

# Organizational Theory in Practice: A Case Study of Social Service Evaluation in Guangzhou

Zhou, Fangfang

1School of Education and Science, Zhongshan Polytechnic, Zhongshan, Guangdong, 528400, China

2School of Social Sciences, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China

**Abstract:** This study explores the development and evaluation of social services in Guangzhou. Since 2011, Guangzhou has implemented innovative models for social service delivery, transitioning from direct government provision to service procurement through social organizations. The evaluation process, guided by third-party organizations and government departments, has evolved to ensure standardization and effectiveness. However, challenges persist, including over-reliance on technical governance, power imbalances among stakeholders, and limited public participation. The study aims to provide insights into enhancing the professionalism, inclusiveness, and ethical standards of social service evaluations in urban governance.

**Keywords:** Social service evaluation; Government-purchased services; Technical governance; Empowerment; Collaborative evaluation

DOI: 10.62639/sspiess06.20240105

## 1. Development Process of Social Services and Evaluation in Guangzhou

Guangzhou is one of the earliest pilot cities in China to start implementing the government's purchase of services. In 2011, Guangzhou launched a pilot project of the government's purchase of integrated services, attempting to shift from the direct provision of services by the government to the purchase of services from social organizations. In 2012, the project of the government's purchase of integrated family service centers was rolled out throughout the city, with an annual purchase funding of 2 million yuan per integrated family service center, equipped with 20 staffs. After 2018, the IFSCs were renamed Social Work Service Stations (SWS), and the service funding was adjusted to 2.4 million yuan. The government's purchase of social work projects is based on a construction cycle of 3 to 5 years, and after each construction cycle, systematic adjustments are made to the standards, implementation process, and evaluation criteria for the purchased services, so that a set of standardized, procedural, and highly operable policy system has been formed. As of 2022, there are a total of 203 social work stations in the city of Guangzhou, realizing full coverage of the social work stations.

The evaluation of social services in Guangzhou is mainly based on third-party evaluation. Guangzhou started to promote the unified evaluation in 2015, with the Guangzhou Association of Social Work formulating the unified evaluation criteria, and the Guangdong Federation of Social Workers and the Guangzhou Welfare Center being responsible for the evaluation and implementation. The financial evaluation is carried out by a separate Accounting Firm. After years of implementation, better evaluation results have been achieved. Social service evaluation has played a role in guiding the standardization and professionalization of the services provided by social work stations. In order to further improve the evaluation, In 2018, the Civil Affairs Bureau of Guangzhou and the Guangzhou Association of Social Work carried out research and analyzed the past evaluation materials and literature, formulated the current evaluation plan.

---

(Manuscript NO.: JIESS-24-5-48001W)

## 2. Evaluation Criteria and Implementation in Guangzhou

The stakeholders in Guangzhou evaluation includes the third-party evaluation organization, the local government, and the district civil affairs department. The third-party evaluation organization is responsible for professional and financial evaluation, and conducts comprehensive evaluation on project management, core project creation, basic project development, special project development, service effectiveness, financial management and use of funds. The local government is responsible for the evaluation of the purchaser, and conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the daily management and service effectiveness of the social work station. District civil affairs departments are responsible for supervising and evaluating the work. The evaluation of social work stations includes project management, service performance, and use of funds. Each service year, the social work stations are evaluated twice, at the mid-term and at the end, with the mid-term evaluation of the services (including the evaluation of the purchaser and the supervisor) and the end-term evaluation of the services and finances. The method of evaluation is mainly conducted through data analysis, questionnaire survey, tele-interviews and on-site observations. The evaluation score of the social work station is determined by the sum of the evaluation scores of the three parties. Among them, 70% of the points are assessed by the third-party evaluation organization, 20% by the local government, and 10% by the district civil affairs department. The evaluation grade is divided into four levels: excellent, good, qualified and unqualified. An evaluation score of 90 points or more is considered excellent, 80 points or more to less than 90 points is considered good, 60 points or more to less than 80 points is considered qualified, and less than 60 points is considered unqualified. The results of the evaluation of the social work station program serve as an important basis for the subsequent participation of social work service agencies in the operation of the social work station program. Those assessed to be qualified and above shall be allowed to continue to undertake social work station projects during the service cycle. If the evaluation is unqualified, the contract of the social work station project shall be terminated, and the social service project purchased with financial funds shall not be undertaken within two years.

