Workshop Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Integrating Volunteerism with Professionalism— A Case Study of Building Repair

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Abstract

Economic core voluntary work (ECVW) is defined as the class of voluntary work that is economically significant and is performed more effectively by volunteers only. ECVW is essential to sustainable community service but is difficult to identify. The paper reports a case study of building repair that demonstrates the identification and implementation of ECVW. The encountered problem is high tender price that the owners cannot afford. The root causes are shown to be incompatible contract practice and lack of trust. A volunteer group introduced a new system that satisfactorily solved the problem. It is concluded that integration of professionalism and volunteerism is essential to the expansion of voluntary service. Retired professionals have a special role in ECVW.

Introduction

Community service has to be viable economically as well as financially for long-term continuation. Optimum delivery of the service may be through a combination of voluntary and paid workers. But it is important that the opportunity cost of the volunteers' time be included in economic evaluation to fully reflect the true cost of the service. Voluntary work already accounts for a significant share of GDP in certain countries. For example, in Kazakhstan the share is 4% to 14% [Leigh 2002]. If voluntary work is to increase, it should result in extra value added as well as being effective in community building. It must not result in a net displacement of regular workers.

Sustainable voluntary work therefore must include a "core" component that is necessarily carried out by volunteers, viz. the same effect cannot be achieved if paid workers perform the work. Further, core voluntary work should generate other new economic activities that can be performed by either voluntary or paid workers. For a given split between the two classes of workers, a certain critical volume of core voluntary work must be attained to avoid adversely affecting the regular job market. The critical core voluntary work component is essential for a community service to be socially and economically sustainable and hence also politically sustainable.

However, there seems to be no report hitherto that bears evidence of core voluntary work having been performed. Traditional voluntary services contribute to community building mainly through social work. In a study by University of Hong Kong 2002, recreational activities, visiting, counseling, baby-sitting and elderly care are found to account for more

than half of volunteering participants. These voluntary works help bridge the gap between the rich and the less privileged but are unlikely to generate other significant economic activities. It is thus not surprising that only 1/7 of all voluntary workers are professionals or semi-professionals. Economically significant voluntary engineering projects in UK and developing countries have been reported [Voluntary Engineering 2004]. However, the projects are not of the core voluntary work type. The same effect would still have been achieved if paid engineers had performed the job.

Economic Core Voluntary Work (ECVW)

When core voluntary work involves professional content, the recipient of the service will only accept if the service provider is professionally qualified as well as being a volunteer. Professional service is generally part of the chain of other activities. Hence core voluntary work is economically productive if it can be performed successfully only by combining volunteerism and professionalism.

Such economic core voluntary work (ECVW) arises from techno-social problems that require both technological and sociological solutions. When the technological solution has to be implemented by a volunteer or when the social solution has to be supported by a technological design, the ECVW comprises true integration of professionalism and volunteerism. The difficulty of developing voluntary work lies in identifying and solving the techno-social problem that underlies community concerns. The problem symptoms and other social issues are often mistaken to be the problems.

A volunteer group of former civil servants in Hong Kong recently launched a community service project to demonstrate how to overcome this difficulty in the repair of ageing buildings. The project aims to achieve two objectives. The first objective was the development of innovative volunteering service by retired civil servants. The second was the application of professional knowledge and experience for job creation. One of the project's sponsoring institutions concluded in its study of population policy that continued participation of willing elderly professionals is one of the ways to address the problem of population ageing in a knowledge society [BPF 2003]

The group initially considered developing 2 types of services: to assist the owners in organizing and managing the repair works including the selection of AP and contractor or other project management aspects, and to explore and organize related social service such as engaging unemployed persons on the project. It was later noted that some unemployed workers had organized themselves to bid for simple building renovation works. This indicates that lower-level organizing work is less urgent an objective than job creation. The group focused on the first type of service.

Community Concern over Ageing Buildings

Because of the group members' professional background, they chose to develop a new approach to improving the built environment as the means to illustrate ECVW. The deteriorating conditions of ageing buildings have become a major community concern in Hong Kong for some 20 years. The increasingly frequent incidents of fractured concrete and falling fragments from external facade of buildings are safety hazard to residents and the

general public. Leaky drains constitute public health hazard that were epitomized in the SARS event of 2003.

