



CENTRE FOR THE  
STUDY OF DEMOCRACY

Policy Studies Building, Room 335  
138 Union Street  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6  
Tel: 613 533-6273 Fax: 613 533-2135  
[www.queensu.ca/csd](http://www.queensu.ca/csd)

## CREATING DEMOCRATIC VALUE: EVALUATING EFFORTS TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY ABROAD

### Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) support for Civil Society in China

BRUCE GILLEY, RANA SIU-INBODEN, AND STEPHEN NOAKES

Global Peace and Security Fund  
Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT)  
GBP 07.115  
March 21, 2008

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PART 1: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT</b>	<b>3</b>
DEMOCRATIC POSITION AND CONTEXT	3
DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE EFFORTS IN CHINA	4
CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA	4
CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE EFFORTS IN CHINA	6
<b>PART 2. DEMOCRACY INTERVENTION</b>	<b>8</b>
PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES	8
EXISTING EVALUATIONS	11
<b>PART 3: EVALUATION KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>12</b>
CASE #1: MOBILIZING VILLAGERS FOR FOREST PROTECTION IN YUNNAN	13
CASE #2: MOBILIZING RESIDENTS FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SHANGHAI	16
CASE #3: MOBILIZING MIGRANT WORKERS FOR SELF-PROTECTION IN BEIJING AND BEYOND	17
OVERALL CSP PROGRAMME EVALUATION: MICRO-LEVEL	19
PROGRAMME EVALUATION: MACRO-LEVEL	20
PROGRAMME EVALUATION: MESO-LEVEL	21
<b>PART 4: RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>22</b>
GENERAL LESSONS FOR DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE TO CIVIL SOCIETY	22
SPECIFIC LESSONS FOR THE CIDA CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAM IN CHINA	22
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>23</b>

# **Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) support for Civil Society in China**

*Bruce Gilley, Rana Siu-Inboden, and Stephen Noakes*

## **Part 1: Background and Context**

### *Democratic Position and Context*

China is a closed authoritarian regime ruled by a single party whose position is guaranteed by the country's constitution. It accounts for 55% of the world's population that is classified by Freedom House as living under "Not Free" governments. Since post-totalitarian reforms were launched in 1978, however, the Chinese state has liberalized to a limited degree. In particular, greater economic and social freedoms have been permitted for individuals, while the state has been partly constrained by an emergent legal system and by the provision of some mechanisms of horizontal accountability – courts, legislatures, and auditors general for example. In terms of the Perlin model, China in the reform era has achieved democratic progress in only a few areas — constitutionalism, legally recognized rights, the rule of law, government effectiveness, and a market economy. In other areas — democratic values and culture, democratic control of the security apparatus, accountability, elections, party development, and information flows, social equality, and social cohesion -- progress has been minimal. Freedom House rates China as a 6.5 on its 7-to-1 scale, while Polity IV gives it a score of minus 7 on its minus-10 to plus-10 scale.

Despite periodic popular protests in favour of faster political liberalization, most notably in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989, the process of democratization has remained a largely state-led one. Prominent pro-democracy activists in China are regularly arrested and jailed. The most active popular movement for democracy in China exists outside of the country's borders. The main democratic advances of the reform era — in particular the promotion of direct elections for village governments beginning in 1987 — have been driven by the state in order to improve governance. China is also unique in being largely insulated from international pressures and demonstration effects. Indeed, the "Beijing Consensus" that combines authoritarian rule with state-controlled marketization has become a model of emulation by other developing countries.

Despite the absence of significant democratic breakthroughs in China in the post-1978 reform era, the country's political trajectory is still best understood in terms of the "democratic transitions paradigm". The question of democracy appears repeatedly in both elite and popular politics, and a lively scholarly debate on the conditions that might make democracy possible is now permitted in the country.

China remains a poor country — its income per capita according to recently-adjusted World Bank estimates was only US\$4,091 in 2005 using price-equivalent (purchasing power parity, or PPP) exchange rates, roughly the same as income levels in Azerbaijan or Angola. Given such conditions, it is no surprise that China remains an authoritarian regime and that democratization remains embryonic. China also faces the challenge of its enormous size, both geographical and demographic. The current population of 1.312 billion is expected to peak at around 1.6 billion by

mid-century, which increases the need to create an effective state and to forge the bonds of community that ensure a democratic success.

China, however, enjoys a positive regional environment for democratization. In Asia Pacific as a whole, 29 of 39 states are electoral democracies, while 13 are liberal democracies, according to Freedom House. Neighbouring states such as South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia became democracies during the “Third Wave” of the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, while India and Japan have remained constitutional democracies since World War II.

China also has an historical momentum for the creation of democracy that began with the May Fourth movement of 1919. Democratic discourse is deeply enmeshed in the modernization project of contemporary China, another reason it is appropriate to think of the country in terms of the transitions paradigm.

### *Democracy Assistance Efforts in China*

Many official international donors are active in aid programmes in China that serve the goal of democratization. However, with only a few exceptions, most donors do not conceive of their activities in terms of democratization. Human rights, social and economic development, gender equality, environmental protection, and governance are more typical program goals. One exception is the activities of the U.S. government; the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), for instance, seeks to “foster public debate of policy alternatives and proposals for constitutional and political reform.”<sup>1</sup> From 1999 to 2006, U.S. government agencies including NED and State provided \$110 million in democracy-related assistance to China.<sup>2</sup> United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the International Labour Organization have bilateral programmes with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) government aimed at strengthening human rights. United Nations agencies with a specific democracy promotion focus, such as the United Nations Democracy Fund, however, are notably absent from China. Nonetheless, since most donors work in areas that affect democratization, any evaluation of the effectiveness of a particular democracy assistance programme must take into account the impact of such programmes.

As with most democracy assistance efforts, however, democracy assistance towards China is generally not complemented by a “whole-of-government” approach that also utilizes diplomacy, political advocacy, sanctions, and moral support for democratic actors. All donors separate their democracy assistance programmes in China from their broader bilateral relations, often resulting in policies that work at cross-purposes.

### *Civil Society in China*

Concomitant with its economic and social liberalization since 1978, China has experienced the growth of civil society organizations that seek to represent the interests of various constituencies and interests and to draw attention to areas of failure of state performance. At the end of 2006, there were 354,000 officially recognized civil society groups. However, the actual number is far higher.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Endowment for Democracy, Asia Program Highlights, Available at [www.ned.org/grants/06programs/highlights-asia06.html](http://www.ned.org/grants/06programs/highlights-asia06.html). Accessed 3 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Lum, “U.S.-Funded Assistance Programs in China”, Congressional Research Service, 18 May 2007. Available at <http://ftp.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22663.pdf>

The All-China Environmental Federation, a government body, said in 2005 that only a quarter of environmental organizations were formally registered. One EC report estimated that there were between 1.4 million and 2 million unregistered civil society groups in China.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, civil society in China is described by most practitioners as nascent and characterized by weak organizational development, a heavy reliance on foreign funding, a heavy reliance on individual personalities, a lack of understanding from the general public, government suspicion, and burdensome registration requirements.

The PRC government's attitudes towards and thus policies for civil society groups have over time become more accommodating, although overall progress remains minimal and advances are generally followed by sharp crackdowns. Under the Social Mass Organizations Registration Management Regulation (revised 2007) organizations seeking registration must have a "supervising" government body in addition to official registration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). In addition, only one organization in one field is allowed to register at each administrative level. Although recently local Bureaus of Civil Affairs have begun registering some of the smallest NGOs without a sponsor, the registration system generally remains rigid and burdensome. All NGOs must also file a report on any project that is done in cooperation with, or with funding from, a foreign organization.