## 3. The Dilemma of Social Services Evaluation in Guangzhou

### (1) Modernist or symbolic: social services evaluation under the new managerialism

Since the birth of social services evaluation, there has been a methodological dispute between positivism and humanism, and a research paradigm dispute between quantitative research and qualitative research. Different methodologies and paradigms have evolved totally different evaluation logics and methods. The positivist methodology based on naturalism and scientism uses quantitative research and statistical analysis, hoping to reflect the problems with digital data. Humanism, on the other hand, believes that human activities have special characteristics different from natural phenomena, and that the significance of human activities should be understood and interpreted by multiple truths. On the whole, social service evaluation should emphasize the scientific nature of evaluation methods and data in order to give a better account of the society, and also the feelings and understanding of the service users in order to reflect the professional care of social work. However, with the rapid development of statistical and information technology and the government's favoring of technological governance, the logic of technological governance has begun to completely override the logic of humanism and has almost gained an orthodox position in social service evaluation. Due to the excessive proliferation of the logic of technological governance, social service evaluation has been unilaterally interpreted as quantitative evaluation focusing on supervision and inspection, such as numerical evaluation, indicator evaluation, and cost-benefit evaluation, which to a certain extent violates the original purpose of social service evaluation, which is to "guide and motivate, and to promote construction through evaluation". Specifically in the field of social services evaluation, technical governance not only refers to specific evaluation methods and techniques, but also to the deep-seated logic of the subject of evaluation in making rational choices and adopting behavioral strategies.

In the practice of social services evaluation in Guangzhou, the logic of technical governance of social services

evaluation is mainly reflected in four aspects: First, single reliance on the authority of experts. Due to the complexity of social service projects and the immaturity of professional evaluation capacity, evaluation agencies often tend to simplify the evaluation process, i.e., replacing evidence-based professional evaluation with simple expert authoritative evaluation. Secondly, it adheres to the principle of procedural justice and pays great attention to the integrity of the evaluation process, favoring static evaluation methods with simpler procedures, such as outcome-based evaluation and centralized expert evaluation. Thirdly, the logic of techno-governance believes in the scientific nature of numbers, and believes that numerical indicators can be used as evaluation criteria to reflect the effectiveness of services, while ignoring the contextual, artistic, and flexible nature of social services. Finally, With the rapid penetration of economic rationality and new managementism in the field of public services, the concepts and techniques of cost control have gradually been accepted by social service evaluation organizations. Social service evaluation organizations are also facing the economic pressure and they will unconsciously adopt the cost-oriented evaluation methods such as bidding for projects at a low price, copying the evaluation indexes, and shortening the evaluation cycle, while neglecting the professional value and the demand for professional ethics.

## **(2) Social services evaluation from post-modernist perspective: a power tussle for stakeholders**

The question is not about seeking a more objective evaluation practice in order to overcome political bias, but to understand evaluation as an inherently and inescapably political project imbued with issues of power (Taylor & Balloch, 2005). Evaluation takes place within relations of power. Apart from answering "what works" in evaluation, we also need to know "for whom they work". The stakeholders in Guangzhou evaluation practices include the third-party evaluation organization, the local government, the district civil affairs department, the social work organizations. The process of social service evaluation is a collection of actions by multiple stakeholders, which is not a simple assembly line process, but, as Bourdieu puts it, a field of existence full of "vitality and struggle", in which the various stakeholders involved in the implementation process have their own interests to express, which are shaped by the institutional environment of the stakeholders and form a relatively stable institutional logic that guides their choices. In the field of social service evaluation, the three main stakeholders, namely, the government, the third-party evaluation organization, and the social work organization, always strive for their own interests to the greatest extent possible. The behaviors of the stakeholders reflect the constraints and shaping of the institutional logic of their fields, and the institutional logic and action strategies are complementary to each other.

