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China's NGO Partnerships in a New Era of Development Cooperation*

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Abstract China's 2021 White Paper, *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, offers a new vision for a more people-centred approach to its development cooperation. While the White Paper extensively discusses partnerships, it only briefly mentions encouraging cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This article argues that NGO engagement in international development activities would improve their effectiveness, a view shared by many Chinese scholars and practitioners. However, challenges exist that constrain optimal engagement, especially access to funding, and a weak enabling environment and policy framework. This article addresses these challenges, drawing from the literature on 'going out' among Chinese NGOs and social organisations, along with interviews with key players in the Chinese NGO ecosystem. The article recommends, among other things, that the government clarify and improve its policy framework for NGOs/social organisations in support of China's international development collaboration, especially regarding funding flows, personnel regulations, and material and capital outflows.

Keywords NGOs, social organisations, China, White Paper, internationalisation, development cooperation, Belt and Road Initiative, partnerships, 'going out', South-South cooperation.

1 Introduction

China has emerged as one of the most influential, debated, and discussed development cooperation actors in the twenty-first century. Chinese international development cooperation⁴ has been extensively researched, scrutinised, mapped, and quantified (Huang 2019; Lynch, Andersen and Zhu 2020; Mulakala 2021). Less research and attention have gone to Chinese NGOs and social organisations⁵ and how they fit into the broader schema of Chinese development and South-South cooperation (SSC). This article posits that for China to achieve the people-centred

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aspirations outlined in its January 2021 White Paper, *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era* (SCIO 2021), Chinese NGOs and social organisations should become part of the equation.

China's two previous White Papers on development assistance (2011 and 2014) largely responded to international calls for transparency (SCIO 2011, 2014). Neither discussed the contribution of Chinese NGOs and social organisations, although both described activities, such as humanitarian aid and improving health care, that may have involved these actors. The current White Paper offers a different vision: it explicitly affirms China's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and people-to-people connectivity, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Partnerships will prove critical to this forward vision. This article takes up this positive outlook on the role of Chinese NGOs and provides a more detailed look at both the potential opportunities and constraints they face.

Section 2 lays out the methodology for our study. Section 3 provides a limited review of the literature on the growing internationalisation of NGOs in China. Section 4 is a brief discussion of how NGOs feature in the White Paper. Section 5 discusses the strategic role for NGOs in the BRI. Section 6 discusses the importance of diversifying development partnerships. Section 7 outlines some of the challenges to internationalisation faced by Chinese NGOs. Section 8 puts forward some recommendations for strengthening the international role of China's NGOs. Section 9 offers some final conclusions.

2 Research methodology

This article draws on a combination of secondary and targeted primary research. It first relies on a desktop review of the literature to provide a brief overview of Chinese NGO internationalisation, i.e. 'going out' efforts. Second, it identifies areas of China's current development cooperation agenda, as articulated in the White Paper, where NGOs can play a pivotal role. Third, it draws again on a desktop review and interviews with seven Chinese NGO leaders and experts,⁶ to discuss challenges in fulfilling that role. Our conversations, semi-structured interviews, and email exchanges with these NGO leaders aimed for nuance and detail that could fill in some of the gaps in the literature and were analysed qualitatively.

The NGOs represented here span the various categories mentioned in Section 2. The Center for International NGOs and Foundations/Beijing Normal University (CINF-BNU) has both a practitioner and policy perspective, while the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) is one of the largest and first Chinese NGOs to internationalise. The Global Environment Institute (GEI) conducts both development and advocacy, and the Beijing Rongzhi Institute of Corporate Social Responsibility

(Rongzhi) brings in some private sector perspectives. The leaders of these organisations spoke with us because they share an interest in advancing Chinese policy and want to take part in the international conversation about China's global engagement. Their views, as described below, have also influenced our recommendations.

3 The internationalisation of China's NGOs

Chinese NGOs comprise a relatively small feature of Chinese development cooperation. However, this role has expanded as the Chinese government, companies, and NGOs recognise the strategic potential this partnership affords.