Civil society groups in China avoid the term *non-government organizations* (*feizhengfu zuzhi*) which is perceived as *anti-government* in the Chinese context.<sup>4</sup> As noted by a program officer at a funding organization "the Chinese government is ambivalent about NGOs. They want the resources and services, but not advocacy."<sup>5</sup> Civil society organizations likely sense the government's lack of enthusiasm for advocacy. Very few civil society organizations are engaged in advocacy activities and there is a dearth of NGOs functioning as watchdogs or independent monitoring agencies.<sup>6</sup> Even civil society representatives who have views on policy are often reluctant to approach the government.

Under a new policy of seeking to reduce social conflicts and pursue greater social equality, known as the "harmonious socialist society", officials have called upon civil society groups to "strengthen their capacity building to play a bigger role in building a harmonious society."<sup>7</sup> There is also a lively literature in the public policy, political science, and social development communities in China that highlights the growing need for a robust and active civil society in order to manage the growing social pluralism and conflicts that beset many regions.<sup>8</sup> However, local governments in particular remain deeply suspicious of civil society groups while the national government has articulated a particular concern about groups that receive foreign funding, arguing that the democratizing "colour revolutions" of 2003-5 in Georgia, the Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were, in part, fomented by such groups. One CIDA report echoes the point made above about "service provision without advocacy"

---

<sup>3</sup> "Evaluation of EC Cooperation and Partnership with China, Country Level Evaluation," 90.

<sup>4</sup> "Emerging Civil Society in China: An Overall Assessment of conditions and possibilities available to civil society and its organizations to act in China," SIDA, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Interview on November 14, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP Assessment of Development Results, 15.

<sup>7</sup> The quote is from Li Yong, deputy director of the State Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations, "Chinese NGOs urged to strengthen capacity building", November 27, 2007, Xinhua News Agency.

<sup>8</sup> For a good overview, see Ma Qiusha. *Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

by noting that the PRC government has allowed NGOs to take up the slack of social service delivery “without, however, allowing any significant voice to NGOs or interest groups, in the hope of keeping civil society diffuse and tame.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Civil Society Assistance Efforts in China*

Several key official donors are involved in the promotion of civil society in China.

The first general kind are those with an explicit democracy (or political and civil rights) focus to their civil society programmes. The European Union’s various civil society programmes, for instance, are specifically linked to a broader democratization theme of “China’s transition to a stable and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles, and the rule of law.”<sup>10</sup> The United States’ funding for civil society in China administered by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) at the U.S. State Department aims to encourage China to abide by international human rights norms.<sup>11</sup> Civil society is a DRL priority, and the DRL’s solicitation for proposals specifically notes that civil society is an area of particular concern. The National Endowment for Democracy also funds civil society groups both inside and outside China that seek to strengthen democracy in China.<sup>12</sup> The absence of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) from China is particularly unfortunate in this case because civil society is the largest single component in terms of budget of USAID’s global democracy promotion activities.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) implements a technical assistance program with the Chinese government related to its implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Part of this program includes facilitating civil society capacity building.<sup>13</sup> The Danish Institute for Human Rights, whose objective is to strengthen human rights based on the rule of law, has partnered with civil society organizations, such as legal aid clinics and NGOs.<sup>14</sup> Australia’s Human Rights Technical Program (H RTP) cooperates with China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs to develop policy regarding official support for civil society. The H RTP also involves NGO participants and has started a partnership with a legal aid NGO.<sup>15</sup>

A second broad type of programme promotes civil society as part of other developmental goals. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), whose mission is poverty reduction, “cooperates with civil society organizations (CSOs) in the PRC to strengthen the effectiveness, quality, and sustainability of the services it provides.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) notes that “democratic governance is valuable in its own right, but it is also central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) because it underpins equitable growth

---

<sup>9</sup> Civil Society Program (CSP) II, Two-Year Report April 2005 to April 2007, p.6

<sup>10</sup> EU Commission Policy Paper for Transmission to the Council and the European Parliament, “A Maturing Partnership: shared interests and challenges in EU-China Relations,” 3-4. Civil society projects are considered to be a part of democracy assistance, 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> [www.state.gov/g/drl/p/c9078/htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/p/c9078/htm), [www.state.gov/g/drl/p/90790.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/p/90790.htm), and Interview on November 14, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> NED website, [www.ned.org/grants/discretionaryGrants.html](http://www.ned.org/grants/discretionaryGrants.html)

<sup>13</sup> UN OHCHR Press Release, August 31, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> <http://humanrights.palermo.magenta-aps.dk/departments/international/partnercountries>.

<sup>15</sup> [www.usaid.gov/au/china/projects/hrtc/cfm](http://www.usaid.gov/au/china/projects/hrtc/cfm) and e-mail correspondence January 8-9, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Asian Development Bank, A Fact Sheet: 2007, [www.adb.org/prc](http://www.adb.org/prc).

and the elimination of poverty.”<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) asserts that “civil society plays an important role, both in achieving concrete results in poverty reduction and for increasing aid efficiency.”<sup>18</sup> SIDA seeks to “promote the development of a vibrant and democratic civil society that improves the possibilities for poor people to improve their living conditions.”<sup>19</sup> The UN Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (the Global Fund) and UNAIDS have stressed the important role of civil society and partnerships with NGOs.<sup>20</sup> The World Bank, whose mission is promote economic development, notes that “many NGOs are making a significant contribution to China’s social and economic development by engaging in public benefit activities”.<sup>21</sup> The Ford Foundation also includes civil society as one of eight focus areas in China.

A key issue that faces all civil society donors in China is how to manage their relationship with a suspicious and often hostile PRC government. An advantage of working with the government is the increased possibility that projects will lead to specific policy, legislative or institutional changes, and the opportunity to link projects more directly with the government reforms and initiatives. For example, the UNDP projects on the legislative environment for NGOs and institutionalizing participatory processes that allow civil society to be consulted on legislation and policies likely benefit from the UNDP’s partnership with the Chinese government.<sup>22</sup> But a close relationship with the PRC government can also backfire. For example, under a UNDP-EU project, the Ministry of Civil Affairs will train local officials responsible for implementing new regulations on the registration and management of social organizations and will draft detailed schedules on implementation of the new regulations once they have been enacted.<sup>23</sup> However, it is unclear if those efforts are designed to empower or control civil society organizations. The UNDP describes its civil society programme as being “a close partner of the government.”<sup>24</sup>

Agencies that highlight and promote their partnership with the Chinese government in developing civil society in China include: the World Bank<sup>25</sup>, UN OHCHR<sup>26</sup> and the Asian Development Bank<sup>27</sup>. The EU also funds and implements its programs in cooperation with the Chinese government, noting that doing so ensures ownership and facilitates implementation.<sup>28</sup> The British Council aligns its civil society program with Chinese government requests and has worked with MOCA on a number of projects over the last five years.

Other agencies downplay their links to government. SIDA notes that “according to Chinese requirements, all project proposals regarding contract, financed technical co-operation are

---

<sup>17</sup> UNDP Annual Report for China 2006, 7.

<sup>18</sup> “SIDA’s Support to Civil Society in Development Cooperation, SIDA policy paper, 7.

<sup>19</sup> “SIDA’s Support to Civil Society, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Revised Guidelines on the Purpose, Structure and Composition of Country Coordinating Mechanisms and Requirements for Grant Eligibility. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, May 28, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> [web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFIC](http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFIC), The World Bank and NGOs in China.

