfare trap" that breeds the new urban poor, using one of the largest subsidised housing communities in Eastern China as a case study. The study finds that the community as a whole is characterised by a mismatch between the supply and demand of public services, a lack of professionalism in social organisations and a constant iteration of old and new projects.

Keywords: Welfare management; Public service system; Public Service Agencies; Affordable housing community

1 INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) measure is the most widely used and conventional indicator of housing affordability. It serves as a core operational tool to identify and assess affordability concerns, leveraging easily accessible data from sources like the U.S. Census Bureau's American Housing Survey [1].

An analysis of HUD rental assistance programs shows they are insufficient for auto-dependent, sprawling areas, often leaving remote renters with high transportation costs [2]. The study suggests directing subsidies toward compact, transit-accessible locations for greater affordability, offering insights into welfare and management issues in dispersed U.S. settings, and informing China's development of large-scale secure housing communities.

China has recently shifted to constructing large-scale affordable housing communities, centralizing vulnerable populations instead of district-level rehousing. The community is crucial to social management, making public services within the community equally essential. This highlights the institutional and professional roles of multi-stakeholder management. To address resource constraints and management challenges, China now purchases public services, enabling professional social agencies and skilled social workers to provide targeted welfare and security services within these communities.

This study examines whether Public sector procurement of public services can meet the security and administrative needs of Chinese affordable housing communities within a Welfare management framework. It explores if such purchases can help avoid the "welfare trap" that may foster new urban poverty as affordable housing expands. By defining a "logic of Welfare management," this framework aims to guide future welfare service policy values.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Development and Transformation of Public Service Agencies in Welfare management

Esping-Andersen's third sector redefines Welfare management, emphasizing a shift from Public sector-led reform to a deregulated, market-oriented, and citizen-focused welfare partnership for more efficient social policy [3].

While the concept of Welfare management is widely used to interpret welfare reform since the 1970s [4], academic consensus on its operationalization remains elusive due to its complexity. Research typically divides into macro and micro perspectives: macro-level management highlights the shift from state-led welfare to market-integrated policies [5], reducing Public sector responsibility [6]. As Amenta notes, Welfare management aims to reduce risk, eliminate inequality, and ensure security, reflecting conceptual shifts in response to demands for social stability. Rather than signaling the collapse of the welfare state, it represents a transformation in Public sector power, focusing on balancing interests and building a social safety net through multi-actor collaboration.

Micro-level Welfare management seeks cross-sectoral collaboration among multiple actors through decentralization within a given welfare context [7]. Achieving satisfactory outcomes with a purely technical or risk-prevention model is challenging due to the increasing complexity and frequency of cross-border risks [8]. Involving multiple actors in

welfare provision can open new avenues for improvement and clarify the institutional costs associated with welfare spending and risk response. The focus lies not only on defining power and responsibility relationships but also on how the transformation of power mechanisms and actor involvement can improve welfare outcomes [9].

The focus is on both defining power and responsibility relationships among actors and assessing how the transformation of power mechanisms and actor involvement can enhance welfare outcomes.

The rise of New Public Management (NPM) emerged as a response to Welfare management, influenced by modern economics and private sector management theory [10]. Gaining prominence in the 1980s in developed Western nations [11], NPM advocates external standards, outcome-based approaches, and reduced public sector responsibility to promote competition and resource efficiency [12]. This paradigm encourages private sector involvement and the creation of public-private partnerships, where power, responsibility, and resources are shared [13]. In response to calls for "regulated Public sector contracting" [14], the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of public service procurement in the UK and US [15], evolving into a mainstream framework by the 1990s, impacting both developed and developing countries.

The rise of New Public Management (NPM) addressed the institutional need for Welfare management and led to policies focusing on purchasing public services for the deserving poor. Since 2006, the transformation of the public service system has been central to building a service-oriented Public sector in China, with the purchase of public services becoming a key output. Given China's transitional Welfare management between totalitarianism and devolution, it is important to assess whether its public service system effectively targets those most in need and balances welfare quality with management performance.