Difficulties arise in pinpointing definitive data on the scale of international Chinese NGO involvement and how it may have changed over time. According to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) statistics, by the end of 2014, out of the 606,000 social organisations in China, 215 social groups, nine foundations, and four private non-enterprise units had engaged in international work (MCA 2015). After 2015, the MCA no longer provided this type of data. A search on the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Database reveals that 20 China-based NGOs have carried out activities outside of China, and 71 Chinese NGOs have 'consultative status' with the United Nations (UNDESA 2021). Li and Dong (2018: 2) note that as of 2017, the China Foundation Center (CFC) had recorded 49 Chinese foundations as active overseas, and that the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) listed 63 of their NGO members as having a focus on international affairs.

Li and Dong (2018) place the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs within the broader context of China's 'going out' as China opened up to the world in waves beginning in the 1970s. The third wave of 'going out' from the 2000s onward involved the export of Chinese culture (through Confucius Institutes) and its experience of development, with NGOs beginning to take part in international development. Li and Dong (2018: 2) also posit several factors driving this internationalisation of NGOs – both political incentives, with the Chinese government encouraging its NGOs to support national geopolitical goals, and economic incentives, due to increasing competition for funding domestically as well as increasing opportunity overseas through mechanisms such as the BRI.

Our review of the literature and our experience as practitioners indicate that Chinese NGOs engage in three distinguishable categories of internationalisation activities. First, some NGOs 'go out' and provide a quick response to international humanitarian and natural disasters. China is a disaster-prone country. Chinese NGOs, most prominently search-and-rescue teams, developed strong professional capacity following the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and started providing

disaster-response assistance to other countries. International humanitarian or disaster response has thus become a primary sector for international Chinese NGO action (Huang 2019; Li and Dong 2018). This has been particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Chinese NGOs and social organisations have played a critical role in China's response, providing support to over 109 countries on six continents by March 2020 (Zhang 2020).

Second, some Chinese NGOs implement on-the-ground environmental, health, education, or other development projects overseas. Some of these organisations operate from a Chinese base; others set up project offices overseas, and some operate through collaborations with local organisations. Examples include CFPA, which has set up field offices in partner countries such as Nepal, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, where it operates water and sanitation, children's education, and women's livelihood support programmes (CFPA n.d.), and the Global Environment Institute (GEI), an environmental and human-development NGO based in Beijing; it partnered with the Ministry of Livestock Development in Sri Lanka to adapt a renewable energy model developed in China to the local context (China Development Brief 2021).

Third, some social organisations conduct research and advocacy on a range of social and environmental issues relevant to development. They may also represent industry, and often work in partnership with international organisations or Chinese companies. Such organisations include GEI, which has created environmental exchange platforms such as the East and Southeast Asia Community Conservation Network⁷ and Beijing Rongzhi Corporate Social Responsibility Research Institute (Rongzhi); it supports Chinese governmental bodies, industry associations, and enterprises in research, development, and application of social responsibility standards and guidelines. It also provides technical assistance to Chinese enterprises.⁸

4 China's 2021 White Paper and the role for Chinese NGOs

The 2021 White Paper reaffirms China's previous commitments to development cooperation partnership with NGOs. It refers to social organisations three times, indicating different levels of commitment. First, the paper underscores a high-level commitment, citing President Xi's statement at the Second Belt and Road Forum (2019) that China would support social organisation participation in public wellbeing projects along the BRI (SCIO 2021: 11). Second, the paper announces a funding mechanism: China's US\$3bn South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF) will focus on micro and small projects across diverse sectors, as well as trade promotion and investment facilitation, in cooperation with Chinese social organisations (*ibid.*: 19). Third, the paper proposes an institutional architecture: under 'future prospects for international cooperation', China's inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for foreign aid becomes responsible for aligning the efforts of various government levels

and social organisations, the better to enhance efficiency and cohesion (*ibid.*: 49).

While versions of these commitments may have preceded the 2021 White Paper, their mention affirms the space for NGO and social organisation engagement, however vague the details. Using the parameters of the White Paper, Chinese NGOs and social organisations can add impact in two broad areas, as described below.

5 Ensuring sustainability along the Belt and Road

China's investments along the Belt and Road have declined significantly since 2016 (Mingey and Kratz 2021). This reflects a slowdown in the Chinese economy, concerns about rising debt and debt management, and more restraint by partner countries amidst challenging economic times. Accordingly, the White Paper's discernible shift in focus from hardware to 'humanware', that is, human development, creates an opportunity to improve the execution and sustainability of existing projects.

