



Expressions of opposition are not welcome: police officers preventing protests in the Shanghai agglomeration.

Service providers wanted

Civil society is growing in Communist-run China. At present, the government permits only limited “third sector” activity but that may change soon. Authorities particularly appreciate initiatives that offer practical solutions and deliver them with convincing efficiency. Donor agencies can support civil society by promoting institutionalisation and conveying methodological skills.

By Peter Patze

➔ According to much German media coverage, China is an economic sensation and a political flop. Reality, of course, is far more nuanced. In view of reports about the omnipotent Communist Party (CPC), corrupt local administrations and media censorship, it seems hard, at first glance, to imagine that

civil society in China is actually growing. However, for around 10 years, the CPC has permitted and even promoted controlled civic participation.

In the past 30 years, rapid economic growth caused social and environmental stresses. Chinese society has become deeply fractured. The government seems to have accepted that it can no longer run the increasingly divided country simply top-down. It wants citizens to assume more responsibility because it no longer feels up to all the challenges it is facing.

Civic engagement in China is still tied closely to the government. In many cases, local government bodies initiate and implement participation processes. Western observers often find such settings disturbing, arguing that civic initiative must necessarily involve pushing through decisions against the will of public administrations and dominant political parties. The hurdles for civic engagement are still high in China. Most local governments have not yet made a clear commitment to allowing public participation.

Nevertheless, there are now numerous good examples of local citizens' initiatives. They include neighbourhood assistance for elderly people, public hearings for urban development projects (such as clearance of fire service access routes) or mediation in neighbourhood conflicts.

The number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is rising rapidly. If the statistics of the Ministry of Civil Affairs are to be believed, there are now 30 times more NGOs than there were in 1978. Back

then, the Ministry was aware of around 6,000 organisations; in 2006 the figure exceeded 186,000.

What is also fairly new is that more and more local administrations are contracting NGOs as service providers. That is a remarkable development because it means, in effect, that the government not only recognises NGOs as social development actors but actually helps to finance them.

Citizens under control

Basically, however, the government struggles to accept the presence of independent groups, initiatives and organisations. Even the rules for registering NGOs are so nebulous and restrictive that they present a serious hurdle. Accordingly, many NGOs either choose to operate without official registration or they register as private-sector companies.

Registration is invariably a matter for local authorities. NGOs are not permitted to operate nationwide. Presumably the CPC fears that such organisations could one day evolve into nationwide opposition groups, which also explains why the CPC keeps countless NGOs under security service surveillance, and tries to get party members into all of them. Furthermore, many local government bodies restrict the number of NGOs or limit their opportunities to engage with the public.

The actual scope for civic participation thus differs widely from one location to the next, and it changes with the political climate. It is influenced by various factors, including the following:

Real commitment or just lip service?

The recent willingness of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to embrace Western participation methods has come under heavy fire from some experts. They argue that the CPC's alleged openness is only a ploy to secure power, a means of solving the party's problem of legitimacy. After all, its claim to power is not based on free and fair elections; it is valid only as long as the guarantee of social stability and growing prosperity for "all".

By promoting civic involvement, the CPC can strengthen its own acceptance in the population. It will also be able to identify conflict potential earlier and find solutions. In this respect, the

critics have a point in the short term. But anyone who has seen how participation has already boosted the self-confidence of Chinese citizens and changed their self-perception will realise that civic participation, in the long run, will promote a new socio-political awareness that demands more transparency and more opportunities for participation.

Other observers doubt China can handle real civic participation at all. They reckon that China has been a top down society for too long to allow independent movements anywhere except at the grass roots level. The Chinese have been kept in tutelage by


emperors and party secretaries for centuries. Confucianism, with its doctrine of the five human elementary relationships, underpins the hierarchical system.

If that argument was true, however, it would mean that societies are incapable of change. And change has definitely started in China. Indeed, it is so marked that the People's Republic today can be considered a shining example of fast and radical societal transformation. So there is hope that the Chinese government's willingness to promote civic participation will actually strengthen the initiative and voice of the country's citizens.



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Construction site in Beijing in 2008: town planning is one of the areas in which authorities would like to fulfil the public's wishes.

- The official in charge matters very much. The CPC is by no means monolithic – it has individuals of just about every political persuasion in its ranks, from pragmatic environmentalists or liberal social democrats to die-hard Maoists. Local party secretaries play decisive roles as the ultimate arbiters on the fate and furtherance of political participation.
- Social and environmental hot spots are not good contexts for civil-society activism. Anyone seeking to organise an initiative in a poor area or near a controversial waste incineration facility is likely to encounter considerable hurdles – because many local politicians fear such activism might give rise to open protest. Their duty is to enforce social stability and harmony. Ultimately, these factors and regional economic growth determine Communist leaders' future careers. They are transferred to a new position every three to five years.
- Civic participation can be implemented only in close consultation with local administrations and the CPC. So active citizens and NGOs need good contacts in state institutions. Anyone who tries to launch a participation process that conflicts with state interests is unlikely to be allowed to continue.

