

Performance Assessment for Welfare Service Organisations under the New Public Management Reform

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30th April 2018

1. Introduction

In Hong Kong, the government-funded social service organisations have been playing a significant role in providing social care and welfare services since the late colonial era (Lee, 2012; Leung, 2002). However, the conventional input-oriented subvention model had been frequently challenged for its inflexibility, inefficiency and lack of accountability (Coopers & Lybrand, 1996; Leung, 2002). In the mid-1990s, a managerialist reform on welfare services was initiated by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) to counter the economic downturn and the rapid diffusion of new social demands (Lee, 2012; Wong, 2008). The output-based subvention system, along with the designated performance monitoring measures and competitive bidding, has commenced a new chapter of reforming social services in Hong Kong. The New Public Management (NPM) model has gained prominence worldwide for its pursuit of efficiency, responsiveness, performance improvement and accountability by injecting competitions in the public sector (Gore, 1994; Pollitt 2002). Nonetheless, the presumed supremacy of market values and the business-like practices under the NPM reform have provoked debates on its compatibility with the distinctive mission and nature of social services organisations (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Tsui & Cheung, 2009).

This paper first provides an overview of the managerialist reform on welfare services in Hong Kong. It moves on to illustrate the generic function and political significance of

performance assessment to welfare service organisations within the NPM framework. Further, it offers a descriptive account of the government-initiated performance assessment measures for subvented services, namely the Service Performance Monitoring System (SPMS). The design of this output-oriented assessment mechanism will also be discussed, as a proxy of the performance assessment model for social service organisations. Moreover, the paper identifies the emerged operational challenges towards effective performance assessment in welfare sector, which will be presented along with the possible suggestion and insights for welfare management.

2. The New Public Management Reform on Social Welfare Services in Hong Kong

Starting from the 1980s, the residual welfare system in Hong Kong has been placed under tension, due to the intensifying public expectation for more comprehensive social care in the midst of challenges from the post-industrialism and economic globalisation (Lee, 2012; McLaughlin, 1993). As illustrated by Leung (2002, p. 62), ‘existing welfare services are being criticised not only as inefficient but also insensitive to the needs of users’. In 1994, a consultancy study was authorized by the government to review the conventional subvention system, which proposed that ‘clearer sets of performance measures should be introduced to make subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) more accountable for their service

quality' (Health and Welfare Bureau & Social Welfare Department, 1999). Approaching the end of the millennium, the Asian financial crisis has revealed the inadequacy of the social welfare system in its entirety (Lee, 2012). Both the state and the welfare sector have come to the consensus that the input-based subvention system has shaped inflexibility in resources allocation, as well as disincentivised innovations and efficiency (Director of Social Welfare, 1999; Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1999). The dissatisfaction among the public and the government put forth the reform on the 'costly' and 'bureaucratic' social services (Leung, 2002). However, instead of establishing a more comprehensive social security and welfare model as observed in Taiwan and South Korea, Hong Kong was confined to its fiscal conservatism, which resulted in welfare retrenchment and cutting off in social services (Kwon, 2009; Wilding, 2008).

In the early 2000s, the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System (LSGSS), Service Performance Monitoring System (SPMS) and competitive bidding were officially implemented. The set of market-like practice mechanism, including competition, performance-based service contract and standardized measurable performance indicators, was introduced to the public sector within the framework of managerialism (Leung, 2002). As illustrated by the government, efficiency, flexibility and cost-effectiveness have become the fundamental pillars in social welfare management (Lump Sum Grant Independent Review

Committee, 2008)¹.

2.1. Performance Assessment for Welfare Service Organisations in the New Public Management Era

According to Lynch-Cerullo and Cooney (2011), the application of business-like practices in welfare management has created rising accountability pressure for human service organisations in the past decades. Few would disagree that performance assessments are increasingly recognized as an end to satisfy the accountability demands from the funders and the public through demonstrating the service achievements. However, as suggested by Fisher (2005), performance assessment is ‘a method of continuous assessment of programs through data collection and analysis while feeding this information back into program design’ (p. 36). Hence, in addition to the administrative pressure from the funders, performance assessment is essential in identifying the discrepancy between the recent and anticipated levels of service performance, which provides concrete information of how the weaknesses can be modified or how strengths can be enhanced (Fisher, 2005).