Durkheim argues that as traditional forms of social solidarity erode, intermediary associations should replace local institutions in providing welfare services like social security and public health, with a more sophisticated division of labor [16]. Drawing on the purchaser-provider split (PPS) concept, the purchasing relationship occurs between the public sector and qualified private service providers. Through "precise identification" of competent sellers, the Public sector acts as a "rational buyer" to transfer welfare service competence via contracts. Consequently, Welfare management has become a prevalent model, with Public sector funding public service organizations [17], making the purchase of public services a key focus of research in Welfare management [18].

2.2 The Development and Transformation of Public Service Agencies in Welfare management

In the United States, Public Service Agencies is referred to as purchase of service contracts or contract outsourcing, a concept equivalent to subvention or outsourcing of social welfare services in Hong Kong, China. Scholars in welfare studies view this practice as the allocation of social welfare funds to service agencies or the procurement of social services via public tenders.

Global approaches to Public sector service purchasing vary: the U.S. emphasizes a market model with extensive procurement regulations; France and Germany adopt a limited market approach; East Asia prioritizes Public sector provision; and Scandinavia relies on high taxes. Payment structures include grants, fiscal categories, vouchers, and loans. Despite differences, purchasing services via social organizations remains effective.

China's 2013 "Guidance on the Public sector's Purchase of Services from Social Forces" marked a shift toward expanding service purchases, reducing direct Public sector involvement, and fostering public-private partnerships under meta-management principles.

The international community has extensive experience in shifting Public sector power from public sector control to external actors, creating mechanisms to accommodate this change [19]. Private sector methods were developed to address public sector inefficiencies, but market-based delivery of social services has led to failures, such as in the UK healthcare sector, where providers focused on low-risk, high-return services to maximize profits [20].

Since the 1990s, the UK has increasingly relied on public-private hybrids and the third sector to complement Public sector welfare services, emphasizing trust in the welfare market. Information asymmetry can lead to profit-driven behaviors, such as inflated service prices. The "Reinventing Public sector" initiative, adopted across Europe, recognized the third sector's contribution to Welfare management, improving effectiveness by at least one-third.

Despite five waves of public service reforms in the UK, influencing other countries, comparative studies on cross-sector welfare providers are scarce [21]. The rise of new organizations complicates traditional sector categorizations, and due to limited data, research on the third sector's characteristics and management mechanisms remains underdeveloped [22]. This study aims to examine the Welfare management performance of public service social organizations within specific community contexts.

2.3 The Welfare Dilemma of Affordable Housing Communities

Since 1995, China has established an institutional model for subsidized housing through land allocation, funding large-scale affordable housing projects, including low-cost, public rental, and policy rental housing as part of the Comfort Living Project.

Public sectors in the UK, US, Singapore, and Hong Kong have implemented social policies to promote affordable housing construction. The US, through the 1937 public housing plan and the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act, established a subsidy-based framework for low- and middle-income families, ensuring 20% of new public housing units for low-income households [23]. The UK has enacted numerous laws, such as the 2003 Shared Ownership Scheme,

to protect citizens' housing rights and assist low-income homeownership. In Singapore, the Housing and Development Board's policy, initiated in 1959 and expanded by 2011, covers 82.4% of the population through affordable housing. Hong Kong's Public Housing Policy, introduced in 1954, provides affordable rental and purchasing options for low- and middle-income groups.

In summary, the relationship between Public sector intervention and privatization can be categorized as follows: Singapore applies strict income assessments, progressively privatizing housing based on household income. In the US, there is a trend toward reduced state intervention, with family planning assessments guiding living arrangements and guaranteeing both rental and ownership rights. The UK emphasizes the rule of law to promote housing privatization. Hong Kong has introduced flexible land leasing policies to activate a rental-based public housing market. This reflects a decreasing intensity of Public sector intervention and increasing flexibility in privatization approaches.

Affordable housing projects have created a homogeneous urban welfare space, but poor public service accessibility has led to fragmented welfare delivery, particularly in areas with limited resource capture. The land valuation system, driven by macro-control and market forces, has resulted in the centralization of affordable housing planning, leading to spatial segregation and the relocation of residents away from urban centers. Simultaneously, housing mobility has created welfare clusters among the middle and working classes.

This isolation and clustering can exacerbate relative deprivation and group isolation, contrary to the Public sector's intentions of equitable welfare redistribution. Low-income households, the elderly, sick, disabled, migrant workers, and newcomers are concentrated in these communities, facing significant welfare deficits. This situation, marked by welfare and institutional challenges, warrants further academic investigation into the public service mechanisms within affordable housing communities.

