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# Policy Forum 08-056: Chinese Civil Society After the 512 Earthquake



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# Chinese Civil Society After the 512 Earthquake

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Chinese Civil Society After the 512 Earthquake

By Jia Xijin

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## I. Introduction

Jia Xijin, Associate Professor at the NGO Research Center at Tsinghua University, writes, "NGOs in China face capacity-building problems such as how to cooperate to avoid repeated work, how to avoid volunteers themselves turning into aid targets, how to maintain social credibility, etc. Nevertheless, the government needs to make efforts to help NGOs in opening up, cooperating and securing fair treatment to improve the institutional environment of NGO's and promote social well-

being."

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## **II. Article by Jia Xijin**

- "Chinese Civil Society After the 512 Earthquake"

By Jia Xijin

The 512 Sichuan Earthquake jolted more than half of China. The rescue process and disaster relief activities that followed the quake evolved into an operation that involved many Chinese participants. Whether through local self-organization to assist these operations or by working with NGOs, the response has been more rapid and positive than in any previous crisis. Observing this organization we can not help but think of this mobilization as an 'NGO Year Zero' for China. According to the experience of earthquake disaster relief, there will be 3 stages after the earthquake: life-saving, resettlement, and reconstruction.

There are four characteristics of the first stage of civil disaster relief.

First is quick joint action. On the very day when the earthquake occurred, 1 Kilo More, NGO Communication Net, and nearly twenty other NGOs based mainly in the South China Area issued an urgent and immediate appeal for NGOs to join in 512 Earthquake Aid Action. They relied on Chengdu Root & Shoot Environmental and Cultural Exchange Center to support the Government's relief work. The next day, more than 50 NGOs had joined the Disaster Relief Aid Action Group. On May 13, Narada Foundation along with China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, China Youth Development Foundation, and others issued an initiative in Beijing to launch the 'China NGOs Joint Declaration for Earthquake Relief Operations', with response from more than 120 NGOs in three days.

Second is broad social participation. Not only different kinds of NGOs, but individuals, enterprises, financial institutions, and the media were also quickly involved in earthquake operations. Cooperation between groups in different sectors of Chinese society was also very frequent. For example, the Jet Li One Foundation cooperated with Tencent, Sohu, Taobao, Tianya, KongzhongNet, and many other websites to issue the Joint Donation Appeal. Similarly domestic and international Red Cross disaster relief systems cooperated with Baidu, Industrial and Commercial Bank, and others to launch special operations to open channels for information and donation to flow. The local self-organization and mutual aid were obvious as well, since many volunteers were victims themselves.

Third is effective resource mobilization. On the second, fifth, seventh, fourteenth day after the earthquake, the central government's earthquake relief fund was 860 million yuan, 34.1 billion yuan, 5.782 billion yuan, and 16.626 billion yuan respectively. At the same time, the social donation statistics of the Ministry of Civil Affairs reached 65 million yuan, 3.175 billion yuan, 8.945 billion yuan, and 30.876 billion yuan, of which the Red Cross received nearly one-fifth. This set of data not only reflected the community's ability to marshal resources, but also showed the strong momentum of social mobilization which rapidly increased with time. While compared with international organizations China NGOs' social mobilization is still far from adequate, China NGOs have shown their effectiveness in these disaster relief activities. We can see the power of NGOs in resource mobilization, allocation of goods, information dissemination, life search, on-site rescue, psychological counseling, child and elderly care, and various other activities. As time goes on, their

advantages will become more pronounced.

Fourth is the rational follow-up thinking. Despite the rapid response and strong resource mobilization, what can not be ignored is that China NGOs are still in the developing stage. They have a keen perception, but lack mature experience in operation, organization, specialization and other areas. They unite widely, but have no systematic cooperative form or organizational alliance. These constitute the constraints of NGOs as a social sector. However, many organizations develop a greater awareness of the areas that they need to improve after experiencing challenges in their growth. While actively involved in emergency relief, NGOs started thinking about a post-disaster reconstruction plan. While they participated in the operations, NGOs began to plan for what they should do two months later. This reflection formed the basis for NGOs' participating in long-term post-disaster reconstruction.

The unprecedented action and operating power which NGOs in China demonstrated during the earthquake disaster relief is related to the development and expansion of Chinese civil society. In recent years, not only has the number of registered social organizations increased by 10 percent per year, reaching nearly 400,000, but other organizations such as community organizations, rural cooperative organizations, and grass-roots organizations have grown as well. Among them "Traveler 365", "Community Online" and others have played an important role in earthquake relief. In recent years, another characteristic of NGO's development is the partnership between civil society organizations and foundations. Particularly after the "Foundation Management Ordinance" was introduced in 2004, Private Equity Foundations have developed significantly. These Foundations not only supply local funds for NGOs, but they also employ a large number of enterprise managers and professionals to assist with management challenges and help transform the poor, marginalized image of NGOs in China. Organizations like the Jet Li One Foundation, Narada Foundation and others use their ability to mobilize resources and organize effectively to promote a positive image of new NGOs.

It can be said that the rise of NGOs is an inevitable outcome of the development of a market economy. However, while the ability of NGOs to mobilize to assist in disaster relief activities is more prominent than in previous crisis, it is closely related to the attitude of the government. NGO responded positively to the 2003 SARS outbreak and the Southern Snowstorm this year, but they encountered obvious institutional difficulties in dealing with donations, relief activities, etc. With the significant damage and strong social reaction to the 512 earthquake, the government carried out the relief work positively, and its attitude towards civil activities was very tolerant, which was an important condition for NGOs to participate in relief activities. The emergent disaster relief stage shows some positive signs for further cooperation between government and civil society. It is hoped that this cooperation will continue in the future. NGOs in China face capacity-building problems such as how to cooperate to avoid repeated work, how to avoid volunteers themselves turning into aid targets, how to maintain social credibility, etc. Nevertheless, the government needs to make efforts to help NGOs in opening up, cooperating and securing fair treatment to improve the institutional environment of NGO's and promote social well-being.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

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