

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Suitable but not optimal: Construction of a stepped functional model for the hub-type social organization's due diligence in China

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**Abstract:** The fulfillment of duties and responsibilities of hub-type social organizations is of great significance to promote the social organizations' participation in social governance innovation. This study summarizes the function of hub-type social organizations into a three-level pyramidal stepped functional model. Different from traditional theoretical explanations, this study believes that the key factors affecting the quality of due diligence of hub-type social organizations are not the pros and cons of professional ability, resource environment or operating mechanism, but the matching degree between these three conditions and the functions of hub-type social organizations. If the matching degree is low, even if the conditions of the hub-type social organization are very good, it is easy to fall into the dilemma of inability to perform duties, which can be called "structural dislocation"; on the contrary, if the degree of matching is high, even if the conditions are very weak, the hub-type social organization can also perform their duties smoothly.

**Keywords:** hub-type social organization, functional dilemma, structural dislocation, stepped functional model

## 1 The value, predicament and blind spot of theoretical explanation of hub-type social organization

At present, social organizations in China have encountered new bottlenecks in the rapid development, so the value of hub-type social organizations has been highlighted. First of all, although the number of social organizations in my country is far from enough in terms of social needs, the government seems to be unable to manage the existing institutions effectively in terms of manpower, energy and ability. For example, some local civil affairs have begun to implement "the strategy of quantity reduction and quality development", which raises the threshold for the registration of social organizations. Secondly, as far as social organizations are concerned, although the number is increasing rapidly, the level of professional skills, resource sharing, industry co-construction, and policy advocacy needs to be improved urgently.

Therefore, at this critical development node, there is an urgent need for a group of hub-type social organizations with industry authority, detached from specific businesses, through professional services, to build a bond for the healthy development of political and social interaction vertically, and to promote the self-discipline, mutual assistance and capacity improvement of social organizations horizontally.

Although the function is very important, the role of the hub-type social organization is uneven. Even if a few institutions have performed well, there are still many problems in general: some institutions not only fail to assume the role of "linking up and down", but instead make the relationship between the government and social organizations even more tense [1]: The services of some institutions are difficult to attract the participation of social organizations, and they rely on administrative background or human feelings and face to maintain relationships [2]: Some institutions have relatively poor resource environments, which are under great pressure to survive, while others are already in dormant or semi-dormant states [3].

The academic circles have given many explanations for the above-mentioned issues, mainly including three aspects. Although they have certain explanatory power, there are also shortcomings:

First, most scholars believe that the top-down operate mechanism under the administrative system is at work [2], leading to hub-type social organizations (especially semi-official institutions) are unwilling or difficult to deeply grasp the needs of their clients [3, 4], resulting

in a “formalism” or “disconnection between supply and demand”. The reality shows that there are indeed many institutions like this, but there are also some semi-official or official institutions (such as associations or people’s organizations in some provinces and cities) that are quite efficient and effective in serving social organizations and are highly recognized by social organizations.

Secondly, some scholars believe that inadequate professional competence makes it difficult for hub-type social organizations to perform their duties. In reality, such situations are relatively common, but in fact some hub institutions do not have an obvious pool of expertise, yet they also provide practical services for social organizations and are recognized as such.

Third, some scholars believe that the lack of external resources (such as project funds) makes it difficult for institutions to serve effectively. However, many studies have shown that under the current policy background of the continued government purchase, the resource problems faced by social organizations are mostly superficial, and more fundamental is the lack of service capabilities. In reality, some hub agencies that play a better role and have abundant resources have come out of the barren resource environment by relying on professional services.

In this regard, this study attempts to base on existing research by constructing a pyramidal “three-step ladder” functional model of the hub-type social organization, which not only fits in with the findings of existing research, but also hopes to explain the “blind spots” that previous findings have struggled to explain.