3 METHOD

The study categorized participants into three groups: (1) community staff involved in the Public Service Agencies, (2) professionals delivering public services, including agency staff and social workers, and (3) residents receiving these services in protected housing estates. A total of 28 interviewees were selected through purposive sampling, including four community staff, five social organization staff, and 19 residents. Intentional sampling was employed to identify participants who could provide the most detailed and informative responses. Informed consent was obtained to ensure comprehensive and accurate data.

3.1 Choice Logic and Strategic Preferences for Public Service Agencies in Subsidized Housing Communities

3.1.1 Fragmentation of supply and demand and fragmentation of services

Socially disadvantaged groups often have limited awareness of civic participation, their own rights, and the roles of Public sector and social organizations, resulting in a reliance on family for welfare provision and weak subjectivity within the welfare system. Among the 19 residents receiving services, only nine were aware that the services were Public sector-funded, and most lacked a clear understanding of the role and purpose of social organizations. This reflects a low awareness of Public sector-purchased public services and related policies. Interaction between residents and social organizations often involves gratitude from parents and elderly for low-cost services, with organizations playing a leading role. However, many community activities are Public sector-driven, with residents passively participating in Public sector-organized events.

As Amartya Sen argues [24], access to public services varies between disadvantaged and advantaged groups, with disadvantaged households facing greater barriers to consistent service access. This study found that community service users often cannot effectively access services, and some residents are dissatisfied with the current offerings. The community has a significant aging population, with 14,100 individuals over 60, including 2,662 over 80, 1,700 empty nesters, and 126 disabled or semi-disabled individuals. However, medical services are limited, with few service points, short durations, and low frequencies, making it difficult to meet the needs of the elderly.

"We love charity clinics, but this one is too infrequent. A few doctors have come to Nanjing Chinese Hospital before, to take pulses, blood pressure, and so on, which is good. But they only came once and stayed for two days. I only found out the next day that there were a lot of people in the queue." (Mr Z, community resident, information code: QX-1018)

"Before that an old sister of mine said that there was a free clinic in their area to look at teeth and also give children what free dental cleaning and fillings to send toothpaste, that regardless of whether it costs money or not, so many of these medical type resources we don't have here." (Ms L, community resident, information code: QX-1012)

The community offers several elderly services, such as "Saijinbao Helpers" and "15-minute meals," but participation is low and the services are highly homogeneous. During the research period, the reading and calligraphy rooms were largely unused, with sign-in sheets showing usage rates below 50%.

"Activities for the elderly are now a lot more, basically singing and dancing volunteering, a while ago the fan dance team and square dance team even performed, just us old sisters." Then the old men are just generally sitting at chess and cards, but there's not much in the reading and writing room; it's basically empty." (Ms C, community resident, information code: XS-1104).

In recent years, the community has prioritized youth development through public service purchases, establishing family education guidance stations and programs such as "Care for Children in Distress," "Youth Development," "Parents' Salon," and "Parenting Forum." While these initiatives focus on after-school care, school support, and volunteering,

they lack sufficient interest classes for children and youth, failing to address the education resource deficit in peripheral protected housing communities.

"There are so many lectures on the weekends, or classes with mum, it's not fun. Other people have fun playing with Lego puzzles, crafts, and roller skates." (Student L, community resident, profile code: QX-1207)

The D-affordable housing community has a complex demographic, including over 400 individuals with mental illness, 140 with depression, as well as drug addicts, AIDS patients, and former prisoners. Social services in the community are primarily purchased through public bidding, with projects divided into five categories: "community management," "cultural services," "women and children's services," "elderly services," and "youth services." However, there are no specialized services for these vulnerable groups, and no relevant project indicators have been included in recent tender announcements. Interviews with social workers highlighted the need for more targeted public service provision that addresses the specific needs of large housing communities.

"Going to do a needs assessment survey is something that should be done before coming in, and it's all for naught if the project application doesn't come down." At the moment, communities like D are tendering for public services in the same way as ordinary commercial housing communities, and the projects are all relatively mainstream. "There is not yet a refined program for different groups in different communities at the time of the annual tender, but the welfare needs of community residents are definitely still different from others." (T Organisation Social Worker, Resource Code: QX-1025).