Ultimately, the success of a Chinese NGO hinges on the services it is able to offer. To be accepted by the leadership and allowed a fairly free hand, it needs to address tasks or provide services more efficiently than the state, for instance by resolving neighbourhood conflict through mediation. At the same time, however, its success depends on being accepted as an independent player by the community concerned.

■ Towards more emancipation

Aside from the restrictive political system, the biggest obstacle for the development of a free and emancipated civil society is lack of experience and expertise. Because of China's totalitarian and paternalist past, its citizens tend to show little initiative and blindly obey the directives of local administrations instead. They believe responsibility resides first and foremost with the government, and they trust no one else to solve society's problems.

It will take a long time to change these traditional attitudes and behaviour patterns – probably at least two generations. So to help China build up civil society, a start needs to be made somewhere else. At present, it is important to focus on two things:

- creating long-term institutions and
- promoting exchange of experience and expertise.

The former calls for interdisciplinary institutes conducting a systematic study into the subject of civic participation. One welcome actor, for example, would be a Chinese equivalent of the German Stiftung Mitarbeit, which bundles expertise, creates networks and promotes participation through training programmes and publications. Initially, researchers should be linked to Chinese universities because universities have some scope for testing theories with empirical experience. Another reason is that higher education is funded, promoted and trusted by the government. Universities, moreover, enjoy high respect among the public. On top of all this, academics work methodically, are normally

well networked and have knowledge of foreign languages, all of which will matter to foreign researchers who need to network in China if they want to play a pioneering role.

In order to strengthen exchange of expertise and experience, it is very important to introduce innovative communication methods. Approaches such as Open Space, Future Conference and Mediation invite people to share views and express new ideas. These sets of methods are largely unknown in China at present, but they can contribute to resolving social problems and boosting public participation. Open Space, for example, is a good tool box for understanding citizens' needs and ideas; Future Conference events bring together people from different fields to join in developing plans for their city; and at Mediation events, a neutral party helps conflict groups resolve their conflict amicably.

These methods can also be used in private-sector companies, schools and even politics. They pave the way for more advanced participation in the form of

participatory budgeting, participatory development planning, formal mediation services et cetera. Development cooperation can – and should – tackle all of these issues. It can promote the establishment of institutes focused on the issue of civic participation. It can also introduce and help establish innovative communication methods and participation models. Another important task is the creation and development of networks beyond China's borders.

But perhaps the most valuable support that development agencies can provide lies in helping Chinese NGOs enhance their skills. In terms of civic participation, China is more or less at the point where West Germany was at the beginning of the 1960s. The big difference is that China has neither fair local elections nor independent media, courts or referendums. So the country's budding civil society still plays a minor role in Chinese policymaking. The last 20 years, however, have brought hope that that role will get stronger. And as capacities grow, NGOs are likely to be taken more seriously by government, party and society. ←



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Protestors toppling a police car in Qidong in July.

Protest in Qidong

On 28 July, some 5000 people rallied against plans for an industrial project in Qidong, a coastal town in the Shanghai agglomeration. A new drainpipe was supposed to channel effluents from a Japanese-owned paper mill into the local harbour. The daily load would allegedly have been up to 150,000 tons. Demonstrators expressed concern for drinking water supply and the fishing industry, which employs many people.

The protesting people were quite assertive. A photographer from the news agency AFP said participants stormed a government building and carried

out boxes with cigarettes and liquor. Such goods are often accepted as bribes by corrupt officials. There were clashes with the police too.

According to media reports, the demonstration dispersed after the government promised to scrap the drainpipe plans. The next day, 2000 police officers patrolled the town, preventing further protests. What will become of the paper mill was not said. The company insists it is compliant with China's environmental legislation. Economic growth, however, has often caused severe environmental damage in China in recent years.

Accordingly, ecologically motivated protests have become quite common even though the authoritarian regime tries to stifle open dissent and punishes dissidents with long prison sentences. In early July, there were reports of rallies in Sichuan Province where thousands opposed plans for a copper smelter because they were worried about air and ground water contamination. The project was cancelled. China's Communist Party is trying to keep everything under control, but it is apparently prepared to give into protests before events escalate and become unmanageable. *Laura Hinze*