<sup>22</sup> Fast Facts, UNDP Promotion of Human Rights in China and UNDP Country Programme for the People’s Republic of China, 2006-2010, 3.

<sup>23</sup> China Development Brief, Tuesday May 22, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> “Teaming up for Human Rights: Promoting Human Rights and Integrity in Government through UN Conventions,” UNDP China, 1. Xiaokang refers to China’s development vision for an all-round, well-adjusted society, in which development is more balanced.

<sup>25</sup> [web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFIC](http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFIC), Country Partnership Strategy for China.

<sup>26</sup> Interview on December 3, 2007 and e-mail exchange January 14, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Interview January 6, 2008 and e-mail exchange January 14, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> [ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/china/intro/summit4.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/china/intro/summit4.htm).

channelled through the Ministry of Commerce.” SIDA’s funding for Chinese NGOs is not considered part of their overall bilateral cooperation program; the fund is administered independently from the Chinese government, and grantees are not subject to Chinese government approval.

The EU’s experience with EIDHR highlights some of the complications of working with the Chinese government. During the EU-China human rights dialogue in October 2005, Chinese officials objected to several of the selected grantees.<sup>29</sup> In the past, EU officials had informally told the Chinese government the identities of grantees without Chinese objection. As a result, the EU cancelled the entire program of funding that year, and decided to centralize funding for human rights in China in future years.<sup>30</sup>

Other agencies eschew official involvement altogether. The U.S. State Department did not implement civil society projects as part of a cooperation project with the Chinese government. The Americans did not sign a bilateral agreement with the Chinese government, and they do not consult the Chinese government in making funding decisions.<sup>31</sup> NED sees its work in China as seeking to “open political space in an authoritarian country” and notes that “the government simultaneously acknowledged the desirability of democracy while reconfirming its intentions to preserve one-party rule.”<sup>32</sup> As is its practice worldwide, NED neither seeks Chinese government approval nor formally consults with the Chinese government as part of its grant-making program.

Donors generally agree that working with the Chinese government can weaken the effectiveness of the project. An evaluator for democracy projects noted that organizations that do not directly involve the Chinese government are able to work with a wider range of partners, explore a variety of reform ideas, and enjoy more flexibility. Another potential drawback to working with the government are the delays caused by negotiation and bureaucracy. Practitioners have also noted times that the Chinese government delayed or cancelled program activities to express its displeasure over issues at the political level.

Chinese government attention can also have less final but still negative consequences. For example, Chinese government officials were invited to a public forum on civil society, which was co-hosted by an international non-governmental organization and their Chinese partner. Through this event the Chinese government became aware of this partnership and as a result, local government officials visited the Chinese partner organization after the activity and asked for more information about the project, including information about the international partner organization and funding sources. Despite a previously close relationship between the local partner and the county-level government, the local government appears to have grown warier and has begun watching the Chinese partner organization more closely.<sup>33</sup> Other international organizations implementing democracy-related projects in China report similar experiences.

## **Part 2. Democracy Intervention**

### *Project Description and Objectives*

---

<sup>29</sup> “Beijing concerned about ‘colour revolution,’” Mure Dickie and Richard McGregor, *Financial Times*, 18 November 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Evaluation of EC Cooperation and Partnership with China, Country Level Evaluation, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Interview November 14, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> NED Strategy Document January 2007 and NED 2006 Annual Report.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with international government donor. November 12, 2007.

The Canadian International Development Agency initiated a Civil Society Programme (CSP) in 1997 as part of the agency’s shift away from economic aid for China towards a focus on governance and the environment. The stated objectives of the CSP were to:

- 1) improve dialogue and interactions between governments at all levels and NGOs on both service delivery and public policy questions;
- 2) facilitate legal rights and legal reforms;
- 3) protect the rights of marginalized groups, including women.

In application materials, potential grantees are asked to show how their project will contribute to:

- a) public participation in policy decision-making;
- b) greater acceptance of civil society and public discourse by government and citizens;
- c) enhanced transparency and accountability in government;
- d) gender equality and human rights;
- e) enhanced access to the law and the promotion of legal reform.

The CSP is premised on a belief that a more active civil society in China will *both* improve the effectiveness of the state *and* make it more democratic, at least in the long term.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, while it is lodged within a governance programme, CIDA sees the CSP as having objectives outside of governance as well, such as poverty alleviation, social development, and “empowerment” and these perspectives tend to dominate those involved in the operational side of the agency.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, it is difficult to classify CIDA’s CSP as clearly falling into either of the two types of civil society programmes described above, i.e. as being primarily concerned with democracy assistance or development assistance.

The programme ran during a pilot phase from 1998 to 2001, during which time 36 projects were funded totalling C\$900,000 in budgeted costs. In the second phase, begun in 2001, C\$2.1 million was allocated for the programme over five years, and the programme was then extended through 2007. In Phase Two, 78 projects had been funded through early 2007. The breakdown of the subject of 41 groups in Phase II listed in CIDA evaluation reports, according to our calculations, was as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1: Breakdown of Reported CSP Phase Two Projects by Type

AREA	NUMBER
Health	5
Women	5
Culture	2
Migrants	5
Environment	7
Citizenship/Rights	5
NGO Development	9
Law	3
ALL	41

<sup>34</sup> Quote something here //

<sup>35</sup> “Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness: Concept Paper”, 17 September 2007, Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, CIDA. <http://web.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cs>

Of those classified under citizenship/rights, just one, a C\$13,000 grant in 2004-05 to a Women's Studies Center at Tianjin Normal University that intended to promote women's participation in local government, was tied explicitly to political participation.

In 2007, CSP deployed approximately C\$300,000, meaning that it accounted for roughly 1% of CIDA's annual outlays in China in that year. Most spending goes on other projects in governance (for example, the training of judges and support for the legislative training of National People's Congress participants) and on environmental projects. Nonetheless, according to Zhen Li, the CSP coordinator in Beijing, the CSP projects are typically highlighted by CIDA for Canadian visitors to China such as journalists, parliamentarians, and interest groups.<sup>36</sup>

CSP projects are created through applications lodged by civil society groups in China that are then approved by a CSP committee based in Beijing (in Phase I the approvals were done in Ottawa). The committee is made up of the CSP coordinator and embassy staff usually from the political and aid sections. Its size varies from just a few people to half a dozen. The chief member of the committee is the Project Team Leader (PTL), an embassy staffer, who calls meetings to consider project approval documents prepared by the CSP coordinator based upon the concept papers from Chinese civil society groups. The programme in 2007 was receiving roughly one concept paper per week. Since the PTL is an embassy staffer, the position typically changes every year or so, meaning that the CSP Coordinator devotes significant time to training each new PTL about the CSP. The CSP Coordinator estimates that he spends roughly half of his time dealing with CIDA administration and the other half seeking out and evaluating Chinese civil society partners.

CIDA's CSP falls among that small minority of civil society programmes whose major funding decisions are made in China rather than at agency headquarters. Notwithstanding the problem of revolving PTLs, this ensures that decisions can be made relatively quickly and are better informed by an understanding of conditions in China. By contrast, U.S. State Department DRL civil society projects in China are reviewed and approved in Washington with only advisory input from embassy personnel in Beijing.

In general, the CSP aims at projects that either provide service delivery or which have a clear policy focus. The programme tries to avoid funding groups that are mere adjuncts of the state. It also seeks to ensure a broad geographical coverage throughout China, and will accept less well-developed projects from more remote areas in order to achieve this goal. Most NGOs in China are clustered in Beijing.

