



The Power of Time Flow: Dongying's Time Banking as a Bridge between Social Governance Innovation and Elderly Care

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Abstract. This paper explores the practical significance of time banks in innovating social governance. Through mechanisms of time saving and exchange, time banks build community mutual-aid networks, addressing gaps in traditional elderly care models and shifting from single-entity dominance to multi-entity collaborative governance. They enhance community autonomy, optimize resource allocation, and improve elderly individuals' social engagement and well-being. The study analyzes the roles and challenges of time banks from the perspectives of governance mechanisms, service models, and social impacts, offering recommendations for broader implementation. The findings indicate that time banks supplement traditional elderly care systems and promote a shift in social governance from "management" to "co-governance."

Keywords: Social Governance Innovation; Time Bank; Mutual Aid Elderly Care

1 Introduction

As China faces rapid aging, the proportion of elderly people continues to rise, posing challenges to traditional family-based care models due to smaller family structures and increased population mobility^[1]. The government's supply of elderly care services is also constrained by resource shortages and inadequate coverage. To address these challenges, the Chinese government has placed a high priority on improving the elderly care service system, focusing on enhancing service quality and addressing existing gaps^[2]. The concept of Time Banking, as an innovative model for mutual aid in elderly care, is based on the idea of "I help others, and others help me." Through the mechanism of time storage and service exchange, Time Banks promote community cooperation, efficiently integrate social resources, reduce service costs, and enhance the social participation and quality of life of the elderly, providing a sustainable solution to an aging society^[3].

The practice of Time Banking breaks away from the traditional government or market-driven governance framework and promotes a shift toward a collaborative, multi-

stakeholder model of social governance. By building platforms of trust and mutual aid, this model strengthens community autonomy, optimizes resource allocation, and stimulates social vitality^[4]. This study uses the Dongying YL community's Time Bank project as a case to analyze its operational model and its role in supplementing the elderly care service system. It explores the potential of Time Banking to improve the quality of life of the elderly and foster innovation in social governance, offering practical insights and policy recommendations for broader implementation in other regions.

2 Research Methods

This study combines literature review, field observation, interviews, focus groups, and roundtable meetings to investigate the Dongying Time Bank. The goal is to provide comprehensive findings for policy and practical improvements. The literature review analyzes the status, development, and policies of Time Banking in China. Field observations focus on Dongying Time Bank's operations, including volunteer activities and community interactions. Interviews with key stakeholders provide data on its functioning, social capital mobilization, and service outcomes. Focus groups explore diverse perspectives on Time Banking's role in elderly care. Roundtable discussions gather insights to inform policy recommendations.

3 Literature Review

The Time Bank, an innovative social service model, aims to enhance mutual aid and support among community members through the exchange and accumulation of time. As shown in Fig. 1. Originally proposed by Edgar Cahn in the 1980s in the United States, the concept was introduced to China in the 1990s. The core idea of Time Banking is to quantify the volunteer service time an individual provides and store it in a personal account. When needed, individuals can withdraw services of equivalent time from others' accounts^[5]. This model is widely applied not only in elderly care but also in various community volunteer services^[6].

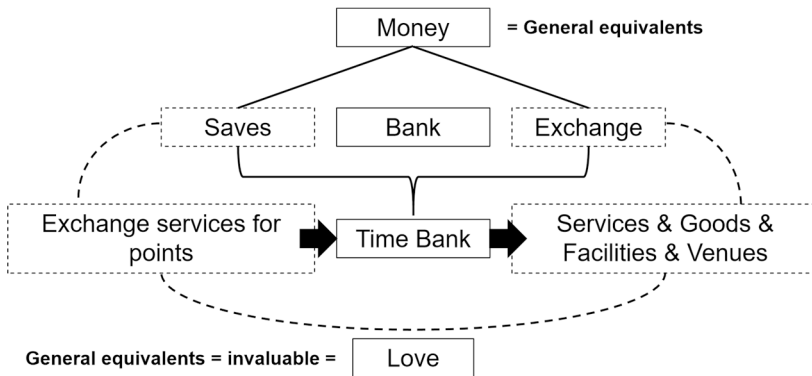


Fig. 1. YL Community Time Bank Operational Philosophy

Time Banking in China has evolved from urban to rural areas, with key development in provinces like Jiangsu, Hubei, Zhejiang, and Guangxi^[7]. It is driven by demographic changes, economic growth, and government support. Scholars have different views: Wang Zehuai differentiates between broad and narrow definitions, with the latter focusing on younger elderly providing services to older elderly^[8]. Chen Gong et al. see it as deferred payment for labor^[9], while Zhang Chenhan and Li Lingyu highlight its community-based nature^[10]. Qi Feng and Gao Ce categorize Time Banking into inter-generational exchange, deferred payment, and volunteer service^[11]. Key characteristics include its reliance on volunteer service, younger elderly as providers, and time as the unit of exchange. However, challenges like credit risk, stability of time currency, and public awareness hinder its success^{[12][13]}. To ensure sustainability, future research should focus on improving management, service frameworks, and credit systems to foster efficiency, fairness, and transparency, ultimately contributing to social development and community solidarity^[14].