Through guidelines and regulations, the Chinese government encourages Chinese BRI-building companies to take care of the communities and environments impacted by their projects, and these companies increasingly recognise the importance of stakeholder engagement and social and environmental considerations in business sustainability (Gu, Li and Zhang, this *IDS Bulletin*); however, they often do not have the experience or knowledge to address these issues (Guo and Duan 2017). NGOs and social organisations can bridge this gap. Simeng, a professional service institute for corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers and its consulting arm SynTao, have offered leadership in this area, producing community engagement guidelines and manuals and providing training for Chinese companies investing overseas. However, such collaborations remain rare. NGOs may have a role in working with frontline BRI companies to engage outside their comfort zone of traditional BRI project implementation and interact with communities and local stakeholders.

The White Paper devotes an entire section to the SDG agenda and presents the BRI as a platform through which China can channel its SDG efforts. China's experience of poverty alleviation, in which Chinese NGOs have played critical roles, offers perhaps its most valuable lessons for partner countries. Sound development cooperation policies and practices also dictate an essential role for NGOs in delivering aid, since they are widely believed to be more efficient than government agencies (McCoskey 2009). People-to-people connectivity and sustainable development are two of CFPA's core principles. Since 2019, CFPA has offered its domestic poverty alleviation experience to BRI countries through the Panda Pack Project, in partnership with Alibaba philanthropy, delivering school supplies to 732,314 children

in ten countries (CFPA 2020). This project complements CFPA's other SDG-related programmes in maternal and child health, higher education, and non-profit hospitals in 20 countries and regions (Dong and Li 2020: 240). Similarly, GEI complements its work with Chinese companies through projects on forest protection in Myanmar, low-carbon development in Sri Lanka, and community biogas development in Laos (*ibid.*: 245–6).

The SDGs, however, are not a simple add-on. While the official Chinese narratives about the 'Green BRI' and 'Health Silk Road' are compelling, delivering SDG results will require more than dotting the BRI with education and health projects, despite their benefits. It requires designing and implementing the core big-ticket BRI infrastructure projects differently and inclusively, with the SDGs and partner country national development goals considered at every stage. Experienced Chinese NGOs, such as those we discuss, working in tandem with local NGOs and communities can contribute to this realisation.

6 Diversifying development partnerships

The White Paper emphasises the centrality of partnerships, noting that China will work through different forms and modalities and with diverse partners. While government-to-government partnerships have historically underpinned Chinese SSC, the stated desire to engage more directly with people (SCIO 2021: 24) may require collaboration with more nimble actors. Chinese NGOs, such as CFPA, that have on-the-ground presence in some of China's partner countries, can deploy local language skills through locally engaged staff, which helps them to implement community projects and respond during emergencies and humanitarian disasters. They can also act as a link between Chinese companies and communities. For example, in Sudan, CFPA collaborated with the Chinese Embassy, China National Petroleum Corporation, and the Al-Birr and Al-Tawasul Organisation, a Sudanese civil society organisation, to revitalise the Abu Ushar Hospital and deliver vital health services to Sudan's poor (Peng, Ji and Wang 2017: 36). Increasingly, Chinese NGOs, such as CFPA in Nepal and Myanmar, are participating in country-based international NGO (INGO) forums.⁹

Many Chinese NGOs and social organisations, such as the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO) and GEI, collaborate and share lessons with international peers and partners through extensive international networks. This helps bring the voice and experience of Chinese civil society to international consultations such as the UN climate change conferences (Dong and Li 2020: 236–7).

Collaboration between international and Chinese organisations has numerous advantages for all partners. Chinese NGOs benefit from exposure to INGO norms, standard operating procedures (SOPs), protocols, networks, and knowledge of local contexts;

INGOs benefit from Chinese NGO quantitative and qualitative information and from their privileged insights into China's development cooperation and overseas investments. Both benefit from mutual learning and sharing. These partnerships can also serve as a form of Track Two Diplomacy¹⁰ in conditions where formal relations between China and other countries may have become strained.