In terms of the three-part typology of civil society roles in closed authoritarian regimes outlined in the literature review for this section, CIDA has been engaged in all three kinds. Two of the groups interviewed for this project (Grassroots Community and the Cultural Communication Center for Facilitators) aim to create an independent space for civil society separate from the state. The other group interviewed, the Rural Development Institute of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, would fall into the "support" category, serving to encourage internal regime liberalization by delivering services while also acting as an "inside" source of policy advocacy. CIDA, like most civil society programmes for China with the exception of those of the NED, has funded very few groups who are adversaries of state power. However, it has on occasion funded such projects

---

<sup>36</sup> This and subsequent references refer to an interview with CSP Coordinator Zhen Li on 17 December 2007 in Beijing.

outside of the normal CSP budget. For instance, in 2006 it helped a democracy activist in Beijing to publish a book that promoted democratic values and concepts.

While CIDA adheres to the ethos that projects should be initiated and “owned” by the local civil society activists themselves, it also devotes considerable time to helping potential grantees to shape their proposals in order to meet CIDA guidelines for outcomes. One project manager in another agency refers to this as “project shaping” (rather than a wholly passive “project taking” or an overly-intrusive “project making”).

Finally, the CSP’s relationship with the Chinese government is complex and changing. In Phase I, the programme was run on a pilot basis with no official PRC government involvement. In 2001, Phase Two was begun as a formal bilateral programme between CIDA and the Ministry of Commerce. In 2004, MOFCOM asked that it be allowed to review all CSP approvals, a responsibility that it would delegate to its China NGO Association. CSP duly began submitting large numbers of documents to MOFCOM, which apparently lacked the resources or expertise to consider the documents. In 2005, MOFCOM informed CSP that project approvals were no longer required, although MOFCOM retained the right to intervene in individual cases. Since then, the CSP has apparently remained under the watchful eye of the Chinese state, although evidence of direct interference is minimal. One CSP evaluation document notes: “Many CSP partners, especially those in rights protection and advocacy, reported that they had been asked to report to the local [police department] about their cooperation with the CSP and other international organizations but they were also informed that the talks between the [police] and them were informal and should not be disclosed to others.”<sup>37</sup> Like other donors working in China, CIDA’s project decisions are governed in part by a desire not to attract undue government attention at either the local or national level, and to not put individuals in danger. The relationship of any fundee to the government is carefully considered in balancing the goals of feasibility and safety against goals of impact.

### *Existing Evaluations*

CIDA’s evaluations of the CSP project have been done in four main forms:

- 1) grantee final reports and self-evaluations;
- 2) external evaluators of individual projects;
- 3) CSP internal evaluation reports of the CSP itself;
- 4) external evaluators of the CSP.

In general, evaluation efforts have been sporadic and incomplete and thus it is difficult to build up a picture of the role of evaluations in the shaping of the CSP programme as a whole. Two external evaluations of the CSP programme have been conducted, one in 2002 and another that began in early 2008. The one in 2002 was not widely admired by CSP staff given that the evaluator was not familiar with China. Internal evaluations of the CSP project are filed every two years by the CSP coordinator. These provide excellent details on the progress of the programme and the challenges it faces. The CSP internal programme evaluations have also contained long lists of worthy recommendations, such as more work with government-run mass organizations and longer project periods. However, given their operational nature, such internal evaluations cannot generally be used to assess broader outcomes or impacts. Outcomes are generally measured in the evaluation reports as direct consequences of outputs — thus for instance in the report covering the 2005 to 2007

---

<sup>37</sup> Civil Society Program (CSP) II, Two-Year Report April 2005 to April 2007, p.18.

period, the outcome of “increased participation ... in public policy decision-making” is measured by the participation-related outputs of the projects themselves.<sup>38</sup>

As for evaluations of individual projects, while the CSP Phase Two has an evaluation budget of C\$390,000, the CSP Coordinator reports that virtually none of it has been spent because of an almost total lack of evaluation expertise available inside China. Thus very few projects are ever evaluated externally. Such evaluations as have been done of individual projects are weak, and tend to largely mimic the reports filed by the grantees themselves. The CSP coordinator lacks the time to conduct direct project evaluations himself — the last one he did was in 2004 and looked at eight projects.

CIDA is not alone in finding that the evaluation of its civil society programme in China is both difficult and subject to high levels of uncertainty and time lags. It needs to be said that the programme operates in one of the most difficult imaginable environments — in a closed authoritarian regime that has not committed itself to democratization and in an sector of society that is avowedly targeted for control and neutralization by the government. In the evaluation of outputs at every level – micro or project, meso or sectoral, and macro or country, baselines can be nearly impossible to ascertain while controlling factors (in particular overt acts of repression) may shift precipitously from year to year.

Most other donors in the field have not taken evaluation seriously claiming that their programmes are not old enough to make evaluation worthwhile. One exception is the European Commission’s Evaluation Unit, which conducted a country-level evaluation of EU-China cooperation in 2007 covering the entire 1996 to 2006 period. The evaluation of the civil society component concluded that the outcomes achieved reached the “best possible” standards.<sup>39</sup> Yet an examination of that report shows that the conclusion was wholly based upon project outputs and made no efforts to address standard outcome evaluation methods (baseline data, control factors, measurement, etc.). In other words, the EU's more ambitious evaluation attempt only penetrated to the same depth as the CSP's limited efforts.

CSP has close to 10 years of experience and, as one of the oldest programmes in the field, it is more appropriate to consider even lagged outcomes. But if CIDA did determine to conduct more comprehensive assessments, the problem of insufficient "democracy assistance" evaluation expertise would remain. CIDA is fortunate in having an in-country presence that could, in theory, improve evaluations, despite time and expertise constraints. And some options do exist. For instance, the lack of a dedicated program officer in China is considered to be a liability for DRL, which has one of the largest programs to promote democracy and human rights in China.<sup>40</sup> DRL has, however, responded creatively to this by holding a roundtable for grantees on an annual basis that includes a session on evaluation methods.

### **Part 3: Evaluation Knowledge**

The Queen’s CSD Evaluation Framework seeks to offer a replicable and useful approach to the evaluation of democracy assistance by reference to a tripartite evaluation focus. The micro level of

---

<sup>38</sup> Civil Society Program (CSP) II, Two-Year Report April 2005 to April 2007, p.30.

<sup>39</sup> Evaluation of EC Cooperation and Partnership with China, Country Level Evaluation, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Although the U.S. Embassy and consulates have reporting officers who cover human rights, rule of law, and democracy, the State Department did not have an officer to monitor, evaluate and oversee implementation of HRDF projects in China.

analysis focuses on actual project selection, project design, and project implementation. While important, and worth considering, this level of analysis is insufficient for the purposes of democracy assistance. The macro or country level of analysis focuses on country-level changes in the higher-order variable, in this case democracy. This is also worth considering, although in most cases — and particularly in a case like China — the results will be highly uncertain. Instead, the Queen’s CSD framework draws attention to the meso or sectoral level of analysis, which in this case means the development of civil society in China. Outcomes on this scale can be both measured and properly attributed. Such outcomes can also in fact be linked to the higher order variable of democracy through reference to an agreed definition of the constituent parts of democracy.

This case study will consider the application of the Queen’s CSD Framework in two ways: first with respect to the three specific projects that our team evaluated during a site trip to China in December 2007, projects that were evaluated at both the micro and meso levels; and secondly at a general level with respect to the CSP as a whole, applied at micro, meso, and also macro levels.