The welfare needs of disadvantaged groups in sheltered housing communities require more precise service responses. However, existing public services fail to address these needs, with issues such as poor alignment between service design and user needs, a lack of social worker support, and service groups' inward focus. As a result, there is little engagement between residents and community services, and special groups lack compensatory services. This highlights a "gap in awareness" regarding the distinct needs of sheltered housing communities. Such communities often reflect a city's welfare ideology and service capacity, necessitating management strategies that prioritize need fulfillment, risk avoidance, redress, and protection. However, the absence of effective welfare need mapping and risk group identification by social organizations undermines their role in these communities, leading to weak management and misallocated resources.

3.1.2 Organisational resource dependency and lack of autonomy

The fragmentation of public service supply and demand in housing communities stems from the weak autonomy and dependency of social organizations. Primarily funded by the Public sector and lacking social capital, these organizations face a Public sector-driven "preference for choice" in service provision. This power-autonomy dynamic is constrained, leading to paradoxical underfunding. Limited Public sector allocations and the absence of authority for fee-based projects leave social organizations in a vulnerable position, reliant on insufficient resources and long-term dependence.

"A lot of the residents are recruited directly by the community to come out and participate in the activities, it's mainly about community support. We are still under pressure, we have been doing activities throughout the year to catch up on assessments and reports, and their [the community's] affirmation is most important." (Organisation X social worker, file code: QX-1103)

Social organization A in this study relies on the Nanjing Public Welfare Investment Programme and is in its early stages of development. Its annual funding is around 400,000 yuan, of which it only charges for after-school tutoring and weekend extensions in the "community youth services" track. The resource situation is concentrated and homogeneous. In this situation, organization A is highly dependent on Public sector resources, both tangible resources such as financial support and intangible resources such as substantive legitimacy. When a social organization in the community has a new idea or wants to hold an event, it must report to the community to inform them in advance, and the community's support is needed for the construction of the service platform, the approval of the venue for holding the event, and the mobilization of publicity.

"Each organization holds regular meetings every month and invites the community to attend. They are, after all, led by the community, and the organization will dovetail with us in time if it has new ideas. Whether it is a grassroots organisation led by the community or a professional organisation introduced, since it serves in my community, we must have constraints on it for the sake of the community and the residents, it is impossible to introduce it and then let it carry out its services. It is inevitable to regulate and to be accountable to the community and its residents." (Community Director H, Information Code: QX-1214)

As Gareth notes(2009) [25], "most Public sector purchases of public services require communities as the vehicle for their delivery, and one of the attractions of social organizations providing public services is their potential to shape the social capital of communities." In China's current social housing communities, there is a strong welfare character, and in a "strong Public sector-weak society" institutional environment, the Public sector is always the institutional power that holds the purchasing power. In the local context, the organizations outside the institutional fence are largely confined to a phased survival strategy and lack professionalism. In this context, it is clearly a paradox to place hopes on the incubation of a capital market among community residents as a possible alternative to Public sector contracting, and therefore the development of a service market is not yet suitable to be at the forefront of the logic of welfare-based management if a hierarchy of needs is attempted by means of a precise needs assessment.

3.1.3 Competitive logic and the paradox of sustainability

Since the adoption of tendering for social service allocation, Public sector purchasing has become embedded in a logic of administrative contracting, emphasizing efficiency, competition, and outsourcing in the Public sector-social organization relationship. While this aligns with New Public Management principles, scholars increasingly recognize

that competitive logic can lead to market failure in the Public sector/non-profit organization relationship.

The research found that public-service social organizations are both project-driven and fatigued by project demands, leading to management focusing on higher-level priorities and neglecting grassroots needs. The shift from addressing needs to prioritizing evaluation has turned these organizations into "delivery-based" or "assessment-based" entities. In addition to daily documentation, organizations must meet numerous performance metrics, including regular reports, publicity, and case documentation. With rising project application thresholds and performance standards, social workers are increasingly trained in report writing and project applications, while volunteers handle basic services, resulting in a potential loss of focus on core service delivery.

