

Subsidiarity: A Path for Moving Beyond the Left/ Right Divide Regarding Social Programs in the United States

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Abstract

The principle of subsidiarity is increasingly being used to provide a framework to address social issues and relationships, particularly in Europe. This principle has been used by business leaders, economists, education leaders, lawyers, and political leaders to influence the development and implementation of policy and service delivery that manage the complex relationships inherent in this process. This article considers the principle of subsidiarity and discusses how the use of this principle can enhance the policy and social program delivery system in the United States. The article highlights a program that attempts to operationalize the principle of subsidiarity in its design. It discusses the challenge associated with incorporating this principle of subsidiarity into social program systems in the future.

Keywords: Subsidiarity, person-centered care, social program development

The recent commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty has reignited the debate on poverty as well as the debate regarding what role the government should have in addressing social problems in our communities, particularly at the federal level (Kilty, 2014; Tanner, 2014). This same debate was the focus of the concerns surrounding the Affordable Care Act, an initiative of President Obama (Dolgin&Dieterich, 2011).

This debate regarding the role government should have in domestic issues dates back to the early days of our nation's history (Hammack, 2002). Throughout our history we have traditionally relied heavily on charity and nonprofit organizations to respond to basic human needs in our communities (Hammack, 2002).

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It was not until the early 20th century, primarily as a result of the success of the advocacy by social progressives, that the nation began to look toward the federal government to have a role in addressing domestic issues in a meaningful way. Openness to governmental intervention in domestic issues, particularly at the federal level, was fueled by the Great Depression of the 1930s (Brinkley, 2011). The New Deal, which was the initiative of the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression, became the first significant structured federal involvement in domestic policy. This initiative was followed during the 1960s by the Johnson administration's Great Society and the War on Poverty programs, which propelled and heightened federal intervention in social and domestic issues (Brauer, 1982; Johnson, 1964). The debate regarding what type of involvement the federal government should have has been present since the inception of these initiatives and contributes to the polarization of opinions on this issue today (Hays, 2012).

The polarization between Democrats and Republicans on this issue has seeped into the commemoration of the War on Poverty and has focused the debate about the appropriate role of government in domestic policy and programs. The Democrats involved with this debate tend to be more open and supportive of a proactive role for the federal government, not only in the area of poverty-related policy and programs, but also on social issues such as health care and housing (Lakoff, 2010), a stance that has traditionally been associated with the liberal approach to government. The Republicans have traditionally promoted the idea that the state and local levels of government should be the primary levels of government to be involved with policy and programs that address basic needs of citizens, as they are closest to the citizenry (Lakoff, 2010). An example of this thinking would be our public educational system, which is under the primary control of state and local legislators even though there is some federal money involved. This is traditionally referred to as a conservative approach to government.

This polarized debate has resulted in a standstill in terms of developing policies and programs that can address not only issues related to poverty but also other social service needs. The need for innovative services will be increasing as baby boomers age and will need support services in order to maintain their independence.

Other individuals, such as those coping with chronic illness and disability, also need a range of community-based services to maintain their independence and involvement with the community.

It is thus anticipated that there will be an increase in the number of individuals who will access social services during the coming decades. With this anticipated demand there needs to be movement toward resolving this debate about the role of government in social policy and programs and setting a direction for the provision of social services at the federal, state, and local levels of government. What is needed is an approach to policy and service delivery that moves us beyond this polarization. One possible way of resolving this debate is to incorporate a principle known as “subsidiarity,” which can provide a third way, beyond the liberal or conservative, to address our social needs. Using subsidiarity as a principle to create a framework on which social programs can be developed and implemented could move the debate beyond a liberal or conservative approach to one that can determine the most appropriate level of government to be involved and respects the autonomy of the recipient of services and their significant others when receiving these services.

Historical Context

The principle of subsidiarity initially emerged out of Roman Catholic social teaching during the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. At that time there was a myriad of political and social movements including industrialization that were challenging the established social, political, and economic order in Europe. Although the Catholic Church was supportive of some aspects of these changes, there were concerns about how they might affect the role of the Church in society (Archer & Donati, 2008). One of the primary concerns of the Church was how it could remain a force in shaping the social discourse when these social movements had the potential of marginalizing the Church. The Church sought to ensure its role through the recognition of primary “associations” that exist within a civil society by governments (Archer & Donati, 2008). These primary associations include not only the family, but also educational, healthcare, and charitable institutions and civic organizations (Archer & Donati, 2008). These primary associations allow or serve as a buffer between the individual and societal, economic, and governmental entities. The principle that emerged to address these concerns and ensure effective primary associations in society was that of subsidiarity.

The principle was developed to provide recognition of the role of the Church and other primary associations that existed within society to promote their long-term viability as entities that could help shape a society and culture.