*Case #1: Mobilizing Villagers for Forest Protection in Yunnan*<sup>41</sup>

In the 2005-06 period, CSP provided C\$14, 954 to an organization located in the southwestern province of Yunnan whose aim was to mobilize people in ethnic minority areas to protect their rights of forest ownership. The Community Development Research Center (CDRC) was an independent NGO established in Kunming, capital of southwestern Yunnan province, and registered as an NGO with the Yunnan Commercial Administration Bureau in 1999. Its primary leader was Zhao Yaqiao, a local academic, who worked with volunteers and academics in the province who were interested in issues of the environment and minority and rural rights.

The goals of this project were generally to enhance the rights and abilities of minority groups to protect and manage their forest resources. The idea was to build a bottom-up approach to forestry management that would contrast with the often ineffective top-down approach adopted in Yunnan (as well as nationally). In particular, the project aimed to better understand minority forest protection practices as well to as mobilize villagers to make use of their rights, raising awareness both among the villagers and among relevant provincial-level officials. The project fit into CSP’s aims of building the capacity and influence of civil society organizations, especially as it dealt with traditionally marginalized groups (farmers, minority groups, forest dwellers) in China.

The project was initiated by Zhao Yaqiao who met CIDA representatives at a conference in Beijing. CDRC officials submitted an initial concept paper for their project to CIDA, which was approved. They then submitted a full proposal. Mid-term and final reports were submitted. Of the costs, roughly a third was spent on the training sessions, a third on the dialogues, and another quarter on the village investigations.

Intended outcomes included:

- 1) strengthening the participation of citizens, communities, and NGOs in policy formation and decisions;
- 2) strengthening government and community respect for the role of NGOs in policy-making and decisions;
- 3) giving citizens more opportunities to protect their legal rights.

---

<sup>41</sup> Based on an interview with CDRC members Zhao Yaqiao, Luo Mingjun, and Hu Jing. 13 December 2007, Kunming, Yunnan province. Also based on relevant CSP project materials.

The final report says that success was achieved in all these areas.

From the micro, or project, level of analysis, this project was a mixed success.<sup>42</sup> Several very positive aspects of the project selection and design and implementation should be highlighted first. The project outputs, as proposed, included the following:

- 1) the holding of a strategic planning session;
- 2) two 3-day investigations of two villages and a report on each;
- 3) 3 dialogues with local and provincial officials;
- 4) two 3-day training sessions for a total of 160 villagers on their rights;
- 5) a final policy recommendations report.

CDRC officials found quite enthusiastic cooperation in all these stages from the villagers in the two chosen villages -- Xixia in the rural parts of Qujing city and Gaomeigu in the rural parts of Lijiang city. Most Xixia villagers are from the majority Han Chinese group, although it has a significant minority (Yi group) presence. Gaomeigu is entirely composed of the minority Naxi group.

Another key output was the holding of dialogues. The dialogues took place both in Kunming, with six villagers meeting with provincial officials and experts, and in the villages themselves, where the provincial and city-level officials conducted dialogues with larger numbers of villagers. The final report describes the dialogues, however, in very formalistic terms and with a heavy emphasis on officials telling villagers about the laws. It says the participants agreed that rights and duties had an equal status.

Since the project has not continued, its outcomes in terms of affecting attitudes among the villagers and, more importantly, among provincial-level officials are virtually negligible. Whatever attitude shifts might have occurred as a result of a single meeting, those shifts appear not to have lasted at the provincial level. However, at the county level, there appears to be a lasting outcome since county officials have asked the institute to do more such projects in future. Some counties in areas with logging bans have also begun to experiment with giving logging quotas to villages to empower them to take part in forest protection. CDRC officials argue that given the unlikelihood of receiving local funding to continue this project, CIDA should relax its requirement that grantees cannot gain repeat funding. "CIDA funding was and could be very strategically important for this," says Zhao.

One difficulty in assessing the CSP role in the strengthening of the CDRC, however, is the fact that the CDRC had previously received grants from the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, Action Aid, World Bank, DFID, AUSAID, and other outside agencies.

Despite these generally positive outputs, the CDRC was subject to a major exogenous shock that significantly undermined the gains it had made through this project in attaining greater autonomy and capacity as an NGO. Shortly after the CSP project had been approved (in late 2005), the CDRC was forced to re-register as a unit of the government-run Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS) The CDRC was thus transformed from an NGO into a unit of the government. Under its new title, the Rural Development Institute (RDI) of YASS, it is located within YASS and answers to the YASS leadership. The takeover was part of a policy decision in 2005 by the Yunnan government to eliminate environmental NGOs in the province, a decision prompted by NGO

---

<sup>42</sup> The project is mentioned on the RDI's website among completed projects at [www.yassrdi.org/cn/projectedsh.asp?id=37](http://www.yassrdi.org/cn/projectedsh.asp?id=37)

activism in opposition to the proposed construction of the Nujiang dam in Yunnan and to the proposed tree plantations in Yunnan of the Indonesia-based Asia Pulp and Paper. As a result, the Yunnan government now tells CDRC/RDI what policy research it can do. The results of that research are then passed onto the provincial party and government. “So we can’t do research in areas the government does not like unless we get outside funding,” says Zhao.

Thus the project-level as well as sector-level output aims of the CSP suffered. It obviously becomes impossible to judge the effectiveness of aid to an NGO once that NGO has been swallowed by the government and thus removed from civil society.

Evaluation at the meso or sectoral level of analysis requires controlling for several additional outside factors beyond the YASS takeover of CDRC. Positive factors (which is to say factors that would have also encouraged greater minority and farmer involvement in self-management of forests) include a move to introduce land tenure reform in China that would delegate land ownership to the community/village level coupled with the passage of a property law in China in 2007 that will make that ownership more secure and enhance land rights consciousness. However, militating against this is a simultaneous pressure for a marketization and commoditization of land being pushed by Beijing. The latter approach has been opposed by CDRC/RDI based on its findings that community-based management is not only more effective for forest protection but is also more culturally sensitive given the important communal role played by forests in the province (in terms of burial grounds, religious significance, water catchment, and poverty coping practices, etc). Given the powerful impact of these factors, the influence of the CSP project was probably most perceptible in terms of the particular concept of bottom-up management that it championed.

CDRC officials also believe that the project has influenced the dynamics of minority forest protection in a positive way. Not only are villagers avowedly more confident in their own skills and abilities to manage forests, but provincial and county level officials are more aware of the possibilities of bottom-up management approaches, and self-management is not being experimented with in other cities and counties in the province, which suggests that some local influence can be attributed to the CDRC. However, without sustained emphasis on such projects — in particular the training sessions for villagers and the dialogues between government and villagers — this spin-off will not be realized, and the shift in CDRC's status to a YASS unit makes such future projects unlikely.

The takeover of the CDRC by YASS also more broadly compromised the CSP's aim of strengthening the existence and role of autonomous civil society in China. That is to say, this output failure has a direct knock-on effect on the impact failure.