4 Exploration of the Dongying Time Bank Mutual Aid Elderly Care Model

4.1 Basic Description and Aging Characteristics of YL Community

Dongying, located in northeastern Shandong Province, has a population with 20.53% over 60 and 15.96% over 65, indicating moderate aging. YL Community, with 30,000 residents mainly retired Shengli Oilfield workers, has a high cultural standard and established infrastructure. The Time Bank model here aims to improve elderly quality of life and foster mutual aid within the community.

4.2 Operational Model

The Dongying Time Bank serves elderly individuals in need, including empty-nesters, those with disabilities, and others facing health or loneliness challenges. The service is precisely targeted based on detailed needs assessments. Volunteers come from retired cadres, community senior schools, and other local organizations. The Time Bank collaborates with local government, healthcare, and enterprises to provide diverse services such as health check-ups, companionship, meal delivery, and emergency support. Volunteers earn points for their service hours, which can be exchanged for incentives like donated items, supermarket discounts, or event space.

4.3 Effectiveness of the New Elderly Care Model

Since its launch, the YL Time Bank has organized over 500 mutual aid activities, improving elderly health, daily life convenience, and reducing loneliness. It has enhanced community collaboration, strengthened social bonds, and created over 100 love savings books with more than 1,500 points, contributing to community self-governance.

4.4 Characteristics of the New Elderly Care Model

Service Precision. Tailored services based on detailed surveys and needs assessments.
Multi-platform Cooperation. Broad volunteer network built through collaboration with various community groups.

Resource Integration. Effective collaboration with local government, healthcare institutions, and enterprises for a comprehensive service system.

Home Service Provision. A range of home services, addressing health, daily living, and emotional needs.

Incentive Measures. Volunteers are incentivized through rewards like product redemption, shopping discounts, and event space use, ensuring sustainability.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Issues in the Development of Time Banks

Unequal Resource Distribution. The YL Community Time Bank has achieved some success in economically developed areas, but the overall practice of time banks faces uneven resource distribution. In particular, grassroots areas in the western regions suffer from resource shortages, which limits service development and impacts fairness and coverage.

Sustainability Challenges. Currently, the YL Community Time Bank relies on local social capital and lacks mechanisms for cross-regional flow. Long-term operation may face sustainability issues due to declining volunteer enthusiasm and insufficient external support.

Management Complexity. Despite the efforts of the Dongying District government to promote the time bank project, the YL Community still faces challenges due to a shortage of professional talent and coordination difficulties. There is a need to strengthen organizational capacity and communication mechanisms to ensure smooth operation of the project.

Lack of Service Standardization. The YL Community Time Bank relies too heavily on volunteers, resulting in a lack of service standardization. This affects service quality and the experience of the elderly. A multi-stakeholder service mechanism needs to be established, along with a government-led operational evaluation system.

5.2 Optimization Pathways

To address service conversion issues, standardized evaluation criteria should be developed, such as nursing levels based on elderly self-care ability and staff workload. The government should issue guidelines like "Elderly Self-Care Ability Assessment Standards" for clear service conversion references. Time banks can also explore development funds by leveraging local elites and creating an effective points "value-added" system for sustainable growth^[15].

Time banks should integrate internet tools to optimize management, replacing manual records with an electronic system. This system should facilitate service matching,

evaluation, and resource sharing with other platforms, using smart decision-making based on demand and supply. A more robust evaluation system will ensure valid service hours are recorded, and service providers are paid for effective services^[16-19].

Government support and a solid regulatory framework are crucial for success. Learning from international examples, such as the U.S. National Volunteer Service Promotion Act and Japan's Long-Term Care Insurance Law, China should establish policies for time banks and create a Time Bank Supervisory Committee to enhance oversight and prevent misuse. Clear legal regulations and inter-agency collaboration will stabilize operations and safeguard elderly care services^[20-22].

These measures will improve the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of elderly care, enriching China's system to meet the growing needs of the elderly and contribute to societal stability.

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