7 Challenges faced by Chinese NGOs 'going out'

In the limited but growing literature on Chinese NGO international activities, three main challenges consistently recur: a weak policy and regulatory environment, lack of access to funding, and weak human-resource capacity for international work. The NGO representatives and scholars we interviewed evoked the persistent incongruence between the aspirations and official directives for an expanded international NGO role and the practical mechanisms (clear policy, access to funding, and capacity) needed to make it happen.

7.1 Absence of an enabling policy framework

The lack of a robust regulatory or policy framework to support NGO internationalisation (Shuai 2017; Huang 2019; Li and Dong 2018) appears as a prominent challenge in the literature. Official directives have not so far translated into practical measures. Our interviewees clearly indicated that globalisation and the global development agenda (the SDGs) drive the increasing internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. As China goes out, so do Chinese NGOs, but without much government support. The irony of the BRI is that while investors and companies traverse continents in the fast lane, NGOs are still waiting for their passports. The 'spontaneous' expansion of Chinese NGOs overseas is taking place in advance of any government support – a reality that puts pressure on the government to both accommodate and manage this phenomenon. A representative of GEI, Ren Peng¹¹ observed that China does not favour Chinese NGO participation in development cooperation, and most such activities suffer from the absence of a national strategy.

Furthermore, there remains no unified administration for NGO international activities.¹² While the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) has qualification methods for enterprise participation in foreign aid projects, no such regulation exists for NGOs (Dong and Li 2020: 251–2). The China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), set up in 2018, does not have an NGO partnership mechanism like those that play important roles in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) country aid systems (e.g. Australia's).

Amidst current global geopolitical tensions, Chinese NGOs have served as, and may increasingly become, a lever of China's soft-power diplomacy. Li and Dong (2018: 2) assert that the

Chinese government had encouraged its NGOs to support China's geopolitical goals. Director Yang Li of CINF-BNU¹³ emphasised that the overseas practices of Chinese NGOs will help reconstruct China's global image and promote international exchanges. According to CFPA Vice President Wang Xingzui,¹⁴ some Chinese NGOs have positioned themselves to participate in global governance and 'share Chinese ways with the Western world'. Yang provided the example of the Amity Foundation, which established a Geneva office in 2015 in part to provide a bridge for Chinese social organisation engagement along the BRI (Amity Foundation 2021).¹⁵ For CFPA, the extent of public display of its Chinese background depends on the local context. In Myanmar, CFPA faces scepticism about its in-country activities from some local stakeholders. To operate effectively, the NGO status needs to be emphasised and distance from the government is necessary.¹⁶ In Nepal, on the other hand, CFPA identification with the Chinese government reassures Nepali government counterparts and facilitates its work in-country.¹⁷

Given this reality, as Chinese NGOs expand internationally, they will require the flexibility and autonomy to position themselves according to local political context and bilateral relationships with China. Strategic positioning aside, our respondents all shared a view of a deeply intertwined relationship between Chinese NGOs overseas and the Chinese government – one in which the NGOs could play a significant role in furthering the government's soft-power and foreign policy agenda, but also one in which the effectiveness of the NGOs themselves depends on supportive measures from the government.

Meanwhile, as Chinese NGOs seek more international engagement, they face the challenge of being perceived as a front for China's state machinery, despite the absence of government funding support. This perception is enhanced by the government's framing of the BRI as an all-inclusive platform for China's globalisation. This challenge does not affect Chinese NGOs alone. Chinese private companies invested overseas are often lumped together with state-owned enterprises in critiques of the BRI, although many operate outside the oversight of the Chinese state. While many other international NGOs funded by their countries of origin are also seen as advancing their foreign policy agendas (Silver 2006; Ishkanian 2007), current geopolitical dynamics may subject Chinese NGOs to more scrutiny.

7.2 Funding constraints

Access to funding has proved a long-standing challenge for Chinese NGOs 'going out' (Li and Dong 2018; Huang 2019; Fan 2019; Shuai 2017; Lu 2017). They rarely receive funding directly from government international development funds. While President Xi announced the establishment of the SSCAF in 2015, very little of its funding has gone to Chinese NGOs. Once established in 2018, CIDCA took over SSCAF management from MOFCOM.

