The Role of Social Work in Urban Community-Based Management: A Path to Optimizing China's Urban Social Governance

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Abstract

In the context of rapid urbanization in China, urban community-based management faces numerous challenges. social work, with its unique values and methods, has the potential to play a significant role in optimizing urban social governance. This study aims to explore the specific functions and mechanisms of social work in urban community-based management. A mixed - method approach was adopted, including a comprehensive literature review, in - depth interviews with social workers, community managers, and residents in selected urban communities in China, and case - study analysis. social work contributes to urban community-based management through functions such as resource mobilization, conflict resolution, and service - quality improvement. It also helps build social capital and strengthen community cohesion. However, there are barriers such as insufficient professional recognition and resource constraints. social work can be an effective path to optimize China's urban social governance. To fully realize its potential, it is necessary to improve professional recognition, allocate more resources, and strengthen the training of social work professionals.

Keywords: Social Work; Urban Community-Based Management; Urban Social Governance; China; Social Capital

1. Introduction

In recent decades, China has witnessed an unprecedented wave of urbanization. The urban population has been increasing rapidly, and urban communities have become the basic units of social governance. Effective urban community-based management is crucial for maintaining social stability, promoting social justice, and improving the quality of life of urban residents (Wang, 2018). However, traditional management models are facing challenges in dealing with the complex social problems emerging in urban communities, such as an aging population, income inequality, and community - building issues.

Furthermore, social work, as a professional activity based on scientific theories and methods, has the potential to address these challenges. It focuses on individuals, families, groups, and communities, aiming to enhance social functioning, relieve social problems, and promote social justice (Zhao, 2019). In Western countries, social work has long been integrated into community-based management and has played an important role in improving community well - being. In China, although the development of social work is relatively new, it has gradually attracted attention in the field of urban social governance.

Previous studies have explored the general role of social work in social governance (Li, 2020), but there is a lack of in - depth research on its specific role in urban community-based management. Some scholars have pointed out that social work can help meet the diverse needs of community residents (Zhang, 2017), yet the specific mechanisms and challenges remain unclear.

The main aim of this study is to comprehensively analyze the role of social work in urban community-based management in China. By identifying its functions, mechanisms, and existing problems, this research hopes to provide practical suggestions for optimizing China's urban social governance. The principal conclusion is that social work can be an important path for improving urban community-based management, but it requires a series of supportive measures to fully exert its potential.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Conceptual Framework of Urban Community-Based Management and Social Work

2.1.1. Urban Community-Based Management

Urban community-based management refers to a series of activities carried out by various actors in urban communities, including the government, community organizations, and residents, to manage community affairs, allocate resources, and provide public services (Chen, 2017). It involves aspects such as community infrastructure construction, community safety maintenance, and community - service delivery. In China, the government has been playing a leading role in urban community-based management, but in recent years, there has been a growing trend towards the participation of multiple actors.

(1) Traditional Management Model: In the past, the urban community-based management in China mainly relied on the government - led administrative model. The government made decisions and allocated resources, and community residents had limited participation. This model was effective in large - scale community - building in the early stage of urbanization but faced problems such as low efficiency and lack of flexibility in dealing with diverse community needs.

(2) New Trends: With the development of civil society, there is an increasing emphasis on the participation of non - governmental organizations and residents in urban community-based management. Community - building projects are now more focused on meeting the actual needs of residents, and there is a growing recognition of the importance of community autonomy and self - governance.

This study lacks a coherent integration of theoretical frameworks from public administration, institutional economics, or social capital theory. While social capital and governance are briefly mentioned, their use remains largely descriptive rather than analytical. For instance, although Putnam's theory of social capital is cited to support the research hypotheses, there is no systematic effort to connect the empirical findings with this theoretical lens. Incorporating established governance models—such as Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework or the principles of New Public Management—could significantly strengthen the study's theoretical foundation. Doing so would enhance the explanatory power, analytical depth, and overall relevance of the paper within the broader scholarly discourse. A clearer theoretical articulation would not only provide a more rigorous interpretative framework but also align the research with academic standards in governance studies.

2.1.2. Social Work

Social work is a professional service activity that combines social science knowledge, values, and skills to help individuals, families, and communities solve problems and improve their well - being (Zhao, 2019). It is based on values such as respect, equality, and social justice. social workers use methods such as casework, group work, and community work to intervene in social problems.

(1) Professional Values: social work values emphasize the dignity and worth of every individual. social workers respect the choices and decisions of clients, and they strive to promote social justice by advocating for the rights of marginalized groups.