The core conclusion of the model is that the functions of hub-type social organizations have three different levels, and they have different social needs, different functional contents, and different required professional skills and external support, and become more complex and demanding as moving up the hierarchy. Therefore, the key to whether a hub-type social organization can play a role is not the level of operation mechanism, professional ability and resource environment, but the matching degree of the three with the requirements of hub functions at different levels.

Therefore, this study is conducive to breaking the traditional thinking on the high expectations of hub-type social organizations in terms of mechanisms, capabilities and resources. On the contrary, we believe that different operation mechanisms (even if it is purely top-down), different professional capabilities (even if the professional technical reserve is very low), and different resource environments (even if the starting point of resources is very low), can all contribute to the hub-type function.

## 2 Construction of a pyramidal stepped functional model

### 2.1 Definition of the concept of hub-type social organization

The term “hub-type social organization” was earlier found in the *Opinions on Accelerating the Reform and Development of Social Organizations* issued by the Beijing Municipal Social Work Commission in September 2008. *Interim Measures on Building a Municipal Hub Social Organization Work System* promulgated by Beijing defines the hub-type social organization as one that is determined by the relevant departments in charge of social construction and is responsible for the development, service and management of social organizations of the same category, nature and field. It is a joint social organization that plays a role as a bridge in politics, takes a leading position in business, and assumes the function of business supervisor in management [5].

In fact, social organizations that play hub-type functions are far beyond the definition of the Beijing Municipal Commission of Social Work. Many social organizations that have not been recognized by the government and have no obvious political function have also played their hub-type functions well. Therefore, this study will define a hub-type social organization in a broader sense: an intermediary organization, which is detached from specific business, has a certain industry authority, and is committed to the development and service of social organizations in the same industry, or to connecting a single social organization and the government to promote the coordination of government and society.

### 2.2 Pyramid-like stepped functional model

According to the functional content of hub-type social organizations, this research divides them into three types of functions: “administrative assistance”, “professional services” and “social governance innovation” from low to high (As shown in [Figure 1](#)).

“Administrative auxiliary function” refers to the administrative supportive service work transferred by the government to social organizations, such as registration, annual inspection, evaluation, *etc.* The decision-making power of administration is still under the control of the

government, and hub-type social organizations undertake specific affairs in the process of public services.

“Professional services function” refers to the professional services provided by hub-type social organizations to promote the development of the industry by using their own professional resources, such as professional skills training of social organizations, summary of industry experience, formulation of industry norms, and evaluation of organizational expertise, legal rights protection of social organizations in the industry, *etc.*

The “social governance innovation function” is the highest level of the hub-type social organization’s function and also requires the highest ability. Its main function is to creatively solve or respond to some significant but difficult problems or issues in the industry. For example, how to carry out party building in social organizations, how to help social organizations achieve capacity growth while undertaking government procurement projects, and how to form a diverse and good governance ecosystem within a certain range (such as a district or county).

In the above three categories, there are big differences in the demand positioning, functional content, professional requirements, external support, and mechanism requirements assumed by the functions of hub-type social organizations.



**Figure 1** Pyramid stepped functional model of hub-type social organization

## 2.2.1 Administrative Auxiliary Functions

### (1) Demand Orientation

At this level, hub-type social organizations meet the demands of excessive government administrative pressure and the transfer of some of the government’s public service functions. With the development of our economy and society, the number of social organizations continues to rise [6]. According to the *2017 Social Service Development Statistical Bulletin*, as of the end of 2017, there were a total of 762,000 social organizations across the country, putting a lot of pressure on government administration. For example, the average number of functional departments of the Beijing Municipal Organization Office is about 4, yet according to the *2016 Beijing Civil Affairs Development Statistical Bulletin*, there are 10,754 social organizations of all kinds in the city. Social organisations are stretched to the limit with regard to registration, annual inspection and assessment.

In this regard, the government seems to have two options: one is to expand its own scale, but the development route of this “all-round” government not only has obvious drawbacks [7], but also is not feasible under the background of the central government’s streamlining of government and management and control. The second is the transfer of government functions, seeking alternative or cooperative forces, and transferring public service functions to third-party forces to complete [8]. Among them, those public services with clear steps, clear basis, and clear scales are the most easily transferred parts.

