

ICVA CASE STUDY #2

SOUTH – SOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND CHINA COOPERATION

Short summary of the case study:

Following the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain, the issue of localization has assumed a prominent place in the humanitarian world. At the same time, an emerging trend has evolved on the roles and importance of southern NGOs. Among the countries involved is China, and the work of its NGOs. This trend is based on the recognition that the current humanitarian system is not sufficiently supportive of local actors. The system is still based largely on experiences and techniques of northern-based NGOs, which may not always be applicable in the global South, and southern organisations still have minimal presence and impact in international structures, in decision-making, lessons learned and knowledge-sharing. The evolution of some countries in the South from being aid recipients to becoming aid deliverers in other countries and regions reinforces opportunities to increase southern perspectives into the global humanitarian system, in particular regarding South-South cooperation. ICVA has been instrumental in making this happen, and in facilitating a more diverse and inclusive approach to coordination, as will be elaborated below.

Timeline of the initiative:

- For a number of years, ICVA has been in discussion with Chinese NGOs on perspectives on humanitarianism. In the initial years ICVA met with limited success on concrete engagement, aside from some dialogue with Chinese NGOs and foundations.
- Among the first international humanitarian actions of many Chinese NGOs was their engagement in Nepal following the devastating earthquake in 2015. China had the first international response on the ground in Nepal following the earthquake, consisting of some Chinese NGOs and a government-backed team. The Amity Foundation (which became an ICVA member in May 2020) and other Chinese NGOs provided humanitarian assistance to Nepal following the earthquake.
- Since 2015, Chinese civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs have participated in over 20 global emergencies, in such areas as search and rescue, materials distribution, medical aid, sanitation and hygiene. One response provided assistance to Mozambique following a cyclone in 2019.
- Over the past two years, supported by the recruitment of a Chinese staff member at the ICVA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, renewed and increased focus was placed by ICVA on understanding and engaging with Chinese NGOs.
- In 2017, ICVA and the UNOCHA Regional Office for Asia-Pacific began planning a joint event in China, which took place in October 2019 – the “International Humanitarian Response Workshop:

Experience and Innovation from Chinese Civil Society”. This was the first ever event bringing these stakeholders together to specifically discuss Chinese civil society’s role in international humanitarian action.

- In 2018 and 2019, representatives from Chinese NGOs attended the ICVA annual meetings in Geneva, and a number of Asia regional workshops in Bangkok organised by ICVA and partners.

ICVA’s role and influence:

- **The October 2019 workshop on Chinese Civil Society** provided a platform for Chinese and international humanitarian organisations to share knowledge and experience, including good practice examples, and to guide participants to explore new ideas for greater humanitarian collaboration. Over 50 representatives from Chinese governmental departments, international and national NGOs (including ICVA members Mercy Malaysia, Mercy Corps and RedR), UN agencies (UN OCHA, UNHCR and UNICEF), international organisations (IFRC), enterprises and academic institutions participated in the workshop. Ignacio Packer, the Executive Director of ICVA, gave the keynote speech on “Roles and Challenges of Voluntary and Non-Governmental Organisations in International Humanitarian Action”. ICVA suggested this joint event and helped to plan it with OCHA and a few NGO partners in China.
- **As an outcome of the October workshop, ICVA was instrumental in establishing the China Civil Society Network for International Humanitarian Assistance**, comprising larger NGOs and grass roots organisations, as a forum for coordination and information-sharing among NGOs in China.
- **ICVA contributed to a paper on “[Positive Disruption? China’s Humanitarian Aid](#)”** with the Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and the Innovation Center for Risk Governance at Beijing Normal University. The paper was launched at the Australasian Aid Conference in January 2020. The paper addresses the evolution and expansion of China’s global assistance programme, prompting considerable interest from the international humanitarian community.
- **In 2019-2020, following devastating bushfires in large parts of Australia, relief packages were sent from China to Australia.** This was carried out with the help of connections made possible by ICVA, which ensured Chinese NGOs wishing to support were connected to the Australian NGO network ACFID (also an ICVA member). This may have been the first-ever example of humanitarian assistance being sent from China to Australia.
- **In February 2020, at a side event during the annual UN OCHA Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week, ICVA organised a discussion on “More Inclusive Coordination for the Global South”.** Panellists from international and national NGOs (from China, Indonesia and Turkey) summarised their experiences in working with the current coordination system in international humanitarian response. They shared ideas on a more localized and inclusive approach, noting existing policy obstacles and operational challenges, and shared good practices in supporting NGOs in humanitarian response, with focus on coordination and partnerships. The Amity Foundation gave a presentation remotely, with its mission to Geneva cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Between March and July 2020, the Amity Foundation and a number of Asian NGOs and networks participated in a series of webinars organised or supported by ICVA.** These webinars placed a

significant focus on CSOs' roles and responsibilities in the COVID-19 response. ICVA was also invited by many NGOs and networks in the region to share its international perspectives in this regard. For example, in April, ICVA was invited by the ad-hoc China NGO Consortium for COVID-19 as a panellist in one of its webinar series on "How International Organizations respond to the international needs in COVID-19".