Furthermore, despite the generic management role as stated above, performance assessments have represented a significant implication for the changing politics in welfare

¹ ‘By exercising flexibility in resource deployment, NGOs can enhance efficiency in their operation, which in turn will enable them to deliver quality service in a more cost-effective manner’ (Lump Sum Grant Independent Review Committee, 2008, p. 57).

services under the NPM reform. In Hong Kong, some 80% of the social care services are publicly funded, whereas the remaining portion is subsidized by programme fees, corporation donations and charity foundations (Wong, 2008). In 2017, 165 subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) opted for the LSG system, which covered over 99% of the total recurrent subvention (Social Welfare Department, 2017). Evidence suggested that the extensive use of performance-based service contracts has restructured the power relations between the government and the NGOs (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002; Lee, 2012). As demonstrated by Lee (2012, p. 545), ‘a high level of state dependency for resources coupled with the NPM reform measures result in the strengthening of the leverage for state control over non-profit organisations (NPOs)’. More specifically, through the use of Funding & Service Agreements (FSAs) and competitive bidding, the government’s role has been purposefully transformed into a service purchaser, which can unilaterally decide resources allocation based on the performance of the welfare organisations. The government is now entitled to purposefully perform the ‘steering instead of rowing’ role in social services with its substantial financial authority and the market-like mechanism (Wong, 2008). Nonetheless, in contrast to the private sector, the roles of service consumer (i.e. clients) and bill payer (i.e. government) are usually separated in the field of human services (Tsui & Cheung, 2009). Hence, the state funding is primarily granted on the basis of the demonstrated outcomes of social services.

Therefore, human service non-profit sector faces rising pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of their services through measurable outputs and outcomes (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011).

2.2. The Utilisation and Implication of the Service Performance Monitoring

System

As discussed above, the government as the service purchaser has the financial and operational dominance in resources allocation under the new streamlined funding system. As a result, to fulfil the outcome expectation of the public, funder has become the principal aspiration of the subvented organisations (Martin, 2005). Therefore, the Service Performance Monitoring System (SPMS) introduced by the SWD is believed to have an inevitable influence on the performance assessment of the subvented social service organisations.

The SPMS is comprised of three main parts, namely the Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs), Service Performance Standards and performance audit. Under the mentioned system, the service performance will be assessed based on the FSAs drafted between the government and the NGOs, through the generic set of service performance standards (Wong, 2008). In addition, the monitoring of service performance also includes regular service visits, self-assessment reporting and audits of service statistics. According to the Performance Assessment Manual issued by the Department, 'if a service operator of an

NGO fails to make any improvement to achieve a reasonable standard of performance according to its agreement with SWD, the latter has the power to withhold or terminate the subvention to it' (Social Welfare Department, September 2012, p. 5). Thus, the FSAs are perceived as relational contracts for the subvented services, which define the mutual obligations of the funder and the service providers (Wong, 2008).

Furthermore, as shown on the Assessment Manual, the agreements are composed of the generic sections and service-specific sections. The former has stated the obligations of SWD, performance monitoring measures and the government's role in overseeing the service performance; while the latter has included specific service definitions and designated performance standards (Social Welfare Department, September 2012). More significantly, the Service Performance Standards can be divided into four parts, namely Essential Service Requirements (ESRs), Service Quality Standards (SQS), Output Standards (OS) and Outcome Standards (OC). Firstly, ESRs stipulate basic requirement of the infrastructure for service provision according to the service type, which may include staff composition, opening hours and availability of a particular equipment. Secondly, for every service type, a specific set of OS is drawn up in the respective agreements, which is the quantitative measure of the core-programme provided by the particular service, such as enrolment rate, number of organised groups, number of registered members. Thirdly, SQSs define the level of service

