

Restructuring Child Care Responsibility: Dynamics of Child Protection Mix in Taiwan

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Continuous suicidal families involving children and fatal cases of child maltreatment reported by the press since 2004 have embarrassed the government by the name of not protecting children in Taiwan, disregard the fact that the Child Welfare Act with child protection items have been amended back to 1993. Among all the following child welfare efforts made by the Central Government in Taiwan, the Service Project for High-Risk Families in 2005, Emergency Relief for the Disadvantaged Families with Children in 2006, and Child Protection Manpower Enhancement in 2006 are those which have caused the direction change of child protection policy in Taiwan since 1989.

It has been noticed that those projects have not been implemented as intended at local governments. It is good timing to observe the potential development of this new child protection direction in Taiwan. And the author tries to grasp the dynamics of the development process involving the Central Government, the local governments, and the contracted NGOs with special attention to the Service Project for High-Risk Families. The following research questions have been addressed:

1. Who are those contracted NGOs to carry out the service projects for High-Risk Families at local areas? How many resources have been allocated by different actors involved, and in what way?
2. Have the Children's Bureau, county governments, and the local contracted agencies perceived the goals of the High-Risk Family Project differently? And if it is so, why?
3. As to the county government and the local contracted agencies, how will they perceive the relations among those three projects, especially that between "the High-Risk Family Project" and "the Emergency Relief Project"? And how will this have impacts on the child protection system?

Keywords: Child protection, family at-risk, NGO, purchase of service contract

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Introduction

The intervention to child maltreatment this social phenomenon by the government does not only stand for the minimum child care standard recognized by the society, but also how much the state is committed to share the child care responsibility with the families. Once you try to improve the circumstances of children in the community, demand for the follow-up services directly challenges the existing social welfare network. Apparently, the child protection development in Taiwan has provided rich data for concerned researchers, though it has been questioned as the modulation of the child protection movement in Taiwan (Yu, 1999). In the late 80's the child protection effort was initiated by a local child welfare agency in Taiwan through conferences and press meetings which was followed by reporting hotlines set up respectively by Taipei City Government and Kaosiung City Government. However, the Central Government didn't respond till the amendment of the Child Welfare Act in 1993. Reporting requirement, definition of circumstances calling for public intervention, due process, parental education, and out-of-home placement were for the first time written in law. However, child maltreatment has been narrowly perceived as the individual parents' inadequacy in Taiwan from the beginning due to the stereotyped "abusing" parents reported by the media. The demand for foster family services has grown rapidly since removal of the children from their "abusing" parents was regarded as the only way to rescue them. Drifting of the abused children among different placements after being away from their home has called the attention of few researchers in Taiwan (Yu, 2000).

In the Child and Youth Welfare Act of 2003, family treatment services were introduced as family preservation, reunification, and follow-up services delivered to the families involving child abuse. Lack of resources was for the first time officially regarded as contributing to child abuse in the families. The local governments have been required to allocate resources on this protection model, but given the welfare budget cuts happened along the years, few local authorities have invested child welfare to prevent child maltreatment. Since 2004, continuous suicidal families involving children and fatal cases of child abuse reported by the press have shocked the public, and embarrassed the government by the name of not caring about children in Taiwan. The Central Government tried to take initiative with many new projects to combat those tragedies. Among those are the Service for High-Risk Families in 2005, Emergency Relief for the Disadvantaged Families with Children in 2006, and Child Protection Manpower Enhancement in 2006, all which have further emphasized the family service model and had tremendous impacts on the direction change of child protection in Taiwan. It is a good timing to observe the potential development of this new child protection direction in Taiwan.

It has been noticed that these three projects mentioned above have not been implemented as intended at the local governments. Therefore, the current purpose of the study is to grasp the dynamics of the implementation process which involves the Central Government, the local governments, and the contracted NGOs with special attention paid to the High-Risk Family project. The following research questions have been addressed:

1. Who are those contracted NGOs to carry out the service projects for High-Risk Families at local areas? How many resources have been allocated by different actors involved, and in what way?
2. Have the Children's Bureau, county governments, and the local contracted agencies perceived the goals of the High-Risk Family Project differently? And if it is so, why?
3. As to the county government and the local contracted agencies, how will they perceive the relations among those three projects, especially that between "the High-Risk Family Project" and "the Emergency Relief Project"? And how will this have impacts on the child protection system?

Methods

Quantitative as well as qualitative data have been collected through the following means: (1) In total, six focus groups part-taken by the representatives respectively from 23 local social units and 60 contracted agencies were held in northern, central, and southern/ eastern regions in January, 2007. (2) Questionnaires were e-mailed or faxed to the social service workers in charge of the High-Risk Family Project at 23 local governments. Similar questionnaires were sent to 60 contracted agency workers responsible for implementing the Project in April, 2007. (3) In-depth interviews were conducted with 36 key persons from both contracted agencies and the social service units of eight local governments (April through July, 2007).