The economic significance of the problem is rapidly increasing with the increasing number and size of ageing high-rise buildings. Lack of maintenance causes progressive deterioration of ageing buildings and leads to their early redevelopment, usually in less than 40 years. Extending the serviceable life of a building by proper repair and regular maintenance has a high economic value. Rehabilitation of old buildings is recognized as a major approach in urban renewal policy.

The social implications of ageing buildings are well known. The majority of residential buildings in Hong Kong are high-rise buildings. As ownership of each building is split among different owners of individual units, the common areas are the joint responsibility of all owners of the individual units. If the owners cannot come to agreement, proper maintenance and repair cannot be carried out timely. As dilapidation aggravates, property value is reduced and the wealthier owners move out. The residential environment quality accentuates the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Building owners encounter two common difficulties in planning repairs. First, an owner has to judge the appropriate extent or standard of repairs commensurate with their financial means. Second, some owners cannot afford to pay for even the minimum necessary repair of common areas of a multiple-ownership building. Several public-funded assistance schemes are recently made available to subsidize needy owners to carry out repair of ageing buildings, hence somewhat mitigate the second difficulty and enlarge the owner's affordable scope of building repairs. However, the first difficulty remains a critical obstacle. Further, from the economic perspective, long-term reliance on public assistance is not sustainable and may even hinder technological progress.

A Case of Perplexing Impasse

The volunteer group selected Hollywood Building in Sheung Wan district as the first target building to be treated in the project. The building is typical of those constructed in the 1960's in a mid-income neighborhood: 7 storeys, 69 units, shops on ground floor and residential flats above.

One important factor of the choice was that the main problem confronting the owners in this case is not caused by the commonly believed difficulties of implementing repairs of old buildings. An Owners' Corporation (OC) has been formed and has a reasonable budget of about $20,000 per unit for carrying out certain voluntary repair work. The OC had appointed a consultant Authorized Person (AP) and a repair contract based on conventional documents was tendered in 2003. However, the lowest tendered sum was about $1.5 M. The OC curtailed the less urgent works and re-tendered. The curtailed contract would still cost about the same and was well above the OC's budget even after allowing for the use of the assistance schemes of the Urban Renewal Authority. The OC therefore had suspended the project and sought the group's assistance through an NGO.

The group examined the tender documents prepared by the original AP and inspected the building conditions. The repairs items specified in the documents are all reasonably required for the building and are all quite common items. External finish at a number of locations of

the external walls or courtyard walls appeared loosened and needed patching. Concrete was fractured and reinforcing steel bars were exposed at many locations. Walls and ceilings needed to be cleaned and repainted. Drainage pipes and connecting traps have to be replaced. Certain potable water pipes had rusted and had to be replaced. The defective works were mostly in the common areas and partly belonged to individual units.

In addition, a number of desirable work items were noticeable that were non-essential for health and safety but would undoubtedly improve the utility or appearance of the building. These included a common antenna and certain tidying and touching up work.

The original tender document covered all the above items adequately in the bill of quantities. The working methods or standards to be attained were also adequately specified. The conditions of contract that set out the rights and responsibilities of the contractor and the employer were based on the standard documents issued by a relevant professional institution. All in all, the original tender documents were the "normal" type. Similarly, the curtailed bill of quantities in the re-tender was also nothing unusual.

Discussions with the OC indicated that they were strongly motivated to improve the conditions of their building, but any substantial increase over their original budget of about $20,000 per unit would be difficult to be approved by the majority of owners. The OC was also suspicious of possible collusion between the ex-AP and the tenderers.

The situation is therefore quite perplexing. On the one hand, the AP has prepared the contract documents in accordance with normal practice. On the other hand, the OC is suspicious of an unfair deal as re-tendering resulted in higher unit prices for the curtailed works than in the original tendering. The solution must include ways of meeting the OC's minimum requirement at their affordable cost and restoring their confidence in the AP and contractor.

After some study, the group concluded that the impasse was due to the following two mutually aggravating root causes respectively of a technological and sociological nature.

a) The owners could not decide on the optimum combination of the scope of repair, the standard or method of repair and the cost to each owner.

b) The OC did not have sufficient trust in the AP for major decisions, e.g. on the scope of repairs or the selection of contractor.

Is "Normal" Contract Practice Wrong?