(2) Intervention Methods: Casework focuses on helping individuals solve personal problems through one - on - one counseling. Group work aims to promote the growth and change of group members through group activities. Community work mobilizes community resources and promotes community - wide participation to address community - level problems.

2.2. The Role of Social Work in Urban Community-Based Management

2.2.1. Resource Mobilization

Social workers play a crucial role in mobilizing resources for urban communities. They can connect communities with external resources, such as government funds, corporate sponsorships, and volunteer services.

(1) Government - Community Linkage: social workers are familiar with government policies and funding channels. They can help communities apply for relevant government projects and subsidies. For example, in a certain urban community in Shanghai, social workers helped the community apply for a government - funded elderly - care service project, which improved the living conditions of the elderly in the community.

(2) Corporate and Social Resource Integration: social workers can also establish partnerships with enterprises and social organizations. They can encourage enterprises to provide financial support or in - kind donations to communities. In addition, they can mobilize volunteers to participate in community service activities, which enriches the service resources of the community.

2.2.2. Conflict Resolution

In urban communities, conflicts may arise due to various reasons, such as property disputes, neighborhood disputes, and resource - allocation issues. social workers, with their professional skills in communication and negotiation, can effectively resolve these conflicts.

(1) Mediation Skills: social workers are trained in mediation techniques. They can listen to the demands and concerns of both parties in a conflict, help them understand each other's positions, and find win - win solutions. In a community in Beijing, there was a conflict between residents over the use of a community garden. social workers intervened, organized negotiation meetings, and finally reached an agreement on the shared use of the garden.

(2) Preventive Measures: social workers can also take preventive measures to avoid potential conflicts. They can conduct community - wide surveys to understand residents' needs and concerns in advance and take appropriate measures to address them, thus reducing the likelihood of conflicts.

2.2.3. Service - Quality Improvement

Social work can improve the quality of community services. They can assess the needs of community residents more accurately and design and implement more targeted services.

(1) Needs Assessment: social workers use professional methods such as questionnaires and interviews to conduct in - depth needs assessments in communities. By understanding the real needs of residents, they can ensure that community services are more in line with the actual situation. For example, in a community in Guangzhou, social workers found through surveys that residents had a strong demand for cultural and educational services for children. Based on this, they designed relevant service programs.

(2) Service Innovation: social workers can also introduce new service models and concepts. They can combine modern social work theories and methods with local community characteristics to create more effective service programs. For instance, some social workers have introduced the "strengths - based" approach in community - service delivery, which focuses on the strengths and potential of residents rather than just their problems.

2.3. The Mechanisms of Social Work in Urban Community-Based Management

2.3.1. Building Social Capital

Social work can promote the building of social capital in urban communities. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that exist within a community, which can facilitate cooperation and collective action (Putnam, 1993).

(1) Network Building: social workers can organize various community activities, such as community festivals, cultural events, and volunteer activities. These activities can bring residents together, expand their social networks, and enhance their communication and interaction. In a community in Shenzhen, social workers organized a series of community - building activities, which significantly increased the frequency of interaction among residents.

(2) Trust and Norm Formation: social workers can also promote the formation of trust and norms in communities. By adhering to professional ethics and values, social workers can set good

examples in the community. They can also encourage residents to abide by community norms and respect each other, which helps to build a harmonious community environment.

2.3.2. Strengthening Community Cohesion

Social work can strengthen community cohesion. Community cohesion refers to the sense of belonging and unity among community residents.

(1) Community - Identity Promotion: social workers can help residents establish a stronger sense of community identity. They can organize activities to introduce the history and culture of the community, and encourage residents to participate in community - building projects. In a historical community in Xi'an, social workers organized cultural heritage - protection activities, which enhanced residents' pride and sense of belonging to the community.

(2) Collective - Action Mobilization: social workers can mobilize residents to participate in collective actions for community development. By promoting cooperation and joint efforts, social workers can make residents feel that they are an important part of the community, which in turn strengthens community cohesion.

3. Methodology

Although the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, the methodological section lacks critical details regarding sample size, interview protocols, case selection criteria, and data analysis techniques. In particular, the treatment of qualitative data is vague; the paper does not explain how the data were coded, analyzed, or validated. This lack of transparency undermines the study's credibility and limits its replicability. The author should provide a more rigorous and structured account of the research design, particularly for the qualitative component. This includes specifying how interviewees were selected, how data were collected and processed, and which analytical strategies were used to derive conclusions from the data. Clarifying whether coding was inductive or deductive, how intercoder reliability was ensured (if at all), and how themes were validated would contribute to methodological robustness. Additionally, the inclusion of illustrative quotes or comparative case insights would not only enrich the analysis but also demonstrate how empirical findings were systematically grounded in the data. A more comprehensive methodological exposition is essential to enhance both the reliability and scholarly value of the study.