As with all such close relationships between NGOs and government in China, it is possible to see a silver lining. Zhao, for instance, believes that the new RDI may have more influence as an “insider” organization than it did as an “outsider” organization. For instance, the RDI is now tasked by the government to produce an annual bluebook on rural Yunnan. Zhao feels this gives them an opportunity to insert their new thinking into what is a de facto government document. The project's report on the forest rights of farmers was also submitted to the national government and had a positive response from them, according to the CDRC. However, while the institute's views of their greater effectiveness as “insiders” are understandable, the fact that they have been unable to advocate stronger measures to prevent the marketization of minority forests suggests that their impact on this particular issue-area, and their broader impact on raising minority farmers

consciousness of their cultural, legal, and civil rights, has been minimized by the change. It's not clear there is a better way forward, however, since seeking to regain autonomy for CDRC/RDI would likely result in the closure of the institute.

Overall then, CSP's "Community Development Research Center" project should probably be graded as only fair, or even as a failure by the standards of the Queen's CSD Framework. While narrow output goals were generally attained, the strengthening of the CDRC is questionable given its change in status. Moreover, depending on the weight attached to the takeover of CDRC, the meso-level impacts on improving public participation in forestry management and bolstering the sense of rights among minority groups must be significantly discounted.

### *Case #2: Mobilizing Residents for Community Participation in Shanghai*<sup>43</sup>

In the 2002-03 period, CSP provided a C\$14,307 grant to "Grassroots Community," a community group in Shanghai's Zhabei District devoted to serving the community needs of local residents regarding their concerns about planning, health, and the environment. Grassroots Community (*Re Ai Jiayuan*) was established in 1999 as a grassroots group. It engages in seminars, complaint handling, and other activities including practicums for university students working in community development in the area of living environment and environmental conditions for residents of the area. Grassroots Community (GC) operates out of the of the administrative building of a soccer field in Zhabei district, and is mainly a volunteer organization.

The CIDA funding of 2002 supported one of GC's earliest projects, an initiative that also saw funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), which remains GC's largest funder. The project involved the selection of a small part of the group's constituency — the 2,000-resident Lane 710 area of the Zhijiang Road Street Committee area within Zhabei District. The goals of the project were to support GC's early growth and expansion of its activities by specifying a particular geographic area for it to work in. The funding was used to pay for the organization, materials, and man-hours of the various activities.

The project involved the holding of a series of activities for Lane 710 residents on local environmental issues: GM foods knowledge, SARS prevention, wild animals eating, clean water, green lighting, tree planting. Efforts included the production of a GC newsletter called *Oasis*. About 500 person-times were involved in all the various activities, while more than 100 volunteers were involved in the various activities as trainers, organizers, and presenters. At the micro-level, then, this small seed-capital project was a success; funding provided at a very early stage in the group's development allowed it to sustain a series of useful early engagements with local residents.

In 2004, CIDA-CSP commissioned a local evaluator to do an evaluation of the Grassroots Community project, and the evaluation gave the project high marks based upon both the observed enthusiasm of the GC members and the positive response of the residents to its activities. Most of the evaluation concerned outputs, yet the report noted that in the four residential blocks of Lane 710

---

<sup>43</sup> Based on an interview with GC members Wang Yan, Guo Bingham, and others. 19 December 2007, Shanghai. Also based on relevant CSP project materials.

“people now dare to say No to those who do not behave well” by discarding rubbish on the street or engaging in other antisocial behaviour.

A meso-level analysis of the impact of GC on broader CSP programme goals is difficult. To be sure, there is some evidence that GC — in its role as an advocacy group — has created space for civil society in Shanghai. It has made representations to the district government on several issues since 2002 including appeals to convert an unused piece of land into a small park, and insisting that a low-income housing development located at a busy intersection be given a wall separating it from the street as well as a gate with guards. Both appeals were accepted by the government.

However, most of these outcomes must be attributed to SIDA, not CIDA, funding since 90% of GC’s revenues since 2002-03 have come from SIDA.

As in Case #1, this project was also subjected to a major exogenous shock in the form of a government takeover that somewhat undermined any project achievements that can be viewed as outputs or outcomes. In 2004, GC was formally registered as a civil society organization in Zhabei district under the leadership of the Communist Youth League Party Committee of Zhabei District. GC officials say the registration resulted from a CYL official whose students had done practicums with GC, and who thereafter arranged for a “special approval” for the group as an officially registered civil society organization. GC officials say that the CYL plays no role in the day-to-day management of the organization and does not have any members sitting on the members committee that elects its management committee.

The question, however, is whether the CYL leadership constrains the abilities of the group. The CSP external evaluation said that “the external environment has improved” for GC as a result of the official registration with the CYL. GC officials say that the CYL takeover was welcomed because it protected them from a crackdown on NGOs in the city. But while it may have saved the group from a worse fate, it is not clear that it has enhanced its impact. A litmus test arose in 2003 when residents complained that the nearby Zhabei Number One Hospital was not burning its medical waste properly and that smoke from the hospital chimney was drifting into residential areas. A CIDA external project evaluation noted that because it was published in the media, the issue became conflictual. It noted as well that GC was not very effective in resolving the issue because of “a lack of partnership with the government”. However, even after the CYL takeover and official registration as an NGO in Zhabei district, GC was unable to have the hospital change its ways.

Thus at a meso-level, the GC project (which is in any case not really attributable to CIDA but mainly to SIDA) can at best be characterized as one that held the line against an overall baseline trend of a worsening environment for civil society in Shanghai.

### *Case #3: Mobilizing Migrant Workers for Self-Protection in Beijing and Beyond*<sup>44</sup>

In 2003, CSP gave C\$23, 849 to the Cultural Communications Center for Facilitators (CCCCF) in Beijing, a voluntary NGO. CCCC was established during the SARS crisis of 2003 in order to assist migrant workers in Beijing in obtaining information about the disease. Since then, it has grown into one of the preeminent NGOs dealing with migrant workers in China. Its four-fold focus of

---

<sup>44</sup> Based on an interview with CCCC members Li Tao, Li Zhen, and others. 17 December 2007, Beijing. Also based on relevant CSP project materials. See also see [www.facilitator.ngo.cn](http://www.facilitator.ngo.cn).

empowerment, consciousness-raising, policy-recommendations, and public education is carried out through a range of activities, from direct aid to legal aid to the use of drama and story-telling to educate migrant workers and also to improve people's understanding of migrant workers in urban areas.

At present, roughly 60-70% of the organization's revenues come from international sources. CCCF has partnered with a range of donors, including the Ford Foundation and the World Bank. It is registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and works closely with central government departments in the areas of education, health, labour and social security, and civil affairs. The CSP project goals were to assist CCCF to raise the profile of migrant-related policy issues and to discuss them among migrants, government officials, and academics and media people.

CIDA's money was used in two key areas: first to help CCCF obtain necessary office equipment and furniture, and secondly to organize a seminar on migrant workers policy in Beijing. The seminar was held in Beijing in November 2004 with more than 100 people in attendance. At the seminar, CCCF presented a report based on research it had done in Beijing, Qingdao, and Guangdong on the plight of migrant workers. Zhang Hongyu, Director of Policy and Regulations at the Ministry of Agriculture was among those in attendance, an audience that also included officials from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the Ministry of Health, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. The CCCF said that the seminar would not have been possible without CIDA funding because given its small scale as a project it would not have been worthwhile applying to other programs with their heavier paperwork burden. The seminar was reported in several media outlets whose journalists attended the seminar including the English-language China Daily, the Farmers Daily, and Economic Daily. The CCCF also posted a compilation of the speeches made at the seminar on its website.

CCCF officials felt the CSP-sponsored seminar had a positive outcome in terms of plugging their organization into policy-making circles and allowing officials to hear not only from CCCF but also from academics from CASS who were in attendance who used the seminar as an opportunity to criticize the tardy unwinding of China's restrictive household registration system and to point to continued flaws in urban management resulting from the lack of migrant status in cities.