This transition contributed to the slow progress on NGO involvement in SSCAF.

In 2017, the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) established the Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network to complement the BRI with coordinated Chinese NGO efforts to build people-to-people connectivity, implement beneficial projects, and build public support for the BRI. The network has attracted 352 members across 72 countries (CNIE 2020). CNIE has a mandate to coordinate Chinese NGO applications to the SSCAF by reviewing NGO project proposals and making funding recommendations to CIDCA. CNIE made its first call for proposals in July 2020 and so far, no Chinese NGOs have received funding awards through this process (*ibid.*). According to You Fei,¹⁸ the Executive Director of CINF-BNU, CNIE should play a larger role both in supporting Chinese NGOs' work overseas and in facilitating dialogue with the Chinese government, including on topics such as access to government funding through the SSCAF.

As a result of the lack of government funding, most Chinese NGOs operating overseas have often relied on online and offline fundraising from the domestic population or Chinese companies. CFPA Vice President Wang¹⁹ says his organisation receives only 4.2 per cent of its funding for international work from the government. The remainder comes primarily from the public, donated through online portals such as Alibaba and Tencent (59.55 per cent), with smaller amounts coming from foundations (10.76 per cent), state-owned and private enterprises (9.7 per cent), and private individuals (9 per cent). He expects to see a gradual increase in government allocation of financial support to NGOs for international work. He noted a sign of progress in CFPA's selection as one of the few pilot applicants for SSCAF funding.

7.3 Limited capacity

Weak capacity and limited international experience create further challenges for Chinese NGOs. Lu (2017) notes that Chinese foreign aid is often criticised for its lack of sensitivity to local contexts and local communities. This reflects the common practice of implementing infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads, and stadiums through Chinese companies and contractors, who lack awareness of why or how to engage communities in the process. While Chinese NGOs could in theory fill this void, their role remains limited by inadequate personnel capacity or lack of overseas experience. In our interviews, all respondents cited internal capacity as a constraint and challenge to effective 'going out'. Chinese NGOs struggle to recruit personnel experienced in both the political and social contexts of their partner countries, as well as the technical procedures of managing international projects overseas. Interviewees often note that their NGOs receive little to no training in international or multicultural engagement, diversity awareness, or in the cultures and socioeconomic contexts of the countries in which they work.

Many of the capacity constraints relate to the challenge of aligning policy frameworks not initially designed to be in sync. For example, Nepal's government requires INGOs to cooperate with local NGO partners in programme implementation, and to maintain an annual contribution of US\$200,000. Due to Chinese policies on foreign exchange control, there are also difficulties in fund transfer.²⁰ Many Chinese NGOs with recent 'going out' experience need more experienced personnel to navigate these administrative challenges.

Other capacity constraints relate to the challenges of managing multiple language and donor requirements. Language barriers make it challenging for Rongzhi to conduct surveys or other activities in targeted countries. CFPA Myanmar often need to produce project reports in Burmese, English, and Mandarin customised according to the interests and priorities of different donors. For example, their Hong Kong-based foundation donors prefer visual records detailing implementation and have less interest in fund utilisation, while their mainland China-based donors attach great importance to local relationships, often promoted through local profiles of projects and events and local media coverage.²¹ These challenges will be familiar to all NGOs working in the international space, but Chinese NGOs have a smaller pool of personnel experienced in international development to draw upon and are relatively new to the game.

In this context, our respondents stressed the usefulness of sharing experiences with other NGOs operating in the same environment. CFPA has established effective partnerships with western INGOs that have significantly assisted their new offices. For example, the CFPA Myanmar Country Director conducted an eight-month internship with Mercy Corps in Myanmar, focused on country office set-up and developing working relationships with local staff.²² Similarly, the CFPA Nepal Country Director attended a useful country-office training at Mercy Corps Nepal.²³ Both country directors cited the helpfulness of The Asia Foundation's operational manual, produced for Chinese NGOs preparing to go out (see Lu 2017).