In this context, the government (especially the civil affairs department) has entrusted some hub-type social organizations with sufficient manpower and strong service capabilities to undertake some auxiliary affairs of administrative management.

### (2) Functional content

In terms of content, it mainly undertakes the responsibilities of government administrative assistance. For example, the *Opinions on Accelerating the Promotion of the Reform and Development of Social Organizations* by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Social Work proposes that hub-type social organizations may, in accordance with the authorization of the government, undertake the administrative auxiliary responsibilities of the professional supervisory units stipulated by relevant national laws and regulations, mainly including: responsible for relevant Auxiliary review work before the establishment, modification and cancellation of registration of social organizations; responsible for the daily management of relevant social organizations, guiding and supervising social organizations to carry out activities in accordance with laws

and regulations; responsible for the preliminary review of annual inspections of relevant social organizations; assisting relevant departments in investigating and punishing relevant social organizations illegal conduct of the organization.

### (3) Professional technology

The functions of professional technology mainly belong to the type of process-based public services. The professional requirements for undertaking institutions are mainly reflected in the familiarity of business processes and the mastery of specific work experience. The requirements for professional thresholds are not high. It can be done with training and effective management by the institution.

In addition, some hub-type social organizations have a semi-official background [9], they are easy to gain the trust of government functional departments, and they are familiar with the process and content of relevant administrative management. They have advantages in undertaking auxiliary functions of administrative management.

### (4) External support

The external support that the pivot-type social organization needs to undertake this function mainly comes from the government, including two aspects: one is legal support, that is, the government must authorize the pivot-type social organization through a formal document and inform the service institution. The second is to provide appropriate resource support, such as work funds, hardware venues and supporting facilities.

### (5) Operational mechanism

As mentioned above, many scholars analyze the reasons for the failure of hub-type social organizations to focus on the mechanism level, and believe that the decoupling from the administration is insufficient, it is a top-down operation mechanism, and it is facing "quasi-bureaucratization", "administration", "monopolization" [6, 10], "sufficient independence", "insufficient vitality", "political generalization" [11] and other issues.

Therefore, another kind of socialization operation mechanism characterized by bottom-up is more favored. The operation mechanism of socialization refers to the system structure and operation mechanism that influence social organizations to break through the internal and external constraints of the system, operate independently, develop independently, and integrate across borders.

It is true that a good social operation mechanism plays an important role in promoting hub-type social organizations to perform their duties, but at different functional levels, the degree of requirements for this mechanism is also different.

At the functional level of administrative assistance, although the higher the degree of socialized operation, the better, but because it only provides process services such as office work and management, even if the degree of socialized operation is low (even a top-down operation mechanism), as long as standardized services are provided in accordance with the process sequence and link regulations, the work can be successfully completed.

## 2.2.2 Professional service function

### (1) Demand positioning

Hub-type social organizations play the function of professional services, which is positioned in the dual needs of the government and social organizations.

As far as the government is concerned, not only does it want social organizations to play an active role in social governance innovation, but also to avoid risks as much as possible, it often requires the intervention of hub-type social organizations with strong expertise. For example, in a government purchase project, a professional third-party organization can provide dual services of process supervision and capacity building, which not only ensures the standardization of the use of government purchase funds, but also improves the professional capabilities and service quality of social organizations [12].

As far as social organizations are concerned, the core problem currently facing is development [13], and the key to development is how to improve the professional ability to solve social problems. A hub-type social organization with professional capabilities can play an active role in this demand thread.

### (2) Functional content

A hub-type social organization that undertakes professional service functions has many similarities with industry associations in the professional field, mainly including the following aspects:

**Communication:** As a bridge between the government and social organizations, communicate the common requirements of social organizations to the government, and at the same

time assist the government in formulating and implementing the development plans, purchasing policies, administrative regulations and relevant laws of social organizations.