provision and management that the NGOs is expected to achieve, which is established based on four principles, including information transparency, resources management, responsiveness to users' needs and the rights of service users. Lastly, OC is designed to measure the effectiveness of service by evaluating the positive changes of service users, such as the enhancement of support network, or clients' satisfaction rate. Nevertheless, only around 30% of the subvented service types have formulated specific OC on their agreements. In summary, the Service Performance Standards articulated on the service agreements are mostly output-oriented and quantifiable, which apparently reflects the government's perspective in performance assessment in welfare services, i.e. only measurable outputs/outcomes (which account for a small portion) are being assessed.

3. Impacts of Service Performance Monitoring System in Social Welfare Management

The preceding session has provided a comprehensive picture of the performance monitoring mechanism adopted by the government. In the following part, we will move on to discuss the appropriateness, adequacy and impact of the SPMS for social welfare management. As mentioned, the state-funded social service organisations are intended to comply with the government's expectation and requirement, given the reasonable concern for survival (Tsui & Cheung, 2009). Hence, it is undoubted that the focus and requirements of the

external monitoring system would extensively influence the internal assessment practice of the subvented welfare service agencies. Therefore, this paper attempts to illustrate the major impacts brought by SPMS and explain the ways the external monitoring system have shifted the direction of performance assessments in the welfare sector. Moreover, the SPMS is taken as a proxy for evaluating the design of the performance assessment system in social services.

3.1. Quantitative Outputs Versus Qualitative Outcomes

As demonstrated above, the generic sets of performance indicators listed on the service agreements are regarded as the principle tool for overseeing and monitoring the subvented welfare services. Nonetheless, it is noted that the quantitative outputs, such as the amount of services provided and the completion rate of key activities, have constituted the major part of the assessment. According to Martin and Kettner (1996), the output performance measures echo with the rising concern for efficiency and cost-effectiveness in operating welfare services, as both of which are determined by the comparison of outputs to inputs. In other words, under the efficiency perspective, the performance is completing the greatest amount of required services with the smallest resources possible, which closely resembles the goals of business management (Martin & Kettner, 1996)². However, as suggested by Titmuss (1974), the goals of human service organisations are usually complied

² In business administration, the ultimate goal of an enterprise is to maximize the profits, which is usually achieved by maximizing the outputs with containing inputs.

with social work values, such as social responsibility, professional ethics and social responsibility, which are difficult to be measured by quantitative outputs. As a result, the shift of focus on cost-effectiveness and efficiency in human services may undermine the effectiveness of the programmes, which can possibly lead to high productivity of low quality service or unsatisfactory outcomes. Therefore, Tsui and Cheung (2009) suggested that, 'the pursuit of effective service is and should be the primary concern of social work administration' (p. 152).

3.2. Difficulty in Ascertaining Service Outcome and Service Quality

As defined by Martin and Kettner (1996), outcome is 'a measure of effectiveness' (p. 63), which is shown by attainment of the desirable social result in compliance with the organisational goals. Though outcome standards (OC) are created for some subvented social services (45 out of 148 funded service types), international experience has suggested that the effectiveness of human services can hardly be reflected by the performance indicators, given the complexity of service production (Walsh & Kieron, 1995). For instance, it is noted that the trust and reciprocity between clients and social workers is crucial in facilitating positive changes in the helping process. However, such dynamic relationship and the associated interactions could hardly be transformed into quantifiable terms (Chu & Tsui, 2008). Also, according to Lynch-Cerullo and Cooney (2011), despite the social work intervention, the

changes of clients are heavily affected by the external environment, such as domestic crisis, social policy or economy, which creates uncertainty in evaluating the effectiveness of the programmes. Last but not least, the outcomes of specific social services, e.g. community development, may take place over a long period of time, which adds difficulty in developing appropriate outcome measures (Snibbe, 2006).