The seminar contributed to the broader impact CCCF is having on policy-level work. For example, CCCF's report on the problem of pay withheld from migrant workers led directly to a 2006 State Council edict on the need to resolve these problems and a fast-tracking in the court system of cases relating to the problem. Thus the seminar was one of a number of crucial early efforts that helped cement CCCF's contacts with the central government and also helped establish its credibility on migrant worker issues.

At the meso level, then, CCCF is a strong and influential group that is cited widely in local media reports for its work in raising the status and rights-consciousness of migrant workers and in acting as a de facto lobby group for them. CCCF achieves two impacts with its activities; it establishes the separateness of civil society as it relates to migrant workers (through their work on the images of migrant workers and on migrant worker rights claims), and as an NGO it works with the state to support the delivery of services to marginalized groups. However, CCCF's success contributes to a "piling on" phenomenon: the World Bank, SIDA, Oxfam, Ford Foundation, International Action, and many other foreign donors, in addition to many domestic institutions and companies, provide funding. CSP likes to highlight the group to visitors, but the attributable role of CSP is very small

indeed. Thus it is difficult to argue that CSP funding is responsible for a notable portion of the impacts. However, CSP did not pile on, having entered at an early stage, and thus can perhaps share in credit for the later success of CCCF in attracting other donors.

#### *Overall CSP Programme Evaluation: Micro-Level*

The CSP's overall approval and project design process generally gained favourable reviews from the three grantees interviewed. All three contrasted its simplicity and expeditiousness favourably with that of other donors. However, all three, as well as the CSP coordinator, believed that current rules limiting or forbidding the in-process revision of projects on the basis of new learning should be revised. CDRC, for instance, found in its project that it could combine the investigation and training portions of the project into a single activity, yet the organization had to stick with the original proposal, meaning that villagers were summoned twice instead of once. It is notable, for instance, that CSP allows grantees to revise their *budgets* with written approval from the CSP office but not the projects themselves. This compares unfavourably, for instance, with the DRL's Human Rights and Democracy Fund. HRDF grantees are able to submit a reprogramming request or grant amendment at any time during the course of the project. Such flexibility allows the project to be adjusted as conditions, especially political sensitivities, change.

CSP's hands-on approach to project design is also the practice that works best in the context of China. On the one hand, it ensures the benefits of project taking (as with NED and DRL, CSP does not specify the nature of projects it seeks to fund). The CSP in particular prides itself on its relative openness to new approaches to civil society suggested by Chinese partners. On the other hand, being a pure project taker in China would run two main risks. One is that projects initiated by government-linked partners would be watered down and would serve the state's interests. (For example, as described above, the Ministry of Civil Affairs' proposed NGO classification system, which the World Bank provided some support for, could allow the Chinese government to more closely watch NGOs and target ones that are perceived as being critical of government policies or too active in advocacy.<sup>45</sup>) A second danger regards accountability within Chinese NGOs (something that in part reflects the lack of participatory culture in politics itself) and the risk of projects being overtaken by personal aims. As Sweden's SIDA noted in a review of China's NGOs: "Internal democracy is not in place, and there is no transparency in decisions and internal matters or in the financial administration."<sup>46</sup>

The main concern at the micro or project output level, then, is not the management of the CSP programme per se so much as the actual results achieved by the individual projects. As noted, two of the three projects investigated by our team had become government-run entities by the time of our report, which represents a fairly high failure rate in terms of the creation or strengthening of autonomous forms of civil society. As well, none of the internal evaluations of CSP projects ever admitted that any of them was a failure, which is also problematic: it is assumed by most donors that civil society promotion in China is a high-risk business where failure would be normal and indeed a sign that programme managers are investing in cutting-edge, democracy-value-building projects. CIDA itself states that "from a civil society perspective...there can be no single expression of local ownership and alignment around government plans, priorities, and systems."<sup>47</sup> Applied to

---

<sup>45</sup> See [www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.php?showsingle=49325](http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.php?showsingle=49325) for information on the MOCA classification system.

<sup>46</sup> "Emerging Civil Society in China," 17.

<sup>47</sup> "Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness: Concept Paper", 17 September 2007, Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, CIDA. <http://web.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cs>, Point 67.

China, this means that projects that become adjuncts to government objectives are de facto failures. As CSP coordinator Zhen Li put it, using a colloquial Chinese phrase: “CIDA’s approach to China is the sugar-coated bullet (*tangyi paodan*). But frankly right now the sugar coat is too thick and the bullet is too small.”

To be sure, many CSP grantees have been very successful, CCCF among them. The influential magazine *Southern Window* (*Nanfeng Chuang*), for instance, included two CSP grantee leaders among its 10 most active individuals and one CSP organization among its five most active organizations in the public interest for 2007. Nonetheless, attribution of these successes to CSP in light of multi-donor support and pre-existing strengths of these individuals and organizations makes measurement of output success difficult.

Thus, in terms of broad strategic considerations that guide project selection, there is room for improvement if CSP is to successfully engage groups that, while potentially more risky in terms of their outputs, have greater probabilities of attaining significant autonomy and effectiveness.

#### *Programme Evaluation: Macro-Level*

Since CSP’s civil society programmes began in China in 1998, China’s macro-level democracy scores have not improved at all. Therefore CSP has no basis on which to claim that its programmes have had any impact on democracy in China. Indeed, given that China’s democracy scores are near rock bottom on most indicators, even the claim that without such programmes things would have been worse is difficult to justify. To put this in more specific terms, even if Mitchell Seligson’s macro correlations between democracy assistance and democratic progress hold true across other cases, China must be an outlier. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars of democracy assistance poured into China over the last 10 to 20 years, China’s level of democracy has not changed.

Macro-level outcomes could only be attributed to civil society programmes (or indeed any democracy assistance programmes) by inferring that there is a considerable lag between project completion and democratic impact, a lag of one or two decades. This is itself not an unreasonable view. Indeed it is the view held by most people working on civil society in China. DRL’s HRDF funding for China, for instance, is intended to “catalyze long-term efforts to lay the foundation for the rule of law, greater public participation and a robust civil society.”<sup>48</sup> But accepting that such lags are inevitable implies that any civil society project needs to set out clear short and medium-term benchmarks in order to check whether the expected long-term benefits are likely to be achieved. To a large extent, this is the argument for the mesolevel of analysis. Progress within a much narrower arena (that is to say in the specific dimension of democracy under discussion) provides a way to generate such benchmarks.

The other reason that the macro-level of analysis is, like the micro-level, inadequate is that the very scoring of democracy at the macro-level might be something that remains in question. Many would argue, for instance, that the liberalization and institutionalization of politics in China since the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 should be reflected in a better combined average ranking score on the 7-to-1 scale than China’s 6.5, the level at which it has been stuck since 1998.

---

<sup>48</sup> “A Comprehensive Human Rights Strategy for China” speech by Assistant Secretary of State Lorne W. Craner, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 29, 2004.

For both reasons, problems of attribution and timing as well as uncertainties about the validity of macro-level measurements, a focus on the meso-level of analysis is essential.

*Programme Evaluation: Meso-Level*

The heart of the Queen's CSD Framework is the focus on attainable and measurable meso-level (that is sectoral) outcomes that build democratic value for the country concerned, and in this case the question to be asked is has civil society in China been strengthened, both in terms of its internal capacity and in its external role, as a result of the CSP?

