

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND COUNTERMEASURES OF GOVERNMENT PURCHASE OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES IN CHINA

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Abstract

“Government’s purchase of social assistance services” plays an important role in accelerating the transformation of government functions and enhancing both the efficiency and effectiveness in the sector of social services. This research first explores the basic concept of social assistance services, including the different categories concerned and the perspectives of viewing social assistance services in China. Then, we introduce the related theories of government’s purchase of social services in the areas of public administration, social welfare and economic perspectives. Then we explore the current situation of government contracting social assistance services in China, by reviewing different policy documents and legislation process. Our present research mainly reveals the existing problems and proposes the potential challenges face with government’s purchase of social assistance services. This is also the main findings and results within our research. In the discussion part, we explore the main implications of “Western Practices on Contracting out Social Assistance Services”, and its impact on the Chinese culture. Then recommend on the future directions and ways for improvement that sustain the development of government’s purchase of social assistance services in China.

Keywords: government contracting, social assistance service, social organization, social equity

Background

The Concept of Social Assistance Services

Social policy is a form of combing different social welfare services undertaken by the government and other organizations, it mainly involves social security policies, public health policies, public housing policies, public education policies, employment policies and social welfare service policies for specialized groups (Guan, 2004). Social assistance service is one of the main social policies in our country. This anti-poverty policy aims to protect people’s livelihood and to achieve social equity, which plays an important role in long-term prosperity and stability in economic development of our country (Lin, 2015; Li & Liang, 2022). Professor Zhu from the School of Public Administration of Zhejiang University of Technology proposed the definition of social assistance services in his research in 2021. He believed that social assistance is a type of social services, that requires to meet the needs of different vulnerable groups. And the purpose of

delivering social assistance services helps to deal with the problem of poverty, and to improve the living standards between different disadvantaged groups within the society (Zhu&Xiang, 2021).

Today, social assistance has become one of the main responsibilities of the Chinese government. Its service can be divided into two categories, including: the administration-oriented tasks and service-oriented tasks. The former refers to services planning, policy formulation and promotion, home survey and performance evaluation. The latter includes providing different types of services to the vulnerable groups (child, women and the elderly) within the society, including: nursing and medical care, rehabilitation training, social integration, psychological counselling, abilities improvement and resources linking(Lin, 2015, Ngok, 2019).See Table 1 below for more information.

Table 1: Types of Social Assistance Purchase Tasks

<u>Administration-oriented tasks</u>	<u>Service-oriented tasks</u>
➤ Home survey about social assistance recipients	➤ Care and medical help for social rescue targets
➤ Investigation about social assistance recipients	➤ Rehabilitation
➤ Provided training on social assistance services	➤ Medical escort
➤ Promotion about social assistance policy	➤ Social inclusion training
➤ Social assistance performance evaluation	➤ Capacity training
➤ Social assistance law consultation	➤ Psychological consultation
➤ Social assistance data analysis	➤ Services related to resources linkage

Social assistance services can be explained from five different perspectives: goals, subjects, service models, service means and service content. First of all, the main purpose of social

assistance is to solve the problem of poverty and to enable service recipients to reach their basic security levels. In terms of subjects involved, the establishment of a complete social assistance system is under the main guidance of the Chinese government, together with the cooperation of both society and individuals. In terms of types of services provided, it has transformed from a single approach to a more diversified approach. In terms of studying the concept of social assistance, recent research on poverty governance has shifted to poverty prevention, with a strong focus on poverty management. In terms of techniques used, modern technology is implemented to master the data of service receipts, in order to establish a complete social assistance service platform. Finally, in terms of service content, it is divided into both transactional types and service types. The former provides material or financial assistance, while the latter provides a range of professional services, including: employment support, family relationship adjustment, psychological assessment and emotional support, resource integration, hierarchical management and crisis intervention (Zhu and Xiang, 2021; Li and Liang, 2022).