In addition, given the accountability demands, it is vital to include quality consideration in performance assessment, which may cover clients' satisfaction rate, public image and reputation of the service agencies, reduced errors in service operation, etc (Martin & Kettner, 1996). Though the reporting of clients' satisfaction rate is found in certain subvented services, the quality assurance of the service is remained largely ambiguous. Moreover, the authenticity of the satisfaction rate is also concerned, since the service users may be placed in a vulnerable position under the imbalance power structure of service provision. Therefore, the mechanism of inspection may be necessary for ensuring the quality of welfare services. *(Performance audit measures do exercise control over the service providers to assure service quality. But it does not necessarily correct the imbalance power structure between the service providers and service users.)*

3.3. Recommendation to Improve the Service Performance Monitoring System

It is increasingly recognized that performance monitoring system is paramount for enhancing the accountability, efficiency, quality and effectiveness of welfare services (Wong, 2002). In order to better achieve the stated management function, the SPMS is suggested to include more comprehensive outcome standards, rather than the extensive use of output performance measures. In addition, as suggested by Hardina (2005), clients' participation should be encouraged during the development of performance monitoring system, since their needs are recognized as the fundamental direction of welfare services. Also, given the operational difficulty in measuring outcomes, qualitative assessments such as publication, exhibition and public sharing may be adopted to demonstrate the impacts and results of social services. *(publication and public sharing are means to deliver results of assessment. You have yet to identify ways to collect qualitative performance data for informing service improvement.)* Relevant examples include 'Fokufulam Village: A Historical Settlement below Victoria Peak', talent show by people with disability, etc. Further, such qualitative expression of outcomes may provide a more descriptive picture for the funder and the public in understanding the changes brought by the welfare services.

4. Challenges towards Effective Performance Assessment in Welfare Service

Organisations

To assess how welfare service organisations can assess their performance more effectively, we shall reiterate the purposes of performance assessment. Despite the external accountability pressure, the primary motivation for performance assessment is and should be service improvement, which can hardly be achieved under the government monitoring system (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011). Therefore, the social service organisations are suggested to develop their own assessment model, so as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the service, and hence truly attain the purposes of performance assessment.

More importantly, as concluded by Fisher (2005), ‘key to outcomes measurement is not only the final measurement plan, but the process involved on designing, implementing, and revising the plan’ (p. 36). Nonetheless, as concerned by social work administrators, the design and implementation of performance assessments often involve significant organisational changes, which may be rife with challenges (Fisher, 2005). Hence, this paper will carry on identifying the operational challenges that may emerge when implementing performance assessment and address them with possible solutions.

4.1. Staff Resistance

As suggested by scholars, the successful development of performance assessment system usually requires high level of staff involvement (Martin & Kettner, 1996; Neuman, 2002). Nevertheless, it is noted the staff buy-in is never easy to achieve (Fisher, 2005;

Hultman, 1998). Firstly, given the lack of understanding towards the management function, arisen concerns for the utilization of performance data is revealed (Mecca & Rivera, 2002). More specifically, the staff may worry that the performance data would be used to evaluate their professional competence, especially when the intended outcomes are not reached (Fisher, 2005). Secondly, in addition to the distrust of data collection, performance assessment may be in conflicts with professionalism, since the social workers may consider their services as 'intrinsically beneficial', who thence reject any form of evaluation or challenges (Carter, 1988; Fisher, 2005). Lastly, as raised by Kraus and Horan (1997), the utility of the collected data as well as the purpose of assessment is central to the motivation and involvement of the staff. According to Fisher (2005), 'without making the data useful, the staff may see no use in collecting it' (p. 38). Hence, despite the simple notion of 'fulfilling the external requirement', the performance data should be purposely used to generate positive changes for the services.