Results

A platform especially friendly for new players

In recent years, either through subsidy from the Central Government (mainly the High-risk Family Project) or from the local governments (mainly the Family Treatment Project), many local agencies have been explored by the local governments to take part in the projects. For example, more than 6 agencies have been contracted to deliver services to the high-risk families in some cities/counties. As compared with the Family Treatment Project, the number of agencies contracted to the High-Risk Family Project has increased dramatically from 2005 through 2007. (refer to Table 1)

Table1. No.of High-Risk Family and Family Treatment contracted agencies (2005~2007)

Year\Project	High-Risk Family Service	Family Treatment Project
2005	33	27
2006	46	32
2007	67	34

The change in quantity has also brought about the quality change in the ecology of local agencies. In the past, the child protection services in Taiwan have been contracted to only few privileged child welfare agencies by the local governments, such as Taiwan Fund for Children and Families, World Vision of Taiwan and Child Welfare League of

Kaohsiung County			V		V	V	V			V
Kaohsiung City			V		V	V	V			V
Tainan County	V	V	V							
Tainan City	V	V	V							V
Chiayi County										
Chiayi City										
Pintung County					V	V	V			V
Taitung County									V	V
Hualien County	V	V	V				V		V	V
Subtotal	6	7	9		10	10	11		3	5
*Family Treatment Proj	20	21	22		2	3	3		3	3

Resources allocation by different actors

The generous budget allocation for the High-Risk Family Project from the Central Government in the beginning attracted many local agencies to jump in. However, the overwhelming reporting later made by all sources, especially the drop-out cases and the child abuse cases from schools have caused confusion as to which population to be served originally designed by the Project. Facing the huge demands, not only the Central Government has increased the budget allocation, but the local governments have also been forced to allocate resources into the Project. For some contracted agencies, especially those who insist professional practice standard, need to hire more manpower to lower the caseload per worker out of their own pockets. In this perspective, the Central Government has successfully induced resources from both local governments and the contracted agencies by initiating the new Project.

Table 3. Budget allocated to the High-risk Family Project by the government (in million)

	2005		2006		2007	
	Central	Local	Central	Local	Central	Local
	40	0.32	49	25.8	82.7	28.4

The same project with different perceptions

The Children's Bureau has set a very clear goal for the High-Risk Family Project by designing a check list to first exclude the child abuse reported cases and those families already on public assistance. It intends to prevent the children from abuse and domestic violence, and especially targets to those families whose children have not been adequately cared due to various circumstances happen to the care-givers, such as complicated marital relationship, suicidal attempts or suicide, illness, death, putting into prison, drug abuse or mental health problems without regular treatment, poverty, single-headed family, involuntary unemployment. However, the experiences of local agencies receiving reports have told a different story.

Traditionally, the schools in Taiwan have been reluctant to report child abuse in order to maintain friendly relationship with the parents, and to avoid social stigma attached to the reported families. High-risk family reporting sounds less threatened to both the school teachers and the families, it becomes a substitute for child protection to the school

system. The school drop-out reporting is another disagreement between the schools and the contracted agencies, since there should be internal reporting mechanism for drop-out students in the schools disregarding of the service quality. The local government has the final say on this issue again, even there has been clear guideline for drop-out reports from the Children’s Bureau. And the responses from the local government are crucial for the contracted agencies to deal with child abuse reports. Some local governments do not only reject the child abuse reports referred from the local agencies, but also further dump the child abuse cases which have burdened them long time to the agencies currently contracted for the High-Risk Family Project. High-Risk Family Project should serve the families at risk of child abuse, clearly demonstrated in the check list, but it also becomes the follow-up service to the child abuse reported families for some local governments due to the resources shortage of child protection systems.

Substitute or complement the child protection system

As mentioned before, to some local governments, the High-Risk Family Project has been regarded as a substitute for the child protection service. What is its relationship to the Emergency Relief Project which was claimed to prevent children from abuse or domestic violence due to economic pressure? The Emergency Relief for the Disadvantaged Families with Children was first introduced in 2006 right after the High-Risk Family Project of 2005, the budget share between the Central Government and the local is 70 to 30, and the poverty line is much lower and more flexible than that of the existing Public Assistance. Table 4 shows that 4,333(71.6%) out of 6,051 families have been helped by the Emergency Relief in 2006, and among them, 1,369 (31.6%) families were also enrolled as high-risk families, and only few (231 families, 5.3%) were registered in the child protection system.

Since the clientele of High-risk Family Project is voluntary, rejection to home visiting has been common, the contracted agency workers now take the Emergency Relief Project as an incentive for the high-risk families to open their doors. Once they get the emergency relief, the families must accept home visiting at least for six months of the social workers from the local government. Given the manpower shrinkage, the local governments are pleased to see more overlapped cases which will be visited by the contracted agency workers, though the original goal is to have the social workers of the local governments with more front line experiences.