From the social service evaluation practices in Guangzhou, the institutional logic of the three stakeholders in the policy implementation chain is very different, and their organizational goals are different, their actions are already biased, with the government focusing on efficiency, the third-party evaluation organization avoiding risks, and the social work organization seeking to survive, and the three stakeholders are strategically cooperating to express their own interests. As a result, the interaction among the three stakeholders around evaluation is not a cooperative governance based on the consensus of goals, but a game of interests among the three stakeholders in the field of policy organization. The goal of evaluation has been weakened by substitutes, and the policy ideals of performance evaluation have naturally fallen through, and a dilemma has been formed.

## **(3) Publicity dilemma: situational justice in evaluation control**

What is public? That is, in social service evaluation should reflect the will of all stakeholders, including the evaluation commissioner, the evaluation agent, the service users, service partners should be reflected, and this public nature should be reflected in the whole process of social service evaluation, i.e., all stakeholders should be involved in the whole process as far as possible in the formulation of evaluation standards, determination of evaluation procedures, selection of the evaluation subject, and determination of the evaluation results, etc. However, in reality, the control of evaluation is often unevenly distributed. The commissioner of the evaluation often has more control over the evaluation, while the service users and the partners have less control.

From the social service evaluation practices in Guangzhou, under the influence of neo-liberalism, social service

evaluation has fallen into the disorientation of technical governance. Dominated by the logic of technical governance, social service evaluation overemphasizes the efficiency of services and is based on procedural justice and instrumental legitimacy, believing that procedural justice will inevitably lead to substantive justice, while neglecting the fact that social service evaluation should take into account both publicness and humanism. Further weakening the link between social organizations and the public. Departments purchase services and measure performance based on their own governance objectives entirely within a closed administrative decision-making system. These practices have strengthened the role of social organizations as a supporting hand in administrative management and services, but weakened their connection with grassroots society. This is one of the major reasons for the weakening of the public nature of social organizations.

#### **(4) Autonomy dilemma: procedural justice and formal autonomy**

With the rise of new public management and governance theories, the importance of management efficiency and technical experts has been prioritized, and technical rationality has been further highlighted in this process. Theoretically, due to their technical rationality, evaluation organizations have a relatively authoritative position in evaluation work, but in fact, this is not the case. In fact, the government always has the absolute right to make decisions, and the recommendations of third-party evaluation organizations on evaluation work are not always accepted, and due to the restriction of the role of the commissioned party, the evaluation organizations would rather lower their professionalism than "offend" the government. In this sense, the mentality of third-party evaluation tends to be "no achievement, no fault".

In their interactions with social service organizations, they often take into account factors such as favors and interests, and often score "favors", making it basically difficult for them to be professionally independent. Based on this, we can also understand why evaluation organizations will "go through the motions" in the process of technical governance, because the more perfect the evaluation management process is, the more it can prove the professional image of its technical governance, and how effective it is is not the point, but how to avoid the risk of its own responsibility during the process, so as to ensure a longer-term cooperation with the government in the future. The important thing is how to avoid liability and risk in the process, so as to ensure a longer-term cooperation with the government in the future.

### **4. Alternative Ways to Beyond the Dilemma**

#### **(1) Empowering service users**

The term "empowerment" was first coined by Solomon to describe and explain the powerlessness of the black community due to the lack of individual and economic resources, and has since evolved into an attractive approach to social work. From the perspective of social service evaluation, under the dominance of expert rule and technological governance, service users participation is procedural rather than substantive, and such formalized participation can only nominally enhance the legitimacy of the program, rather than empowering service users through genuine empowerment. Therefore, in order to eliminate the negative impacts of the logic of technological governance, it is necessary to resolutely oppose technological control and knowledge hegemony, and to enhance the subjectivity and participatory capacity of service users through empowerment. Specifically, the application of the theory of empowerment in social service evaluation includes two aspects: on the one hand, it is to reserve power space and institutional space for service users to participate in evaluation, so as to give full play to the evaluation power they already possess. The first step is to increase the weight of service users' satisfaction evaluation in the social service evaluation system. The evaluation of the satisfaction of the service users should become the most important evaluation content. Secondly, it is necessary to change the reliance on static evaluation methods such as outcome evaluation, numerical evaluation and indicator evaluation, and use more dynamic evaluation methods such as service users' demand evaluation, process evaluation and tracking evaluation, so as to maximize the ways for service users to participate in evaluation. On the other hand, attention should also be paid to stimulating the internal vitality of the service users and encouraging them to actively participate in

the evaluation activities.