Again, baselines and controls are important factors to consider. The general trend for civil society in China has been mixed — a combination of powerful forward surges related to socio-economic development countered by determined and often persistent government crackdowns on civil society organizations that show any signs of being effective or autonomous or both. As for controls, the large number of donors involved in similar programmes, and even now some domestic involvement through domestic companies, individuals, and foundations, makes attribution of sectoral impacts to CSP challenging to say the least.

Civil society constitutes one sector where a direct link often can be made between outputs and meso-level impacts because, by definition, the creation of a new or stronger and more sustainable NGO organization that does more things is itself evidence of a strengthening of civil society. Evaluations showing that projects have succeeded in these terms are *sufficient* to also show higher-level impacts. However, the problem, as noted already, is that it is not clear to what degree each project is responsible for overall success of a given NGO. In the absence of detailed project outputs, especially in terms of strengthening the civil society organizations themselves, meso-impacts via this route are impossible.

Meso-impacts can, however, be attained via other routes. In particular, there is ample evidence that the CSP has significantly contributed to the strengthening of civil society in China merely because of its presence in the country and the demonstration effects this has created. As the earliest, and still one of the most widely-admired programmes in this area, the CSP is used by many Chinese civil society organizations as a resource and source of ideas, even if those organizations do not become CSP grantees. About one in five projects is approved, and an even greater number of Chinese CSOs meet with CSP staff either in the Beijing office or at civil society-related activities around the country.

The CSP publicizes itself with printed materials that use the Chinese word for “civil society” (*gongmin shehui*), a term that the Chinese government initially wanted it to drop. The CSP's self-evaluation of 2005-07 states that “CSP is perceived by other donors as having a niche in terms of supporting nascent, grassroots NGOs” and this claim is borne out by the views of other donors. CSP coordinator Zhen Li puts it this way: “The main impact of CSP is that we are a symbol of this concept in China, we are leading people's intellectual change.” This experience of unintended positive impacts has been experienced by other donors as well and remains, perhaps, the strongest justification for the continuation of civil society programmes in China. For instance, as a result of guidelines requiring that civil society representatives must be “selected/elected by their own sectors

based on a documented, transparent process, developed within each sector”<sup>49</sup> of the Global Fund for HIV, AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the 2007 election of such representatives in China was overseen by the International Republican Institute (IRI). Many registered and unregistered NGOs participated, and all of the NGOs signed a statement attesting that they agreed to the process and outcome of the election.

As with the Global Fund experience, the CSP experience shows that international assistance can be used to legitimize civil society in China by giving them a voice and providing civil society organizations opportunities to work together and by creating mechanisms for increasing dialogue.

#### **Part 4: Recommendations**

##### *General Lessons for Democracy Assistance to Civil Society*

The CSP case study highlights several key lessons for civil society promotion programmes. These should be understood as relevant to all cases, whatever the stage of democratization and whatever the particular context of the country.

- 1) Evaluation is a critical component of programme success for civil society organizations and yet is usually not done enough. This truism is especially pointed in the case of civil society organizations where such interactive, deliberative, democratic, and self-critical processes are part and parcel of the development of the organizations themselves.
- 2) Civil society promotion works best when it is explicitly linked to a democracy assistance agenda. When it is linked to other developmental goals, civil society may become an adjunct to government objectives and fail to develop the autonomy and effectiveness necessary to play its role in democratic development.
- 3) Civil society assistance should be conceived of as a risk-taking business. Any programme should expect to have a significant number of project failures in high-risk areas. Without such risk-taking civil society programmes tend to overlap with established baseline trends by strengthening organizations that are already in good shape, or by strengthening organizations that are too closely tied to governments.
- 4) Civil society programme managers should recognize that the sectoral impact of their programmes may result from indirect and even unintended processes, such as demonstration effects, commitment effects (when local governments become unintentionally committed to processes that include civil society), and networking effects. They should therefore be prepared to spend significant time in considering how such impacts can be maximized.

##### *Specific Lessons for the CIDA Civil Society Program in China*

In light of the analysis above, we have a series of recommendations concerning how the CSP programme can be strengthened.

- a) The CSP needs to be lodged within a broader strategic commitment by the Canadian government to the promotion of democracy in China. Without such a commitment, the CSP

---

<sup>49</sup> Revised Guidelines on the Purpose, Structure and Composition of Country Coordinating Mechanisms and Requirements for Grant Eligibility. The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, May 28, 2007.

lacks the high-level political backing and whole-of-government support necessary to make it more effective.

- b) The CSP, in line with the general lessons above, needs to engage in more risk-taking in China, while carefully balancing this against the preservation of its status in the country. The CSP has chosen wisely to conduct its programme as much as possible without active Chinese government involvement. It should make use of this freedom. In particular, it should be allowed to make a greater number of undisclosed or off-budget grants to high risk groups. In light of the importance of ideational impact, even some high-risk projects that fail may have a more positive impact on the development of civil society in China than low-risk projects that succeed.
- c) Consistent with the view that its ideational impact may be its greatest asset, the CSP needs to vastly improve its in-country Chinese-language website ([www.cccsu.org.cn](http://www.cccsu.org.cn)) in order to have greater demonstration effects on China's civil society.
- d) CSP project guidelines need to be changed to allow in-process project revisions and to allow both larger grants (the current limit is Rmb100,000) and multiple grants over several years. Both would suit the Chinese context where situations change rapidly and where year-to-year foreign funding may be the only way for groups to survive over an initial period.
- e) Evaluations need to be increased in number and improved in quality. They should also be posted online in order to boost their ideational impacts. One way to do this, following the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) at the U.S. State Department model, would be to have an evaluation conference for all grantees once a year. Such a conference would have the added benefit of providing a networking opportunity. Additionally, it would seem possible for CSP to fund a project that aims to train democracy assistance project evaluators in China. Such a project would be a safe way to initiate a discussion on how to measure China's progress towards democracy.
- f) The proportion of CIDA funding for CSP projects in China needs to be significantly increased from its current proportion of only 1%. Were the programme to have half a dozen individuals as dynamic as CSP Coordinator Zhen Li, its impact would be that much greater.
- g) CSP projects should be expanded into new and emerging areas of civil society development in China. These include corporate social responsibility activism and the reform of GONGOs into genuine civil society actors.
- h) The CSP Committee in Beijing should have some local representation from civil society or public policy individuals in China, if only on a consultative basis. The aim would be to give greater influence to liberal voices in China who can recommend and push for greater innovations in the programme.

## **Conclusion**

CIDA's Civil Society Programme is a useful window on an important area of democracy assistance. The programme brings to light many important dimensions and lessons of this area of the field. The programme itself should be judged a modest success overall in light of the very difficult operating environment in which it acts. It has gathered significant expertise and institutional momentum and at the level of ideational impact it has had some success.

Ultimately, however, the CSP will have to grope its way towards the goal reflected in its name, supporting autonomous and critical voices in the Chinese polity that will help to increase domestic

pressures that are already moving the country in the direction of a democratic opening. As CCCF director Li Tao wrote in his third anniversary letter to members in 2006: “Although the trend is for the public to gradually acknowledge China's civil society, a beautiful prospect in itself, people are first needed to find a way to make this prospect a reality...China needs critics, and in particular it needs practitioners who have a critical spirit. Otherwise, civil society will be merely an empty myth.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> [http://www.facilitator.ngo.cn/cn/english\\_%202005\\_3years.htm](http://www.facilitator.ngo.cn/cn/english_%202005_3years.htm)