**Coordination:** Develop and implement rules and regulations and standards, and coordinate between social organisations in the field

**Supervision:** Supervise the service quality, competition methods and business style of social organizations in the industry, maintain industry reputation, encourage fair competition, and reduce illegal and irregular behaviors.

**Statistics:** Make statistics, analyze and publish the results of the basic situation of the industry.

**Research:** Carry out basic surveys on the development of the industry at home and abroad, study the problems faced by the industry, put forward suggestions, and publish publications for reference by social organizations and governments.

**Capacity building:** Provide professional training, consulting, special evaluation and other services for social organizations in the industry;

**Other services:** Such as information services, holding exhibitions, organizing conferences, etc.

### (3) Professional technology

In the field of non-profit management, the professional capabilities of social organizations usually include two types of professional skills in specific fields and skills in social mobilization and democratic consultation. At this level, the professional requirements for hub-type social organizations are also the same:

First, professional skills in specific fields, such as hub-type social organizations serving educational (health, environmental protection...) social organizations, need to master or link the field of education (health, environmental protection...) expertise.

The second is the professional skills of social mobilization and democratic consultation, such as mobilizing social organizations to formulate self-discipline norms or advocating policies to achieve collective action, or adjust the distribution of interests or resolve conflicts between organizations through democratic consultation or rules of procedure [14].

### (4) External support

At the level of professional services, hub-type social organizations usually require external support, including external professional technical institutions and government departments.

Firstly, the support of external professional and technical forces: one is to organize a team of experts to provide services such as skills training and knowledge transfer directly to social organizations; the other is to invite professional forces to build the capacity of the hub-type social organization itself, so as to improve it as a social organization Provide professional service capabilities.

Secondly, government support: First, the government divests the functions of professional services to hub-type social organizations, such as third-party assessment, research on issues related to the development of the social organization industry, etc. Second, the government issues special policies to support the development of hub-type social organizations' professional capabilities. For example, the Beijing Municipal Social Work Committee and the Chengdu Civil Affairs Bureau have issued corresponding policies and measures.

### (5) Operation Mechanism

At this functional level, the hub-type social organization not only needs to mobilize professional and technical resources in specific fields, but also needs to mobilize social organizations in the industry, but also needs to link government resources, so the vitality of its operation mechanism is proposed higher requirements. At this time, the strong mechanism guarantee of socialized operation has become the basis for the hub-type social organization to undertake the professional service function.

## 2.2.3 Social governance innovation function

### (1) Demand positioning

Hub-type social organizations play a social governance innovation function, and promote social organizations to participate in social governance from a more macro perspective, which is not only consistent with the country's requirements for deepening reform and innovative governance, but also a social The needs of the healthy development of the organization industry.

From the perspective of national development, whether it is the 18th and 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, or from the content of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee to the Third Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee, the central government has clearly proposed to deepen reform and promote social

governance innovation, and the participation of social organizations is a key initiative, and hub-type social organizations are obviously indispensable.

From the perspective of the development of the social organization industry, many current difficulties and key issues need to be broken through by hub-type social organizations. For example, in the current situation of rapid growth in the number of social organizations and uneven quality, how to establish a social organization's energy promotion system and integrity system is very critical, and this is the node where pivot-type social organizations should play a role. In addition, the cracking of a series of new topics such as party building in social organizations requires a group of hub-type social organizations with innovative capabilities to work hard to explore the construction of new governance mechanisms and new work models.

## **(2) Functional content**

A hub-type social organization whose functional content assumes the role of innovation in social governance. Its functional content is positioned to address the key and difficult issues faced by the development of social organizations in China at present and in the future, including but not limited to the following issues:

First, to promote the formation of the social selection mechanism of survival of the fittest allows high-quality social organizations to obtain more and better development opportunities, and eliminates institutions with low integrity and poor service quality.