As illustrated above, the staff resistance mainly originates from the distrust and lack of understanding for performance assessment. Therefore, communication and participation may be crucial in resolving the concerns of the team members. In particular, a focus group is proposed to be organized in the initial stage, which carries the role of designing, implementing and reviewing the performance assessment system (Martin & Kettner, 1996). The group should be composed of representatives of different stakeholders in the services,

who are regarded as bridges to connect the administrators with the ordinary staff and service user. Hence, the group members are significant in three main perspectives: 1) to contribute their knowledge (both theoretical and experiential) to the assessment process, 2) to actively collect feedbacks from different levels of service programmes, 3) to promote and explain the management functions in response to the emerged concerns. Moreover, some also suggested that a team leader may be essential for providing guidance and support throughout the assessment process (Neuman, 2003; Fisher, 2005).

However, as noted by Fisher (2003), the participatory assessment system may require considerable time and resources, which is considered as another substantial obstacle for social welfare management.

4.2. Adequacy of resources

As discussed above, the design and implementation of performance assessment usually involve significant organisational change. Therefore, the adequacy of resources, which may include financial subsidy, labour and technological support, appears as an inevitable consideration for social welfare administrators (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney 2011). For instance, a study conducted in the United States discovered that social service organisations with more adequate financial resources are more likely to implement performance assessments in their services (Zimmerman & Stevens, 2006). Nonetheless,

notwithstanding the rising demands for performance assessments, the funders have provided little monetary support for the management system, which resulted in stagnation of performance assessment techniques across the field (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney 2011). Also, as described above, additional labour inputs which are expected to collect, review and report the data are necessary for performance assessment. However, given the time constraint and heavy workload, the staff may hesitate to take up administrative roles. Furthermore, when the staffs are requested to conform in the performance assessments, they may provide inaccurate performance data, due to the stress and confusion throughout the assessment process (Mecca & Rivera, 2000).

In respond to the concerns of resources, Fisher (2005) suggested that social service organisations should actively allocate the potential funding sources from the various social groups, such as charity fund and corporate donations. In addition, a rewarding system is also suggested to be integrated with the welfare management, so as to motivate the voluntary participation of the staffs as well as different stakeholders in the assessment process (Fisher, 2005). In particular, the rewards can be offered in the form of compensation leave, job-sharing, bonus or service certificate (more appropriate for the service users).

5. Conclusion

It is well-illustrated that the managerialist reform on welfare services has brought vital changes to the public sector. In responding to the ever-changing environmental demands, the social welfare managers have devoted themselves to acquiring new management tools and complying with business-like practice (Tsui & Cheung, 2009). However, as criticised by Reinders (2008), 'the impact of managerialism on organisational culture appears to have been that it reverses the order of priority between primary and secondary processes (of service production)' (p. 569). More specifically, without understanding the distinctive mission and content of welfare service, the management is done for itself and by itself. Therefore, social workers are reminded to embrace the person-centred and empowerment characterises of social work while performing the administrative role. Also, the professional values, knowledge and skills should not be undermined by the managerialist measures imposed (Tsui & Cheung, 2009).

In conclusion, this paper has reviewed the background and impacts of the NPM reform on social services. It also demonstrates the nature and political significance of performance assessment, by debunking the imbalanced power relationship between the government and the subvented service agencies. Furthermore, the SPMS is used as a model to illustrate the arisen difficulties for designing appropriate performance indicators in human service organisations. Lastly, the operational challenges for effective performance assessment

are discussed, along with the possible solutions and recommendation.

Work Count: 3518

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<i>Assessment area</i>	<i>Assessment standard</i>	<i>Grade</i>
<i>Knowledge (40%)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Able to employ relevant concepts and theoretical knowledge to formulate the discussion</i> - <i>Demonstrate accurate understanding of relevant concepts and theoretical knowledge</i> 	<i>A</i>
<i>Analytic vigor (40%)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Able to make critical appraisal of theoretical knowledge and its application</i> - <i>Able to connect theoretical knowledge with past experiences and encounters to enrich understanding of management practices in welfare context</i> - <i>Able to make strong and logical arguments in the discussion</i> 	<i>A</i>
<i>Writing quality (20%)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Able to maintain logical flow in the discussion</i> - <i>Demonstrate proficiency in language use</i> - <i>Appropriate and extensive use of literature</i> 	<i>A</i>
<i>Total:</i>		<i>A</i>

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