Theoretical Basis of Government Purchase of Social Assistance Services

Government purchase of social services first began with the reforms in New Public Management in the 1970s. The most apparent theories that emphasized significance changes in administrative reforms were the “New Public Management Theory” and the “Welfare Pluralism Theory”. The concept of New Public Management first existed in 1970s, and became popular among the European countries, such as England and America. Osborne and Gaebler emphasized the concept of customer orientation in New Public Management, with an aim to introduce an appropriate market mechanism that provide public services. The government itself is not the only provider for public products, the role of private enterprises, social organizations and other local human resources are also important for the development of government purchase of social assistance services. This not only reduces the cost of government management, but also improves the overall service efficiency and quality that satisfy with the public expectations (Wang, 2005; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

“Welfare Pluralism Theory” plays an important role in the New Public Management Movement in Western cultures. The word “welfare pluralism” has been systematically discussed by a famous British scholar named Norman Johnson. He believed that government’s purchase of social services not only allows social welfare providers to participate in public services, but also create mutual exchanges of information among all the entities, which can eventually improve the efficiency of social services and reduce the workload of government departments (Johnson, 1987). In addition, managers can adopt new innovative ideas in their practice of new public management. A professional manager must possess important qualities that employ the use of modern technologies and production techniques to effectively allocate human resources. This type of method enables better social and economic development, in order to build a more stabilize country in the long-term. Therefore, the public sector is often encouraged to implement previous

successful experiences from the private sector, in order to motivate their personnel working in organizations. This not only minimizes the exceed resources within the government, but also enables organizations to operate smoothly and improve their overall performance (Wang, 2005).

Both principal-agent theory and transaction cost theory also provide strong theoretical foundations for government purchase of services. Principal-agent theory emphasizes the relationship between government and social organization, from which government is known as the “principal”, while social organization is known as the “agent”. The principal-agent relationship is a type of contract, which the principal authorizes the agent power to engage in the management of administrative affairs within the organization. In order to facilitate this relationship, this theory proposes the methods such as entrustment, procurement or contracting as building cooperation between the government and social organizations. In this context, the government is necessary to transfer certain types of public services to social organizations. Due to the constrain of the contract, social organizations also need to comply the rules or requirements set by the government when providing social services to the public. This helps to enhance the efficiency of public services provision and reduce the overall operating costs by the government (Ngok, 2019).

In the past, governments and bureaucratic organizations monopolized the production of public services, which affect the overall quality and efficiency. The theory of transaction cost believes that by transferring certain types of public services to private institutions, can effectively reduce transactional costs. However, during this process, the boundary between the government and the market must be determined at the first place. The introduction of a market mechanism with incentive elements also requires conducting a cost-benefit analysis, only then we can truly bring out the best interests of government departments and provide high quality services to recipients that are consistent with public satisfaction (Wang, 2005)

Aims and Objectives of investigating government purchase of social services

(1) The Demand of Social Welfare Services, requires the Government to Purchase Social Services

Our country's social service products and social service receipts have continued to rise since the opening of the Chinese reform, this results in a successful introduction of the corresponding social service policies in our country. Slowly, government purchase of social services has become one of the most important considerations for the government in terms of achieving social value. According to the National Strategic Research Group on Population Aging, China has already become an ageing society in 2024. The current aging level remains at 20.3% and the elderly population is 295 million. Nowadays, the increased amount of elderly people means a higher needs of providing elderly care services within the local government. In order to improve the service supply, quality, and efficiency of providing public services, it's important that the government transform the traditional way of providing social welfare services, from the strategy

of "steering" to "rowing". This will require the government to purchase social services from social forces or social organizations (Yue, 2020).

(2) The Lack of Social Service Professionals within the Government

Specialization has always been an important element and development trend in social services and social welfare service policies. However, the shortage of social service professionals within the government, resulting in the difficulties to provide professional social services directly to recipients in different vulnerable groups. Especially, services for specialized groups such as the disabled and the elderly require more competent professionals from social organizations to be accomplished. Under this context, the "Guiding Opinions on Government Purchase of Social Work Services" issued in 2012 proposed the needs of cultivating a team of high-quality social work professionals, that forms the basis of government purchase of social services. At the same time, develop sufficient numbers of social work organizations for the provision of professional public services and management proposes (Yue, 2020).

Current Situation of Government Contracting Social Assistance Services

In February 2014, China's State Council promulgated "the Interim Measures for Social Assistance" (No. 649). This policy first launched in the early May, it stipulates how social forces can participate in social assistance and encourages individuals or groups to participate through donating, setting up institutions or projects. In this policy, "government purchase of social services" has been listed as one of the main ways to participate in social assistance services, which highlight the roles and functions of social work and improve the effectiveness of China's social welfare policy (Wang, 2014). China also encourages local governments to assist and develop a number of training courses for social work professionals, that enhance their competence and the reputation of social organizations. This helps social assistance recipients to better integrate into the community and to establish good interpersonal relationships. Overall, the establishment of "the Interim Measures" has improved the social assistance system, which promoted a greater development of government contracting services in China (Xiong, 2014).