Second, to promote the establishment of a market cultivation and capacity building mechanism, and build a channel for professional capacity growth while increasing the number of social organizations.

Third, to promote the establishment of state-social relations that adapt to the characteristics of the development of the times, solve the problems of party building in social organizations [15], explore a supportive government purchase policy system [16], and innovate an ecological pattern of multi-departmental cross-border cooperation and win-win.

## **(3) Professional technology**

At this functional level, the professional technology requirements for hub-type social organizations are higher with except "domain-specific expertise and social mobilisation and democratic consultation skills" of the previous level but a strong ability to target "problem awareness" and the ability to "think creatively".

First, the professional technology in specific fields and the technology of social mobilization and democratic consultation, the specific content can be found in the corresponding section above.

Second, a strong awareness of the problem. President Xi Jinping requested in the 20th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee in 2015: "Have a strong awareness of problems, be oriented by major problems, grasp key issues for further research and thinking, and strive to solve a series of prominent contradictions facing China's development. and problems" (Xinhua News Agency Commentator: Enhancing Awareness of Problems and Solving Development Problems. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/26/c\\_1114137607.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/26/c_1114137607.htm)). The participation of social organizations in social governance innovation is a new field in China. It involves many aspects of social construction, and the interest relationship is also relatively complex. It requires a group of hub-type social organizations to play an active role, and a keen ability to locate key issues is a prerequisite.

Third, strong innovative thinking. In the field of social development, some issues are complicated because they involve a wide range of issues and require a new mechanism or model to creatively integrate the forces of the government, enterprises, media, the public, and social organizations. As far as the function of cross-border cooperation is concerned, hub-type social organizations have more advantages than general organizations, but they must have the ability to think innovatively.

## **(4) External support**

At this functional level, external support is particularly necessary for the hub-type social organization to undertake the functions, mainly including the following two aspects:

First, policy support. Under the current background of deepening reform and promoting innovation in social governance, it is necessary to further invest in corresponding policies and funds at all levels, and stimulate the innovative awareness and capabilities of hub-type social organizations through venture philanthropy and other means.

Second, think tank support. A hub-type social organization needs the support of a strong and multidisciplinary expert think tank in order to obtain the ability to systematically solve social problems in this field in social governance innovation. At present, some hub organizations (such as the Social Work Department of the Beijing Disabled Persons' Federation and the National Yicang Development Network) have initially met such conditions.

**(5) Operation mechanism**

In this functional level, due to the high requirements for the position height, breadth of vision, professional depth and cross-border level of hub-type social organizations, more emphasis is placed on the space for autonomous operation in the mechanism. and the vitality it brings. Therefore, this level requires the highest degree of socialization of its operations.

**2.2.4 Model summary**

To sum up, the functional model of a hub-type social organization can be divided into three functions: administrative management assistance, professional service function and social governance innovation, and finally constitute the pyramid ladder structure shown in Figure 1 and content comparison shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Comparison of the content of the layers of the Hub-type Social Organisation Functional Model

Hierarchy	First level	Second level	Third level
Appellation	Administrative assistance	Professional service	Social governance innovation
Demand positioning	Transfer of government administrative service functions	1. Government:transfer of professional and technical functions; 2. Social organizations: industry professional service needs.	1. Government: The spirit of innovation in central social governance has landed; 2. Social organizations: solve the difficult problems in the development field.
Functional content	Assist administrative organs to complete the establishment, modification, cancellation, daily supervision, annual inspection and evaluation, illegal investigation and punishment of social organizations and other auxiliary services	Intra-industry communication, coordination, supervision, statistics, research, capacity building, information services, organization of exhibitions and conferences and so on.	Important and difficult issues in the development of the industry, such as promoting the formation of a social selection mechanism for the survival of the fittest, capacity building and market cultivation mechanisms, and state-social relations in the new era
Professional competency requirements	Business Skills for Streamlining Public Service	1. Area-specific expertise; 2. Expertise in social mobilisation and democratic consultation.	1. Problem awareness; 2. Innovative thinking; 3. Second level of expertise.
External support	Government provides legitimacy and resource support	1. Professional strength technical support; 2. Government policy and resource support.	1. Government policy and resource support; 2. Think tanks provide intellectual support.
Operation mechanism	No special requirements	Higher social operation mechanism	Highly socialised operation mechanism