Table 4. Statistics of the Emergency Relief and related projects (2006)

No. of Applicants	No. of Approved Cases	Overlap w/ High-Risk Families	Overlap w/ Child Protection System
6,051F/10,909C	4,333F/7,891C (100%/100%)	1,369F/2,602C (31.6%/33.0%)	231F/406C (5.3%/5.1%)

As to the Child Protection Manpower Enhancement of 2006, the Central Government will subsidize the local governments 40% salary of each social worker they employ for child protection. Given the current 185 workers (51 full-time and 267 part-time workers)

with caseload about 80, the Central Government tries to decrease the caseload to 30 by increasing 320 social workers for child protection. However, this estimation has been static by nature and ignored the dynamics of manpower utilization at the local governments. With the great demands for High-Risk Family Project and the Emergency Relief Project, more coordination efforts have been made between the local governments and the contracted agencies for the former, and in the mean time, social workers have been busy in making home visits for the latter. The most important, the newly hired social workers need time to get familiar with the system, and can not be put on work right away. The transaction costs have been demonstrated in the continuous rotation of the contact workers at the local governments facing the contracted agencies.

Discussion

Since 2004, the continuous reporting of suicidal families involving children and fatal child abuse cases by the media has explored the miserable circumstances of under-class families in Taiwan. It also challenges the State's capability to protect our children. The Central Government rushes herself into the High-Risk Family Project at the end of 2004 by allocating budget to contract the local agencies through the local governments. The number of contracted agencies has been increased to about seventy without much screening by the local governments, given the overwhelming reports to services. The Project offers a platform very friendly for new comers disregarding their backgrounds and expertises. It also changes the practice territories of the three agencies which have committed themselves long time to child protection in Taiwan. The tradition of only the best child welfare agencies for child protection has been changed, and the High-Risk Family Project has opened a door for whoever likes to do child protection.

In 2005 there were only two local governments with their own budgets which made 0.32 million for the High-Risk Family Project except budgets from the Central Government. And the number of local government with their own budgets made of 25.82 million increases to nine in 2006. In this sense, the Central government has successfully induced resources allocated to welfare from the local governments. Through the contracts, the local agencies have recruited in total 191 workers subsidized by the Central Government in 2007 but not without costs. Some contracted agencies have complained of the low salary assigned to the workers and their costs for adding up to the agency level and insurance payments. It also explains why most contracted agencies have been conservative about the number of families they can serve, even with pressure from the local governments to hire more workers.

It was not required to have only one reporting registry at the local government to take the high-risk family reports until the early 2007. Before that, reporting from various sources directly reached the contracted agency, it opened much room for each agency to define what constituted high-risk families which varied with her professional background. But the perception discrepancy between the local governments and the contracted agencies is big, for most local governments, the High-Risk Family Project does not only prevent children from abuse or domestic violence, it also substitutes the child protection service originally budgeted from the local governments by law. The Emergency Relief Project, on the other hand, complements the High-Risk Family Project by introducing

financial assistance to the families by the contracted agencies, and relieves the local governments from doing home visits. But it is heard from many local governments that the 70% subsidy from the Central Government has been phased out along with the increasing demands of families recognized by the local governments. It turns out that the local government concerned of family welfare are punished by paying the money out of their own pockets.

As to the Child Protection Manpower Enhancement, 253 social workers have been newly employed respectively by the local governments with 40% salary subsidized by the Central Government. It will take the local government at least half a year to invest orientation and in-service training before the new manpower can be put on work. And the local governments absorb the transaction costs by rotating the contact workers dealing with the contracted agencies which in turns has caused confusion and bad coordination.

Back in 1993, out-of-home placement for the abused children and parental education were the main services provided by the government to combat child abuse. It attributed the problem to individual parents' lack of parenting knowledge, and stigmatized the reported families. The Child and Youth Welfare Act of 2003 introduced family treatment services categorized into family preservation, family reunification, and follow-up service to the families with children just be reunified with their natural parents. But the implementation varies according to the financial capability and welfare investment of each local government. The new projects initiated by the Central Government since 2004 have been designed to prevent children from abuse or domestic violence, although it sometimes mixed up with the child protection service. All those projects enhance the prevention of child abuse by delivery various services to families. Although they are basically regarded as demonstration projects, no guarantee for all those projects to continue if the political party in power changes after 2008, they switch our attention to preventive services of child protection in time. The Central Government has successfully involved the local governments and the contracted agencies together to share the costs. However, there is no guarantee for the service quality, since the contracted agencies vary in their professional backgrounds and expertise, and not every local government with the capability to supervise them.

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