In September 2017, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Office of the Central Institutional Establishment Commission, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security jointly issued the "Opinions on Actively Promoting Government Procurement of Services to Strengthen Capabilities of Grassroots Social Assistance Service" (referred to as: "Opinions"). This policy requires the central government and the State Council to focus on the basic needs among the citizens, and take further actions to enhance the capabilities of grassroots social organizations in handling services, in order to fully encourage local government's purchase of services to combat poverty and stabilize social development of the country. After the promulgation of the "Opinions" in 2017, the central government encourages local governments to focus on the significance of social assistance services from different policy levels. The main

objective is to enable local governments to formulate policies that will strengthen the procurement of grassroots social assistance services. In terms of the supporting policy documents, 31 provinces (both district levels and municipalities) have issued specific opinions for policy implementation of procurement of social assistance services, including Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Gansu and Shanghai. In terms of funding, 13 provinces including Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guangxi, Shanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Tibet, and Xinjiang, have identified their expenditure ratios by setting up the highest proportion of expenditure for contracting out social services as a special fund in their whole year of budgets. In terms of handling professionals for social assistance, 25 provinces including Tianjin and Hebei, have proposed the particular ratios or the numbers of professionals at the basic level. All provinces have specified their own set of requirements for the allocation and arrangement of staff for social assistance work at village level (Yue, 2020).

In order to accelerate the development of purchasing social assistance services in China, the Department of Social Assistance and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) cooperate with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to establish the “Strategies to Promote the Participation of Social Organizations in Social Assistance” project. At the same time, they jointly launched a series of studies on “Making Use of Social Forces to Participate in Social Assistance” and held relevant training activities for the whole civil affairs system in Chengdu in August 2019. The project team conducted a questionnaire survey to collect data about purchasing social assistance services, from the staff in civil affairs departments at all levels who also participated in these training activities. The collected data indicates that over 50% of local civil affairs departments have started to purchase social assistance services from social organizations since 2017. This survey figures out that “policy support” is considered as the most significant factor for the promotion of government’s purchase of social services. Nowadays, nearly 80 % of civil affairs departments have included the purchase of social services in their financial budget. The main purpose is to improve service quality and transform government functions (Yue, 2020).

Results

Problems Concerning Local Government Contracting Social Assistance Services

In recent years, our central government has issued a series of policy documents, that promoted the development of local government’s purchase of social assistance services from social organizations. However, there are also problems arise in practice.

First, the insufficient investments that governments put into purchase of social services has always been a significant matter. After a new round of administrative reform has been carried out in China, the number of civil affairs departments have been declined rapidly, which results in the insufficient supply of organizations for delivering social assistance services. Therefore, it becomes necessary to emphasize and strengthen the need to encourage grass-roots governments in

purchasing services from social forces. Although in 2017, almost all of the regions in China have applied the practice of purchasing social assistance services from social forces. The results and effects were not significant due to the limitation in socio-economic development and financial capacities between different regions. In some rural and poor areas, the purchase of social assistance services is still at the primary stage. This is completely opposite in the Eastern parts of the region, where the development is rapid and fast. In addition, the lack of investment may also be due to the lack of awareness and understanding of the benefits of purchasing social services, especially by local financial departments. As a result, most local governments have not considered “purchase of social assistance services” in their budgets within their year of expenditure. Even if some have decided to include into their government budgets, the total amount of investment is very limited in size (Yue, 2020).

Another factor that affects the purchase of social assistance services is the quality and quantity of social organizations. In recent years, although the government has issued a list of policy documents, with an aim to encourage the growth of social organizations and social institutions. There is still a shortage in the number of grassroots social organizations. Even if there is sufficient number of social organizations, the autonomy of most of them is rather weak. And most of them lack the abilities in performing professional skills in the sector of social assistance services. They also rely heavily on the government's funding, without the available resources for long-term commitments and goals planning within the organization. At the same time, the personnel working in these organizations are highly mobile, which becomes extremely difficult to carry out effective organizational learning. Nowadays, it's common to see that these social organizations are hard to meet the set requirements by local governments in purchasing social services. In order to improve the overall capabilities of grassroots social organizations, the personnel working in the civil affairs departments are required to invest a lot of time and money into designing suitable training courses for social work professionals, which also increase the original workload and pressure by the local governments (Yue, 2020).