Over time this principle expanded and was applied to more situations involving the interplay of various levels of government and their relationship with primary associations, along with relationships with individuals, families, and communities. The principle of subsidiarity was initially promulgated by Pope Leo XIII (1890) in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (meaning "on Capital and Labor") that addressed human labor and the rights of workers. This encyclical addressed the emerging economic and political transitioning occurring within the world during the late 1800s. Its use, however, has moved beyond a principle of Catholic social teaching to guiding governmental relations and social development and individual rights and responsibilities.

Defining Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity was most thoroughly defined by Pius XI in 1931. He defined it as ...that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals, what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to members of the body social, and never destroy or absorb them. (Quadragesimo Anno par. 79)

This definition of subsidiarity reveals its premise that a hierarchy exists within any given society regarding its institutions. These institutions, whether they be governmental or private in nature, are ordered in a hierarchical manner. For example, in the United States there are local, state, and federal levels of government as there are local, national, and global corporations. According to the principle of subsidiarity, these institutions at the higher levels are not to minimize or undermine institutions at the lower levels. An example of the use of this principle at the macro level would be that nation-states that have access to abundant resources or power do not abuse them to the detriment of less-advantaged nation-states. At the micro level, for instance, the government should not undermine or provide what the family, as a primary association, can provide.

However, if a particular family unit is in need and cannot adequately provide for its members, then other primary associations, such as charity organizations, may need to assist the family.

If the need exceeds the ability of the charity organizations, then the government would have a responsibility to assist with helping to meet the needs of the family. However, this involvement would ideally be only until the family is once again able to meet its own needs. Also, according to the principle of subsidiarity, the family, even when receiving assistance either from charitable organizations or the government, should never lose its right to be involved with decision-making processes or have to relinquish its integrity as a family in order to receive the needed assistance.

The principle of subsidiarity has since been addressed in other papal encyclicals and pastoral letters since its initial promulgation. In the 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops stated,

This principle of subsidiarity states that, in order to protect justice, government should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of individuals or private groups acting independently. Government should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiatives. Rather it should help them contribute more effectively to social well-being and supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities. (*Economic Justice for All*, p. 28)

The use of the principle has also been used to guide relationships between national governments and states. The Treaty on European Union in Article 5(3) operationalizes subsidiarity as:

Under the principle of subsidiarity, in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Union shall act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at Union level.

The principle of subsidiarity, according to this treaty, defines the relationships between individuals and social institutions and structures. The principle used in the treaty recognizes and supports intermediate and mediating primary associations.

The relationship between these primary associations and governments should be one of mutual support and promote a relationship that respects each of their desires and uses social institutions judiciously when the individual or family is unable or unwilling to meet their needs (Graziano, 2009).

The preference is that those closest to the issue or concern should be provided the opportunity to address the issue (Colombo, 2008). These examples demonstrate how the principle of subsidiarity provides a framework for establishing supportive relationships between societal and governmental institutions, primary associations, and individuals, leading to a sense of solidarity within a society. The principle also contains a perspective that provides a protective function regarding relationships between people and social institutions. The principle desires to protect individuals from abusive use of authority by these social and governmental institutions and promotes the common good (Agandona, 1998).

One issue that needs to be addressed at this point is that the subsidiarity principle seeks to identify the level of primary associations or governments that can best respond to the need and does not necessarily identify that the lower level is also the preferred level of concern and intervention (Stabile, 2005). Thus subsidiarity is not to be confused with the concept of devolution, even though some have equated subsidiarity with devolution (Vischer, 2001). Devolution is the process by which there is movement away from higher levels of government assuming responsibility for lower levels with the belief that those most affected by decisions should have more access and control over those decisions and is the automatic best level (Geen, Waters Boots, & Tumlin, 1999). We have seen in various social programs that devolution has resulted in downward movement from the federal to the state and local levels. This movement is based upon the belief that those closest to the delivery of programs can best oversee and administer those programs and can also better define how to fund these needs. Often, when shifting responsibilities from the federal to state level, funding has also decreased (Geen et al., 1999). The shifting of responsibilities to lower levels without considering whether the lower levels can actually absorb the new responsibilities is not reflective of subsidiarity. Using subsidiarity to redefine responsibilities between various levels of primary associations and government would entail inter-organizational and inter-governmental dialogue, and conducting an impact assessment and financial analysis of what any changes would cost. These changes would need to be agreed to by that level being most affected by any changes.

Use of the Principle of Subsidiarity in Professional Venues

Subsidiarity has demonstrated its usefulness in a number of societal venues and professions. Within the European community, the concept of subsidiarity has been used to develop, guide, and implement public policy, whereas its use within the United States has been more limited. One reason for this may relate to the historic role the Catholic Church has played within European society and culture, leading to some level of comfort using principles emerging out of the Church.