- **ICVA is committed to further explore and facilitate international connections of Chinese and southern NGOs with global humanitarian networks and systems.** ICVA is further developing its partnership with the Amity Foundation, including discussions on collaboration with other Chinese NGOs. A proposal advanced following the October workshop is being finalised with the Amity Foundation through a partnership agreement.

How the process and outcome reflected ICVA's priorities, and related to the Theory of Change:

Three of the "Top Outcomes" in the ICVA Theory of Change have been positively influenced through South-South and China engagement:

- **Cross-cutting issues:** NGOs navigate and influence changes in the response to affected populations. Policies and systems improve.
- **Humanitarian financing:** Needs of the populations affected by crises are better met. Innovative approaches are developed on humanitarian financing with southern NGOs.
- **Coordination:** Coordination contributes to effective assistance and protection to those affected by crises. The collective NGO ability to engage and influence coordination mechanisms is strengthened.

How the work has influenced the humanitarian sector:

- The increased prominence of national NGOs in China and elsewhere from the global South is very beneficial to regional and global humanitarian sectors. Their expanded role in international forums and coordination mechanisms will offer more opportunities for them in humanitarian and development activities (perhaps focusing on disaster preparedness, search and rescue, and natural disaster response, where they have strong track records).
- The fact that China ties humanitarian assistance to long-term development is a positive example of strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus, and a potential model for other organisations to emulate.
- The fact that the Amity Foundation is a member of ICVA has strengthened its application to become a standby partner of UNICEF.

What has been the positive impact so far?

- One of the strengths of ICVA has been its priority on localization and its ability to bring together international and national NGOs and other actors. This has led to increased discussion and engagement of national NGOs in coordination mechanisms.
- The roles and expansion of southern NGOs working outside of their country is a positive development. In addition to examples cited above, Human Initiative Indonesia has been doing fundraising and humanitarian work in other countries. New generations of NGOs are now moving into the international humanitarian space.
- With the Amity Foundation seen as a well-established NGO, ICVA is considering other Chinese NGOs in coordination mechanisms and operational activities (e.g., search and rescue, and humanitarian assistance). Chinese NGOs see the value in ICVA, with its global networks, UN agency contacts, and diverse members. This will in turn enable the NGOs to have access to more international partners and activities.

What could be further improved?

- More awareness-raising and capacity strengthening work needs to be carried out with Chinese NGOs in the international humanitarian and development environments.
- Among the mechanisms could be exchange visits, participation in international workshops, study tours, joint advocacy, and joint project implementation. ICVA will have a continued role to play, as for example in development of a PSEA policy for Chinese NGOs.
- As part of navigating change in an evolving environment, more effort needs to be placed on engagement and advocacy with host governments as well as donors, including a review of challenges and governmental restrictions. Chinese actors tend to coordinate directly with national governments or the Chinese diaspora, rather than with international coordination mechanisms (from “Positive Disruption”).
- More lessons need to be learned on success stories of Chinese and southern NGOs moving into the international space. To keep in mind are the “differences in humanitarian aid” between the Chinese Government/NGOs and other governments/NGOs – in conceptual approaches, funding, delivery modes, response to natural disasters rather than responses to crises, policy/strategy differences, and varying quality of response (from “Positive Disruption”).

The way forward – some recommendations:

- **Targeted engagement:** The work of the ICVA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific is an excellent example of a “targeted” approach to better understanding and engaging with one country (in this case, China). Similar types of targeted engagement by ICVA in the future might be considered.
- **capacity:** Consideration might be given to expanding the staff capacity of the ICVA Bangkok office beyond the current two positions. This would be dependent on the future terms of reference, the

anticipated work load of this office, and resource availability.

- **Chinese NGO engagement:** ICVA should continue its efforts to facilitate engagement of Chinese NGOs in global and regional humanitarian action, through coordination, partnering, and shared learning.
- **Translation:** Resources permitting, increased translation of ICVA and humanitarian documents into the Chinese language would be a definite asset in facilitating growth, learning and capacity strengthening of Chinese NGOs.
- **Promotional materials:** A “promotional product” specifying benefits of ICVA membership (in addition to the existing ICVA member guide) may be useful to develop for prospective members, particularly those which are not very familiar with ICVA and its work.