Local governments generally focus on the element of “purchase of services”, without paying much attention on the processes of quality management evaluation and monitoring system after contracting. Even if there is supervision, it is more formalistic. The lack of an effective evaluation system in the practice of procurement, makes it difficult to promote long-term sustainable development of social organizations. In addition, the supervision tends to focus more on service provision based on the agreement of contracts, rather than focusing on the quality of services providing to recipients. The audit of contract termination mainly focuses on finances, while the implementation process and quality of the projects are mainly ignored. There are also problems and deficiency in the capacity of the third-party assessment agencies. Therefore, establishing an effective evaluation and monitoring system in order to improve the performance and supervision of the procurement process is necessary in this case. At the same time, the boundaries and roles between the government and social organizations are not clear due to the incomplete laws and regulations issued by the government. This creates challenges during the formulation of contracts, and becomes difficult to reach a consistent solution between both

parties. As a result, the government will be unable to provide sufficient support to sustain the long-term development of social organizations, even after the process of purchase social assistance services(Fu, 2017; Yue, 2020).

Suggestions on Promoting the Development of Government Purchase of Social Assistance Services

So far, the government's purchase of social assistance services is still at its preliminary stages. Most local governments do not invest much funding into purchasing services from social organizations, and the number and capacity of grassroots social organizations are insufficient to provide good quality services to recipients. As a result, this article purposes four recommendations on the promotion of government purchase of services from social organizations.

First, it's important to establish a comprehensive legal system, that supports the financial investments by local governments. A clear legal system can be effective and provide a solid foundation in standardizing the process and indicators for government to purchase social assistance services. In order to stabilize and increase the financial investments for government purchasing services, capital and funding need to be strictly monitored and managed. Financial departments in different regions are encouraged to support local governments in arranging or stipulating the proportion of funds for service purchase in social assistance work. This will eventually enhance the overall level of financial input that local government invest into purchasing services. However, different regions of our country demonstrate different service abilities and financial capacities. For example, in central and western regions, where the development of social and economic growth is low. The central government is required to provide special funds and financial support for these regions to promote the purchase of services from social organizations. In addition, an introduction and implementation of a long-term mechanism that enhance human resources and government financial investment, can effectively promote government's purchase of services from social organizations in social assistance work(Fu, 2017).

Due to the shortage and insufficient capabilities of social organizations in China, local governments in different regions are encouraged to invest more resources into establishing a better platform for the development of social organizations and provide greater space for training of social work professionals. At the same time, regular training courses can expand human resources and build a strong professional team, which is beneficial for building up social organizations with a large number of social work professionals. In addition, our central government can learn from the previous successful experiences of most western countries. And formulate policy that attracts more social organizations to actively participate in social assistance work, in order to manage the needs of different vulnerable groups within the community (Fu, 2017). At the same time, the relevant departments are recommended to establish incentive measures or policies that promote the development of talented social workers living in different regions in China, especially those living in poor areas. This policy legislation will support more

people for obtaining higher qualification of becoming professional social workers, which will improve the overall quality of our social assistance services in China (Zhu & Xiang, 2021).

Another factor which improves the overall efficacy of social assistance services in China is the use of modern information technology. Nowadays, social work professionals are required to learn ways to grasp the data of service recipients through the internet perform, in order to solve the problem of poverty among different vulnerable groups. The Department of Civil Affairs of Shandong Province in China is concerned about the construction, collaboration and coordination work of developing this type of social assistance management information platform. This platform was outstandingly performed and demonstrated during the meeting of the provincial group in December 2020. And it had received full recognition and support from the provincial leaders and other members of the team. Then in February 2020, the provincial Civil Affairs Department transferred people from similar job positions, and establish a professional team that specifically responsible for the construction of this information platform. The building of this team enables the implementation of constructing this platform, to run smoothly without delay. In addition, our country establishes the first "one database and two systems", which includes: a main database that records all the social assistance recipients, a comprehensive social assistance management system, and a verification system that verifies the family economic status from all service recipients. The establishment of this platform can effectively provide accurate social assistance information, by synthesizing the data in the databases and to carry out effective management. This will eventually improve the overall efficiency in the delivery of social assistance services to different vulnerable groups in all of the regions within the country (Wang & Zhang, 2021).

A diversified supervision and evaluation system is the milestone for improving the efficiency of government purchase of social assistance services. Before purchasing services, it's necessary for the government to clarify the bidding procedures, including the signing of contract with the undertaking social organization. The contract must state all the roles and new responsibilities of the social organization, and the establishment of a full set of scientific evaluation indicators. When conducting the work of evaluations, a third party should be entrusted to evaluate the project of government purchase services, including assessing elements such as: project management, project output, financial management and innovation management through project reports, field observation and interviews. Focus on the effectiveness of project implementation help us to effectively reduce costs (Yue, 2020). However, the entrusted parties often have the problem of unclear responsibilities or conflicts in their practice of daily assessment. Therefore, the government and related departments should formulate local regulations or plans to establish a "Code of Ethics for Third-Party Evaluation of Government Procurement of Social Assistance Services". This will clarify whether or not the behavior of the third-party evaluators conforms with the relevant ethical standards and principles according to the procurement process (Shi and Li, 2020). At the same time, it's important to clarify the supervision responsibilities of all parties involved in the process of government purchase of social assistance services, including: the roles of social organization, government department, the public

