IPS Institute of Policy Studies

3rd Social Service Research Network (SSRN) "Transforming Research Into Solutions"

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The 3rd Social Service Research Network (SSRN), co-organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), was held on 16 February 2016. Held annually since 2014, it serves as a platform to bridge the gap between research and practice in the sector, so that the evidence generated by research can be translated into actionable insights for policy and practice. The first SSRN in 2014 explored the various aspects of a conducive ecosystem for social service research, while the second in 2015 examined the various oft-untapped assets like community artists and design thinkers. This year's meeting is a continuation of the last, exploring the potential of other professional groups like data scientists and academics who facilitate action research for voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs).

In his opening address, Fermin Diez, Deputy CEO of NCSS, said that while there was increasing interest in research by VWOs, they also lacked the know-how in conducting research or analyses. Mr Diez acknowledged a need for better coordination between all stakeholders, to amalgamate the efforts of similar VWOs and enrich the analysis of related and relevant research.

This was followed by the three plenary sessions where six speakers from various academic institutions, research centres, and VWOs shared their experiences and expertise on the following themes:

➢ Developing a robust programme monitoring system

➢ Analysing programme data for insights

➢ Academic and practitioner research collaborations

Session One: Developing a Robust Programme Monitoring System

Lin Xiaoling, Assistant Director of Public Education and Advocacy from the Singapore Children's Society, used the example of KidzLife, a sexual abuse prevention programme from the Society, to illustrate the process of getting from programme development to programme monitoring. To scale-up the efforts of a small team of four into something that has far wider outreach and impact, the team intends to tap external resources by training pre-school educators as well as volunteers to help conduct the programme. In the short run, staff will be paired with,

and serve as mentors to volunteers. Their longer-term plan will include having the more experienced volunteers train and mentor newer volunteers.

Dr Robyn Mildon, Head of Centre for Evidence and Implementation at Save the Children Australia then described the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) framework, which can be used to ensure delivery of high-quality services in the social sectors where pressures to deliver are high and data not as clean as in the medical sciences. The CQI framework takes into account research evidence, at the same time contextualising and accounting for preferences of the people that organisations serve. It allows for a contextualised, efficient use of data to see if programmes are reaching to intended audiences, if implementation is done according to plan, and if outcomes were as planned. She argued that constant and structured monitoring of actual implementation and outcomes was absolutely vital for a drive towards programme sustainability. Nonetheless, there were several barriers. First, it was necessary to tap on the technical skills of a wide variety of people; support and training should be provided for this to happen. Second, there was often a need for intensive resources for data collection. While services often claimed a lack of financial capability, she argued that it was necessary to set aside 2 to 3% of an organisation's budget for it — the way for-profit organisations do. Third, organisations could end up doing more harm than good, and it was important to do a "moral self-check", to ensure that this did not happen. Dr Mildon urged against the tendency to blame frontline workers for failures, but instead, to focus on the systemic issues and underlying organisational processes that might have caused those failures.

Session Two: Analysing Programme Data for Insights

During the second plenary discussion, Eric Sandosham and Tan Poh Choo from SAS User Group spoke about the process of preparing data for analysis. SAS User Group is a volunteer organisation that provides users of the Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) a platform to share knowledge and experience. Mr Sandosham said that large quantities of data could be confusing because data would have no meaning until it was contextualised. Therefore, it was essential to develop a good problem definition. A common mistake was to confuse the symptoms of the problem with the actual problem itself. For instance, patients might sometimes say that they "have a headache" to the doctor, but this could be a symptom of an underlying medical problem. Similarly, a manufacturing company might point out "inventory over-bloating", but this could be a symptom of the suboptimal decisions made by the organisation. Only through good problem definition can the solutions to problems be found.

Associate Professor (A/P) Michelle Cheong from the School of Information Systems at the Singapore Management University subsequently demonstrated the usefulness of basic tools like Microsoft Excel to address business needs. A/P Cheong, who has been conducting a course titled Computer as an Analysis Tool (CAT), described how some of her students helped the Social Collaborative, a network of skilled volunteers, come up with a gamified system for volunteer management and matching by using the Microsoft Excel programme. The presentation showcased the power of

spreadsheets and demonstrated the potential for practitioners to equip themselves with spreadsheet skills to resolve business problems faced by VWOs.

Session Three: Academic and Practitioner Research Collaborations

Associate Professor (A/P) Esther Goh from the Department of Social Work at NUS and Jade Low, Principal Social Worker at Montfort Care then shared their experiences in collaborative research, including one they had worked on together. This research was about the increase in the number of males who were willing to seek counselling on marital issues. The researchers were interested in their profiles and the common issues that surfaced. A/P Goh also conducted focus group discussions with the counsellors on the techniques and strategies involved when working with male clients. A/P Goh and Mrs Low talked about the challenges they had to navigate as they straddled between being a researcher and a practitioner. Mrs Low said it would be beneficial if the management could carve out time for both practice and research. A challenge that she faced was in garnering support for research because practitioners typically think that research is useful but not integral to practice, especially when they are already laden with frontline work. She suggested that academic-practitioner teams convene right from the start to collectively come up with areas of interests, so that the research can be helpful for their practice and create a sense of ownership.

Disseminating findings remains an important challenge, because research will not be utilised if it is not translated to practice. Hence, platforms for sharing research within the sector are necessary. A/P Goh added that it was important not to use academic yardsticks to measure the value of practitioner-based research, as they served very different purposes. Although such studies may not always contribute to theory, they provide important insights into service improvement and policy decisions, she said.

Wong Fung Shing is with the Society and Identity research cluster at IPS, which studies a wide range of social issues including racial and religious relations, social inclusion, education and social service provision.

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