



Policy Forum 08-082: China Civil Society Report: An Overview of Social Work with the Disabled in China



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China Civil Society Report: An Overview of Social Work with the Disabled in China

By Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

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I. Introduction

Jia Xijin, Associate Professor at the NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, and Zhao Yusi, Project Assistant of NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, write, "At present, China's disabled people's organizations face some challenges. First there are human resource issues... Second there is a registration problem for these organizations... Additionally there are other problems, such as a limited impact on public opinion, lack of publicity, insufficient funds, challenges in building the organization, and so on."

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II. Article by Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

- "China Civil Society Report: An Overview of Social Work with the Disabled in China"
By Jia Xijin and Zhao Yusi

In the past thirty years, Chinese society has undergone significant changes. Large numbers of NGOs have emerged in China, the economy has seen sustained and rapid growth, and there have been significant improvements in people's lives. NGOs represent the public welfare in case of government failure, the economic interests in the case of market failure, and also represent a more extensive social interest during this time of great societal transformation. This system consists of not only tens of thousands of grassroots organizations set up by citizens, but also the numerous community organizations centering on different interest groups and social groups. There are community organizations serving in special rural or urban areas; there are associations, foundations and private non-enterprise units which have a governmental background; there are various social service agencies which were left by the old system and need to be reformed. Together they constitute a very large, complex, volatile and multiple-tiered system of NGOs in China. To a certain extent, the requirements of reforming, improving and constructing these NGOs dovetails with the tasks of building a harmonious society in the PRC.

Serving vulnerable groups is one of the most active fields for NGOs in China. Since the beginning of economic reform the NGOs which provide services to disabled people have developed rapidly. At present, a large number of NGOs have worked in this field, from the government oriented Disabled Persons' Federation to small grassroots organizations. Thus NGOs that work with the disabled in China are an important example of the development and activities of civil society in China.

There are around 60 million disabled persons in China. This accounts for around 5% of China's total population. 80% of this group, around 48 million people, are located in rural communities. 81.5% of urban disabled people are currently employed while the employment rate in rural areas is 86.7%. The status of disabled people is connected with the happiness of nearly one-fifth of China's families and their 200 million relatives.

In China, the social welfare system for disabled people dates back to the Song Dynasty. In the Song Shenzong period, there was a special institution called Futian House that would adopt children, the elderly, and disabled people. In the Qing Dynasty, Jiyang Houses were established to care for leprosy patients and the disabled. Similar efforts were undertaken in the 1940s, notably the Chinese Blind People Welfare Association and the China Deaf and Dumb Association, but most of them failed due to lack of government support.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the China Blind People Welfare Association was re-established in 1953. The China Deaf and Dumb Association was also reconstituted in 1960. Both organizations sought to perform social work for the disabled. Many provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities set up local associations and grass-roots organizations associated with disabled people. In 1988, the China Disabled Persons' Federation was formed to unify the local groups and separate organizations that supported the needs of disabled people in China. The China Disabled Persons' Federation has been described as a GoNGO, or Government Oriented Non-Governmental Organization, and has a very close relationship with the government. The Federation consisted of the local disabled associations and is still the biggest social organization that works with disabled people. In 1990, the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons" which protected the rights of the disabled was approved and implemented. Since then, China has

participated in the "United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983 ~ 1992)" and the "Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993 ~ 2002)" activities, and has received the United Nations "Messenger of Peace Award" and "Special Prize of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons" recognizing the country's efforts.

Currently various types of civil organizations for disabled people are gradually growing. For example, the Beijing Huiling Disabled People Community Service Agency, which was set up in 1986, is a civil organization that has provided community-based services for 16-year-old youth and adults with intellectual disabilities. The Beijing Xingxingyu Educational Institute was set up in 1993 to support the parents of autistic children, and was the first special educational institution in China for children with autism. The Beijing Lizhi Rehabilitation Center was established in 2000 and is a non-profit organization which mainly provided services to people with intellectual disabilities over the age of 15.

At present, China's disabled people's organizations face some challenges. First there are human resource issues. Low wages and work pressure has made it difficult for these organizations to retain talented employees. Second there is a registration problem for these organizations. Under the background of China's dual management system of non-governmental organizations or non-profit organizations, most of the civil society disabled people's organizations can only register as a corporation with the industry and commerce administration departments, which raises legitimacy and financial management difficulties for them, for example, they have to pay corporate taxes. Additionally there are other problems, such as a limited impact on public opinion, lack of publicity, insufficient funds, challenges in building the organization, and so on.

At present, there are still more than 10 million rural disabled persons without adequate food and clothing, and more than 20 million urban disabled persons with income below the minimum standard of living. Even if those disabled people who have initially solved the food and clothing problems, most of them are still in an unstable state and are vulnerable. At the same time, the educational level of disabled people is generally low and they are at a disadvantage to find a competitive job. They have great difficulties in rehabilitation, health care, education, employment and other areas, and there is a big gap between their living conditions and the average level of social living conditions. These all need to be improved urgently.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org