and the news media(Fu, 2017). The government is also recommended to establish a comprehensive reward and punishment system for the undertaking social organizations and to the contractors. This will enhance the work motivation among social work professionals, to fully extend their career potential and to establish a highly effective social assistance system for service receipts (Zhu and Xiang, 2021).

Discussions

The Implications of “Western Practices on Contracting out Social Assistance Services” for China

There are three Western countries, that selected as important examples of performing good practices on contracting out social assistance services. They are New Zealand (NZ), United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). The context in specific experiences of contracting out in relation to social assistance among these countries, can offer great insights into ways to transform the practices of government contracting in the sector of social services that “best fit” for in the Chinese culture.

In UK, most contracting out has been carried out using the “commissioning” approach. This method involves a cycle of activities beginning with analysis of needs, resources, the market and risks; moving on to planning how to meet identified needs with the available resources; taking action through, for example, tendering and monitoring the approach which has been adopted to inform necessary changes. For social force, they should be encouraged to produce social services with agreeable outcomes. “Joint commissioning” has been first developed in the UK, where a number of different agencies are involved and commissioning can be carried out together between both agencies. It’s important for this method to have a result-based payment that is focus on clear goals and limited priorities, so as to achieve the mutual agreement during the process. China can adopt this method in the long run, to improve on the co-ordination of policies between different agencies at a local level (Hudson, 2018; Rees, Miller & Buckingham, 2016; Ngok, 2019).

In terms of government purchase, New Zealand had a long history of developing contracting out social services. In New Zealand, government agencies tend to select service providers based on their knowledge, skills and capabilities with the service recipients. In 2013, the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development (MSD) has been implementing an “Investment Approach” to designing and targeting employment services for young people, this helps young people to achieve their own education outcomes without depending too much on their levels of income (Lunt, 2008). Since the development of the New Public Management (NPM), the USA also has the most experiences in the area of contracting out social assistance services among all the Western countries (Smith, 1996). However, there is only limited evidence that supports government contracting or social institutions perform better compared to publicly provided systems (Ngok, 2019).

In order to protect the reputation and autonomy of social organizations, the Chinese authorities is recommended to fully inform and consult with the social service users and the public before the implementation of government contracting out social services. Increasing awareness and understanding of the concept of “joint commissioning” is also important among the government, in identifying the basic needs and available resources, so as to decide whether or not to adopt the process of contracting out services from social forces. Since there are obvious differences in the experiences of contracting out services and development of market mechanisms between different regions in China, it’s necessary for the Chinese government to adopt a phased approach during the process of purchase social services. Some cities have considerable experience of contracting out and developing social markets, while others are at its initial stage. At the same time, providing extensive training courses for the professionals working in social organizations is also important, in building up their capabilities and facilitating the process of government purchase of services. Another issue needs to be considered during the commissioning process is gender. Designing an appropriate commissioning process between both agencies should be based on the needs of gender and should follow the rules and regulations of the gender policies (Ngok, 2019).

Conclusion

Based on the theories relating to government’s purchase of social assistance services, the Chinese local governments can purchase certain services from social organizations through entrustment, contracting and procurement. Invite social forces to actively participate in public services, reduce the expansion of government functions and the overall costs within the public sector. In order to encourage local governments to purchase social assistance services from social organizations, it’s important for governments to make adequate preparations during the processes of policy formulation and implementation.

For the government itself, apart from increasing the financial investment during the process of procurement or contracting, it’s also necessary to establish a complete supervision and evaluation mechanism to control and evaluate the process. At the same time, formulate policies that encourage the establishment of different social organizations, including enhance both the reputation and public support of large organizations. Social workers often need to prepare themselves for further career development, and get ready to complete new training sessions to enhance their professional skills in the field of social assistance work.

In the future, it’s important to obtain clear goals and orientation during the construction of social assistance platform in our country. And the usage of this internet platform should also be open to the general public, in order to promote professional knowledge and skills within the social assistance services. This will help to sustain the development of our distinguished “Chinese Social Assistance System”, and to provide effective social services to specialized groups between different regions within our local communities.

Statement of Contribution

The author (Chon Cheng Vong), confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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