8 Recommendations for key actors

We argue the need for greater action as China's international development cooperation prioritises a more human-centred vision and as opportunities for people-to-people connectivity become more critical in an increasingly polarised world. We suggest some practical steps that can include all players in the ecosystem – the Chinese government, private sector, partner countries, foreign and Chinese NGOs – to improve delivery of the SDGs. Here we consolidate recommendations from the literature, our interview respondents, and our own practitioner-based experience.

8.1 Recommendations for the Chinese government

Given the lack of a robust policy framework and funding support, we recommend that the government clarify and develop

an improved policy framework for Chinese NGOs and social organisations, especially regarding funding flows, personnel regulations, and material and capital outflows. A public–private partnership (PPP) model and policy framework would enable NGOs to leverage SSCAF funds for collaboration with Chinese businesses, thereby increasing their impact in international partnerships. To strengthen understanding between NGOs and various government agencies, the government, or government-mandated organisations, could establish a systematic and regular coordination framework, including semi-annual dialogues between the government and internationally active NGOs and social organisations.

Smaller task forces, co-led by an NGO and a government counterpart, could conduct in-depth engagement on topics such as setting up country offices, managing funding outflows, applying for funding from SSCAF, and other priority policy measures. To facilitate coordination and promote knowledge-sharing and mutual learning, we recommend that CIDCA or CNIE, working in partnership with academic or thinktank partners, establish a comprehensive database of Chinese NGOs and social organisations that have ‘gone out’ in various ways. Finally, the government needs an evaluation mechanism to assess Chinese NGO contributions to international cooperation, including their global practices, social impact, achievements, and challenges. This could result in recommendations or actions for improved planning and optimised resource allocations.

8.2 Recommendations for Chinese NGOs regarding ‘going out’

NGOs can and should access the wealth of best-practice knowledge in international development, both prior to and after establishing an international presence (whether on a project basis, or through a country office). Prior to ‘going out’, NGOs should develop sound and transparent accountability mechanisms for overseas projects, including details of project development, sources and use of funds, and project evaluation upon completion. They should also invest in developing in-house expertise in the language, culture, history, and customs of key countries of operation.

Once they have developed a concrete plan for overseas activity, NGOs should analyse the country or location as an ecosystem, identifying all potential resources, including the Chinese Embassy, Chinese enterprises active in the location, other INGOs, local NGOs active in their sector, and the Chinese diaspora community in-country. Where NGO associations or coordination forums in partner countries exist, Chinese NGOs should seek to join these, to learn and share knowledge about local regulations, cultural norms, and development practices. Emergency response NGOs should establish relationships with counterparts in key partner countries, setting up networks and collaboration systems prior to any disaster that might require rapid response. They may wish to

set up internships with other INGOs before establishing country offices, to observe international best practices, protocols, and implementation standards.

8.3 Recommendations for Chinese enterprises and businesses

NGO and private sector partnerships offer beyond-aid answers to sustainability and scale, combining complementary resources and capabilities to address development challenges. The BRI offers an opportunity for closer cooperation between Chinese NGOs and enterprises. Chinese companies lack the skills and experience to engage with communities, yet investment sustainability depends significantly on strengthened community impact. The Asia Foundation's programmes and research with companies and communities engaged in BRI projects reveals opportunity and willingness on both sides to improve project implementation and community impact (Guo and Duan 2017; The Asia Foundation, forthcoming). Partnerships with NGOs should help in such cases.

Perhaps with support from the SSCAF, a new Chinese model of what we might call 'South-South collaboration' will emerge – one where Chinese business, government, and NGO interests coalesce with those of partner countries (Mulakala 2021). We recommend the development of a PPP model for partnering with NGOs using SSCAF funds: Chinese businesses could then allocate matching funds for said partnerships in key countries. Companies should also develop SOPs for partnerships with Chinese NGOs to assist with community engagement, socio-environmental impact assessments, and poverty alleviation activities in the communities where industrial and infrastructure projects take place.

8.4 Recommendations for other INGOs, development partners, and donors

Foreign INGOs and Western donors often do not actively engage with Chinese organisations in coordination and knowledge-sharing. This results in a lost opportunity for improving development effectiveness, given the increasing importance of Chinese assistance. We recommend that INGOs and international development partners should, as a matter of course, reach out to Chinese social partners when researching Chinese development projects in partner countries, to forge ties with Chinese companies and to gain insights into Chinese perspectives. Furthermore, they should invite Chinese NGOs and social organisations to join donor coordination meetings in-country, arrange to meet with them bilaterally, and encourage the establishment of internships or exchange programmes with other INGOs.