## **(2) Collaborative evaluation**

Multiple viewpoints of the stakeholders are incorporated into the design and planning of the evaluation to collect credible and actionable evidence for fostering program improvement. Collaborative evaluation maybe a good choice. In the current social service evaluation, it is basically based on a third-party evaluation organization leading the formation of experts and regional representatives to set up a evaluation team, which tends to have a single design, ambiguous norms, lack of a basis for multi-party deliberation, and is a mere formality. The essence of evaluation is to promote the deepening of services, and it is difficult to truly respond to the needs of practice by relying only on purely professional knowledge and objective methods. Therefore, address the issue of participation in evaluation, a comprehensive evaluation body should be established by the commissioner, the evaluation organization and the service users. It is necessary for the third-party professional evaluation to reposition its own responsibilities, and encouraging the service users to participate in the evaluation of the project by collecting the information on the evaluation of activities' effects from the service users, so that the service users will have the opportunity and channels to reflect the real situation. The whole evaluation process should assess the effectiveness of the project in a realistic manner to decide whether it is suitable for project completion.

## **(3) Value-driven social service evaluation**

In order to prevent the malfunctioning of social service evaluation, it is necessary to strengthen the role of evaluation ethics, so as to ensure that the evaluation of social work can move towards the professional mission of guiding and motivating. To this end, a national social service evaluation committee should be established. The social service evaluation committee can be composed of experts and scholars in the field of social work, and it should take on at least three main functions: First, it should carry out real-time supervision and dynamic ranking of social service evaluation organizations nationwide. On the one hand, it can dynamically rank the social service evaluation agencies in terms of professional methods, evaluation results, staffing, financial situation, and so on, in order to motivate them to continuously improve their service results; on the other hand, it also needs to discipline the social service evaluation agencies by setting up a mechanism of rewards and punishments. Secondly, localized research on evaluation concepts, methods, contents and standards should be promoted. Thirdly, the Social service evaluation Committee should screen and promote some general and applicable social service evaluation cases, so as to provide evaluation agencies with some standardized and practicable evaluation methods. In addition, it is necessary to formulate a ethics for social service evaluation. At present, there is no ethics for social service evaluation in China, resulting in the lack of a unified consensus on evaluation ethics among evaluation organizations, as well as the lack of guidance and constraints on evaluation ethics. Besides, it is necessary to establish a monitoring and feedback system for social service evaluation ethics.

## **References**

- [1] W.E.Bijker.(2010).How is technology made. Cambridge Journal of Economics. 34(1). 13-23.
- [2] S.M.Wilson & L.C.Peterson.(2002)The Anthropology of Online Communities.Annual Review of Anthropology.24(31).21-42.
- [3] Tobin Im & Wonhyuk Cho & Greg Porumbescu. (2014).Internet,Trust in Government,and Citizen Compliance.Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory.24(3). 102-132.
- [4] Ekbia &Hamid &Mattioli&Michael &Kouper &Inna. Big Data,Bigger Dilemmas: A Critical Review.Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology.66(8). 211-254.
- [5] G.A.Porumbescu.(2016).Placing the Effect? Gleaning Insights into the Relationship between Citizens Use of Government and Trust in Government.Public Management Review.18(10).12-34.
- [6] Solomon,B.Black.(1976).Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Community,New York: Columbia University Press. 85(8). 341-420.
- [7] Rissel,C.(1994).Empowerment theory in collaborative partnership for community health and development.American Journal of Community Psychology.12(23).119-210.
- [8] Hannberger A.(2006).Evaluation of and for democracy .Evaluation.12(1).98-103.
- [9] England,H.(1986).Social work as art: Making sense of good practice.London: Allen and Unwin,21(1).338-423.