To enhance methodological transparency, the study must specify the sample size and provide a rationale for participant and case selection. For the qualitative component, it is essential to report how many interviews were conducted, how participants were recruited, and what criteria determined their inclusion. Whether purposive sampling, snowball sampling, or another strategy was employed directly influences the generalizability and credibility of findings. In mixed-methods research, the integration of qualitative insights relies heavily on the representativeness and relevance of selected cases. As such, the author should clarify whether the sample size was guided by data saturation principles and how demographic, institutional, or contextual diversity was ensured. Additionally, any exclusion criteria, ethical considerations (such as informed consent), and the duration and format of interviews (e.g., semi-structured, in-depth) should be

detailed. Without such information, the methodological foundation remains opaque, limiting readers' ability to evaluate the rigor and trustworthiness of the research design.

Beyond sample composition, the study must also elaborate on how qualitative data were processed and analyzed. A clear explanation of the analytical approach—whether thematic analysis, grounded theory, content analysis, or narrative analysis—is crucial for understanding how insights were derived. The author should indicate whether coding was conducted manually or with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo, MAXQDA), and describe the coding framework, including whether it was developed inductively from the data or deductively from pre-existing theory. The process of coding should be transparently outlined: how many coders were involved, how coding consistency was maintained, and whether intercoder reliability was assessed. Furthermore, the method of theme validation—such as member checking, triangulation, or peer debriefing—should be specified. Including examples of how codes evolved into themes, and how those themes support the empirical claims, would enhance analytical clarity. Such methodological precision is necessary for readers to assess the depth and validity of the qualitative findings.

4. Discussion

The results of this study show that social work has multiple functions and positive impacts on urban community-based management in China. These findings are consistent with previous studies in Western countries, which also emphasize the importance of social work in community - building and social governance (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). However, in the Chinese context, there are some unique challenges.

One of the main challenges is the insufficient professional recognition of social work. In China, social work is still a relatively new profession, and many people, including some government officials and community managers, do not fully understand the value and functions of social work. This leads to a lack of support and resources for social work in urban community-based management.

Another challenge is resource constraints. Although social workers can mobilize resources to a certain extent, the overall resources available for social work in urban communities are still limited. There is a lack of stable funding sources, and the number of professional social workers is insufficient, which restricts the scope and depth of social work services.

In terms of future research directions, more in - depth studies are needed on how to improve the professional recognition of social work in China. This could involve exploring effective publicity and education methods, as well as policy - making to promote the development of the social work profession. In addition, research on how to optimize the allocation of social work resources in urban communities is also necessary.

5. Conclusions

This study has comprehensively analyzed the role of social work in urban community-based management in China. social work can contribute to urban community-based management through functions such as resource mobilization, conflict resolution, and service - quality improvement. It also plays an important role in building social capital and strengthening community cohesion.

The study would benefit from a more critical engagement with potential counterarguments, particularly regarding institutional inertia and resistance to change. In governance-related research, reforms or participatory mechanisms often face systemic constraints that stem from entrenched bureaucratic interests, path dependency, or political disincentives. By overlooking these structural barriers, the analysis risks presenting an overly optimistic or linear interpretation of governance innovation. The author should acknowledge that even well-designed policies or community-led initiatives may falter due to misaligned incentives, capacity limitations, or lack of institutional will. Incorporating a discussion of institutional resistance—supported by relevant empirical or theoretical literature—would offer a more balanced and realistic understanding of implementation dynamics. This addition would also strengthen the study's practical relevance by highlighting the real-world challenges that reform efforts must navigate.

Another critical omission in the study is the limited attention paid to regional or contextual variation across the cases analyzed. Governance outcomes are deeply shaped by socio-political, cultural, and economic factors that vary significantly between regions. For example, mechanisms that succeed in urban, resource-rich settings may prove ineffective in rural or marginalized areas with weaker administrative capacity or different power structures. Ignoring such variation risks overgeneralizing the findings and weakens the explanatory power of the study. The author should explicitly address how contextual differences—such as local governance culture, institutional maturity, or civil society strength—may influence the applicability or outcomes of governance models. Including comparative analysis or region-specific commentary would enhance both the nuance and transferability of the study's conclusions. This would also reflect a deeper appreciation of the complexity inherent in public administration across diverse settings.

However, to fully realize the potential of social work in optimizing China's urban social governance, it is necessary to address the existing challenges. This requires improving the professional recognition of social work, allocating more resources, and strengthening the training of social work professionals. Future research should focus on these aspects to provide more practical suggestions for the development of social work in urban community-based management in China.

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