


Policy Forum 08-097: China Civil Society Report: Opportunities for the Assessment of Civil Organizations in China

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By Deng Guosheng

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I. Introduction

Deng Guosheng, Professor of School of Public Management and Policy at Tsinghua University, writes, "Surveys show that at present the Chinese people trust the government the most, followed by businesses, then civil society organizations. Currently Chinese civil society organizations seriously lack credibility, which hinders their development. Assessments may be one of the most important means to restore public confidence in civil organizations."

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II. Article by Deng Guosheng

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In 2007 the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued "Guidelines for Promoting the Assessment of Civil Organizations" and carried out a national assessment of Foundations in China. After these guidelines were issued many provinces and cities started their own assessments of civil society organizations. These assessments are a creative mechanism for reform and are an opportunity for both the civil organizations and their management.

Opportunity for Civil Organizations

Civil society organizations all over the world have inevitably faced challenges in their development. One of the biggest challenges is to demonstrate their credibility. Without credibility it is very hard for the civil organizations are hard to raise money, attract volunteers, and obtain the support of the general public. Where does the credibility of civil organizations come from? Many people do not know much about civil society organizations, especially if they have not directly encountered these groups. In the absence of detailed information, professional assessment agencies can play an important role to help build public confidence in civil organizations assuming the assessing agency itself is credible.

During the First World War America saw a significant surge in fund-raising. However, with the exposure of corruption and abuse scandals in a very small number of civil organizations, there was great confusion over which organizations were trustworthy and donations dropped sharply. Because it is very hard for ordinary people to judge which civil organizations are credible and which are not, scandals in just a few civil society organizations can cause a crisis of trust for the whole non-profit sector. To correct this problem an independent and third-party assessment agency, the National Charities Information Bureau (NCIB), was created. The assessments performed by NCIB gradually helped American civil society organizations to restore credibility and encourage public donations.

Surveys show that at present the Chinese people trust the government the most, followed by businesses, then civil society organizations. This is the opposite of what is generally seen in Western countries. Currently Chinese civil society organizations seriously lack credibility, which hinders their development. Assessments may be one of the most important means to restore public confidence in civil organizations. Thus the assessments of civil society organizations in China are a good start and a timely opportunity to build the credibility of civil society organizations.

Another challenge that civil society groups face is the capacity of their organizations, especially in terms of management. Currently some government sectors don't want to transfer functions to civil

society organizations because these groups don't have the capacity to adequately perform these duties. Although this is not a common excuse it is very important to enhance and improve the management capacity of civil society organizations in China. Assessment is a means of diagnosing organizations and encouraging effective organizational management. Without assessment it is hard to determine whether an organization is developing in an appropriate way and the goals of organizational management cannot be realized. So the civil society organizations need both a means of self-assessment as well as external assessments to advance their organizational management capacity. If an organization is struggling to reform it can turn to an external assessment for help. Civil society organizations should thus take a positive rather than negative attitude towards these assessments and see them as an opportunity to improve their organizational capacity.

Opportunities for Management Sectors of Civil Organizations

The assessment found that chronic issues for civil society organizations included "annual inspections were a mere formality", "they paid more attention to registration than supervision and management", and "the necessary management structure was not in place". In this case it is difficult for the management to take on the burden of cultivating and managing civil society organizations. Carrying out these assessments of civil society organizations is an opportunity for management to solve these problems. Through the assessment, the government can capture basic information and new developments in civil organizations, and have the data necessary to establish policies to effectively manage civil society organizations. The assessment allows the government to develop the incentives and restrictions necessary to regulate the development of civil society organizations. Through the assessment the government can understand the accountability, performance, and the organizational capacity of civil society organizations and provide the data necessary for the government to contract the services of civil society organizations.

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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