The above situation presents a techno-sociological problem that requires fundamental rethink on the contracting system. The current practice and the corresponding "standard" Specifications and Conditions of Contract have evolved over several decades in the implementation of new building and engineering works. When a client wants to build a new facility, he engages a consultant engineer or AP to prepare the design and to select a contractor to build it. The cope and details of the new facility to be constructed would be thoroughly discussed between the owner and the consultant in the planning and design process. The owner's knowledge of the new facility and his trust in the consultant are both essential in the process. In certain cases of more complicated new facilities, the owner employs a project management team to help him clarify his functional and other requirement of the project and to ensure that the consultant's design meets his requirements. The project

management team also helps the client select the consultant and contractors and oversees the progress of the project. The Hong Kong SAR Government has been using this system to implement all major construction projects.

It should be noted that in a new construction project, the typical value of each contract is usually in the order of $100M. However, in building repair works, each typical contract is valued in the order of a few million dollars only. The consultant fee is rarely sufficient for the AP to engage in the same level of detailed discussions with the OC as in a new construction project. The AP can only prepare a repair contract based on common expectations. On the other hand, the optimum scope and standard of the repair depends on the OC's perceived value and their financial means. Without knowing the cost implications of alternative extent and quality of repair works, the OC cannot confidently decide on the repair works and would have to rely on the AP to advise on the work items to be included in the contract for a given budget. The OC 's only control is to accept or reject the returned tender. If the OC did not have absolute trust in the AP, suspicion would be inevitable when the cost or time for completion or indeed any other conditions of the process are not as expected. A way must be found to enable the OC to participate in the decision on the extent and standard of each repair item.

By virtue of its development history, the standard specifications of works are more suitable for new construction than for repair. It is irrelevant to include them in entirety in a building repair contract. For example, new works construction often involved laying a substantial volume of concrete in plain or reinforced concrete structures. Standard specifications rightly devote a substantial section to quality control of concrete and reinforcement, starting from selection and testing of cement and aggregates, method of mixing, sampling and testing concrete, sampling and testing of steel bars, checking of steel reinforcement and formwork, laying and compaction of concrete, etc. On the other hand, building repair usually uses only a small quantity of concrete in each location. The preparation of the exposed surface of concrete and reinforcement steel of the existing structure and the workmanship are more critical. The inclusion of the large volume of standard specifications on the preparation and laying of concrete would at best distract the contractor's attention and at worst cause him to charge a higher rate just to play safe.

Similarly, the standard conditions of contract also grew out of the long experience of new works construction. The conditions address all likely situations that may occur in a major construction contract. Many of these situations such as natural disaster, interruption of works, etc. are extremely unlikely to occur in a small building repair contract of short duration. Further, the level of control exercisable by the contractor in a repair contract is not quite the same as in a new works construction site. The inclusion in a repairs contract of standard conditions of contract originally designed for new works will cause unnecessary alarm to the contactor who might also see it as an unfair shift of risk or responsibility from the employer to the contractor. The result is not only a higher price but also is not conducive to mutual trust and good working relationship.

The Solution and Necessity of Volunteerism

The technological solution comprises 3 prongs. First, photos are used to illustrate the spots requiring repair, and the repair items are separated into the necessary and optional categories. The new arrangement minimizes ambiguity and uncertainty to the contracting parties, and

allows greater freedom for the OC to decide on the scope of contract after tendering. Second, the revised tender documents allow the tenderers to put forward alternative scope of items and alternative working method or alternative standard of completed works. This enables a wider range of realistic alternative scope or standard of major items to be made available in tendering for both the OC and the contractor. Third, a simplified set of conditions of contract is prepared that are more relevant to the repair works. This reduces the risk to the contractor in unforeseen circumstances and hence should help lower tender prices.

The new 3-pronged approach promotes the spirit of trust and cooperation in contrast to the adversarial game spirit that has crept into Hong Kong's construction contracts in the last few decades. The new approach should help inspire and reinforce mutual trust between the contracting parties that is crucial to the success of any contract. The technological solution therefore addresses the sociological root cause of the difficulty as well as solving the first problem.

Solution of the sociological problem is completed by 3 additional conditions of safeguard. First, the revised works contract is tendered before selecting the AP. This administrative arrangement removes the cause of distrust that arises from the possibility of collusion. Second, the minimum extent and standard of each repair item that must be attained are set out in the revised bill of quantities. This condition ensures that the cost of trust and harmony due to genuine different understanding of the simplified tender documents is bearable to each one of the contracting parties. Third, the new contract conditions stipulate that in dealing with a situation on which the documents are silent, the parties should conduct friendly discussions to arrive at a fair and equitable solution. If this is not achieved, they should resolve by reference to the relevant clauses of the reference standard specifications and conditions of contract issued by the AP at the time of signing the contract, or by reference to the corresponding part of the standard documents of a prescribed professional institution as the last resort. This third condition promotes trust and harmony by catering for the genuinely unforeseeable situations.