In Europe, the principle of subsidiarity has been foundational to the formation of the European Union. A report issued by the general secretariat of the Committee of the Regions highlighted the application of the principle of subsidiarity to all the institutions of the European Union (Moens&Trone, 2014). Subsidiarity provides a boundary between the member state and the European Union, much like we in the United States have between states and the federal government. In the Lombardy region, which is one of the twenty regions that form the country of Italy, the principle of subsidiarity has been used to revamp its governmental relations and the provision of public services (Lorand, 2012). In recent decades Italy has moved towards greater autonomy of the regions, which allowed regions to determine how best to develop and implement practices involving economic and social activities. The Lombardy region chose subsidiarity as a guiding principle to develop their regional plan (Powell, 2007).

Beyond the realm of European Union relationships and governmental relations, the principle of subsidiarity has been used to address the governance of schools (Cullen, 2001) as a principle that can guard against monopolies and promote local democratic school governance, particularly in Northern Ireland. The principle of subsidiarity has also been identified as providing a framework for employee and organizational empowerment and promoting movement beyond traditional bureaucratic models of organization functioning (Mele, 2004).

The International Reference Centre for the Rights of Children Deprived of Their Family (2007) used the principle of subsidiarity to guide their position on inter-country adoption. In their Fact Sheet N35 they state that subsidiarity is a central issue in the protection of children deprived of their family.

The preference is for solutions that allow children to remain with their family of origin; however, when that is not possible, subsidiarity can guide options that protect the rights of children to retain social connections.

Thus this principle has wide applicability for addressing a range of governmental, social, and economic concerns, and although the primary region that has attempted to implement this principle has been in Europe, there is increased interest in using it in the American legal community, especially in understanding the Establishment Clause and a means for the resolution of church and state questions (Duncan, 2007). Some political leaders have promoted aspects of the principle to define intergovernmental relations and a principle for developing and managing social programs.

Dimensions of Subsidiarity

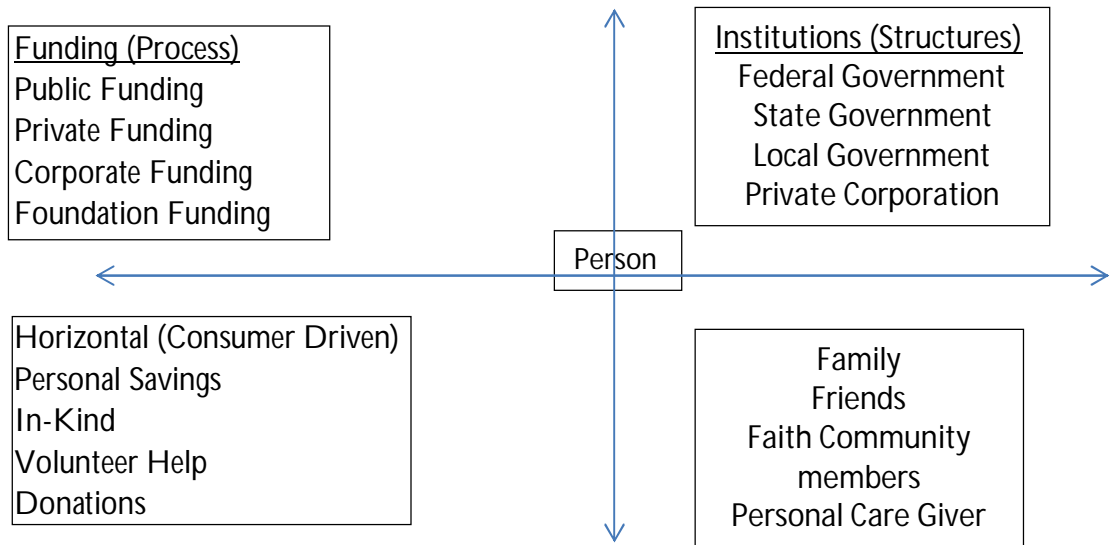
Subsidiarity, as was mentioned earlier, is oriented toward defining the relationship between individuals and societal and governmental institutions; thus the focal point of the framework, which is based upon the principle of subsidiarity, is the individual. The framework incorporates two dimensions—horizontal subsidiarity and vertical subsidiarity (Maltoni, 2002). According to Maltoni (2002), the horizontal dimension of subsidiarity is focused upon the relationship between individuals and their primary social relationships and primary associations. This would include the individual's family, friends, and social network, the local community, and primary associations such as churches, civic clubs, and other local involvements. In social work practice this would relate to the micro and mezzo levels of practice.

The vertical dimension of subsidiarity has traditionally referred to the various levels of government and societal institutional structures (Rivolin, 2005). In the United States this dimension of subsidiarity would address the relationship between the local, state, and federal levels of government. Applying the dimension of vertical subsidiarity to economic activities, vertical subsidiarity would begin with entrepreneurial activities, then move to small businesses, then move to national and then global corporations.