8.5 Recommendations for partner countries

As Chinese development cooperation assumes a larger proportion of their available international resources, many developing countries will need to integrate such resources into national development planning and policy frameworks. While

some have established systems and government agencies to receive and partner with OECD-DAC donors, they often have not yet done so for Chinese ones. Investment in understanding, integrating, and maximising this source of international development funding will prove critical. Partner countries should include and invite Chinese NGOs to national development roundtables and establish procedures for adapting or applying existing SOPs and protocols to Chinese development projects. In addition, partner-country NGOs and thinktanks should receive encouragement to collaborate with Chinese NGOs as local implementers of Chinese development projects.

9 Conclusions and further research

The scale and breadth of China's international development cooperation have a critical place in the global effort towards sustainable development. While China's 2021 White Paper creates space for enhanced NGO engagement, our review here reveals that these NGOs face persistent deficits in policy enablement, funding opportunities, and organisational capacity. Interviewees commented that it might take over a decade before we see a boom in the global expansion of Chinese NGOs. Our findings reveal points of opacity in China's development cooperation strategy, as Chinese NGOs have an official and vital status, but with unclear articulation of their precise role or the means of enabling it. Our recommendations indicate a possible way forward for Chinese NGOs to receive the attention needed for them to play a strategic role in China's international development cooperation.

This article presents primary qualitative perspectives of a few key Chinese NGOs on the current scope and environment for Chinese NGO participation in Chinese development cooperation. Due to time constraints and limitations resulting from the pandemic, we were unable to undertake a broad quantitative assessment of Chinese NGOs' experience or conduct primary research with relevant Chinese government stakeholders. We hope our research may inform further discussion with government actors and with a broader range of Chinese NGOs, particularly as more enter the development cooperation arena. Further research can also track implementation of the White Paper to investigate whether and how NGO partnerships increase.

Notes

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- 1 Anthea Mulakala, Senior Director for International Development Cooperation, The Asia Foundation, Malaysia.
- 2 Robin Bush, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation, Malaysia.
- 3 Hongbo Ji, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation, China.
- 4 'International development cooperation' refers to China's bilateral and multilateral efforts, within the framework of South–South cooperation, to promote economic and social development through foreign aid, humanitarian assistance, and other means (SCIO 2021).
- 5 The **2016 Charity Law of the People's Republic of China** lists three categories for charitable organisations, including foundations, social groups, and social service organisations. We use NGOs and social organisations interchangeably in this article to refer to all three categories.
- 6 Lin Yuan, Myanmar Country Director, China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) – interviewed via phone call. Liu Neng, programme manager, Beijing Rongzhi Institute of Corporate Social Responsibility (Rongzhi) – interviewed by email. Ren Peng, programme manager, Global Environment Institute (GEI) – interviewed by email. Wang Xingzui, Vice President, CFPA – interviewed via phone call. Yang Li, Director, Center for International NGOs and Foundations/Beijing Normal University (CINF-BNU) – interviewed in person. You Fei, Executive Director, CINF-BNU – interviewed in person. Zou Zhiqiang, Nepal Country Director, CFPA – interviewed by phone call.
- 7 Ren Peng interview, 23 April 2021.
- 8 Liu Neng interview, 23 April 2021.
- 9 Lin Yuan and Zou Zhiqiang interviews, 9 April 2021.
- 10 Informal or backchannel diplomacy carried out by non-state actors.
- 11 Interview, 23 April 2021.
- 12 Yang Li interview, 8 April 2021.
- 13 Interview, 8 April 2021.
- 14 Interview, 8 April 2021.
- 15 Interview, 8 April 2021.
- 16 Lin Yuan interview, 9 April 2021.
- 17 Zou Zhiqiang interview, 9 April 2021.
- 18 Interview, 8 April 2021.
- 19 Interview, 8 April 2021.
- 20 Zou Zhiqiang interview, 9 April 2021.
- 21 Lin Yuan interview, 9 April 2021.
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