The revised repair contract was re-tendered in late 2004. A site meeting was held by the OC to clarify any queries to all tenderers. The 2 lowest tenders including all optional items were lower than the first original tender by 20%. Significantly, none of the tenders suggested any reduced scope or alternative method or standard of the repair work items. Checking the government 's tender price indices indicates no reduction in the cost of relevant building works in the period 2003 to 2004. The cost reduction is therefore genuine. The re-tendered consultants fee was also significantly lower than before.

The OC chose the second lowest tender. It is only marginally higher than the lowest but offered an extra free service in the tender. The revised contract was signed in June 2005 and was substantially completed in September 2005. A small amount of extra work was also commissioned including some that were paid for by the individual owners. The OC, the contractor and the AP were all satisfied with the new contract.

There was close cooperation between the 3 parties of OC/owners, AP and contractor. The new approach verified the usefulness of the traditional values of trust and harmony in solving the techno-social problem. These values are the cornerstones of harmonious society that the government advocates. The values are also the underlying key factors in the partnering approach to contracting. The concept of partnering is recently gaining favour as a form of

contract for major new construction works. The example case demonstrates one way of achieving trust and harmony in contract management with a technology solution.

In addition to the above techno-sociological solution, the OC's trust in the volunteer group is the other critical success factor. The non-professional cannot readily understand the merits of the professional advice. The OC might not have so readily accepted the new administrative arrangement or the new tender documents if the group were not volunteers and seen to have absolutely no interest in the repair contract. The reported case is believed to the first ECVW where the integration of professionalism and volunteerism is the root cause of success.

Throughout the case duration the NGO played the important liaison role that helped maintain trust among the parties. They attended all the meetings between OC and AP and contractors and prepared minutes. As a disinterested party and having close contact with the owners and residents, they helped reduce any potential difference in understanding or interpretation of other party's views. The NGO took part in all the meetings attended by the volunteer group.

Development of Community Service

The ultimate goal of community service in building repair is to enable the owners to use their resources to maintain and repair their properties to optimum standards. Public resources should not be used other than absolutely necessary and only for genuine public interest. Thus community service should be built around core voluntary work. The above example case illustrates how the technological-cum-sociological solution to one of the common problems faced by building owners leads to economic core voluntary work.

The crux in planning the expansion of voluntary service therefore lies in identifying the techno-sociological problems underlying specific social concerns. Volunteer professionals can then be attracted and guided to apply volunteerism and professionalism together to develop new areas of voluntary service that generates new economic activities. The example case illustrates how the problem of suppressed demand of building repair was solved by the volunteer group's advisory service provided to the OC whereby the repair works contract generated new activities.

The resulting new activities from core voluntary work provide scope for sustainable development of further voluntary work. In the example case, paid workers delivered the works contract and the AP service. With some prior organizing, these activities could have been taken up by volunteers. As the activities are generated from the core voluntary work, the alternative arrangement would not affect the regular workers. Further work is continuing to develop a new management system of building repair in which service delivery would be led by a volunteer core.

Between the extremes of nil or full allocating of non-core generated activities to volunteer workers, a whole spectrum of community service can appear with varying combination of paid and volunteering workers. In the whole spectrum, professional advice by volunteers would be essential for improving the current practice to adapt to different types of situations. The new possibility is not only beneficial to the healthy growth of volunteering, but also facilitates the planning of sustainable community service by making the optimum use of volunteer work.

Conclusion

An integrated application of professionalism and volunteerism is necessary for solving certain common techno-sociological problems. Implementing such solutions constitute ECVW that benefits the community both socially and economically. The case studied in this paper demonstrates how volunteer professionals develop and implement such a solution to revive a building repair contract.

Population ageing being an inevitable world trend, community building must include the creation of more jobs that are suitable for both the increasing number of elderly workers and the regular workers. Retired professional have a special role as volunteers for job creation. With their knowledge and experience, they can help improve current work practice thereby reducing cost and making more new work worthwhile to the client. As volunteers they enjoy greater trust of the otherwise hesitant client and hence can help realize the suppressed demand for new work. Further development of economic core voluntary work by retired professional in their area of experience and expertise should be explored.

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