The diagram below developed by Flanagan and Patchner graphically depicts a conceptual framework using these two dimensions of subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity

Vertical (Provider Driven)



The Conceptual Framework

According to the principle of subsidiarity, the preferred point of intervention is at the horizontal subsidiarity level. In the diagram above, the person is at the center representing the fact that the person is the priority focus. Classifications above the horizontal line represent the vertical dimension of subsidiarity; classifications below the horizontal line represent horizontal subsidiarity. Along this line are the primary associations of the person. This would include family, friends, community groups, churches, and other individuals or groups closest to the person. The types of supports that are provided to the person are listed, as well as the financial resources that may be expended by the person's primary associations.

The vertical line represents the governmental, social services, and business entities that may interface with the person. Once an individual moves beyond their primary associations for support, he or she begins to utilize formal services in order to meet their needs. The entities that may come into play are listed on the vertical line in a hierarchal order with those that are most local located nearest the person.

The type of funding that may be used to cover the cost for services listed on the vertical subsidiarity is also provided.

This framework has implications for micro and macro levels of practice. The person, as was mentioned earlier, is the focal point using the principle of subsidiarity. Upon the onset of a crisis or situation requiring support, the person, in most situations, will seek assistance and support from their primary association. This may include immediate and/or extended family members, friends, neighbors, and others close to them in the church or community.

This is the typical trajectory that is used to meet needs: One turns to those who are closest. As the needs of the individual begin to be more longterm and complex, it will usually trigger the introduction of more formal supports. It is at this point that vertical subsidiarity begins to interface with the horizontal level. As people move beyond informal supports to formal support systems there is the danger that the individual's preferences will begin to be compromised in order to permit eligibility for services. Employing a subsidiarity principle would mean that the services are structured to meet the needs and preferences of the client rather than the organization or funder. This is the point at which the active employment of a person-centered approach can be realized.

The person-centered approach is often referred to as the patient-centered approach, relationship-centered approach, or resident-centered approach, depending on the location of services (Brooker, 2004). The premise of the person-centered approach moves beyond deficits, disease-focused, and clinical approaches to care that has been so dominant in our health and human services systems (Brooker, 2004). The approach emphasizes a holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual integration that respects the individual's perspectives and desires (Brooker, 2004). According to the framework and the principle of subsidiarity, as the individual utilizes resources from higher levels of vertical subsidiarity the focus must remain on the needs and desires of the individual and make every effort to meet them. Thus the two dimensions of subsidiarity, horizontal and vertical, are not mutually exclusive but need to work in tandem with one another.

Using the principle of subsidiarity also has implications for macro practice. This principle can guide the development and implementation of policies and services that meet needs in a responsive manner, always respecting and ensuring that the horizontal level is given priority in terms of attention and involvement. This approach provides the opportunity to be creative with implementing services at various levels in a manner reflective of a matrix of care where services are based upon assessment, rather than being predetermined with the individual having to meet predetermined requirements and expectations. It has significant funding implications in that it permits government and organizations at the higher levels of vertical subsidiarity to provide funding for needed services and supports yet allows those at the horizontal levels to have control over how those funds are used.

Moving Toward a Subsidiarity Society: Next Steps

Working with the principle of subsidiarity and moving forward to implement social program designs using the principle will entail that a number of steps be taken. First, our social programs need to become more focused on the person and empower the person to be able to access and control the needed services. In order to move toward implementing this approach, there needs to be openness to negotiating between the individual at the horizontal level and the vertical levels. Rather than a rigid separation of authority, subsidiarity requires a stance of negotiation. Policies and practices would need to be changed to enhance person-centered approaches and empower the person in need to be involved with the identification and preferences for care. At times members of the person's primary association could be the provider of care and support yet receive funding from organizations on the vertical level of subsidiarity. In fact, the preference would be to utilize and support the primary associations to provide the needed support.

If vertical-level subsidiarity institutions need to be accessed, they are to promote the involvement of the person in need and members of their primary association if appropriate. As movement occurs from the horizontal level (support level) to the vertical level (services) the primary associations of the horizontal level are not excluded from the process. This is the key to being faithful to the principle of subsidiarity. Even in situations in which the financial burden shifts to the vertical level, the horizontal is still actively engaged and the person remains the focus.

The use of the principle of subsidiarity and framework presented in this article requires significant changes in regulations and practices, as they have traditionally put the provider in charge of services rendered by vertical-level institutions. Those interested in furthering the model will need to be proactive in terms of strengthening primary associations, as in recent years they have not been actively engaged in social program development and implementation.

The implementation of a subsidiarity approach to social program design encourages the use of a more entrepreneurial type of services. The entrepreneurial approach is a more organic life-giving approach that creates a sense of unity and helps to prevent approaches that socially fracture relationships.

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