Does Workfare policy work for economic independence of people with disabilities? A lesson from the challenge combining arts by the intellectually disabled with businesses

Nobuko Kanaya

Hiroshima City University, Hiroshima, Hiroshima, Japan

Recently social policy for people with disabilities has been transformed from welfare to workfare in Japan as well as other developed countries. However, the result of the new policy seems to throw the disabled people and the supporting non-profit organizations into severe confusion, especially workshops for the people with intellectual disabilities. There are many disputes over the workfare policy from a perspective of human rights, but studies about the effect on non-profit organizations serving for social services are still in progress. This paper examines the effect of recent institutional changes to policies that are supposed to help individuals with disabilities, as well as their supporting non-profit organizations, regarding small informal workshops for the people with intellectual disabilities (shokibo-sagyosho) in Japan, through examination of case studies and a survey, conducted by a research group to which the author belongs.

It is very difficult for the adults with intellectual disabilities to obtain proper jobs or regular trainings outside their homes after finishing special secondary education. Though there are institutionalized workshops for the disabled established and funded by the government, their capacity is quite limited. Therefore, more than 6,000 private non-profit workshops, outside the formal welfare institution, have been established by their parents and supporters in Japan over 30 years. The businesses and activities of the workshops are diverse, including bakeries, easy handiworks, food business and service, and arts and crafts. These jobs are assigned in accordance with ability, aptitude and interest of the workers, while considering their quality of life. Though most workshops are hand-made-type small fragile organizations without professional management skills, they have been operated by devoted staff and volunteers in communities. As their important role had been recognized gradually in the context of normalization, the number of local government agencies providing grants for the workshops had increased.

The workfare policy, however, changed the public financial support from block grants to grants based on fees or quasi-market systems. As a result, many informal workshops have been forced into maintaining a balance between business operation and the well-being of their workers with disabilities. Actually, most informal workshops had not succeeded in business, and rewards for the workers had been quite limited (most made only around $100-$200 per month). However, after the social policy changes, the workers were actually required to pay fees for working in the workshops. As a consequence, many individuals were forced to quit coming to the workshops. Additionally, many non-profits have closed unprofitable businesses such as the production of arts and crafts.

On the other hand, some of the arts created by the people with intellectual disabilities had won a reputation as one of modern fine arts born from the naive passions of the unique individuals who created them. The exhibitions of these arts had come to be popular and the number of people having an interest in purchasing these works of art had been increased. Nowadays, some of their artworks are traded commercially, though quite limited, and sometimes even sold at a high price.

Therefore, non-profit informal workshops supporting the creation of arts by the intellectually disabled are now trying to seek ways to combine the creation of arts with a formal business. This, however, presents a huge challenge, because the arts are not usually a commercially rewarding business by nature. Also, the staffs of these workshops end up devoting social workers, who usually do not have much experience and knowledge of business. The third
reason is that the process of making arts, as well as the personalities and lifestyles of the disabled artists, are completely different from the ordinary workers and artists. Therefore, the staffs, whose priority is usually the well-being of their clients, have a tendency to never force them to produce artworks against their will. This conflict between a business model and a social work model presents severe confusion for the staff.

Through the examination of these problems, as found through case studies and a survey, it becomes clear that these non-profit workshops face a real dilemma. How can non-profit workshops for people with intellectual disabilities survive? Public support and understanding, as well as the individual support of many citizens are needed in order to solve this important societal problem. Examining this problem indicates that the current social policy should be reconsidered in order to make the workfare policy actually "work" for the individuals who take part.