**2.3 Structural dislocation: Interpretation of the status quo of hub-type social organizations performing their duties**

According to the model, the functions of hub-type social organizations are composed of three levels from low to high. The degree of requirements for socialized operation mechanism is not the same, and there is an increasing trend, which is shown as follows:

Demand positioning gradually changes from one element to multiple, and service content presents from “basic” to “professional” to “innovative” The requirements for professional ability are also constantly improving, and the external support needs are more inclined to more complex “soft and hard combination” support, and the requirements for socialized operation mechanisms are getting higher and higher. Therefore, at different functional levels, the conditions (professional technology, external support, and operating mechanism) for hub-type social organizations to fulfill their responsibilities are different.

Therefore, no matter how low the performance conditions of a hub-type organization are, as long as it is not lower than the requirements of this level, it can successfully assume the functions; on the contrary, no matter how high the performance conditions of a hub-type organization are, as long as it is lower than the requirements of this level, will fall into a difficult predicament.

This can also explain the phenomenon that previous studies could not explain. The first is that the reason why semi-official institutions and even highly administrative people’s organizations can better assume the function of hub-type organizations. Secondly, why institutions with obvious socialization orientation and strong professional capabilities are also in the dilemma of performing their duties.

**3 Conclusions and discussions**

In summary, the main conclusions of this paper are drawn:

**Conclusion 1:** From the perspective of functional types, the due diligence performance of hub-type social organizations can be summarized into a pyramid-like functional model, which

mainly includes three levels of administrative management assistance, professional services, and social governance innovation.

**Conclusion 2:** At different levels in the pyramidal ladder-type functional model, hub-type social organizations have different needs, positioning and functional content for performing their duties, as well as different requirements for professional technology, external support and operation mechanisms, and overall trends towards higher and higher.

**Conclusion 3:** One of the important reasons for the many problems faced by hub-type social organizations is the tension caused by “structural dislocation”: when the performance conditions of the organization are lower than the requirements of the current functional level, it will fall into Overcome the predicament. Once the conditions improve and the performance requirements are met, the predicament will be lifted naturally.

Therefore, whether a hub-type social organization can play a role, the key factor is not the level of professional ability, resource environment or operation mechanism, but the degree of matching of the three with the functional requirements of different levels of hubs.

The above conclusions can not only theoretically explain the current status of due diligence of hub-type social organizations, but also have positive reference value for the optimization of practical operations:

Firstly, traditional thinking often believes that only mechanisms, capabilities and resources have reached a high level. Only in this state can a hub-type social organization perform its duties due diligence, which can be judged from the definitions of hub institutions by many scholars. However, this study shows that institutions with different operating mechanisms (even if it is purely top-down), different professional capabilities (even if the professional technical reserve is very low), and different resource environments (even if the starting point of resources is very low) may be competent as hubs function of social organization.

Secondly, in the face of the current complex situation of social organizations and the fact that the overall capacity of hub-type social organizations is weak, both the government and the hub institutions can find a way out from the conclusions of this paper:

For the government, the hub-type social organizations can be classified, managed and supported according to the functional needs of different levels, and they can be encouraged to develop to a higher level, which ultimately become an important part in the ecosystem of social organizations participation in social governance.

For hub-type social organizations, they can identify their own functional positioning. Organizations with poor conditions can start by locating to a lower level, and those with better equipment conditions can locate to a high level, while multi-functional ones need to develop themselves in multiple directions.

In addition, the focus of this research is to build a new theoretical framework and put forward some viewpoints that can explain reality. More empirical materials are needed to be analyzed and verified, which can be used as a further research direction under this topic.

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