China's decentralization encourages local Public sectors to compete for growth, prioritizing short-term, high-visibility projects due to the lack of standardized performance appraisals and appeal mechanisms. However, for disadvantaged groups and professional social organizations, continuity in public services is crucial for enhancing well-being and ensuring quality. In a market with tight timelines and annual project cycles, maintaining continuity of professional services is persistently challenging.

Project funding is disbursed in three instalments: 30% at the start, 40% after passing the mid-term assessment, and the remaining 30% upon successful completion, based on the final assessment. If the project fails the assessment, it is terminated and must be resubmitted the following year or withdrawn if no new project is available.

"Our organization is mainly dependent on the Public sector, now they are more in favor of the group and community work, these can leave a trace, run activities have an impact good publicity, for us or to produce results to write a case, the case is too small the cycle is long, you are not good every time to take pictures to promote what, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of not significant to be cut in the middle, that is better not to do, so we basically did not." (Organization Y social worker, information code: XS-1109)

Attention to the welfare needs of disadvantaged groups should necessarily be an ongoing, long-term, and dynamic mechanism, and whether their welfare needs can be effectively communicated also depends on whether they can receive continuous supportive support. Annualised cycle projects can hardly provide in-depth long-term follow-up services, and services for disadvantaged groups need even longer cycles to show results. However, the current performance-based, fast-paced, market-based competition model inevitably leads to a significant loss of quality in public services, resulting in the failure of long-cycle, high-quality services. In this way, social housing communities are more a synonym for geopolitical than functional, an intermediary vehicle for a Public sector-commissioned social organization to act as an agent for service projects, while at the level of service effectiveness, they are mostly in a state of impatience where old and new projects are constantly iterated. This state of impatience will, I am afraid, spread to a collective anxiety in China's public-service social organizations, a developmental cage that will be difficult to break free from in the short term.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on a theoretical perspective of Welfare management, this paper analyses the logic of choice and strategic preferences of Public Service Agencies in the practice of D-sheltered housing communities. The study finds that the untimely and weak access to public services has led to a secondary risk pattern of "welfare delivery disconnect" in the affordable- housing communities, where the welfare needs of a large number of special groups have not been included in the welfare redistribution.

The plight of residents in China's affordable- housing communities stems not only from insufficient welfare resources but also from the mismatch between the supply and demand for public services. This issue is rooted in the current institutional design of welfare resource transfer and social organization development. Social organizations, reliant on Public sector funding, face an asymmetrical dependency that limits their autonomy in work content, finances, decision-making, and operations. The "commission-agent system" has constrained their institutional power, weakening their ability to shape community social capital. This results in ineffective service delivery, a stagnant professional workforce, and an over-reliance on volunteers, leading to a situation of "amateurism in philanthropy" and "market failure."

Based on the above analysis, this paper further puts forward effective countermeasures and suggestions for the Public sector's purchase of public services from the levels of system, subject and financial guarantee, as follows: First, based on the current situation that China's existing laws and regulations and the construction of a large number of guaranteed housing are relatively lagging behind, it is necessary to carry out corresponding system construction. It should be based on the basic principle of safeguarding the welfare needs of the disadvantaged groups, improve the system related to Public Service Agencies as the goal, and pay more attention to the sustainability of work with the disadvantaged groups. The project cycle can be extended to an appropriate extent, reserving room for competition for public services with long and in-depth cycles. Secondly, in order to change the passive participation role of residents and encourage them to express their needs, it is necessary to incubate residents' autonomous organisations and collect community residents' needs in the form of grassroots organisations, so as to achieve specialisation and customisation in the provision of community public services and seek a dynamic balance between welfare demand and supply. On the one hand, we can learn from the characteristics of community groups and from the advanced experience of other communities to form community psychological counseling centers and community anti-drug associations to cope with the special needs of depressed people and drug addicts; on the other hand, we can guide the current ad hoc community organizations to develop into mature community autonomous organization, for example, by consolidating the now established illegal pyramid scheme self-defense teams in the community and improving their institutional, financial, and personnel

structures. The third social organization should develop multiple sources of funding. Thirdly, social organizations should develop multiple sources of funding. They can seek support from enterprises, club donations, relevant foundations, and public welfare organizations by building up their social reputation and branding their organizations in order to draw in diverse resources and take more ownership.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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